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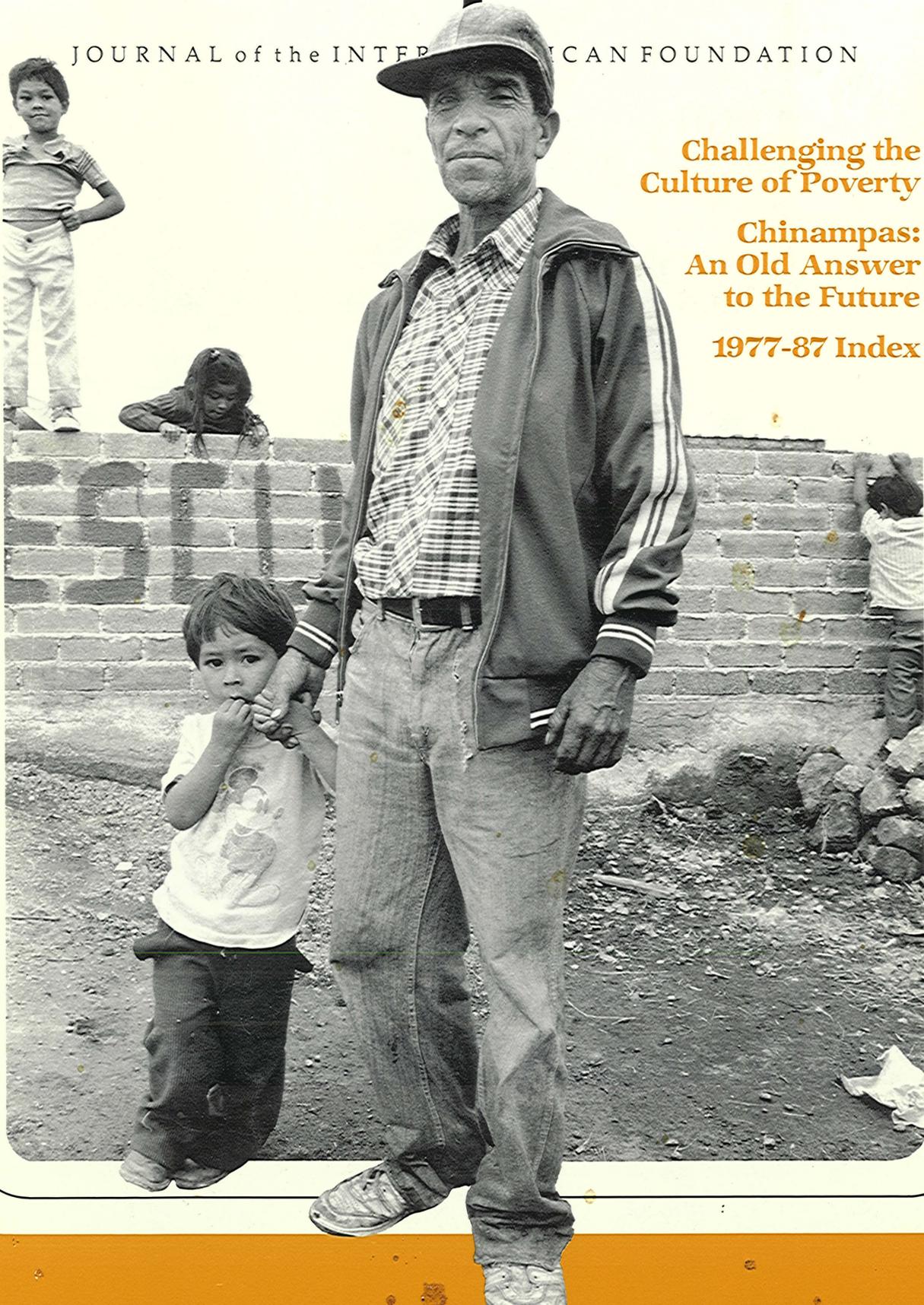
grassroots development

JOURNAL of the INTER-AMERICAN FOUNDATION

**Challenging the
Culture of Poverty**

**Chinampas:
An Old Answer
to the Future**

1977-87 Index



The Inter-American Foundation, a public corporation created by the United States Congress in 1969, provides direct financial support for self-help efforts initiated by poor people in Latin America and the Caribbean. The Foundation makes about 200 grants a year to support projects carried out in more than 25 countries. Approximately half of its funds are appropriated by Congress. The remainder comes from the Social Progress Trust Fund, which is administered by the Inter-American Development Bank.

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Cover photo: Residents of Nueva Casa Blanca, a shantytown on the outskirts of Mexico City, ponder the fate of their new school (see article p. 18). Photo by David Melody.

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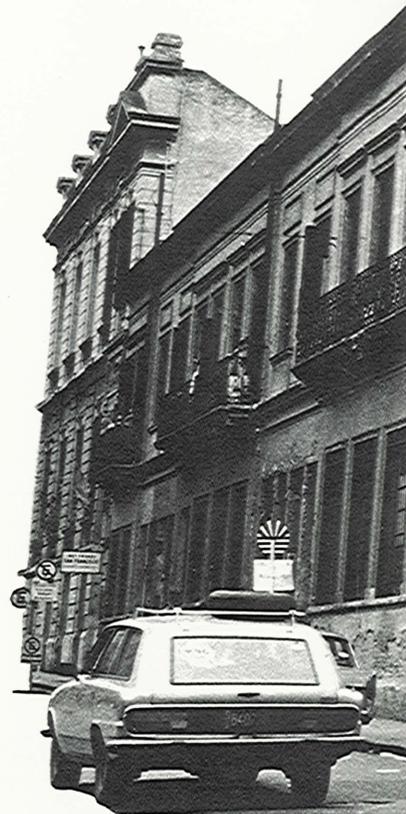
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HOUSING SOLUTIONS FOR BUENOS AIRES' INVISIBLE POOR

David Welna

Affordable housing for the poor is in short supply, but a research group and a tenants' organization have come up with new ideas for renting vacant dwellings and renovating historic older buildings that often mask a miserable reality behind once-elegant facades.



It is commonly assumed in Buenos Aires that the urban poor left the city when bulldozers stripped the capital of its shantytowns in the late 1970s, during Argentina's former military government. Many of the urban poor did flee to outlying areas at that time, but others chose to remain close to income sources and urban services. Those who stayed behind, largely unnoticed, were the occupants of once-grand but decaying buildings near the heart of the city.

This phenomenon extends beyond Argentina. The housing plight of the urban poor in Latin America is not confined to the widely publicized squalor of the shantytowns that typically surround the continent's large cities. It also encompasses the dark, crowded life of inner-city tenements, many of them once respectable hotels or the homes of important families. Although they have long since deteriorated, these buildings sometimes form an essential part of the historical patrimony of cities as diverse

as Rio de Janeiro, Lima, Mexico City, and Santiago. Bulldozers are unlikely to erase them from the urban landscape like they eliminated the Buenos Aires shantytowns. As the structures fall into ruin, though, they add to the misery and endanger the lives of their inhabitants.

Oddly, the rents for these hovels are not cheap and often consume much of their tenants' wages. Rents are high because there is virtually no other housing available to the inner-city poor.

In Buenos Aires, the housing market is bleak. A prolonged economic recession has gouged salaries, stagnated the construction of new housing, and severely constricted the new civilian government's social programs. Although some estimates indicate there are about 100,000 unoccupied housing units in the city, uncertainties caused by triple-digit inflation have combined with on-again, off-again rent controls to discourage many property owners from renting out apartments bought as investments. And

since there is virtually no mortgage credit available, only people who already have money can buy. The poor, even in the best of times, must rent, and their only option is the city's worst housing.

Three kinds of dwellings in Buenos Aires commonly are available to the inner-city poor. The first, known locally as *conventillos*, are decrepit mansions on the south side of the city. They were subdivided into single-room tenements for European immigrants a century ago when their wealthy occupants moved to the northern barrios of Buenos Aires to avoid yellow fever. Today, most of the occupants are immigrants from neighboring countries, or dark-skinned migrants from the Argentine interior, such as Virginia Gómez.

Virginia Gómez spends most of her afternoons on Calle Florida, a fashionable pedestrian mall lined with some of the smartest boutiques in Buenos Aires. Surrounded by her five children — the



Eduardo Gil

oldest is five years old — she sits on a doorstep, selling aspirins. The \$40 a month this soft-spoken woman earns as a street vendor has been the sole source of support for her family since her husband left in 1986.

At the end of each workday, Virginia Gómez crosses Plaza de Mayo, passing the presidential offices and the cathedral. A half block farther, the 28-year-old mother and her children crawl through a metal grating into the one-room hovel that is home. Their room is part of a crumbling 19th century estate that once belonged to the widow of an Argentine president. Today 40 families live there, just a stone's throw from officialdom. They and their misery remain hidden from the rest of the city by the plain wooden door that leads into their jumbled complex of single-room homes. But clues to their presence are there — trash spilling out onto the sidewalks, and ragged children playing in parking spaces.

Virginia Gómez and her children live with the hardships endemic in *conventillos*: no proper place to bathe, one communal latrine, a closet for a kitchen, no windows. The only palliative is that the occupants of her building temporarily live there rent-free. The municipality, which owns the property, plans to evict the tenants because the building is unsafe. But the eviction has been stalled several times. Since the restoration of civilian government four years ago, the bulldozer mentality no longer prevails in dealing with the urban poor.

Before Virginia Gómez found her niche in the municipality's *conventillo*, she stayed in a second kind of poor urban housing: the so-called "family hotel." These dwellings are really boarding houses that rent rooms by the week, with no contractual obligations on either side and no protection from eviction for the tenants. The dismal yet relatively expensive rooms of these run-down hotels are usually where recent arrivals

to the city first stay. But when they begin to have children, as Virginia Gómez did, they are evicted.

A third option for the urban poor — one that has become increasingly common — is to illegally occupy vacant buildings. The faltering national economy has slashed real wages, and many Argentine families in the past five years have lost their apartments or rented houses. The lack of alternative housing has made abandoned factories, vacated institutes, and houses and apartments up for sale into potential targets for urban squatters. Thus far, the authorities have largely looked the other way.

GROUP FORMS TO TACKLE CITY HALL

In mid-1986, Grupo Habitat — under contract with the Center for Population Studies (CENEP), an IAF grantee — organized a four-day seminar to

heighten awareness of the housing plight of the poor in Buenos Aires.

The head of Grupo Habitat, Rubén Gazzoli, says he became involved in urban housing problems while working with a tenants group in 1984. When he realized the magnitude of the problem, he joined architect Néstor Jelfetz and sociologist Silvia Agostinis to form Grupo Habitat.

Gazzoli says his organization began to focus on changing the legislation governing such issues as landlord-tenant agreements in order to find new solutions to housing problems. One of the first things Grupo Habitat discovered, however, was the lack of reliable statistical information on who lived in the city's low-income housing or even where such housing was located.

So with the cooperation of the Secretariat of Family and Human Development, the municipal government of the city of Buenos Aires, and the municipal government of the city of Avellaneda, Gazzoli and his associates surveyed a random sampling of 5 percent of the city's dwellings.

From this initial sample, a smaller group was selected for in-depth, follow-up interviews. Forty questions were asked from a standard form. Some dealt with the socioeconomic background of respondents and their housing history; others covered the kinds of contracts or other agreements by which housing was obtained. The canvassers carrying out the survey also noted details of each dwelling such as its state of repair, its access to cooking and bathing facilities, and its price. Gazzoli says many landlords were not eager to cooperate at first, but reluctantly agreed after being told the survey had been endorsed by the municipality. Grupo Habitat also obtained the endorsement of the Buenos Aires hotel owners association, which was essential for access to the "family hotels."

"The results confirmed what we already suspected," says Gazzoli. "While the percentage of people living in substandard housing in Buenos Aires proper is relatively low, the absolute number of people affected is huge." Based on survey data and government

statistics, Grupo Habitat estimates that 205,000 of Buenos Aires' 3 million residents occupy single rooms in substandard housing. Of that total, 45,000 live in conventillos, 60,000 in "family hotels," and 100,000 in illegally occupied housing — this last the most rapidly expanding group.

THE BUENOS AIRES TENANTS' CENTER

A soft rapping on a wooden door brings a woman's hushed voice from inside: "Who's there?" An activist from CIBA (the Buenos Aires Tenants' Center) assures her it is friends. She opens the door.

Inside, an open fire burns on the cement floor of what looks like a former living room. Forty-four-year-old Ada Tramonti leads her visitors to some chairs, the only furniture in sight. Ada explains that she broke into this vacant dwelling only a week earlier, after her husband entered the hospital for surgery. She then reported her break-in to friends at CIBA, an organization that provides low-cost services to tenants and helps people contest arbitrary evictions, and that assisted Rubén Gazzoli in obtaining data for his survey.

