RIO DE JANEIRO is a large city of 6 million inhabitants in the south-east of Brazil. It is Brazil’s second largest city, after São Paulo and its massive 23 million population (Figure 1).

For decades, Rio de Janeiro’s slums appeared as blank areas on its maps. At best these favelas, which house nearly one-fifth of the city’s inhabitants, were ignored by residents of the richer neighbourhoods, and abandoned by local authorities (Figure 2). At worst, the favelas were scorned by many as urban scars that ruined one of the world’s most beautiful cities, and scars that should be removed – by force if necessary (see Figure 3). The location of the many favelas in Rio shows a demarked clustering around the eastern coastal strip near to the CBD. More remote settlements tend to be along main roads.

However, this attitude changed following the return of Brazil to democratic rule in the mid-1980s. An acceptance of the favelas’ existence and compassion for the plight of its poorest citizens began to prevail amongst the city authorities and planners. Rather than destroy the favelas and cram their populations into public housing, the city would now seek to upgrade their basic infrastructure and provide much needed social services. New strategies were

![Figure 1: Location of Rio de Janeiro in Brazil](image1)

![Figure 2: Location of favelas in Rio de Janeiro](image2)

![Figure 3: A favela in Rio de Janeiro](image3)
Rio’s favelas are growing at a rate that exceeds the rest of the city. This places an enormous burden on the infrastructure and housing. As a result conditions in the favelas can be appalling, though the severity differs from one slum to the next.

- In one favela (Rocinha), average incomes are very low at around $100 a month.
- A lack of sewers means that diseases such as dengue fever thrive, leading to infant mortality rates that are 50% higher than elsewhere in Rio state.
- Drinking water is usually accessed by tapping into a city water main – these are often at the bottom of the steep slopes on which the favelas are located and a long arduous journey several times a day is required for dwellers at the top of the slum.
- Only about 50% of favela residents have access to indoor toilets.
- Sewers are often open drains running at street level, creating a major health hazard.
- Rubbish is either disposed of by incineration or by bringing it down to the foot of the favela for the city authorities to collect. However, that which is incinerated can set fire to surrounding wooden homes and the smoke can be harmful. In addition, the city does not always collect the dumped rubbish so it festers in the hot, humid climate and becomes a source of disease.
- Heavy tropical rainstorms can lead to mudslides on the steep slopes on which most favelas are built (Figure 4). In April 2010, intense rain triggered the most lethal mudslides in Rio’s history, which left 224 people dead.

**Programa Favela-Bairro**

In 1995, with the support of the Inter-Americas Development Bank (IDB), Rio de Janeiro launched its ambitious Programa Favela-Bairro, an initiative that aimed to improve the quality of life for some of its inhabitants by changing the favelas into proud neighbourhoods and integrating them into the formal city’s fabric.

Despite monumental challenges, the programme has been hailed as a success and at least ten other Latin American cities have adopted the strategy to help improve their own slum problems. In 2003, the IDB announced that it would continue to fund the programme and committed to raise the budget to over $1 billion, having already spent $600 million on the project, the majority of which went on public works in approximately 168 of Rio’s favelas.

A recently announced upgrade is in Complexo de Alemao, a large area of favelas that sprawl over the hillsides in the north of the city. Improvements will include providing 26,000 residents with access to a network of water supply and drainage systems and the collection of waste. Public lighting will be provided and the streets and pavements widened. Two new primary schools, a technical college, a library and two crèches will be built, along with other healthcare and public services. There are also plans to secure the hillsides around the favela to prevent future landslides.

Perhaps the most ambitious plan is the installation of a cablecar system that will connect the favela to the wealthier and more commercial Ipanema district of Rio, with the capacity to transport 30,000 people a day. The main objective of this is to integrate the Alemao residents with the rest of the city below to improve their quality of life, mobility and employment prospects.

However, Favela-Bairro still has challenges to overcome, not least extending its benefits to all of Rio’s 700 favelas. Problems have arisen with the maintenance of newly built infrastructure and housing. Cracks and other signs of wear and tear are appearing and residents lack the skills and resources to make repairs.
The problem of gangs, violence and drug culture

Perhaps of greatest concern is the well-publicised problem of drug-related violence within the favelas. Many favelas are under the control of well-armed and well-organised drug gangs and are virtually no-go areas for non-residents. Without police control of the favela, the city authorities cannot move in and begin the necessary improvements. Furthermore, the criminal gangs block the important objective of Favela-Bairro of formalising the favelas and allowing the residents’ properties and business activities to become legal. With the gangs in control, the residents are condemned to a life outside the law, where electricity and television must be pirated, residents lack legal property deeds and their jobs remain within the informal economy.

