



El Mezquital: a community's struggle for development

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SUMMARY: *This paper describes the history of the community in El Mezquital, from the land invasion in the mid 1980s, through its consolidation and growth, until the present, drawing principally on interviews with the inhabitants and staff from supporting agencies. It analyzes the development of the different, and sometimes conflicting, community organizations and compares their different mandates and objectives. It shows important processes of community empowerment, the changing role of women and community self-help initiatives. It also describes how, in much of the settlement, basic infrastructure and services were in place and of good quality. However, it also highlights the lack of employment opportunities, how many people still live in overcrowded conditions, and the problems of violence, drug addiction and street children. It also highlights the inadequacies on the part of government agencies – including their incapacity to respond to the needs of the community, their under-estimation of community capacity and the attempts at political manipulation.*

I. BACKGROUND

GUATEMALA IS RANKED 117th by the United Nations Development Programme's Human Development Index.⁽¹⁾ This is amongst the lowest of the countries considered to have achieved an intermediate level of development. It is characterized by high levels of inequality in both rural and urban areas. In Guatemala City, the middle-income residential areas provide a sharp contrast to the many precarious settlements which are home to populations whose living conditions are hazardous and whose settlements are often on sites ill-suited to residential neighbourhoods. Even within such informal settlements, there are marked inequalities in the distribution of resources and quality of living environments.

There is little accurate documentation on these informal settlements. A recent study identified 161 areas characterized as precarious, housing a population of approximately 250,000 people out of a total population of 823,301 in the metropolitan area of Guatemala City.⁽²⁾ In addition, the study identified 176 *barrios populares* (low-income neighbourhoods) where there had been some improvements, such as formal housing, but which still showed high levels of poverty. The study revealed another critical point: of the 161 areas identified as precarious, 111 had been formed since 1992. Despite this, the government's economic policy tends to consider the market as the principal economic actor whilst the state fails to carry

out any visible or tangible role, whether in promoting development or in curbing inequalities.

This paper focuses on the different sub-divisions of the settlement of El Nuevo Mezquital (commonly known as El Mezquital and referred to as such in this paper) in the south of Guatemala City. The settlement is the result of the single successful land invasion in Guatemala during the 1980s and is one of the largest in Central America (c. 3,500 families). As El Mezquital has developed over the years, it has had to strengthen its community organization and generate a capacity for negotiation with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

THIS PAPER IS drawn from a longer report that sought to identify the positive and negative experiences of the "development process" in El Mezquital and to disseminate this within a society where the space for discussion and debate has been very restricted, and where poverty, marginality and precariousness continue to increase. This paper focuses on describing the development of El Mezquital and the very limited role of government agencies. Quotes from focus groups or interviews are in italics. The original report in Spanish and the longer report on which this paper draws in English are also available.⁽³⁾ These include more details on the role of international agencies and more discussion of the lessons learnt from these experiences that might have relevance to other programmes and projects in low-income urban areas around the world.

The research on which this paper draws aimed to:

- document and synthesize the nature of community organization in El Mezquital;
- analyze the interventions and impact of external organizations, including international, governmental and non-governmental;
- evaluate the successes and failures of the case of El Mezquital in tackling poverty.

The research was carried out using individual, in-depth interviews and focus groups with members of the community and organizations who have been involved in the development of El Mezquital. The fieldwork was carried out from May to August 1999. Eight individual interviews and 12 focus groups were carried out, involving 62 individuals. Focus groups had a maximum of ten participants, who were drawn from sub-committees within the cooperative in El Mezquital, from community organizations such as women's groups, from youth groups (boys and girls separately) and from community discussion groups. The Catholic Church was instrumental in helping the researchers contact some of the poorest members of the community, who were part of various religious groups. Interviews were carried out with community leaders, professionals who had been involved with developments in El Mezquital, representatives from slum dwellers' organizations and the local Catholic priest. In addition, existing literature on El Mezquital and other precarious settlements was reviewed.

At the end of the study, the field workers organized a "validation and reflection workshop" in which the preliminary results of the research were presented: 31 people took part, most of them from the community of El Mezquital. Some had taken part in the interviews. During the workshop, five working groups were formed which discussed the preliminary

a particular interest in race and ethnicity issues.

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The UK Government's Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC) provided support for the preparation of this paper (and the longer report from which it is drawn), as part of their support for a series of case studies on innovations in poverty reduction in urban areas. This work is coordinated by the International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED).

1. UNDP (1997), *Human Development Report 1997*, Oxford University Press, New York.

2. De Alfaro, G and L González (1997), *Estudio cuantitativo de las áreas urbano-marginales del AMCG*, COINAP/UNICEF, Guatemala.

3. These are available from the Human Settlements Programme, IIED, 3 Endsleigh Street, London WC1H 0DD, UK.

research results and presented their conclusions. The results from the workshop enriched the final report. The time limit of the research, which took place over three months in 1999, was the principal constraint.

III. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION IN EL MEZQUITAL

a. Stage 1: Establishment 1984-1986

IN 1984, A group of some 1,500 families invaded land surrounding the colony of El Mezquital, in the south of Guatemala City (zone 12). The colony had been built during the 1970s by the National Housing Bank (BANVI) as a residential area for people of low- to middle-income. The land covers an area of 35 hectares: to the north is the Central de Mayoreo (market place and bus station), to the west, the sheer drop of the El Zacatal ravine (with seasonal drainage) and the colony of El Mezquital; and to the south, the Villalobos river joins the Frutal gorge (a permanent running sewer). At that time, the only access to the settlement was by foot, since it was not reached by any of the city bus routes.

Part of the land that was occupied belonged to the colony of El Mezquital and had been set aside for recreational or environmental protection purposes. The rest belonged to a private landowner. The area was considered uninhabitable because it was so close to the ravines and because of the seismic instability in the area.

The settlers were diverse, both ethnically (Quiché, Mame and mixed race) and with regard to their birthplace – coming from many different departments of Guatemala. What they shared was poverty. Doña Esperanza Morales,⁽⁴⁾ from the Board of Education of the cooperative in El Mezquital, describes why she took part in the invasion:

"I lived in zone 3, where we were renting. But when you don't have work, you cannot go on renting because they kick you out, because you can't pay. And another thing was the electricity, because they put it on at 6pm and at 10pm they turn it off again. In the dark, if the children or some animal got sick, it was a problem. Another thing was the water; there wasn't any, they only gave you drinking water. So for washing we had to go to a public tank. So then, when we heard that they were invading El Mezquital, my husband and I started talking about it, and I said to him I'm going, because we need to invade for our children's sakes."

