



Civic Media Labs in São Paulo and Lagos:

Lessons and methods from and for
housing movements

About the authors

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Front cover photo: Participants of civic media labs in Lagos. Credit: Media4Change team

Back cover photo: Participants of final workshop in São Paulo. Credit: Camila Cociña/IIED

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1. Introduction: Learning from civic media labs

Between 2022 and 2025, IIED partnered with housing social movements from São Paulo and Lagos to explore the importance of communication capabilities for housing movements. IIED's Housing Justice team, along with partners in Brazil (**União dos Movimentos por Moradia** and **LabJuta, Federal University of ABC**) and Nigeria (**Justice & Empowerment Initiatives** and the **University of Ibadan**) have worked together on the action-research project, 'Civic media for housing rights: lessons from struggles against evictions in São Paulo and Lagos'. The aim was to strengthen grassroots-led civic media initiatives, improving their ability to shape equitable decision-making processes and support more inclusive and just visions of housing.

As part of this initiative, the research team conducted a series of analyses, including a framing of the discussion about **communication practices and the struggles for housing justice**, the documentation of the state of housing rights in São Paulo and Lagos, and a revision of the historical communication practices that the housing movements in both cities have utilised over the last decades.

Beyond these reflections, a critical component of the project was the implementation and documentation of media workshops for grassroots groups in both cities, which we have called 'civic media labs' (see Box 1). In this case study collection, we aim to learn from the implementation of these civic media labs and inspire other civil society groups to mobilise active efforts to strengthen communication capabilities as a strategic means for consolidating housing social movements.



Final workshop and Presentation of the result of the 'Written text' workshops in final session, December 2023. Credit: UMM-SP

To this end, we present the experience of the labs in São Paulo and Lagos through a series of common questions:

- What were the strategic objectives of the labs, and how did they align with current movements' needs and aspirations?
- How were the labs structured, who were their participants, location, and describe the media focus, material used and outputs?
- And what were the main challenges and lessons identified in the labs' implementation and aftermath?

Looking at these two experiences together, this case study collection concludes by reflecting on the value of implementing workshops and activities with an explicit media focus. It also provides some insights on what is needed to enhance the potential of initiatives such as the civic media labs, and their implications for movements struggling against housing injustices.

Box 1: What are civic media labs?

The implementation of 'civic media labs' was a critical component of this action-research project. These labs are a series of workshops for grassroots groups that focus explicitly on strengthening the individual and collective capacities to produce media, using a diverse set of communication practices and technologies, and targeting housing movements' members and their networks. The design, length, structure and focus of the labs are defined by each movement.

Although the scope of the use of media varies, civic media labs share some common considerations:

- **Civic media labs are community-led with members of civil society and grassroots groups taking the lead in different aspects of the design and implementation of the workshops.** This implies using technologies, tools and methods that are culturally appropriate and recognising differences across age (such as different degrees of digital literacy), gender (for example the participation and engagement of women might be restricted, depending on the location or timing), ethnicity (such as potential tensions emerging depending on the focus of the workshops), among others.
- **Civic media labs have a strategic intent which responds to the collective objectives, needs and aspirations of the organisations steering the workshops.** Some of these objectives might focus on individual capacities and personal skills acquisition, but overall the strategic intent responds to the common needs and aspirations of the movements, either in terms of their own organisational strengths, and/or in terms of their outward-looking struggles.
- **Civic media labs approach learning from a critical pedagogical perspective as they bring together technical skills and media literacy with political and critical awareness.** Labs include practical sessions focused on learning how to use different technologies and communication channels, intertwined with discussions about rights, citizenship and collective action. They also approach participants as active agents of the learning space, conceiving the labs as a shared learning experience between trainers and trainees, who collectively create political consciousness.
- **Civic media labs have a structured methodology which is collectively decided before their implementation.** Although labs are flexible and respond to events that may not go 'as planned', they are designed not as a collection of individual training sessions, but rather with an understanding of how the different components work together. This implies considering how they are structured, their length, the physical location of the activities, the participants and audience of the workshop, and the media and thematic focus of the different sessions. Together, these components provide interconnected building blocks to respond to strategic objectives.