"It was either here or the street — we couldn't afford rent anymore after living in our apartment for 12 years," she explains. "We don't want to be looked upon as pariahs. We want to live with some dignity."

Friends have helped her to rig up wiring to tap electricity from a nearby streetlight. "I plan to fix this place up," she adds. "Maybe then the owner might even consider giving me a lease."

Ada Tramonti's hopes of attaining legality do not seem remote to CIBA or to Grupo Habitat. Rubén Gazzoli thinks landlords might be persuaded that tenants, legal or otherwise, could help renovate rental properties — an important step towards expanding the supply and lowering the cost of rental housing, and fighting urban decay. Gazzoli believes that, in the long run, it is also in the landlord's interest to negotiate with illegal tenants. Court battles to evict squatters can drag on for months and even years while the property, if it is not already too dilapidated to sell, continues to deteriorate. Squatters, for their part,

Estéban Fernández (left) sits in a neighbor's room in an inner city Buenos Aires tenement after his own roof caved in, breaking his leg and leaving him homeless.



Eduardo Gil



Once the elegant home of an Argentine aristocrat, this decaying mansion, or conventillo, is now divided into dwellings for 40 families. It is located just half a block from the presidential offices in Buenos Aires.

face the constant menace of eviction as well as the social stigma of living as trespassers.

STRATEGIES FOR SELF-HELP RENOVATION

Tenants groups in Buenos Aires have devised two strategies for helping poor urban tenants renovate their homes. One plan would provide technical assistance from university engineering students through the auspices of Grupo Habitat. Negotiations have already begun to set up such a consulting service. The other plan would form a labor pool of tenants with construction skills who would be available to make home improvements.

Without self-help renovation efforts, Gazzoli fears that many buildings currently occupied by tenants may become completely uninhabitable at a time when almost no new rental units are being built.

In the conventillo where aspirin vendor Virginia Gómez lives with her children, 66-year-old Esteban Fernán-

dez recently lost his home and had his leg broken when the roof fell in on his one-room abode. When rains then broke a hole through the ceiling of his neighbor Ana Roldán's house, the municipality, which owns the building, told her she had to move out. "They offered to put me up for 10 days in a hotel," recalls Ana, the single mother of three boys. "But then where would I go?"

Instead of moving out, Ana contacted CIBA, which in turn alerted Grupo Habitat to her predicament. Gazzoli and his associate Nestor Jeifetz went to the emergency meeting at Ana Roldán's house one evening, crowding into her single room with about 15 neighbors. A 10-inch-square wooden beam, braced against the floor, supported an exposed ceiling timber in one corner. "This is only a stopgap solution for the roof," Ana told the assembly. "If another ceiling falls in, it might mean all of us getting evicted."

Another woman turned to Gazzoli. "What can you do to help us?" she asked.

His response was polite but blunt: "We're here to help those who've gotten

organized, but not to organize." Gazzoli explained that Grupo Habitat normally does not make on-site inspections but had made an exception in this case because of the danger posed by the collapsing ceiling timbers. "We prefer to work with groups such as CIBA that represent tenants. Then we can stick to our role as advisers rather than try to become organizers," he said.

Gazzoli's response prompted a lively debate in Ana Roldán's crowded room over what to do next. "We can't just wait for another disaster before doing something," said a young mother. An older man everyone called Don Juan drew himself up and declared, "What we need is a common fund to fix this place up."

Another young mother protested: "We don't have enough money to feed our children, let alone pay for remodeling this building."

"Don't give up before you've started," Don Juan shot back. "If we get organized, we can get money — the will is here but the organization is lacking."

The meeting broke up with Ana Roldán agreeing to take charge of trying



Daughters of vendor Virginia Gómez stand in the doorway of the one room they share with their mother and three other siblings. They live as many conventillo dwellers do — with limited or non-existent bathroom and kitchen facilities, and even less certainty for their future as tenants there.

to collect the equivalent of two dollars from each of the building's 40 families. The money would be used for the next emergency. And, they planned to seek advice from Grupo Habitat about economical ways to use their own labor to reinforce the decaying roofs.

Back in the room — stacked with housing surveys — that Grupo Habitat occupies at CENEP, Rubén Gazzoli elaborates on the aims of his organization. "Our focus is on concrete solutions," he states. "Too many housing studies end up in somebody's files and have absolutely no impact. We're interested in solutions for the present, not the future."

Armed with abundant information gathered from its survey, Grupo Habitat plans to propose corrective legislation. According to Gazzoli, the most common complaint cited by survey participants was the enormous cost of obtaining a lease. "These people are being driven to squat rather than rent because of the absurd requirements involved in renting," Gazzoli says. To obtain a lease, the urban poor, many of them recent migrants with few personal connections,

must provide proof of employment and find one or two co-signers who own property in the city (and who charge the equivalent of a month's rent to sign the guarantee). The first month's rent is due in advance, and two months' rent must be paid for a damage deposit and another two months' rent as a commission. "Many people have the income to pay rent month-to-month, but they end up living in costly 'family hotels' — which are really rental units without leases — because they can't pay the enormous entrance cost for long-term apartments."

Gazzoli thinks the government might offer subsidies or fiscal incentives to encourage owners to put vacant housing units on the rental market. The effect of expanding the market could be two-fold, he says: It might drive down the average price as the supply expands, and it might reduce some of the pressure leading to illegal squatting.

Grupo Habitat has proposed that CIBA create a rental agency to be run by tenants. Under that plan, properties that might otherwise remain abandoned and vulnerable to invasion would be identi-

fied and their owners contacted to negotiate rental fees. The center might also eventually provide financing to help pay the high costs of entering into lease agreements. There has been an enthusiastic response to the idea by CIBA, which is now seeking financial backing for such a project.

The lack of protection from eviction for those who live in "family hotels" was also frequently mentioned in Grupo Habitat's housing survey. "They are really false hotels," says Gazzoli. "They're usually buildings that are too run down to be put on the real rental market, and so they're advertised as hotels, but certainly not with tourists in mind." The so-called hotels often lack cooking and toilet facilities, yet charge rates that consume most of their tenants' incomes.

Grupo Habitat has devised a project that would transform these hotels through legislation into tenants' consortiums that could be managed by the tenants themselves. Gazzoli suggests tenants could then undertake the physical improvements most of the hotels

badly need, using part of their rental payments to finance the renovations. Representatives of the 60,000 hotel tenants are enthusiastic about pursuing the consortium project, he says. Gazzoli believes the consortium idea may eventually appeal to hotel owners as well. Most of them are rarely on the premises and must pay somebody else to manage their property — usually someone with no personal interest in maintaining the hotel in good condition.

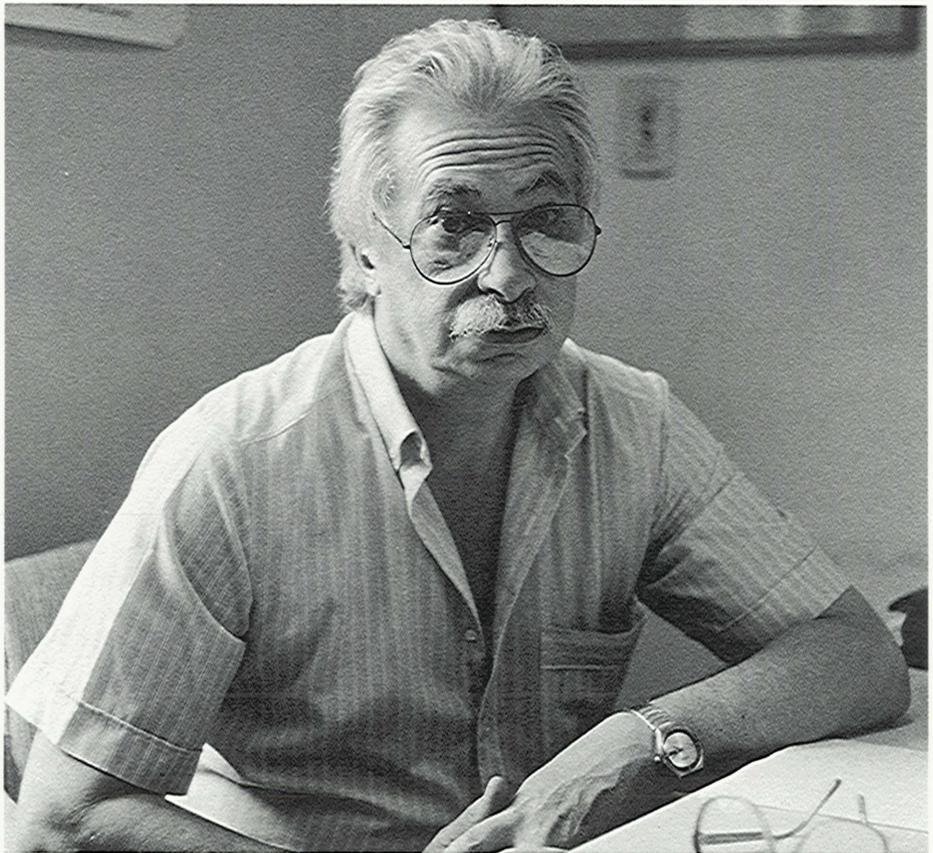
Gazzoli is generally optimistic about official receptivity to the proposals. The number of urban trespassers keeps growing, as do pressures from landlords to evict squatters. With no place to put illegal tenants besides the street, the city of Buenos Aires urgently needs new legal strategies to fill the enormous amount of vacant housing. The city also is in danger of losing many of its old buildings if neglect continues to prevail in the conventillos and family hotels. The picturesque but poverty-infested houses on Montserrat and San Telmo near the heart of Buenos Aires can barely contain the increasingly grim world behind their doors.

The kind of self-help and grassroots efforts proposed by Grupo Habitat are still relatively new concepts in Argentina. But with the help of organizations such as CIBA, these ideas might keep the poor of Buenos Aires from being buffeted from one eviction to another. If proposals for expanding the rental market and lowering its costs prosper, women like Virginia Gómez and Ana Roldán may be less likely to enter into the illegality that has become a way of life for Ada Tramonti and 100,000 others in Buenos Aires. ♦

DAVID WELNA is a writer currently based in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where he has reported on South America for National Public Radio since 1982. Since this article was written, the IAF has approved a second grant to CENEP to provide technical assistance to tenement dwellers for services such as renovations and the organization of tenant-managed buildings.



Alicia D'Amico



Eduardo Gil

Top: A canvasser interviews a conventillo resident as part of a housing survey sponsored by Grupo Habitat. Bottom: Rubén Gazzoli, head of Grupo Habitat, at his desk in his Buenos Aires office.

THE SEDUCTION OF MODELS

Chinampa Agriculture in Mexico

Mac Chapin

Can an agricultural technology devised by the Aztecs rescue today's small farmers from the excesses of the Green Revolution?



At all levels—from peasant farmers in the Amazon Basin to concerned scientists worldwide—there is growing alarm that the pace and scale of environmental devastation threatens not only individual communities but nations, and may eventually upset the ecology of the planet. As the prospect of denuded forests, contaminated rivers, and massive rural to urban migration looms closer, Latin Americans are beginning to react: Conservation groups are forming, the media are becoming a regular forum for environmental debates, and technicians are experimenting with alternative development schemes. But while awareness of the interlocking nature of the crisis is widening, answers have proven elusive.

This is particularly evident in the search for new approaches to agriculture. The luster of the Green Revolution has faded as its social, economic, and environmental costs have mounted. Intensive reliance on expensive machinery, chemicals, and seed strains has encouraged agroindustrial monocropping, increased the concentration of

landholdings and wealth in the countryside, and accelerated the exodus of small farmers to cities that are already overcrowded.

In a quest for small-scale alternatives that are affordable, productive, and ecologically sound, development specialists and environmentalists have formed a somewhat uneasy alliance, in the process bringing forth a new field known as "ecodevelopment" and the more specialized subdisciplines of "sustainable agriculture" and "agroecology." The urgency of the search has sparked a miniboom in the publication of articles and books on the topic, and conferences are being held all over the globe—in Nairobi, Ottawa, London, Mexico City, and Washington, D.C. Yet despite a few scattered, often endlessly recycled, success stories, the truth of the matter is that no one has thus far devised much in the way of workable models.

Thus, considerable excitement results when something genuinely promising appears on the scene. This occurred in the mid-1970s, when Mexico's Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones sobre los Recursos Bióticos (INIREB) unveiled a plan to build *chinampas* in the swampy region of Veracruz and Tabasco, along



The Great City of Tenochtitlán, 1945, by Diego Rivera. Photo by Mac Chapin

the eastern coast of the country. Derived from the Nahuatl word *chinamitl*,¹ which literally means “enclosure of cane,” chinampa agriculture involves the construction of raised farming beds in shallow lakes or marshes. Perfected by the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico prior to the Spanish Conquest, chinampas had nearly vanished except in a few isolated and shrinking areas around Mexico City, the best known of them being Xochimilco’s “floating gardens” that, of course, do not float.

