LOCAL INITIATIVE IN LOW INCOME SETTLEMENTS IN BOGOTA, COLUMBIA

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KEYWORDS

Low Income and Periphery Settlements, Community Participation, Local Initiative, Identity.

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses how community initiative urban, architectonic and/or environmental projects, can be better than those produced by public or private plans, in low-income settlements. Low-income settlements are peripheral and growing areas in Bogotá with huge shortfalls in economic and social terms, the same as in public services and infrastructure. These areas continue to grow in size without organised urban or economic policies and plans. Most of the organisation in these areas of urban growth is the informal planning of the people building. People themselves have built and improved their habitat, have built and shared their dreams and ideas about the future, have built a community vision and have used formal and informal participation channels to achieve their goals. This paper invites reconsideration of the role of people as leading actors in building, upgrading, and expressing their own urban environment.

INTRODUCTION

This Paper comes from the research project entitled 'PARTICIPACIÓN COMUNITARIA EN EL HÁBITAT POPULAR DE PERIFERIA, UNA MIRADA DESDE LA ESTÉTICA SOCIAL' (Community Participation in Low Income Settlements, a View since the Social Aesthetics), financed by the University of La Javeriana (Bogotá, Colombia). The research project explores the relationships that are held in poor urban areas between the environment and the urban development and the people who live in those areas. It discusses the community participation in creating, transforming and (most of the time) upgrading those neighbourhoods in terms of urban and environmental quality. The project took place in Bogotá, and it studied 30 cases in poor areas. This paper discusses the theoretical and practical issues and presents the findings of the research.

Colombia, located in the northeast corner of South America, has a population of more than 40 million people, according to the Colombian National Department of Statistics (DANE). It is a highly urbanised country with 73 per cent of its population living in urban areas in 1998. Rural-urban migration continues to be strong, mostly because of social conflicts in the countryside. Colombia's largest urban agglomeration is Bogotá, with an estimated population of 7 million, followed by Cali, Medellin, and Barranquilla, each having close to 2 million people (DANE).

To date Colombian urban and environmental planning has been largely regulated by various policies and projects; however, in practice the situation is much different, it has often been 'bottom up'. People themselves, especially in poor urban areas, are responding to their situation and are developing their own settlements through the construction of housing, community infrastructure and environmental services. Sometimes these initiatives work well and are integrated and adopted by the city and authorities, sometimes the quality and level of community organisation is poor and the settlement fails. The purpose of the research was to argue what can be learnt from these 'informal' practices by the 'formal' policy, urban and architecture directives.

This research was proposed as a basic documentary investigation and the authors who have studied these topics in distinct scenarios developed it. It is a basic study because its purpose is to elaborate an understanding and characterisation of the problem, contextualise it in Colombia, and produce conclusions and recommendations that could be useful to improve the low- income settlements and upgrade the quality of life of the people. There were 30 case studies of different community participation projects in terms of creating, transforming and upgrading the urban and

environmental development. The cases were looked at in the light of the literature studied and the conclusions and recommendations were elaborated.

The paper explores the challenges that are involved and suggests key actions for the development of more successful stakeholder engagement strategies. It also discusses how 'top down' policies and projects can meet 'bottom up' community practices, and how both strategies can be largely enriched for creating better urban environments especially in those areas that are in great need – the low income urban settlements.

The organisation of the paper is as follows: first, urban and environmental information of Colombia is presented, especially in terms of background aspects and policies; also information about Bogotá is offered in some detail in order to understand the context in which the study cases are developed. Second, a general contextualisation is developed in terms of urban growth, housing and participation in low-income settlements and some general literature is cited. Then, the findings obtained from the study cases are discussed and some recommendations are addressed. Finally, the conclusions are developed; demonstrating that involving people in the construction of the urban environment and finding the tools to do it successfully seems to be the challenge.

COLOMBIAN URBAN AND ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

- Colombia: 42 million inhabitants (estimated for 2006).
- Land Area: 1.141.748 sq km.
- Highly urbanised – more than the half of the population lives in cities.
- Between 1945 and 1995 the economy grew at annual average rate of 5per cent, but in 1999 the country suffered a steep recession, the GDP shrank by 4.5per cent. The forecast for 2006 is +2.5per cent.
- Unemployment: 18per cent
- High economical inequalities, around 40per cent of the population lives in poverty.
- Second in biodiversity in the world.
- Bogotá: 7 million inhabitants (estimated for 2006).

Source: Colombian National Department of Statistics (DANE).

