

Briefing

Urban; Communication

Reflections on knowledge gained and key lessons learnt from IIED research and action



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Project overview

Title:

Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos

Timeframe:

August 2022 to May 2025

Summary:

A participatory action-research project aiming to strengthen grassroots-led civic media initiatives, improving their capacity to shape equitable decision-making processes and support more inclusive and just urban development and housing.

Change in action

Communication practices are fundamental to social justice movements, but they receive relatively little support. This project employed a participatory action-research methodology to explore how communications and civic media – technologies, designs and practices that support connection through common purpose – can bolster grassroots efforts to advance housing rights. It supported 'civic media labs' in two cities (São Paulo and Lagos) to help residents and grassroots groups build their communications capabilities through mutual learning. Participants expanded their individual and collective capacities, enabling them to more effectively advocate for inclusive housing interventions, stop housing rights violations and shift harmful narratives around informal settlements.



Credit: Sam Okechukwu

Strengthening communications capabilities for housing justice

The transformative potential of civic media labs

Civic space is crucial to fostering democracy and equality, and there is widespread recognition among development organisations and donors of the urgent need to strengthen it. There is less awareness, however, about the importance of supporting the communication capabilities of social movements, which reflections from a recent action-research project – 'Civic media for housing rights' – show could be transformative.

In 2022, IIED partnered with housing movements in two cities – União dos Movimentos de Moradia (UMM) in São Paulo, Brazil, and Justice & Empowerment Initiatives (JEI) in Lagos, Nigeria – to explore the role of communications and media in housing struggles.¹

This participatory action-research project shows that communication capabilities underpin the efforts of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. Housing justice movements in both cities

use a range of communication practices in performing key functions, such as mobilising their members, building a collective voice, denouncing rights violations, documenting forced evictions and changing harmful narratives about informal settlements.² These practices combine online and offline activities and have taken different forms over the years to meet the changing demands of evolving conditions and political contexts.³

The media and communications landscapes in which social movements operate are themselves shaped by structural inequalities and power imbalances. The project found that these inequalities affect the ability of housing movements to produce housing and organise collective housing efforts, to oppose discriminatory housing narratives and to mobilise alternative housing policy claims.⁴

In this context, the project supported local organisations in São Paulo and Lagos to develop and run a series of 'civic media labs' between 2022 and 2024 to help grassroots groups and local residents develop their communications capabilities. During the labs, participants produced a range of media products, including videos, audio, graphics for social media and written news.

Civic media lab outcomes

As the media lab series ended, the teams from both cities gathered in Lagos to discuss their experiences and the extent to which they helped advance housing struggles in their communities. Although the structure, focus and content of the labs in São Paulo and Lagos differed – as they responded to the strategic objectives of each local movement – we have identified five key outcomes common to both:

Contesting dominant narratives. The labs gave local residents the opportunity to tell their own stories in their own voice, from which they can build an archive of experiences and challenge official narratives that often criminalise or discriminate against housing movements and people living in informal settlements.

Resisting violence and rights violations. Through the labs, residents expanded their capacity to use technology to produce media (for example, using mobile phones, which are widely accessible, or more sophisticated tools). More residents are now able to quickly record and share threats of forced evictions and situations of violence, mobilising support and providing legal and paralegal teams with evidence of rights violations that can be used in court proceedings.

Expanding personal agency to struggle for housing rights. The civic media labs provided opportunities for participants with different motivations and interests to expand their individual agency, from younger residents wanting to gain new skills to older local leaders seeking to improve their capacity to use technology. Regardless of their motivations, participants developed their capacity to communicate about issues important to both individuals and collectives, such as security, flooding, evictions, and access to water and land.

Strengthening solidarity and movement building. The labs helped increase the institutional capacities of both housing movements. First, the labs attracted residents with diverse individual motivations, particularly younger people, who could contribute new energy and skills to movement building. Second, the labs provided housing movements with an opportunity to review their communication capacities, limitations and aspirations. Finally, the media and communications outputs raised the visibility of issues within and across communities, creating opportunities for housing movements to strengthen solidarity around specific agendas.

Influencing decisions about actions, practices and policies. The workshops offered an opportunity for participants to highlight key concerns within communities. The content produced (for example, videos showing challenges relating to water access and security) has been used to illustrate community concerns to local leaders, call for changes in community practices and address authorities with specific demands related to their community and housing needs and aspirations.

A key mechanism for expanding civic space

The outcomes from the civic media labs demonstrate that efforts to actively strengthen the communications and media capabilities of housing social movements can help expand the civic spaces in which they operate. By recognising communication as a core function of grassroots groups and supporting initiatives to strengthen these capabilities, donors and development organisations can help improve the effectiveness of their work across different scales and objectives and advance democracy, equality and social justice.

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Key lessons & innovations

- Unfair media landscapes directly affect housing justice struggles.
- Housing movements use a range of online and offline communication practices that have evolved with changing conditions.
- Action to strengthen communication capabilities is strategic for consolidating housing movements and their efforts to contest harmful narratives, resist violence, expand individual agency, strengthen community solidarity and influence policy and development decisions.

Partners' view

Some lab participants said they use [the media training] to support their business. Some say they use it to make change in their community. Some are excited to just learn, even if they haven't done much.

Civic media lab facilitator in Lagos

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Knowledge
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Notes

¹ For more information, see: www.iied.org/civic-media-for-housing-rights-lessons-struggles-against-evictions-sao-paulo-lagos/

² Cociña, C and Frediani, AA (2024) Bringing housing justice and civic media together: three reflections. IIED, London. / ³ Cociña, C and Frediani, AA (2024) Media trajectories: a brief introduction to the communication practices of housing movements in São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London. / ⁴ Frediani, AA and Cociña, C (2024) Communication practices and the struggles for housing justice: early reflections from São Paulo and Lagos. IIED, London.