CHINAMPAS AND THE VALLEY OF MEXICO

When the Spaniards descended into the Valley of Mexico in 1519, they viewed spread out before them the lacustrine heartland of the magnificent Mexica (Aztec) empire. The scene filled the invading force with awe. “And when we saw all those cities and villages built in the water,” writes Bernal Díaz del Castillo, a 27-year-old member of the expedition, “and other great towns on dry land, and that straight and level causeway leading to Mexico, we were astounded. . . . Indeed, some of our sol-

diers asked whether it was not all a dream.”

The capital city of Tenochtitlán-Tlatelolco, containing an estimated population of between 100,000 and 300,000 people spread out around the imposing array of pyramids and temples clustered at its center, occupied an island at the southern end of Lake Texcoco. The city’s packed markets, replete with a staggering variety of produce streaming endlessly in by canoe along a latticework of canals, reminded the Spaniards of Venice. In fact, however, it was not the canals but the island itself that was manmade. Tenochtitlán and its sister city Tlatelolco were nothing more than a huge aggregate chinampa. Since its founding in 1325, the island-city had gradually grown as urban sprawl crept over older farming plots, which were simply built anew on the ever-expanding periphery. Further to the south, in the swampy Xochimilco-Chalco Basin, was an even greater concentration of chinampas, covering an estimated 120 square kilometers of terrain.

New chinampa beds were, and still are today, built of alternating layers of aquatic weeds, bottom muck, and earth packed inside rectangular cane frames

firmly rooted to the lake floor. The “artificial islands” thus formed varied in size, ranging from 30 to 100 meters in length and 3 to 8 meters in width. *Ahuejote* trees (a type of willow) were planted along the banks of new chinampas to provide shade, while their roots formed living fences that anchored the beds more securely to the lake bottom. The narrowness of the beds assured that the water in the surrounding canals filtered evenly through the plots at root level. Soil fertility was maintained through regular applications of swamp muck, aquatic plants, and manure. Canals one-meter to three-meters wide separated the chinampas, forming a network of islands reachable only by water.

In a very real sense, chinampa agriculture has represented a self-contained and self-sustaining system that has operated for centuries as one of the most intensive and productive ever devised by man. Until the last several decades, it demanded no significant capital inputs yet maintained extraordinarily high yields year after year. A wide variety of crops, ranging from staples such as corn and beans to vegetables and flowers for the market, were mixed with an array of

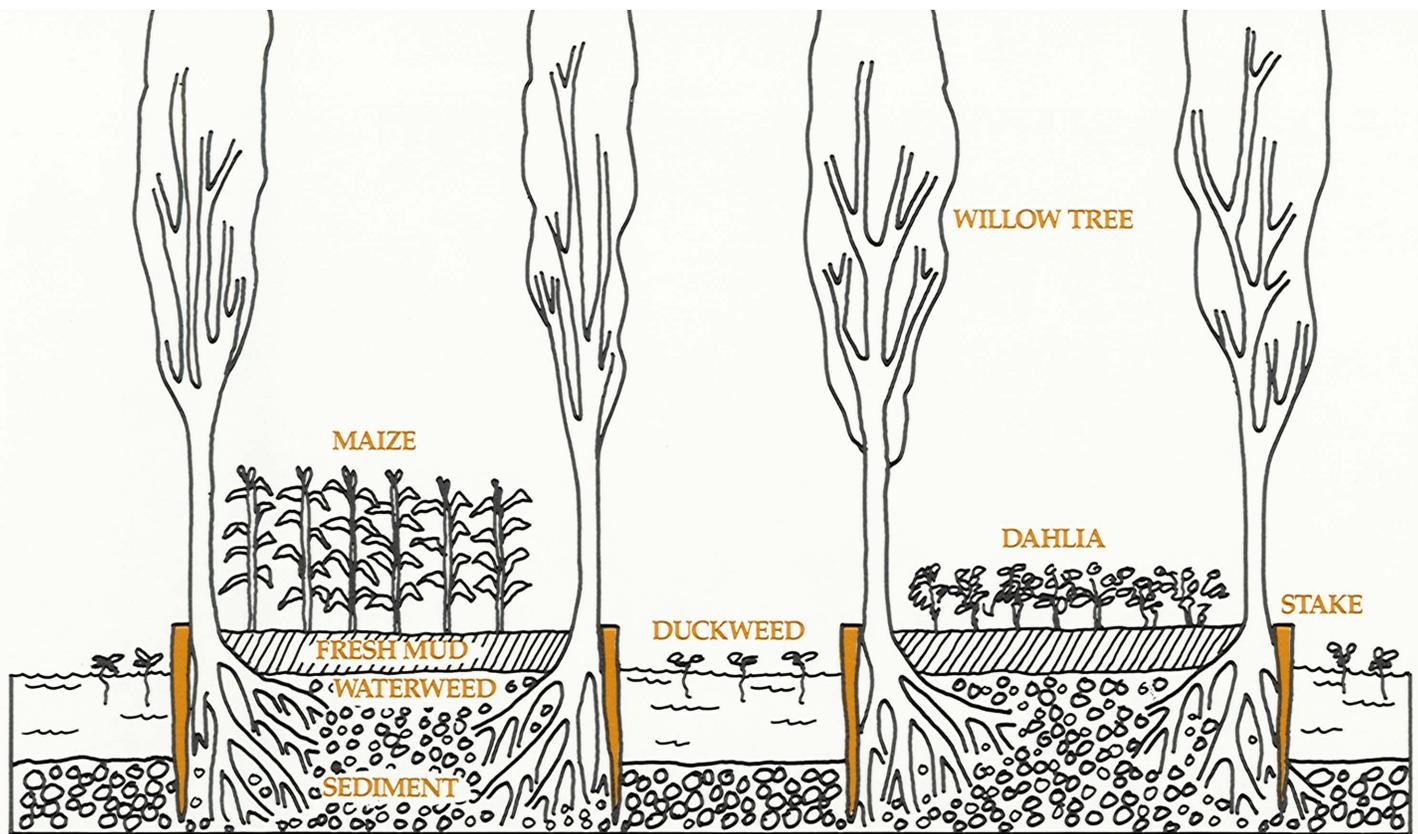


Diagram shows how traditional chinampa beds are built of alternating layers of aquatic weeds, bottom-muck, and earth packed inside rectangular cane frames firmly rooted to the floor of a lake or marsh. Ahuejote trees, a type of willow, are planted along the banks of new chinampas to provide shade, while their roots anchor the beds more securely to the bottom.

fruit from small trees and bushes. Abundant aquatic life such as fish, salamanders, frogs, turtles, and all manner of fowl provided valuable sources of protein for the local diet.

The system is, however, labor intensive. Even today, the primary agricultural tool remains the digging stick; and until recently, no chemical fertilizers, insecticides, or fungicides have been used. The farming plots, which ideally yield as many as four harvests a year, need constant tending. A variety of crops are perpetually in rotation, and the interconnecting waterways must be kept clear of silt and weeds.

During the 15th century, the Mexica empire could marshal all the labor it needed. A 15-kilometer causeway had been built by huge work teams to protect the chinampa beds in the southern half of the Valley from heavy concentrations of salt at the northern end of Lake Texcoco. When the empire fell to the conquistadors, the chinampa system was mortally wounded. The indigenous people of the Valley were hit broadside by diseases against which they had no resistance, and their numbers plummeted from an estimated 1.5 million people to as few as 70,000 by the end of the 17th century. Most chinampas were abandoned and neglected, and the

Spaniards, having neither experience nor interest in swampland agriculture, drained large portions of the Valley's lake system to make way for livestock herds and the plow. Gradually, most of the chinampa areas became landlocked and unserviceable.

By the first decades of this century, Lake Xochimilco had shrunk to one-quarter of its former size. In fact, the lake and its chinampas had survived only because numerous natural springs provided a continuous flow of fresh water. Up until 1900, a canal connected the chinampa farms directly with Mexico City's central market. Further draining dried the canal, and it was replaced by an asphalt road, forcing the local farmers, or *chinamperos*, to deal with market middlemen. But even with these changes, Xochimilco's "floating gardens" continued to be the major source of vegetables and flowers for the capital city.

The special flavor of the site in the 1930s was nicely captured by the German geographer Elisabeth Schilling, who wrote:

The artificial islands or chinampas are used for the intensive cultivation of vegetables and flowers that grow splendidly in the favorable climatic conditions of Xochimilco. As one

leaves the village behind, going into the intricate network of canals, the huts made of grass and cane decrease in number. . . For a while an occasional bridge appears, afterwards all that remain are tall willows along the edges of the beds, and beneath their shade, fields of vegetables and flowers. One is able to paddle for hours between islands planted with cabbages, spinach, lettuce, cucumbers, celery, jitomates, peas, corn, and onions; or with lilies, carnations, poppies, tulips, forget-me-nots, alcatraces, nardos, chrysanthemums, pansies, and daisies. During the season when the nardos and carnations are in flower, the landscape is especially beautiful and the senses are hit with an intoxicating perfume.²

In recent years, however, the chinampas have been steadily constricted as Mexico City has extended out and swallowed Xochimilco. The fresh-water springs that once fed the canals have been diverted for urban use, and more than two-thirds of the beds farmed in the 1930s have dried up and been covered over with houses and streets. The chinampas that remain are fertilized with low-grade sewage; and many of the canals have become stagnant and contaminated with garbage, domestic waste runoff, and increasingly, the insecticides and chemical fertilizers that chinamperos are using to raise new and

“improved” plant varieties. The fauna once so abundant in the area has vanished; the willows are dying off; and if the present trend continues, the livelihood of the chinamperos will soon follow suit.

TRANSPLANTING CHINAMPAS

It is not only the chinamperos who have been suffering in rural Mexico. During the 1970s, the entire agricultural sector began plunging into acute crisis. The country rapidly lost its productive self-sufficiency and became heavily dependent upon imported grains to satisfy basic food needs. The Green Revolution had brought forth new strains of high-yield and drought-resistant crops, and helped to extend the agricultural frontier into regions that had formerly been wilderness. But at the same time, scientists at INIREB saw that this process encouraged the accelerating concentration of land into large holdings farmed with modern, capital-intensive techniques. These operations required sophisticated farm machinery; heavy inputs of chemical fertilizers, insecticides, and herbicides; and infrastructure for storing and transporting produce. Several interlocking trends converged, driving the rural sector into a downward spiral: Peasant farmers, lacking capital, were virtually excluded from the benefits of the new technologies; biological diversity declined as new regions were opened up for monocropping; contamination with agrochemicals became widespread; and soil fertility dropped as erosion took a heavy toll. At the same time, cattle ranching was booming — expanding at a rate of almost 1,000 percent between 1960 and 1976.

Peasant farmers, increasingly feeling the pinch for land, became the objects of heavily financed colonization projects in the southern states of Veracruz, Tabasco, and Chiapas. However, the fragile tropical soils of these regions, when worked by traditional slash-and-burn farming methods, degenerated rapidly. Within a short time, production of food staples

had declined precipitously, and more than half the land was converted into cattle pasture.

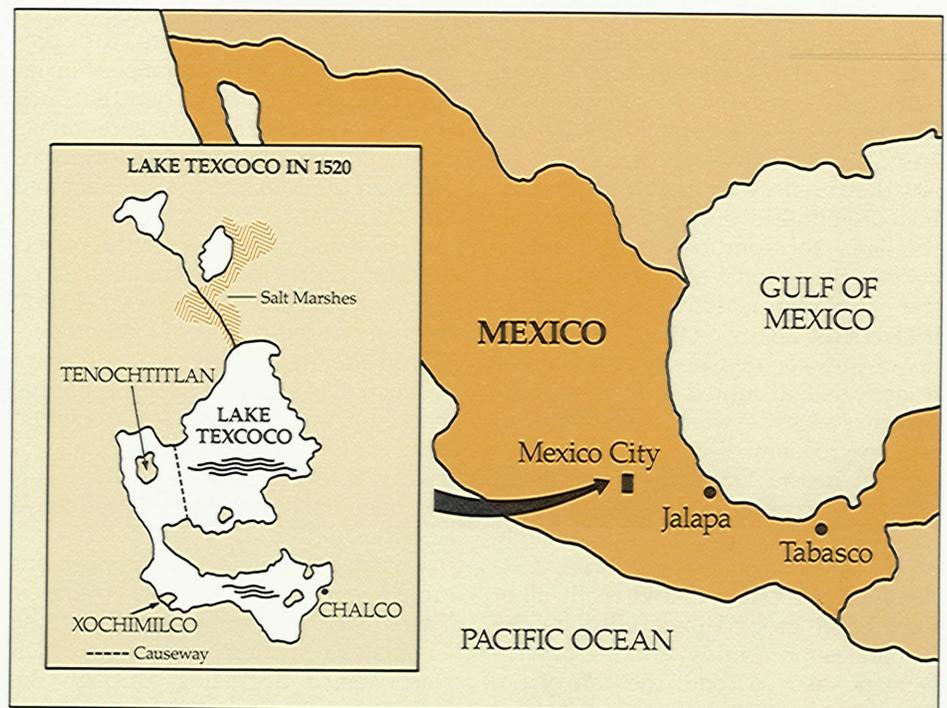
At this crucial juncture, the INIREB scientists actively began to search for alternatives. The institute’s central office is in Xalapa, Veracruz, and INIREB focused its attention on the humid tropical lowlands of this southeastern coastal state. Interestingly, the search for potential solutions for this impoverished yet water-rich region led back to the nation’s heartland.