Colombia entered the 20th century with one of the poorest economies of Latin America: it was reflected in the low rate of economic development and the lack of basic services and amenities for the population. With industrial development, the opening of the economy to foreign investment, and the start of mechanisation of the production of coffee – the main export product – the economy started to grow and with it, the advantages and the problems.

However this economic development has never been shared by the majority of the population, and because of this, it is possible to say that within Colombia, two different countries exist in parallel: one is the 'statistical', also known as the 'formal', country which tries to ensure political stability and steady economic growth. The second is sometimes called the 'real' country, and includes the people who are often killed for their political thoughts and deeds, and those who work and live in the 'informal' sector of the economy. This is the real country, with most people struggling day by day to improve their living conditions and provide a better future for their children.

Today Colombia is facing the challenge of strengthening local environmental management in 1,134 municipalities, following the UN Earth Summit in Rio in 1992. All the legal instruments to facilitate broad community participation in environmental decisions have been put in place, but the possibility for popular management that environmental decisions require has yet to be achieved. Responsibility for participatory environmental management of regions, municipalities and cities cannot rest solely on the state.

Metropolitan Bogotá faces severe deterioration of its interesting and rich environmental conditions, which are laid out in a complex socio-cultural and historical, often violent, background. At an altitude of 2,640 metres above sea level, in the East Andean mountain chain of Colombia, Bogotá is located at the foot of hills stretched east-west along the fertile valley of Bogotá river. Here the city has developed since its Hispanic colonial foundation in 1538 and has spread out to some other historical urban centres that were located in its surroundings.

The first institutional action to deal with the environment was the foundation of The National Institute for Natural Resources (INDERENA) in 1974. It was established to raise awareness and to start developing policy concerning environmental and natural protection matters. Also it intended to tackle, in a general way, ecological aspects, air, water, solid waste, urban green areas, flora and fauna. Nowadays the development of the environmental policy has been closely linked to 1992's new Colombian Constitution and 1992's UN Earth Summit, whose outputs included support for Local Agenda 21.

In Bogotá, the main issue concerning policies and management of the environment was the foundation of the Management Environmental Department (DAMA) in 1990 and the elaboration in 1993 of the Local Environmental Action Plan, which was called: Environmental Management Plan. It became the first important local effort to integrate policies, strategies and actions leading to the proper management of the city, in terms of the urban environment. Another institution that deals with the environment in the city is the Bogotá Planning Management Department (DAPD). The main difference between these institutions is that the first mainly concerns itself with the protection of the environment, while the second deals with the environment as an urban planning issue.

In 1989 the Urban Reform Law was issued, where many important reforms were introduced especially concerning land tenure and development. A further step was given in 1997 with the launching of the Urban and Territorial Development Law, which became the starting point for other urban and territorial policies that deal with Urban Development Plans. From this policy, the Urban Development Master Plan for Bogotá, 2000 - 2010 (POT) was launched in year 2000, in order to regulate the city growth for the following 10 years.

The Urban Development Master Plan for Bogotá (POT) deserves further explanation of its main objectives, for two basic reasons: 1. Probably for the first time in Bogotá's urban planning a very comprehensive and integrated orientated tool is developed, a Plan that deals at the same time with urban, environmental and economic development. 2. Although the Plan has a 10-year frame, it has been worked on a 30-year joint vision (also probably for the first time), where the environmental aspects become crucial.

The Urban Development Master Plan for Bogotá contemplates an integral model of development, in which the guidelines and necessary mechanisms are directed towards achieving a balanced, equal and efficient territorial use. Six types of strategies were developed for the next 10 years:

- Conservation of the built sectors that are preserved in good state.
- Consolidation of the built sectors that allow densification (concentration)
- Improvement of the informal neighbourhoods.
- Renovation of the deteriorated urban sectors.
- Orderly development of the expansion areas.
- Protection of the main ecological structure.

The guiding principle is that it is necessary to reorient the planning process of the city, in order to:

- Assume as basic responsibility the integral approach to urban development and not simply adhere to the regulation of partial processes of urbanisation and construction issues.
- Recover and strengthen the public urbanism above interests that relate to the developments of private interests.
- Try to diminish the factors of poverty and urban segregation, looking for mechanisms of generation of resources and employment, decrease of production costs and development of systems of redistribution of the social benefits for the achievement of a bigger justice.
- Regards transport and housing as priority issues to be tackled.

The environmental aspects of POT are related to the ecological location of the City, as well as to the state and the dynamics of the altered ecosystems generated by its development. As a starting point it is necessary to recognise a series of processes and features in the current form of occupation of the territory, which relates to the following:

- Ecosystems are diverse and fragile in the city surroundings and within the City.
- A faulty normative frame in the treatment of the diverse situations of spontaneous development, leading to many of the current environmental problems of the city.
- A quick and unbalanced growth of the urban-regional system with little prediction for capacity, planning and control of the territory.

