# Background for *Favela Rising*

## Civil Society in Brazil: AfroReggae

In a country known as Switzerland/India to its citizens for its extreme socioeconomic inequities, Brazil's poor and mostly black urban youth see little opportunity for social mobility. In addition to their social exclusion based on class and race, those living in *favelas* (slums) are on the frontlines of daily armed conflict between corrupt police and drug traffickers   With little prospects in the form of employment or education, *favela* children and adolescents are seduced by the prospects of money, power, and the alternate path to social mobility that drug trafficking appears to offer. But such riches come at a high price: Rio de Janeiro's homicide rates are the second highest in Brazil, however these pale in comparison to its murder rates concentrated in male youth from 15 to 24 years of age, which are almost ten times the country's average. Because almost seventy percent of these deaths are caused by automatic weapons, the extreme armed violence in Brazil has been referred to as a genocide of poor youth.  Surrounded by violence and such slim prospects for the future, it is not surprising that these youth live their lives intensely in the present. As one fourteen year old child trafficker said, "I sleep at night thinking about what will come tomorrow…if I'll be alive today and dead tomorrow" (Dowdney, 2003, p. 216).

In response to this crisis, one nongovernmental youth organization uses equally strong recruitment strategies of music and art for youth empowerment and social change. The **Grupo Cultural AfroReggae** (GCAR) offers an opportunity for *favela* youth to address the structural and direct forces of violence that inhibit their perceptions of the future. Through its integration in the community and extensive knowledge of youth realities, AfroReggae is an excellent example of peace in practice.

The mission of Grupo Cultural AfroReggae (GCAR) is "to promote social inclusion and social justice through art, Afro-Brazilian culture and education, bridging differences and serving as foundations to citizenship sustainability" in what was once the most dangerous *favela* in Rio de Janeiro (GCAR Missão).

## AfroReggae's Beginnings

AfroReggae began in January 1993 with the intention of disseminating information about black culture. Originally using the publication, AfroReggae News, the group soon realized that the newspaper was an inefficient way to involve itself directly and positively in the social problems that proliferate Brazilian society (GCAR História). Unfortunately, in this same year, armed violence against the urban poor, and youth especially, made clear the need for immediate action.  In July, eight street children were murdered by a "social cleansing" death squad made up of off-duty policemen as they slept on the steps of the Candelária church in downtown Rio (Rubin, 2003).  One month later, after drug traffickers in the Rio's northern *favela* of Vigário Geral refused to pay further bribes to policemen to operate in the area, police returned to the *favela* the next night to massacre 21 innocent residents (Yúdice, 2001).  The brutal killings made headlines throughout Brazil and a civic response ensued. Many new nongovernmental organizations were formed as part of the Community Movement of Vigário Geral (MOCOVIGE) (Rubin, 2003). AfroReggae, which had become a nongovernmental organization just two months before, relocated to Vigário Geral, where they have been an important actor in the movement for decreased violence and increased opportunities for *favela* youth.

## From Guns to Drums

From the inauguration of AfroReggae in Vigário Geral until today, their vision has continued to focus on youth empowerment. Ecio Salles, the education coordinator for AfroReggae, summarizes the organization's main objectives:

> AfroReggae's personality is to invest, above all, in the youth of the *favelas*, creating a means and opportunities for their human and professional development especially in the field of art: of music, theatre, dance, circus, etc. Apart from that, to look for conditions for their insertion in a positive and effective manner in society, transcending the processes of exclusion, discrimination, racial and social prejudice that, frequently, impedes the mobility of youth, chiefly the blacks and those from the *favela*.[1] (personal communication, 2005, November 30)

In order to attract youth into the organization, José Junior, the founder, general coordinator of AfroReggae and a resident of Vigário Geral, states that "we use the same magnetic energy that attracts young people to drug trafficking to make them leave it" (UNICEF, 2003). Through their varied youth involvement in a newspaper, internet site, six bands, a theater group to promote HIV/AIDS awareness, a chorus, an early childhood education project and a circus, AfroReggae's mission is to use culture to create leaders who can affect social change in their community and society (UNICEF, 2003). In addition to the incorporating interests of youth through the use of technology, popular music and culture, Lemgruber and Ramos (2004) state that the components of individual and cultural affirmation are what make AfroReggae effective.

AfroReggae has garnered domestic and international attention for the success of its two groups, Banda AfroReggae and AfroCirco, both of which work with professionals in the field and travel throughout the world to perform, and now through the inspiring film *Favela Rising* (Yúdice, 2001). They have expanded their organization to include three other *favelas* in Rio de Janeiro and are working to create an outreach center in the downtown area in order to offer percussion classes to street children and at risk youth from all over the city to create citizenship and increased self-esteem.

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**For further information, please visit the following websites:**

*Favela Rising*
www.favelarising.com

*Rio Slums Blighted by Gun Crime (21 Oct 2005).*
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4338652.stm

*Brazil Army ends Rio Occupation (13 Apr 2006).*
http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/americas/4803944.stm