

# **APPROACHING LATIN AMERICAN CITIES FROM THE BOTTOM-UP: SELF-HELP NETWORKS, PLACE IDENTITY AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH**

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## **1 A deteriorating quality of urban life**

Improving the quality of life in Latin American cities has become a bigger challenge for stakeholders involved in urban management including urban populations, researchers, municipal authorities, non-governmental organisations, industry representatives and international funding agencies. Cities maintain their traditional role as centres of socio-economic and cultural innovation but their quality of life is increasingly deteriorating. Problems of environmental degradation, poverty, violence, and criminality are heightening across the continent at an unprecedented pace. As it has been predicted that by the year 2010, 85% of the total Latin American population will be living in urban areas, a deteriorating quality of urban life is a major concern. Improving the quality of life in urban centres has become a central priority in the agenda of sustainable development.

The direct causes of a deteriorating quality of life in Latin American cities are of multiple nature, with the most important being: poverty, social inequity and incapable municipal governments. One of the factors, however, which seldom receives its deserved importance, is the lack of identities. I argue here that the phenomenon of a deteriorating quality of life has in great part to do with the inability of many urban residents to identify themselves with the city where they live. This impossibility of place identification is a result of equity problems such as the deficient social integration of many groups and the lack of social respect for all individuals and groups.

Identity is the motor for social action. I believe that urban populations actively participating in the redefinition, improvement, or protection of their daily environments are ultimately doing so because they are developing, strengthening or defending a social identity. Identity, is an important indicator of the quality of life in a city. The traditional approach to the quality of urban life, exclusively based on material growth and the improvement of living conditions, needs to be expanded to include the dimensions of social integration and place identity.

Community organisations and cultural groups are important sources of identity in today's cities. Throughout the world there are examples in which grassroots urban

groups are developing spaces of encounter, participation and mutual solidarity (CASTELLS 1997; INURA 1997). *Barrio* communities (poor communities engaged in collective survival) in Latin American cities are a remarkable example. Over the past four decades they have mobilised themselves to satisfy their needs for housing, urban services, infrastructure, and socio-economic survival. Based on a collective solidarity they have generated a feeling of belonging among community members and ultimately a cultural identity despite the dominant context of social exclusion (CASTELLS 1997; DEGREGORI, BLONDET and LYNCH 1986; RIAÑO 1988a, b; RIAÑO-ALCALÁ 1986). Therefore, if we are to aspire to make cities socially sustainable we must address the dynamics of grassroots urban organisation and its contribution to an identity of place.

## 2 Approaching Latin American cities: distant and ground-level perspectives

Studies on Latin American cities have been conducted since the 1960s covering a variety of topics including social, economic and political aspects of urbanisation. In geographical studies, cities have been in many cases addressed from the distant perspective of urban maps and survey statistics, the approach of traditional economic geography. Statistical descriptions, urban maps and geometrical abstractions of physical structures have been used to describe dominant patterns of land use (e.g. BÄHR and MERTINS 1981; GILBERT and WARD 1988; GRIFFIN and FORD 1980), residential structures (e.g. AMATO 1970; WILHELMY and BORSODORF 1985) and population and employment structures (e.g. MERTINS 1997; VASCONCELOS 1985). Studies have generally been conducted at the macro geographical scale of one or more cities.

Anthropologists, sociologists and some geographers have placed more emphasis on ground level studies of grassroots organisation in Latin American cities, particularly in peripheral *barrio* areas. Conducted studies have focused on three main topics: (a) the process of social organisation to access land for self-help housing (e.g. COULOMB and MEJORADA 1992; MOSER 1982); (b) the self-help organisation of *barrio* communities to improve urban infrastructure, cope with daily survival, define an identity, and open avenues of political participation (e.g. BARRIG and FORT 1987; CASTELLS 1983; GILBERT and WARD 1984a, b; LOGAN 1981; LOMNITZ 1977; PÉREZ SAÍNZ and RIBADENEIRA 1987; RIAÑO-ALCALÁ 1991; VARGAS 1986), and (c) the values and links of rural immigrants with the communities of origin (e.g. ALBO and GREAVES 1982; ALTAMIRANO 1988; GOLTE and ADAMS 1987).

Collectively, the former studies have greatly contributed to our contemporary understanding of the forces that produce Latin American cities. The economic approach, however, although it has been praised by many for its ability to generalise, has been increasingly questioned in the literature. Geographers from the humanistic tradition (e.g. AGNEW et al. 1984; BUTTIMER 1972; MOLES and ROHMER 1972; SAMUELS

1978) have argued that statistical methods of distant observation are not able to provide an “insider’s” understanding of urban processes. In economic urban descriptions people are not represented by words – just statistics. LEY (1983) maintains that in order to understand the city it is necessary to use close up examination methods – not from the distant perspective of maps, air photographs, and census data, but rather from the ground-level by sharing and observing the dynamics of everyday life.

Ground-level studies carried out by anthropologists have not explicitly addressed the “where” and “when” questions of social organisation. The geographical dimension of everyday interaction has been neglected. Daily social interaction is not independent of physical settings and of temporality.