The land invasion took place in various stages: first the sub-division of El Exodo, then later El Esfuerzo, Tres Banderas and Monte de los Olivos, and then, finally, La Esperanza. The different invasions reflect slightly different dynamics. For instance, El Exodo was a more organized invasion whilst in La Esperanza the process was more gradual, as smaller, individual groups heard that an invasion was taking place and decided to try their luck. The initial invaders gave shelter to newcomers, on the grounds that the more settlers there were, the greater their lobbying capacity and their chances of avoiding eviction.

The sites that were occupied and the form of their occupation reflect different economic situations and levels of organization. The poorest households ended up on the steep slopes of the ravines and in the areas around the sewage and waste water outlets, whilst some of the central areas of El Mezquital show relatively high levels of development and physical infrastructure. La Esperanza is the most remote area with the

4. Committee member of the housing cooperative (Cooperativa Integral de la Vivienda Esfuerzo y Esperanza – COIVEES), interview, May 1999.

most dangerous topographical conditions; in the years that followed the invasion, the most severe disease outbreaks (typhoid) and the highest violence levels were recorded in this sub-division. Today, when members of the community of El Mezquital refer to the sub-division of La Esperanza, they usually call it "that place down there" (in Spanish, *allá abajo*), a phrase which refers not only to the geographical position of the area but also to its economic and social remoteness.

a. Consolidation of the Invasion

The first actions of the community centred on defending their land occupation. In addition to the attempts by the police to evict the community, the invaders had to confront the threats of other local communities – specifically those of the colony Monte Maria, a residential area of medium/high-income levels. Relations with those living in the original colony of El Mezquital were also tense since the invaders occupied this colony's green area. In the early days, the settlers had to carry out protection vigils.

El Mezquital was the only successful land invasion during the 1980s, that is, the only one to resist eviction. The main reasons for this were the large number of families involved and their level of organization. Over the course of several months, more than 4,500 families (some sources even suggest as many as 9,000) settled in the area. Although they came from different places and cultures, with different histories and even different ideologies, the population united around basic objectives.

Other factors also favoured the invasion, including the political context with the decline of the military executive of Mejía Vítores after the prolonged "Scorched Earth" campaign (1980-1983) and the subsequent attempt at legitimization, in which El Mezquital served as a showcase. Thus, from 1986 onwards, the weak Christian Democrat government of Vinicio Cerezo needed the support of the popular sector to develop, whilst also responding to the historical pressures that had brought it to power, namely political democratization, increasing autonomy of the civil government from the military and redistribution of wealth.

The specific interests of the private landowners were another factor. The owners of the land occupied by the invaders had also owned the land on which the original colony of El Mezquital had been built and they had sold this to the National Housing Bank (BANVI). The invasion gave economic value to an area considered uninhabitable and at high risk. It became a good business opportunity for the owners: years later, the government paid them more than US\$ 1 million for the land.

When the state failed to evict the first settlers, the settlement expanded and this consolidation of the settlement strengthened the community organization. Different sub-divisions had management boards (*juntas directivas*) and these collaborated in the creation of the Association of United Residents of El Mezquital (AVAUME) which was composed of two representatives from each sub-division. In addition to AVAUME and the different management boards, there were also organizations at the sector, micro-zone and street level. The process of land invasion and later settlement consolidation led to a strengthening of the community organization to the point where this organization became an important pressure group.⁽⁵⁾

However, tensions and contradictions characterized the Association almost from the outset. In each sub-division, there was more than one

5. Marroquín, O (1991), *La migración interna y su incidencia a nivel urbano en un caso de estudio: los asentamientos precarios de la Península de El Mezquital*, Tesis de grado, Universidad de San Carlos de Guatemala, Guatemala, page 6.

6. Dr Espinoza was director of UNICEF's Basic Urban Services Programme in Guatemala until 1997. This programme gave support to improving basic service provision in El Mezquital and many other settlements – see Espinosa, Lair and Oscar A. López Rivera (1994), "UNICEF's urban basic services programme in illegal settlements in Guatemala City", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 6, No 2, October, pages 9-29. This quote is drawn from an interview with Dr Espinoza in May 1999.

7. MONAP – Movimiento Nacional de Pobladores

8. SODIFAG – Sociedad para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia Guatemalteca

9. Fe y Alegría

10. Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunitario

11. Médicos Sin Fronteras

12. Fundación Ecueménica Guatemalteca Esperanza y Fraternidad

13. Empresa Municipal de Agua

management board, including some which represented purely private economic interests. The Association's reputation suffered from the lack of communication and low level of dialogue with the population. Parallel committees and groups opposed to the management boards emerged, representing the different visions and interests of the population as well as different perspectives regarding community work. For example, the Reflection Group, supported by the Catholic Church, spoke out about the dubious dealings and corruption of the management boards, as well as against two government agencies, the National Reconstruction Committee (CRN) and the National Housing Bank (BANVI). At this first stage, community organization was not one organic group but various groups, with heterogeneous composition and varying conflicting priorities. A certain degree of confrontation still exists today.

During the first months, the inhabitants faced very serious health problems from the high levels of overcrowding, the lack of water and the unsanitary living conditions. A typhoid epidemic in La Esperanza in 1985-1986, during which 160 children died, increased the urgency of resolving the problem of lack of water. As Lair Espinoza commented: *"If today the settlement has a precarious health situation, at that date it was like a refugee camp."*⁽⁶⁾

Between 1984 and 1986, the community organization received support from a wide range of organizations. It successfully lobbied the health centre of Villa Nueva to provide 500 community latrines. The National Movement of Settlers⁽⁷⁾ supported the community in the creation of the management boards and the land legalization claims. Other organizations also supported the community, such as the Society for the Integral Development of the Guatemalan Family;⁽⁸⁾ Faith and Joy⁽⁹⁾ (a religious organization); FUNDESCO (the Foundation for Community Development);⁽¹⁰⁾ UNICEF Basic Urban Services Programme; MSF (Doctors Without Borders);⁽¹¹⁾ the Ecumenical Foundation of Guatemala Hope and Fraternity;⁽¹²⁾ and, the Catholic Church which, from the outset, providing spiritual and social support.

The extent of the need was heightened by the lack of government response to the problems. Although the government decided not to evict the settlers, it offered no support, citing the illegality of the settlement as a justification for not providing services. The settlers were forced to steal in order to survive. They broke into the central water distribution pipe belonging to the Municipal Water Board (EMPAGUA)⁽¹³⁾ which separated the colony of El Mezquital from the settlement. Their first attempt left residents of the original colony without water, creating further tensions between the two settlements. After this, the settlers made illegal connections, hiding the taps beneath their beds so that visiting water engineers would not notice them. Some time later, the government authorized the installation of the first community taps. MSF (Doctors without Borders) donated three pipes for each installation.

Similar tactics were used to obtain electricity connections. The settlers put up numerous illegal connections to the main electricity posts. When the electricity company cut off their connections, a group of children from the settlement went on a protest march to the city centre, bearing a placard which read: "If the children are the future, we need to be able to read." In this way, by the end of 1986, the settlement had consolidated although the basic problems still remained.