These factors have generated an unbalanced situation in the environmental, public and social services affecting the quality of life in the city. In this context the environmental actions will be mainly referred to:

- Stop and decrease the environmental alteration process caused by the accumulation of lands degraded by mining, the deterioration of channels, swamps, and agricultural soils in the rural areas and the gradual contraction of the remainders of native forest.
- Increase the coverage of the sewer system to improve the solid waste management of the city, as a priority issue.
- Improve the offer of environmental services, including, among others, public space, green areas and recreation scenarios.

'This current century [20th] finds an urbanised Latin America. In fact, it is a continent with cities, and a predominantly urban population. At the same time, it has become the scenario of richness polarization and poverty concentration. 3,500 cities with more than 100,000 inhabitants constitute 77 per cent of total population and 90 per cent of poor households' (*La Era Urbana*, 1993).

Urban growth is a condition that is affecting the life of the people around the world. In 2025 two thirds of the world population will be living in cities and almost 90 per cent of this growth will be located in developing countries (Bartone, 2000). The third millennium is and will be urban, and a great part of this new urban population will be situated in poor cities of what is called 'the Third World'. Much of these people will be looking for a place to live in low-income sectors, where by legal or illegal means, they will provide themselves with a house, with public services, and with some kind of social welfare.

In the same way, globalisation and technology are also defining the collective and the individual life, and they are providing or giving away possibilities for a better quality of life. The people in the world have experienced these circumstances very differently and they are causing much more polarisation than ever between those who can afford these services and technologies and those who cannot. This global paradox also applies to countries, cities and neighbourhoods; in other terms, polarisation can be found globally, nationally and locally.

Low-income settlements demonstrate the above exactly, they are the nest of many economical problems and even more social difficulties; these are the areas in the cities where much urban poverty is situated, and partially because of that, also urban and environmental degradation. The problems of these sectors are huge and complex, not only in social but also in urban and housing terms, but at the same time these places have a lot of potential, mostly because of what the people themselves have done and do every day to overcome their difficulties; because to a great degree those settlements are what people have developed by themselves. This is not an argument to let people do what they want, or even worse, to permit national and local governments do nothing for those in need against their constitutional responsibilities; this is an argument to take people more seriously in terms of habitat, help them with technical assistance and resources to upgrade their environments and perhaps learn something from what they develop, and with this knowledge improve the formal architecture and urban practices.

Low-income settlements in Colombia are normally boundary sectors, which are characterised by great shortages of economic and urban resources such as the lack of urban infrastructure, proper housing and social services. The origin of these settlements is usually by one of the following, or a combination of them: the 'standard way' (purchasing of developed or undeveloped plots by public or private companies), clandestine (lots that are bought by illegal developers), or land invasion. A community of settlers that later, their origin indistinct, achieve full development thanks to self-build and/or self-help practices, both in terms of urban improvement and housing upgrading. These areas develop progressively and it is possible to affirm that these developments contribute to a better outcome in terms of economic and social settlements in comparison to others developed entirely by public or private actors. (Pugh, 2002)

Nevertheless, low-income settlements are not only compounded by sudden and informal rise, there also exists governmental programs and, more recently, private sector initiative projects. In spite of some interesting developments, most of what is offered to the people has serious problems in terms of what people need and are expecting, especially in housing issues; as Tarchópulos and Ceballos express it in the book *Household quality for low-income sectors in Bogotá*:

'The solutions offered to the low-income users did not fulfill the minimum expectations of people. A vast amount of these houses had to be demolished and 85 per cent had to be adapted to accomplish basic needs' (Tarchópulos y Ceballos, 2003, Page 16).

The issue of community participation in the production and transformation of urban environments has been studied for years, and its formal origin can be traced back to the 60s and 70s with the manifestation of community movements and representatives around the world, where people-performance in habitat affairs were noted.

Since 1950, the United Nations and its organisations began using the term community development – therefore participation. However, the first attempts at community participation were not actually well intended participation processes, they were a way to legitimise designed plans for the residents. Francisco Gómezjara defined participation as a tool to spread capitalist relationships to isolated and backward places, within governmental interests. (Avendaño and Carvajalino, 1985)

Community participation was more an illusion than a reality; statements like 'preventive civil medicine' or 'nurse of capitalism' were heard in the 70s. Authors such as Robert Goodman,

David Elliot, Francisco Gómezjara, Gerrir Guizer y Jhon F. Turner, among others, wrote and created controversy about the topic. Some of them taking a positive stand affirmed that community participation is an effective tool to the construction of a fairer society; others stated the opposite, community participation is an elite tool to exercise power.

