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The trials and transformation of Chocolatão

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The wellbeing and future of the community's children were critically important to the Association of Women of Vila Chocolateão, the small group of women who made the first steps towards improving the lives of their community in the face of resettlement. Through the Participatory Budget, and with the support of the Sustainability Network, community leaders worked for better opportunities for community members in the lead up to resettlement. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.



## The trials and transformation of Chocolatão

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The more than 10-year-long journey preparing to resettle over 800 residents of Vila Chocolatão is a remarkable story – one that captured the attention of the Brazilian city of Porto Alegre, and many internationally. The threat of forced eviction became a community's demand for a better life. The resultant struggle for rights to citizenship, education, livelihoods and housing, together with the engagement of City Hall, civil society and the private sector, transformed a re-housing project into a citywide initiative to combat poverty and exclusion.

The hurdles and crises faced during the Chocolatão resettlement are a sombre reminder of the frailty of the human condition and our global challenges. However, the lofty ambitions, spirit and courage of the people who dedicated themselves to the journey are a point of inspiration, and the process and outcomes over those years are a valuable model for cities worldwide.

The principles of this process, including participatory approaches and cross-sectoral engagement, are now being applied in other socially and economically marginalized communities in Porto Alegre. As one of the original sites to trial the Cities Programme's cross-sectoral 'Melbourne Model' in 2006, the Vila Chocolatão resettlement has a long-standing connection to the United Nations Global Compact. The story, approach and outcomes of the Vila Chocolatão resettlement provide rich insights into human rights in the urban context, overcoming poverty and the systemic support structures that can underpin community engagement and facilitate long-standing cross-sectoral partnerships. This article draws from research undertaken by the Global Compact Cities Programme and RMIT University from 2012 to 2014 that mapped the history of the resettlement and the purpose, processes and actions of the Network for the Sustainability of Vila Chocolatão (*Rede para a Sustentabilidade da Vila Chocolatão*, or Sustainability Network).

### Vila Chocolatão

Vila Chocolatão was an irregular settlement in a central area of Porto Alegre, Brazil that was established in the 1980s at a time when many rural Brazilians were migrating to cities in search of work. Most residents of Vila Chocolatão relocated to Porto Alegre from rural areas and were only able to draw a meagre living as *catadores*, or street pickers, collecting recyclable materials from the streets of the city under a repressive cartel system.

Named after an adjacent office building that resembled a chocolate bar, Vila Chocolatão was a highly impoverished community situated on a small parcel of land near the city centre in a district of federal offices. It was allegedly dominated by a 'parallel power' (a Brazilian term for criminal forces that control irregular settlements), which stood to gain from keeping the community in the city centre. The housing in Vila Chocolatão was transitional and dangerous. Fires, exacerbated by illegal electricity connections, regularly caused loss of life and decimated the community. Residents without formal addresses faced difficulties with securing employment in the legal labour market. Social issues, including crime, violence, child labour and drug addiction, also plagued the community.

In contrast, the standard of living and educational attainment rates in Porto Alegre, the capital of the southern state of Rio Grande do Sul, are amongst the highest in Brazil. Porto Alegre is renowned globally for its democratic public management model. It was the first city in the world to successfully implement participatory budgeting and is also the birthplace of the World Social Forum. The city's social democratic efforts have focused on addressing inequity in impoverished communities, many of which are located in irregular settlements.

### The shadow of eviction

The impetus to resettle the Vila Chocolatão community arose in 2000 when the Federal Union, a government body that owned the land where the community lived, initiated a court request to reclaim the lot and evict Chocolatão residents. The Federal Regional Tribunal of the Fourth Region (*Tribunal Regional Federal da 4a Região*, or TRF4), the court that heard the Federal Union's claim, determined that the eviction should be postponed given the community's vulnerability and absence of resettlement options. In an unusual move, the court,

which also neighboured Vila Chocolateão, proceeded to initiate a social project to support a sustainable resettlement called the Vila Chocolateão Emancipation and Social Inclusion Project. A dedicated social worker was employed who commenced the project by identifying and bringing together key organizations connected with the community, including government agencies and NGOs. The court provided a space for community members and external stakeholders to meet. The initial goals of the project were to ensure there was alternative adequate housing, that citizenship was promoted and that there was access to rights-based human development. The court played a leading role in the network and continued to support the community throughout the resettlement process.

At the inception of the project, a small number of women formed a group called the Vila Chocolateão Association of Women (*Associação de Mulheres de Vila Chocolateão*). The group's motto was 'recycling to preserve, working to educate'. Lacking any existing social infrastructure or community organization, the association formed to represent the community within the city's Participatory Budget (*Orçamento Participativo*), which is a mechanism that determines how municipal funds are spent through democratic public participation.

