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## **Reflexions on Popular Habitat Processes in Colombia**

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This paper is still in a preliminary stage, and pretends to advance over the theme of participation of communities in the process of achieving and producing its habitat and upgrading its life and habitability conditions. It is part the Centro de Estudios del Hábitat Popular CEHAP studies, in its search to identify ways to understand, analyse and to develop proposals to improve habitat development and its problematic. There are still lots of empty areas to be studied, in order to have a deep knowledge of this theme; mostly if we take into account, recognize and denounce the demagogic and opportunistic use in behalf pretended "new and democratic" speeches. This points the need to bring forward some elements for discussion in the direction of searching alternatives which would be socially valid for the popular (1) groups.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In order to give a general framework, we will briefly identify some basic elements on Colombian reality.

- In spite of the efforts of the inhabitants and the State, in the field of habitat and housing, the living conditions of a large part of Colombian urban population have a high level of shortages which can be classified as unhuman (Below human conditions).
- Eventhough its evident: as in most of Third World countries, large sectors of population are segregated from the possibility of acquiring human housing conditions, due to the fact that housing is still ruled by the capitalist dependant market. The same as in many other human rights: The established are not enableing its population an equitative attention in regard to housing, education, recreation, health, work, etc.
- The possibilities for the low income sectors to achieve urban land are still mediated and limited by a system of private property which does not formulate feasible alternatives to attend in an efficient and realistic way the existing demand in those groups. Being this true for the quantitative deficit, it is even worst if we make reference to the cualitative land deficit.

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(1) In Latin America the term Popular (in urban studies done in spanish) represents the most generalized issues of the mayoritarial social group, which in our countinent happen to be the low income groups. When it is used in this paper it makes reference to this low income groups, including also the contents in regard to their, it culture and way of building their environment, social and economic resources and structures. Anyhow I find the term "low income" limited, due to the fact that it doesn't include the other meanings which are implied in popular (socially and culturally speaking), having more a reference only to income factors.

- The financial conditions for low income construction are mainly ruled by a system of constant power units (2) which excludes considerable sectors of population. It does not correspond with the national unemployment rates ( even lesser with the existing rates in the low income groups, were the phenomenon appears in a concentrated dimension), nor with the raise of the minimum salary of the employed groups, which has a gap with the raising rhythm in the costs of living and building ( these two are also affected by this constant power unit system).
- There is an enormous deficit in the coverage of the basic public and social services. Worrying also the fact that only water, sewage, garbage collection and electricity are considered as public services. Transportation, education, health, are not considered as public services, etc. Even though new policies speak of community participation in the boards of the public services enterprises (3) up to the present the real possibility for it has not been established.
- Urban growth in Colombia (different from most of the other countries in Latin America), is distributed in a wide net of various large, intermediate and small cities (4). Those cities received large population movements caused by expulsion processes in the rural areas starting in the 40's, and actually keep a high vegetative growth. This process is mainly concentrated on the low income groups. Actually, new violence is happening in different regions of the country, due to laboral and political reasons, generating population movements which obviously affect urban areas.

Since the 50's, up to the present, urban structures didn't assimilate this process in a socially planned way, and no it was not attended by a qualified and rational supply of land, urban services nor housing. It produced an intensified urban growth mainly located in the periphery of the cities, through illegal land occupations of public and private lands and illegal urbanizations (5); accompanied by extreme densification and deterioration of some urban areas through shared rented houses(6).

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(2) Unidad de Poder Adquisitivo Constante UPAC.

(3) Law 11-1986 establishes that the board for public services enterprises should be integrated as follows: one third by functionaries of the corresponding municipal administration; one third by Representatives from the corresponding Councils; and the final one third by delegates from civic entities, or users of the service or services given by the public service enterprise.

In november 1986 Decree 3446 limits such participation, ruling that a Civic entitie or Users League long may participate at the board as long as it doesn't represent less than 5% of the average of the monthly invoicing of the enterprise during the previous year. This really makes difficult the participation of the low income groups, due to the fact that their consumption is not comparable to what could be, as an example, the one of the industrial sector.

(4) Bogotá, Medellín, Cali and Barranquilla, as large cities.

Cartagena, Bucaramanga, Pereira, and others as intermediate.

