



The role of external agencies in the development of El Mezquital in Guatemala City

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SUMMARY: *This paper describes and discusses the role of different international agencies (including UNICEF and the World Bank) and NGOs in supporting development in El Mezquital, a settlement formed from a land invasion in Guatemala City the mid-1980s. It draws on interviews with the inhabitants and with staff from supporting agencies. The support from these international agencies and NGOs allowed considerable improvements in infrastructure and service provision, and supported important processes of community empowerment and greater status and possibilities for women. However, the paper also describes the limitations of this support, including the limited scope for participation, the projects that were planned and never implemented and the problems that the international support failed to resolve. It also describes the resentment from groups within the community with regard to what was achieved.*

I. INTRODUCTION

THE DEVELOPMENT OF El Mezquital, a large informal settlement in Guatemala City with over 23,000 inhabitants, was described in some detail in the April 2000 issue of *Environment and Urbanization*.⁽¹⁾ This paper aims to complement the earlier paper by reflecting on the support for this development provided by international agencies. In this instance, the role of certain international agencies was particularly important in that the city authorities in Guatemala City had little interest in providing any support for internal developments within El Mezquital. The case is unusual in that relatively large urban development programmes funded by official donors (including the World Bank) usually work with and through the city authorities or national agencies working at city level.

The earlier paper describes the history of the community in El Mezquital, from the moment of the land invasion in the mid-1980s, through its consolidation and growth until 1999. It describes the very significant achievements of the community-based organizations working with a range of external organizations, who managed to prevent the government attempts to evict their initial settlement. It was the only successful squatter invasion in Guatemala City during the 1980s. There have been great improvements in provision for infrastructure and services (including provision for water, sanitation, drains, roads and footpaths, electricity, health care and schools), largely through the work of community organizations working with some external support. The community-

managed water supply provides cheaper, better quality, more reliable services than those in nearby settlements served by the official water agency. The community-based integrated health programme started in El Mezquital developed a model which has been widely copied in other parts of the city. Four hundred and fifty new homes have been constructed and many more improved with support from a housing credit scheme. There were also many tangible improvements regarding community empowerment, the changing role of women and community self-help initiatives. All this was achieved despite the lack of interest and support from the municipal authorities. The earlier paper also describes the limitations, especially the inability of the local development programmes to increase real incomes and widen employment prospects. By 1999, despite more than a decade of successful community development programmes, much of the population still had to subsist on incomes that allowed only one meal a day, and the very low incomes of much of the population are reflected in the fact that much of the housing is still of poor quality. There are serious problems with violence and drug abuse. There had been measures to generate employment, some successful – and the public works generated incomes for up to 1,000 people – but these were only short-term. The development programme within El Mezquital showed how much can be done to address many of the most serious deprivations faced by low-income households, often with modest resources, but it also showed the limitations in terms of addressing the most immediate cause of their poverty, namely, inadequate and often unstable incomes. Although the role of women within the community has developed and changed, principally due to the work of the community health workers (*reproinsas*), the power structure within the household remains male-dominated. The earlier paper concludes with the observation that much remains to be done if integrated, sustainable poverty reduction is to be achieved in settlements such as El Mezquital.

II. CHRONOLOGY

BEFORE DESCRIBING THE role of different external agencies, this section sketches the history of El Mezquital, since this helps explain the various roles taken by different external agencies (the paper in the April 2000 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* provides more detail).

1982: First attempt at invasion. Two hundred families occupy land in the south of the city within an upper-income residential area; they are evicted.

1983: Second attempt at an invasion, on state-owned, serviced land. Also evicted.

1984: 1,500 families occupy “green recreation areas” in the already existing El Mezquital colony. Soon there are 2,353 families in what was originally El Nuevo Mezquital but which later became known as El Mezquital.

March 1984: El Exodo is the first sub-division to be founded within the invasion site. This is followed by Monte de los Olivos, El Esfuerzo and Tres Banderas. La Esperanza emerges last, the inhabitants coming from an unsuccessful invasion on land where the Central de Mayoreo market is now located. They are dislodged by anti-riot police. The bulk of the whole settlement's invasion takes approximately one month.