In spite of the risks, it seems to be that community participation is an appealing alternative for creating and/or upgrading an urban environment. Authors like Jose Ospina, explain the main benefits of such an approach within two main reasons:

- For the creation of an environment that fulfills users' needs.
- For the creation of a strong community sense. The positive effect on the participants and the communities reinforces and vitalises community itself. As a result, it prepares social groups to initiate diverse projects on improvement of living conditions and quality of life.

From these common ideas, applications in different architectural and urban fields appeared, one of them was known as 'community architecture' or social architecture (for more information related to community architecture see MA thesis of the author: 'Self Build Housing in England, with Reference to Colombia'). This was popular in the 80s and beginning of the 90s and some of their principles are still very current:

'Community architecture is based on the simple principle that a space (urban or architectural) works better if the residents who live, work and play in it, are involved in its conception and management, instead of being treated as simple passive consumers'. (Wates y Knevitt, 1987)

Community participation is, perhaps like never before, an important tool to produce and express city. For this research project, the interest is centred on locating this motivation in low-income settlements in order to analyse its pertinence and the architecture and urban space that is generated.

The magnitude and impact of low-income settlements in Colombian cities is huge, because of the population they have and the portion of the city they engage. Colombian cities are still growing – especially boundary sectors – not only because of demographic factors, but also as a product of forced and voluntary displacement (the refugees initially settle down, in the main in a definitive way, in the periphery). Nowadays, in cities like Bogotá the inhabitants, without 'interference' of any private or public planning institution, have developed more than 50 per cent of the urban fabric spontaneously. People themselves have built and improved their own habitat, have built and shared their dreams and ideas about the future, have built a community vision not always explicit but always 'there', have used formal and informal participation channels to achieve their goals.

Fig 1: Low income settlements in Bogota

No matter what the origin of a low-income settlement, the first thing the community is interested in is in getting the basic infrastructure (water, light and sewerage) and the first roads to enter the neighbourhood. After these first steps (that can sometimes take decades), the interest moves on to the public space, the recreation areas and some cultural and social amenities. These services are basic to the people because they consider them as spaces of identity and symbols of their new neighbourhood. They will also improve the image of the settlement and the sense of belonging. At this point the communities either start a community organisation to get what they want or improve the organisation they already have. In this research, projects with those characteristics were studied, especially in terms of how community organisation and action was crucial in order to manage and develop those projects.

The community organisation in the projects analysed is very similar, all of them start with a problem to resolve and a leader who gathers the people. They organise themselves into groups or committees and look for advice and help from the Junta de Accion Comunal (JAC) (Community Action Group) and/or public and non-governmental organisations; some of the organisations studied were actually the same JAC. Community organisation and participation has a long history in Colombia, mainly because neither the public nor the private action actually reaches the entire population, therefore the people themselves have to deal with their 'own businesses'. Although there are many successful histories, some others just cannot leave the ground.

During the research work 30 case studies in Bogotá were done, in order to analyze how community participation works in habitat initiatives. It was also important to explore how people themselves build their own environments and what kind of urbanism, architecture and social links they produce. The cases studied were on public spaces (squares), pedestrian pathways, streets, green urban spaces and improving facades. After studying the projects and comparing the findings with the literature on the topic, the following themes appeared to be the most important:

BUILDING CAPACITY

FIG 2: PEOPLE AT WORK IN AN UPGRADED PARK

It is perhaps the most important common characteristic of the studied projects, the possibilities that the development of the project leaves the people. The knowledge, the methodologies and the management experience are tools that the communities acquire and they can be very useful for other projects the community may want to develop. This outcome is very much related to the possibility of having had any help, assistance and capacity from a public organisation or an NGO. In some of the projects studied help came from the municipal program called Obras con Saldo Pedagogico or Obras por tu Lugar, the help from which comes in the form of courses and peers that accompany the community through the whole process.

The architecture and the urban spaces that are produced as a result of these community projects, was also analysed. The first thing observed was that the projects and the production are very functional. The projects are mostly concerned with basic needs in terms of mobility, pedestrian connections, children's playgrounds, public meeting spaces, and some with the image of the neighbourhood (improve the 'aesthetics' some said).

FIG 3 AND 4 : PEDESTRIAN PATHS, PARKS AND URBAN SPACE

The second thing observed was the simplicity of the forms used, the same as the 'lack' of diversity in the design themes. In contrast with the previous it is worth mentioning the use of decoration and the use of colours in different ways. Perhaps the formal production cannot resist an 'academic' or even a 'professional' examination in terms of innovative design, however this production has at least two very important aspects, first it is what the people like and need, and secondly it generates a great sense of belonging.