(5) Called: Urbanizacion 'Pirata' or loteamiento clandestino in Colombia. Ref: "Illegal land subdivisions and the financial account of a Pirata Developer in Medellín, Colombia". M. C. Echeverría, A. N. Noorduynd and F. Coupé. CEHAP. 1987

(6) Called Inquilinato in Colombia; conventillo in Uruguay and Argentina; Vecindades in Peru; Tugurios in Ecuador.

- The main initiatives of attending and consolidating low income habitat needs have been initiated basically by the efforts of the inhabitants. They permanently demand and develop activities (in an organized or non organized way) towards the improvement of their living conditions. This can be demonstrated observing that from 60 to 70 % of the urban area in the main cities in Colombia has been produced as non controlled popular settlements.
- Participation of communities in the solution of their habitat needs has developed organizational processes which achieved important levels of consolidation. This dynamics must have the recognition from the State, considering them as option and alternative, and consequently orienting policies which take into account such experience (7), in a wide dimension.
- Most official and private entities take into account community participation in the reduced interpretation of its meaning: just as hand labour resource; with the aim of reducing building costs or enabling the acquisition of housing for the lowest income groups. However communities have not been considered in real self-managed (self-conducted, self thought) process; with the implied recognition of their history, culture and conduction abilities, and the establishment of policies, programs and projects which enable a real democratic participation in decision making (in regard to different issues on urban development and levels on decisions).
- Actually, Colombia is living a Municipal decentralization juncture, which might be an opportunity for the development of important processes in regard to citizen's participation and might admit a more democratic definition of urban future.
- The treatment for the low income habitat problem has been marked by conceptions which limits it to the quantitative dimension of the physical housing problem (such as houses, streets and services). In such a degree, that most governmental actions have oriented actions towards the reduction of the quantitative housing deficit, with no improvement of the habitat quality or conception. Living conditions of the population are attended in a unilateral way, with no mayor developments towards new conceptions, mostly if we make reference to integral policies, which would attend the totality of the content of habitat: in its social, economic, antropological, cultural and institutional meaning.

If quality of our cities is not a matter of attention of governments, our future scope shows the gradual inversion of what development should be in terms of evolution of our environment through its improvement and not through the reduction of its possibilities, as it is actually happening.

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(7) A large amount of **first degree housing organizations** have developed important experiences which should be seriously considered. These constituted various **second degree housing organizations** in their search for joint developments; being: FEDEVIVIENDA, PROVIVIENDA, CONSTRUYAMOS, CONSTRUYAMOS VALLE, CENPAVI. And created a national **third degree housing organization**, which groups second degree organizations, and plays an important role in terms of unifying the efforts of the inhabitants in their search for better living conditions; named CONAVIP: Central Nacional de Organizaciones de Vivienda Popular.

- Also, urban planning conceptions generate an unilaterally defined practice (by technicians), which is strongly marked by political purposes. Little has been done towards the development and implementation of new planning conceptions and policies, which corresponding with Colombian urban reality, in this end of the 20th century: a country that at the present has around 73% of urban population, with the scope of having a system of cities which will go beyond the stage of intermediate cities; with socio-political conditions that claim for alternatives of urban and regional development which take into account the needs, expectations, conceptions and participation of the different social sectors.

### 1. Community Participation: From the concept of physical action to the concept of social action.

The term "community participation", has come and gone everywhere, and frequently been demagogically manipulated. It might be to tell a simple well known truth, but we need to say that there are different interpretations of it, being a term which appears insistently in recent housing and habitat papers, conferences, policies, etc. (as if it had something magic or miraculous). The fact that it is being widely used by speakers with different origin, interests, political compromises, social interests, etc., points out the need for an explanation of what is meant when each one uses it.

If not, we would be playing the "risky game of being all in agreement", which obviously would inhibit the real development of a constructive criticism; the generation of conditions for concerted efforts which take into consideration the various interests and sectors; and the opening of safe working lines and alternatives, which would take into consideration the past experiences, but would also open new scopes.

#### 1.1. **What we do not share** about the different interpretations of "community participation":

- In the search to diminish the housing problem, Third World Governments are implementing different policies, programs and strategies. In those we can find common characteristics: the permanent and continuous reduction in their understanding of the housing concept (in regard to its technical as well as urban, spacial and social treatment); the tendency to implement massive site and services programs; and the use of hand labour from the target group as common denominator.

This use of hand labour "as a resource" is generally referred as community participation, and it is precisely in this issue where we can find one of the differences: there we can obviously find an action being developed by the inhabitants....They provide their hard work in different jobs, from secretarial to building jobs.