1984-1985: The National Movement of Settlers (MONAP) and the local

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1. The April 2000 issue of *Environment and Urbanization* has a paper by the same authors which describes the development programme in El Mezquital – see Cabanas Diaz, Andrés, Emma Grant, Paula Irene del Cid Vargas and Verónica Sajbin Velásquez (2000), “El Mezquital – a community's struggle for development in Guatemala City”, *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 12, No 1, pages 87-106. Both papers are drawn from a longer and more detailed study prepared as one of ten case studies on innovations in poverty reduction in urban areas, coordinated by IIED, with support from the Department for International Development (DFID) and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). An earlier paper in 1994 described UNICEF's urban basic services programme in Guatemala City, including the integrated community-based health programme developed in El Mezquital and later extended to other low-income settlements in Guatemala City – see Espinosa, Lair and Oscar A López Rivera (1994), “UNICEF's urban basic services programme in illegal settlements in

Guatemala City",
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priest support the creation of the AVAUME (Association of United Residents of El Mezquital). In the early stages of creating the management boards for each of the sub-divisions, many cases of corruption, anarchy and abuse of power on the part of army-sponsored leaders emerge, to the point of creating paramilitary groups. The Reflection Group emerges in opposition to this abuse.

1984-1985: First contact is made with the health centre in nearby Villa Nueva, which provides 500 public latrines. Governmental institutions give their first support (500 communal latrines, a health post, communal taps) but in a non-participatory, uncoordinated way, encouraging clientelism.

1985: UNICEF's Guatemala office produces a study on precarious settlements within Guatemala City, identifying priority work areas which include El Mezquital.

1985-1986: Typhoid epidemic in El Mezquital. One hundred and sixty children die. UNICEF and MSF ("Doctors without Borders"), with permission from the government, enter the settlement and seek to address the epidemic, as does FUNDESCO (the Foundation for Community Development). They work on short-term projects in isolation, and attempt to address immediate needs. At this point, community participation is used only to carry out the work.

1986: UNICEF begins its Urban Basic Services Programme in Guatemala City. El Mezquital is selected because of the number of residents, the precarious living conditions, the existence of local organizations and community interest in working together to solve the problems. UNICEF bases the programme upon the following principles: adapting the methodology to take on board community participation; coordination of the work between a number of governmental and non-governmental organizations; and the presence of community organizations.

1986: The beginning of the Integrated Health Programme (supported by UNICEF), initially with distrust and friction on the part of the community due to prior negative experiences with external organizations, but this develops as a successful and later much copied model of community-based health care.⁽²⁾

November 1986: On the government's initiative, MSF ("Doctors without Borders") starts working in El Mezquital. They request funding for the construction of a health centre.

February 1987: COINAP (the Inter-institutional Committee for Precarious Areas) is founded by the government to support and coordinate a city-wide programme for illegal or informal settlements, involving private and public sector representatives and NGOs.

June 1987: The Association of United Residents of El Mezquital (AVAUME) is awarded legal status.

1987: As the community develops, the community organizational structures are adapted under the umbrella of the National Reconstruction Committee. In 1987 the National Reconstruction Committee appeals to the World Bank for support.

1988: From this year onwards funding possibilities are sought.

1988: UPAVIM (Women United for a Better Life) is founded within El Mezquital, to address the problems of children's health and the situation of women living in extreme poverty and exposed to domestic violence; it receives support from churches in the USA. Over time, it develops a clinic, a nursery, a handicrafts workshop and a scholarship programme.

1989: The first community pharmacy is founded to support the Inte-

2. See reference 1, Espinoza and López Rivera (1994).

grated Health Programme and the work of the community health workers (*reproinsas*).

1989: The design of the first housing model and construction of five houses with UNICEF's support. This opens the way for support from the Inter-American Foundation.

November 1989: The Guatemalan government and the World Bank agree upon a municipal development project but cannot carry it out because of the closure of the World Bank Guatemalan programme.

October 1990: The cooperative COIVEES (Integrated Cooperative of Housing Esfuerzo and Esperanza) is founded within El Mezquital (Esfuerzo and Esperanza are the names of two of the sub-divisions within El Mezquital). This has within it various boards including a board for water, for building materials, for credit, for housing (to plan and supervise housing construction).

1990: Creation of FUNDAESPRO (the Foundation of Courage and Prosperity) as a result of the community health workers' (*reproinsas*) efforts.

1990: Housing project supported by the Inter-American Foundation (60 units) and the first water well and water tanks constructed by COIVEES with support from UNICEF and the Swiss government.

1992: 1,100 families are moved to Villalobos II to reduce overcrowding.

March 1992: Formation of the sub-division Ocho de Marzo, which becomes part of El Mezquital.

June 1993-July 1994: World Bank staff visit El Mezquital and decide to support the urban development programme there – PROUME (Programme for the Urbanization of El Mezquital) – according to the initial agreement of 1989. Negotiations take place. No attention is paid to the divisions among the community leaders and groups, some of which date back to the time of the invasion. These later prove to be problematic.