With regard to education, the residents interviewed described the long struggle they had to obtain their first school and with no government

support. One resident, from the Administrative Board of COIVEES commented:

"There is a lack of communication with the government. I will give you an example: we struggled for a long time in La Esperanza. I had a colleague who worked as a volunteer for a long time in the school and, at last, we managed to get her a teacher's salary. Up until now, she has given classes in the Rising Sun school but the government has given no support at all."⁽¹⁴⁾

In the absence of governmental support, organizations such as Faith and Joy and the Foundation for Community Development (FUNDESCO) collaborated in the construction of the school.

14. COIVEES, focus group, June 1999

b. Stage 2: Early Growth 1987-1992

At the beginning of 1987, drinking water was supplied to the settlement by water tankers, public taps or from residents of the colony of El Mezquital who sold it at a high price. There was no street lighting and the electricity supply reached barely 40 per cent of the population (through illegal connections). There were five small private clinics and only one health post provided by the Ministry of Health. There were no telephones, roads, street-cleaning services or green areas for the 4,500 families living there.

In 1987, the community organization, AVAUME (Association of United Residents of El Mezquital) met with the government's National Reconstruction Committee⁽¹⁵⁾ to develop the first Programme of Urban Improvement of El Mezquital. This programme defined green areas, reservations and environmentally protected areas, an area for sports grounds and, in each sub-division, a site for a multi-purpose hall. It also defined pedestrian streets, main and adjoining streets, and regulated the layout of the different plots. In practice, the development of this plan by the National Reconstruction Committee working with the community organization effectively gave the latter official government recognition.

However, this first programme included one component that was unacceptable to many members of the community, namely, the size of the plots. While the government wanted to offer plots of six by ten metres and a rapid provision of services, the community rejected this proposal and lobbied for larger plots. The Church, through Father Luis Rama, supported this movement and helped form the "Six by Twelve Group", as the smallest plot size the community would accept was six by 12 metres. Although this struggle was ultimately successful, with the notable involvement of community organizations and the support of the Catholic Church, it also led to some contradictory situations, including groups of residents who invaded new areas for a second time. Esperanza Morales, at that time a member of the Six by Twelve Group, commented:

"The government was trying to offer us six by ten metres but everybody resisted because can you imagine, five children and two parents just wouldn't fit. We wanted a bigger place, and we deserved it, and we had the right to fight for something good. But there were a lot of people who said no, we shouldn't fight, they were very conformist. We had a lot of problems, confrontation with the technicians who came to measure the plots. In my case, for example, my husband is dead and so I am single, and they said that I didn't have the right to a plot as I would not be able to pay for it. Just because I was in the Six by Twelve Group. Then they said that they would give me building materials, sheet iron, if I stopped fighting, but I did not give up because I thought about the time when my children would be grown up. They put me in the middle of plots which were only six by ten metres

15. The National Reconstruction Committee was formed after the earthquake of 1976 to coordinate reconstruction efforts. After the earthquake, it continued to work in precarious areas until it was closed down in October 1994 as a result of the reductionist policies of the state.

16. COIVEES, interview, May 1999

17. The creation of COINAP was an attempt to establish some coordination between the different organizations working in El Mezquital. Its members came from the public and private sectors. For more details, see reference 6, Espinoza and López Rivera (1994).

18. Housing Committee, COIVEES, focus group, June 1999

and in a place where water was always coming into the house, and so one night, with three other families, I went and invaded a different part, where we made plots of six by 12 metres, we all did, and we would not leave that area. The people who had six by ten metre plots were those who did not want to fight, who were afraid, who did not want problems with the government. If we always plod along doing what we are told, we are just like donkeys. If we had not struggled, we would still be renting somewhere."⁽¹⁶⁾

While the developments by the National Reconstruction Committee were being carried out, the community began to work to improve the housing and infrastructure in the neighbourhood. The community worked with a newly created Inter-institutional Committee for Precarious Areas (COINAP)⁽¹⁷⁾, UNICEF and others, using participatory work methods. Together, they designed the first housing prototypes which were built in 1989. Through MSF and UNICEF, the community obtained funding for the construction of five houses. Due to a favourable exchange rate and the careful administration of the community, six houses were built with the money.

In 1989, under pressure from the community, the government agreed to sell the community the land they occupied. It was transferred initially to the National Housing Bank (BANVI) and the National Reconstruction Committee, before being allocated to individual residents. This marked a turning point in the struggle to legalize the land. At this same period, some families began to move to other settlements (e.g., Villalobos, Ciudad Peronia) in order to escape the high levels of overcrowding.

Emergence of the Cooperative

This stage of growth required changes in the organizational structure of the community. The concern that some management boards might be mis-using funds and the new development projects taking place meant that a new type of management was required. A selection of community representatives, with support from UNICEF, travelled to Mexico to see and hear about the experiences of community organizations in this country. Finally, it was decided that the most suitable structure would be that of a cooperative, whose work would be subject to constant monitoring, including audits of how funds were used, and it would be guided by the principle of serving the community with equal rights and responsibilities for all members.

The Guatemalan General Law of Cooperatives states these are not allowed to be profit-seeking and they must attempt to promote education, community integration and the establishment of social services. In addition, each member must have the right to one vote and the management of the funds must be regularly inspected by the general inspector of cooperatives. In El Mezquital, this mechanism helped to avoid the kind of corruption and abuse in the management of funds which had occurred with the management boards. Hugo Paredes, currently a member of the Housing Board of the Cooperative, stated: *"The Cooperative began because we were in a precarious situation. At that time, there were a lot of management boards and they all went around knocking on doors collecting money in the name of the community but who knows what happened to that money..."*⁽¹⁸⁾

The Cooperative was officially opened on the 20th October 1990, the date when Guatemala commemorates the anniversary of the October Revolution. It was named the "Integrated Cooperative of Housing, Esfuerzo and Esperanza" (COIVEES), Esfuerzo and Esperanza being the names of two of the sub-divisions in the settlement. The title indicates the

emphasis that was to be placed on the issue of housing. The organization was structured according to its own principles and the existing legal norms into the following boards:

- Administrative Board, directing the Cooperative;
- Supervisory Board, responsible for ensuring the smooth running of each of the sub-committees in COIVEES;
- Education Committee, in charge of informing new members of the Cooperative regarding their rights and responsibilities;
- Water Board, responsible for ensuring provision of drinking water;
- Credit Board, in charge of analyzing, supervising and approving loan applications by members;
- Building Materials Board, responsible for the manufacture of tiles and the distribution of building materials for all the projects which come under the Cooperative's mandate;
- Housing Board, in charge of planning, carrying out and supervising the construction of houses, and providing advice on how to address technical problems relating to construction of housing units.

