Planning in Squatter Settlements
An Interview With a Community Leader

Conducted by
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CASE STUDY

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PLANNING IN SQUATTER SETTLEMENTS:
AN INTERVIEW WITH A COMMUNITY LEADER
I. INTRODUCTION

1.01 In January 1988 we traveled to the capital city of a Latin American country on a mission for the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). The purpose of our trip was to initiate a study of household water demand in the low-income squatter settlements surrounding the city. We spent several days visiting squatter and periurban areas looking for suitable sites for our study.

1.02 Late one afternoon we arrived at a large squatter settlement that looked very different than others we had observed. The housing units were among the poorest we had seen, often constructed of little more than cardboard and scraps of metal. The alleys separating the houses were only about three meters wide, but they were perfectly straight, and the lots were rectangular and of standard sizes, as if laid out by a planner. Public water taps had been installed at regular intervals throughout the community, and above each was posted a list of the neighboring households that had paid their water bills and were currently entitled to use that tap. Many households had made drains in front of their dwellings to remove rainwater. We were informed that the settlement had been in existence for several years.

1.03 There was obviously a story here somewhere, and we asked people on the street whom we should talk to about the planning and organization that had gone into the establishment of this settlement. We were guided to the home of Mr. Rodriguez [not his real name], "El Presidente" of the community. We spoke with him briefly and made an appointment to return the next day to talk about the community. That appointment became a very lively interview, which we were able to record on tape.

1.04 Squatter settlements are a major source of housing for the urban poor in most Latin American countries, and indeed throughout the developing world. We want to share Mr. Rodriguez's observations with others because of the insights he provides into the creation and organization of squatter settlements, and also because he is an eloquent spokesman for human hope and courage.

1.05 The remainder of this report is a translation from the transcript of our tapes, edited slightly for clarity. Financial data are now presented in US dollars. Details of time and place have been altered or omitted to protect the privacy of the community and its citizens, many of whom Mr. Rodriguez praised highly for their various contributions to the welfare of the settlement. Because our questions were simple and brief, we have not reiterated them here but simply have let Mr. Rodriguez tell the story of his community in his own words.
II. COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION

2.01 I arrived in the community several months after the settlement had started. Some neighbors say that about thirty to fifty families had begun to arrive by midwinter. By spring people had already occupied an area about three kilometers long by a few hundred meters wide. Those who came first occupied the best and higher ground; by late spring newcomers had to settle on lower areas. As more and more came, they started creating different communities within the settlement. I am currently president of both my own particular community's board of directors and of the board that coordinates plans and activities for all the communities in this settlement.

2.02 In my estimation about 30 percent of the people in my community are from the capital city, 20 percent are Indians from outside the city, and the rest are campesinos (peasants) from the provinces, where people work hard. The campesino is a devoted, faithful, and loyal person; with them we have built this community on a basis of mutual trust and brotherhood.

2.03 Our residents come from many areas of the country. Some came straight from rural areas, others moved to the city many years ago. Those of us who lived in the city—I was born there myself—did well enough until recent conditions brought drastic increases in rent. Most of us had lived in the same zone in the center of the city, in small flats or single rooms. As more and more people crowded into the city, rents tripled, sometimes quadrupled. We felt forced to leave the city to occupy this land. Once we got ourselves established, some of our relatives started to come here from different places, forming our community as you see it today.

2.04 At first, because there was plenty of land, we took all the land we needed. But as many more came, we all had to divide our lots into smaller plots, so that everyone could have a piece, though small. My lot was at first 10 x 10 meters, but as more and more came, it was reduced to 7 x 6 meters, then to 5 x 6 meters. Others had to reduce theirs to 4 x 5 meters. We even had to accommodate more than one family in the same lot.

2.05 In late spring the earliest settlers had some confrontations with the police and the army, who tried to make them leave. Meanwhile people had begun to recognize the need for clean water, a health center for the children (there are plenty of children around here), transportation (what was available did not meet our needs), public lighting, a sewage system, schools, and so on. They also experienced a need to get themselves organized. Even though at the beginning each person did what he or she could, people soon started creating small groups and community committees to address common problems.

