

EL PAÍS

SOCIAL REINTEGRATION

André Ramos, from leading the drug trafficking to leading social projects in Rio de Janeiro

The life of this former delinquent took an unexpected turn thanks to a social reintegration programme. Now he contributes to the reintegration of others who, like him, managed to get out of the world of drugs

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André Ramos, social integrator, poses for a photo in Rio de Janeiro.

BRUNO ITAN

It was a golden coloured afternoon in January 2013 in the Fallet favela, below Christ the Redeemer, in Rio de Janeiro. I was very busy managing the relationship with communities, companies, government, advisory bodies of the United Nations. I was called from the porter's lodge of the neighbourhood association where we were launching a social project. A boy wanted to see me, it was André Ramos (36 years old

now). With no money, he had taken four buses and travelled four hours to ask me to participate in the [leadership empowerment project](#). There were no more vacancies, but the sparkle in his eyes, his tenacity and his story of life inspired me to make room for him without hesitation.

Ramos has always been a leader, but today he leads sustainability projects: “I integrate ex-prisoners from the [penitentiary system](#) into society, as it happened me. I am also a taxi driver, tour guide, pastor and father of Luis.”

As we do when we collaborate in projects, in May 2022 we did this interview: immersed in the local context. We walked through Galinha, Baiana or Fazendinha, some of the dozens of favelas that make up the Complexo do Alemão cluster, considered the largest arms and drug supermarket in Latin America, and home to [more than 180,000 workers](#).

Ramos' story represents that of many people in Brazil. He was born in Santa Margarida (Minas Gerais State, in the southeast of the country) and migrated with his mother and seven siblings to Rio. “We were looking for the dream of a better life in the big city, but we ended up living in its streets. We sold candy at traffic lights and a drug trafficker liked how I developed myself. I joined the Company [drug trafficking in the local jargon] and got a roof for my family”, he confesses.

Contrary to the simplistic message of many American movies, with which our Western systems tend to align, the lines between good and bad are blurred. “I felt confused because society demonizes drug traffickers; while police, military, and politicians collaborate with them. In addition, the drug, longed for by society, was the one that provided a roof for my family”, he admits.

The unequal distribution of power in Brazilian society contributes to the seduction of many young people by crime. Joining criminality allowed him to have some power over his own life and survive. “Before being arrested, I was leading an important part of the drug sale here in Alemão.” His experience with drug trafficking makes him think about, perhaps, one day writing a book, he comments excitedly. “What would the rich – who also commit crimes, for example, evading the taxes that would have allowed me to go to school – do if they suffered the smell, the cold humidity and the shit of living on the violent streets?”, he reflects.



André Ramos, social integrator, poses for a photo in Rio de Janeiro.

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After two years in prison, he finally had an opportunity for social reinsertion, as an assistant in the public administration, which revealed new life expectations for him. “I felt hope. Could my mother sleep easy and stop imagining my body coming home in a coffin? My companions used to not reach a year of life since they entered the Company”, he recalls.

Although in the end it can be said that he had support from the Government, there are very few reinsertion initiatives like the one in which Ramos participated. The contrast is enormous if we reflect on the situation of Brazilian prisons: overcrowded and kept in [subhuman conditions](#). The work carried out by NGOs or companies through social projects could help, but for Ramos "they rarely work."

The [leadership empowerment project](#) in which he participated in 2013 was financed by companies, the public administration and the United Nations; but even though he considers that it is not enough: "More money, time and political stability are needed", but above all it is necessary that the stakeholders learn the realities/context from inside (on-the-ground). “[In the leadership empowerment project] we felt that we mattered and that our participation was really desired. We felt safe and hopeful to open up and tell our life stories sincerely. Consequently, we were able to come up with real solutions. Those project experiences united us, I am still in contact with those leaders from around the world [who participated] until today”.

In 1969, Sherry Arnstein concluded in her seminal scholarly article ‘*Ladder of Citizen Participation*’ that there is no social impact without true participation, which in turn requires distribution of power. Authentic empowerment generates a feeling of trust and, consequently, enables real collaboration that is essential for a more truthful

sustainability. Genuinely participatory social projects generate differential values for all participants, including investor interest groups. This is a unique value, since society, according to the Havas Institute, [does not believe in companies' sustainability projects](#).

“Companies, NGOs and governments promote that they empower us. But it is likely to be propaganda. Their leaders come to take their photo, not to meet us or to think of solutions with us. We immediately feel it in their looks, postures, bodies, attitudes, behaviour, topics of conversation, words... They embarrass others. How are we going to believe their inclusion speeches if they are not minimally capable of integrating? We know they seek power, money, promotion and we know that they do not really care about us. But surviving means relating with them.”

Leaders like Ramos are a reference for young people, who are in turn the soul of the future. Therefore, if we want sustainable societies, it is essential to empower them through true participation in sustainability projects.

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This is the seventh 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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