There was some conflict between this new management structure and the management boards. Some of the management boards were opposed to COIVEES on the grounds that this new organization restricted their former levels of power. Lair Espinoza suggested that the management boards showed a lack of vision in this respect and prevented the development of *"...an organizational umbrella, which the management boards would have provided and beneath which the Cooperative and other interest groups could have united."*⁽¹⁹⁾

COIVEES' first actions focused on the provision of water. Dona Marina Dueñas, recalling the days before regular water service was achieved, said: *"In La Esperanza, we had ten minutes of water per family; you ended up with a splitting headache collecting it. Sometimes, I had to go and get water in the middle of the night, and I was very frightened."*⁽²⁰⁾

COIVEES constructed the first well and two water tanks with financial support from UNICEF and from the Swiss government who provided around 1,000,000 Quetzales (about US\$ 250,000 at that date). Negotiations with the Church took place to allow the well to be dug and the water tanks to be installed on Church premises with a lease of 25 years. The well was 869 feet deep and each water tank had a 175 cubic metres capacity. The initial distribution network covered 325 domestic connections and ten communal taps in La Esperanza, 76 domestic connections in Monte de Olivos, 17 in Tres Banderas and 40 in El Esfuerzo. From the outset, El Exodo, which relied on water from the Municipal Water Board (EMPAGUA) and illegal connections, cut itself off from this project, partly because of the private motives of the management boards who were in charge of collecting the monthly fees, which never reached EMPAGUA.

COIVEES also sought to address the problem of precarious housing with support from the Technical Consultancy Firm (ECOTEC) which developed a project with the Inter-American Foundation to build 60 new houses between 1991 and 1993. Just as in 1989, careful management of the funds allowed an extra five houses to be built on top of the original 60.

Reproinsas

At almost the same moment as the Cooperative organization was beginning work, the Integrated Health Programme was going through a process of consolidation, having started in 1986. This programme arose

19. Lair Espinoza, UNICEF, interview, June 1999

20. Administrative Board of COIVEES, focus group, June 1999

21. From the Spanish Representante del Programa Integrado de Salud, hence "REPROINSA".

22. Fundación Esfuerzo y Prosperidad

23. Comisión Nacional de Alfabetización, CONALFA

24. Unidas para vivir mejor, UPAVIM

from the need to confront the serious health problems in the community and the indifference or inefficiency of the relevant government bodies. It was based on a system of micro-zones or sub-divisions, each comprising approximately 50 families, into which the community had divided itself. In each micro-zone, the families elected one person as their representative on the Integral Health Programme. These became known as *reproinsas*⁽²¹⁾ and all those elected were women.

The *reproinsas* received part-time training for one year, with the support of UNICEF, for example in recognizing the symptoms of dysentery, in providing oral rehydration therapy, vaccinations, hygiene and other basic health care. They provided health care for the sick, including during the night, and thus built up a very good relationship with the community. Their first achievement was to increase immunization levels. From the outset, they set about making other changes within the community, not only in health but also in other social areas such as literacy schemes.

The *reproinsas* model heralded the beginning of a more complex organization which was replicated in other areas of the city. In 1990, the first community pharmacy was founded, as was the Foundation of Courage and Prosperity (FUNDAESPRO)⁽²²⁾ to provide a network of *reproinsas* across the city, which rapidly expanded into other precarious settlements. By mid-1999, there were between 600 and 700 *reproinsas* in 11 precarious settlements in the city, working in psychology, legal advice and literacy, the latter in coordination with the National Literacy Commission.⁽²³⁾ The *reproinsas* also began to change the perception and status of women through their role in public activities, moving out of the private sphere, and through their major role in community development.

On the negative side, the *reproinsas* found it difficult to combine their community work with their other responsibilities – for instance, many were responsible for taking care of their children and the household chores and many also worked in the formal or informal sectors. This led to many women dropping out of the programme within two years.

Women United for a Better Life (UPAVIM)⁽²⁴⁾

UPAVIM was an organization that went through a similar process to that of the *reproinsas* in El Mezquital. This organization was founded in 1988 to address the problem of children's health and the situation of women living in extreme poverty and those exposed to domestic violence. It received support from churches in the USA. The springboard for this was the work in the parish clinic of La Esperanza, in addition to the organizational experience of the Reflection Group and the Six by Twelve Group. UPAVIM started in loaned office space with three members and a small handicraft workshop. A few years later, before the beginning of the Programme for the Urbanization of El Mezquital (PROUME), the group had managed to construct and inaugurate a four-storey building.

The creation and growth of UPAVIM showed three important characteristics:

- the search for economic sustainability by the organization members (all women) which would allow them to survive and to confront problems such as domestic violence;
- work focused in the sub-division of La Esperanza, where the community was in most need, and it thus became a point of identity for the community in question;
- UPAVIM developed without support from the government, international organizations such as UNICEF or the World Bank and, hence, it

had a degree of financial independence – not total but certainly critical – which gave the organization a certain sustainability.

This stage of growth in the community, both quantitative as well as qualitative, later referred to by the community as the “bridge-phase”, served as a springboard for the achievements and projects to come.

c. Stage 3: Expansion 1993-1997

At the end of the 1980s, the National Reconstruction Committee had submitted a proposal to the World Bank requesting a loan for a municipal development programme in what it termed precarious areas. This loan was approved in November 1989 but was never paid out due to the closure of the World Bank Programme in Guatemala. In 1993, the original project was taken up once more. Invited by COIVEES and UNICEF, a World Bank evaluation mission visited El Mezquital. According to Mario Alfonso Bravo, this visit served the purpose of “...ascertaining the participation of the community and community organizations in developing, managing, implementing and administering community projects.”⁽²⁵⁾

After a long period of negotiation and preparation, the project started in March 1995, supported by an outlay of one million Quetzales (equivalent to US\$ 200,000 at that time). It was called the Programme for the Urbanization of El Mezquital (PROUME) and it included components for:

- Infrastructure: including sewers and sewage treatment plants, rainwater drains, pavements for pedestrians, the introduction of electricity and the creation and maintenance of green areas and environmentally protected areas;
- drinking water: to continue the COIVEES water project and to extend it to El Exodo, one of the sub-divisions;
- housing improvement: to construct 1,000 new houses and improve 500 houses;
- creating a main transport road through the settlement with access to the market: to be carried out by a private construction firm under the responsibility of the National Reconstruction Committee;
- relocation of tenants: this was aimed at those families who lived in areas which impeded developments, for example, in the middle of where a street was planned. They needed to be relocated to areas of similar conditions to the rest of the settlement. A total of 350 families were selected for moving.

Designs and plans for basic social infrastructure were developed in response to the expressed needs of the different groups. These included:

- an integrated centre for women’s needs (FUNDAESPRO)
- a fire station (Power Group)
- a primary school (management board of Tres Banderas)
- a basic education institute (management board of El Esfuerzo and COIVEES)
- four multi-purpose halls (management boards of Monte de los Olivos and El Exodo, Environment Group and Reflection Group)

The total cost of the project was US\$ 6,654,160 – provided by the institutions shown in Table 1.