The once-flourishing chinampa system in the Valley of Mexico was literally drying up, but the model remained intact and seemed to fit the bill perfectly. It promoted biological diversity, thrived without chemical inputs, and maintained high year-round crop yields. This was no abstract conceptual theory that required exhaustive testing, but a living, functional system that had proved it could work. And beyond this, it had a romantic patina about it: In the

mid-1970s, it was announced as “an old answer to the future,” a phrase consciously used to suggest revitalization of a remnant of the glorious Mexica past.

Earlier this year I visited four chinampa projects in Veracruz and Tabasco as part of an IAF-sponsored assessment of ecodevelopment projects among peasant farmers in Mexico, and I discussed chinampas in other areas with scientists and technicians involved in agroecology. Ten years had passed since the idea of transplanting this pre-Hispanic technology from the high altitudes (2,250 meters above sea level) of the Valley of Mexico to the coastal marshes of the Southeast had been put into action. Given the currently intense interest in ecologically sound agricultural technologies, it seemed time for a closer look at how things were going. What follows are brief case histories tracing the evolution of two chinampa projects, one in Tabasco, the other in Veracruz.

Sites of contemporary chinampa projects in the humid tropical lowlands on Mexico’s southeastern coast. This self-sustaining agricultural technology was perfected by the inhabitants of the Valley of Mexico prior to the Spanish Conquest. Inset shows Lake Texcoco — where chinampa agriculture was perfected — as it was in 1520.



Map by Mary Ann Wojtechowski

THE CHONTAL "RAISED BEDS" OF TABASCO

In 1976, INIREB selected Tabasco as the site for the first chinampa experiments in the lowland tropics. The area was perceived as ideal for several reasons. First, INIREB's central office was located nearby in the contiguous state of

restricted areas where a handful of Chontales grow subsistence crops on tiny parcels of land, but the bulk of their livelihood comes from wage labor, primarily in oil-rich Villahermosa.

In 1978, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI) — Mexico's official arm of assistance to its Indian peoples — joined with the state government of Tabasco to begin construction of a series of large

subsistence crops. There was a plan, modeled on Xochimilco's relationship to the markets of Mexico City, to create a vegetable production center for nearby Villahermosa. The project was supposed to strengthen the ethnic identity of the Chontales by returning them to what were imagined to be their pre-Hispanic roots. And finally, it was viewed as a pioneering scientific venture, an experiment to reclaim agricultural land in marshy areas, through the resurrection of chinampa technology. What is significant about the stated and unstated objectives is that neither set grew spontaneously out of the Chontal community.

One of the principal sites for the new project was Tucta, a Chontal village of approximately 300 families, located half an hour by car from Villahermosa. The hamlet sits on the edge of a huge open-water swamp and is boxed off on the landward side by cattle ranches owned by non-Indians. Before the project began, only 10 percent of village families were actively farming plots, which ranged from one-fifth to one-half hectare in size.

The introduction of chinampa technology here began on a grand scale. To speed up the traditional mode of construction through hand labor and the meticulous layering of organic matter and mud, INI brought in huge aquatic dredges. They clawed up mud from the swamp bottom and heaped it in piles measuring roughly 30 meters across and from 100 to 300 meters in length. The 65 raised strips of land that resulted were enormous, but the natural order of mud within them was inverted. Organic material was not integrated into the beds, and the richest soil was placed on the bottom, leaving the surface covered with sterile clay that hardened like cement when exposed to the air. Although the beds looked like chinampas, they lacked the fertility and porosity to function as chinampas. At the same time, the irregular gouging action of the dredges had left the surrounding canals with a pitted bottom ranging from one meter to five meters in depth. This made it virtually impossible for the Chontales

Despite all of the technical expertise poured into the project, no one had researched the market situation, and no arrangements had been made for transporting and selling the highly perishable produce.

Veracruz, facilitating logistical support and monitoring of experiments. Second, Tabasco is literally covered with shallow swamps, an environment that seemed ideal for chinampas. And third, a recent series of massive draining projects to convert large areas of marsh into farmland for peasants had badly misfired, creating widespread disillusionment.

The most ambitious project to transplant chinampas took place among the Chontal Indians, who reside in several small villages a few kilometers from Villahermosa, the capital city of Tabasco. Uncomfortable living conditions and the absence of agricultural potential had discouraged outside settlement in the area for centuries, and through colonial times and well into this century, the population was sparse and largely indigenous. Living on the outer periphery of Mexico, the Chontales had traditionally fished, hunted, and farmed over wide expanses of swamp and dryland in relative freedom.

Then in the 1950s, the government launched an ambitious project to drain large stretches of swampland for cattle ranching and dryland agriculture. Cattle ranches appropriated virtually all of the higher ground once used by the Chontales for farming, and the Indians were pushed out onto the rim of the swamp. At present, there are several

"raised agricultural beds," or *camellones*, in the swamps bordering the Chontal villages of Tucta, La Cruz, and Olcuatitán.³ The idea for the project was buttressed by two seemingly favorable precedents. Early reports were touting the success of an INIREB chinampa project in another part of the state, at a place called San Pedro Balancán. In addition, archaeologists had discovered the remains of what appeared to be pre-Hispanic raised agricultural beds in Tabasco, supporting the notion that such systems were ecologically appropriate. Heavy financial backing was forthcoming from the Mexican government and the World Bank.

INI's stated objectives for the project were to: (1) provide the landless Chontales with permanent employment; (2) bring about self-sufficient food production in the area; (3) ensure a constant production of vegetables for the internal market of Villahermosa; (4) strengthen indigenous cultural identity; and (5) develop a real alternative for the incorporation of swampland into productive activities.

Unstated agendas and suppositions lurked beneath each of these objectives. There was an attempt to divert the Chontales away from wage labor, which was deemed degrading, through the intensive cultivation of both cash and



Kip Ross © 1961 National Geographic Society

1961 photo of barges filled with Sunday visitors in Xochimilco, Mexico City's famed "floating gardens." The gardens, still a popular recreation spot, are the remnants of a vast system of chinampas, estimated to have covered some 120 square kilometers of the Xochimilco-Chalco Basin in the 16th century.

to use dragnets for fishing around the beds.

Compounding these difficulties, INI decided to organize the Chontales into collective work teams. According to INIREB technicians, who were brought into the project at a later stage, this particular form of organization was entirely foreign to the people of Tucta. The initial project managers apparently rationalized the decision in two ways. First, pre-Hispanic Indians were believed to have worked communally, making this the most appropriate form of labor for implementing a pre-Hispanic technology; and second, it would foster social solidarity among the Chontales. During the first season, participants were paid daily wages for their work from a fund controlled by INI; the actual rewards for working communally would be distributed only after the harvest was in and the cost of advanced wages had been deducted from profits.

Technical assistance and capital subsidies were heavy during the first year. Collaborating institutions introduced

massive amounts of organic matter and fertilizers into the dense clay beds to improve the quality of the soils. Technicians worked closely with the Chontales to teach them how to grow a series of vegetables that were largely exotic to the region and totally exotic to the Chontales. Actually growing the vegetables meant that everyone involved had to overcome new and difficult challenges. Chinamperos brought in from the Valley of Mexico as advisors were unfamiliar with the volume and variety of insects they encountered in sweltering Tabasco, and were forced to resort to large quantities of chemical insecticides. The growing seasons for specific crops were also different from those in the Valley of Mexico, and adjustments had to be made. Although the farmers reportedly continued to chafe under the unfamiliar practice of working in teams, the payment of wages helped mitigate the snags and confusions, and by all accounts, the first harvest was reasonably good.

But the real problems, according to

people initially involved with the project, started when the vegetables began to ripen. Despite all of the technical expertise poured into the project, no one had researched the market situation, and no arrangements had been made for transporting and selling the highly perishable produce. With crops rotting in the resulting disarray, wholesale buyers from Villahermosa appeared on the scene and purchased whatever they wanted at cut-rate prices. The first harvest yielded an economic shambles. Disputes were soon erupting over cash and labor arrangements among program beneficiaries, and the Chontales rapidly lost interest in trying to grow garden vegetables for the urban population of Villahermosa.

Several efforts were made to retool the project. One of the chief complaints of the Chontales had to do, ironically, with one of the few ways the raised beds truly resembled chinampas. Isolated from each other by water, the beds were difficult to reach from the village. This defect was corrected by adding a strip of

land at one end that linked the beds together in the form of a comb. The plots became readily accessible by foot, but unfortunately, the new structure cut off the natural flow of water through the canals, reducing the accumulation of silt and weeds needed to fertilize the gardens.

The project continued its slide into disorder until INIREB, which began to provide technical assistance in the early 1980s, started listening to the Chontales. Communal labor was abandoned, and the 65 raised beds were divided among individual families to conform with traditional arrangements. Intensive vegetable gardening was discontinued; according to one of the INIREB technicians now working with the Chontales, even today "when somebody mentions the word 'vegetables,' the villagers' hair stands on end." Most families grow subsistence crops such as corn, beans, and bananas, together with some fruit trees. These crops are not labor or capital intensive, and can be tended while the Chontales pursue wage labor in Villahermosa — a secure source of family income. Bit by bit, some of the more enterprising farmers are moving, cautiously and on a small scale, back into cash crops.

THE CHINAMPAS OF EL CASTILLO

In 1979, INIREB became involved in another chinampa project in the *ejido* of El Castillo, in the state of Veracruz. El Castillo is a community of approximately 100 peasant families in a region dominated by undulating hills of coffee plantations. The site includes a lake with several marshy inlets that had been formed by a dam built in the 1960s.

It is clear that El Castillo was selected as an experimental project site because of the lake, as well as the village's proximity to INIREB's central office in Xalapa, rather than community interest in chinampas. When INIREB presented its proposal during a town meeting, the only person to step forward was a teenager named Imeldo Mendez Carmona who owned property that fortuitously included one of the inlets of the lake. Imeldo took several technical courses at INIREB headquarters, and plans were made to build chinampas as part of a model integrated farm, or *granja integrada*, on his land. The Inter-American Foundation, along with several other international donors, enthusiastically funded the program.

The larger "integrated" operation included pig and chicken raising, fish culture, and a biogas machine, but the chinampa system clearly constituted the showpiece. The proposal was a unique attempt to blend modern and pre-Hispanic technology, and enthusiasm among INIREB technicians and participating students ran high. Under the technical direction of a chinampero from the Valley of Mexico, four chinampa beds were built — each measuring thirty by eight meters, with three-meter-wide canals in between. Ahuejote trees were planted along the borders of the beds to form living fences. Most of the physical labor was supplied by hired peasant laborers and by students complying with thesis requirements at the Technical Agricultural School of Veracruz, located in Xalapa.

Construction was completed toward the end of 1980, and by March of the following year the farm was operating full swing. In the words of one technician, the project had been designed to create "an emporium in the jungle," a highly productive, intensively worked vegetable garden. Despite early difficulties — the growing seasons did not match those of the Valley of Mexico, and insects descended in legion — the crew forged ahead. Imeldo and four companions, assisted by INIREB technicians and the students, grew an impressive crop of cabbages, carrots, peppers, tomatoes, beans, Swiss chard, and coriander.

As among the Chontales, the workers were paid wages or otherwise recompensed for their labors. However another, more disturbing similarity to the Chontal project soon materialized. No one had thought about marketing harvested produce, even though INIREB had an economist on the project team.

Aerial view of camellones, or artificially raised agricultural beds, constructed in Tabasco. Although the beds look like chinampas, they lack the fertility and porosity to function as chinampas.



Courtesy World Resources Institute

Confusion followed as INIREB technicians attempted, *ad hoc*, to make last-minute contacts with restaurants and wholesalers in Xalapa. Because local demand was minimal and production was irregular, most of the produce was either sold for next to nothing at the farm, fed to the pigs, or left to rot in the field.

