

# EL PAÍS

**Otávio Junior: "My dream is to create a center that connects children, education and art"**

**A writer and educator in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro reflects on the usual negative narrative about these neighborhoods in Brazil and the need to listen to their inhabitants to propose useful solutions to violence and poverty.**



Otávio Junior, escritor y educador, en Complejo Penha.  
LEONARDO MARTINS DIAS

Otávio Junior, writer and educator, at Complejo Penha.

LEONARDO MARTINS DIAS

**JUN 16, 2022 - 05:34 EST**

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Otávio Júnior (1983) was born and lives in Vila Cruzeiro, one of the 13 favelas that encompasses Complexo da Penha, one of the most conflictive areas of Rio. In February, we walked from the Igreja da Penha to some of them, such as Vila Cruzeiro, Fé, Caracol, Grotão or Sereno. We crossed lush Atlantic forests colored by yellow and purple ipês, mangoes, papayas, banana trees interspersed with houses with open doors and windows. We reached the top of one of these neighborhoods, with amazing views, where we have lunch. "Coming here broadens perspectives and inspires," observed Júnior.

Although I couldn't take out cell phone nor note book in many areas, the atmosphere was friendly and welcoming. "But everything changes radically, peace ends when police or rival drug gangs come" he explained. We heard gunshots drowning out the frenzied symphonies of the little birds. Warned of the danger, we get out of the way. A week after our walk, a police operation claimed eight lives. Last week, at [least 28 people were killed](#) in another security force operation in Vila Cruzeiro. The killings occurred in [Terra Prometida](#), the poorest part of the favela.



Un árbol de mangos en las favelas del Complexo Penha.  
LEONARDO MARTINS DIAS

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A mango tree in the favelas of Complexo Penha.  
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### ***“Literature changes lives”***

Junior educates children who grow up in that environment and does so through books and theater. “Literature changes lives. The book *Don Gatón*, which I found in the garbage when I was eight years old, connected me with libraries and writing, and with museums and knowledge.”

With a lot of commitment, donated books, suitcase and rug in hand, he launched the [Ler é 10 project](#), the first mobile library in the Complexos Alemão and Penha, which could add up to 30 favelas and 200,000 people, according to [IBGE](#), although these data are often [questioned by organizations](#).

With four published books, some translated into Spanish, Júnior has won three awards, including the traditional [Jabuti](#) for Brazilian literature. “All of that is important. But I need resources to innovate. I want to do more projects in our community to recover the affective memory of children, for example, linking gastronomy to literature, to stimulate conversations. You and I have collaborated to promote art and literature in favelas, but look how different one feels right now enjoying this food and these views”, vibrates the author, before a long silence contemplating the favelas.

***“With a lot of commitment, donated books, suitcase and rug in hand, Otávio Júnior launched the Ler é 10 project, the first mobile library in the Complexos Alemão and Penha”***

We met in 2010 when he was [presenting his books](#) in Madrid. His link with popular knowledge, considered informal, caught my curiosity, because I know that this is the key to designing projects that generate real impacts. “I eagerly seek connections between popular and scholarly wisdom. Why, when talking about our communities, do the media spread violence and drugs, and not the positive?” Shortly after, we began to collaborate in the [Rio+20 United Nations Summit](#), projects in [Rio](#), [Madrid](#)...

This accent on the positive of the favelas helps its residents to have references to project their life perspectives: “I realized that [in these neighborhoods] they need to read, learn and get to know each other more. For this, I spread their constructive stories, their wisdom and their own knowledge. Thus, their self-esteem improves,” says Júnior.

### **Solutions from inside**

Achieving the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs), transforming towards authentic sustainability, implies assimilating and considering in projects the knowledge of people who experience challenges such as poverty, hunger or inequalities. Thus, the ability to

get [engaged in the projects is more intense](#) and, consequently, a true collective and shared impact and value is generated. Lastly, the allies of the projects are positively differentiated from a [skeptical society about the sustainability promoted by organizations](#). For all these reasons, Júnior is an excellent collaborator for projects.

Sterile sustainability plans continue to be made. "Some organizations, like well-intentioned companies, try to help, but they often don't reach out to the community and the results are dubious. I haven't even been invited to a sustainability event Although I would like to."

This occurs even with entities specialized in social development, such as the United Nations, which [invests millions of euros in programs such as the so-called Improvement of Neighborhoods](#). An example is the Kensup project, in Kibera, the largest slum area in Nairobi (Kenya). Its effectiveness was compromised because its team was not sufficiently present on the ground, although it is possible to reach it on foot from UN-Habitat headquarters. In addition, the communities were not adequately listened to in order to learn the necessary knowledge for the design of solutions. This is how the [institution itself](#) (p33) and the journalist Doug Saunders analyze it in the book [Arrival City](#) (p112-120), mentioning negative impacts for local inhabitants.

***"Those of us who work in this sector know that unemployed children on the streets, at the mercy of crime, are a cornerstone of social inequity and violence, endemic in Brazilian society"***

As we addressed the needs of his community, Junior became emotional: "I prefer to focus on one [need]: the idleness of these poor children on the streets makes me panic." Putting his hands on his head and shaking it negatively, he asked himself: "What future can we have as a society if they lack references, life perspectives?" Those of us who work in this sector know that unemployed children on the streets, at the mercy of crime, are a cornerstone of social inequity and violence, endemic in Brazilian society.

On our walk we talked with different people, including children, youth and adults who were carrying pistols, rifles and grenades. Some had been Junior students, whom they treat with respect. His voice trembled and his eyes moistened: "It's impossible to reach everyone. I remember some of them, now here armed, sitting in a circle, listening to my stories".

We talk about solutions: "My dream is to create a hub [center] that connects children, education and art. A physical space that stimulates children to ask themselves questions, because these raise intelligence. Why am I black? Am I black like the Africans? What is my family tree? How do dreams come true? Why do I speak Portuguese? Why does this fruit, whose juice we now drink, taste like this? (...)". Junior paused, looking carefully at the horizon and continued: "Education has to improve a

lot. It is also necessary to rethink the student-teacher relationship. For example, they should be related for more years, instead of changing annually. In addition, the local language have to be spoken, as you do, to involve families, unleash their curiosities and connect them with knowledge, so that they encourage their children to go to school". What about technology? I asked him. "It may be important, but thinking systemically, the solutions lie in real human relationships, not there."

It is fundamental to understand, from inside, the realities that one claims to want to transform. In addition, it is thus possible to differentiate companies' brands by promoting a more authentic sustainability, which builds trust with society, and generates true, collective and shared impacts and values.

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**This is the second article in the [series 'Relationship with communities and informal popular knowledge: central pillars to transform towards authentic sustainability'](#) published by Leonardo Dias.**

**[Leonardo Martins Dias](#) carries out multi-actor sustainability projects. He teaches classes and does research on more authentic sustainability, currently with a focus on education..**

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