Anyhow, to work in something is not enough to set participation.

- In the same direction, we find pretended democratic approaches that state different degrees of community involvement in certain activities, which go forwards than the plain provision of hard work. As an example we can mention the establishment of joint boards with the participation of the promoting agencies and communities.

The analysis of such processes should be very rigorous (analysis that still has to be done), since generally the ranges of the decisions in which communities participate are limited, the statements and working methodologies are one-side originated, the scope of integrated development is unfrequent, the possibilities for a social projection of communities and articulation to citizen and social participative processes in regard to urban development is out of the goals.

This is one of the most critical issues, and the one that brings up most confusions, to communities as well as to technicians: Participation is defined by pre-established frames and scopes limited by the local project, with a functionalist conception (9), with no real decision power for the communities. From this starting point, it limits and conditions a real participative, creative, own oriented process; which can set up its own frames and limits.

- Methodologies for the pretended support of participative processes must be carefully studied and proposed due to the fact that these are also instruments to hide manipulation in the decision making or instruments which supposedly set self diagnosis and planning of communities, but in reality technicians are permanently orienting and controlling the development of the processes; or instruments to set up a political use of it, in their clientelist search for votes; or used as a convincement instrument for the setting of any other type of project (very much used in cases of relocations of settlements, due to road plans, "cleaning areas", etc. = official urban plans).

- As some of the main obstacles to achieve real participative processes are : "the influences of external forces (economic, social or political), which block or change the scope of the real meaning of community participation; the lack of an adequate organization in communities" (9).

## 1.2. Our meaning of community participation:

Community participation potenciality is one of the elements which enables the setting up of a new society. This way of seeing things differences radically from the past descriptions, it is linked to the search to generate deep social changes in society, and consequently in urban development, and not only to use communities as a resource.

Self help in habitat processes is, in the same way, mainly considered as the objective of the interventions. This should be strictly criticized. While it represents the extension of the working day for the inhabitants of the poorest areas in the cities, with the already known negative elements in it (10) in terms of its real social and political implications; we can't stop seeing the stage of development of low income housing in Third World Countries, which is absolutely backwards in terms of its qualification and has an enormous repressed deficit which demands for joint actions to achieve a real improvement of such conditions.

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(9) See: Memories from the 13th and 14th Latinamerican Workshops on Popular Settlements. CEHAP-PEVAL, Medellin, Colombia. 1986.

Self help has been seen as the paradigm of housing interventions: In the present situation, in which most of our countries maintain structural conditionants for the development a real shared responsibility in the evolution of the housing problem, we can see that it represents one of the only ways in which the poorest groups have been able to achieve some urban rights. Anyhow this fact should be wisely treated in order to avoid the neglect of responsibilities from the State and the private sector; and to potentiate the involvement of the population in a more definite way, in terms of their participation on decisions at different levels, in their fight for better living conditions.

● The obtention of a house has been seen as the goal for community participation: Against it we see that the goal should be to obtain a balanced integrated development on communities, with the dignification of the popular sectors; in which housing constitutes a way of achieving this. Through the establishment of real participatory processes, we know that communities are really the only ones who would be permanently searching and defending the evolution of integrated upgrading of their living conditions. (11) But this should be supported by the different agents which intervene in habitat problems, through the setting of correspondong policies, administrative structures, planning methodologies, educational processes, etc.

● When we speak of participaton we make reference to a process which believes in the popular man, in his culture, in his potenciality as a builder of his own environment (12), on his capability to play its social role for the building up of a better society, in regard to social, economic and spacial spheres. A participation which would dignify and enable the evolution of this popular sectors and would not look at them as marginal, but as margined by the estructural, political, social and economic system.

That one which potentiate what the participant groups are and may be (as subjects on the process and not as objects) enableing the representation of the thoughts form the different social sectors and establishing equitative participation of what our world, society and life generate. Avoiding also subestimation, charity and paternalism, which are really dangerous in it social and political meanings.

● A participation which believes in liberty, in the possibilities for that liberty to be reflected in a colective way of thinking, way of perceiving its own situation, of defining its own expectations, of developing proposals to acquire its aims, of assuming active compromises, of establishing agreements with the different social sectors.

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(9) See: Memories from the 13th and 14th Latinamerican Workshops on Popular Settlements. CEHAP-PEVAL, Medellín, Colombia. 1986.

(10) Emilio Pradilla has developed several works in this matter.