As all of this was happening, Imeldo drowned while swimming in the lake. Three of the villagers working on the project deserted, and Imeldo's brother was left to continue on his own, with assistance from hired workers paid by INIREB. A short time later, INIREB pulled out entirely. The salary of the last peon discontinued, the free truckloads of manure stopped arriving, the technicians and the students vanished, and the farm was abandoned.

In June of 1987, I stood with two INIREB technicians on the dirt road overlooking the remains of the farm. It is set in a bullrush-clotted corner of El Castillo's lake, on the lip of a small valley that meanders out of adjoining coffee plantations. Before us were the cracked cement walls of an abandoned biogas tank and a pig pen with a collapsed, tarpaper roof. Beyond these were four indistinct, rectangular plots of grassland extending out into the bullrushes. Ten-meter-high ahuejotes stood in uneven lines along the beds, and the canals separating the beds were clogged with aquatic weeds. A horse grazed on grass near the edge of two small, overgrown fish ponds lying perpendicular to the beds. This was all that remained of El Castillo's pre-Hispanic emporium in the swamp.

THE MYTH LIVES ON

The difficulties encountered in El Castillo and among the Chontales are not exceptions: Nowhere in the country has the transfer of chinampa technology from the Valley of Mexico to the humid lowlands been successful. What, then, is to be concluded from this experience? And what can be said about the future of chinampa agriculture as an agroeco-

logical model appropriate for poor farmers in Latin America?

Although the examples of chinampa technology transfer presented in this article had different outcomes, they shared several crucial defects. In both cases, the stated and unstated objectives of project managers had little fit with the interests and needs of the farmers. The two projects were designed and implemented by outside technicians without significant local participation, and both rapidly fell to pieces when "beneficiaries" failed to cooperate. In both cases, the technicians were preoccupied with

intensive chinampa gardening were present. The lake was too deep for chinampa construction beyond a few marshy inlets, making significant expansion virtually impossible. Vegetable gardening could not compete as a cash crop with coffee growing, a traditional activity that has low risks, comparatively minimal labor requirements (except during the harvest season), well-established market channels, and relatively high and stable prices. The abundance of land already available for subsistence crops meant that there was no need to build chinampas for that

Technicians overlooked the wider social, economic, and political context in which the farmers lived, and therefore had no notion of how their model might adapt within that context.

the narrow technical task of implanting an agroecological model. They overlooked the wider social, economic, and political context in which the farmers lived, and therefore had no notion of how their model might adapt within that context.

Among the Chontales, this situation might have been avoided if representatives from the various participating agencies had simply listened to the villagers, discovered their needs, and given them an opportunity to participate in the decisions and actions being taken. In the case of El Castillo, it is probably safe to say that the lack of local interest from the outset meant the project would never have worked, least of all as a "community" endeavor.

It might be argued that if Imeldo had lived and the various technical and economic wrinkles had been ironed out, the chinampa beds at El Castillo not only would still be functioning, but would have also served to promote the technology among other farmers in the region. However, closer examination shows this outcome to be unlikely. Too few of the necessary conditions for

purpose either. The project at El Castillo failed completely, and little more than the lesson that community participation is essential was salvaged. Too many hidden subsidies, coupled with an absence of controlled data, rendered it valueless even as a pilot experiment.

The Chontal case is notable because, after a series of failures, it finally worked — but only after INIREB technicians broke free from preconceived programs and began listening to the Chontales. When this occurred, the project fell in line with Chontal interests and achieved harmony with local social and economic structures, as well as Tabasco's physical environment. Collective labor was stopped, and the beds were divided up among individual families — an arrangement that, incidentally, obtains in the Valley of Mexico today and was also the prevalent form of labor organization on chinampas prior to the Spanish Conquest. Subsistence crops with low labor demands took the place of exotic, intensively farmed vegetables, which solved two problems simultaneously. First, since traditional crops have much greater resistance to disease and insects

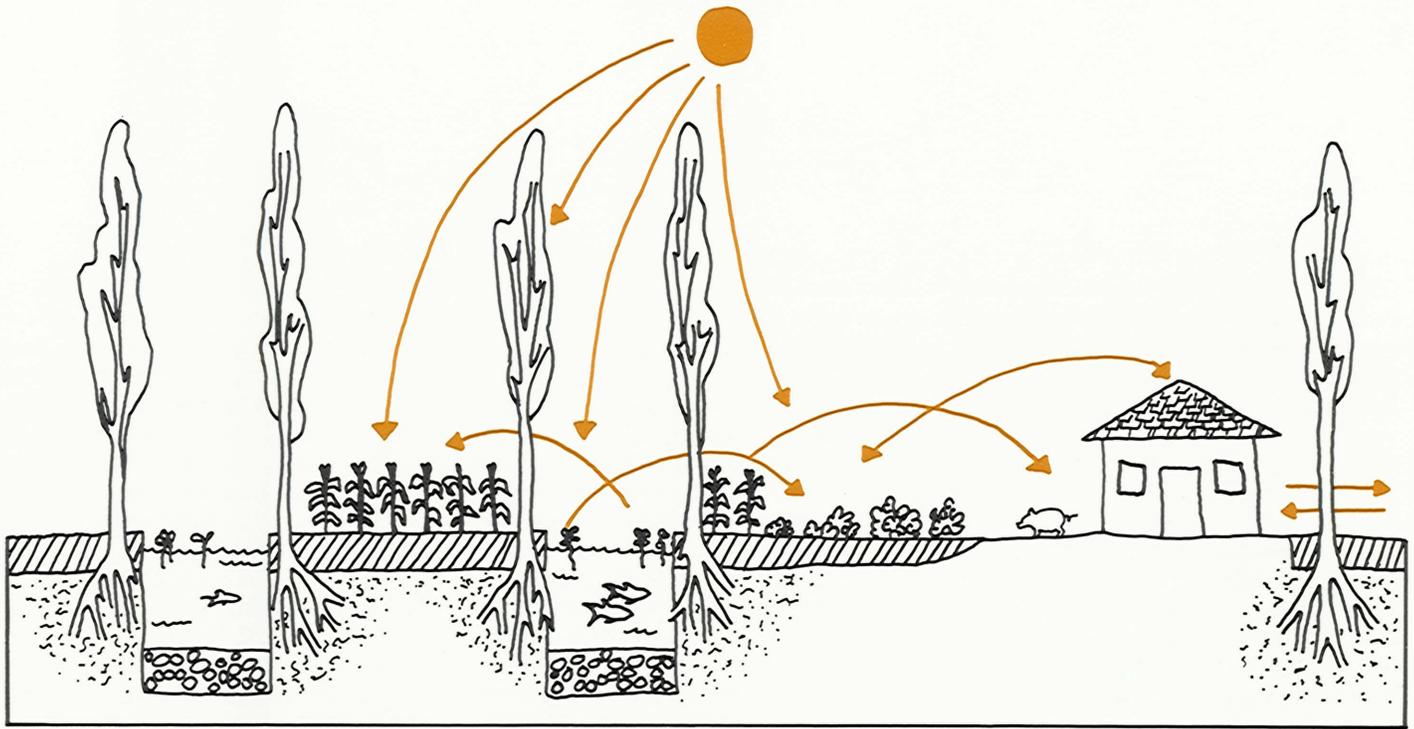


Diagram of model farm, or granja integrada, such as the one built at El Castillo. The operation included pig and chicken raising, fish culture, and a biogas machine, but the chinampa system constituted the showpiece of the project — an attempt to blend modern and pre-Hispanic technology.

than newly introduced vegetables, they require fewer chemical controls. Second, the Chontales are now free to carry on their former wage labor pursuits, and they have additional land on which to grow more of their own food.

Despite the favorable outcome, it should be noted that the Chontal project does not constitute much of a model for application in other regions. First, the cost of the construction alone — not to mention additional expenses for subsequent work to restore the integrity of the soils and for massive technical assistance — was monumental, especially when one realizes that a mere 65 families benefited. Second, the raised beds are not really chinampas. They lack the intricate layering of organic matter and swamp muck that gives traditional chinampas their fertility, and the porosity for water to filter through the beds at root level. While the chinampa model involves basic symbiotic relationships among a series of elements, the Chontal beds accommodate fairly straightforward subsistence farming. They contain no great diversity of interrelated cultigens; animals such as pigs and chickens, where present, wander about more or less at random or are kept in pens as part of INIREB experiments; fishing is still done in much the same way that prevailed before the arrival of

the raised beds; there is no systematic routine of dredging aquatic weeds and muck from the canals to fertilize the plots; and the bulk of the soil restoration work thus far has been provided by government institutions. In other words, any correspondence between chinampa agriculture — as an ideal construct — and the raised beds of the Chontales of Tabasco is minimal.

I recently spoke to a biologist about the failure of attempts to apply the chinampa system, and after expressing his disappointment, he added, “but I still think the model is valid.” Perhaps, but one must also question the utility of a conceptual model that has so eluded successful application in real life. Since the first chinampas were proposed in the mid-1970s, they have yet to find a comfortable niche among peasant farmers struggling to adapt their daily routines to the complex modern world. Why, quite simply, has it been so difficult to move the conceptual model from the scientist’s head to the peasant’s field?

In pre-Hispanic times, the chinampa system thrived in the Valley of Mexico because the social, political, economic, and environmental circumstances were favorable. In other words, the total ecological context — including the dynamics of human society as well as that of “nature” — was right. Where there were

problems with salinity and periodic flooding, the Mexica state sponsored construction of hydraulic infrastructure in the form of causeways, dikes, dams, and channels for diverting spring water. The dense population of the region, the propitious climatic conditions, the shallowness of the lakes, the existence of a totalitarian state with tight harness over its subjects — all of these shaped the environment in which the chinampa system evolved. It was not an imported model. It developed naturally over a period of centuries as an adaptive response by the people of the Valley of Mexico to meet their particular needs, reaching its apex at the time of the Spanish Conquest.

Although the chinampa system has survived into the 20th century, it has done so only as a threadbare remnant. In its final foothold in the highlands, conditions are becoming so overwhelmingly adverse that the model will soon exist only in history books. Attempts to transplant this moribund technology to other regions have failed because the necessary conditions for success have not been found there. Perhaps they no longer exist, and the time of the chinampa — like that of the steam engine — has passed. It is very possible that in contemporary Mexico the chinampa model can never function as

much more than a small-scale scientific sideshow kept afloat by heavy subsidies — a characterization expressed to me on numerous occasions by both peasants and technicians.

Yet the myth lives on in the literature with remarkable vigor. Articles center-folding the chinampa system as a viable alternative continue to appear with regularity in magazines and journals such as *Ambio*, *The Ecologist*, and *Discover*, as well as in books and monographs. The authors of an article published in 1986 in the *World Resources Institute Journal* proclaimed that the modern application of chinampa technology in Tabasco and Veracruz has been "... a concrete success ... one of the most novel advances in agriculture for tropical humid lands throughout the world." And the following glowing description of an unspecified "project" involving chinampas in Tabasco is taken from an otherwise excellent survey of agroecology published as recently as June 1987:

... researchers have designed and installed production units based in part on indigenous polyculture and in part on the application of ecological knowledge. ... each production unit consists of a forest shelter belt, a water-storage tank or reservoir, raised-earth areas for vegetable production, and areas for growing staple annual crops and fruits. In the reservoirs, fish and ducks are raised. Reservoir sediments and aquatic plants are used as fertilizer for crops and to construct chinampas. ... Organic matter from the reservoirs and manure from pigs, chickens, and ducks (fed excess or spoiled produce) enrich the soil of the chinampas continually. ... Traditional mixtures of crops, primarily vegetables, are cultivated intensively. With this broad array of species, some food is always available for harvest, every usable patch of ground is covered by plants, and light is more completely utilized. ... Pest management in these production units requires no commercial chemical pesticides. The forest shelter belts probably act as reserves for numerous predators and parasite insect pests, and the high structural and species diversity of the cropping system also favors these beneficial organisms. ... In short, [the Tabasco project] shows that ecological principles and practical knowledge can

be successfully combined to create self-renewing agricultural production systems.⁴

Several things are interesting about this idyllic picture of agroecological harmony. First, it is presented as a system actually being practiced by Tabascan peasants. The fact of the matter is that there never has been a single project like this, either in Tabasco or anywhere else. The description quoted above was drawn from an earlier article — published in 1981, in the Dutch journal *Agro-Ecosystems*⁵ — which was intended to be essentially theoretical. It was a thickly textured composite of features from several sites, including experimental plots, that were interwoven with a series of imagined elements from an ideal system. Although not stated explicitly in the article, according to principal author S.R. Gliessman, the purpose was to present "a variety of ecological concepts" that might be combined into an alternative production system for peasants.

