

Fight For Peace: Creating Opportunities & Boxing Champions

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The most obviously lucrative opportunity available to young people in the majority of Rio's favelas is the violent drug trade, where it's not the high-risk criminal life that allures but the high salaries and strong gang identity.

Operating in Maré, one of Rio's largest agglomerations of drug gang-controlled favelas, Fight For Peace (Luta Pela Paz in Portuguese) is an innovative boxing and martial arts NGO founded by English former amateur boxer Luke Dowdney in 2000. The project gives young people an alternative definition of strength and education to access opportunities beyond those immediately available.



At the end of the main shopping street entering the favela, off which narrow alleys lead into a sprawling maze, there's an open space where Fight For Peace's bright blue three-story sports and education center dominates the landscape. The recently refurbished 1,200 square meter facility has a boxing gym, three classrooms, an IT suite and a new martial arts studio. Showing me round, Gabriela Pinheiro, FFP's institutional relations manager explains the Fight For Peace approach: "Sport gives the young people focus, discipline and the adrenaline rush they could look for elsewhere. But sport alone isn't going to improve things. There's a real lack of opportunities so there needs to be full education package."

Fight For Peace's Five Pillars model combines boxing and martial arts training, personal development and education, youth support services such as mentoring, job training and work access, and youth leadership. Those who want to train are required to be registered in school and attend the center's citizenship classes which discuss topics such as rights, violence and sexual health. For older youths who have been out of the education system for some time, Fight For Peace has a Novos Caminhos (New Pathways) fast-track formal education and preparation for the workplace program which participants can take at their own pace. "We work to offer them the idea of future beyond the community and to get them into formal work, because sometimes they're under pressure to just get money coming in and find themselves stuck in the informal sector with no skills," says Gabriela.

Elaine de Silva, a cheerful and bubbly 28-year-old mother of one, is currently enrolled in the center's education program. She explains how growing up in the rural northeast of the country made it difficult to attend school and says: "I was really nervous to come to Fight For Peace, but when I did and got to know people I loved it. Now I can finish my education, and I have the ambition to do psychology at university."

The education program offers access to a broader range of opportunities, but Fight For Peace is also training boxing and martial arts champions, boasting a national champion in Roberto Custódio, currently on Brazil's national boxing team.

Douglas Rocha has similar ambitions. The 18-year-old has been training at Fight For Peace for five years and recently started competing in matches. With a quiet polite manner, he talks about his passion for boxing ("it's in the blood, I've always had it") and how Fight For Peace is helping him realize not just his sporting potential, but also personally. He says: "If it wasn't for Fight For Peace I wouldn't be talking to you like this. I wouldn't have this sense of education and manners. They teach you about how to be in the world."

Currently, Fight For Peace's reach within Maré is limited. Pointing out from the recently built third floor, Gabriela explains, "Just over there is controlled by a different [drug] faction. We can't reach young people there. It's very difficult for them to cross this invisible border to come to the center." The problem of territorial control between rival gangs poses for the project's reach is being solved by a new Petrobras-sponsored initiative Maré Unido, which will see Fight For Peace satellite units in other parts of the favela complex.

Along with his continued active involvement in the Rio project, Dowdney has established a successful Fight For Peace academy in London, is consulting on projects in Africa and South America and has just launched a sportswear brand Luta with 50% of the profits going to Fight For Peace and 50% to investors. Of the Fight For Peace and Luta outlook he says: "Fight For Peace is about being strong but peaceful. With Luta we want to pay homage to those young people that turn their back on violence and find their way to be in the world and show that real strength is a real story."