(11) They have a daily living of their problems, and will be always worried for themselves

(12) Not only as a constructor of houses.

- Which searches for collective goals, looking for the permanent and continuous building of communities, with the most real involvement of all the individuals belonging to the community. With a decision processes based on mayoritorial representation, which would benefit majorities. Anyhow, we should point out that the issue of mayoritorial representation deserves to be analyzed in terms of how to take into consideration individual origins, interests, resources and expectations, and jointly find out a collective way of interpreting and evolving those to their common meaning. It is risky if we just take aside also the individual needs, positions and expectations, as real collectivity should defend also the possibility of being oneself as part of a society.

- A participation which would enable the inclusion of communities in every stage of the development of it proces: from the diagnosis, crossing the analysis of resources, priorities, planning of works, until the implementation and evaluation.

That one which would potentiate what the participant groups are and may be (as subjects on the process and not as objects) enabling the representation of the thoughts form the different social sectors and establishing equitative participation of what our world, society and life generate.

## 2. From reivindicacion and subsistence to citizenship dignification and social participation .

Popular Organizations in most of Latin America "are not, by nature, mainly reivindicative eventhough they do have a high component of it. For that reason, we can't leave aside the fact that one of its constitutive characteristics comes out from de simultaneous development of other type of activities, which are not necessarily linked to the demand for improvements. Being in such a way, as an example, they have activities on reproduction, self management, culture, etc. eventhough their estrategies state reivindications by its own or as a whole." ( 13).

Such characteristic is applicable to Housing Organizations in Colombia. Which actually have developed important estrategies searching for a stronger participation in different fields which surpass the main obtencion of acquiring a service or imediate benefit.

"These organizations don't limit its action to the sphere of the settlement, nor to the privileged scope of the strategy, breaking with the organicist analysis from the theory of marginalism and making us re-think them in boundaries which go even further than the "urban matter". First, because their estrategies are composed not exclusively by urban matters, but by multiple determinations, developing territorial configurations which excede the settlement sphere . Secondly, because its constitution comes out from its articulation with the State, the civil society and the general urban process in which they are especificed"( 13).

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(13) Carrión, Fernando: "Los Movimientos de Pobladores en los Barrios Populares de Quito, Ecuador" 4ª Seminario Latinoamericano CEHAP-PEVAL.CIUDAD. 1986. Quito, Ecuador. (Translation: M. C. Echeverría).

This statements make a clear analysis of the broad significate of Settlement Organizations (14) which generally have been mainly interpreted in terms of a social group worried about the obtention of an immediate good, ("marginal" in society), but not seen in their real dimenssion: as a social sector which, being part of the existent system (15), generates its own relations with the different agents, with a national, regional and urban projection, setting up its own strategy to play a political role, which builds up its own culture and productive relations, which has a meaning for society. This has another meaning, in terms of the search for real citizenship roles, linked to the fight for the obtention of social, cultural, political, urban and economic rights, among others.

The present development of such organizations confirm their real capability and support to the conformation of society. We see their foughts are then oriented towards the dignification of urban and social participation, in their search for the guidance of their own destiny.

### 3. State-community relations.

In this context, society should be able to receive such a dynamic and potentiate its meaning towards the building up of a feaseable better world. If we take into account the real meaning of the organized actions of popular groups in their search for better living conditions, we should Interpret those as a possitive development towards the qualification of life. Being then the responsability of the states, to recognize this, and in a real democratic structure, to set up conditions which would enable a joint development of urban policies.

Anyhow no real innovations have been developet towards the setting of new participative definition of plans for the treatment of habitat problems.

#### 3.1. Habitat concepts in Statal interventions and future scope.

As a result of this way of planning, which is vertically defined (not horizontally). "In the 80's the State continued the development of mass housing programmes, showing a strong tendency towards site and service projects which in some cases have been delivered with almost no services at all and which generally are designed with a reduced standard size of sites. An evaluation needs to be made in terms of analizing the effects of this type of large-scale intervention in the land market, due to rigid spatial structures imposed. With a high degree of confidence we can foresee a freezing of future possibilities for densification of such areas, which obviously will increase the demand for new land and imply a future need to develop new urban areas, due to the fact that redensification of already served areas is unfeasible. (We might also add the need for social, psychological and economic evaluations of the effects of such projects in the short and long term)." (16)

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(14) Organizacion Barrial: meaning quarter, area, or district organizations.

