

Risk Prevention in Irregular Settlements

Given these obstacles and other factors, the political will to launch a legalization process is also lacking in many Venezuelan cities. The politicians who depend on patronage to remain in office have no interest in “resolving” the problem, since that would “kill the goose that lays the golden egg.” To date the occupation of land and subsequent acceptance of possession has been the prevailing pattern, but many observers believe it is imperative to overcome that pattern. To continue relying on the ambiguous position that only possession counts and that ownership is irrelevant is to condemn both the possessors and the owners to a permanent legal vacuum. In time this posture leads to urban chaos and a daily life for the inhabitants characterized by uncertainty, fear and violence.

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In recent years, Latin America has suffered from many natural disasters that have had especially serious impacts on irregular settlements in densely urbanized areas. Drawing on the findings of research in Mexico funded by the World Bank and other institutions, the Lincoln Institute cosponsored a seminar in November 2000 in the port city of Veracruz, focusing on ways to mitigate the risks and results of natural disasters. The seminar explored such issues as:

- the relationship of irregular settlements in high-risk areas to regularization processes;
- the attitudes and efforts of the local populations;
- recent technological advances relevant to diagnosing risks;
- lessons learned from previous disasters; and
- successful experiences with disaster prevention and mitigation.

Representatives from municipal authorities and community organizations shared experiences and learned technical and practical methodologies to identify high-risk zones, implement policies to reduce illegal settlements in those zones, and establish prevention and mitigation measures. Participants also identified the importance of social participation in the process. The principal findings are summarized below:

Irregular or illegal settlements reflect the inability of land markets to provide suitable (low-risk) residential locations for low-income families. Mitigation efforts will continue to be frustrated unless this policy environment is improved.

Actions at higher levels of government are almost exclusively reactive, such as relief measures only after disasters strike and limited efforts to improve planning and prevention. There is an urgent need for governments to revise their priorities to avoid some of the predictable impacts of natural disasters.

Data and management tools to improve preventive approaches need to be made available to citizens and local authorities, who have been the source of most successful mitigation efforts in recent years and are in the best position to originate future initiatives.

It is important to begin promoting and developing insurance policies that will both reimburse households and localities for damage and losses and put in place incentives to improve practices with respect to building standards, maintenance of watercourses, and other preventive measures.

Since rapid and poorly managed urbanization has been a major culprit in increasing the number of families at risk, as well as the levels of risk, strengthened urban planning should be a vital tool in the quest to reduce the effects of disasters.

The Institute has been working on this issue with State, Urban and Municipal Services (SUME), an institution established in late 1999 to raise the quality and efficiency of governance and management at state and local levels in Mexico. SUME aims to accomplish these objectives through consulting, technical assistance and training of government officials. Its activities have been supported by the United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (Habitat), which cosponsored this seminar, and by the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank. □

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