Housing improvements: The new housing and the improvements to existing housing were to be funded through a loan system to which, in principle, the whole population had access whether or not they were members of the Cooperative. Credit was provided to cover the cost of building materials, hiring a qualified builder and also a certain amount

25. Bravo, M et al. (no date), *El programa de urbanización de El Mezquital: PROUME. Una experiencia de coordinación comunitaria e institucional, y modelo autogestionario para vivir mejor*. COINAP/UNICEF, Guatemala, page 43.

Table 1:	The Funding Contributed or Loaned by Different Sources	
Institution	Amount of money contributed or loaned (US\$)	
UNICEF	117,521	
National Reconstruction Committee (CRN) and the Office of Human Settlements and Housing (Dirección de Asentamientos Humanos y Vivienda - DAHVI)	1,470,282	
Community	188,099	
World Bank (International Bank for Reconstruction and Development)	4,878,267	

SOURCE: Bravo, M et al. (no date), *El Programa de Urbanización de El Mezquital: PROUME. Una experiencia de coordinación comunitaria e institucional, y modelo autogestionario para vivir mejor*, COINAP/UNICEF, Guatemala.

for paying family members to cover the costs of the hours of work invested. Each family whose loan request was approved was entitled to up to US\$ 2,250, to be repaid over a period of 15 years at an interest rate of 9.5 per cent. However, not all families could take out the loan since they would not be able to pay it back.

Drinking water: Two new wells were sunk, the first in El Exodo (1,002 feet deep, providing 280 gallons of water per minute) and the second in Lomas de Villalobos (1,000 feet deep, providing 260 gallons of water per minute). This meant that water was supplied to the community throughout the year. In contrast, in the neighbouring colony of El Mezquital, the service provided by EMPAGUA, the Municipal Water Board, is highly irregular with water sometimes only available for three or four hours a day.

Infrastructure: The infrastructure was installed with the help of community labour. Once “urbanized”, plots of 72 square metres were sold to residents for 4,500 Quetzales (currently under US\$ 700) if the full price was paid immediately or for 8,000 Quetzales (about US\$ 1,100) if paid over a 15-year period. Payment was still dependent on the final legalization of property deeds and, at the time of writing, this still had not yet begun.

In addition to the five initial sub-divisions, PROUME relocated residents whose houses were in the way of the redevelopment – about 350 families in all – and two fully urbanized new sub-divisions were developed for them – Ocho de Marzo and Lomas de Villalobos – which became integrated into the settlement.

Community work: PROUME was the outcome of a multi-institutional effort and community input. The management boards in each sub-division were responsible for mobilizing and coordinating the voluntary work needed to install the infrastructure. This meant holding frequent meetings to inform residents of plans, and to discuss them. This also meant that work had to be carried out at night and at weekends. Women and children carried out 70 per cent of this work. A committee of management boards⁽²⁶⁾ was also created, involving three representatives from each sub-division.

The Cooperative (COIVEES) was responsible for:

- receiving and managing the funds from UNICEF and the National Reconstruction Committee, and administering loans to residents;
- getting hold of the building materials for carrying out the PROUME projects, and administering the implementation of the projects and loans;
- collecting loan repayments;
- gathering all the relevant information for auditing the accounts, checking and reviewing the different projects;
- presenting to UNICEF a three-monthly report regarding expected costs or any other form of expenses to be withdrawn from the programme funds.

For their part, the main responsibility of the government (via the National Reconstruction Committee and DAHVI (the Office of Human Settlements and Housing) was to act as intermediary for channelling government funds to the community, constructing the main road access to El Mezquital, the stretch of road adjoining the market area and the introduction of electricity to those households still lacking it. The World Bank provided most of the funding. UNICEF's Urban Basic Services Programme provided training and technical assistance for those community organizations managing the implementation of the projects; UNICEF initiated and coordinated support from other local and international organizations, and administered and channelled resources from the World Bank to the project management committees in the settlement.

PROUME carried out most of the projects that had been planned, with only a small delay in the two-year timetable initially stipulated. Four hundred and fifty completely new houses were constructed, out of the 1,000 originally planned. The rest of the funding was used to improve existing housing. The two new wells that had been sunk extended the provision of water to the whole community. Pavements, sewers and rain-water drainage were installed in all the sub-divisions. The planned relocation of those who lived on sites needed for redevelopment took place.

On the 15th May 1997, the FUNDAESPRO clinic was inaugurated with funds from PROUME, and was named the Integrated Centre for Family Development,⁽²⁷⁾ (initially planned as the Integrated Centre for Women's Needs). During the first year, the clinic was open only for consultancies in the mornings but in the second year it was open all day. New sections were opened up for a laboratory (privately run), for legal advice (supported by University of San Carlos) plus a dental project and a mental health project. The efficient and well-kept clinic, like the wells, shows the quality of development in this settlement. However, PROUME also left work unfinished, and thus a certain amount of dissatisfaction exists within the community.

d. Stage 4: Situation in 1999

Since the end of the PROUME project, COIVEES has carried out various different kinds of projects including a building block manufacturing enterprise (begun in 1998, this initiative only lasted three months due to a part being broken and stolen and never replaced) and a waste collection project, which relied on one or two waste collection lorries which, unfortunately, provided only an irregular service. They produce community bulletins regarding their work and particular needs and priorities in terms of basic service provision.⁽²⁸⁾ They also developed a proposal for a new housing project that was submitted to the Inter-American Foundation, but

27. Centro de Desarrollo Integral de la Familia, CEDIF

28. COIVEES, 1997, 1998, 1999

this did not receive funds. COIVEES also worked with students from the Mirna Mack High School to carry out a survey of the situation and needs of the population.

Community organizations such as the network of *reproinsas* carry on growing. During the 1980s, their level of activity decreased, mainly because of the heavy work burden of the community health workers, but they have gradually recovered former levels of activity even without the provision of salaries or other forms of economic support. This is largely due to the growing awareness and organization of the women who are part of the programme and to the support of the FUNDAESPRO network. Currently, there are 80 *reproinsas* working in El Mezquital, but with practically no access to medicines (because of a lack of funds). The capacity-building for each worker lasts two years and they are trained by FUNDAESPRO staff. Recently, workers have been trained in HIV/AIDS prevention as well as legal training for dealing with violence against women, both domestic violence and violence within the community.

