

BRAZIL HUMAN RIGHTS FUND

Mothers of May: fighting for memory, truth and justice for victims of structural violence



Ana Valeria Araujo

In 2006 violence by prison gangs and police retaliation unleashed a wave of killings in the Brazilian state of São Paulo. The victims were often poor young people of African or indigenous descent, a good many of whom died at the hands of the police. Mostly they were not involved in organized crime, and their mothers were unable to find out what had happened to them. In response, Mothers of May was formed, a network of families and relatives of the victims, with the aim of fighting for truth and justice for their children – an aim that evolved to embrace the bigger struggle against police violence and the violence of militias. The Brazil Human Rights Fund decided to support Mothers of May, and what follows is an account of what the group achieved with this support.

Key messages

- The importance of advocacy and community organizing: a key role for social justice philanthropy is helping to amplify local voices and supporting organized movement building, recognizing grassroots collective action as a tool for change.
- ‘They know better than we do what needs to be done’: the Brazil Fund’s perspective is to support their grantee’s perception of the problem and how to address it. This perspective is at the core of social justice philanthropy.
- It is crucial to give groups the support they need without imposing your own views on what they should be doing.

The Crimes of May 2006

Between 12 and 21 May 2006, a wave of violence erupted across the state of São Paulo. The so-called 'Bloody Week' began after the state government moved 765 prisoners to a maximum security prison located 380 miles from the capital. One of the transferred prisoners was Marcola, the leader of the Primeiro Comando da Capital, a São Paulo-based prison gang. Marcola directed the organization's attacks from prison. Attacks were mounted against police stations, police vehicles and other public buildings, and riots erupted in prisons across the state. In the first six days, 59 police officers were killed.

The police responded to the attacks with excessive force, and death squads were also active at this time. In total, 564 people were killed by gunfire in the state of São Paulo during that week (59 police officers and 505 civilians), according to the São Paulo Regional Council of Medicine. Of these, over 400 were youths of African or indigenous descent, who were summarily executed. In the city of São Paulo itself, 163 deaths were registered during Bloody Week, an increase of 52 per cent compared to the same period from 2000 to 2004. On 24 May, when the police response still had not subsided, the authorities admitted that only 79 of the 300 recognized victims were involved in organized crime.



Mothers of May is established

These Crimes of May 2006, as they became known, gave rise to a group named Mothers of May, organized by a network of mothers, families and friends of the victims. In most cases, victims were killed when leaving their homes, their jobs or their schools; they were not being arrested. Some ‘disappeared’ and it took a while for their families to find out that they were dead. Mothers of May’s aim was to fight for truth, memory and justice for all victims of discriminatory, institutional and police violence.

In 2010, the Brazil Human Rights Fund decided to support a proposal from Mothers of May made in response to its annual call for proposals. The Brazil Fund wanted to help them to take their fight for memory, truth and justice to a different level. As well as organizing activities and meetings, the grant enabled the group to produce a collection of video and written testimonials with the purpose of bringing the relatives closer to each other in the fight for justice. Four years after the crimes, most mothers were still waiting for an official explanation of the killings of their children, and the material would bring pressure to bear on the authorities and help move the process forward.

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How did the Brazil Human Rights Fund come to support Mothers of May?

The goal of the Brazil Human Rights Fund is to promote respect for human rights in the country and we do this by supporting grassroots and human rights organizations that are fighting against structural violence and discrimination. As a funder, our perspective has always been to support our grantee’s perception of the problem: they are the ones facing the problem, so they know better than we do what needs to be done. Once we decide that a proposal is worth supporting, we support the grantee’s strategies, attempting to provide concrete opportunities for their voices to be heard.

But how did we come to the conclusion that Mothers of May was the right organization to address problems arising from discriminatory institutional and police violence? Would the group’s proposal effectively advance the fight for justice for the families of victims?

Answering those questions required us to examine the group closely and find out what kind of experience they had, as well as evaluating the strategies they were putting forward. We learned that their experience included systematic reporting of cases and of the status of investigations and law suits; participation in debates and meetings; and planning activities such as protests, marches and vigils. Mothers

of May were clearly capable of implementing their proposal. The fact that they maintained close partnerships with groups in other parts of the country where police violence is also a major issue, and their ability to network in order to strengthen their work, showed us that other human rights defenders in the country recognized the group's legitimacy, and this helped to convince us that their proposal was worth supporting.

The 'resistance followed by death' campaign

A year after that, the Brazil Human Rights Fund made a second grant to Mothers of May to develop the National Network of Mothers, Relatives and Friends of Victims of State Violence, which coordinated a national campaign for the end of the terms 'death while resisting arrest' and 'resistance followed by death' in police reports throughout Brazil. These terms were used as a means of legitimizing judicial murders by police officers, usually of poor people of African descent. Under cover of this pretext, most cases had been dismissed, and the assassins had not faced trial.

By mounting a strong campaign against the indiscriminate use of the term 'resistance followed by death', the Network of Mothers aimed to shine a spotlight on institutional and police violence that discriminates against the poor and those of African descent. A number of NGOs took part in this initiative. Mothers of May was also able to step up its actions, and to organize marches and peaceful protests.

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Risks and challenges

In the field of human rights there is always the risk that the political context may change to such an extent that strategies need to be adjusted, or an initiative may not be viable in the way it was initially planned. When we select a proposal based on the analysis of human rights activists and experts, it is easier to anticipate some of those risks, and to find ways to deal with them, but it is always more difficult to anticipate the risks when the police are involved.