This group of women also worked to counter domestic violence and build better futures for their children. According to community leader Fernanda Simões Pires, the group "didn't only look for housing solutions but also education, health and basic sanitation for their families and the wider community."

This fledgling group eventually grew into the Vila Chocolateão Residents' Association (*Associação de Moradores Chocolateão*), which made specific demands in Porto Alegre's Participatory Budget in 2005. On behalf of the community, the group requested that:

- the community be resettled to an alternative site
- a childcare centre be constructed at the new site
- a recycling centre be established at the new site to support the livelihoods of Vila Chocolateão community members.

These views did not necessarily represent those of the whole community. As many have recognized and commented, speaking in general terms, the community was initially fearful, distrusting and lacking social cohesion. Trust was slowly built over time and as tangible projects and outcomes were achieved.

#### Network for the Sustainability of Vila Chocolateão

In 2007, the cross-sectoral Sustainability Network was formalized and afforded dedicated resources by City Hall. The network comprised representatives from different municipal government departments, federal and state government bodies, civil society, the private sector and the Chocolateão Residents' Association. It grew from the TRF4-led Vila Chocolateão Emancipation and Social Inclusion Project and was supported by Porto Alegre City Hall's newly established participatory democracy system, Local Solidarity Governance (*Governancia Solidaria Local*, or GSL), which employed a full-time coordinator to facilitate the network and help drive the group's projects.



The establishment of a legal electricity network in Vila Chocolateão was one of the first major projects of the Sustainability Network. Aside from the stigma of irregularity associated with the absence of formal electricity supply, illegal connections to surrounding electricity networks, combined with debris, resulted in several catastrophic fires in Vila Chocolateão. The legal provision of electricity was prioritized by network members based on their belief that access to basic services and a safe living environment is a human right and an essential element of citizenship. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

The Local Solidarity Governance scheme built on the concept of decentralization and was developed by the municipal administration elected in 2005 to promote a system and culture of partnerships. Under this scheme, City Hall is responsible for connecting the public sector, businesses, Porto Alegre citizens (especially the least politically organized and most socially and economically vulnerable) and civil society organizations through cross-sectoral, multidisciplinary networks that are organized territorially across the city.

The resettlement project became connected to the Global Compact Cities Programme as an Innovating project and one of 12 trial sites for the 'Melbourne Model' – a cross-sectoral approach to tackling complex urban issues. Some of these systems and principles were incorporated into the project. Porto Alegre became a Global Compact participant in early 2004 and there was a lengthy period (2003–06) of working with the city to identify and connect a specific project to the model. There was a strong synergy between Porto Alegre and the aims of the Global Compact and its Cities Programme. In light of the city's long history of public participation and development of innovative approaches to engaging citizens in participatory democratic processes, the then Mayor of Porto Alegre envisaged that "participation in a global network of cities... and more inter-sectoral partnerships would promote social inclusion and sustainable development [in Porto Alegre]".

In interviews with Sustainability Network members, 'citizenship' and 'transformation' were the most commonly used terms to describe the purpose and process of the network. In the words of project facilitator

Vania Gonçalves de Souza, the main objective of the Vila Chocolateira Emancipation and Social Inclusion Project was "to promote social inclusion and improve the quality of life and dignity of Chocolateira residents both prior to and following resettlement".

The number of community members involved with the Sustainability Network was initially small but grew over time and as projects were realized. In the words of Fernanda, "the community fought for their rights, looking for quality of life and social inclusion. No one lives in the Chocolateira community of their own free will and accord but for lack of opportunity and we were aware that we could look for a better life through collective action. Our vision was building for the community in an egalitarian way".

The impact of the Sustainability Network extended beyond community members. All interviewees – representatives from a range of external organizations – referred to their personal experiences of being part of the network and their changing perceptions and opinions throughout the time they spent working together. Bringing stakeholders together through a cross-sectoral, project-focused network dissolved silos and allowed space for relevant municipal departments to work cooperatively. Local government network members also negotiated with state and federal government representatives on behalf of the community.

#### **A network of conversation, problem solving and major projects**

A striking feature of the Chocolateira resettlement was the implementation of key development projects in the original informal settlement. These projects were



Moving recycling collection from the streets to the community. With the support of NGO partners in the Sustainability Network, the community's first recycling cooperative, the Chocolateira Recyclers' Association, was formed in 2005. A communal sorting shed was established to facilitate the delivery of recyclables directly to the community by the city's Department of Urban Sanitation. The professionalization of livelihoods based on recycling and the inclusion of cooperative members in Porto Alegre's citywide recycling network made a significant contribution to building livelihoods. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

particularly unusual given the impending relocation and planned demolition of the site. Working within the framework of the Sustainability Network, a range of partners contributed varying resources and expertise depending on the focus of each project.

