

EL PAÍS

BRAZIL

Dreaming and feeling hope from the favela City of God

The social activist Jota Marques talks about his work in one of the most famous neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro

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**The Brazilian activist Jota Marques in City of God (Rio de Janeiro).
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Jota Marques (30 years old) immigrated from the province of Espírito Santo to Rio de Janeiro, both in Brazil, when he was only 20 years old to settle in City of God, or CDD as it is colloquially known. "I was looking for a better life. I arrived without references and got involved in the National Movement of Street Children", he says, visibly tired. He had two mobile phones ringing constantly and two sleepless nights managing conflicts.

The day of the interview he met me just after mediating a family conflict. An underage youth had been kicked out of his house for getting into trouble. As guardian counsellor, Jota Marques was warned of the situation and came into contact with the boy. After talking with him to find a solution, he managed to stay in a shelter for underage youth in City of God.

Known as one of the most conflictive favelas in Rio de Janeiro, [CDD gained international fame for the film Cidade de Deus in 2002](#). Its first inhabitants arrived in the 1960s evicted from other neighbourhoods in more touristic areas of Rio. According to the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics ([IBGE 2010](#)) latest census, today there are 36,515 residents in CDD, but [local organizations](#) estimate that there are actually more than 60,000. "Most are humble workers who were displaced and have to live hours away from work," confirms Marques.

Jota Marques is the son of a domestic worker. Although he studied Advertising and then Pedagogy, he did not finish them and has no degrees. Currently, he is a recognized local leader, educator, social project developer and social activist. "In our social organization we manage basic sanitation, the Covid-19 pandemic, human abuse, professional training, food and health sovereignty, and we educate", he says. These initiatives go ahead thanks to the union and collaboration of the community, but also to the support of international donations and the Movimento Sem Terra (Landless Movement), [the largest social movement in the world](#). Jota states that neither the State, nor the companies or large NGOs support them. "They sell empowerment and meritocracy. Fallacies! We need an active presence in the centres of power", he comments.

From sustainability initiatives and projects, the empowerment of people is frequently diffused. But in reality, it takes a lot of effort to get investors to share power with the communities they say they want to help. "[Investors] unilaterally decide what, how and when to do, without really knowing the reality, coming closer to the ground or listening to people", says Marques. In the end, the efficiency of the investments and the much-publicized impacts tend to be limited. In addition, investors lose an irreplaceable value: the opportunity to build trust with a [sceptical society that does not believe their sustainability projects](#).

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The trip to CDD from Leme, south of Rio de Janeiro, required me to take three buses. It was extremely hot and the buses had no air conditioning. The third bus driver, perplexed, warned me: "Do not go there.". Actually, when I got out of the bus, in CDD, I

was obliged to explain to the local informal power forces why I was there, which made me feel their power. Experiencing local life on-the-ground, as it is, contributes to connect and build trust with communities, and enables the assimilation of local knowledge and context. Consequently, experiencing local life, on-the-ground, contributes to foster more authentic and efficient sustainability projects.

Along the same line, Jota highlighted two global and central gaps for sustainability: the illusory idea of meritocracy and the lack of representativeness and social representation in the political arenas and public spheres. Those who the formal system usually classifies as 'low socioeconomic background' are underrepresented. Their knowledge, ideas, cultures and interests are not represented where our systems are shaped (the political arenas and public institutions). Jailson de Souza, Jorge Barbosa and Marcus Faustini, intellectuals from the poor peripheries of Rio, discuss about these issues in the book *O Novo Carioca* (The New Carioca, 2012). Daniel Markovits, professor of law and principal at Yale University, argues about the flaws of meritocracy in the book *The Meritocracy Trap*.

"Companies maximize profit, deduct taxes, or evade them in tax havens, [destroying the hope of any system's sustainability](#). We mistrust the companies", says this community leader. In his opinion, the reason for this distrust is partly because companies do not seek to understand the contexts of the world, but to use initiatives and people as propaganda for sustainability [sustainability-washing] and to profit. "They invest in short-term sustainability projects, although social transformation requires long-term frameworks. CEOs and managers seek to maximize their own power, salaries, bonuses and wealth immediately. To do this, they need poverty, inequality and crisis. This is a reason why they engender fear and dependency, exploit margins, control and perpetuate powers. People do not matter, but since dehumanization takes its toll, it is fashionable to sell the idea that they put people first or in the centre", Jota argues.

In fact, Marques has never been invited to sustainability events. He considers them unsustainable, with empty and unilateral speeches. "Universities do invite me to events. But I feel like a studied lab rat, not a thinker. Furthermore, they practically do not come here. There is a lack of real interest in the human. They do not even share the conclusions of their researches about us with us."

"In the future I want to be able to have hope in the future. Last night some police officers were here [in front of his house] with rifles, grenades, etc., but they know that there is no crime in this specific zone of CDD. They pursued shady interests. Like this, looking at death from your bed, it is difficult to dream and feel hope."

As a research from the University of Oxford analyses, part of the academic community recognizes [this gap, also between scientific knowledge and popular knowledge](#). From practical perspectives, this gap and distance produce inefficient sustainability projects. From academic perspectives it contributes to train students, the leaders of tomorrow who will shape our systems, without engaging them to genuinely adopt social and environmental criteria in their decision-making processes.

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

[Leonardo Martins Dias](#) designs and implements multi-stakeholder sustainability projects. He teaches and researches on a more authentic sustainability, currently with a focus on education.

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