What has happened here is that the chinampa model, after years of promotion in journals and through word of mouth, has managed to break free from the constraining grip of the tangible world to take on a life of its own. The curious thing about the "Tabascan case" is not that it is an exception, but rather that confusions of this sort are common, even normal. They occur repeatedly and can be found occupying prominent places throughout development literature. This appears to be especially true in the subfield of ecodevelopment, perhaps because of the desperate urgency surrounding the search for valid models. All too often, this search has been hindered by the predisposition of both scientists and funders — in their scramble after strategies to stem destruction of the planet — to promote and support models before they have been tested in the field. And more specifically in the case of the chinampa phenomenon, considerable time and money are wasted when we become blinded by the beauty of a conceptual model and lose our bearings, mistaking it for reality itself. We end up seducing ourselves. ◇

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NOTES

1. Nahuatl was the predominant language of the Valley of Mexico at the time of the Spanish Conquest, and is still spoken widely by indigenous people throughout Central Mexico.
2. "Los Jardines Flotantes de Xochimilco," by Elisabeth Schilling, in *La Agricultura Chinampera*, edited by Teresa Rojas Rabiela, Colección Cuadernos Universitarios, Universidad Autónoma Chapingo, Mexico City, 1983, p. 74.
3. Most of the information in this section is based on lengthy discussions with INIREB technicians and farmers; a visit to the site; and an INIREB document, "Los Camellones Chontales," by Lilia Alemán Ramos, Justino Lobato Cárcamo, Pedro González Franco, and Olivier Pierard, INIREB/Tabasco, February 1987. This paper was presented at a symposium entitled "Prácticas Tradicionales y Manejo Integrado de Recursos," at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México in June 1987.
4. *To Feed the Earth: Agro-Ecology for Sustainable Development*, by Michael Dover and Lee M. Talbot, World Resources Institute, Washington, D.C., 1987, pp. 40-42.
5. "The Ecological Basis for the Application of Traditional Agricultural Technology in the Management of Tropical Agro-Ecosystems," by S.R. Gliessman, R. García E., and M. Amador A., in *Agro-Ecosystems 7*, Amsterdam, 1981, pp. 173-185.

THE CHILDREN OF SANCHEZ REVISITED

Louis Werner

Mexico City [AP] — Santos Hernández, patriarch of the family described in Oscar Lewis's best-selling *The Children of Sánchez*, died when he was struck by a car while on his way to work. He was thought to be almost 90.

—January 5, 1987

Caution! Traffic accidents can be avoided. Afterwards, nothing is the same.

— Road sign on Avenida Zaragoza on the way to Valle de Chalco

With the death last year of Santos Hernández, also known as Jesús Sánchez, a symbolic if not mythic figure in postwar Mexico has passed away. Born in a small village in the state of Veracruz in 1910 — the year that marked the beginning of the Mexican Revolution — it is not surprising that the press should barely notice his demise.

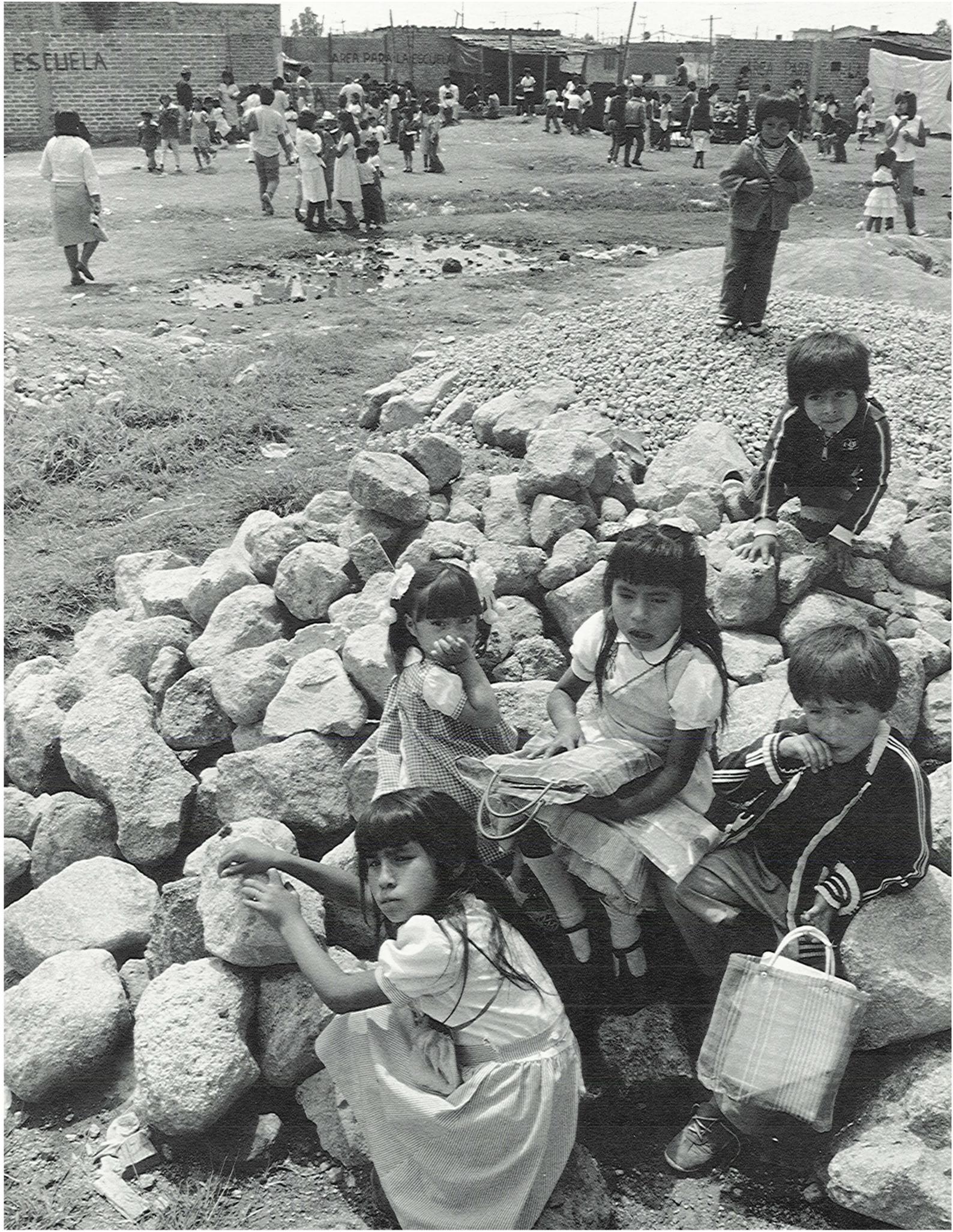
"Jesús was brought up in a Mexico without cars, movies, radios, or TV, without free universal education, without free elections, and without the hope of upward mobility and the possibility of getting rich quick," wrote Oscar Lewis in the introduction to *The Children of Sánchez*, published in 1961. "He was raised in the tradition of authoritarianism, with its emphasis upon knowing one's place, hard work, and self-abnegation."

For many in the United States, Oscar Lewis's story of the Sánchez family brought Mexico and the Mexican people vividly alive for the first time. Lewis's use of first-person oral histories to present a nonsentimentalized account of urban Mexican poverty was unprecedented in popular anthropological literature. Indeed, issues such as whether Lewis's portrayal of the Sánchez family was distorted by his perceptions as a white, middle-class, well-educated anthropologist are debated even today — several decades later. At the heart of that debate is Lewis's interpretation of what has become widely known as "the culture of poverty."

Based on interviews he conducted in the 1950s, Lewis concluded that the grinding poverty of the Sánchez family and of others like it — a daily reality for people in what is now often called the "informal sector" — cannot be defined only as a state of economic deprivation, disorganization, or the lack of some specific thing. It is "positive in that it has a structure, a rationale, and a defense mechanism without which the poor could hardly carry on."

According to Lewis, the culture of poverty is a persistent condition, a remarkably stable way of life that is passed down from generation to generation along family lines. Unemployment and underemployment, low wages, unskilled occupations, child labor, absence of savings and shortage of cash, lack of food reserves,

Opposite: Children of Nueva Casa Blanca gather atop building materials that will one day be used to make their new school more secure. Such efforts at community organizing may be occurring more often in shantytowns surrounding Mexico City.



borrowing from local moneylenders at usurious rates of interest, and spontaneous informal credit devices all characterize this constant struggle for survival.

The question may be asked whether Jesús Sánchez, the passive paterfamilias living in a one-room inner city slum tenement, or *vecindad*, remains an archetypal figure in today's Mexico. Or does the current plethora of neighborhood organizations, particularly in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquake, signify a new era for the poor? This wave of grassroots activism contrasts strikingly with Lewis's description of the culture of poverty, which was typified by family insularity and a lack of trust in government officials and others in high places that extended even to the Church.

Indeed, if Lewis were alive to choose a family that epitomized Mexico City's poor today, he might not look again in the neighborhoods in the center of the city. The sociological phenomenon that would most likely capture his attention is not the migration from the countryside to the city proper, which typified the 1950s, but rather the massive growth of newly settled *colonias*, or shantytowns, at the margins of the city. Recent arrivals there are not absorbed into long-existing urban environments, but rather join the urbanization process from the very beginning, and thus directly influence — knowingly or not — the future of their community.

In the Valle de Chalco, beyond the eastern rim of the city between the colonial towns of Ayotla, Chalco, and Ixtapaluca, Lewis would find thousands of hectares of *ejido* land — the communal farmland held by the government and leased out to landless peasants after the Revolution. Technically, holders of *ejido* land, or *ejidatarios*, are prohibited from selling it, in part to protect the land from speculation and to preserve its agricultural capacity for future generations. In fact, however, thousands of hectares have been sold illegally, and these once-productive fields now support a population estimated to be in the hundreds of thousands.

Lewis would undoubtedly be surprised to find that many of the residents, or *colonos*, are newly arrived not from rural areas, as was Jesús Sánchez, but from the more urbanized areas of central Mexico City itself — most of them “rent fugitives” escaping inflationary housing costs. What might surprise him even more, however, is the degree of community activism found in at least one of Chalco's *colonias*. While the “Nueva Casa Blanca” (a pseudonym borrowed from the original Casa Blanca tenement brought to life in Lewis's book) chosen for this article is perhaps less typical than other settlements, it may be just slightly ahead of its time. The *colonos'* activism is expressed inwardly through a commitment to self-help solutions. It is expressed outwardly through well-organized pressure on state and municipal governments, exemplified by a recent demonstration at the state capital of Toluca when some 60 residents of Nueva Casa Blanca joined groups from other *colonias* to lobby for schools, electricity, a water system, and sewers.

“Many of the traits of the subculture of poverty can be viewed as attempts at local solutions for problems not met by existing institutions because people are not eligible for them, cannot afford them, or are suspicious of them.”

— Oscar Lewis, Introduction *The Children of Sánchez*

“Prompt payment for our teachers.”

“Fixed prices for a barrel of water.”

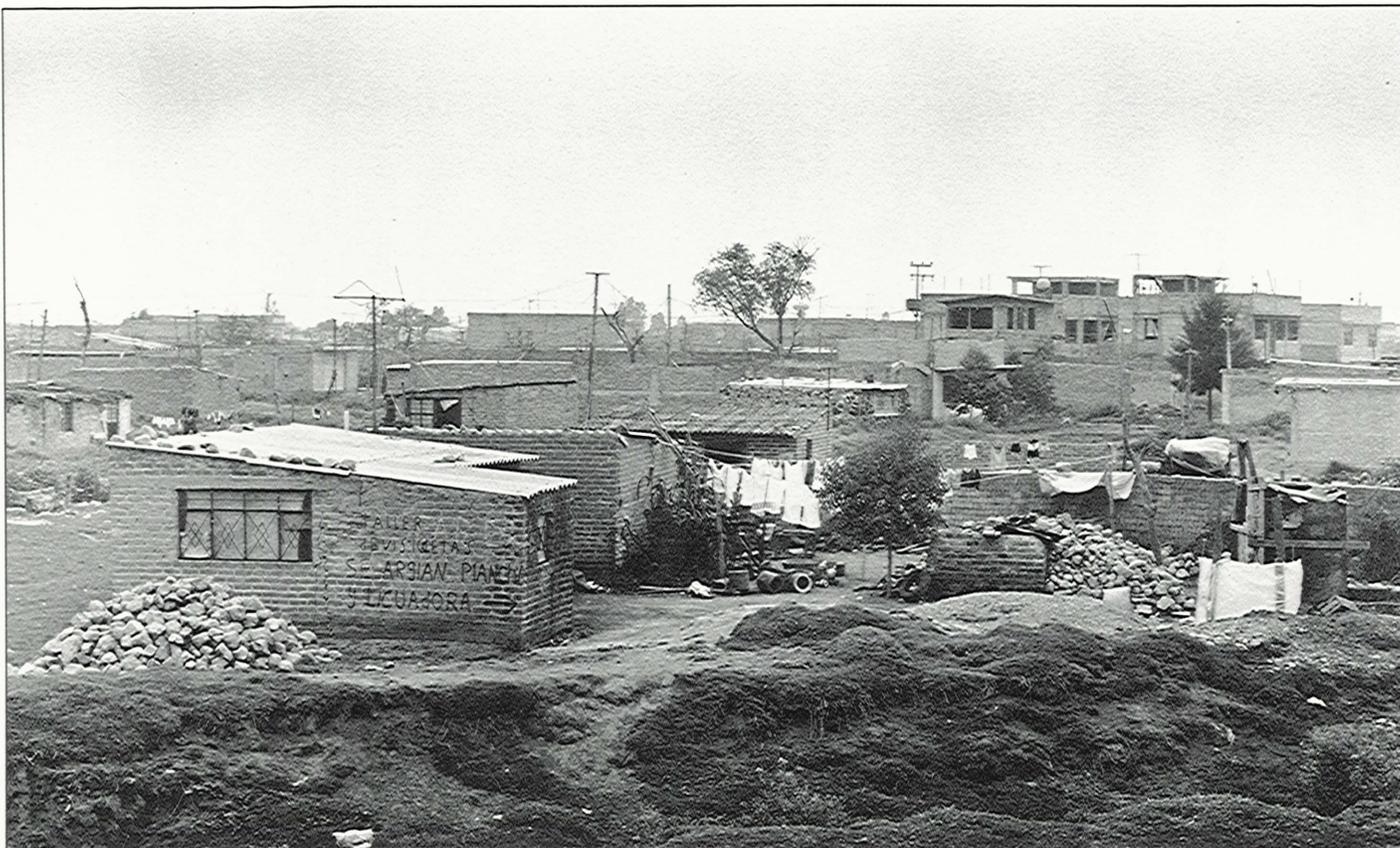
“Repair our streets.”

