Urbanization, Resettlement, and Environmental Protection in the Alto de Alegria Community

Submitted By: São Paulo City Hall



Organization Profile

Organization Name: Executive Secretariat of the Watersheds Program - São Paulo City Hall

Organization Type: Subnational government

Website: https://prefeitura.sp.gov.br/web/secretaria_executiva_do_programa_mananciais

Practice Details

Country(ies): Brazil

City(ies): São Paulo

Start Year: 2012

Ongoing: Yes

End Year: N/A

Main Adequate Housing Components:



Housing Thematic Areas:

- Social Housing
- Housing & Informality
- Housing Rights & Social Inclusion
- Housing & Climate Adaptation

Relevant SDGs:



UN-HABITAT

Problem & Context

The Alto da Alegria community, located in the southern zone of São Paulo, faces serious socio-environmental challenges. With more than eight hundred families living in homes built on an irregular landfill, the occupation took place in an environmental protection area, subject to high geological risk.

The unplanned growth of the community reflects the absence of effective public policies for social housing, urban planning, and environmental enforcement. The lack of accessible housing alternatives and adequate land regularization programs has led low-income families to resort to self-built homes in unsuitable areas.

Solution Developed

Integrated into the Watershed Program (Programa Mananciais) since 2012, the urbanization of Alto da Alegria targets families living in high-risk and environmentally protected areas, particularly those with low income.

The main objectives include the permanent resettlement of families into safe housing, urban rehabilitation of the region, implementation of public facilities, expansion of permeable areas, and the provision of sanitation, drainage, and preservation infrastructure for the Billings watershed.

The practice stands out for its integrated approach to housing, urbanization, environmental protection, and social inclusion, with strong intersectoral coordination.

Socially, the improvement in families' quality of life, including the addition of leisure spaces such as Praça da União and the local health center, contributes to sustainable urban development and community resilience.

Implementation

Actions implemented by the Executive Secretariat of the Watershed Program (Programa Mananciais):

Construction of 84 housing units (HU), consisting of 3 towers of 28 apartments, delivered in 2023; continuation of the towers under construction, totaling 412 HUs. Urban infrastructure works: 4,300 meters of risk area containment, 233 meters of water networks, 1,055 meters of sewage network, 3,600 meters of paved streets.

Actors involved: SEHAB/Mananciais – planning, execution, and financing. Engibrás Engenharia (private sector): execution of urbanization works through contract 025/2012 – SEHAB / Tender 004/13/2012 – SEHAB, and SABESP – support in the implementation of sanitation infrastructure.

Summary schedule: 2012 – contract start; 2013 – registration of families within the intervention perimeter; 2023 – delivery of the first stage of urbanization works (infrastructure and containment) and 84 housing units; 2025 – delivery of Praça da Viela União and urbanization of the surrounding area; (ongoing) – continuation of construction of the remaining housing towers, urbanization works, and construction of the Basic Health Unit (UBS).

Some resources: Municipal Budget

- Containment: USD 6,735,000
- Drainage: USD 65,400
- Piping: USD 869,000
- Sewage: USD 142,500
- Water: USD 1,200
- Paving: USD 244,000
- Housing Units (HU): USD 5,230,000
- Urbanism: USD 151,000
- Social Monitoring: USD 485,000

Total (considering all the services above and others): USD 38,330,000

Enablers & Obstacles

The implementation of the Alto da Alegria project was driven by the São Paulo Municipal Housing Plan (PMH) 2005–2012, which prioritized interventions starting in 2012, and strong political support from the Executive Secretariat of the Watershed Program, acting in high-vulnerability, environmentally protected areas.

Local community engagement was crucial, with families participating in urban design and housing planning through management council meetings. Regulatory frameworks enabled public funding for risk areas, supported by technical geological and environmental data.

Key challenges included community resistance to relocation due to insecurity and lack of information, addressed via continuous communication and social monitoring, and the technical complexity of works in high-risk areas, requiring project adaptations and strict environmental licensing.

Results & Impact

Quantitative and qualitative results:

- Construction of 84 housing units, consisting of 3 towers with 28 apartments each, delivered in 2023; the remaining towers are under construction, totaling 412 housing units.
- Completion of Praça da Viela União, a green space with playgrounds, rubber flooring, landscaping, and lighting.

- Urban infrastructure works: 4,300 meters of risk area containment, 233 meters of water networks, 1,055 meters of sewage networks, 3,600 meters of paved roads.

Impacts on low-income families / marginalized groups:

- Relocation to safe housing with adequate structures, secure tenure, and communal areas, reducing landslide risks.
- Improvement of sanitary conditions, mobility, and quality of life through urban infrastructure and leisure spaces.

Broader / medium- to long-term impacts:

- Contribution to urban resilience and environmental restoration of the Billings and Guarapiranga basins.
- Strengthening community cohesion through revitalized public spaces.
- Potential reduction in public spending on disasters and health, and increased territorial value through sustainable infrastructure.

Replication & Scale Up

The practice is being reapplied in the intervention areas covered by the eight active construction contracts of the Executive Secretariat of the Watershed Program, considering:

- Political commitment and dedicated financing through integrated public programs.
- Detailed technical and environmental diagnostics to support safe planning.
- Communication actions that engage and reassure the community regarding relocation or resettlement.

These contextual factors are crucial for successfully replicating the approach in areas of high social and environmental vulnerability.

To expand the reach of the housing practice, it is necessary to:

- Expand the scope of the Watershed Program to more neighborhoods, especially in geologically risky territories, considering municipal management planning for the allocation of financial resources to support new construction bids.
- Replicate the model by integrating housing, infrastructure, public facilities, and environmental education through intersectoral partnerships.
- Facilitate community participation and improve resettlement plans.

Policy Uptake

This housing practice has been fully adopted into formal policy frameworks and legislation, and is being implemented at scale with institutional support.

The practice is fully integrated into public policies through the Watershed Program of the São Paulo City Hall. It is being implemented on a large scale, with actions in several areas in the southern zone of São Paulo, especially in the watershed region, encompassing housing, urbanization, green infrastructure, and, in some cases, nature-based solutions.

Lessons & Takeaways

- Invest more in participatory planning from the start, with more effective dialogue to reduce resistance and accelerate resettlement.
- Expand integration between housing and environmental plans.
- Establish post-delivery monitoring mechanisms to assess medium- and long-term socio-environmental impacts, adjusting actions as needed.