June 1993-January 1995: PROUME is developed and planned, and different procedure manuals are developed. It receives official approval in July 1994 and includes components for infrastructure (piped water, sewers, drains, paved roads, electricity), housing improvement, relocation of tenants and those whose homes had to be moved, and community facilities (see Box 1).

March 1995: After various delays, implementation of PROUME begins. After signing the agreement, there is a long waiting period before the first funds arrive. At the end of 1994, the first funding instalment is received (equivalent to US\$ 200,000 at that time) by COIVEES. However, legal problems and opposition from a group in El Exodo (based upon private interests and long-standing disputes) delays the purchase of the building materials. Only in March 1995 does the project begin.

January 1996: A change of national government also brings changes for PROUME. The National Reconstruction Committee is replaced by DAHVI, Office of Human Settlements and Housing, which produces further delays in the distribution of funds to COIVEES.

May 1996: The Coordination Authority of El Mezquital emerges, aiming to bring together the different organizations working in the area in the post-PROUME phase.

May 1997: Inauguration of the Integrated Centre for Family Development, belonging to FUNDAESPRO (Foundation of Courage and Prosperity).

June 1997: PROUME ends.

October 1997: The World Bank carries out an audit of PROUME.

November 1997: The Slum Improvement Programme, planned on the

PROUME framework, begins work in precarious areas.

April 1998: Waste collection programme begins.

October 1998: Creation of building block manufacturing enterprise to produce low-cost blocks and create employment.

1997-1999: COIVEES housing project proposal for building 200 houses is submitted to Inter American Foundation but rejected.

Box 1: The Programme for the Urban Development of El Mezquital (PROUME)

The PROUME included the following components:

- 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 subdivisions. This includes sinking two new wells.
- Housing improvement: to construct 1,000 new houses and improve 500 houses, to be funded through a loan system. Credit was provided to cover the cost of building materials, hiring a qualified builder and also a certain amount for paying family members to cover the costs of the hours of work invested.
- 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 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 with similar conditions to the rest of the settlement. A total of 350 families were selected for moving and two fully urbanized new subdivisions were developed for them – Ocho de Marzo and Lomas de Villalobos – which became integrated into the settlement.

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 below:

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: For the financial information: 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 the details, see Cabanas Díaz, Andrés, Emma Grant, Paula Irene del Cid Vargas and Verónica Sajbin Velásquez (2000), "El Mezquital – a community's struggle for development in Guatemala City", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 12, No 1, pages 87-106.

III. THE ROLE OF INTERNATIONAL AGENCIES

AS SUGGESTED BY the range of organizations mentioned in the section above, development in El Mezquital has been based upon the interaction of different organizations – government institutions, NGOs, international organizations (including the World Bank and UNICEF) and community organizations. It has taken place on the understanding that living conditions in the settlement cannot be improved single-handedly by the isolated efforts of the market, the state, international cooperation or the community. However, these organizations did not always share the same vision, objectives or work programmes and there were many moments of confrontation. The text below draws on interviews with a range of informants, to clarify the role of different international organizations in the developments within El Mezquital. Eight individual interviews and 12 focus group discussions (involving 62 individuals) were held between May and August 1999. Participants in the focus groups were drawn from community organizations such as women's groups, youth groups and community discussion groups. Individual interviews were held with community leaders, professionals who had been involved with the work in El Mezquital, representatives of "slum" dwellers' organizations and the local Catholic priest. A workshop was organized at the end of the study to which the research team's preliminary findings were presented. Thirty-one people took part, most of them from El Mezquital. During the workshop, five working groups were formed to discuss the preliminary findings, and the response of these working groups helped develop the conclusions.

Before discussing the role of international organizations, the very limited role of government agencies in the development of El Mezquital should be noted. This limited role and the reasons for it are described in some detail in the earlier paper on El Mezquital. As the president of the Administrative Board of COIVEES summed up: "The government did nothing, absolutely nothing."⁽³⁾ To date, government support has provided one health centre with a part-time nurse for an area covering 3,500 families, and a few schools. When compared with the social infrastructure built through the organized work of the community, it seems little. Initially, it was also opposed to the community health workers. The earlier paper describes how the government had systematically underestimated community capacity; how politicians and partisan interests had sought to manipulate the inhabitants of El Mezquital; and how all government agencies demonstrated an incapacity to respond to the needs of the community which, ultimately, received a better response from international organizations. It also discusses the various factors that help explain this, including the privatization trend, the limited revenue base and the government's lack of trust in community organizations. For instance, it should be recalled that when the community approached the municipal water board (EMPAGUA) requesting water, they were told that, since they were illegal settlers, they had no rights: this led to the community breaking water pipes and stealing water. Government bodies have had very little role in urban investments or housing construction.