“Total electrification.”

“Valle del Chalco — an organized community. We want electricity, water, health posts, schools for our children. We call on competent authorities for help.”

— Signs carried by residents of Nueva Casa Blanca at Toluca demonstration, August 28, 1987

Nueva Casa Blanca has some 2,000 building lots. About half of them are occupied, most by unregistered owners who bought them directly from *ejidatarios* or speculators, but there are some renters as well. Where the colonia begins and others end is not immediately obvious, sandwiched as it is between several neighboring settlements. Only its northern boundary is distinctly marked — by a large sewage canal spanned by two rickety bridges.



View of Nueva Casa Blanca, a shantytown in the Valle de Chalco, just east of Mexico City. Lower housing costs have led the poor to migrate to colonias such as these rather than settle in inner city tenements as they did when Oscar Lewis researched the culture of poverty in the 1950s.

Like Jesús Sánchez's inner-city *vecindad*, Nueva Casa Blanca is a self-contained community. It has three pharmacies, where prices are generally twice those in the city proper; a dry goods store; a beauty school, which is now closed; and many walk-up windows in private homes where soft drinks, cigarettes, and other sundries are sold. In addition, there is a central market with one stand each for meat, produce, canned goods, and used records. And of greater significance to this article, the community also boasts a primary school currently under construction; a health clinic established by a private voluntary organization; and a market, or *centro popular de abasto*, sponsored by the Compañía Nacional de Subsistencias Populares (CONASUPO). This government-subsidized collective is locally managed and sells, among other things, discount tortilla coupons, called *tortibonos*.

"If there's no resolution, we'll strike."

"Let the commission find another solution."

"Don't let the commission adjourn without an answer."

— Chants at demonstration outside the Government Palace,
Toluca, August 28, 1987

Nueva Casa Blanca is now organizing itself around three issues of primary concern to the community: education, health care, and food prices. The leadership structure is still tentative, however, as shown by the colonos' emerging political vocabulary. Residents all share an intense distrust of those they call *líderes*, or self-appointed community organizers associated with outside professionals and representatives of political parties. At the same time, the colonos have an almost messianic belief in *dirigentes naturales*, or people who lead by example. As one resident explained, "A líder tells you what to think, while a dirigente natural acts according to the needs of the community, working for the common good."



Parents listen intently as the principal describes plans for the community's new school.

There is also a deep suspicion of official negotiations because private deals can be struck between so-called community representatives and the authorities. "Getting too close to officials in order to achieve your goals is dangerous," explained the manager of the CONASUPO store. "The government pulls at even the best *dirigentes naturales* and tries to corrupt them."

Distrust in private dialogue with authorities is so great that during the rally in Toluca, one of Nueva Casa Blanca's delegates would emerge at regular intervals throughout the meeting with the governor's secretary, to update the group outside. Despite this lack of faith in the likelihood of honest representation, however, a three-member CONASUPO committee does exist, and an eight-person school board was recently elected. But they always meet at public gatherings, never in private.

Although it is often difficult to establish the beginnings of "community," in Nueva Casa Blanca it seems that three apparently unrelated incidents provided impetus for the colonia's burgeoning public institutions—one a family tragedy, one a staple food shortage, and one a casual comment. The final push to build a local school came after a small girl drowned in the canal on her way to another school across the bridge. The CONASUPO store was started when the market in a neighboring colonia responded to a shortage of tortillas by deciding to stop selling tortibonos to customers from Nueva Casa Blanca. And finally, the health clinic was established after the executive director of the Fundación Mexicana para la Planeación Familiar (MEXFAM) mentioned to his field coordinator that Chalco's colonias might be suitable sites for the organization's innovative community-doctor homesteading program, which provides subsidies in the beginning but ultimately requires that financial responsibility be assumed by the local community.

Foreshadowing these three somewhat formal institutions, there are smaller, more subtle indications of neighbors talking and working together. Precursors are found in the committees, set up by families with hookups from the same lightpost, to maintain electrical transformers; in the truckloads of gravel brought in by the community to fill mud holes in the dirt streets; and in the system of launching skyrockets to warn others when a troublesome landlord appears. Despite the obvious benefits of such acts of solidarity, residents of Nueva Casa Blanca have also

learned that community activism can have bleak consequences for those who are not careful, as witnessed by the unresolved murder case that still hangs heavily over the colonia.

“He told me, ‘I’m not leaving you anything, but I’ll give you a piece of advice. Don’t get mixed up with friends. It’s better to go your own way alone.’ And that’s what I’ve done all my life.”

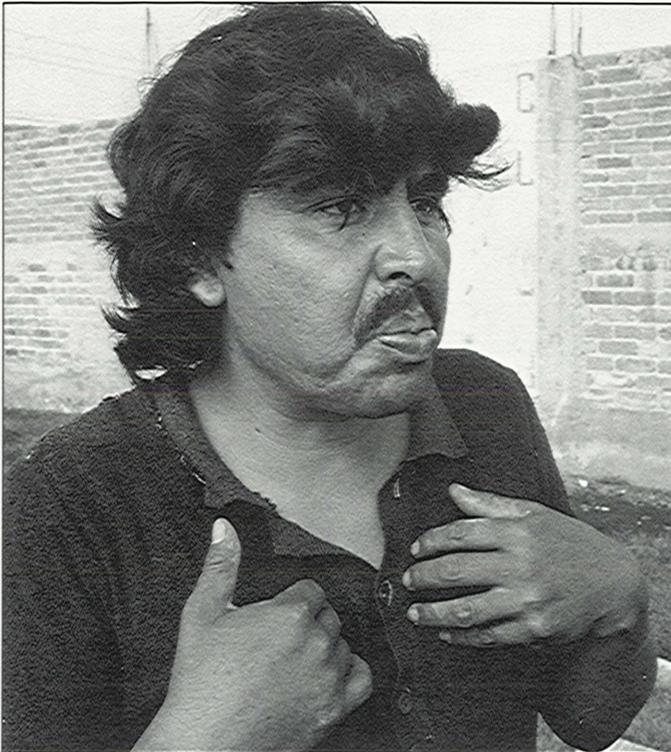
— Jesús Sánchez, speaking in the late 1950s about his father

“There are many dedicated people in the different colonias of Valle de Chalco who work for the common good. Their efforts to organize community residents are fraught with problems, however, because they encounter official resistance to, rather than support for, their labors.”

— Ramiro Díaz Valadez, from an article in *Uno Más Uno*, September 4, 1987

In September 1987, Macedonio Rosas Garrido, his wife Rita, and his sister Guadalupe spoke to me about Nueva Casa Blanca, their efforts on its behalf, and their feelings about its future. The testimonials of these contemporary “children of Sánchez,” which are patterned after Lewis’s original oral histories, are intended to be more symbolic than representative of new community initiatives among Mexico City’s lower class. The conversations, purposely directed toward the subjects covered, were transcribed from tape recordings and translated. The names of the family members, as well as the name of their colonia, have been changed.

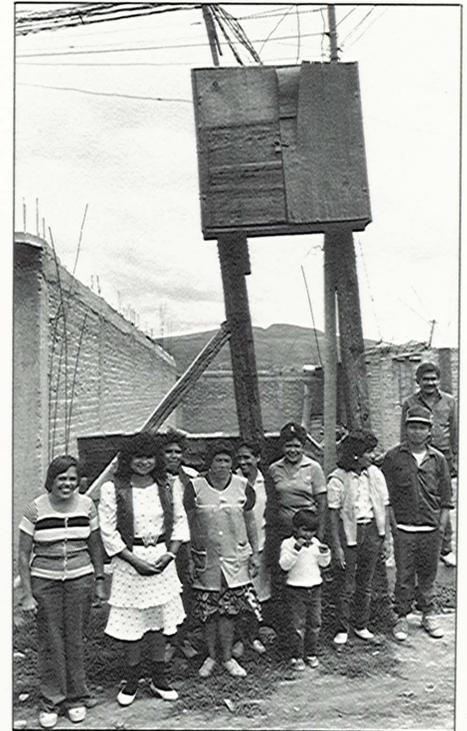
David Melody



“In Nueva Casa Blanca there aren’t any official organizers . . . any politics of any kind. It’s simply a battle we’re all fighting together — all the neighbors — for the benefit of the colonia.”

MACEDONIO ROSAS GARRIDO

I’m 33 years old and was born in Mexico City. I’ve got about 10 brothers and sisters living all over the city. One sister lives next to me here in Nueva Casa Blanca. My father died about 17 years ago, but my mother is still living in a little village called Tecama in the colonia 5 de Mayo. I’ve been married 11 years and have three children, two girls and a boy. I’m an eight-wheel truck driver, but it’s been more than a year since I had regular work.



Left: Illegally-tapped electrical wires crisscross the sky above Nueva Casa Blanca. Right: Residents pose in front of the transformer box they share with as many as 50 families, each family marking its own cable.

We ended up living here four years ago because we heard that the ejidatarios were selling land. We were interested because we were living in a tenement of about 10 families near San Andrés. The building didn't have a name: I think only the older and bigger tenements have names. We were renting there, and twice a year the owners would raise our rent. We started off paying 230 pesos a month and by the time we left, it was up to 1,500. So with a lot of sacrifice, we bought this lot here and built the house, little by little. The cement floor just went down last year.

In the center of the city, life in a tenement is crowded, sad, but here it's sadder still. Over there we had water, sewers, electricity — all the services. Maybe not one or two blocks away, but we had everything we needed, like markets and schools. Out here we have to fight to get an education for our kids, and it's dangerous because the schools are so far away. We even battle for water to drink.

Friendships and the sense of solidarity are the same here as there. I left a lot of *compadres* in the tenement, a lot of friends. I'm very sincere when I make a friend, and I think that when someone is my friend, they're sincere too. When I first got here I didn't know anyone, but then — little by little — I got to know people.

The earthquake didn't do much damage here. We were getting up and the house shook, that was all. Something happened afterwards, though. About a year ago during the windy season between January and March, there were really strong gusts, and wind devils. We didn't have any problems with the earthquake, but with the high winds, yes, we did. In one case a mother was washing clothes outside her house and had left her baby hanging inside in a cradle. A gust came up and took the roof off her house and everything inside it — including the baby.

The ejidatarios, they make money not twice but three times off this land: first when they use it for farming, second when they sell it to people like myself, and third when the government pays them to transfer it back. I don't know any original landowners that still live around here. They all live where they've got conveniences like water, telephones, paved roads, and sewers. They aren't going to be so stupid as to come here and suffer after having made out so well selling us the land.

We have to fight for everything. Sometimes it can be dangerous. I really don't know much about the man who got killed because when I moved here it had already happened. My neighbors told me about it. They said he was killed because he was putting up electrical wires for people. You know, illegal hookups to get electricity to the houses. They say nobody had him killed. The men he was working with just

killed him because they thought they could charge money for what this guy was doing for free to help the community. Some say the killers got caught and others say they didn't.

Some people are afraid to do too much because of this killing. It's an example. That guy was a government employee, a bodyguard for the ex-president's brother, and he still got killed. What can his neighbors think, who don't have any protection like he had?

