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Community participation in the sustainable development of human settlements in Mexico City

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· Introduction

Community organisations in low-income urban areas of Mexico have been working with non-governmental organisations in the field of housing for around 30 years, searching for alternative ways of ensuring that low-income groups can have access to housing and participate in decision-making about their surroundings. Over the last few years, they have incorporated the struggle to conserve, improve and protect the environment into their approach. This has resulted in a process called the 'self-managed promotion of popular housing', enabling people to transcend isolated experiences and put forward significant proposals for policy alternatives in town-planning, housing and environment. Working with such organisations is an integral part of developing participatory approaches in Mexico City. The self-managed groups and team of consultants have developed a methodological model based on the active participation of community organisations.

This article gives an overview of housing and environmental problems in the Metropolitan Area of Mexico City. It describes the history of attempts to encourage participation in two particular cases: the Calpulli del Valle Housing Cooperative and the Settlers Union of San Miguel Teotongo. Finally, we discuss the basic elements of the methodology used to conduct these processes.

These particular cases are at different stages of development. The Calpulli del Valle Housing Cooperative is a group which has been working for eight years on a housing project for 1,000 homes and is now about to complete the many negotiations and formalities required to start

building. The Settlers Union of San Miguel Teotongo has worked to develop a Neighbourhood¹ Plan for local development and environmental protection.

Housing and environment in Mexico City

Most Mexicans live in urban areas, the cities having grown in response to considerable economic and population growth as well as migration. The urban fringe has expanded in a spontaneous and unregulated manner on common or communally owned land (the most prevalent form of land tenure around cities.) Although the Government attempted to prevent this process, they lacked the planning capacity and their housing budget has mainly been devoted to the middle income groups.

Low income groups have suffered a serious deterioration in their living standards over the last few years reducing access to housing even further. In 1990, the unemployment rate reached 25% of the economically active population, while 50% of that population was working in the informal sector with access to neither social services nor most state programmes. In 1992, 40% of the population earned less than twice the overall minimum wage and in 1993, 31.7% of the population was living in conditions of extreme poverty. While

¹ In the case of the Federal District, the capital of the country, these are known as ZEDECs (Controlled Development Areas). Criteria for land use and urban development in the neighbourhood are established on the basis of an agreement between the various neighbourhood groups and the authorities. This is currently the only case in which the prime movers have been the community organizations in the area.

wages increased by 409% between 1982 and 1993, the price of a basket of basic goods rose by 1,461%. Housing costs increased by 3,000% in 1989 while the highest salaries in Mexico - those in manufacturing industry - increased by only 2,300%.

The only government institution providing assistance to the lowest income groups is FONHAPO (National Social Housing Fund), which has suffered a significant decrease in its resources. In 1990, it received 4.9% of resources allocated to housing, but this fell to 1.5% in 1992. Although the government's total housing budget has increased over the last decade, that increase has not kept pace with the growth in demand.

The problems faced by low income groups in gaining access to housing and the lack of urban planning are compounded by environmental degradation in the cities. Environmental problems include air pollution, lack of water, inadequate waste disposal, exhaustion of underground water reserves and the absence of water harvesting, as well as the lack of space - apart from living space - for the recreation and reproduction of the population. The government and some other sectors have blamed the residents of low income settlements for the deteriorating environment and have tried to prevent the establishment of spontaneous settlements and/or to dislodge those which already exist.

Community participation in Mexico

Low-income groups have responded to the problems of gaining access to land and housing by organising. Through self-managed organisations, low-income groups have gained experience in working through the different phases of obtaining housing:

- Acquiring and, in many cases, regularising title to land;
- Contracting technicians to develop urban and housing projects;
- Developing collective responsibility and management of housing credit;
- Mobilising savings;
- Controlling the process of housing production; and
- More recently, protecting and restoring the local environment.

The wave of social mobilisation which occurred after the earthquakes in 1985 strengthened the capacity of self-managed organisations to deal with government agencies. They were successful in ensuring the reconstruction or rehabilitation of more than 45,000 homes by the Popular Housing Renovation Programme and 4,000 more by non-governmental groups. In the second phase of the Programme, a further 10,000 homes were renovated. In recent times, community organisations have been able, with the support of NGOs, to influence national urban policy.