2.06 The first leader in our community helped some families measure their lots and locate their houses. There were other community leaders who lasted only three or four months. Although there were leaders in every community, they never tried working together as a single unit. If they actually thought about doing it, they never did it. Perhaps they never considered the idea.
2.07 I became engaged in community issues not long after I came here, at a point when the leadership as yet had no awareness of our problems and most basic needs. The very first members of the leadership committee had tried to take personal advantage of the community by using people's labor to favor their own interests. Actually they seemed like delinquent, shaggy, dirty people. We really distrusted them because they were always shouting and intimidating us with threats. So a group of serious residents decided to create an opposition group that we called the coordinadora (coordinating group). I was involved in trying to form this group, but it was very difficult because of our lack of experience.

2.08 One of the group misrepresented himself as the chairman and started to work with landowners, helping them collect rents or otherwise expelling families that would not pay. But actually the landowners were using us, and we were working for them. When I understood this, I realized we were not helping ourselves but acting against ourselves, so I left the coordinating group after awhile.

2.09 Some residents saw that I had an honest interest in helping, and they called me to join a new board of directors. Everyone was very young, and we had a lot to learn. We discussed the need for coordinating our efforts and something even more important: the need for building the community's confidence and trust through our own behavior and example. We had to be very serious about it, we thought.

2.10 It seemed like finally we had started going in the right direction. But some of the people working with me gave up very easily. They did not have determination, or a willingness to sacrifice. Perhaps they did not have ideals or believe that we could make it. Some of them left the country, leaving me alone with all the plans we had already thought about for organizing all the communities as a single unit. Those who decided to go on, however, never stopped working.

2.11 The first thing was to organize a community council for each of the communities in the settlement. My own community, the oldest, has thirty-eight sectors, each with fifty to one hundred families; each sector has two representatives, sometimes three. Organizing the other communities went fairly well until we got to the very last community, the newest one. Things were very difficult there. That community had only four different sectors, each with community representatives. But in the end they called us for help, and all the community councils together became what is today the United Neighborhood Association. After a year the association had obtained a degree of legal recognition. Once we had obtained a legal status, we started working by organizing residents in each one of the communities.

2.12 We soon realized that unless we organized ourselves we could not receive benefits from government agencies, nongovernment institutions, or some foreign agencies. As president of the association, representing all our communities, I have had to deal with government agencies and several nongovernment organizations. With the help of an international group of doctors called Medicos sin Fronteras (Doctors without Boundaries) we established our
first medical and health center. We have also created what we call integrated health commissions, run by groups of women from each community. For example, my community’s health commission is formed of forty-two women. Each subgroup of nine women has a coordinator who works together with a representative from the centralized Program of Integrated Health. These women take care of gathering information about residents’ health conditions and presenting it before the community’s representatives.

2.13 Our health commissions have received training through awareness courses that cover various primary health care activities, such as vaccination, and other basic health needs. We also have a good group of midwives who can be called to attend patients at any time in the day or night, saving the patients a trip to the hospital. The midwives have received the intensive training recommended by the Ministry of Health, which has even given them the equipment required to attend urgent childbirths.

2.14 In addition to the health center we have already built our school facilities and a gymnasium. Six teachers have just come from the school at another settlement to start classes here. Last year we had about seven hundred children, who of course lacked buildings for their classes. We started with some jerry-built sheds for classrooms. But later, with the help of a private school in the city, from which we received some construction materials, we built the school with our own hands. The gymnasium was conceived to have dual functions: first, to enable our children to receive some physical education and, second, to serve as a wrestling arena for the entertainment of our community. We have also formed play-makers groups for young people, and football teams that compete towards an all-settlements championship. We have sponsored some beauty contests, and eventually we expect to show movies for family entertainment. We would like very much to produce an informative or instructive newspaper or bulletin, but we do not have the equipment or the facilities required to do it.