2. São Paulo: Strengthening *Comunicação Popular* across the city

2.1 About UMM-SP

União dos Movimentos por Moradia (UMM-SP) is an alliance of housing movements in greater São Paulo, established in 1987 as the São Paulo chapter of a national housing movement called União Nacional por Moradia Popular which coordinates initiatives from different parts of Brazil. UMM-SP is organised as a coalition of several movements that represent different regions of Greater São Paulo, as well as groups around specific issues such as women's organisations and informal settlement dwellers. Its work focuses mainly on supporting and managing processes of collective self-help housing, stopping evictions and organising social mobilisation to advocate for policy change.

2.2 What were the strategic objectives of the labs?

For UMM-SP, the possibility of implementing civic media lab workshops was seen as an opportunity to advance several strategic objectives. On the one hand, it aimed to increase the technological and digital literacy of members and leaders of the movement, particularly addressing the existing skills gaps of older members. On the other hand, the workshops aimed to identify, train and recruit movement members with an interest in media production, who could help disseminate media skills across the movement. In the mid-term, the intention was to constitute a media working group with representatives from the movements across the city, who could coordinate media production and establish feedback loops between localised and centralised actions. In this context, they decided to label the civic media labs as 'Popular communication course: unveiling communication strategies'. Importantly, the word 'popular' here refers to the broader sense of 'belonging to the people' or 'common', which could also be translated as 'grassroots communication'.

2.3 How were the labs structured?

To achieve these objectives, UMM-SP organised a series of six workshops, taking place monthly between July and December 2023. All workshops were hosted in a common venue in central São Paulo and, in order to facilitate the participation of representatives coming from different corners of the city, they took place on Saturday mornings.