In addition, there are risks in supporting social movements and grassroots organizations that may not be structured, and struggle to maintain their existence. A good selection mechanism minimizes these risks, but the greatest challenge in supporting such groups is how to balance providing the support that they need with giving groups space to develop their activities without intervention, only acting to amplify their voices.

We address this partly by providing technical assistance to grantees alongside the grants in order to help build their institutional capacity. We keep up regular communication with grantees, conduct site visits and hold an annual training workshop. These training workshops put together capacity-building sessions on finance and office management, fundraising and communication. Most of all, they are good networking and peer learning opportunities for grassroots organizations. We think of these efforts as part of the grant, as a way to increase the effectiveness of our funding in pursuit of the grant's aims.

What has been achieved?

The activities carried out by Mothers of May with our support provided great visibility to the group, which became a focal point for fighting against police violence in general. With nearly 70,000 followers, Mothers of May's Facebook page is currently used as a tool to report institutional violence perpetrated by police forces throughout the country. More specifically, they contributed greatly to exposing the violent state reaction to the attacks carried out by Primeiro Comando da Capital in 2006. Although impunity is still the norm in relation to this episode, a few mothers have been able to get access to the official version on the killings of their children, and are likely to be compensated by the state. In 2011 Mothers of May won the National Human Rights Award, the country's recognition of the relevance of the work carried out.

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Activities supported by Brazil Fund grants

Mothers of May carried out a great range of activities with the support of the Brazil Human Rights Fund in 2010 and 2011.

These include:

- participation in public activities organized by different movements
- participation in interviews
- launch of a book on the struggle of mothers who lost their children to police violence
- creation of a Facebook page for updated communication
- submission of a series of documents and reports to authorities
- expressing solidarity with other victims of institutional violence



Debora Maria da Silva, one of the founders of Mothers of May, speaks at the São Paulo Union of Journalists in 2011. During the event, which marked five years of impunity for the crimes of May 2006, Mothers of May launched the book *From Mourning to Fight*, published with the support of the Brazil Fund.

Mothers of May also went on to present a Bill to the Brazilian legislature to ban the terms ‘death while resisting arrest’ and ‘resistance followed by death’ from police reports in Brazil. They worked on this in conjunction with the Secretariat for Human Rights, the National Council for Human Rights, the Legislative Office of the Ministry of Justice and the Public Defender Office of São Paulo.

On January 2013, those terms were banned from police reports in the state of São Paulo. It was a major victory and a great precedent for the country as a whole. A Bill is currently before Congress to expand it into federal law.

What next?

Mothers of May operates in an atmosphere of intensifying violence by police officers both on and off duty, who are strongly suspected of being the authors of new massacres carried out on the outskirts of São Paulo in 2015.

Now, the group is developing a project called ‘10 years after the Crimes of May 2006: remember the date, so it never happens again’, which aims to guarantee the right to memory, truth, justice, reparation and peace in the city of São Paulo.

With a small grant for emergency support by the Brazil Human Rights Fund, the movement is celebrating a decade of work with educational activities and documentation. The country's need to take action against institutional violence is one of the greatest slogans of this movement. To Mothers of May, the failure to punish the military

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dictatorship torturers allows state repression to survive and make new victims.

For us, if at any point we had any doubt about supporting Mothers of May, their achievements have shown that we made the right decision. There is huge potential in supporting grassroots organizations, even informal groups, that are directly connected to human rights violations in the field. We need to empower those groups in order to help change realities in Brazil.

Ana Valeria Araujo is executive director of the Brazil Human Rights Fund.
Email
avaraujo@fundodireitoshumanos.org.br

Videos

Respeitem as Mães de Maio! (Show respect to the Mothers of May!)
Excerpt from an emotional speech by Deborah Maria Silva, founder of Mothers of May, nine years after the massacre, during a protest in São Paulo on 15 May 2015. www.youtube.be/y56NwaRL1oo

Missão: Justiça e Paz (Mission: Justice and Peace)
Documentary on Mothers of May from the Crimes of May 2006 through the end of 2010. This is part of the Brazil Fund-supported project ‘Mothers of May in Brazil’s democracy’. www.youtube.be/Q1Wz6tYoveo

Crimes of May

Documentary produced by journalism students of Paulista University in 2012. It reflects on the acts conducted by the police during the May 2006

Key facts

The Brazil Fund has made three separate grants to Mothers of May.

Mothers of May in Brazil’s democracy – five years after the crimes in May 2006: truth and justice, yesterday and today!

Grant amount: R\$ 24,940

Grant period: 2010–11

Other support: participation in Brazil Fund training workshop

National Campaign for the End of ‘Death while resisting arrest’

Grant amount: R\$ 22,440

Grant period: 2012–13

Other support: participation in Brazil Fund training workshop and speaking opportunities for

Mother of May’s Debora Silva Maria

Emergency support for: 10 years after the Crimes of May 2006: remember the date, so it never happens again

Amount: R\$ 15,000

Grant period: 2015

attacks, the role of the state, and the hundreds of executions. Includes reports by families of victims.

(English subtitles available) www.youtu.be/-eEboklrFmU

Mães – Efeitos psicológicos da violência policial nas famílias (Mothers - Psychological effects of police violence in the families)

Mothers whose children were killed in the Crimes of May 2006 talking about the impact on their lives. Following this, a therapy group was established.

(English subtitles available) www.youtu.be/BJfHNadtHPA