Stronger policing

In recent years Rio’s city authorities have been criticised in the media for their heavy-handed approach towards the drug gangs in the favelas (Figure 5). The BOPE (Special Police Operations Battalion) have been accused by residents of the favelas of being treated as criminals during police raids whether or not they have any connection to the drug gangs. Confrontations between the BOPE and the gangs are often violent, with both sides using heavy weaponry, such as machine guns and grenades, and can lead to several casualties. Human rights groups estimate that over 1,000 people are killed during police shoot-outs with drug gangs each year.

However, heavy-handed or not, the evidence suggests that until the police gain control of a favela, it is difficult for city-backed improvements to begin. One recent example is from the Cidade de Deus favela. The police took control of this area in 2009 and now a force of 318 officers is based there in a new police station. In 2008 there were 29 murders in the favela, but as of June 2010 only 1 had been reported. The police action in Cidade de Deus is part of a larger strategy to establish Pacifying Police Units, or UPPs, throughout Rio’s favelas in an effort to restore law and order. The aim is not so much to abolish the drug trade, but rather to drive the gangs from the streets and so allow the authorities to improve the infrastructure and public services and to formalise and legalise the favelas.

The benefits in Cidade de Deus can be seen already. In May 2010, the favela had its first health clinic, while next door the government has built a subsidised restaurant. Residents are now able to sign up to receive their electricity from state companies. While this might mean higher utility bills, the companies offer free refrigerators and energy-saving light bulbs as an enticement, and the residents’ supply will become more reliable, safer and, importantly, legal.

Conclusion

The problems in Rio’s favelas are complex and well-established. Efforts to improve the conditions take time and vast resources. Fortunately, Rio’s economy is currently booming. It is the centre of Brazil’s offshore oil industry and is attracting other new businesses as well. This means that funding for improvement projects is increasing and jobs are becoming more available. In combination with the pressure to polish the city’s image and upgrade its services in time for the 2014 World Cup and 2016 Olympic Games, this will it is hoped stir the city authorities into further efforts to improve the quality of life of its poorest and most vulnerable residents.
1 (a) Approximately how many people live in Rio’s favelas?  
(b) Why is it hard to know the number of favelas in Rio and precisely how many people live in them?  
(c) How and why did the Rio city authorities change their attitude towards the favelas?  

2 Study Figure 2.  
(a) Draw a field sketch of the scene in which you identify the key problems for the favela residents. Make sure you leave enough space around the sketch for detailed annotations.  

Tips for field sketches  
• You do not need to be a good artist to draw a field sketch.  
• You are aiming to identify and draw the key features of the scene that you wish to show. You are not trying to show everything – the value of a field sketch is its simplicity and ability to clearly show the relevant information.  
• You can use tracing paper to help sketch the basic outline.  
• Identify any landmarks that you can draw, to help you identify and sketch any of the smaller key features.  
• Don’t just focus on the foreground – there may be features of interest in the background too.  

(b) Label the key problems and then add detailed annotations explaining why they are a problem.  

3 Create a table to help you identify the advantages and disadvantages of the Programa Favela-Bairro strategy and UPP strategy. You might set out your table copying the framework above.  

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Squatter settlement redevelopment strategy evaluation</th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Programa Favela-Bairro</strong></td>
<td><strong>UPP</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advantages</strong></td>
<td><strong>Disadvantages</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

4 (a) Read the section in this unit about conditions and improvements in the Cidade de Deus favela. Then read the following blog by a resident of Rocinha in which he discusses the attitude of favela residents to the police presence:  
(b) Now imagine that you are a resident of Cidade de Deus. Write a diary entry in which you discuss life before and after the pacification of your favela by the UPP.  

5 Group activity  
Rio de Janeiro is hosting the 2016 Olympic Games. In groups, imagine that you are the Rio Olympic Committee. You must come up with a plan to ensure that the city is ready to put on the Games and appear in front of a world audience.  

Create a presentation in which you identify the problems in the city that need to be dealt with, and explain how you might go about doing that. Your conclusions could be in the form of a PowerPoint presentation, a poster or video.  

Begin by thinking about all the different people involved:  
• The city authorities  
• The residents of the formal city neighbourhoods  
• The residents of the favelas  
• Local businesses  
• Tourists  
• Athletes  

(b) Can you come up with a plan that meets all of their needs, or not? You must justify your decisions.  

6 In your class, hold a debate around the following statement: ‘The future of Rio de Janeiro’s favelas is hopeless’.  

GeoActive Online Series 22 Summer issue Unit 458 Squatter Redevelopment in Rio de Janeiro: An Update © 2011 Nelson Thornes