Working to improve the living conditions of families who dwell in the slums and work in the informal economy in downtown São Paulo.

The project

The main aim of this innovative new project is to develop the ability of informal economy workers and their families to improve their living standards, by increasing the range and security of jobs open to them and by improving the security and quality of their housing. The project will also support local initiatives to increase these people’s access to the social safety net that exists in Brazil.

The project will focus on the city central region, represented by the Subprefecture of Sé, where more than 300,000 residents are squashed into 1,138 tenements. Members of this community find themselves shut out from the regular labour market with no access to housing finance. This increases their social exclusion.

The São Paulo Urban Project will be run by Christian Aid partner the Gaspar Garcia Human Rights Centre, which provides support and advice to people living and working in the area. The project will operate from Gaspar Garcia’s base in the heart of the city.

Local context

In the second half of the last century, Brazil underwent a process of rapid urbanisation. The urban population increased from 13 million in 1940 to more than 150 million in 2010. This growth was fuelled by large numbers of people moving from the countryside to big cities like São Paulo, which became one of the world’s largest cities, with a population of more than 10 million.

Many rural families who migrated to the cities to escape poverty and seek employment opportunities did not have proper schooling or professional training. At the same time, the burgeoning cities lacked the infrastructure, public services or employment opportunities to meet the demands of the new arrivals.

As a result, millions of Brazilians now live in precarious conditions in the favelas, slums and irregular settlements that have sprung up in these cities. Many are unemployed, while those that do have work are employed in low-skill and low-paying irregular jobs.

Even with the growth in the country’s economy in recent years, one in four Brazilians lives in poverty today. Most of these individuals are completely outside the formal labour market and operate predominantly in informal activities, for instance as hawkers, construction workers, domestic servants, recycling collectors and temporary staff in the clothing industries. They have no social security, no pension, no unemployment insurance and, if they are in work, no right to annual leave. Depending on the job they perform, they can even suffer persecution from local authorities and are strongly discriminated against by other sections of the population.

In general, these individuals work alone or in small groups, which limits their ability to come together to improve their working conditions. Another factor that slows change is that most workers see informal employment as temporary, and this makes them less interested in taking steps to press for improvements.
São Paulo

With mass unemployment, many of São Paulo’s poorest people have no formal jobs and are dependent on the informal economy – such as market stalls and streets sales – to make ends meet. At the very bottom of the pile, at least in many people’s eyes, are the city’s 10,000 rubbish and recycling collectors. They haul heavy wooden carts through the streets, collecting rubbish that they then sort, separate and sell on to recycling companies.

Many of the families living in the city centre slums are packed into appalling conditions. Overcrowding is rife and people often lack basic water and sanitation. Without outside support there is no way that poor families could stand up for their housing rights, because they have no money to access legal advice; and challenging a landlord could result in immediate eviction and homelessness.

With power so overwhelmingly in the hands of the much richer landlords, Gaspar Garcia helps redress the balance by informing poor tenants of their legal rights and helping them to challenge unscrupulous landlords.

Our partner

Gaspar Garcia Human Rights Centre is a local non-governmental organisation based in São Paulo’s city centre. Established in 1988 and named in honour of Spanish missionary priest Gaspar Garcia Laviana, it works to protect and support São Paulo’s most vulnerable citizens, including the poorest of all – those living rough. Christian Aid currently supports the organisation’s work with four main groups: homeless people, city centre slum dwellers, Latino immigrants (mainly from Bolivia and Paraguay) and informal rubbish collectors.

Case studies

Sergio

After 23 years living rough and taking drugs, Sergio finally has a home and a job. He no longer takes drugs and now volunteers as a drugs counsellor helping other people break free from addiction.

Everything changed for Sergio when Gaspar Garcia invited him to join its recycling centre, to help with the sorting and separating of São Paulo’s waste. Six years on, Sergio’s co-workers have voted him the coordinator of the recycling cooperative. Sergio says that Gaspar Garcia gave him the chance to ‘recycle his life’ – he went in as ‘human litter’ and came out a new person.

Miriam

Miriam is a Bolivian who has lived in Brazil for the past 10 years. She is married and has two children: a nine-year-old boy and a one-year-old girl. Miriam works at home, sewing garments for the company owned by her landlord. She receives a tiny amount of money for each item she sews and each month half of her income is paid out in rent for the cramped flat that she and her family share with 12 other people in São Paulo’s central region. Miriam is a member of an association of immigrant home workers that is being supported by Gaspar Garcia. The association is seeking to improve the working and living conditions of members like Miriam by negotiating with employers and landlords on their behalf.

Endnotes

1 About five per cent of the urban population is classified as extremely poor, compared to an estimated 25 per cent of the rural population (United Nations).
2 See cia.gov