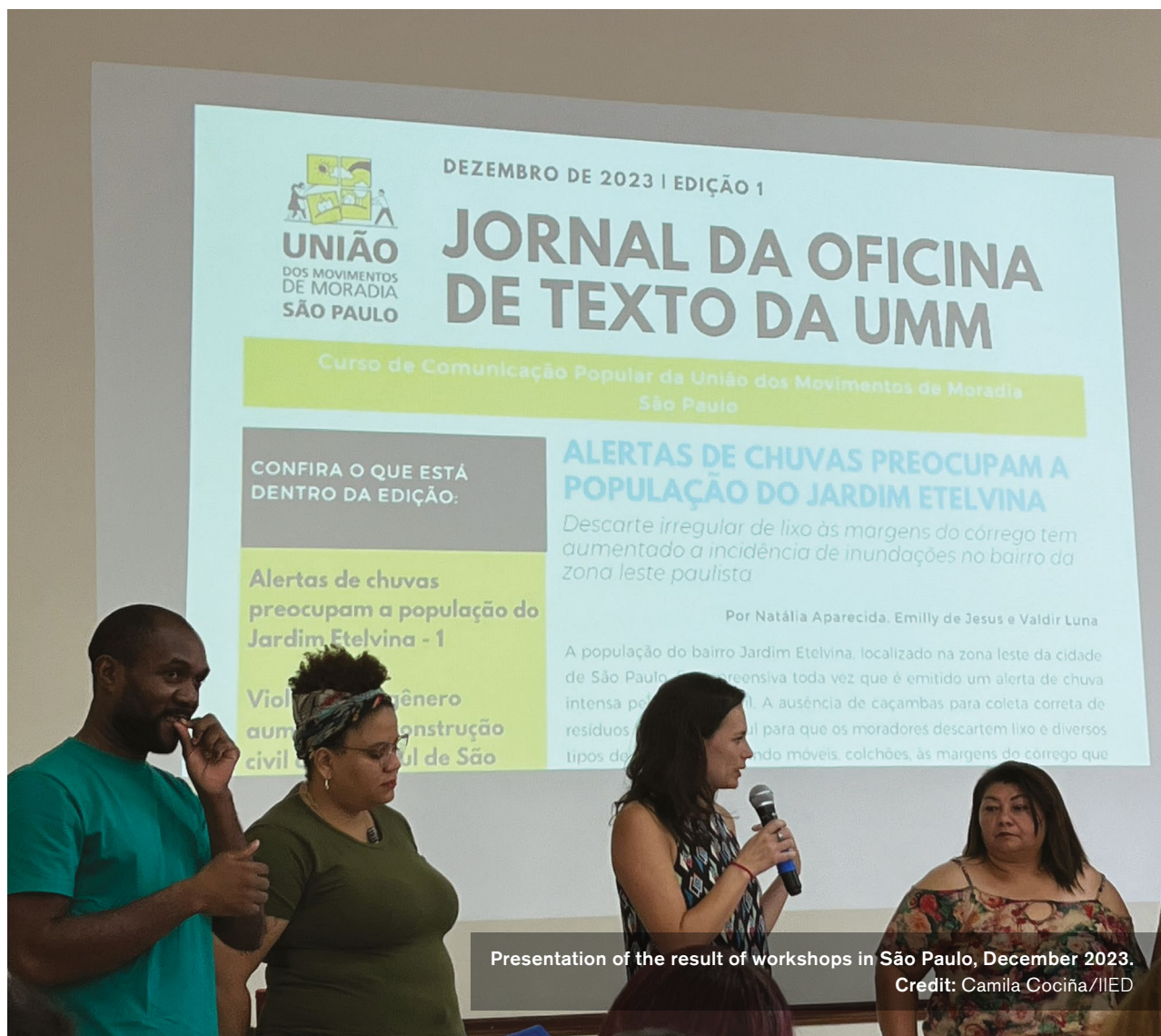
Each session was structured in two parts: the first half of the morning focused on 'theory', in which a guest speaker delivered a presentation addressing key topics in relation to 'popular communication'. These topics included the role of communication and mainstream media in social struggles, social networks and alternative media, and experiences of popular communication, among others. The second half of the sessions focused on 'practice', for which the group was divided into media 'languages' and used the time together to develop specific skills, and advance individual and collective projects to put those skills into practice. The groups focused on the following media languages: video, podcast, graphic design and written text. Each session focused on a different aspect of the media production process: planning and scriptwriting, pre-production, production, editing and dissemination, and providing training on technical skills.

Before the launch of the course, UMM-SP put out an open call to all members, assigning quotas for the representatives from different areas of the city. Even though the number of participants slightly decreased throughout the workshops, the course was completed by more than 100 members. Each participant self-selected for the media languages they wanted to develop. A crucial aspect of the practical component of the course was the use of 'low-key' technology: specifically, the use of mobile phones as the main (and often only) tool was crucial, as well as prioritising freely available apps.

In the final session of the course, groups shared the outputs and results from the different media languages. Although not all of them managed to fully finalise their outputs, the session served as a celebration and an opportunity to share the richness, difficulties and lessons of the process. All participants received certificates at the end of the training course.

Table 1: Structure and content of workshops – São Paulo

Session	Theory	Practice
Month 1	The role of communication in popular struggles	Practice session in smaller groups divided by media languages: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Video ▪ Podcast ▪ Graphic design ▪ Written text
Month 2	Commercial media and housing struggles	
Month 3	Social networks and alternative media	
Month 4	Experiences in popular communication	
Month 5	Formation of an UMM communication collective	
Month 6	Presentation of the work and closing	



2.4 What were the main challenges and lessons identified in the labs' implementation and aftermath?

The important lessons learnt from the São Paulo's labs that could inform future experiences are:

- **Heterogeneity:** This course was attended by a mixed group – particularly in terms of age. It was one of the main successes of the experience, but also a critical challenge. Particularly, the gaps in terms of digital literacy, access to hardware and software, and availability of data created some difficulties in achieving all expected outcomes in the practical component of the workshops. This was particularly acute for aspects that required higher technical skills, such as editing.
- **Facilitators:** The course relied on the knowledge and experiences of facilitators and guest speakers, and in the interactions between them and the labs' participants. In that sense, it was crucial to invite partners with both grounded media experience and a practical and pedagogical understanding of popular education – as well as sharing common values about housing rights and struggles.
- **Location:** The decision to host the course in a central location was fundamental for the strategic objectives of the labs, allowing cross-cutting participation across different movements of São Paulo, and promoting more interactions and opportunities for synergies across different local organisations. This decision, however, comes with some trade-offs that could be considered for future versions. These include the difficulty of coordinating work between the monthly sessions (as participants may live very distant from each other), and the possibility of engaging more in depth with local issues and themes.
- **Media languages:** Different media languages pose different technical issues that translate into specific requirements and challenges. For instance, the group focusing on podcast production struggled to produce an end product. However, this problem was resolved by the surprise of an improvised live podcast streamed by the group during the closing session – demonstrating the different ways in which the acquired skills could be used and mobilised. Conversely, the group working on the graphic design team started producing, utilising and disseminating digital flyers for their housing-related activities almost from day one. This was testament to both the predominance of WhatsApp 'cards' as a media channel, and the appropriateness and simplicity of the tools used. Across all the media, the use of free apps, available on mobile phones, was an essential starting point.
- **Continuity and engagement:** Although there was very active engagement throughout the workshops, inevitably there was some decrease in participation – partly due to the need for movement members to compromise activities and livelihoods to participate. It was particularly challenging to establish the intended media working group, and the consolidation of a collective identity for UMM-SP media presence. However, the interest from participants in repeating the course and being able to enrol and learn a different media language has been explicitly shared. The active engagement and mobilisation of media practices is key for UMM-SP to continue challenging narratives that discriminate against, and hinder housing social movements.

An important lesson is that communicating effectively within communities, between communities, externally with partners and more broadly to society as a whole, plays a key role in fuelling the struggle for the right to housing, the right to the city and other human and citizenship rights.

São Paulo civic media lab participant¹

1 Gonsales, TA, Comarú, FA, Barbosa, BR, Rodrigues, E, Rosa, EF, Bacha, CC e Oliveira, JPR (2025) *Movimento de moradia e práticas de comunicação popular: aprendizados a partir de um processo de capacitação em São Paulo, Brasil*. IIED, London. Available at: <https://www.iied.org/pt-br/22646iied>

3. Lagos: Expanding Media4Change efforts in key settlements

3.1 About JEI and Media4Change

Justice and Empowerment Initiatives (JEI) is a Nigerian NGO that supports the Nigerian Slum/Informal Settlement Federation ('the Federation'). It aims to empower marginalised communities to lead the changes that they would like to see in their own communities. The Federation is a national mass movement of residents of informal settlements who work together to improve the living conditions of the urban poor. As part of Slum Dwellers International (SDI), they have traditionally participated in a global network of slum dweller federations. JEI supports the work of the Federation through paralegal services, movement building, strategic advocacy and supporting the Federation's media team through the Media4Change (M4C) initiative, convened by young members of the Federation who produce media content.



Civic media labs in Lagos.
Credit: Media4Change team

3.2 What were the strategic objectives of the labs?

Media4Change, with the support of JEI, has a long experience in supporting the production of media and audio-visual documentation aligned to the Federation's and communities' priorities. In this context, the labs were seen as an opportunity to bring training and capacity-building close to strategic neighbourhoods where communities were going through processes of transformation. This was particularly relevant given the predominance of online and centralised interactions during the pandemic and its aftermath, and the need to 'return' to the grounded work in the communities. Then, the strategic objectives of the labs centred around putting power in the hands of urban poor communities through media skills acquisition, amplifying critical voices towards improving the wellbeing of residents and countering negative stereotypes – as well as identifying and recruiting potential new members for the M4C team.