• Participatory urban planning

Participatory urban planning has developed from the social and professional involvement of groups, social organisations and NGOs in the process of securing housing and urban land, as well as in developing more comprehensive legislative and policy proposals for urban areas.

The struggle for collective, organised access to housing has been facilitated by a combination of two factors, community organisation and specialised technical assistance. The participatory methodology that has developed is based on 'action research', an alternative methodology to traditional research techniques. The primary and ultimate objective of such research is to transform reality, so that knowledge becomes a means and not an end in itself. From this perspective, the subject of learning is the group itself and professional intervention is to provide specific technical support to the learning process of the group trying to influence its circumstances. The idea of a separation between the one who knows and the one who does not know is rejected in favour of an interaction between the professional and the subject of social enquiry, both of whom know about reality from different perspectives. The different perspectives are part of the whole which neither can easily master alone. From this perspective, the tasks of the researcher are:

- To structure the investigation process with the social group in order to make available to the latter the options which emerge from the investigation; and,
- To undertake a specific technical analysis to provide a basis for taking timely political decisions in accordance with the group's interests.

Popular Housing Technology (PHT)

At FOSOVI, we have developed a series of working methods to support groups involved in alternative urban planning. We have given the name *Popular Housing Technology* to the concept and methodology with which we have been working as consultants and advisers. We use the term 'technology' to describe the set of proposals used and developed to give professional and technical support to groups in different sectors and stages of the process of housing and/or urban-environmental planning. We are developing Popular Housing Technology in an inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary manner, through setting up professional teams to deal with various aspects of participatory urban planning processes: social organisation, town planning, architecture (design), the technical side (building and/or eco-technology), the financial side, the legal side (management and procedures), administration, politics and environmental considerations.

The advice given by the team to the groups covers a variety of areas including research, analysis, evaluation, communication and education. As a result of the exchange between the team and the community group, the advisory team develops work needed by the group such as in-depth analysis and indicative proposals. Decisions about the internal process, interaction with the authorities and the direction to be taken are made by the group itself.

Calpulli del Valle housing cooperative

In 1987, the Calpulli del Valle Housing Cooperative was established as a limited cooperative company. There are now 500 members located in several municipalities of the State of Mexico. 70% of the cooperative members are non-wage earners. The others are self-employed or have no regular paid occupation. 73% of the members pay rent; the remaining 27% lodge with friends or relatives. 46% of cooperative members earn incomes less than 1.5 times the minimum salary; 30% earn between 1.51 and 2 times the minimum salary and only 24% are found in the range from 2.01 to 2.5 times the minimum salary. Each head of family has at least two economic dependants.

Obtaining land

The idea of setting up an organisation to gain access to housing arose in about 1985. Slum dwellers began to look around the northern part of the metropolitan area to locate suitable land for the establishment of a housing project and in May 1986 they found a place within the Coacalco municipality in the State of Mexico. The land was suitable for urban development and had the advantage of belonging to FONHAPO, a government body. The cooperative decided to ask FONHAPO to transfer part of this land to the cooperative. In August the cooperative also requested credit from FONHAPO. In June 1988, the purchase and sale pledge for the land, valued at the equivalent of some \$230,000, was signed with FIPAIN (Real Estate Liquidation Trust). The cooperative paid 15% of the purchase price, undertaking to cover the remainder in three months with a loan from FONHAPO. This was when the major difficulty in the negotiating process began. In order to request a loan from FONHAPO, the municipal and state agencies must certify the feasibility of providing services. The root of the problem was that the property had no services. The Town Council asked the cooperative to make various proposals, as it had no resources to provide conventional water and drainage services.

Provision of services: the problem of water supply

In August 1988, the cooperative presented technical options for water and drainage to the municipal authorities. A meeting was held with the FONHAPO credit management department and two agreements were reached. As FONHAPO does not fund infrastructural work, it was decided to propose the construction of a well to provide water to be funded jointly by FONHAPO and the cooperative. One year later it was finally possible to sign the credit agreement for studies and plans and thereby obtain the certificate concerning the feasibility of service provision. In order to reach this agreement, the cooperative conducted many meetings and negotiations with various government bodies.

Defining the town planning and architectural project

The town planning and architectural project was developed jointly by the consultants and the cooperative members. The plan took several factors into account including developing suitable technological solutions to the lack of services on the land, making optimum use of the facilities available on the property, environmental protection and, in respect of architectural design, the needs and expectations of the future users.