In some ways, *reproinsas* is a women's organization, not because the workers themselves are women but because they confront concrete problems faced by women. At the end of the 1980s, perhaps without realizing it, the Integrated Health Programme and the *reproinsas* started off a complex and profound developmental process: from being a project for others, and from their role in development, in the public arena and in community organization, they created a space for reflection regarding identity and the particular problems faced by women. This process, which took place only gradually, met with resentment and opposition from many men within the community, and even from family members of the *reproinsas* themselves. However, the process gradually began to bear fruit. In one of the focus groups carried out with *reproinsas*, one worker stated:

"Individually, each one of us has grown, and each one grows together with her children. Now the little girls don't grow up so timid, their mothers work and they too benefit from it, and the little boys too. I am a very different person now to what I used to be. I was really shy, I wouldn't talk to anybody."⁽²⁹⁾

Edgar Hidalgo, consultant to UNICEF, recalled such an example:

"In one of the first training modules for the reproinsas, somebody asked why all the men had holidays but the women didn't. With the support of Lair Espinoza, they organized holidays, some women took their husbands and children, some went alone. The whole thing led to trouble at home, beatings from husbands and conflicts, but the women still went. Every year they organized a lunch and went for a long weekend because they had the right to some time off. Most of the ones that I knew have since said to me, 'If my husband wants to shout at me or hit me, he'll think twice about it now'."⁽³⁰⁾

The Reproductive Health and Self-Esteem Group for Women's Development,⁽³¹⁾ coordinated by *reproinsas*, runs a one-year course of two hours per week for groups of young women (ten per group), teaching them to know themselves and develop self-esteem. Their activities and goals are:

"Knowing ourselves better, having self-esteem, knowing our bodies and our private parts, sharing experiences with other young women, understanding how to feed ourselves with vitamins, and trying to prevent so much pregnancy amongst adolescents..."⁽³²⁾

UPAVIM, Women United for a Better Life, currently has 67 members, more than 50 of whom work in the handicraft workshop. They also have a clinic, a nursery (with 64 children), a laboratory, a healthy child programme (where children's weight is measured once a week), a dental clinic, a women's breast-feeding programme (training 24 women in

29. *Reproinsas*, focus group, July 1999

30. Dr Edgar Hidalgo, consultant, interview, July 1999

31. Grupo Salud Reproductiva y Autoestima de la Mujer para Superarnos Mejor

32. The Reproductive Health and Self-Esteem Group for Women's Development, focus group, July 1999.

breast-feeding) and a scholarship programme which helps support 650 children in their studies. The main funding for this comes from the hand-craft workshop and donations from North American religious organizations. UPAVIM continues to work for the financial independence of women and the work hours are flexible to accommodate the other chores and needs of the women. They are currently working to build a school next to their building. The organization has a Board of Directors in each project and a general Board of Directors which oversees the whole programme; there are monthly evaluation meetings and general meetings twice a year. Moreover, every two years there are elections for committee members of UPAVIM.

UPAVIM provides an environment where women's dignity and self-esteem can develop. As the president declared, "...the possibility of earning a salary, albeit small, allows us to make decisions in our homes."⁽³³⁾

In El Mezquital, the *reproinsas* and UPAVIM are both examples of capacity-building and of empowerment of women. This process can be seen, for example, in the way women came to occupy positions of power within the community (the current president of the Cooperative is a woman) although the majority of those interviewed stated that this empowerment had yet to fully reach the domestic sphere and what Pérez Sainz refers to as "redefinition of the hierarchies within the household".⁽³⁴⁾

In the focus group carried out with members of UPAVIM, one of the women commented that they could make decisions, but that "...we still dare not make the final decision"⁽³⁵⁾, referring to existing problems within the household.

Alongside these developments, the principal problems of El Mezquital mentioned by the interviewees are of a socio-cultural nature relating to the lack of social development. They include:

- violence: including domestic violence, rape of youth and children;
- drug and substance abuse: including marijuana, cocaine, crack, glue-sniffing and alcohol. Drug addiction has increased among children aged between seven and 15 years old according to the *reproinsas*.

"Young people today have started killing people and robbing people in order to be able to get drugs. Also there are many very young mothers, 13 or 14 years old, and they too take drugs and gather together on street corners to mug people;"⁽³⁶⁾

- the submissive role of women: a subject which came up most often with the women's focus groups;
- the lack of green spaces, recreation areas and facilities: most of which were not finished by PROUME. This problem particularly affects young people. According to Anleu and González, the lack of freedom, private space and recreation is one of the principal reasons why children leave home;⁽³⁷⁾
- the existence of a high percentage of street children and delinquent youth: groups like Casa Alianza which work with street children in Guatemala City claim that most of the children they work with in the city come from colony Limón and from El Mezquital. The extent of this problem is illustrated by the fact that, in 1995, La Novena Integral Development Unit began a programme aimed at stopping the children and youth of El Mezquital from becoming street children, a programme which was later reoriented to reducing social risk factors for children and adolescents;⁽³⁸⁾
- the lack of employment and informal or casual employment: several of those interviewed commented that some families only eat once a day and even then only the basic staples (tortilla and beans). In some of the

33. UPAVIM, focus group, July 1999

34. Pérez Sainz, J P (1990), *Ciudad, subsistencia e informalidad. Facultad latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales, FLACSO, Guatemala.*

35. UPAVIM, focus group, July 1999

36. Palua Juárez, Faith and Solidarity Group, focus group, June 1999

37. Anleu, C and M González, (1997), *Instituciones y niños de la calle. Perspectivas de ex-niños/as de la calle. Programa de Apoyo para la salud Materno Infantil y para la salud de otros grupos de riesgo*, PAMI, Guatemala.

38. UDINOV (1998), *Sistematización de la metodología de trabajo comunitario. Proyecto de promotores juveniles comunitarios. Programa de apoyo para la salud materno infantil y para la salud de otros grupos de riesgo*, PAMI, Guatemala.

39. Julia Olivares, Faith and Solidarity Group, focus group, July 1999

40. Housing Board, COIVEES, focus group, June 1999

focus groups which included youths, girls commented that it was sometimes difficult to continue studying due to a lack of funds. Doña Julia Olivares de Fernández, a *reproinsa* and coordinator of various community groups, commented that:

"...here the majority of household heads are low-income and there are also more children than adults and there are a lot of unmet needs. I would like people from outside to come and see, not just to come and visit the church or an institution but they should get the people together and see what their needs are, they should approach the poor people and see the hardships that they suffer;"⁽³⁹⁾

- precarious housing: there are still houses built entirely from sheet metal and wooden boards with a dirt floor, creating health problems for the inhabitants. Through PROUME, 450 new houses were funded and many were improved. But not everybody had access to the loans. In addition, not everybody approved of the house designs and building materials – preferring instead a more solid construction which would allow for the later addition of a second level. Hugo Paredes from the Housing Board of the COIVEES commented that:

"60-65 per cent of the community have built their houses, the remaining 30-35 per cent haven't because of a lack of means, economic resources, and we hope that they will somehow be able to have this possibility through the Cooperative;"⁽⁴⁰⁾