3.3 How were the labs structured?

The groundwork for the labs began with extensive conversations and dialogue with key stakeholders to identify which communities were ready to take advantage of this programme. As a result, three communities were selected and offered the training – Isale Akoka, Ago Egun and Otumara – all communities with a strong Federation presence and all going through transformation processes.

The labs were organised and facilitated by the M4C team and JEI directly in these three communities, with support from community leaders and Federation members. The training built the capacity of youth in informal settlements to tell their own stories of housing and community struggles through media-making.

In each of the communities, the labs were structured in four training 'phases' of increasing complexity:

Phase 1: Introductory Training (3 days) took place in locations provided by community leaders in each of the neighbourhoods, and included introductory sessions on issues such as storytelling, photography and social media advocacy, along with practical sessions on how to handle the camera and sound recording.

Phase 2: Intermediate Training (3 days) was also carried out in each community and included more advanced sessions on issues such as telling stories through photography, composition, creating stories, media advocacy and how to tell audio stories.

Phase 3: Advanced Media Making (4 days) took place at JEI's office, with participants from different communities who wanted to deepen their skills, and who were meeting each other for the first time. This phase included in-depth training and practical sessions on issues such as videography, interviewing and sound for storytelling, video editing, media advocacy, and the co-creation of plans for a two-day, story development session.

Phase 4: Project Planning and Production (2 days) Participants returned to their communities to develop and implement the planning, pre-production and production of their own projects.

Following Phase 4, each team identified a project they would work on through the next two months, with mentorship from M4C members to ensure the trainees put into practice what they had learnt during the phases. The themes of this projects were the right to clean drinkable water (Ago Egun), awareness-raising around community insecurity (Isale Akoka), and a campaign around waste management and clean community, calling for partnership from the Lagos Waste Management Authority (Otumara).

Table 2: Structure and content of workshops – Lagos

Phase 1: Introductory Training	Phase 2: Intermediate Training	Phase 3: Advanced Media Making	Phase 4: Project Planning and Production
<p>Day 1</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction to Civic Media Lab, getting to know one another, level of experience 2. Making media to make change: overview of kinds of media and goals 3. Introduction to storytelling <p>Day 2</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Review of what was covered during day 1 2. Introduction to photography 3. Practical session on how to handle camera <p>Day 3</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Introduction to social media advocacy 2. Introduction to sound recording, and practical session 3. Coming up with plan for next training 	<p>Day 1 – Photography</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Applying the rules of photography in taking pictures that tell a story (with mobile phones and DSLR camera) 2. Composition, creative eye / perspectives, and simple light situations 3. How to link your photography with stories 4. Practical session, assignments and a group presentation <p>Day 2 – Right to housing and storytelling</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What is the right to housing 2. Deeper understanding of storytelling, the art of storytelling 3. Who am I telling my story to? 4. Who can I collaborate with? 5. Group assessment: practical drafting, making/creating stories, presentations of potential group's project. <p>Day 3 – Part 1: Media advocacy</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Now that you have made your story, how do you put this media to good use? 2. Campaign strategies, partnerships, and how to reach your target audience 3. Distribution plans and methods 4. Monitoring and evaluation to know if your media was effective 5. Film screening and discussion on films watched, highlighting the way stories are told <p>Day 3 – Part 2: Sound</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. How to tell audio stories 7. Stages of production: pre-production, production, scripting, managing and editing audio files 8. How to link audio media with an advocacy strategy 	<p>Day 1 – Videography</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Explanations on camera setup for videos (similarities with photography) 2. Differences in resolutions and the right settings for filming 3. Rule of thirds in videography/filming 4. How to position subject and camera for an interview 5. Discussion on the common challenges faced in videography 6. Group practical work: setting up your camera for filming, using both DSLR and phone 7. Assignment: practice interviewing, with group presentations on outcomes <p>Day 2 – Interviewing for storytelling</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Basics on how to conduct an interview 2. Interview techniques and public speaking 3. How to prepare your subject for the interview 4. Use of body language while interviewing 5. How to keep your subjects engaged 6. Use of follow-up questions <p>Day 2 – Sound for storytelling</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Using audio for storytelling 2. Assignment: collecting audio, with group presentation on outcomes <p>Day 3 – Practical session on video editing</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. How to organise your files 2. Story sequence: how to create a beginning, middle, and end 3. Synchronising audio and video 4. Editing on smart phone apps <p>Day 4 – Media advocacy</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Social media dissemination on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and X 2. Co-creating plan for 2-day story-development session 	<p>Day 1 – Setting the agenda</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What have you learned? 2. What have you tried out? 3. What do you still want to improve on? 4. What is your mindset like since the last three phases of the training? <p>Day 1 – Review</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Media advocacy 2. Storytelling 3. Photography and videography <p>Day 1 – Project planning: How to co-create a story?</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Project planning, roles and responsibilities 2. Participants identify a story they want to work on <p>Day 2 – Pre-production and Production</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Completion of project proposal planning forms 2. Drafting key questions that need to be answered in the story 3. Identify locations and people to interview 4. Fieldwork, organising interviews and research for more information
<p>Location: In communities, at locations provided by community leaders</p>	<p>Location: In communities, at locations provided by community leaders</p>	<p>Location: JEI's office as a centralised training for all participants</p>	<p>Location: In communities, at locations provided by community leaders</p>

