

PROMOTING ADEQUATE HOUSING

IN VACANT PROPERTY IN CITY CENTERS

BACKGROUND

“Too many people without homes, too many homes without people.” This phrase captures a paradox that has echoed in several cities across Latin America and the Caribbean. On one hand, people are living in precarious conditions in informal settlements, without access to infrastructure and far away from jobs and services; countless families are being evicted; and homelessness is increasing at alarming rates. On the other hand, well-located and serviced land and buildings sit empty or underused, not serving a social function. In Brazil, according to the Fundação João Pinheiro (2018), 6.3 million families lack adequate housing, yet 6.8 million housing units remain empty.

Habitat for Humanity Brazil has been developing and improving its advocacy strategy since 2008, in parallel with its work of building and improving houses. Originally, Habitat Brazil’s advocacy focused on promoting tenure security and comprehensive upgrading of informal settlements, mainly through networks and institutional spaces such as multistakeholder forums and conferences that allowed the democratic participation of civil society in urban policymaking. But the turbulent political environment that the country is currently experiencing not only jeopardizes the democratic structures for civic participation in urban policies at the national level, but also challenges resource allocation for housing construction and improvements. **As Habitat Brazil reviewed its advocacy strategy in the face of this political and housing policy crisis, the idea of promoting adequate housing in existing vacant property emerged as an innovative approach toward building more compact cities.**

ADVOCACY METHODOLOGIES AND TOOLS

A **baseline study** was the first step to better understanding the context, challenges and opportunities of advocating to improve existing vacant property for housing. Focusing on the city center of Recife, where the national office of Habitat Brazil is located, and working with a network of partners and volunteers, the study included a field assessment in the neighborhood with the highest concentration of vacant property. A desk review was conducted of local legislation and policies, and national and international experiences and best practices. Findings showed that in Recife’s Santo Antonio alone, at least 40 multistory buildings were vacant, in reasonable condition, and owing millions of Brazilian reais (R\$) in property taxes to the municipality. In only one neighborhood, in one city, there was enough building area to house 2,000 families.

By **disseminating the study findings through a workshop** and inviting various stakeholders and media channels, Habitat triggered informed dialogues with government representatives, raised media attention and started to build public support for the cause. A **series of meetings were conducted with local government representatives**, from the historic heritage department to the housing departments and legislative bodies. Habitat Brazil then organized **field visits so that government authorities** could see the vacant property for themselves. The issues became clear and undeniable to all stakeholders.

Habitat Brazil and partners also started to **draft policy proposals**, taking advantage of the moment when the City Master Plan and the Social Housing Policy were being reviewed. In partnership with the regional area office, Habitat Brazil organized **Action LABS**, a methodology developed by Habitat’s Latin America and Caribbean area office to promote peer exchanges and informed dialogues so that policy proposals are designed collaboratively, based on lessons and evidence. Experts from across the country gathered with Habitat Brazil and partners from NGOs, social

movements, academia and local government to discuss the challenges and opportunities for action. As a result of this effort, a series of **policy recommendations** was drafted, disseminated and mutually supported by coalition members to ensure a commitment to convert vacant property into affordable, adequate housing units for the most vulnerable groups in the city and metropolitan region.

In parallel, Habitat Brazil was **building public support through a communication strategy** that included the dissemination of both technical information and human-interest stories through social media, mail, TV, radio and newspapers. A highlight of this strategy was the preparation of a documentary called *Who Lives There* (*Quem Mora Lá* in Portuguese), which tells the story of families living in risk of eviction who organize themselves and occupy a vacant building in downtown Recife.

IMPACT, SUCCESSES AND LESSONS

Evidence, quantitative and qualitative data, and life stories supported the advocacy work of Habitat Brazil and its partners in drafting sharper policy proposals and recommendations, strengthening their voice in public spaces. “With this study, we are more prepared and confident to participate in public debates about vacant property, and the local governments can’t deny the urgency for action,” says Socorro Leite, national director of Habitat Brazil. The study also signaled the opportunity to engage with different stakeholders, such as the Catholic Church, an important property holder in Brazil. Alongside this advocacy initiative focused on vacant property, Habitat Brazil has been monitoring cases of land conflicts and forced evictions in Recife and the metropolitan region, which provides a more comprehensive perspective of the housing issues to be addressed.