Far from the idea that common people just do not care about environment, especially poor people, what was found gave the opposite view. People care very much about the environment, especially in terms of the quality of the air, the garbage collection and the green areas. These three topics were specially treated in the projects developed by the communities, the first and the second because they identify them with health issues (respiratory and gastrointestinal problems), and third with the quality of the public space in their neighbourhood.

FIG 5 AND 6 : GREEN AREAS, CHILDREN'S PLAYGROUNDS AND WELL MAINTAINED SPACES

IDENTITY/SENSE OF BELONGING

Together with building capacity – identity, or a sense of belonging, is the most important issue that arises from these projects. Communities feel more for those projects that belong to themselves, and it is displayed in the way they refer to them, the way they remember them, and most importantly, in the way they maintain them (in most cases, but not in all). People consider those projects as symbols, when somebody asks about the neighbourhood, they answer by indicating *that* space. These projects are also what the people use to meet, use to stay; use to show to strangers.

FIG 7 AND 8 : COLOUR APPROACH DEVELOPED BY THE COMMUNITY. PLAYGROUNDS BEING USED BY THE CHILDREN

SUSTAINABILITY

Sustainability is related to economical aspects and maintenance issues. Firstly, people identify with the possibility that this new space or amenity gives to make 'business', to open a shop, to offer a service. The second in terms of the maintenance of that space; cleaning, protecting from strangers, gardening and so on. However, it is important to mention that not all projects had the maintenance properly developed; in some it just wasn't done and in time the project started looking deteriorated.

FIG 9 AND 10 : SOME SHOPS HAVE BEEN OPENED AROUND NEW PUBLIC SPACES. URBAN SPACE IS KEPT CLEAN AND

The community initiative projects showed a number of important issues:

- Public spaces are very important in low-income settlements (and not the other way round, as is generally considered) due to the very basic commodities of the houses the urban space replaces those facilities. Moreover there are the public spaces, which give identity to the neighbourhoods when the people themselves have had the opportunity to be involved in the creation and development of them.

- In similar terms it is possible to say that people create and develop a special link to their territory, a link that allows the place to be sustained by the community.

- Community organisation is a crucial factor to a successful or unsuccessful project. In the cases studied, strong communities were more able to develop better projects; on the other hand, when community links were not well-developed, good results in the projects were more difficult to achieve.

- Another important issue was the possibility, or not, of having someone to help the community, both in technical and management terms. The relationship with public and private organisations, the same as participation tools, is also something that communities may not have and if they cannot count on help (NGOs, private or public consultancy groups) usually the project fails.

- Building capacity is perhaps the most important aggregated valued of these kinds of projects. It is the 'know how' that will allow the community to engage in other projects that improve their urban, architectonic and social life.

Finally it is possible to see that community initiative projects create important relationships between the people and their environments and between the people themselves. We can also say that, although there are not easy, these kinds of projects achieve much more than the traditional way. We, of the 'formal' urban planning approach, can learn and enrich our understanding and practice from the 'informal' urban development approach.

In Colombia community initiative or community involved projects are important to the communities themselves, but also for a quality developed environment.

- Community involved projects have demonstrated that they can build better environments; more suitable to the people, healthier for the cities, easier to maintain and 'loved' by the communities.
- Community involved projects have demonstrated that they can also 'build' better citizens; with superior community links, with higher social organisation and with leadership.
- Capacity building is the main profit that communities obtain; giving them the possibility for developing others projects to improve the quality of life.

Although the important advantages of participation, to develop projects within this strategy is not an easy task in Colombia; the following lines express suggestions in approaches and tools to make this practice more achievable.

- In Colombia public participation is made compulsory by the planning process laws. Formal strategies and methodologies are being developed, however the results are very poor, meanwhile informal strategies (in low- income sectors) have had many years of developing but they have not always had good quality results. It is necessary to work to find better approaches and skills to make 'more formal the informal processes', or to make 'more informal the formal processes'.
- There is a need to work more in the local level, in the neighbourhoods; more 'with' the people and less 'for' the people.
- Specific tools and community work strategies to make public participation possible need to be improved; there are some but they still have to be developed to be more successful.

Experiences in Colombia demonstrate that 'top down' and 'bottom up' approaches can meet and find a 'middle' approach is possible. Building the environment is not only a physical matter, it is especially a social matter; therefore to involve the people in this construction and find the tools to do it successfully, seems to be the challenge to take.

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