

UNIVERSITY OF DETROIT MERCY

# THE LONG ROAD AHEAD FOR PEOPLE WITH DISABILITIES IN NORTHEAST BRAZIL

By Roba Hrisseh, October 1st 2018

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Photo 1: Musical activities at an Afro-Brazilian community called *quilombo* in the state of Minas Gerais, Brazil. A *quilombo* is a group of individuals who had once escaped from slavery and now live together with their families and descendents. This particular quilombo is located in the city of Belo Horizonte, where conversation regarding the

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challenges faced by the community took place, including challenges for persons with disabilities.

Photo courtesy of Daniel McArthur. July 2018.

The beauty of Brazil is quite endless. I was able to see this first-hand. In 2018, I travelled to the country to participate in a [Fulbright Hays Group Project Abroad \(GPA\)](#) with the goal of studying special education and disability rights in the Northeast Brazil. For those of you who may be unfamiliar, the Fulbright Hays GPA is a program of international exchange that encourages cultivation of international relations between countries by sponsoring individuals and organizations to conduct research overseas.



Photo 2: Beautiful scenery located in the region of Pampulha, Belo Horizonte. This

I was very excited to research these issues in Northeast Brazil. But when I arrived in the region and began my research, I was immediately able to see that the road for Brazil's citizens with disabilities was very complicated and almost seemed endless too. There were a lot of challenges for persons with disabilities in the region. Here is a glimpse as to what these issues look like.

## **Persons with disabilities in Brazil.**

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Over 45 million Brazilians, or 24% of the country's entire population, live with some sort of deficiency in the country according to [UNESCO](#). UNESCO further explains that Brazilians with a disability face severe injustices due to their disabilities, such as fewer opportunities in accessing quality education and less progress within inclusive environments.



Photo 3: Music activities during a visit to *Community of Arturas*, a quilombo located in Minas Gerais, Brazil. Here, a discussion on disability rights took place. The quilombo leaders explained that although special education and disability rights were very important for them, there were many human rights issues to be tackled at the forefront. Photo courtesy of Daniel McArthur, July 2018.

There are many reasons to help explain these fewer supports and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. The primary reason is that the people of Brazil are just too busy fighting for other human and social rights for their citizens. Some of these issues include obtaining land ownership rights, obtaining a good public school education for students, and decreasing racial inequalities. Let's dive in a little deeper.

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# The three main reasons why disability issues are not at the top of the priority list for Brazil.

**1. Afro-Brazilian communities are still fighting to obtain basic rights to own their land, never mind building accessible sidewalks for individuals needing wheelchair access.**



Photo 4. Quilombo in the state of Maranhão, Brazil. Here, we were able to see cultural music dances celebrating the Afro-Brazilian way of life. Refer to Photos 5 & 6 below to

Firstly, there's a term to these communities. They are called *quilombos*. The term refers to Afro-Brazilian communities in Brazil made up of individuals who had first-handedly fled from their colonial masters during the slavery era of Brazil, as well as the descendants of these individuals. They live together on these

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land grounds, and have been living on them for more than 250 years. These quilombos, over time, became areas of sprouting resistance against slavery and colonialism. However, these lands are



Photos 5 & 6. The same quilombo from photo 4 in Maranhão that has created accessibility

not actually owned by these Afro-Brazilian individuals. They are owned by the government.

In fact, it wasn't until the year 1888 that the Brazilian constitution even began recognizing the rights of slave descendants to receive these lands from the state, according to [Cultural Survival](#).

Basically, the Afro-Brazilian people live on these lands, where they were born and raised-where their ancestors who were slaves were also raised- but many of these quilombos are still unable to obtain the rights to legally own the land. Very few quilombos have actually succeeded in doing this.

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I was immediately able to see that in these communities, land ownership is one of the topmost priorities. Much further ahead than disability issues.

It made sense. Before trying to create wheelchair-accessible sidewalks, the community really has to find a way to ensure that the land to build those sidewalks on actually belong to their rightful owners.

## **2. Brazil's general education schools are generally severely under supported and under resourced, so that leaves special education school services even further behind.**

There's a lot to say about the education system of Brazil, especially the public school system. They often lack plumbing and heating and even tend to be neglected altogether ([Brazil](#)). Teachers are underpaid and under supported. Many of them want to apply principles of special education but simply do not have the training to do so, nor do they have the extra staff support either.

School days are also extremely short in Brazil, often as short as four or five hours a day like in many other Latin American and Caribbean countries. Many argue that this could be insufficient time for students to grasp necessary learning concepts.

Lack of supports for at-risk children is problematic. Many children do not attend school, or miss a lot of it. According to the [Brookings Institution](#), children of parents who fall under the high rate of illiteracy and unemployment often do not go to school at all because they are out working to help support the family. These are all problematic issues with the general public education system.

## **3. Brazil continues to experience serious difficulties with racism, and the Afro-Brazilian people are still extremely marginalized.**

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Brazil did not abolish slavery until the year 1888, thus making it the last country in the Western world to do so, according to the [University of Michigan's Center for Latin American and Caribbean Studies](#). This is an important note to consider since 45% of the country identifies itself as non-white.