(15) Supporting its productive, economic, social, cultural, antopologic, urban and spatial evolution and development.

(16) Echeverría M. C., Noorduyn A and Coupé F.C.. "Illegal land subdivision and the financial account of a 'pirata developer' in Medellín, Colombia. CEHAP. 1987. Medellín, Colombia.

"In Medellín the appearance of new illegal settlements -'pirate' (17) or occupations- have reduced in number during this period, partially due to restrictive policies and official projects and actions. However it needs to be asked if this means that official programmes and projects are attending the lowest income groups or, on the contrary, if this demand has been frustrated and is being reflected in extreme densification of existing low-income settlements, poor conditions in rental housing (inquilinos) and overcrowding, all of which would partially disguise a growth in the deficit."

"Existing uncontrolled popular settlements are recognized by the State through a sort of 'laissez faire' attitude or through legalization or upgrading of settlements. There is no doubt about the importance of this system in terms of land supply, but equally about the problems which result due to a lack of planning, high social costs and difficulties in providing services and infrastructure of an adequate standard."

"In terms of the land acquisition for housing for low income groups, a discussion is currently taking place in Colombia concerning a proposal for urban reform with the apparent objective of creating a more efficient land supply system for housing and urban development. However there is still no clear policy design for integrated proposals for the balanced development of urban land, oriented towards the real improvement of the living conditions for the poorest."

At the present three governmental programs are initiating its implementation, in terms of urban housing, through the participation of the national Housing Bank (Banco Central Hipotecario), being those: Housing subdivision, housing extensions and "Plan Terrazas" (18). Anyhow these is still not clearly defining a collective base for its development, nor a clear orientation towards real participative processes, nor defining a clear orientation towards the poorest groups in our Colombian society.

The policy related to the "Plan to Erradicate Absolute poverty in Colombia", defined by the present government, as never before, is planning to invest considerable amounts of budget in the lowest income areas. With destination to upgrade the most critical areas of the country, starting by the most conflictive regions in terms of its social and political conflicts, simultaneously with some main cities in which habitat conditions have come to have a critical deficits. (Pereira, Medellín, Bogotá, Cali, among others).

In the general scope of new housing schemes, nothing has been work in regards to a new treatment to the present minimization of standards, in terms of searching for a technical and urban qualification; which would enable the future opportunity to have a human settlement for the inhabitants. The present production of low income habitat generates living conditions which don't admit any productive use of it, nor future evolution through densification or growth of its physical structures. This means, that the future possibility for the coming generations (mostly if we speak of the lowest income groups) is not being planned in order to admit the inhabitants to make use of its own territory as a resource to support economic and social growth.

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(17) Illegal land subdivisions : Ref: Echeverria M.C. et al opus cit.

(18) The building of a second floor in an existent house.

#### 4. Technicians-community relations

As a common fact in most Latin American countries, we can find the existence of different non-profit organizations which are having an important presence in terms of opening alternatives for the development and improvement of habitat conditions in the poorest groups of society. These experiences, have established different forms and relations with the inhabitants. This is one of the issues that deserves a reflection, in terms of looking the demonstrations which are occurring, as alternative methodologies and procedures for a more integrated evolution of the habitat problematic.

Governments, and planning entities, should take into account such experiences, and its real meaning. They should understand that these experiences have tested different ways of integration between inhabitants and technicians, and represent a resource to generate a more integrated and inter-institutional development in the habitat processes.

As a relation which enables a real democratic development of the urban evolution (as long as it is seriously worked towards such concept), it is of great importance to stimulate the existence of well structured technical assistance groups. In that sense, efforts should be oriented towards the constitution of technical assistance groups who would support the inhabitants fought for better living conditions. This demands research and educational activities in order to strengthen the bases for a wider effect of these experiences. By the other side, proposals should be worked out in order to enable the existence of such technical assistance groups, in a more generalized way. This implies, to set up even institutional support to enable such a work, and to set inter-institutional agreements for it.

Among others, but being one of the most important contributions of technical assistance groups for the establishment of a democratic evolution of urban development, we find that in many Latin American countries, efforts have been developed in the search to change from the traditional planning to participative planning. Having now a first level of application of such experiences, we point out the need to join efforts in order to make a more systematic evaluation of those, in order to guarantee a permanent dialectic evolution of such concepts, which foresee will support the transformation of quality of life in the lowest income groups in our third world countries.

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