- overcrowding: the average size of the plots is now six by 12 metres which is inadequate to house families, creating personal, social and behavioural problems;
- low educational provision: most of the education in the settlement is in private institutions which are too costly for the majority of households. The lack of education affects employment opportunities and the general development of the inhabitants;
- lack of health services: the health post belonging to the Ministry of Health and Public Assistance, situated in Tres Banderas sub-division, functions irregularly – mainly for vaccination purposes – and is without medical personnel. Some of those interviewed also claimed that it is about to shut down permanently and the service will be transferred to another settlement in the area. The *reproinsas* provide a much better service, as do the different clinics belonging to the organizations active in El Mezquital, namely those of CEDIF (Integrated Centre for Family Development), the clinic of the Catholic Church and that of UPAVIM women's organization, although the cost is sometimes beyond the population's means.

e. Observations

After 15 years of community struggles, the work accomplished has left a profound physical imprint on the community. It no longer resembles the 1984 settlement of families who had little when they arrived. Since 1984, the community organization has accomplished the main part of their original objectives: legalization of the land (underway), water, sanitation, electricity, housing improvement; objectives which ran alongside a determined organizational structure. The management boards of the settlement sub-divisions were especially committed to legalization of the land whilst the Cooperative focused on housing improvement and provision of water.

In this new phase, most of those interviewed stated that they had no clear idea of the objectives. Others said that although the achievements

are many, much remains to be done in terms of housing, education, employment and violence. Moreover, there was no apparent reflection process in the various organizations regarding changes in their organizational structures in order to adapt them to this new phase. Neither AVAUME (Association of United Residents of El Mezquital) nor the management boards have been restarted or replaced by other community-based organizations, creating a vacuum which COIVEES, the largest and most consolidated of all the community organizations, cannot fill, since its nature and goals are different.

Just as at the end of the 1980s the organization made a qualitative leap forward which allowed it to embark on a new growth process and to take on PROUME, today such a change in organizational structure and objectives is needed if the community is to move ahead in addressing the current problems listed above.

In some sectors, the prevailing feeling is one of satisfaction with the goals already achieved. Two of the interviews carried out with members of COIVEES illustrated this. A member of the Water Board of COIVEES stated:

"The main problem we had was at the beginning because there were no basic services. We didn't have water, we didn't have electricity, streets, transport, they didn't want to legalize the settlement and a whole range of problems. That was at the beginning. But now, in contrast, the thing is, what do we want if we have everything already? It's been a great achievement because we've had a lot of help. It really has been a success. Now there's no pollution, everything is really nice, we've got electricity and they are making up the deeds to legalize the land."⁽⁴¹⁾

Indeed, a member of the Administrative Board stated the same thing:

"During my lifetime, our dreams have been realized but now there are other dreams. I came here aged 31 and frankly, I came here to get away from my past life, to wipe the board clean, leaving everything. I came here empty handed and in those days I didn't have a single grey hair. But we came to work for our communities so that we could carry out this true dream. But I feel satisfied because I have been on the committee of the Cooperative for eight years and I believe that the little that we have done, we have done it with a good will. Cooperative committee members who give their hearts to work for the community are few and far between."⁽⁴²⁾

This attitude is fully understandable, particularly from the point of view of those who built the community up from nothing and, in so doing, went through a process of personal development. However, it should not mean that current problems are disregarded.

41. Water Board, COIVEES, interview, June 1999

42. Administrative Board, COIVEES, focus group, June 1999

IV. THE ROLE OF GOVERNMENT

DEVELOPMENT IN EL Mezquital has been based upon the interaction of different organizations – government institutions, NGOs, international organizations and community organizations. It has taken place on the understanding that living conditions in the settlement cannot be genuinely improved single-handedly by the market, the state, international cooperation or the community when working in isolation. However, the organizations did not always share the same vision, objectives or work programmes and there were moments of confrontation.

According to the majority of those interviewed (both within the community and with non-community stakeholders) the government played the least significant role both in qualitative and quantitative

43. The role of NGOs and international agencies in El Mezquital is discussed in the longer report on which this paper is based – and this will also be the focus of a paper in the April 2001 issue of *Environment and Urbanization*.

44. COIVEES, focus group, July 1999

terms.⁽⁴³⁾ Few interviewees referred to government interventions and when they did it was almost always in reference to the obstacles they put in the path of community work. The comment of Marina Dueñas, president of the Administrative Board of COIVEES, sums this up: *"The government did nothing, absolutely nothing."*⁽⁴⁴⁾

There is little evidence of government intervention or support in El Mezquital, from the beginning to the present day: one health centre with a part-time nurse for an area covering 3,500 families and a few schools. It seems little, when compared with the social infrastructure built through the organized work of the community. Any visitor to the settlement will notice a visual contrast between, on the one hand, the water tanks set up by COIVEES, painted with bright colours and significant scenes of community life, or the well-maintained three-storey building of FUNDAESPRO and, on the other hand, the government buildings such as the health centre in Tres Banderas (one of the sub-divisions of El Mezquital), its roof made of sheet metal, its windows broken and in a state of disrepair.

According to those interviewed, the attitude of the state can be characterized as follows: an underestimation of community capacity; political or partisan manipulation; and all parties showing an incapacity to respond to the needs of the community which, ultimately, received a better response from international organizations.

The government's actions were shaped by:

- the trend towards privatization and the particular economic model being adopted;
- financial constraints due to the inadequate taxation system which fails to generate enough resources for development. Successive attempts at tax reform have generated political instability and attempts at political coups (for example, May 1987; early 1998);
- weakness of the government in the face of traditional power groups, e.g. army and economic groups who are generally disinterested in housing issues and development for the poorest groups;
- the lack of a coherent, integrated development plan for Guatemala City;
- the government's own fear and lack of trust in community organizations in a country where, since 1954, popular organization has been considered the enemy from within.

These are characteristics of governments as apparently different as those of General Mejía Víctores, at the end of the "Scorched Earth" era, and the contemporary one of Alvaro Arzú, the government that signed the peace accords in December 1996. Regarding the current government's ability to respond, Gellert and Palma comment: "A decrease in institutional capacity can be seen, both in the actual number of government institutions as well as in the number of areas covered. In comparison with 1988, the situation in 1997 shows a notable lack of sectoral ministries, like those of health, education, public works. The social programmes of these ministries have for the most part been transferred to social funds. However, these funds are destined primarily for rural areas."⁽⁴⁵⁾ (Translated from Spanish).

