

Social impact incubators support Afro-Brazilian women to establish their own enterprises

by Andrew Thompson



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If you come from a low-income background in Brazil; if you are a woman; and if you are of Afro-Brazilian heritage, your chances of getting ahead can be limited. Statistics show that you may face triple discrimination because of your class, gender, and race. Compared to averages for the population as a whole, you are less likely to move ahead in terms of employment, less likely to have good access to social services, and less likely to be able to raise your standard of living. On the other hand, you are more likely not to have completed your education, or to be unemployed, or to live in the shanty towns known as *favelas*.

Improving life chances for Afro-Brazilian women depends in part on long term changes in government policies. But equipping women with the skills necessary to set up creative and social enterprises is also an important way forward. Doing that lies at the heart of a British Council DICE-funded project, delivered in collaboration between two organisations, [Asplande](#) in Brazil and [Social Starters](#) in the UK.

Asplande (an acronym for Assessoria & Planejamento para o Desenvolvimento – ‘planning and development consultancy’) was created in 1992 with the objective of helping low-income groups, particularly women-led households, to set up community and cooperative organisations. Based in Rio de Janeiro, it has concentrated on building what it describes as social and democratic networks. Initiatives include *Belezas da Favela* (a group linking local cosmetics retailers), *Favela Gourmet* (a network of cooking and catering businesses) and



Rede Cooperativa de Negócios Sociais, an association of women-led social enterprises. There are also mutual support groups for entrepreneurs involved in other activities such as craft-making, sewing, and health and fitness products.

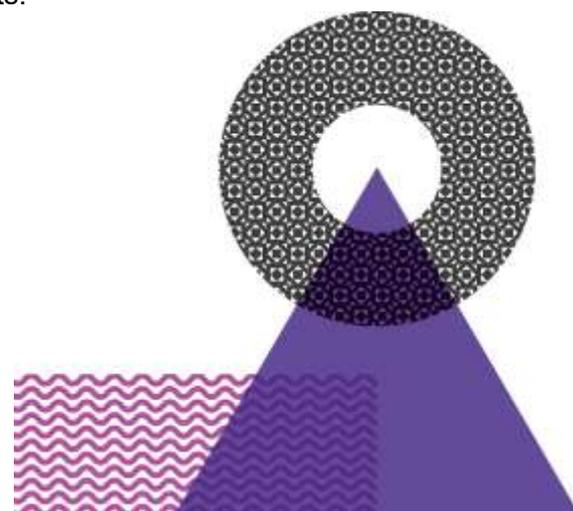
Social Starters on the other hand, is a UK-based incubator and consultancy for social start-ups in different countries around the world. It aims to work with young people, encourage creativity and diversity, and promote environmental sustainability. It describes itself as a small team of social entrepreneurs, marketing and charity finance professionals who work remotely with low overheads. It says its core belief is that “socially driven business is the sustainable future”.

The two organisations are jointly supporting Afro-Brazilian women entrepreneurs in Rio and the surrounding neighbourhoods. The project is known as the Social Impact Incubator for Women. It has involved working with two cohorts of approximately 30 women entrepreneurs, who each benefit from a six-month support programme. This support breaks down into various components, including three months of business training, skill-sharing and mentoring from business experts, access to workspaces, peer review, and seed finance. Coupled with this is a program of marketing and publicity which is designed to raise the profile of the women involved, helping them build contacts with potential investors and business associates. Three women from the first cohort also spent time in London in November 2019 taking part in the Global Entrepreneurship week.

According to a survey conducted by the organisers, just under half the women in the first cohort had not completed their education; two out of three were single, divorced or widowed; for most, their small business was their main source of income, although some had other part-time jobs. Not all businesses were formally registered, but there was a widespread conviction – from almost 90% of respondents – that these small enterprises had a positive social impact. It was also clear that there was a need for sharper business skills. Two out of three lacked a business or marketing plan; nearly half of the women said they would not know how to go about pitching for investment in their enterprise. Many said they were unsure about how to price their main products. Most worked from home, and most used computers and smart phones for running their businesses. All of them had access to the internet and two out of three sold their products online.

Jiselle Steele from Social Starters explains that in Brazil there can be a big gap between different types of social entrepreneurs. Predominantly white and relatively affluent people with a middle-class background often launch start-ups as a career choice, driven by a new business idea or opportunity. On the other hand, many of the lower income Afro-Brazilian women in the programme became social entrepreneurs not out of choice but out of sheer necessity in the absence of other employment alternatives, as a survival technique. Many have been running businesses without even thinking of themselves as social entrepreneurs. Jiselle says the first cohort’s inaugural meeting, held in the impressive We Work centre in Rio, was both exciting and quite moving. “To have all those women together in a co-working space they would not normally be able to afford boosted their pride, reaffirmed their role as social entrepreneurs, and was really inspiring,” Jiselle comments.

As part of the process, the women made three-minute business pitches to a panel of judges. Each pitch was required to set out the business idea, along with details of the product, market, and a business expansion plan. Pitches from first cohort straddled a whole range of activities, including food and restaurants, consultancy, and tourism and crafts. Products and services offered by these social and creative enterprises included organic cosmetics, soaps, African handbags, art



promotion in local schools, organic farming, low cost eyesight testing, physiotherapy, confectionery, and care for the elderly.

