

USA

THE 'UNION DE VECINOS' IN USA

The Union de Vecinos demonstrates the influence a well-run community organisation can have, not only in empowering its members, but also in affecting decisions made at municipal level.

When the city of Los Angeles threatened to demolish the homes of two of the poorest housing estates in East Los Angeles in 1996, a group of local women organised Union de Vecinos, a Community Based Organisation (CBO). Union de Vecinos encouraged and supported those women who were mobilising their neighbours to take control of their lives and offered them an opportunity to tell their stories.

The CBO did not have a conventional structure and meetings were not hierarchical. The group makes decisions at weekly meetings. There are two treasurers who manage the group's funds. Priorities are set and are based on events that are relevant to the community at the time. Every action is evaluated by discussion on what worked and what did not work and what should be done in the future. The initiative has established local, national and international partnerships and networks. The group discovered that the most powerful tool in building relationships was through sharing stories between each other. Women gained confidence as they told their stories, remembering their struggles, obstacles and fears, which they overcame. This is an empowering experience, offering the possibility of making collective changes.

Since its formation in 1996, the group has been successful in expanding its impact on four other housing projects. It has trained 12 residents as community organisers. It produces a bilingual newsletter for its Black and Latino constituency distributed to 700 families. It has given a voice to poor immigrant women. Most importantly, it has succeeded in imposing a moratorium on the demolition of low income housing in Los Angeles. This has been possible through its network of partners who included artists, lawyers, architects, teachers, trainers and several housing-based lobby groups. The groups have also changed the allocation of housing units to meet the needs of residents and have ensured that an additional 42 units were assigned to low-income families. The Union has succeeded in changing the policy of the city of Los Angeles with regard to low-income housing estates.



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