Table 3: Communities participating and final project focus

Ago Egun	Otumara	Isale Akoka
20 trainees (5f/15m, average age 26) 5 Media4Change trainers 1 community leader	13 trainees (7f/6m, average age 20) 6 Media4Change trainers 3 community leaders	34 trainees (24f/10m average age 23) 7 Media4Change trainers
Team Project: advocacy film entitled 'Right to Clean Drinkable Water' that documents the challenges the community has faced in accessing clean water for drinking and other uses, and calling on the Lagos State Water Corporation to extend piped water to their community.	Team Project: campaign film that highlights how organising can result in a clean community, calling for partnership with the Lagos Waste Management Authority.	Team Project: awareness-raising film that highlights the challenges of insecurity and what the community is doing to address it.

3.4 What were the main challenges and lessons identified in the labs' implementation and aftermath?

There are important lessons learnt from the Lagos labs to inform future experiences:

- **Timeframes:** The planning phase for the labs took longer than anticipated, particularly due to the emphasis on respecting community processes in all phases. This calls for being flexible in planning and execution, following organic development while adapting to the timing of community members.
- **Addressing ongoing struggles:** During the implementation of the labs, eviction threats continued and divided the team's attention. Therefore, it was essential to emphasise the labs' focus on ongoing struggles and build in flexibility to ensure the authenticity of media that is grounded in real challenges. The best training instances tended to happen 'by doing', for instance, when documenting evictions or developing urgent and unplanned social media campaigns.

- **Continuity and inclusivity of participants:** The trainees varied across the lab phases and activities, with more prolonged engagements offering better opportunities for multiple touch points. It was necessary to offer flexibility for different people to engage in diverse ways, as not everyone could be away from work or school all day. Availability was a key determinant of participation in the labs, with factors that combined to determine individuals' availability – notably gender and employment status. Fundamental disparities in cultural expectations in the community led to uneven engagement of women and men. As one of the facilitators in Ago Egun reflected, "women majorly carry the family responsibility. Most times, the only thing that men do is to go and fish. That is why we have this very

"I have learned a lot. How to produce, how to do [video] editing... How to introduce yourself to people. How to go to them and tell them, 'this is where we are from, this is our place'. How to tell them your story... And if something is happening in an area, how you can invite people... and how you can protect your people."

