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"Rethinking Democracy in Latin America: New Actors — The Experience of Villa el Salvador in Peru"

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What was the problem?

The urban expansion of large Latin American capitals, particularly Lima, Peru, has spawned many problems, such as social instability and increased demands for basic services, infrastructure, and employment. In addition to these challenges, demographic changes can influence electoral processes if the state is weak and has few resources. In order to incorporate hundreds of thousands of poor families that had migrated from mountainous rural areas to the capital, an urgent housing shortage had to be addressed.

What was the innovation?

Villa El Salvador began as a shantytown in 1971. After only one month, 90,000 people had settled in the deserted sand flats to the south of Lima, in the biggest single urban population expansion in the history of Peru. City planners were faced with a sudden catastrophic housing shortage in an area where there was absolutely no infrastructure in place. In order to overcome this challenge of building something from nothing, reformers implemented a methodology of community self-management by mobilizing multiple social networks with the willpower to overcome the stringent challenges these people faced.

The innovation of Villa El Salvador's building program consisted of a plan for integrated development, with direct participation from the community through civil society organizations. Reformers also relied on both internal and external mobilization and on a horizontal relationship between the State and the residents of Villa El Salvador. The first generation of community leaders involved with the project had a background of organizational experience drawn from their lives in the peasant communities of Peru. Thus, part of the success of Villa El Salvador's citizen mobilization was its adaptation of traditional leadership to create a positive community of neighbors with shared beliefs in justice, mutual aid, and local solidarity.

What obstacles did you face?

The main challenges stemmed from the initial conditions of the area: it was difficult for innovators to transform a previously deserted area of land into a neighborhood, particularly given

the local population's relative poverty and social marginalization. In the first stage of its construction, Villa El Salvador was supported by the reform government of General Juan Velasco (1971- 1975), but subsequent administrations showed little support for or interest in the struggles of this poor immigrant community on the outskirts of the capital. The terrorist organization Sendero Luminoso sent death threats to Villa El Salvador's main leaders, frightening its population, which led to the curtailment of the participatory assemblies which had become the bedrock of the community's direct democratic administration. The Villa also had to accommodate its plans to fit the strict economic model imposed on Peru under the administration of President and dictator Alberto Fujimori (1990 - 2000).

What were the planned versus actual results?

Villa El Salvador has evolved into a huge, vibrant urban zone under the auspices of its community administration. On June 1, 1983, it was formally established as a district within the Lima Province. Currently, Villa El Salvador houses nearly 400,000 residents, and is equipped with water, sewage, electricity, and asphalt roads in main routes and economic zones, all of which have improved resident property values. Villa El Salvador has received many prizes for its organizational model, social development practices, commitment to community participation, and its experiments in popular development.

Seventy-five to eighty percent of the development plans for the Community and Municipality of Villa El Salvador have been implemented, as demonstrated through written documentation and surveys of the area's accomplishments over the years. The municipality's goals have evolved as the social actors in the planning have changed, as women, entrepreneurs, merchants, youth, and cultural groups have all begun participating more actively in the city's government.

Michel Azcueta is currently President of the School for Advanced Study of Municipal Management and a professor of political science at both the National University of San Marcos and the National Technological University of the Southern Cone (UNTECS), in Lima. Mr. Azcueta has been active in politics for many years. He was elected the first mayor of Villa El Salvador in 1983, reelected in 1985 and 1995, and subsequently became a Metropolitan Councilman of Lima in 1999. Mr. Azcueta has extensive experience as a consultant in local development and education and has published widely on both subjects. He is also a founding member of the International Union of Local Authorities (Paris-Barcelona) and a member of the National Accord Forum of Peru. Among other distinctions, he received the United Nations Peace Medal in 1987; the Prince of Asturias Prize, which was given to Villa El Salvador during his tenure as Mayor in 1987; the International Human Rights Prize in 1993; and the World Prize in Solidarity from CARE in 1999. Mr. Azcueta is a graduate professor of the Pontificia Catholic University of Peru and holds a Masters Degree in Education from the University of Montreal, Canada