An understanding of social action from the combined social, spatial and temporal points of view needs to address the following questions: what are the spaces of grassroots organisation? What are the links at the local, regional and global levels? How do the actions of groups and individuals connect these geographical levels? What is the social, economic and political significance of existing links? How do they change over time? How do physical settings at each individual geographical level get invested with social meaning? What is the impact of this meaning on the emergence of an identity of place? How does the relationship between place and identity change as a consequence of external interventions and global forces? Addressing these questions is a challenging and promising field of inquiry. Scientific efforts in this direction are developing with growing interest (e.g. CASTELLS 1997; GARCÍA SUÁREZ 1998; PÉRGOLIS 1998; RIAÑO 1996; RIAÑO-ALCALÁ 1986; VIVIESCAS 1989).

From the former discussion it follows that we need to balance out our geographical understanding of Latin American cities by shifting the emphasis to ground-level studies and to the study of the role of social organisation, norms, values and spatial significance. The social geography of Latin American urbanisation is a field in need of much study.

### **3 Implementing social geography approaches: social networks and participatory research**

#### ***3.1 The approach of social networks***

The study of grassroots organisation is addressed in this paper through the concept of social networks (MITCHELL 1969). Broadly defined, social networks are the social alliances structuring everyday action. Social networks can be oriented towards individual and/or collective needs. Person-centred networks (primary networks), based on kinship, friendship, neighbourliness or common place of origin, are an important means of improving people’s access to urban resources. On the basis of reciprocity, members of personal networks informally exchange goods (e.g. money, food, land or

housing) and/or services (e.g. self-affirmation, moral support, child care, jobs and housing contacts, labour for housing improvement).

In contrast to primary networks, group-centred networks (secondary networks), such as self-help groups and associations, have a formalised structure, dispose of an identifiable setting of action and have publicly defined cultural, economic and political aims (e.g. lobbying, defending, promoting, political alliances). Although primary and secondary networks play a central role in structuring processes of information exchange, reciprocal help and mobilisation of resources they can also be responsible for discrimination, exclusion and social control.

Social networks are not just an object of study but “the most important approach for the study of social relations in urban society” (SCHWEIZER 1989). They are the structuring element of daily social action. The approach of social networks is suited to ground level studies thus allowing for an “insider’s” understanding of the city. It yields an integrated view of social organisation in the city and reveals the variety of social, cultural, economic and political practices of groups and individuals with regard to their surrounding environments.

Studies of Latin American urbanisation have revealed social networks as the keystone of grassroots organisation in the informal production of the city. They play a central role in the improvement of physical infrastructure, are crucial for the integration of rural migrants and are the most important capital used by barrio residents to solve problems of daily survival (e.g. HARDY 1987; LOBO 1982; LOMNITZ 1977; RIAÑO 1988a). Unfortunately, social networks have received only scant attention from geographers (LEY 1983; RIAÑO 1996).

### ***3.2 Participatory research and local empowerment***

As explained earlier, achieving a deeper understanding of reality is one of the main concerns of contemporary geographers. The main challenge in achieving this purpose devising an appropriate methodological framework. It is clear that some social processes cannot be studied from the perspective of distant observation. For example, whereas group-centred networks can be identified by these methods, person-centred networks are “invisible” to the eye of the casual observer and require participatory methods in order to be identified.

At the same time, traditional academic research has been criticised for its lack of concrete commitment to the phenomena under study. The critics, especially numerous among Latin American scholars, emphasise the need to conduct “socially responsible” research which empowers the studied subjects rather than simply use them as research objects (CORAGGIO and TORRES 1991). In this context, “empowerment” means rendering the studied group more able to take educated decisions on matters relating to themselves and to the self-management of their living environment.

“Participatory research”, also called “action-research”, has emerged as the approach which combines the dual concerns of achieving a deeper understanding of the

urban reality and of empowering the studied population. For the researcher, this approach requires becoming integrated in the community under study, and requires involving the locals in the research process.

The next section will present the results of a participatory research project carried out in the peripheral barrio of *Mena del Hierro* in the city of Quito, Ecuador. The research had three practical goals: (a) to gain an “insider’s” understanding of the “visible” and “invisible” characteristics of social networks; (b) to develop a methodological framework which permits an understanding of the social and spatial organisation of networks and, (c) to produce tangible benefits to the community of Mena del Hierro by transferring technical skills useful to the self-management of their local environment.

## 4 The barrio Mena del Hierro: self-help organisation and social boundaries

Mena del Hierro is one of the many low-income settlements that have emerged illegally in Quito’s periphery over the past three decades. These settlements, known locally as *barrios populares*, house approximately a quarter of the city’s population (DIRECCIÓN DE PLANIFICACIÓN 1992), and are arrayed in a belt around Quito (fig. 9). At an elevation of 2900 m, well above the level of the city’s water-supply reservoirs, Mena del Hierro is located in the north-western part of the city and occupies sloping land at the foothills of the Pichincha volcano. Mena del Hierro emerged from the illegal subdivision of the cattle-farming *Hacienda La Concepción*. In the early 1970s, the physical expansion of Quito increasingly approached the hacienda and cattle farming was no longer a profitable activity. Given Quito’s large demand for low-income accommodation, the most profitable activity for the hacienda owners was to sell their land for housing purposes.

As the change of land use from rural to urban activities was officially not permitted, the hacienda owners made use of the weaknesses of the legal system to accomplish their purpose. An official permit was obtained in 1972 to subdivide the land into *huertos familiares* (vegetable gardens), which were to have a minimum lot size of 2500 qm and were to be used exclusively for gardening. In practice, however, the lots were sold for urban housing without having to provide the basic infrastructure or services required for an urban development. In the majority of cases, related migrant families formed groups to buy *huertos familiares* lots collectively and then subdivided them between themselves. In other cases, informal land developers bought lots for later illegal subdivision and resale at a considerable profit.

