

The development of a training covering coping strategies for local social educators working in the violent slums of Rio de Janeiro

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Residents, living in the slums of Rio de Janeiro, are almost daily confronted with drug related violence. Similarly, local social educators working with children and young adults in these slums, also frequently live amidst this extreme violence. However, while this gives them a thorough understanding of the needs of the people they work with, it may also sometimes interfere with their ability to assist others, and they may sometimes be in need of support themselves. A local nongovernmental organisation has started developing a training for these social educators, in order to assist them to better understand their own coping strategies, as well as how these strategies influence their daily work with traumatised children and young adults.

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'Cleaning up' the drug-related violence in the slums of Rio de Janeiro

For the past 20 years, somewhere within the approximately 600 slum neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro, armed conflict between the police and three local, heavily-armed gangs has occurred daily. These gangs rule and control the drugs trade within the

various slums. Additionally, there is also armed fighting between the gangs vying for control of the drugs trade. While the police attempt to eliminate these gangs, in order to halt the drugs trade, their efforts are hampered from within due to the high level of corruption in the police force. Some of the police are involved in the drugs trade themselves, others own illegal weapons. According to Human Rights Watch (2009), some police are members of illegal militia.

In preparation for the World Cup (2014) and the Olympic Games (2016), the Brazilian government has ordered the police of Rio de Janeiro to 'clean up' and pacify the violent drug trade in these slums, especially those closest to soccer stadiums and tourist centres. The resulting police interventions can be extremely violent, and very sudden. These 'interventions' use tanks, helicopters, heavy armoury, large police forces and the military, all within heavily populated areas. Residents, who may be innocently going about their business at the time of these sudden police invasions, are often caught in the crossfire. Innocent children and teenagers die during these invasions, and through illegal police violence (Human Rights Watch, 2009; Human Rights Watch, 2012).

Box 1: Violent police action

One sunny afternoon, in a slum neighbourhood called Vila Aliança in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), children are playing soccer. Approximately 20 children are playing, when all of a sudden a huge black helicopter lands in the middle of the soccer field. Ten policemen, dressed in black, heavy armour and carrying machine guns, jump out of the helicopter, beginning a violent police operation in search of a local drug lord. The children run away in fear. Where just a moment ago, they were having fun, now bullets are flying everywhere.

This *'clean up'* appears to be mostly about taking young drug soldiers (often teenagers armed with machine guns) off the streets of the slums, thereby regaining territory, and less about stopping the drug trade itself. In the (so-called) *'pacified slums'*, it is common to see armed military personnel and policemen walking through the main streets, while a little bit further up, the drug soldiers are still dealing, only now without the machine guns. Alternatively, those drug soldiers still armed relocate to other non *'pacified'* slum neighbourhoods, controlled by the same drug gang. As a result, these other slum neighbourhoods are now being flooded with armed drug soldiers, simply moving the problem from one area to another (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

The (long-term) effects of these changes on the residents remain uncertain. In the past, local drug soldiers ruled some areas for more than 10 years. Those soldiers were mostly young men, teenagers and sometimes even children, who grew up and were raised in the slums themselves. While these drug

soldiers ruled with a firm hand, they also *'took care'* of their neighbourhoods; outlawing theft, banning prostitution, as well as caring for orphans and throwing parties for the resident children. Now policemen watch over these areas. Often, these policemen were not born nor raised within the neighbourhoods, and frequently have a prejudiced attitude against the inhabitants. It is not unusual for the same policemen who killed innocent children during police invasions to now act as a guard in those selfsame neighbourhoods. Reports of deprivation of rights and abuse of slum residents by the police are not infrequent (Human Rights Watch, 2012).

IBISS: a local NGO fights back

'Instituto Brasileiro de Inovações em Saúde Social' (English: Brazilian Institute of Innovations in Social Health, IBISS) is a nongovernmental organisation that was founded in Rio de Janeiro, in 1989. The organisation aims to improve slum residents' access to social services, and to increase social equality and respect for human rights. To date, it has established more than 60 projects in the slum neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro, in sports, culture, education, health, community and social development. Additionally, the organisation works with drug soldiers, providing them with support to find a way out of organised crime and to pursue a new and better life. IBISS strives to empower the target group, assist them in improving their life situation, and taking control of their own lives. Therefore, training in leadership, human rights and citizenship are all components of a holistic approach that integrates care, assistance, education and advocacy.

In many cases, projects begin by supporting initiatives that have been proposed by the target group. IBISS transforms these

initiatives into pilot projects through which new and innovative approaches are developed: hence the name *'Institute of Innovations'*. Based on the experiences in the pilot projects, IBISS provides training courses to facilitate the recognition and implementation of innovative approaches in the field. Through advocacy in forums, councils and political bodies, IBISS shares successful methodologies to shape public policy and government action. Often this has led to considerable success, with schools being built, community centres adopted by the local government, and new public policies based on new laws, all coming up from the initiatives posed by the residents.