To clarify, Afro-Brazilians are Brazilians of African descent, but most people in the country don't use that term. They refer to the population as black, or *preto*.

In the US, if you have one drop of black blood in your DNA, you are considered to be black, but this is not the case in Brazil. Race in Brazil is based on what you look like and *not* your DNA.

Phenotypic characteristics like skin color, nose shape, and hair type are all ways that people categorize other people's race.

Race can also be determined based on behavioral characteristics such as dress and language. Someone can even be classified racially based on social markers like education and income.

This means that even if there is a set of twins in front of you, and one looks more "black," than the other, that twin *actually is more black*, according to Brazilian social standards.



**Photo 7: Afro-Brazilian people in Brazil are still extremely marginalized. But they are proud of their culture and customs**

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There even exists the ideology of *whitening*, which refers to the tendency of people who, if they may be on the “border” of a skin color category to defer to being classified in the lighter category. It is simply more beneficial and advantageous for them to be classified as white.

## **The road to disability rights is a long one, but there are organizations that can help.**

The road to disability rights is long and wrought with challenges. As discussed, there are many other issues that become priority for the citizens before disability issues.

But there is help out there for individuals with disabilities still. I was able to see this. There are many organizations that were willing to help, such as local nonprofits and cultural community centers.

These local community organizations are great resources for people, because they truly understand the needs of their community members. They live in the communities. They are also mostly black and *understand the struggle of being a black Brazilian*. Even if their assistance is small-scale and directed at their own smaller communities (as oppose to large-scale efforts), this is significant. If every community can somehow do its part, the country as a whole can shift towards applying greater supports for individuals with disabilities.

## **Who are these local community organizations?**

These local community organizations include nongovernmental organizations (or NGOs), nonprofits, spiritual /religious groups, university affiliate groups, and youth leadership groups. It was discussed earlier that many of these organizations are primarily black and are also directed by black leaders as well.

These organizations help tackle the day-to-day struggles of their communities, including food, water, social activities, familial supports. They can also provide emotional support, job training, job opportunities, religious supports, and centers for spirituality as well.

Persons with disabilities need these types of resources. During the Fulbright Hays GPA, there was a large focus on speaking and visiting these organizations, primarily the ones that are mainly black. They were



Photo 8: Our Fulbright Hays GPA team posing after an informative

made up of leaders who are strong, intelligent, creative, motivated, and compassionate. They knew what issues their communities faced and knew what solutions could help target these issues.

But the problem is that these organizations need help. They are extremely undersupported and struggle financially.

## Joana's Story

One example of the effect that a local nonprofit has had in the life of an individual with a disability is a young woman with bipolar disorder in Salvador, Brazil. We will name her Joana for the purpose of this article, but her real name will be kept private. Throughout her life, she found it difficult to find emotional supports and friendship due to her disability. In school, she struggled keeping up with peers academically and socially. These are common trends in the lives of individuals with disabilities.

Joana then found her way to an organization called [Steve Biko](#), a nonprofit based in Bahia, Brazil that offers black students educational courses using a pedagogy that emphasizes and honors Afro-Brazilian culture and history. She thrived in the courses. Through Steve Biko, she gained confidence, friends, and supports despite the fact that she is a black woman with a disability. She stated to me through our translator that, "For the first time in my life, I have [formed] relationships with people. When you get into Steve Biko, you are someone and when you leave, you are a different person. They helped me grow so much."

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Organizations like Steve Biko still lack major funding that would be needed to further expand their supports, and help them reach a wider audience. The thought is that if these organizations can help individuals who need it, why not help fund them so that they can provide assistance to the individuals who need it the most?

## **Why should the government fund them?**

There are many reasons why the government should fund these local organizations. Firstly, funding these organizations is culturally empowering. It can provide a stronger sense of community to the black population that they need to navigate the injustices they face. It can also empower the groups to be proactive in meeting future difficulties and needs.

The next reason is that funding these organizations is tactful delegation. By providing these organizations funding, one is essentially delegating leaders to take charge of their own community needs. The leaders of the organization live in the community and know the types of struggles their members face. Delegating in this manner is effective because this provides leaders with opportunities to create solutions to address community challenges. That frees up time for the government to focus on other large-scale issues.

Lastly, funding these organizations is a financial investment. Many of these organizations are providing education and vocational training to individuals ranging in age from youth to late adulthood. Essentially, it is a financial investment in the future of Brazil by supporting the education and vocational training of Brazilians who can later give back to the country by working essential jobs within the community.

## **Concluding thoughts**

The road for disability rights in Brazil is a long one and this is primarily because there are a lot of other issues that the country is tackling, such as land ownership, issues in public education systems, and racism.

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The answer is in providing financial supports to the local community organizations, who are aware of these issues and can help tackle them. With the proper financial supports, these community organizations can assist their community members further, including those individuals with disabilities.



Photo 9: Figurines representing Afro-Brazilian culture.

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## More info.



Click [here](#) for more information on the Fulbright Hays GPA within the Fulbright Hays Program funded by the US Department of Education.



Click [here](#) for more information on the program through the University of Detroit Mercy, and to check out past University of Detroit Mercy's applicant work all over the globe.

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