Despite its illegal beginning, Mena del Hierro was eventually legalised and it became officially accepted as part of the municipality of Quito. This phenomenon is typical of the entire process of Latin American urbanisation. The explanation for this type of urbanisation is political. Barrio residents represent a large voting potential and

thus local parties are willing to grant them “favours” (e.g. legalisation, infrastructure) in exchange for votes at the time of elections for city administrators. This political mechanism, locally known as *clientelismo*, is typical of the north-western part of Quito. Practically all the barrios in the Northwest are a result of the illegal subdivisions of haciendas, either directly into barrios or indirectly via huertos familiares.

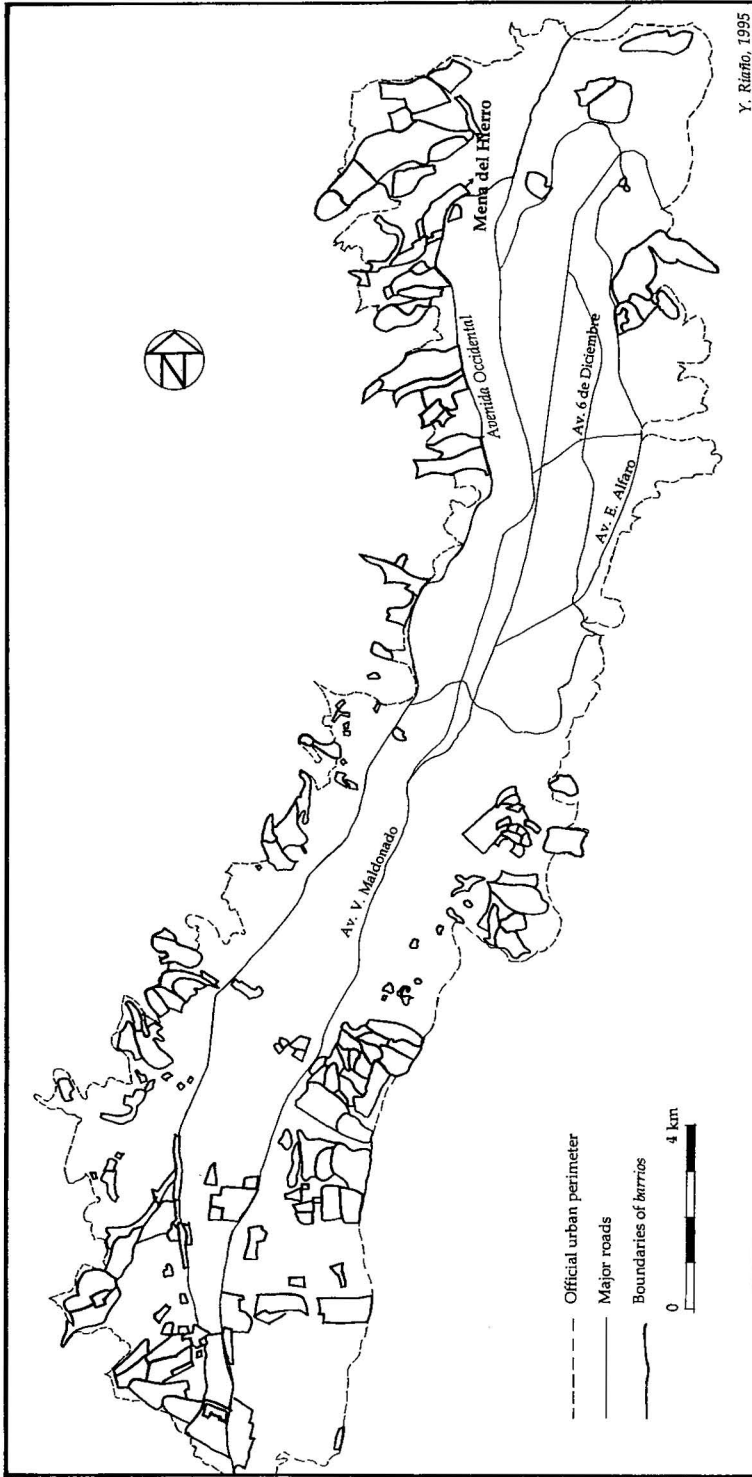
As a result of self-help efforts by local residents and *clientelismo* “favours”, Mena del Hierro has acquired basic infrastructure and services over the years. At the time of the field study in 1993, however, there was still no sewer system or public transport to Mena del Hierro, water and street lighting were only partially installed, streets were steep and unsurfaced, and the air was full of unpleasant amounts of dust, particularly in the dry season; nevertheless, Mena del Hierro could not be qualified as a barrio in despair. Despite its poor infrastructure, houses in the barrio were of very good quality: they were relatively large and had a modern appearance, and they were all connected to Quito's electrical supply.

Although Mena del Hierro has a legal status and clear administrative boundaries, it is not a socially homogeneous neighbourhood today. Two diverse social communities with contrasting socio-economic levels and diverse life styles coexist within the administrative unit of Mena del Hierro. In fact, there is an invisible boundary between the southern and the northern part of Mena del Hierro across which there is hardly any social contact between residents. The reasons for the marked differences between these two areas are historical.