2.15 I must say that at the beginning, even though we had enormous motivation and a strong desire to do good things for ourselves, we were not given serious attention. We received many promises that were never fulfilled. But in spite of that we started to deal with our problems of health, services, and education by ourselves. We decided we could demonstrate to everyone that we had the human potential to accomplish significant progress because we were not one hundred or two hundred, we are thousands. About thirty thousand people live in this settlement.

2.16 Among these thirty thousand there are between fifteen thousand and eighteen thousand adults. The adults were the ones, outraged by the lack of official attention, who demonstrated that we were human beings and also deserved some attention, because no delinquents lived here. We are honest and honorable people, and our goal was to show our society and the government that if they would give us some attention and help we could show we were hard-working, serious, and organized people. We wanted to show that poor people are not poor because they are lazy, but because we have never been given the opportunity to gain education, and hence the opportunity to get a decent job and have a fair life.
2.17 Once we organized a big walk. This was absolutely our own idea. Nobody said anything to us about it, it was our own achievement. The walk was attended by thousands of people: children, young people, and old people. Everyone wanted to express what we as a community needed. The police were present at the walk because the government thought we wanted to disturb the public order. But we were not there to act with violence. We just wanted a dialogue with people outside our settlement: to be listened to, and to understand why we had been ignored so far. We also wanted to make clear that even though there are rich and poor people in our society (we being in the second group), we did not want to be treated or taken as beggars. We are not beggars, we are just poor. We do not want anybody to throw food at us; we want to be taught how to earn our own food decently. On past occasions some institutions have offered us food in exchange for our labor. But we are not used to this; we believe we must work for our own wages, and if we work, it is not only to receive food, but also to benefit our community's progress. This is our ideology, our mentality, and the way we have accomplished whatever we can enjoy now.

2.18 We have kept records of the history of our community and its progress. We have files of all the newspaper articles and pictures that record visits to our community by government officials and other public figures. We also have photos that show some friends being interviewed by a city newspaper after policemen were sent to the settlement to try to force us to leave. We are very proud to have received a letter from the president of a major international agency. He had visited the settlement and wrote to express his admiration for our organization.

2.19 I have been lucky as a community leader because our people have been able to respond very well. Thank God, the people have some respect and admiration for us. There are twelve community leaders on our community board of directors (all men so far, no women). We are very close and share our problems so that we can make ourselves available to one another in times of serious need. Because our people know who we are, we can walk freely around the settlement without having to carry any arms. The people themselves act as police, keeping order and applying the law to thieves regardless of whether they live here or not. Neighbors here have even recovered things that have been stolen and returned them to the authorities.

2.20 Still, one should always be careful; sometimes we do encounter a drug addict. But we believe that the drug addict is an individual who has problems in relating socially with others. The addict needs a lot of affection and understanding that he or she may not receive at home. If we isolated the addict from the community, we would be inviting the addict to become our enemy, who could harm us after harming himself. We prefer to continue working with addicts within the community.
III. OBTAINING THE WATER SUPPLY

3.01 One issue of fundamental concern to us is water. The first year the settlement was begun, we heard a rumor that typhoid fever was around, that some tanker trucks selling contaminated water were making our people sick. This turned out to be true. We had to stand in lines for hours to buy water from the tanker trucks. Then the vendors started raising their prices, until they finally were incredibly high. Yet we had to drink this water or buy clean water from the neighboring town. We as the community leaders soon realized the necessity of dealing with the issue firmly.

3.02 The problem of getting water to some of the families who lived on steep slopes was particularly difficult, for obvious reasons. In my own community about 30 percent of the people, some six hundred families, used to live on steep slopes. They were entirely relocated to flat areas where water provision was less difficult. We introduced water provision to our community later that same year. I remember that we tried every means to persuade the government water authority to install a water system in our community. But they kept telling us that because we were squatters, we had no right to receive water services.

3.03 But to what rights were we entitled? To thirst? So we, the community leaders, called a meeting at which we decided that everyone would install a pipeline in his own area at the same time. Well, we did it, and we also connected our pipelines with a major line that supplies water to a town nearby. With this improvised connection we were able to secure some water supply for families in twenty-four of our thirty-eight sectors. We installed plenty of taps all over the community, about 150 of them. It turned out that once we connected up with the major line only about 25 to 30 percent of the taps really worked, but that was good enough for us.