By contrast, from the very beginning other organizations were involved in the work and the main achievements in the community. Those most frequently mentioned by the community, are:

- The Foundation for Community Development (Fundación para el Desarrollo Comunitario) known as FUNDESCO;

3. COIVEES, focus group, July 1999.

4. The Six by Twelve Group was a movement to oppose the government programme for urban improvement which wanted to offer plots of six by ten metres; the Six by Twelve Group demanded that the smallest plots be six by twelve. See reference 1, Cabanas Diaz et al. (2000).

- Doctors without Borders (Médicos Sin Fronteras) known as MSF;
- the Catholic Church (with the support of various local priests) which supported groups such as the Reflection Group and the Six by Twelve Group.⁽⁴⁾

In addition, there are other groups which worked for a limited time in El Mezquital or which started work some time after the invasion, including:

- Faith and Joy (Fey Alegría), the religious organization which constructed a school;
- The Society for the Integral Development of the Guatemalan Family (Sociedad para el Desarrollo Integral de la Familia), known as SODIFAG;
- The Guatemalan Ecumenical Foundation Hope and Brotherhood (Fundación Ecueménica Guatemalteca Esperanza y Fraternidad) known as ESFRA;
- La Novena Integral Development Unit, known as UDINOV;
- The technical consultancy firm ECOTEC.

For these external organizations, community acceptance had to be earned: the UNICEF programme director commented that it took a year's work with the community before it began to accept him. These organizations generally established better working relations with the government than those which the community had developed. Some of the community's most basic achievements, such as the introduction of water services, the first latrines, technical support in creating the cooperative and the *reproinsa* programme were due, in part, to external support.

Amongst these organizations, UNICEF's Urban Basic Services Programme played an important role. The programme started off as an experiment in El Mezquital in 1986 and was terminated when PROUME came to an end. The programme not only had to win over the community's confidence but also had to get around problematic issues such as the institutional structure and work methods of UNICEF and the UN, which were not always compatible with the needs and context of El Mezquital. It must be noted that it was more often the driving force of certain local technicians, rather than centralized decisions, which ensured that the work moved ahead.

The initial plan of UNICEF's Urban Basic Services Programme, which was modified over the years, sought to improve material living conditions as well as working conditions. The programme's first priorities included ownership of the land and site suitability for housing, housing provision, public services and social infrastructure. Secondary issues included action to increase income levels, settlement's proximity to the work place and provision of basic staples (maize, rice, beans etc.)

When PROUME began, supported by World Bank funding, it drew on the work of the UNICEF Urban Basic Services Programme and completed some of its components, in particular improving the physical infrastructure. PROUME's size (as measured by the amount of funds managed, the character of pilot projects, institutional coordination and large-scale community participation) makes it a good focus for an analysis of the relationship between community and external organizations.

The concrete achievements of PROUME were described in the previous paper. But there were also projects which were initially planned and never carried out which led to considerable dissatisfaction. These included social infrastructure projects, such as the fire station, the four multi-use halls and the creation and maintenance of green areas and envi-

ronmentally protected areas (which eventually disappeared). There were also projects carried out which were not satisfactorily implemented, such as the drains which, according to the community, were too small and constantly blocked.

Other criticisms of PROUME included the failure to consider employment initiatives, the lack of community consultation and the interaction with community organizations. For the first of these, despite the fact that, initially, the Urban Basic Services Programme considered one of its fundamental components to be the improvement of employment conditions, PROUME restricted itself to the provision of infrastructure. Moreover, during the development of PROUME, the technicians, at the request of the community, developed new projects which were submitted to the World Bank, UNICEF and PROUME but which were never implemented. For one UNICEF consultant, the debate at that time was about "...cementing poverty, putting a roof over its head or, alternatively, giving people a better life which would involve addressing the economy."⁽⁵⁾ The consultant added that during the development of PROUME, an employment survey was carried out to develop a partnership with the community; however, proposals that were developed were never even read. PROUME temporarily improved the employment situation in the community, with up to 1,000 people on the payroll at one stage, but it was a short-term project and the employment levels were unsustainable. For some of those interviewed, these achievements were insignificant relative to the size of the sum invested.