Huertos familiares lots were sold in two stages. Those in the southern, steeper part were sold in an initial phase in the early 1970s. Lots located in the northern lower part, in contrast, near the hacienda's residence and the exclusive *El Condado* Golf Club, were sold approximately ten years later. As there was no basic infrastructure available during the initial phase, the southern lots were sold at low prices and were acquired by low-income families. By the time the second group of lots was sold, access to the barrio had been greatly improved by the completion of a major inter-urban road, and several facilities were available in the barrio itself, including a supply of drinking water installed by the collective self-help organisation of the pioneer residents.

Mostly high-income populations acquired improved lots. Today, not only is there a lack of social contact between these two distinct populations, but the residents of the lower-income Mena del Hierro also perceive that the *ricachos* (derogatory word for the rich in northern Mena del Hierro) have taken advantage of their self-help efforts to acquire a basic infrastructure (The results presented in this paper pertain only to the southern, lower-income part of Mena del Hierro). The problem described in this section illustrates the fact that boundaries within the city are traditionally drawn according to administrative criteria that do not take into account the real social links between community members. This paper presents a method of social mapping that allows for the definition of geographical borders between diverse social communities.

Figure 9: The peripheral *barrios populares* of Quito and Mena del Hierro's location in the Northwest



## 5 Methodology: participatory video-making, social mapping and narrative interviews

A methodological approach was developed which is transdisciplinary and combines qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The principal components of this approach were participatory videos, „social mapping“ (a new technique developed for this study) and qualitative interviews. Traditional techniques of structured surveys and land use mapping were also used. The barrio Mena del Hierro was selected for the participatory research project following discussion with the *Federación de Barrios del Noroccidente*, a grassroots organisation involved in the improvement of the north-western barrios of Quito as well as with the *S-20*, the main youth group of the barrio Mena del Hierro. The research was undertaken with the active collaboration of the *Centro de Investigaciones Urbanas CIUDAD*, an internationally renowned NGO.

### 5.1 Participatory videos and social development

Video production was chosen as the main means of participatory research. The developmental dimension of participatory videos has increasingly interested theorists, practitioners and grassroots organisations that see it as a suitable means, “to empower the powerless” (RIAÑO-ALCALÁ 1994; TOMASELLI 1989). Community-made videos have proved to have several positive effects on local training and social development, including drawing the community together by strengthening community networks; fostering collective decision-making; recovering and documenting local histories; increasing the social and personal confidence of individuals; and serving as a means to communicate local needs to a wider public.

I set up a small-format video and photography workshop with members of the *S-20* youth group who had no previous experience with single-lens reflex- or video camera equipment. The workshop was intended to serve several purposes: (a) to assist my integration into the community; (b) to provide me with first-hand experience and personal understanding of the reality I wished to observe; (c) to allow youths to collaborate in the research process and (d) to serve as a developmental project with potential gains for the group members.

The workshops with the *S-20* group produced a collection of 10 videotapes, which cover a variety of topics, partly suggested by me and partly by local residents. One videotape, on the history of the barrio and the public social life of its residents, entitled *Una Parte de Mi Vida* (A part of my life), was edited with the professional collaboration of the *Centro de Educación Popular CEDEP*, based in Quito. The videos were shown to the assembled residents on several occasions, and copies of *Una Parte de Mi Vida* were distributed to NGOs and grassroots organizations in Quito.

## 5.2 Social mapping

RIAÑO (1996) developed the geographical technique of “social mapping” as a tool for understanding the spatial organisation of social networks. As opposed to traditional geographical maps, which display the spatial organisation of physical features, “social maps” show the spatial organisation of individuals and social groups in a specific physical setting. Thus, patterns of social density, distance and segregation can be visually appreciated.

An example of social mapping consists in recording on a map the place of residence of members of individual networks as identified by participant observation. Several maps were produced for “visible” and “invisible” networks of Mena del Hierro such as sport, barrio-improvement, kin, *vecino* and *paisano* groups. The maps produced by the combined methods of participant observation and social mapping are fascinating. They reveal the complexity of the spatial structure, density and extent of individual networks (see fig. 10, 11 and 12 in the following section on social networks).

On the assumption that social groups are the observable indicators of community, social maps of barrio groups were used as means to discern social boundaries in Mena del Hierro. For this purpose, a map was compiled by superimposing all the maps of social networks in the barrio. The resulting map was compared to “mental maps”<sup>6</sup> produced by barrio residents. The results are remarkable. The limits of the residential area comprising all social networks indeed match the limits of the barrio as defined by the mental maps of the residents (the southern, lower-income part). On the one hand, this result illustrates the awareness that community members have of their effective territory, and on the other it illustrates that the two geographical definitions of the barrio, official (the northern, higher-income and the southern, lower-income parts together) and perceived (the southern, lower income part), are both tangible and distinct. The technique of social maps can thus be used as a means of obtaining the geographical boundaries of social communities in the cities.

## 6 The social and spatial characteristics of “visible” and “invisible” networks

A well-integrated community of 800 residents exists today in Mena del Hierro. The framework of this community is woven by more than sixty self-organised social

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<sup>6</sup> The technique of mental maps consists of asking residents to draw a sketch map of their barrio. The idea behind this technique is that the places that people put on paper are those which are socially or symbolically meaningful for them. Mental maps are also a means of identifying the boundaries of a specific place as perceived by residents.





networks. They are based on the principles of common interest, neighbourliness, kinship and *paisanaje* (origin from the same region). These networks satisfy a variety of the community members' material and non-material needs, ranging from economic survival and barrio improvement to moral support and social respect. They are responsible for the dynamic social life that characterises Mena del Hierro and for the significant improvements in infrastructure and services that have been achieved over the past fifteen years.