3.04 Once the water authority found out that we were stealing water, it called us to a meeting. As we had before, we explained to them our needs and the undeniable connection we had found between poor water quality and the diseases our people were suffering. The water authority proposed a project to provide our community with potable water once a study of technical feasibility could be completed.

3.05 The study was done, and we were promised a 3,000-meter piped water system that would cost our community about $11,000. That amount of money was very hard for us to collect given our economic conditions. Nevertheless we committed ourselves to the cause. We wanted to create public consciousness not only about the imperative need for water, but also about the need to demonstrate to everyone that we could meet the challenge successfully and had the responsibility to deal with our own problems.

3.06 We started by asking each household to give $20. We soon realized that this amount was unrealistic for many poor families, so we lowered it to $6 to cover the cost of basic construction materials. In addition everyone pledged
to donate his or her own labor. As you can see, we got our water system. Even though we were unable to collect the originally planned $11,000, we did gather about $5,000, and we did put into the project our own labor as well as some construction materials, including pipelines and water meters. We have a letter from the water authority that records our cash payments and the labor we contributed to the project.

3.07 The water authority now charges us a monthly fee of $0.80 per family for water. Because some families in our community are extremely poor and unable to pay such a fee, our board of directors decided to sign with the water authority a contract in which we made a commitment to pay a fixed monthly fee of $730 for the entire community. That way we could collect the $0.80 from families that could afford it, others would chip in what they could, and we still would have raised enough to pay for water for everybody. However, because several hundred families have since been relocated to other communities, it is becoming increasingly difficult to collect the amount we are supposed to pay.

3.08 The other communities in the settlement have also been subject to the monthly fee of $0.80 per family. We have all requested the water authority to reduce this monthly fee to a more realistic one that we can afford, but without success. They reply that there are too many people that consume a lot of water. But we have our own meters that show a different figure from theirs. Anyway, we are looking forward to that reduction, because we have been accumulating a debt since the middle of last year, when people began to be relocated. Losing so many families—maybe a thousand eventually—is a big problem for the settlement, and we cannot make the water authority understand our situation.

3.09 That is our water story so far. Now we are waiting for the official housing project to become ready, so that every family can connect their own pipes at home. Our main pipeline can support this, but the source may not be enough. The government and the water authority will have to look for another source or drill wells—or find some other solution. But that's their problem, since we are willing to continue with our payments.

3.10 Our need for potable water is only part of an overall problem. We also need to plan for a sewage system. So far, by working on Saturdays and Sundays, we have been able to construct a series of drainage systems that have temporarily solved the problem of waste disposal.

3.11 You can certainly see a difference, how the settlement was before and how it is now. The conditions were really bad. We had to bring the president of the housing bank here to see the situation for himself, to see what the problems really were instead of sitting in his office listening to the news and just speculating on how it was here. Even so it was our well-attended walk that really made an impression, that got results.
IV. OBTAINING ELECTRIC POWER

4.01 Our water system was pursued through our community committee, but provision of electricity was the result of individual endeavor. Some people got interested in having electricity in their homes and managed to raise about $600 toward having meters installed. But after receiving several messages from the owners of the land we were occupying, the power company decided to stop the connections, for which they now had many requests. Several times we went to request connections, at least for our school and meeting-room buildings, but the power company always turned us down. So together with other friends we decided to steal energy just as we had stolen water.

4.02 This decision was made, however, outside the functions of our committee. I informally gathered a group of interested residents, whom I warned about the risk of simply losing our money or investment because our connections would be illegal. We decided to go ahead, and with the help of an electrician we connected to the public power lines without public authorization. We now provide electricity to some seventy families. Not long afterward the power company came to our community and destroyed our connections to the power lines. As soon as they left we reconnected them all over again. The power company’s officials came back to disconnect us from the system again. This time we armed ourselves with sticks and did not allow them to carry out their intentions.

