

COLOMBIA, A LEARNING SOURCE for integrated improvement approaches to slum districts

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How does Colombia fare against other countries in approaches to urban inclusion for settlements of informal origin? Academics from different nations have analyzed the prevention policies and approaches for tackling these conditions in 15 countries around the world. Patricia Acosta Restrepo, a lecturer at the University of Rosario, wrote a chapter—(*Learning from the Bottom Up*)—on a case study of public prevention policies and care applied to these conditions in Colombia.

Obsession. This word might well fit the intense approach by Professor Patricia Acosta to the idea of having cities in Colombia with good quality of life. It is an ‘obsession’ that began when Acosta, now of the Faculty of Political Science, Government, and International Relations at the Universidad del Rosario, was working on these state policy challenges from the District Planning Office and as an adviser with the World Bank.

Working from these trenches to find a balance between technical, academic work and that of constructing state policies to meet the challenge of creating more inclusive cities, Acosta has incessantly sought conditions to create environments where not only the well-paid citizen has access to good quality of life.

In tackling the worldwide issue of informal growth of cities, Latin America has made significant progress through implementing preventive and improvement programs that have caught the eye internationally. Decision makers and public administrators in Asia and Africa look towards our continent in search of benchmarks.

Contributing to this debate, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) published a study—*Slum Upgrading and Housing in Latin America*—highlighting the lessons of experiences in Colombia for those facing similar challenges. Outstanding among the input from the Universidad del Rosario, directed by Professor Acosta, is the case of Colombia, as opposed to other countries, where land management policies in prevention and improvement of quality of life in slum settlements have arisen from local government innovations. Bogotá and Medellín boast emblematic experiences, those based on enabling policies within Colombia but, conversely to other countries, without specific directives or intervention models derived from national policies. The study reveals that national policies tackling this issue in Colombia not only came late but failed to resolutely back local initiatives in smaller cities with similar challenges but a limited capacity to implement them without help.



← For Patricia Acosta, Colombia is an interesting example of proposed solutions for avoiding illegal settlements and looking to the needs of populations living in slum areas.

→ Innovations have been introduced in Medellín to improve conditions in districts connecting peripheral settlements with the city, one example being Metrocable.

A PROBLEM ON THE RISE

To put this in proportion, between 30 and 70 percent of the inhabitants of the country's main and intermediate cities live in informal settlements, with the urban areas of Montería, Sincelejo, Villavicencio, and Cúcuta being those currently experiencing the fastest population growth. The phenomenon of forced displacement and migration from country to city weighed in heavily in Bogotá in the 70s and 80s, as well as in other main cities. But now it can be said that the situation has stabilized and, as a consequence, these cities are constantly working on bettering infrastructure, roadways, public services, education, and health, thus assimilating these settlements. But for other intermediate cities, the story has only been getting under way. This is so much the case that all that might be learned from comparing urban experiences proves vital for improving responses and not repeating the same errors.

Despite it being a big problem for local administrations, these illegal housing developments form part of the development of the metropolis. "Latin cities have two parallel realities: formal and informal markets that work simultaneously and complement each other. The uneven way in which we manage city planning is one of the causes behind there being informal development, and there is a permanent interaction between the two situations," argues Acosta.

SOLUTIONS FROM THE CITIES

Colombia is an interesting example when it comes to offering solutions for avoiding illegal settlements and looking to the needs of these



populations. In the case of Medellín, for example, innovations were achieved by improving conditions in districts connecting the city's peripheral settlements, as occurred with the Integrated Urban Projects (PUI), which drew huge investments such as the Metrocable, an urban cable car transport system.

Bogotá, meanwhile, has seen experimentation with the tools brought by the municipalities legislation, Law 388, aimed at land management for Priority Interest Housing (VIP), and carried out with the help of Metrovivienda—an industrial and commercial company belonging to the Mayoral Office of Bogotá that promotes construction and the acquisition of social housing—as a public agency promoting urbanized land, offering it to private constructors for building affordable homes for the poor. This even created competition between firms, thus promoting better architecture for the homes within the limits set by the government for this purpose.

In terms of technical support, organizations such as the Inter-American Development Bank want to learn from lo-

cal successes in order to take ideas to other countries just embarking on meeting similar challenges, so the bank is financing research carried out here. It is a big boost for the Universidad del Rosario, whose research is involved in transferring knowledge to other spheres.

QUALITY OF LIFE

Solutions applied in Colombian cities have definitely improved inclusion for the inhabitants of slum areas. In some cases, social integration has been achieved alongside reduction of risk levels related to landslides and floods by working on relocating people facing unmitigable risk. "In the case of Medellín, one highly-applauded move was the *in situ* resettling of inhabitants at risk of flooding, moving them to safe spaces within the same district, while at the same time carrying out restoration work on river bank areas to provide safer and more pleasant spaces," explains Acosta.

Without doubt, the main challenge facing the new president of Colombia is to revive the spirit of Law 388. "Colombia has a very progressive and very powerful Urban Reform Law, with tools that the whole planet wants. This is underlined even better when you consider that the international agreement signed at the grand summit Habitat III included all that our Law 388 has," argues Acosta. "All the world's countries look with envy on Colombia because we have all the tools required to implement projects for inclusive cities," she adds.

For this reason, national programs such as the priority interest housing scheme must also learn from the bad experiences of our Latin American neighbours, since errors that occurred in Mexico 20 years ago are now being repeated. In Buenaventura, for example, social housing is being given to people in vulnerable situations who no longer wish to live there because they end up far from their jobs and general activities in their city. In Mexico, all these houses were left abandoned because people preferred to go back to renting in more central areas.

To sum up, Acosta believes that Colombia must rethink the local impact of its lack of awareness of the advances in land management offered by Urban Reform and Territorial Planning Law 388 if it is to provide better support to local councils in dealing with these challenges. To this end, the new president could start by recognizing that these principles still need to be incorporated in national policies and that, following the example of Habitat III, it is time to do something in this regard. ■

Types of policies

There are two broad types of public policies identified in this research study: **Prevention policies:** these are designed to prevent the development of urban settlements that generate risks for the population. To this end, the public initiative of Priority Interest Housing (VIP) was developed, in other words producing affordable homes for lower-income citizens, this requiring cities to reserve land for the purpose. Bogotá, through the work of Metrovivienda in the Usme Project, is the most outstanding case of this type of public policy.

Care policies: these policies are oriented towards creating schemes for integrated improvement of districts or integrated urban improvement. Examples to cite would include Metrocable, the reclaiming of river bank zones for public spaces, *in situ* relocations in already consolidated areas to improve quality of life in established settlements. This is highlighted by experiences such as those in Medellín.