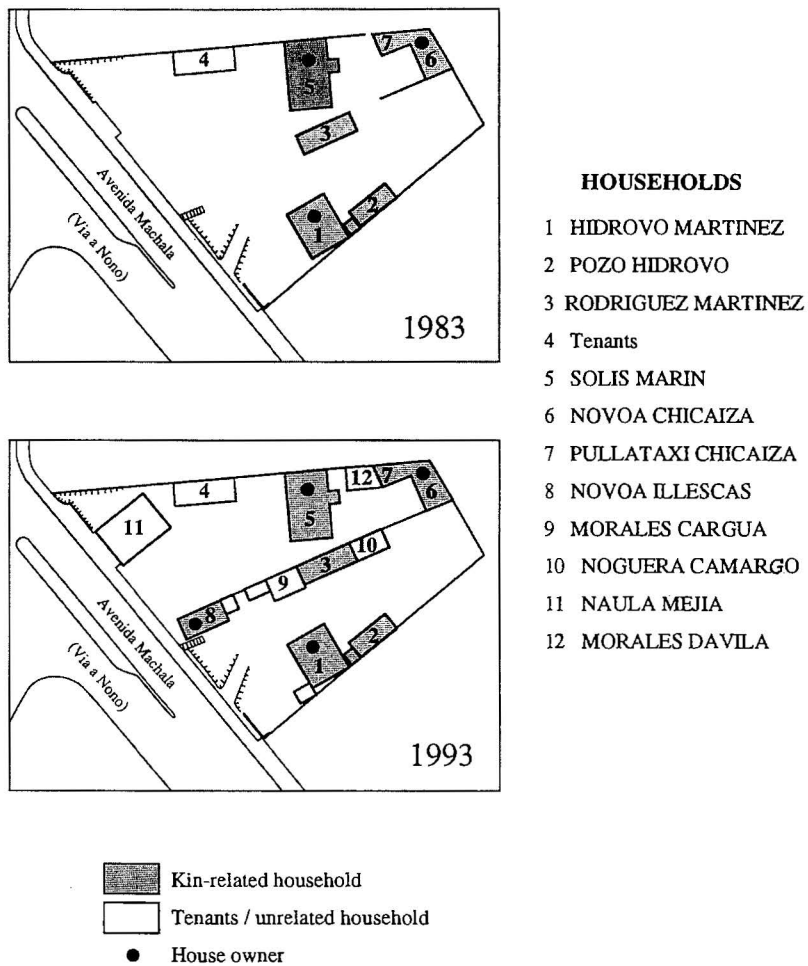
Social networks in the community can be classified as “visible” or “invisible”. Visible networks are easily identified by an external observer and consist of sports groups, cultural groups and neighbourhood-improvement groups (see fig. 10). Invisible networks operate at a smaller scale, are mostly aimed at household survival, and are not obvious to the eye of a casual observer. They consist of kin (see fig. 11), neighbour and *paisano* groups. Visible networks operate at the public level and barrio men are their main protagonists. Invisible networks, in contrast, belong to the private realm of community life and their vitality results from the daily activities of barrio women. The equilibrium of the barrio's community depends on the existence of both public and private networks.

Kinship is the keystone of social networks in the community. Over fifty percent of the barrio's households are related to others by immediate kinship and close or distant family ties relate many more. Kinship permeates all levels of community life, whether public or private. This omnipresence is explained by the multiple representation of kin-related residents in the barrio's networks, by the economic and political influence of kin groups, and by their sheer numerical extent.

The cluster-like residential distribution of kin groups is one of the special features of the community of Mena del Hierro (see fig. 12). The majority of groups cluster on one or more contiguous land sections where household members live in separate dwellings but share much of their daily routine, particularly women. This social and spatial organisation of kin group members reduces the extent of women's movements within the neighbourhood and explains their reduced presence in the barrio's outdoor public spaces.

The social networks of barrio residents are not confined to the neighbourhood. In fact, the geographical configuration of the residents' networks is threefold: the barrio, the vicinity within walking distance, and the countryside. Besides the networks in the barrio, residents also have social ties with self-help organizations in the neighbouring barrios of Mena del Hierro. Networks in this area offer residents, particularly young people, the possibility of public recognition and social mobility. Residents also sustain social links with countryside networks of kinship and commercial exchange. These urban-rural links are an important part of the economy of both urban and rural residents and involve mutually beneficial exchange of goods and services. Urban-rural links also enable network members to maintain and further develop traditional forms of religion and sports.

Figure 12: The cluster like residential distribution of kin groups in Mena del Hierro



Source: Fieldwork Y. Riaño, 1992.

## 7 Social networks and self-help organisation: strengths and vulnerabilities

The local initiatives of social networks in Mena del Hierro are making an important contribution towards improving the quality of life of barrio residents. Local activities of environmental management are aimed at satisfying the social and economic needs of low-income populations and the economical use of scarce natural resources. Over the past fifteen years, largely due to self-help organisation, significant advances in infrastructure and service acquisition have taken place within the barrio.