4.03 I immediately went to speak with the power company’s executive manager and explained to him our frustration with his company for cutting off our power after it had installed meters in most of our homes. Throughout our interview the manager insisted that the company could not provide our community with electricity because we were squatters and because of the uncertain nature of our settlement. But in the end he decided to be indulgent with us, in exchange for our promise that we would not abuse our arrangement by "going too far" with domestic connections. That is how we were able to secure provision of energy for our community, almost in the same way as we were able to get our water system: by stealing it, or rather, by taking it without authorization. The fact is that now we do not pay for electricity. It is free, and we have been able to illuminate our streets, our school, and our homes. If there was anything else that we needed and if the government were unwilling to give it to us, then we would just take it without authorization. It is the hardest thing to do, but in the end it has always worked.
V. COMMUNITY PLANNING

5.01 Our first community leaders were the ones responsible for the current arrangement of our blocks and streets. I think it was generally recognized that we needed some physical order in our community, and all residents decided to cooperate to attain that order. We thought that we had to include sidewalks and lanes for the circulation of vehicles, considering that this was going to be our permanent home from now on. We now have alleys 3 meters wide. Initially we had planned for lots of 7 x 6 meters, 6 x 5 meters, and 4 x 5 meters. We now believe that the ideal size is about 72 square meters, that is, lots of 9 x 8 meters.

5.02 The person now in charge of drainage and environmental improvements has been helped by some architects and engineers from the university. UNICEF has provided some technical assistance as well. This year it has been planning a grocery store, structured as a cooperative so that our people can have access to basic food items at fair prices. Some of us in the community are currently being trained in how to administer such a project.

5.03 You have asked whether we would be interested in viewing informational videos about various technical matters having to do with drainage and environmental improvements for communities like ours. Some of the residents have television sets, but no one has a VCR machine. Our community organizations lack any kind of modern equipment. In the past, though, we have been able to borrow VCRs from UNICEF and other organizations to watch videos like those you describe. Eventually, I have faith that we will acquire our own equipment, through the support of institutions who have recognized and appreciated our efforts.
VI. COMMENTS ON A PROJECTED STUDY

6.01 [The interviewer mentioned that a USAID research team was planning several studies in the area within the year and asked whether Mr. Rodriguez thought the community residents would be willing to speak with the team about local drainage and environmental improvement problems.]

6.02 Of course we are always willing to help, as long as you explain to our community the purpose of your study and how we might derive benefits from the results of the study. The residents will be willing to help as long as they understand that your study will benefit them directly as well as our community. Throughout the years we have been here, we have contributed to many studies, and many times all we have received in exchange for our help and time has been documents and reports. We expect more than "paper" as the result of our contributions to studies.
VII. CONCLUSION

7.01 [The interviewer thanked Mr. Rodriguez for the interview and complimented the community on its success and its strong foundations in mutual support, affection, and brotherhood.]

7.02 And thank you, because you make us feel as if our lives really matter. All that we do is to serve our brothers and sisters in everything we can. This is our only purpose. In doing so, we not only help others but help ourselves. We are all parents with at least four, five, six, eight children, and thus we need to work for them, the next generation, while at the same time offering them our best example.

7.03 In the past many of us had no purpose in life, and our existence was rather empty and insipid. Now we realize we have a very clear sense of direction and a reason to live, to show our children and the people of our country and other countries that when people set up goals for themselves with determination, they can accomplish many things, even if they look impossible in the beginning. In our community we have pursued the common good regardless of political affiliation or ideology. We think it is our only choice and the right thing to do. Like us, there are many other partners and friends whose humble and simple lives are entirely committed to their communities and to the needs of their neighbors. You'd be surprised . . .
APPENDIX: MR. RODRIGUEZ'S PROFILE OF HIMSELF

I think my life has been very special.

I am the only one among the community leaders who was born in the capital city. Everyone else came from the provinces. My parents were very poor. My mother used to make tortillas, and my father was a shoemaker. I did have the chance, however, to go to school until the sixth grade. Perhaps one of my greatest satisfactions was that I did not fail any of my school years. At age fifteen I became a shoemaker myself.