Civic media lab participant from Isale Akoka²

² Sesan, T (2025) *Building local capabilities for housing rights advocacy: lessons from grassroots-led civic media labs in Lagos*. IIED, London. Available at <https://www.iied.org/22624iied>

low number [of women]. It is like we are telling somebody who has the responsibility of carrying the family to come and sit down and learn this thing.”

- **Technology, language and equipment:** Inequalities in technology access and digital literacy were an important challenge for the implementation of the labs. The ownership of smartphones and access to mobile data is not evenly distributed, generating disparities within and across communities. Likewise, the use of English in interfaces of technological equipment, poses a formidable challenge to non-English speaking groups.
- **Community expectations:** Given that most training activities took place in the communities, there were some challenges around potential misunderstandings about the labs’ objectives, focus and scope, and participants had to manage the perception of residents in their respective communities around the nature of the project and the benefits they could expect to derive from it. Despite this challenge, participants were able to identify opportunities for pushing crucial community agendas through their media work.



Presentation of results of the Labs in community in Lagos, November 2024.
Credit: Camila Cociña/IIED

4. Moving forward: Enhancing the potential of civic media labs

The civic media labs developed and implemented in São Paulo and Lagos not only increased the media skills of people experiencing different forms of inadequate housing, but also strengthened the linkages between these two teams and their struggles for housing justice.

In the context of this project, the teams in São Paulo and Lagos have discussed the wide range of opportunities to continue collaboration and exchanges between these two cities, building on the experience and lessons from the civic media labs. Specifically, teams seek to continue developing spaces for:

- **Showing solidarity** across countries for ongoing and future causes, such as declarations against eviction threats, international demands to governments, and so on
- **Exchanging tactics and strategies** for neighbourhoods and initiatives, such as partnerships to increase media literacy or tactics for incremental upgrading of occupied buildings
- **Showcasing community-led media** produced by the teams and their networks through screenings of videos, organising film festivals and similar events, and
- **Exchanges of policy strategies** for housing struggles, such as innovative policies for in situ upgrading and advocacy strategies.

Beyond the intent of continuing to collaborate between these two cities, the civic media labs also generated outcomes that are crucial to housing justice struggles. As has been discussed more extensively in this IIED Briefing, these include:

- **Increasing the collective capacity of contesting dominant (and often criminalising) narratives**, giving visibility to local voices, challenging mainstream ideas, and building a grounded memory of local housing narratives
- **Resisting violence and rights violations** through quick and visible responses, increasing the capacity for producing evidence for court and other opportunities for contestation
- **Expanding personal agency to struggles for rights**, equipping labs' participants with new skills and capacities
- **Strengthening community solidarity and movement building** by increasing institutional capacities and visibility of housing issues within and across communities, and
- **Influencing decisions about actions, practices, and policies** by reaching community leaders and authorities, and addressing community practices.

Identifying these outcomes has been the result of collective feedback from the sustained exchanges, comparison, reflections and co-learning between these groups throughout the project, who although active in two very different cities, nevertheless face the same housing challenges.

Considering these broad outcomes, as well as the challenges and lessons discussed in relation to each of the cases, it is crucial to expand the support towards efforts to actively strengthen the communications and media capabilities of housing social movements. This calls for donors, research institutions, governments and NGOs to recognise communication as a core function of grassroots groups. This means supporting initiatives like the labs is fundamental to fostering housing social movements – and advancing housing justice.



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This publication is focused on the implementation of 'civic media labs' led by two grassroots housing organisations in the cities of São Paulo in Brazil and Lagos in Nigeria. It explores key lessons from the implementation of these labs and aims to inspire other civil society groups to mobilise active efforts to strengthen communication capabilities as a strategic means for consolidating housing social movements. Looking at these two experiences together, this case study collection concludes by reflecting on the value of implementing workshops and activities with an explicit media focus. It also provides some insights on what is needed to enhance the potential of initiatives such as the civic media labs, and their implications for movements struggling against housing injustices.



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Products

Case study collection

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