Disseminating the movie and study findings through different channels also increased the visibility and legitimacy of Habitat Brazil, strengthening its role as a reference institution on the issue. Habitat has been increasingly invited to speak and participate in local and national events at universities, governmental public hearings and even some spaces usually inaccessible to civil society, such as judicial public defense offices. This helped to raise the awareness of different stakeholders, including government and legislative representatives, and to build public support by challenging stereotypes and engaging new audiences with housing and land issues.

This advocacy program also was an opportunity to discuss **forms of tenure security in cities** besides the conventional approaches that tend to focus on individual private ownership. Creative alternatives have been explored during the policy proposal phase, such as social rent or collective or cooperative ownership arrangements, along with other approaches that combine housing with livelihood opportunities and ensure the sustainability of the social interest developments.

Working through a strong coalition and diverse networks of partners backs up Habitat Brazil’s advocacy strategy. That means the policy proposals and recommendations, and the positions taken in the coalition, are drafted and supported through a collective process, informed by different perspectives on the issue, including voices from the grassroots and social movements sector to the academia and professional sectors. As a result, Habitat Brazil helped to ensure programmatic lines for converting vacant property into affordable housing units in the Recife Local Plan for Social Housing and in the City Master Plan. In addition, the municipality recently passed a decree enabling civil society to report vacant property that should be reclaimed by the municipality. This is likely an indirect result of Habitat Brazil’s advocacy work.

However, changes in policies and even public commitments by governments to address an issue are sometimes too far from actual changes in people’s lives, particularly in developing contexts. “With limited resources, our role was to trigger an informed debate with the relevant stakeholders and position the issue,” Socorro says. “But we still have a huge load of work ahead to ensure budget for policy implementation and to monitor

government action. For that, we must continue participating in advocacy circles to be 'at the table' to shape affordable housing decisions and government resource allocation at local, state and national levels, and that requires resources that are not always available in the organization. Meanwhile, we also need indicators to better express our efforts and successes, in an environment where policy changes *per se* do not necessarily represent concrete impact to the most vulnerable groups."

VACANT PROPERTY: AN EMERGING POLICY ISSUE IN LATIN AMERICA AND THE CARIBBEAN

Habitat Argentina is also exploring ways to take advantage of vacant property to promote affordable housing. After conducting a **pilot project** focused on social rent, the national organization decided to engage in advocacy work to scale and replicate the experience through governmental policies. Leveraging existing relationships with government agencies and with civil society organizations that were actively engaged in advocacy circles, Habitat Argentina conducted a **baseline study** focusing on vacant property and social rent, followed by an **Action LAB** and a series of webinars, also called **Micro LABs**, to promote informed dialogues with multiple stakeholders and to draw from experiences from across the region.

The study and Action LABs informed the development of policy proposals, to identify the entry points for a sustainable advocacy approach, and to establish a working group on the topic. Since then, Habitat Argentina has strengthened its role as a reference organization on the topic and has been invited to participate in several government-led discussions. Acknowledging the recommendations from Habitat Argentina and partners, the national government is changing the way vacant property is measured in the country, and the government of Buenos Aires launched a number of programs to regulate the price of rent, standardize tenant agreements, and provide a warranty and legal assistance for tenants. Habitat Argentina now has been invited by the national government to lead a program to replicate the assessments and policy proposals piloted in Buenos Aires for other cities across the country.

The advocacy efforts led by Habitat for Humanity both in Argentina and in Brazil have contributed to advancing the policy dialogue and practice around the social function of land, a key concept of the global frameworks toward sustainable development, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and the New Urban Agenda. The concept of social function of land has been embedded in the legal frameworks of Latin American and Caribbean countries for quite some time but has lacked a feasible means of implementation. Habitat Brazil and Habitat Argentina are advancing ways to make the social function of land a reality to help more families meet their housing needs in central areas, near job opportunities, public services and infrastructure. This will make cities and human settlements more inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.



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