Providing a meeting space for community participation to occur within Vila Chocolatão was the first project carried out by the Sustainability Network. It was considered critical that discussions were held on neutral ground and that as many community members as possible were involved in decision-making processes. Trust was very slow to develop. A community shower block was built as there were no washing facilities in the settlement. There was also a host of social projects implemented over the years, many directed at the health, care and development of the community's children.

The formal mapping of the community and subsequent connection of dwellings to a legal electricity grid was arguably the most controversial initiative undertaken by the Sustainability Network. As well as reducing the risk of fires, this was seen as a critical step in establishing citizenship because a legally recognized address is a prerequisite to obtaining an identity card and formal employment in Brazil. Having service accounts linked to formal addresses with an electricity provider established the official 'existence' of community members living in Vila Chocolatão.

Improving livelihoods was a core focus of the Sustainability Network. To improve opportunities for community members who derived income informally through rubbish collection, a temporary communal recycling shed was built at the settlement. NGO partners were brought in to provide training in recycling and business management systems. Community engagement in this initiative slowly

increased from six to 40 members. A formal Recycling Cooperative (*Associação dos Recicladores Chocolatão*) was established and with rules, regulations and processes put in place, a 'collectivist' culture took root in the community and developed over time.

The Sustainability Network provided a framework to discuss and resolve a range of issues, including the proposed relocation site and its development. After a lengthy negotiation process, Morro Santana, which is located 12.8km from Vila Chocolatão, was chosen as the location for the new housing development.

The resettlement process was not an easy journey and the community and Sustainability Network faced many challenges. Issues with the parallel power continued to confront the community in the pre- and post-resettlement phases. The first president of the Chocolatão Residents' Association was murdered in 2009 and the community was reportedly too dangerous to enter for approximately three months after his death. The network continued its activities, however, and held meetings and carried out programs under the trees next to Vila Chocolatão and, on hotter days, in a shed loaned to the community by the Municipal Department of Urban Sanitation.

There was also active and sustained opposition to the resettlement from a small number of external groups who purported that Vila Chocolatão residents had limited participation in the resettlement process and believed that removing the community from the city centre would result in disadvantage. These groups claimed that City Hall, sought to avoid public scrutiny over the living conditions of Vila Chocolatão residents by moving people away from the heart of the city. Interestingly, these issues were often discussed by 'opposing' parties within the network.



Former Vila Chocolatão resident and manager of the new recycling centre at Residencial Nova Chocolatão being interviewed at the new community's inauguration on 13 May 2011. The state-of-the-art, cooperatively managed recycling centre has the capacity for 60 workers per shift and was financed and constructed by Soluções Usiminas, a Sustainability Network partner. Approximately 40 households receive their income from the recycling centre. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

### Residencial Nova Chocolateão

Following years of negotiation and community building, the final development, Residencial Nova Chocolateão, was a substantial capital works project that included:

- 181 homes, each with two bedrooms, a lounge room, bathroom and kitchen, supplied with electricity, running water and sewerage services
- paved streets and lighting
- four commercial buildings
- a childcare centre with the capacity to care for 120 children
- a library
- a state-of-the-art recycling centre
- a sports field.

On 12 May 2011, the community was relocated and Vila Chocolateão was demolished. Members of the Cities Programme who were on site at the time witnessed a community that was relatively calm and prepared. The community's quiet resolve was surprising and served as the impetus for the Cities Programme to undertake an extensive research effort. Amongst the chaos of bulldozers and furniture being moved, the community was reposedful. It appeared as though they had taken part in a participatory process, which we wanted to learn more about.

On the day after the relocation, 13 May 2011, a sizeable public ceremony and celebration took place at Residencial Nova Chocolateão to mark the inauguration of the new community.

### Post Vila Chocolateão

This research sought to map and document the history of the resettlement project and the processes of the Sustainability Network, rather than evaluate the relative success or failure of the relocation. We can, however, report on some of the outcomes.

In relation to improving livelihoods, the increased space and state-of-the-art equipment in the new recycling centre at Residencial Nova Chocolateão allowed for the expansion of the cooperatively managed Chocolateão Recyclers' Association and an increased demand for formal recyclable waste workers. This provides income for approximately 40 families. Operating the centre as a collective has presented its challenges and there was a relatively high degree of worker turnover during the first 12 months of operation. However, given the cultural shift and transition from the informal to the formal economy, the centre appears to be functioning well. Some residents have reportedly moved on to external formal employment after working in the new centre. Skills training has been provided to community members seeking employment as electricians, bakers and maintenance workers.

The aspirations for the children of Vila Chocolateão are very high and many say it will take a number of years to see what affect the social projects, early childhood education and care have had on the children's development and how they will impact their future. The childcare centre at the new site is also state-of-the-art, professionally staffed and provides children with three meals per day. The centre and its practices have influenced the culture of the community. From outside observation, the differences between this centre and the streets of Vila Chocolateão are startling. The community library is also helping to improve



Residencial Nova Chocolateão one year following resettlement (May 2012). A noteworthy feature in the new community is the number of (unauthorised) additions and extensions to residents' houses. While they technically violate municipal law, some believe these house extensions indicate a sense of ownership and permanency. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

educational opportunities and provides a cultural centre for the community. It continues to be staffed by an NGO.