Through IBISS' projects, about 150 local social educators work with children and young adults who have had traumatic experiences due to the extreme violence of their daily existence. Most of these social educators grew up in the slums themselves, and most have experienced the same violent conflict. As a result, they know what the

children and teenagers are going through, and can also recognise specific behaviours and attitudes often arising in children who have grown up within an area of armed conflict. These can include: aggression, avoidance, drug abuse, withdrawal, non-participation, apathy and self-mutilation. However, recognition is only the first step, therefore these social educators also expressed a need to learn how to support these children and young adults in coping with their traumatic experiences. For this reason, the IBISS decided to investigate the needs of these social educators, in order to develop a new training.

Qualitative research

From 2010 – 2012, IBISS did qualitative research in order to reach a better understanding of the traumatic experiences of these children and young adults. It consisted of 35 interviews and conversations with 25 different social educators, 14 women and 11 men aged 25–65 years old, from IBISS'

Box 2: Split-second reactions of a local social educator

Very suddenly, Romero¹ (a 34-year-old soccer trainer and social educator) saw the black police helicopter rise up behind the soccer field, over a little street crowded with houses. It flew low, the policemen hanging out of the helicopter, ready to jump out onto the soccer field. They began shooting machine guns while still hovering above the field with playing children. Within seconds, bullets were flying back and forth between the police and the drug soldiers, who were hiding in the streets, houses and on nearby rooftops. Romero pulls the children standing beside him down onto the ground. He yells to the others on the field to lie down, and crawl as fast as possible to the shelter of the canteen. As if the children are trained to do this exercise, within half a minute all of them are laying down on the floor inside the canteen. It's the fourth time in a week that the police have invaded this neighbourhood in search of a local drug lord. Less than three years ago, Romero's four-year-old daughter was shot in the crossfire during such a police invasion. She turned her head when Romero shouted to her to lie down on the ground, but with that same turn of her head she walked into a bullet, and died.

projects in various slum neighbourhoods in Rio de Janeiro. Additionally, informal conversations with other residents provided a lot of information. The conclusion was that children and young adults resident in these areas might be traumatised by a variety of negative experiences and forms of violence, such as drug-related violence, domestic violence, sexual violence (either within or outside the family), institutional violence, social exclusion, racism, and *'bad luck'*.

Much behaviour, attitudes and reactions presenting in these children and young adults, who have survived traumatic experiences, caught the attention of the social educators. Some of these manifestations could be difficult to handle, or made them doubt their own actions. Most of these behaviours, attitudes and reactions seem to conform with common theories about reactions to traumatic experiences. However, some of the behaviour stood out, due to its severity. For example, one of the social educators described the difficulties he encountered working with a certain boy from his soccer project. Whenever the police invaded the neighbourhood, the little boy would run out into the streets. The social educator

needed to hold him during the whole invasion, in order for him not to run out into danger. The boy eventually told him that he wanted to die, to be close to his dad who had died from a stray bullet during a police invasion.

Coping strategies

Many of abovementioned manifestations are strategies used by children and young adults to cope with traumatic loss and daily violence. However, some of these same behaviours and attitudes can also be seen presenting in social educators as a selfsame reaction to their own traumatic loss and experience of daily violence. These social educators include people with diverging backgrounds: some are university graduates, while others have only finished primary school; some have witnessed violence, and others have been a direct victim of violence. Other educators are former drug soldiers, who got out of the drug gangs through one of IBISS' projects, and are now working to prevent teenagers and young adults from joining these gangs. All of them have been living amidst the daily violence in the slums.

Box 3: Coping strategies of a local social educator

Romero explains that he never talks about the fact his young daughter was shot in the head during a police invasion. He argues that when he does not talk about it, he does not need to think about it, and then does not feel sad. He says, however, that especially at night it is very hard to not think about her. When he is lying awake, the rest of his family sleeping, he often cannot stop thinking about her. Sometimes he cries, but only when he is sure no one can see or hear him. Romero wants to prevent other people from feeling sad as a result of seeing him cry. When he is asked how he reacts when a child from his soccer school cries, he answers that he would go to the child and tell him to go with him and play soccer. He explains, he wants to distract the child, so that he or she stops crying and does not feel sad anymore.

Through some of the extensive interviews it became apparent that some social educators, without realising it, were using coping strategies that could disrupt their interactions with the traumatised children and young adults in their projects. At times, their reactions to the behaviour of these traumatised children are not necessarily what is best for the children. Additionally, some social educators were found to be suffering from trauma-related symptoms (e.g. flashbacks), which as a result, could make them temporarily lose contact with the children.

Training for local social educators on the influence of their own coping strategies

As the social educators have lived through the same violence as the children and young adults from their projects, they can personally relate to what these children are experiencing. They know very well how to interact in a supportive and respectful way with the children. However, having experienced the same violence makes the social educators also vulnerable to their own coping strategies in their daily work. As a result, the educators might not be as supportive to the project beneficiaries as they could be.

Individual or group therapy by local psychologists or therapists, for either the children or the social educators, is still not very accessible nor common in Rio de Janeiro. Therefore, IBISS decided to develop a new training for its social educators. This

new training, planned to start in 2013, will focus on providing social educators with more awareness of their own coping strategies, and how these strategies influence their daily work with the children from their projects. Through this training, they will also learn more about the basic theories around trauma and traumatic experiences, children's reactions to these experiences, coping strategies and their own limitations and limits in this work. IBISS hopes that with more support and awareness, the social educators will have improved their capacity to support the children and young adults from their projects in coping with traumatic experience.

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¹ Romero is a pseudonym.

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