With regard to government institutions such as COINAP, the Inter-institutional Committee for Precarious Areas, the interviewees showed the same lack of knowledge as to its role and interventions although, at the individual level, some of the technicians and workers from this organization built up a good working relationship with the community. COINAP was founded in February 1987 with the aim of coordinating the

45. Gellert, G and S I Palma (1999), *Precariedad urbana, desarrollo comunitario y mujeres en el Área Metropolitana de Guatemala*, FLACSO, Guatemala City. Debate no. 46, 114 pages.

work of the public and private sectors within Guatemala City. It covered five main areas of work:

- the Integrated Health Programme;
- the Productive Project Programme (including the following projects: pharmacy; community shops; pig-rearing and slaughter; Nixtamal mill and bakeries. Of these, only the pharmacy was sustainable);
- community mobilization and education;
- water and the environment (including drains);
- research and systematization.

Underestimation of community capacity: Professionals had little respect for community skills and capacity, and this attitude was directed chiefly at the community leaders and those responsible for the various developments in the settlement. This lack of understanding was experienced by the *reproinsas* who encountered: "...a lack of institutional flexibility, little recognition and acceptance of the community's concerns and criticisms on the part of the technicians, difficulty in integrating these technicians into local work teams, as well as a lack of understanding of the process of self-development and independence of FUNDAESPRO."⁽⁴⁶⁾ When interviewed, Edgar Hidalgo added that the medical doctors employed in the state-run health centre were systematically opposed to the *reproinsas'* work, claiming that they tried to tell the doctors what to do.⁽⁴⁷⁾

Manipulation: There are various examples of the opportunistic exploitation of the organizational capacity of the community, or attempts to manipulate the community according to specific party-political interests. The *de facto* government of Mejía Victores (1984-1985) and that of Vinicio Cerezo (1986-1990) tried to convert El Mezquital into a showcase,⁽⁴⁸⁾ in order to use it to legitimize their weak and discredited governments (during the 1987 and 1988 coups). The government of Serrano Elias also wanted the Cooperative to support their government's actions.

Incapacity to respond to the needs of the population: The early experiences of the community with the government set the pattern for their subsequent relationship. The lack of response to demands for water and electricity forced the community to look for alternative sources of support and, above all, to fall back on their own resources. From the very beginning to the present day, the community has been forced to rely upon its own solutions to the varying problems confronting them, with no significant government input. This was the case when the community approached EMPAGUA requesting water and were told that, since they were illegal settlers, they had no rights. This led to the community illegally tapping into water pipes, as mentioned earlier.

Since then, faced with even the gravest problems, the community has sought solutions with minimal government input. Neither in water provision nor in the general community urbanization nor in housing construction has the government played a significant role. In this sense, the attitude of the government and government bodies has been more that of observer than facilitator. They have shown little capacity for resource mobilization, a lack of understanding of, and poor relationship with, the community itself and little capacity to meet the population's needs, including those to which it is constitutionally bound.

In particular, Guatemala's continuing fiscal problems (the country has one of the lowest levels of income tax in Latin America) have resulted in a serious lack of resources for development. At the local level, autonomy has been reduced and there are few advances in decentralization, combined with severe budgetary constraints. This has generated insecu-

46. Espinoza, L and E Hidalgo (1994), *Una experiencia de participación comunitaria en las áreas precarias de la Ciudad de Guatemala*, UNICEF, Guatemala, page 119.

47. Edgar Hidalgo, interview, July 1999

48. CITGUA (1991), *Asentamientos precarios y pobladores en Guatemala. Ciencia y tecnología para Guatemala*, Guatemala.

city, particularly as there has been a visible reduction in international support within El Mezquital and in Guatemala as a whole, rendering active state intervention in community development ever more necessary.

V. CONCLUSIONS

THE RESIDENTS RECALL that when they arrived in El Mezquital, the invaded area was "filthy and stripped of vegetation". The initial invasion by thousands of families aggravated these conditions. The lack of water, the discarded waste, the precarious living conditions (for example, the shacks which offered little protection against the elements, generally built from bamboo, cardboard and waste materials) and the overcrowding resulted in a very low quality of life as well as high levels of mortality and morbidity, particularly for the children.

Since then, there have been significant developments. After 15 years of community work, supported by external organizations, almost all the families in the settlement have access to water. COIVEES supplies 2,537 water meters with clean, good quality water 365 days per year, a much better service than most residential areas receive in the rest of the city, including middle- and upper-income areas. The cost of getting connected to the water system is 550 Quetzales for members of the Cooperative and 650 Quetzales for non-members. The cost of water supplied by COIVEES is relatively low compared to the other providers. According to Francisco Chitamul, from the Water Board of COIVEES, the Cooperative tries to keep the price stable as a form of subsidy to the residents. There are still groups in the settlement whose water is supplied by EMPAGUA, a more irregular service, and in La Esperanza there are still some communal taps supplying the poorest families who do not have in-house connections. Ninety-five per cent of families have electricity in their homes. The entire population of El Mezquital, some 3,500 families, has sewers and rainwater drains in their areas (although there are still problems with drains, especially in La Esperanza).

The cultural and personal changes are not so easily quantifiable but they have important implications. The inhabitants' struggle reinforced their group identity and led to skill development and community organization. Marco Paniagua considers that: *"These people will never in all their lives forget their mobilization, participation and the way they worked together like ants in the community. They are conscious that they themselves did this and, in terms of identity this is very valuable, although you cannot measure it. Of course, you can measure the negotiation capacity of the 24 leaders who started off the project. They abused the professionals, they chucked the government out of the community, they totally changed the traditional submissive relationship of settlers towards the government. They learnt a lot about how to get people together, how to use participatory techniques, communication and accountancy, and there they still are. It would only take another project and they would be back there organizing people once more."*⁴⁹

In one of the focus groups conducted, older people of low socio-economic status showed adeptness in managing technical development vocabulary, including economic terms and concepts. In the same way, *reproinsas* and women from UPAVIM demonstrated that they had lost their timidity and had raised their self-esteem. In particular, the researchers noted how these groups of women would speak frankly in front of the research team regarding intimate issues such as their bodies,

49. Marco Paniagua, UNICEF consultant, interview, May 1999

alcohol problems or domestic violence.

Since 1984, El Mezquital has improved the quality of life in many areas (health, housing, mortality levels) whilst in other ways it has not advanced and has even deteriorated in part (recreation, levels of consumption, work conditions). The population, for the most part, has acquired an adequate physical space (housing), with adequate infrastructure but not adequate incomes or employment opportunities. There is adequate basic infrastructure in most of the settlement, and some areas of social infrastructure, yet the residents have not managed to fully overcome the precariousness of their situation and their poverty.

El Mezquital serves as an unprecedented example of development within Guatemala from the mid-1980s. Experiences such as those of COIVEES, UNICEF's Programme of Basic Urban Services and PROUME (Programme for the Urbanization of El Mezquital) are today considered to be "model" experiences and are frequently used as a reference for other settlements' developments. The economic situation has improved for residents through the work of the community organization, the supportive external organizations and, in part, the state government. Moreover, these experiences generated both individual and collective skills. Nevertheless, fundamental problems such as education, housing, employment and violence still remain to be resolved, either partially or in full.