The Sustainability Network understood that the attrition rate is high in resettlements, with the majority of people typically returning to living informally within six months of relocation. The lengthy preparatory process appears to have had a positive impact on the residents of Residencial Nova Chocolateão but exact figures are not known. A number of residents have 'sold keys', some reportedly to pay drug debts. There appears, however, to be a reasonable degree of stability in the community. This is reflected in a number of households undertaking illegal housing extensions, such as the addition of front enclosures, to the displeasure of Porto Alegre's Municipal Housing Department. Many view these extensions as reflecting permanency and a commitment to 'home'. The network continued to meet after the resettlement but the frequency of meetings has reduced over time.

### **The Chocolateão Model and its Sustainability and Citizenship Networks**

A significant outcome of the Vila Chocolateão Emancipation and Social Inclusion Project is that the principles and approach that emerged through preparing for the resettlement – the Chocolateão Model – are now being applied in other impoverished communities in Porto Alegre. These include Santa Terezinha, Vila Santo Andre and Ihla do Pavão.

The model is based on the development of cross-sectoral groups called Sustainability and Citizenship

Networks. These are defined as governance networks based on cooperation between governmental and non-governmental institutions, as well as individuals who volunteer to address challenges in communities with high social vulnerability. There is a defined process for developing these networks and projects. It includes:

- mapping the place (based on a tool)
- getting to know community leaders (social capital), NGOs, volunteers and public servants who work in the community
- identifying problems and demands
- recognizing potential partners in the first, second and third sectors
- encouraging community empowerment and leadership
- holding network meetings locally and encouraging full community participation
- promoting transversal government actions.

There are also a number of principles that govern the way these networks function and how their projects are developed.

### **Mobilizing cross-sectoral and collective will**

The processes around the resettlement of Vila Chocolateão demonstrate that continuous participatory, cross-sectoral engagement is by no means quick or easy. However, a network of partnerships is clearly a valuable platform from which to address entrenched societal inequities and action change.



Former community member and leader Fernanda Simões Pires addresses the crowd at the inauguration ceremony on 13 May 2011. Fernanda was a leading figure in the development of the Vila Chocolateão Association of Women, which sought to preserve residents' recycling activities and represent the community in Porto Alegre's participatory budgeting forums, as well as the Chocolateão Residents' Association and the Sustainability Network. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

One of the most important lessons from the Chocolatão story is that collective responsibility is required to transform the lives of vulnerable communities. The problems of the Vila Chocolatão community became the problems of the city. Community members moved from living in a 'hidden world' to one where, for a period of time, their struggles were known, felt and shared.

Mobilizing and harnessing the collective will and resources of many is valuable and powerful. It required the commitment of time and expertise (and in some cases financial resources) from many organizations, including local government, NGOs, the private sector and, most importantly, the community. A long-term view was required and the process took over a decade. It was possible because there were shared goals and principles.

Continuing dialogue was critical. The process challenged partners to be flexible, open and patient. Cultural and social shifts had to occur before physical improvements could be realized. Trust was built in the community by producing tangible outcomes and delivering on promises.

A remarkably diverse group of people committed to working with community leaders to improve the lives of Chocolatão residents and their children and to facilitate access to the fundamental human rights enjoyed by the majority of city residents – housing, employment, health, education and citizenship.

While the Sustainability Network achieved a number of significant and positive outcomes for Vila Chocolatão residents, it also encountered many challenges, some of which are enduring. We hope that other cities can learn from the Chocolatão experience and work in a similar way.

Porto Alegre leaders are available and willing to work with others to share their lessons, methodologies and the principles of their approach. A research report about this project has been developed and is available at:

[www.citiesprogramme.org](http://www.citiesprogramme.org)

*The City of Porto Alegre has been a Global Compact participant since 2005 at the Innovating level. It was one of the first cities to trial the 'Melbourne Model' through the Vila Chocolatão Social Inclusion Project. The Local Solidarity Governance scheme resourced and underpinned the project and Porto Alegre was the first Global Compact city to provide a long-term, cross-sectoral support framework for critical urban human rights challenges. The model is now being implemented in a number of other communities in Porto Alegre.*



A baby being cared for in the new childcare centre at Residencial Nova Chocolatão. Approximately 120 children are currently enrolled at the childcare centre, where they receive three meals per day. There is also an after-school literacy program. Many interviewees reported that their hopes for the community, and its 'transformation' and 'emancipation', lay with the community's children and improvements in their early childhood care, education and future opportunities. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.