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BOLIVIA

DEFEATING DISEASE THROUGH HOUSING

Fundación Pro Hábitat's 'Project Chagas 2000' brought together a range of problems faced by poor communities in Tarija, South Bolivia: health, housing, training and education. It enabled communities to increase their understanding of the problems and develop their own solutions to them. It also explored the wider implications of poor housing and the importance of community involvement and it went to scale.

Chagas is a fatal parasitic disease widespread in South America, where it is known as 'poor man's plague' because of the way it particularly affects poor communities. In Bolivia, it is the second most prevalent disease, affecting 1.4 million people, with a further 3 million potentially at risk. There are no vaccines or effective treatment for Chagas, which is spread by parasites transmitted by the bite of the beetle, *Triatoma infestans*, known locally as the vinchuca. The vinchuca thrives in the poor housing common in rural and peri-urban areas - partly because of the physical structure of the buildings, and partly because of the lay out, in which animals are corralled close to living spaces. Thus the only way to tackle the disease is to eliminate the presence of the beetle in domestic situations.



The NGO Fundación Pro Hábitat was formed in 1993 'to respond to the challenge of promoting community participation and management as an essential strategy in the development of human settlements in Bolivia'. The project began with three related objectives: 1) to improve community and institutional training and education; 2) to facilitate physical and quali-

tative housing improvements; and 3) to promote the fumigation of houses and establish local systems for pest control.

In each community the project started with a meeting to explain its objectives and intentions and to form committees of local residents to conduct surveys to establish the condition of houses and the levels of vinchuca infestation. Prior to the project, few people in poor communities really understood the links between the vinchuca and Chagas. Most simply viewed the disease as an unfortunate aspect of life. Training and education provided the links that allowed the project to crosscut institutions such as municipal authorities and health and education departments whilst remaining firmly based in individual communities. The educational aspects tended to focus on women and children, the groups most vulnerable to poverty-related ill health. Training sessions that explained how Chagas is spread were generally conducted in schools and health posts. Educational fairs were also held where children and adults performed songs and plays aimed at reinforcing the messages about the disease.



Simple physical improvements to the houses were a major part of the project, particularly in terms of generating grass-roots involvement. The most common components of house improvements were: moving animal corrals away from living spaces and rendering their walls; filling cracks and rendering the adobe walls of houses, both inside and out; and painting the houses white or other light colours. For the house improvement, local materials and low cost technologies were used to ensure sustainability and to ensure that good practices would not be aban-

doned once the project finished. Entire communities were brought together in the house improvement programme as people became aware that, in order to effectively eradicate the vinchuca, all the houses in a locality needed to be improved at the same time.

In Pro Hábitat's work, the total cost of improving an average house was around US\$ 900, of which some 70% of which was contributed by the participating family in the form of local building materials and labour costs. The other costs (non-local construction materials, technical assistance and education, including the production of training materials) were met by Plan International, a UK based donor agency, and Pro Hábitat itself. In its current programmes of Chagas control, Pro Hábitat has secured a subsidy from the Bolivian Housing Ministry to cover the cost of non-local materials. In addition, Homeless International, a UK based charity supporting community-led housing developments in Asia, Africa and Latin America, has helped Pro Hábitat set up a micro-credit programme, to enable residents to make further improvements or extensions to their homes. By the end of 2000, the project had reached over 4,000 families in 45 communities in Tarija, South Bolivia, and its successor, PRO PLAN II, is currently working to improve a further 11,500 homes both in the Department of Tarija and Chuquisaca over the next five years.

By tackling a specific poverty-related health problem, 'Chagas 2000' has physically improved houses, educated communities about the disease and other health problems, trained people in low-impact sustainable building methods and established local loan schemes. It was such a success that the Bolivian government has adopted Pro Hábitat's simple schemes, and plans to extend them to over 90,000 more households throughout the country. Pro Hábitat has become renowned for its expertise in this area, and this has helped them build up excellent relations both with central government and local municipal authorities. In itself this relationship is a major achievement, as it has helped open up a dialogue between municipalities and poor communities. The communities that were part of the initial drive continue to benefit from the changes, and also from the continuous vigilance programme which keeps tabs on any re-infestation.

In recognition of its success, the project was awarded the World Habitat Scroll of Honour in October 2000.