

MEET THE WEST ZONE COMMUNITY UNIVERSITY

Graciela Hopstein introduces the West Zone Community University with the enthusiasm of an activist that believes in the power of shared reflection. Created by the Instituto Rio (www.institutorio.org.br), the first community foundation in Brazil, this may be one of the few examples where a local community foundation has established a university. This, however, is a university with a difference. The emphasis is not on physical infrastructure or elite education. The aim, instead, is to offer open and democratic public space for the production and sharing of knowledge. In the style of renowned Brazilian educator, Paulo Freire, community activists co-produce and exchange knowledge, while benefiting from the workshops, seminars, conferences, training sessions and on-going discussions that take place under the umbrella of the community university. There is also a focus on creating partnerships with a variety of public, private and civil society entities. What provides a twist to this initiative is the fact that the West Zone of Rio de Janeiro is marked by enormous social inequalities. The priority area for the community university is the growing favelas which shelter some of the poorest communities in Rio.

Instituto Rio is currently providing grant support, alongside the opportunities offered through the West Zone Community University, to a range of community-based projects. Luiz Vaz, long term cultural activist with the House of Love street project, outlined the positive role that drama can play in working with young people who might otherwise be attracted to gang culture. Not only have a number of these youngsters graduated into the professional theatre, but Luiz believes in the power of creative self-reflection in the tradition of the famed Theatre of Resistance. The medium may be giant puppets, but the message is of the streets. The power of culture to embed community identity was also emphasized by Adilson Almeida, who recently received an award in recognition of the work of his organisation, ACUCA. Extensive voluntary effort is invested in protecting the dance, song and historical environment of what was once a slave community. Located in an area of natural beauty, Adilson is being supported by Instituto Rio to train young men and women as ecoguides in the local environmental project. Youth are also the focus in a Cultural Centre operated by an ex-gang member turned community activist, who now preaches the art of living in peace in what was a very violent area. Learning to be; to know; to do and to live became his mantra that he now shares with others.

For community activists from the West Zone there is general agreement that people feel safe working with the Instituto Rio – no mean achievement in an area where trust is a preciously guarded commodity. There is recognition that what Instituto Rio provides is much more than the small amounts of grant money available. As Selma explains the support from the West Zone Community University ‘Makes us see things we didn’t see before’. This is the mark of true sustainable development; although there are also grants for re-cycling projects and cooperative craft ventures. As for the Instituto Rio itself, it wants to create a West Zone Community Fund endowment. It believes that there is a real opportunity not just because of the forthcoming Olympic Games, but also because this zone of the ‘City of God’ (the film *Cidade de Deus* was based in these communities) has the will and tenacity to make its own future. Notwithstanding this sense of independence, partners are always welcome. After all if Instituto Rio can create an university, why not a West Zone Community Fund?