

## MEXICO

### **PARTICIPATION IN NEIGHBOURHOOD IMPROVEMENTS IN MESA DE LOS HORNOS**

*This initiative shows how the process of developing and implementing an integrated and participatory neighbourhood improvement programme can contribute effectively to change traditional government / citizen relations. The process managed to improve living conditions in the neighbourhood and made it possible to propose a form of urban management that is inclusive and plural.*

Mesa de los Hornos is a neighbourhood situated on the urban fringe of Mexico City. It has a population of 6,000 inhabitants and covers 32 hectare. It originated in the late 1970s as an irregular settlement inhabited by people whose main occupation was brick manufacturing. Most of the population received an average income equal to the city's official minimum wage and high levels of unemployment compounded poverty.



This existence of the settlement was the result of a process of negotiation between community groups and the local authorities, with support from NGOs. During the course of the 1980s, people in the settlement were constantly under the threat of eviction. Due to the pressure exercised by organised social groups and the complexity of land tenure, services, infrastructure, and housing standards, the settlement was considered a 'Special Zone of Controlled Development' in the 1989-91 Urban Development Plan. In the wake of this initiative, community groups and an NGO (COPEVI) developed a Partial Plan for

Urban Development. This process culminated with the approval of the plan, formalising the tenancy of land, leading to the proposed provision of urban services and infrastructure. National and city level political changes in early 1990s, however, led to difficulties for the implementation of the plan. This resulted in disagreement between community groups and local authorities, which brought the process of regularisation and service provision to an end.

In the light of favourable democratic changes in Mexico City's political arena, the consolidation process in Mesa de los Hornos has now been reinitiated, reconvening the principal actors. They have come together through the Co-ordinating Council for Participatory Planning (CCPP), consisting of the City authorities (National Ministry of Housing and Urban Development), the local authorities, COPEVI, organised community groups, and the inhabitants. An election was held in each of the five zones of the settlement to choose their representatives, in an effort to legitimise the leadership.

The main objective of CCPP was to achieve a consensus to define and implement a negotiated Integrated Plan for Territorial Development. It bases its actions on the tripartite method of harmonising actors and operated in terms of a by-law that was negotiated with all parties. The process is being financially supported by the City authorities, the local authorities and by the Urban Management Programme through its Latin American section. CCPP and the zonal committees have become crucial instruments for encouraging appropriate relations between the government and the citizens. Both bodies have played a crucial role in the three main phases of the initiative, (the undertaking of a participatory action, which included a gender-aware approach; official acceptance of urban regularisation and renewal; and the development of programmes and actions for backing participatory governance to ensure effective responses to urban poverty).

This initiative has brought important improvements to the principle of citizenship and a positive impact on the relations between the government and communities. This has been evident in the processes of negotiations and agreements, the defence of citizen rights to participate in planning and decision-making. In so doing, the process has contributed to a change in traditional relations by providing a democratic character to the proceedings. It has also helped to improve the influence of citizenship, both of the local

population and among authorities leading to a real possibility of achieving urban management that is inclusive, plural, and above all, an example of democratic governance.

In spite of progress, some difficulties have been present throughout the process, particularly in reaching consensus. The traditional, centralised political culture of decision-making in Mexico has tended to prevail over the interest of a real change. For instance, it was extremely difficult for the new local authorities to commit themselves to an integrated approach. The political context and culture tended to undermine the ability of the local authority to enforce their decisions. Long discussions were often unable to produce concrete agreements.

The community groups were also trapped in their own organisational issues. They tended to see negotiations as a way of making demands to the authorities rather than a means to develop partnerships. They were also anxious not to lose their identity and, therefore, tended to be vulnerable to political elements that had vested interest in conflict with the authorities. Over a period of two years, several of the proposed actions have been implemented. These include the provision of urban services and infrastructure to various zones, bringing improvements to water supply, sanitation, electricity, health facilities and land tenure regularisation. The entire process has been developed into an integrated and participatory neighbourhood improvement model. This model is expected to assist in the effective improvement of other areas in Mexico City.



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