Organisational characteristics of the cooperative

The organisational structure of the group reflects both current legislation on cooperatives and the experience of other self-managed groups. The cooperative is a non-hierarchical organisation governed by the principle that each member has the same rights and obligations. Specific bodies and processes guarantee both free expression and the participation of all members. The *General Assembly* is the highest authority; it makes policy and takes the fundamental decisions affecting the group. The *sections* disseminate information, control savings, monitor attendance at assemblies, etc. The *commissions* carry out the work and organise the group's various needs and also collect information for subsequent dissemination. They commission legal representation, management, financial administration and the technical drawings for the housing complex.

Drawing up the executive plan

The architectural and town planning blueprint was drawn up gradually in weekly meetings and workshops held by the Technical Commission through which the community forwarded proposals. The participatory design process was conducted in two stages. First, the commission members learnt about various elements of urban development in order to assess the prepared plan. Second, the Technical Commission advised grassroot members of the principles lying behind the preliminary plan. This was the culmination of the design process, which tested the effectiveness of

communication between the advisory team, the Technical Commission and the local residents.

Advice and support

Advice and guidance were provided in different ways:

- Exhibitions, practical sessions, discussions, analysis workshops and information bulletins were arranged to maintain communication and dialogue;
- Group representatives were guided and assisted in the negotiating process with the relevant authorities and given financial and administrative training;
- Scale models, plans and explanatory diagrams were developed; and,
- Individual interviews clarified the needs and expectations of users.

The project today

After several years of struggle with bureaucracy, the group has managed to drill the well, thereby producing more than enough water for the settlement. The loan from FONHAPO has been finalised and the cooperative is recruiting more members (up to 1,000) in order to be able to start housing construction.

San Miguel Teotongo settlement

The San Miguel Teotongo settlement is located on the slopes of the Santa Catarina mountain range, in Ixtapalapa Department to the east of the Federal District. It has a population of approximately 80,000 in a land area of 260 hectares. The settlement grew up on communal areas and common land sold 20 years ago by illegal property developers. There are now attempts to secure legal tenure.

Background

A series of recent events led to the decision by the Settlers Union of San Miguel Teotongo to prepare a Neighbourhood Plan. In October 1991, a group known as *Antorcha Campesina* carried out one of many land invasions on an area of open space within the settlement. This group has violent methods of struggle and this

caused considerable tension in the settlement. There was concern within the Union about the risk of confrontation between the settlers and about the possibility of a government decision in favour of the land claim of *Antorcha Campesina* which is considered to be an organisation close to the PRI.² As a result of the invasion, the inhabitants felt there was an urgent need to formalise their tenure of areas which had been common land. They were concerned that the government might seek to resolve the conflict by means of a decree of expropriation. There was also a risk that other members of the Union might decide to invade other collective or communal areas. Therefore, the organisation decided to prepare an alternative land use proposal with an environmental approach. The Union was well aware that they must respond with a proposal that demonstrated social and technical competence and that demonstrated an improvement in the community's quality of life. Such a proposal could be a useful tool in negotiation with the authorities. It was in this context that they sought technical support from FOSOFI.

Organisational structure of the union

The Settlers Union is legally registered as a civic association. However, developing and stimulating a participatory process in a settlement with 80,000 inhabitants is much more complex than setting up a simple formal structure. The process needs to seek the best way to collect the opinions of the majority of inhabitants and also to open up ways for the settlers to put their proposals forward. This was achieved through a formal organisational structure. The highest authority in the union is the *General Assembly* which receives feedback from the *Sectional Assemblies*. Projects are carried out by the *work committees* and are developed with the participation of specific work teams.

² The PRI, or Institutional Revolutionary Party, has been in power since 1929 following the consolidation of the Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920. It is in fact a State or official party and is far from most people's views of what a political party should be; amongst other things, it has practically no militants. Throughout its history, it has set up puppet parties and pseudo-political groups behind the scenes, such as the *Antorcha Campesina*.