An example of the former is the fresh water supply and distribution system that has been built by local residents using the principle of *minga* work (voluntary teamwork). Water has been tapped from a source at the foothills of the Pichincha mountain and subsequently piped, stored and distributed to every single house in the barrio. Residents use the precious liquid sparingly for their daily needs. The local system of water administration is low-cost, relatively efficient and allows for the direct participation of residents. It has also earned considerable revenues for the community, which have financed further improvements to local infrastructure. Over the past decade, self-administration of water has been a crucial integrating mechanism for members of the community and a focus of collective pride.

Land is a natural resource not wasted in the community of Mena del Hierro. In fact, private land plots are used intensively for the multiple purposes of housing, production, commerce and recreation. The multifunctional use of land includes living, renting, urban farming, manufacturing (e.g. tailoring, brick-making, bread- and shoe production) and recreation (e.g. volleyball fields). Multifunctionality of land use is essential to the economic survival of the community's households: urban farming provides families with valuable vegetable and animal produce for self-consumption; renting of land and houses produces additional back-up income for local households; using the land for manufacturing prevents paying high renting costs in the city; and setting up public volleyball fields within private lots satisfies a recreational need that cannot otherwise be satisfied in the barrio<sup>7</sup>.

Urban farming in Mena del Hierro and in other barrios has a potentially important contribution to environmental protection, particularly slope stabilisation. The concentration of barrios at the foothills of the Pichincha mountain in Quito has caused deforestation and a consequent destabilisation of slopes and water catchments by erosion. This has led to frequent landslides with human and material losses. Residents of the barrio Mena del Hierro, with the support of the *Federación de Barrios del Noroccidente*, are examining the possibility of combining urban farming with agroforestry in order to ensure slope stability; some trees have already been planted, particularly in

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<sup>7</sup> As Mena del Hierro developed "illegally", no specific areas were set aside for community services and public recreation.

public open areas. Urban farming and garbage disposal are complementary activities in Mena del Hierro. Much of the domestic garbage produced by residents has a high organic content and so it is used as compost to fertilise crops.

The system of informal networks has also allowed a wealth of informal economic activities to emerge in the barrio: e.g. grocery sales, bread-making factories, transport businesses, and car-repair workshops. Through the development of these informal activities, local residents have managed to significantly improve their standard of living. Many of these activities would not be feasible without the support provided by kin, neighbour and *paisano* networks, e.g. a flexible and low-cost labour force, credit facilities, reciprocal exchange of goods and services, useful contacts, and low-cost goods from the countryside. An interesting example of the economic role of informal networks is the *Caja de Crédito S-30*. This credit agency was developed through the initiative of barrio youth in order to save money and provide credit to residents undertaking business development. The *Caja de Crédito* has been relatively successful to date. The strength of this economic initiative is obviously the fact that a solid social network existed beforehand. Since ties of friendship, common interest and kinship connect members of the *Caja de Crédito*, much trust exists between them and thus, decisions are easily taken. It can be concluded from this example that economic development projects are likely to have more success if they can be couched within existing social networks in the barrios.

Social networks also play a key role in the relative social stability that characterises Mena del Hierro, at both the individual and collective level. Being a member of the triad of social networks: (a) the barrio, (b) the vicinity and (c) the countryside gives residents of Mena del Hierro a great sense of belonging. Many youths in Mena del Hierro are unemployed. Most adult workers are affected by problems of lack of social security. To a certain extent barrio residents are socially excluded from the wider Ecuadorian society. Despite these social problems, there is no evidence in Mena del Hierro of public problems such as drugs, alcohol, violence or crime. Belonging to the triad of social worlds evidently provides a positive sense to the life of community residents. Barrio residents thereby achieve social respect, a sense of community and of place.

As in every form of social organisation, however, informal networks also have limits. Kinship may be the keystone of network and community vitality but it is also a source of conflict. Large kin groups in the barrio have much influence and risk being over-dominating. A certain degree of tension exists between younger and older generations as they compete for local management. Tenants in the barrio have a much lower degree of participation in resource administration than landowners. Adult women are content with their role in “invisible” networks but younger women strive for an increased participation in “visible” networks.

Further, informal networks are susceptible to external economic, social or spatial influences that may destabilise the internal social and economic balance of the community. Internal differences between community members on how much political loyalty should be granted to politicians promising barrio improvements in exchange

for votes are certainly an important source of local tension. Municipal measures also affect the organisation of networks. Enforcing laws that restrict the size of lots in Mena del Hierro, for example, can easily disrupt the social and spatial basis of kin groups and thereby dislodge the keystone, which holds the community together.

Recently, the Municipality of Quito intervened in Mena del Hierro in a way that caused significant social impact within the community. After a decade of local water management, official authorities are connecting the barrio to the city wide water network, without any involvement of the locals. As a result, the community is losing a large investment of effort and capital as well as a sense of pride in a major collective achievement. Local employees are losing their jobs and their associated social standing in their community. It is clear that the local system of water supply had limits in the long-term, as it could not satisfy the needs of an ever increasing population. Municipal administrators, however, could have considered some form of joint administration with the locals in order to avoid disrupting the community.