At an early age I also became an alcoholic. This was my own destruction. I used to beg to get money to drink, and occasionally I worked to drink and drank to work. When I was twenty-five I married a young woman of fifteen. My first daughter was born twenty years ago. But I kept drinking and drinking until age thirty-two, when I stopped destroying the life of those around me and my own life. I am now forty-six. My family and also my parents, who are still alive, are very proud of the things I have done in the community.

I first got involved in community organizations as part of an improvement committee that was able to build a health center in the neighborhood where I used to live. I also worked setting up the organization for a football team. People around me began to recognize my energy and enthusiasm and invited me to get involved in various cooperatives.

I was also interested in politics and tried to explore what it was all about by engaging in several political campaigns. In doing this I soon realized that I had serious problems trying to make myself understood. So I decided to start reading a lot of books. Books certainly refined my personality, but I did not seek to become famous or known but rather to be able to be myself. I wanted to "find myself" as I had always dreamed. I also worked with Alcoholics Anonymous and retired when I came to live here in the settlement. I asked God many times to place me in a situation where I could serve Him. If He had saved me from being an alcoholic, I thought, it was because He had plans and purposes for me.

When I first came here I was simply a resident, like anybody else. But I soon heard rumors about the community committee and its wrongdoings, how it was trying to swindle the people. I decided to join the coordinating group to pursue this activity I have been telling you about, and finally ended up on the community board of directors. I think whatever our community has accomplished is not the work of only a few people. I believe we have been compelled to act by a supernatural power beyond our comprehension.

You must realize that I did not go to college, nor have I earned any degree, and I lack scientific or technical knowledge about the nature of organizations. I just do what my heart and soul show me to do, doing what I think I should do. I speak often with my friends not only about our organization
but also about life in general, about God, and about morals and good behavior, realizing that we all have defects but that our goal should be to understand each other and learn from our mistakes.

I have come to realize that my goal in life is to serve my people and never fail them. I have also come to understand that this is my home and the place where I should always be. I very much enjoy walking around these areas and making myself available to others for help and advice. I work all the time and never get tired. Well, there are times when I feel exhausted, and then I decide to rest for a day or two; after that I come back to work with more energy than ever.

Another reason for being satisfied with my work is the opportunity I have had to meet many important people. To a humble person like me, who did not have any education, these kinds of things are really something. They have meant a lot to me and to our community. Today I think that if I have been called to serve others I must do it well, at my highest potential. Otherwise my life would not make much sense. I also believe that everyone has to find himself and find the things he is supposed to do in life. I am certain I have found the way I want to exist, and knowing that makes me completely happy and gives me a pleasing feeling of fulfillment. My universe of relations and contacts has also been enlarged, and I have found myself speaking with important people in the same way that I speak with the people of our community. I look forward to the future with high expectations, and even though I sometimes get pessimistic, my major aim is to do whatever I have to do in the best possible way.

We still have a lot of troubles. A number of people disagree with how we have been leading the community. That is all right with me. I cannot expect everyone to agree with the community leaders—we have disagreements ourselves. After all, this community is a democracy, and every citizen has the right to be listened to and to express his or her point of view. That is the way I am. We are all here to help each other and to depend upon each other. I am not better than everybody else, and I just try to do my job as the rest do theirs.

I have no idea how much longer I am going to be on the board of directors of this community, certainly for as long as the people want me to. As soon as they determine that I am no good anymore, I will step down immediately. But I will still be very satisfied with all our accomplishments, because I have put my heart into the work. I think sometimes that we are called to do certain kinds of jobs and that nobody else could do them for us. Obviously I could not preach at the local evangelical church, because it already has a pastor. Nor could the pastor do my job as a coordinator, because that is what I am for. When I come to this realization, I say to myself, "If God is with me, I shall not be afraid because He wishes me well."
Editors' Note:

On the "living room" wall of Mr. Rodriguez's house is a cross-stitch embroidery which reads--

Where there is Faith there is Love
Where there is Love there is Peace
Where there is Peace it is God
Where there is God nothing is Lacking.