Planning for open space

Since the formation of the Union, the community had informally decided to designate areas within the settlement as *green areas*, preventing the construction of housing on those plots. This decision was very far-sighted, since at that time, most organisations were developing a settlement model which the popular urban movement described as *housing at all costs*. The union allocated 44% of land in the settlement for self-help housing, 25% for highways and 31% for public facilities and green areas. The first attempts at planning were made by settlers from the union with other NGOs, the Faculty of Architecture of the National Independent University of Mexico (UNAM)³, the Independent Metropolitan University (UAM) and other professionals and researchers who cooperated with the Union at different stages of the process. There is no doubt that all this preliminary work constituted a most valuable technical asset when finally drawing up the Neighbourhood Plan.

Settlers' participation in the neighbourhood plan

The description of the participatory process is divided into three stages, although these are not necessarily consecutive and there is no clear direction to the process.

- Stage 1. Proposal for use and design of collective areas.
- Stage 2. Drawing up specific projects, such as the ecological park.
- Stage 3. Regional project for the Sierra de Santa Catarina.

Stage One: proposal for the use and design of collective areas.

To meet the time-scale and political needs of the organisation, the advisory team helped the union draw up a proposal over a period of seven months for the use and designation of green areas on a sound technical and social basis. This

³ In this case, considerable support and participation came from the NGO CENVI (Housing Studies Centre), whose leading members included teachers who established the link and brought their experience to bear on the communities' work.

proposal served to back up demands to the authorities that the areas reserved for the union should be respected and that *Antorcha Campesina* should leave these areas vacant. Developing the proposal included several processes:

- *Historical reconstruction of the settlement process.* This involved considering the geographical origin and cultural background of the inhabitants. This reconstruction was carried out by the Ecological Committee together with the advisory team on the basis of qualitative interviews with the founders of the settlement.
- *Initial plan for the provisional location of green areas, highways and housing development.* This was done at various meetings with a team of settlers including settlement founders.
- *Land use assessment/population survey.* A field survey was completed in each of the 16 areas within the settlement. A work team of about five settlers went into each section to look around, observe, take notes and, with the support of the professional team, feed the information back into the plan.

The population survey was conducted to find out the origins of tenure, population density and characteristics, occupation, schooling and level of family income. Sectional and general meetings were held in order to discuss needs and expectations about land use and proposals made there were recorded. Field research provided the necessary information about the physical situation of the settlement and the communal areas that were already being occupied and it was possible to obtain the necessary economic and demographic information.

A permanent process of training and evaluation was developed so that the sectional work teams were able to undertake the physical and social surveys. This enabled 100% of the neighbourhood land to be surveyed, something which is unusual and not normally achieved by such work. The financial cost was very low, since most of the work was done by members of the association.

4. *Drawing up the plan for land use and allocation.* Drawing on the results of the social, economic and physical surveys, and the expectations and needs expressed by the settlers, the advisory team began to draw up proposals. Proposals were continually put forward and revised until a plan was agreed which would provide the basis for negotiating with the government authorities to achieve the support needed to implement the projects.
5. *Negotiation and approval of the plan for land use and allocation.* Land invasions in the settlement were stopped as a result of the permanent mobilisation of the inhabitants to physically defend the green areas and to put pressure on the authorities to prevent them from fostering or favouring their occupation by groups close to the official party (PRI). Although this tactic was effective, the organisation had to be constantly prepared for action. It was therefore decided to go on the offensive with a proposal that would prevent land invasions and allow the union to consolidate the collective areas.

This was how the union, with the support of FOSOFI, was able to present a planned programme of improvement to the authorities. Responses from the authorities varied, some of them, especially from those which had local interests (e.g. the Ixtapalapa Government Department), sought ways to hinder and prevent approval of the plan. However, others took a broader view and, following systematic pressure and negotiation by the group, decided to approve the project. Thus, in November 1992, approval of the land use and allocation plan was published in the Official Journal of the Federation.

Stage Two. carrying out specific projects: the ecological park

The organisation's self-management capacity has developed over the years that the settlement has been in existence. This is evident in the organisation's struggle for infrastructure and facilities but also in the more integrated approach it has shown to community needs within the 'self-development project', which includes activities in health, nutrition, production, communication, culture, ecology

and housing improvement, all of which seek an overall improvement in the quality of life.

With its long experience of self-management, the organisation was aware of its own interests and quickly developed an environmental protection project. While drawing up the land use and allocation plans, discussion began within the organisation and the whole settlement about which of the projects within the overall plan would take priority and the process of environmental recovery. Following various discussions, analysis and proposals within the group and a more widespread process of consultation with the advisory team, the union decided to begin the Ecological Park Project in one of the largest and most central properties of the settlement. It was hoped that this project might be the driving force in a process of education and of the environment throughout the settlement.