A further positive characteristic of informal networks is that they are flexible and adaptive. Over the years, informal networks in Mena del Hierro have been influenced by many changes, be it by the loss of internal public areas of social meeting, by the increase in the number of tenants in the barrio, by the improved access to the barrio or by internal disparities between residents regarding political involvement at election time. The social networks, however, have always adapted to these new circumstances and have thus persisted, maintaining the cohesiveness, which marks the community of Mena del Hierro.

It is likely that, despite internal and external influences, social networks of Mena del Hierro will persist in time, for several reasons. Although residents have an improved economic status in comparison to residents of other barrios, they still suffer from a lack of social security and some from a lack of a regular income. They need to support each other on a long-term basis. The complex linkage of networks in Mena del Hierro is another factor guaranteeing their persistence. These ties are likely to increase with time: marriages between neighbours will reinforce kinship networks; the arrival of people and relatives from the countryside will strengthen *paisanaje* networks; and the dynamism of formal and informal groups in constantly developing new activities for residents will ensure social integration.

## **8 Perspectives for future urban research in Latin America**

Improving the liveability of urban centres has become a central priority in the agenda of sustainable development. The challenge of the future for researchers is to develop approaches and to formulate questions that suitably address the problem. In view of a future research programme for Latin American cities, the following approach and questions of inquiry are proposed:

## **8.1 Research approach for future research**

### ***An integral approach to the understanding of the quality of life***

An approach to the quality of life of cities exclusively based on material growth and the improvement of living conditions is not sufficient to tackle the problems of Latin American urbanisation. We need to expand this approach by including the dimensions of social integration and place identity. Identity is an important indicator of the quality of life in a city. Part of the cause for many urban problems resides in residents' inability to identify with the city where they live. Improving the quality of life in the cities and achieving a sustainable future requires, as well as equal opportunity of access to material resources, the encouragement of the social and territorial solidarity that will allow urban residents to integrate in society and space.

### ***A participatory approach to improving the quality of life***

Improving the quality of urban life cannot be carried out exclusively from the top-down level of international funding and municipal policy. Grassroots self-help organisation needs to be integrated into the process. For decades, self-help organisation has played a tremendous role in improving the quality of life of Latin American cities. Such organisation needs to be sufficiently recognized, carefully assessed and adequately integrated into wider urban management schemes. Urban research needs to direct its efforts at building a bridge between science and society, allowing for the integration of grassroots expertise in the debate on liveability and sustainability. Participatory research methods allowing for creative interaction between city residents, urban professionals, industry representatives and policy-makers need to be set up.

### ***A case study approach to urban geographical research***

Our geographical understanding of Latin American cities needs to be balanced out by shifting the emphasis to ground-level inquiry. Generalisations based exclusively on the basis of available survey data will always have feeble ground. Statistical analyses from survey data need to be complemented by exemplary case studies. Case studies not only allow for direct data collection but for an interdisciplinary perspective and a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods to be planned and implemented. The insight gained from such studies will make it possible for stakeholders involved in urban management to anticipate future developments in the cities. Being able to anticipate is a prerequisite of sustainable urban management. Preventive rather than remedial actions need to be formulated.

## **8.2 Questions for future research**

The role of grassroots self-help organisation in improving the quality of life in Latin American cities needs to be given renewed attention by urban researchers and policy makers. A topic of particular importance, where little information is available, is that of the *typologies of grassroots organisation, their spatial extent and their interconnectedness*. The variety of organisational spaces is not well known. We do not

have comprehensive overviews of their social and political dynamics, long-term stability, and social significance. *The social, cultural and economic significance of informal links between urban and rural networks* is also an important area of research that has emerged out of the case study presented in this paper.

Further, another topic that needs to be given careful attention is the *assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of grassroots organisation*. The long-term viability of grassroots organisation needs to be assessed in the context of: (a) the increasing inability of many women to balance multiple tasks thus not being able to participate in grassroots organisation, (b) the influence of political clientele forces on the internal cohesion of organisations, and (c) the influence of municipal interventions on the internal stability of grassroots organisation.

Grassroots organisation needs to also be assessed in the context of its *potential to manage the natural environmental*: to what extent is self-help organisation able to sustainably manage natural resources? What are the limits of current practices of multifunctional land use? How does the degradation of land use security affect the possibility of multifunctional use? How do activities of urban farming and housing construction compete over the years? What long-term effects can multifunctional land use have on soil degradation?

A further topic of interest is *the impact of "transformation processes" on the structure and dynamics of grassroots organisation*. We know very little on the micro level impact of ongoing transformation processes such as economic deregulation, trade liberalisation, privatisation and decentralisation. Have local forms of social organisation weakened? Have they adapted instead, developing new forms of organisation? We need a comprehensive overview of the impact of transformation processes at the micro level of urban communities.

It is clear that the discussion on the ability of grassroots organisation to have a wide and sustained impact on improving the quality of life in urban centres depends very much on the possibility of a coordinated action with "top-down" forces of urban management such as municipal authorities, industry representatives and international agencies. The challenge for research is thus to carry out practical studies on the *possibilities and constraints of concerted action between "bottom-up" and "top-down" forces of urban development*.

Addressing the questions presented above is essential in order to make recommendations to the various stakeholders involved in urban management on how to improve the liveability of cities. The challenge to the future is, therefore, to search for creative and appropriate ways of strengthening grassroots organisation, both in their "visible" and "invisible" dimensions. The future of sustainable communities in Third World urban areas is at stake. Let's work towards that challenge!