With regard to the lack of community consultation, criticisms in this area concerned designs for the new housing, which were not suitable for building a second level extension and were thus rejected by some. In addition, the community felt that they were not sufficiently consulted about productive and employment initiatives, for which they blamed the donors' and technicians' failure to listen to the community. For the UNICEF consultant, PROUME was based upon a fundamentally flawed method of consultancy: "If you count them up, the people who were consulted were those in the management boards and committee members of COIVEES, 30 people in all out of a community of more than 3,500 people."⁽⁶⁾ The lack of consultation also included a lack of transparency about the different projects, the changes made along the way and the destination and allocation of the funds.

With regard to PROUME's interaction with community organizations, when it began, the Association of United Residents of El Mezquital (AVAUME) only existed in name and the different management boards (about ten at that time) were not united. PROUME therefore decided to found another organization that would bring them together, namely, the Committee of Management Boards of the Settlement, known as the CJD.⁽⁷⁾ This decision caused a lot of dissent with the old AVAUME, since it constituted the creation of a community organization by an external organization and ignored the community's historical processes. Nor did this new organization manage to resolve the problems which already existed between the different management boards of El Mezquital, which were based on personal interests, corruption and lack of legitimacy or, indeed, the disputes between the management boards and the cooperative, COIVEES. Thus, while PROUME was active, the community organization demonstrated its highest levels of organizational capacity in terms of managing, administrating and carrying out projects yet, at the same time, had a serious political weakness.

5. Interview with UNICEF consultant, May 1999.

6. See reference 5.

7. Comisión de Juntas Directivas de Asentamientos.

Some of the deficiencies mentioned above were sparked off by opposition to PROUME in 1997. At this time, a group of residents gathered in front of PROUME offices (buildings which were formerly the People's Library of Monte de los Olivos) whilst members of the governing board of PROUME were inside. The governing board consisted of representatives from UNICEF, the government's Office of Human Settlements and Housing (DAHVI), management boards and COIVEES. The protesting crowd prevented the board from leaving the offices, threatening to lynch them or burn the building down whilst they were still inside. They demanded that PROUME be terminated. This emergency situation lasted for an entire day and was only resolved by the intervention of the police, the state and the United Nations Verification Mission to Guatemala, MINUGUA.

One member of the Faith and Solidarity Group, who was also on the Committee of Management Boards at the time, was one of those locked inside the building. She recalls:

"They wanted to lynch us. They kicked me and punched me, pulled my hair. They wanted to burn us. They even took the drinking water and spat and urinated into it. This took place from 8am until 5pm, until representatives from the Public Ministry arrived with the police, and we had to make a bargain with the people outside."⁽⁸⁾

The deal they struck meant the total disbanding of the Committee of Management Boards and the closure of PROUME headquarters. In 1999, when the research for this paper was being undertaken, the building remained empty and unused.

Some of those interviewed attributed the confrontation to UNASGUA, the Union of Guatemalan Settlements, a popular city-wide organization. Nevertheless, the director of UNASGUA denied having anything to do with the incident, claiming instead that a leader from one of El Mezquital's sub-divisions was responsible and had used the UNASGUA name to incite the people for his own personal motives.⁽⁹⁾ The UNASGUA director claimed that this same individual later deceived residents from other informal settlements close to El Mezquital, promising them various services, which were never carried out, in exchange for money. The reasons for this violent end to the PROUME project, however, should be sought within the community and the actual programme, especially in its lack of transparency and the vertical, top-down relations it imposed. Thus, PROUME showed that external intervention can destabilize a community organization if it does not take into account the priorities, organizational processes and existing power relations within the community.

A final point regarding international organizations concerns the level of support they gave after PROUME. One community leader considers this support to be virtually non-existent:

"Here, we are really lacking in supportive organizations and yet El Mezquital is one of the most marginalized areas. Before, they gave us some support, for example PROUME, but now that project is finished they have forgotten all about us in El Mezquital."⁽¹⁰⁾

This last point is linked to a perception of El Mezquital, shared by both the government and international organizations, in terms of the extent to which they believe that the objectives have been achieved. The experience in El Mezquital can be read in two ways. One perspective points to the great potential to improve housing conditions and basic infrastructure and services through community-directed programmes supported by external agencies; the other acknowledges that the programme did not

8. Faith and Solidarity Group, focus group, June 1999.

9. Interview with director of UNASGUA, July 1999.

10. See reference 8.

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address other aspects of poverty, especially inadequate incomes and income-earning opportunities, and had very limited influence on public agencies. The combination of economic difficulties and non-responsive local authorities meant that the capacities for community action developed during PROUME could not be capitalized on to help address the other aspects of deprivation.