One of the most useful instruments in designing and developing the Ecological Park was the historical analysis by the inhabitants of the settlement. This analysis made it possible to identify a range of cultural elements that could be incorporated into a self-sustaining ecological project. The plan for the Ecological Park included an observation tower, children's garden and game area, ecological museum, processing plant and planting/reafforestation area. Funding for the park has been negotiated with the relevant authorities at the same time as the land use and allocation plan and an agreement has now been reached with them that they will support the settlers' work and fund part of the park's costs. In April this year, construction began.

One activity which is essential to ensure consolidation of this stage is the environmental education of all the inhabitants; this has already begun. The organisation considers that this task is a strategic necessity if the settlers are to feel that the ecological project belongs to them. So far, the bulk of the educational effort has been conducted with children and young people in the settlement in all the schools, but it is hoped to extend the process throughout the settlement.

Stage Three. regional project for the Sierra de Santa Catarina

During the process of understanding and developing self-sustaining ecological concepts, the organisation came to realise the need for a regional approach to protecting their environment. They encouraged a series of social organisations to come together to launch the Regional Bio-project for the Sierra de Santa Catarina, of which the San Miguel settlement is part. The organisation has made great progress to date, especially with the involvement of community organisations in trying to influence (or at least question) the government of Mexico about the projects which the Inter-American Development Bank is funding. Furthermore, together with the advisory team and other NGOs and social organisations, they have begun to survey the whole of the Sierra region, in order to provide a starting point for an alternative proposal to government planning and, on the basis of this, to draw up a final project for restoring the environment in the Sierra.

• **Conclusions**

- In view of the difficulties faced by low income groups in gaining access to housing, community-driven self-managed housing development is an alternative way of obtaining this fundamental right even if it takes a long time (e.g. in Calpulli, construction has still not started, eight years on).
- Although the government authorities are beginning to acknowledge popular housing development (e.g. in the Law on Human Settlements, which has recently been revised with input from NGOs and social organisations, and in the conception of FONHAPO, which has by now to a large extent been counteracted), in practice there is no government policy specifically for low-income property development of a social nature rather than commercial profit-making property development.
- 'Popular' housing development has been a way for low-income groups to acquire land on a collective basis, since lack of land, especially in the major cities, is currently the first and largest obstacle in

the path of such groups seeking access to housing.

- Community self-managed initiatives have been able not only to meet the specific needs of organised groups but also to become mechanisms for the organisation and systematisation of proposals for housing, urban development and the environment which provide an alternative to those currently existing.
- Over the last few years, community housing initiatives have made an important qualitative leap, going beyond simply seeking housing to becoming active proponents of alternative approaches to urban problems.
- A significant element in broadening the perspective of community groups with regard to their understanding of the struggle for housing has been the gradual integration of strategies to overcome environmental problems within their housing and urban projects.
- Environmental problems require government policies to conserve and restore the environment and a process of re-education of the population so that they may participate actively in new practices. The educational work carried out by community groups can be significant in developing new processes for environmental protection.
- The two cases described illustrate this self-management process and are part of a transcendent national movement which, supported by the specialist work of non-governmental organisations in improving living conditions, has demonstrated its viability in ensuring that low income groups can gain access to housing and preserve and improve the environment.
- A fundamental aspect of the self-management experience is the organisation of popular groups⁴ which has

enabled them to face up to the many problems and realities of a world which ignores them, hinders them and will not let them be. The objective of group efforts is quite obviously not only to achieve some material benefits, which are important in themselves, but also to go beyond this and seek to transform their entire existence on the basis of the strength of their organisation. Perhaps the greatest richness and most important outcome has been the social and personal growth of the people involved in these processes, which to some extent explains their persistence despite the long years of struggle.

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⁴ In social studies jargon, the term 'popular' is used to refer to those social groups which have a series of characteristics such as: family social organisation based on the traditional patterns of Mexican society, i.e. extended families, family networks linked in spatial and economic terms, values which have become customary over time, having close links with rural, peasant societies. In

Mexico and many other societies in the so-called Third World, these social groups are in the majority and are basically low income groups. To some extent, they represent the other face of what are known as the *middle classes* which are supposed to be the expression of so-called modernity.