## Summary

The quality of life in Latin American cities is increasingly deteriorating. Problems of environmental degradation, poverty, violence and criminality are heightening across the continent. One of the important reasons for this phenomenon is the inability of many urban residents to identify themselves with their environment. This is a result of equity problems, such as the deficient integration of several social groups and the lack of social respect for individuals and groups in the city. The traditional academic measure of quality of life, exclusively based on economic growth and the improvement of material living conditions, needs to be expanded to include the socio-cultural dimensions of social integration and place identification. Such an expanded perspective requires participatory methods that allow for creative interaction between city residents, urban professionals, industry representatives and policy makers. Based on the case study of the *barrio* Mena del Hierro in the periphery of Quito (Ecuador), this paper presents an implementation of the expanded, participatory perspective. A mix of quantitative and qualitative techniques was used with emphasis on participatory video production, social mapping and open-ended interviews. The technique of social mapping has proved a useful means of (a) understanding the spatial structure of self-help networks, and (b) identifying the geographical boundaries of diverse communities in the city. Results from the participatory research have revealed the tremendous role of self-help organisation in the improvement of the quality of life of *barrio* residents. Structured by networks of reciprocal help, *barrio* residents have managed to install a fresh water supply and distribution system, improve other infrastructure facilities for the *barrio*, and develop a wealth of socio-cultural activities that maintain the social cohesion of the community. Urban farming, small-scale industry and the direct import of agricultural produce from the countryside for sale in the city, are examples of the informal economic activities developed by *barrio* residents. These activities are not only essential for the economic survival of the residents, but also for the survival of their rural partners in the *barrio's* exchange networks. Being members of social networks in the city and in the countryside has helped residents to develop a sense of place that affords them orientation in their daily lives. On the basis of this case study, some perspectives on research for the future are proposed. A plea is made for: (a) an integral and participatory approach to quality of life research, based on exemplary case studies, (b) renewed attention to the role of grassroots organisations in urban-rural development, (c) careful examination of the social, spatial and temporal organisation of self-help groups, (d) assessment of their strengths and vulnerabilities in the context of changing global processes, and (e) evaluation of the viability of concerted action with municipal authorities and representatives of large scale industry and international development corporations.

## **Resumen**

*La calidad de vida en las ciudades latinoamericanas está en proceso de deterioro. Los problemas de degradación del medio ambiente, pobreza, violencia y criminalidad aumentan de manera preocupante. Una de las razones importantes detrás de este fenómeno reside en la incapacidad de muchos habitantes urbanos de identificarse con el medio donde viven. Esta dificultad de identificación se explica por razones de desigualdad social. Por una parte, existen muchos obstáculos para la integración social adecuada de numerosos habitantes urbanos y por otra, una ausencia generalizada de respeto social a la mayoría de habitantes urbanos. El enfoque académico tradicional sobre la calidad de vida urbana, basado exclusivamente en el crecimiento económico y en el mejoramiento de las condiciones materiales de vida, necesita ser ampliado para incluir los aspectos socioculturales de relativa integración social e identificación urbana. Una perspectiva integral como ésta requiere del uso de métodos de investigación participativa que permitan el intercambio creativo entre residentes urbanos, profesionales, autoridades municipales e industriales. A partir del estudio de caso del barrio periférico Mena de Hierro en la ciudad de Quito (Ecuador), este artículo presenta un ejemplo práctico de la aplicación de un enfoque integral y participativo. El estudio se lleva a cabo a partir de la mezcla de métodos cuantitativos y cualitativos, con énfasis en las técnicas de videos participativos, cartografía social y entrevistas narrativas. La técnica de la cartografía social ha mostrado ser muy útil para la comprensión de la estructura espacial de las redes sociales y el discernimiento de las fronteras espaciales de diversas comunidades urbanas. Los resultados de la investigación participativa han revelado el rol fundamental que juega la organización de base barrial para la mejora de la calidad de vida de sus pobladores. Estructurados por la organización de las redes de ayuda mutua, los residentes barriales han alcanzado logros importantes como la construcción de una red de provisión y distribución de agua potable, la mejora de la infraestructura barrial, y el desarrollo de numerosas actividades socio-culturales que mantienen la cohesión social de la comunidad. Así mismo, los pobladores barriales han desarrollado un número importante de actividades económicas informales como la agricultura urbana, la pequeña industria y la importación directa de productos agrícolas del campo para su venta en la ciudad. Estas actividades no solamente son esenciales para la sobrevivencia económica de los pobladores barriales sino también para los pobladores rurales miembros de sus redes sociales de intercambio. Siendo parte de numerosas redes sociales en la ciudad y el campo ha contribuido de manera central al desarrollo de un sentimiento de pertenencia social y territorial para los pobladores el cual les da estabilidad en su vida cotidiana. A partir de los resultados del estudio de caso se proponen las siguientes líneas de investigación para el futuro: (a) la aplicación del enfoque integral y participativo a partir de la realización de estudios de caso tipo muestra, (b) la atención renovada al rol de las organizaciones de base en el desarrollo urbano-rural, (c) el estudio cuidadoso de la organización*

*social, espacial y temporal de los grupos de base, (d) la evaluación de las fortalezas y debilidades de la organización de base en el contexto de los procesos globales de transformación, (e) el análisis de la viabilidad de una acción concertada entre las organizaciones de base, las autoridades municipales, y los representantes de la gran industria y de las corporaciones internacionales de desarrollo.*

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