In Nueva Casa Blanca there aren't any official organizers . . . any politics of any kind. It's simply a battle we're all fighting together — all the neighbors — for the benefit of the colonia. And by the way, we aren't afraid of the authorities as much as of each other. Afraid that somebody among us might propose some dirty business like those killers did. Those guys didn't have any political connections, nothing to do with the authorities, just personal ambition.

What we've got to do is fight together, like we're doing now. We form committees to ask for services for this colonia: We go to Toluca if we have to, or to Chalco or Ixtapaluca, or wherever else we have to go.

There are various groups that maintain the electrical hookups. Each group is in effect the owner of its own transformer box. Some boxes have 10 or 20 families hooked up — ours has 50 — and everyone has to mark their own cable so they know which is theirs. But there's one person in charge of the box, and when he needs money to buy a new fuse or a new main cable, we all pitch in. With our box we've always had cooperation from everybody. Some other guys run their box like a business, and call meetings every week just to ask for more money. That's what happened to us at first. One guy appointed himself in charge, and he exploited us whenever he could. Finally we got tired, and chose someone else who does a good job.

I've got this big cistern, but not for any special reason or because I want to make money out of it. In the rainy season the water trucks can't get through the muddy streets, so they don't come. Not everyone has the luxury of having a cistern. Some get their water in 50-gallon barrels, while others, with less money, get theirs in buckets. When it's wet and the people with buckets run out, I give a little to whoever needs it. You know, some people charge 400 pesos for 200 liters and 100 pesos for a bucket. It's robbery because really water shouldn't even cost half that much.

The primary school we're building came from the idea of one person, who told someone else, who told another person, and that's how the idea started taking shape until the moment came that it became a reality. It wasn't anything political. We're all cooperating in the construction. It's work for men, but to finish the school, the mothers do some heavy work too. They work side by side with the men.

We have plenty of labor but no capital to buy materials. We give what we can — 100, 200, 500, 1,000 pesos — but you must realize, it's a real sacrifice. We're using pieces of old wood and used cardboard. We've already got seven temporary classrooms, but I hope to God that the winds don't come up early, because then we'd lose these rooms and everything. By the time the windy season starts, we've got to have the classrooms more secure.

You see, we're humble people here. We've barely got money to eat so it's impossible to finish the school right. Maybe over the long term, if we build two classrooms a year. We still hope the government steps in. But if the government says no, we've only got our own resources to work with, which are very low. Yet little by little, maybe one classroom a year. . . .

*“Almost 20 schools are built each day. The 1982-86 Administration.”
— Road sign on Avenida Zaragoza outside Ciudad Nezahualcoyotl*

I don't believe it! Imagine! To say that they're building 20 schools a day is crazy. You can't believe it. In Mexico City there are millions of people, but if they build 20 schools a day where is the city going to end up? It will be pure schools and no more people. Oh, in the whole country? Well, it still seems exaggerated.

The school still doesn't have a name. For the time being, we call it Nueva Creación (New Creation), not because that's its real name but because it's brand new. The children are going to choose its name. It doesn't have to be named after someone from Mexican history either. The old school is named Simón Bolívar, and he doesn't have anything to do with the history of Mexico. And the other school is named

Beethoven, and you know perfectly well that Beethoven isn't famous because he did something for Mexico.

The owners are still a threat. We're afraid they might come by, not to take back the lot, because that's impossible now that we've petitioned the authorities, nor to steal our building material. What we're really afraid of is that they'll come for revenge and burn all the laminated panels we put up as a temporary roof. They'd go up in a second. But we won't have to worry once the real roof is in place.

And the skyrockets? Well, we bought them because we had other problems with the landowners. We took over big lots for the kindergarten we want to build next so there'd be plenty of room, and we did get some threats. So the skyrockets are in case of an emergency if they come to take back the lots. We shoot the rockets off to pass the word to all the parents to come to the school and stop the owners from harming our children.

We haven't had to use the rockets often, thank God, only once or twice. We've never had to fight or anything. Only confrontations and arguments. One owner is all right and the other is really negative. They have threatened us with legal proceedings, and one came waving some papers in our faces, which he wouldn't let us read. So we ignored him. And once he brought a lawyer, and a photographer who took our picture and said everyone in the picture would go to jail.

When the government gets around to our petitions, we're ready to support the owners if they have supported us. We'll go with them to the authorities so they get other land in compensation for what we're taking for the school. We don't have the power to give it to them ourselves, but we realize that they could lose all their rightful inheritance. If we don't go in a committee to speak up for them, they could lose their land.

David Melody



"By fighting and pushing and doing whatever took away our silence, we learned we could succeed, not just with the store but in other things, too."

GUADALUPE ROSAS GARRIDO

I'm Macedonio's older sister by nine years. I've got three grown children and two grandchildren. I'm with my husband here and my youngest daughter, who's 18. We moved out from Mexico City three years ago after Macedonio told us they were selling land for less than we were paying for rent downtown.

I'll tell you how we got our CONASUPO store. They began selling tortibonos at a store in another colonia named Independencia, at 64 pesos for 2 kilos—the same as it is now. In other places the price for 2 kilos was 130 pesos. Today, without coupons,



Mothers and children eagerly wait in line for tortibonos (discount tortilla coupons) at the CONASUPO store organized by the community.

2 kilos will cost you 200 pesos. We used to go to the store on the other side of the red bridge at the highway. But sometimes they wouldn't have enough for everybody, and then they told everyone from Nueva Casa Blanca that they couldn't sell to us anymore.

When I first moved here, before the coupon system began, there was another CONASUPO store in Nueva Casa Blanca. It had been opened along with stores in four other colonias, but they all finally closed. Ours had a problem with the woman in charge. She acted as though she was the owner. People didn't like that, so they stopped going.

We all learned that we needed someone with the right personality to run the store this time, someone who wouldn't call himself the boss. And by fighting and pushing and doing whatever took away our silence, we learned we could succeed, not just with the store but in other things, too.

Let's say it was the start of getting to know each other and learning about everyone's problems, not just financial, but social and physical too. Trying to open the store became a way to communicate. It was a basis for better financial and community support for everyone. That's how you learn about yourself, and acquire the respect that self-respect deserves. One of the best ways to find out what people need is for them to go out and look for it themselves.

"The desire to know and to demonstrate that one knows is born in the heart of man."

— Benito Juárez, inscription at the Secretariat of Public Education

Mutual needs you see and live and feel are what help you join with others. There isn't any organizing here, rather we're a group. We've united to move forward toward finding and solving our common needs. Before, we didn't have an organization. Each of us lived our own lives. We didn't see each other: nobody knew who was who, not even each other's names. Everyone kept their needs inside. But

once we had the store there was something to talk about. Thanks to that store, we've gotten the courage to tell the authorities about what else we need.

And then we had the idea for the school. We fought, marched, went to see the authorities. But they paid no attention to our petitions, so we now propose to insist on what is ours.

What's the difference between requesting and insisting? "Request" is to ask for something that has been promised, and then you keep on waiting. "Insist" is when you see a lot of promises that are never delivered, then you protest . . . and march. That's our way of insisting so they will listen to us.

We hold meetings every Saturday morning at 10 o'clock. Doña Carmen and Doña Zenobia and I are on the CONASUPO store committee. Everyone comes to those meetings. That's how we began to talk about the school. The salary for the store manager and the money for the rallies, to take petitions to the authorities, come from the store.

Yes, I feel like an example for others because, more than anything, we all should be like this. Not to get ahead of the others, no, but simply to be decisive, to know how to talk, to write, to make our needs known. Because if we women are silent, or don't speak up, the authorities will never listen to us, and women will never be treated well. Women should have the same rights as men.

Before, I was very tied to the home. I was the first that tried to get tortibonos at the Independencia store, and I told some of my friends here about them, that I wished we had tortibonos here. That's how I was accepted by these people, and they listened to me. That's when I decided to get more involved, to help my colonia a little more, and me too. And until now I haven't felt like stopping, not until what we want is achieved.

I've made new friends. I've been accepted by some people and rejected by others, but I don't pay attention to the rejection, I just keep on fighting because you have to realize that we have a lot of jealous people in this colonia, people that really don't

Residents listen as the community's doctor describes services available at the MEXFAM clinic. The clinic serves Nueva Casa Blanca as well as neighboring colonias, but as yet, there is no one on duty at night.

David Melody



care about the well-being of others. They're conformists, without any desire to improve themselves. Some are among the first people that moved here, others are new. Maybe they don't have any little ones who risk their lives going to school, or they're just backward. We don't ask their support, but we also don't want them to drag us down. They see the school, our sacrifices as parents, and instead of being quiet they're against us. A lot of parents are under their influence . . . well, maybe just a few. The rest of us have decided to carry forward without paying attention to them.

No, I don't feel proud of myself, just satisfied. Nothing more than that. Not proud, because I don't have any reason, because we're equal here. But satisfied, yes, in seeing that something has succeeded in our colonia. I don't think about the present as much as the future because I have grandchildren and I want them to have an education.

"Out here nothing's certain, that's for sure, but it's a little better now that the school is being built. Now the children won't have to walk so far."



David Melody

RITA MARTINEZ DE ROSAS

I was born in Poza Rica, in the state of Veracruz, and went to Mexico City 15 years ago. Macedonio and I moved out here with the children four years ago. My sister lives in this colonia, too. She's a store cashier and helps us out sometimes. The money I make selling comic books at the school isn't very much. Out here nothing's certain, that's for sure, but it's a little better now that the school is being built. Now the children won't have to walk so far.

"To buy school supplies, parents must pay 25,000 pesos per child — the equivalent of one-and-a-half times the monthly minimum wage."

— from an article in *El Excelsior*, September 2, 1987

What do I know about the MEXFAM clinic? I know its specialty is family planning, but they also give general exams and attend to children. The doctor treats everybody. Most days there are a lot of people to see him — at least 15 or 20 — and they come from other colonias too. The doctor helps the community a lot because he's the

only one we have. We still don't have a doctor on duty both day and night. My little girls sometimes have sore throats and diarrhea. It's very common here because we have no water system.

If the doctor's able, he gives us medicines for free because the pharmacies charge so much. Everyone else pitches in too. If someone brings medicine back from the free pharmacy at the social security hospital and doesn't need it, they give it to the doctor to give to someone who does. He charges very little compared to others, less than they charge at the government clinic in Ayotla, plus that clinic is so far away.

MEXFAM brought the doctor here two years ago. When the clinic first started there was a lady doctor, now we've got a man doctor. Sometimes his sister comes. She's a dentist, and she charges the same as her brother. He's also thinking of putting in a small hospital, with beds for overnight patients and baby deliveries. He wants to get the midwife who lives nearby to cover for him at night. There's a social worker who gets us together to talk about how we can improve our nutrition, to make things better here for our children's health. We don't have a support committee for the doctor, but I think we should.

The tortibono coupons from the CONASUPO store are necessary because there are lots of families here with hardly anything to eat. Some of them have six or eight

David Melody



A small cross reminds Nueva Casa Blanca where a child drowned as she crossed a bridge on her way to a distant school. The event sparked community efforts to build a school nearby.



Macedonio and his wife Rita pose with their children and cousins in front of their home. Their belief in a better future illustrates an important change in attitude among Mexico City's poor.

children, and there aren't enough tortillas or the money to buy them. A family with five people can eat four or five kilos of tortillas a day because we eat them for breakfast, lunch, and dinner. They only let you buy two kilos a day with the 'bonos. Really, a family with a lot of people needs more tortillas than that.

I buy milk from the subsidized dairy three times a week. We have to go all the way to the other side of the highway. It costs 300 pesos for four liters, and they limit how much you can buy, depending on how many children you have. If you have more than four children you can buy it every day. Still, it would be a good idea to have our own dairy here. Maybe that should be our next project.

About the death of that little schoolgirl, it really brought us together with her mother. When they found her little girl's body in the canal, we saw we all lived here and just how bad the consequences of that ditch can be.

Some anthropologists dispute Lewis's concept of the "culture of poverty" as too restrictive. Lewis, in fact, sometimes defined it as a subculture rather than a culture, and he recorded testimony from his informants demonstrating a wider variety of experiences among the poor. Even if Lewis's conclusions were valid some 30 years ago, the concept today might have to take into account people like the Garrido family. Their openness, their belief in a better future for their children, and their willingness to act on behalf of the community stand in sharp contrast to the individualism and fatalism expressed by Jesús Sánchez.

The community achievements in Nueva Casa Blanca are such that Macedonio Rosas Garrido would never tell his son, as Sánchez was told by his father, "Don't get mixed up with friends. It's better to go your own way, alone." ◆

LOUIS WERNER, who holds a master's degree in public health from Columbia University, is the former project evaluation officer at the International Planned Parenthood Federation/Western Hemisphere Region in New York City. He writes frequently on cross-cultural topics, including a recent article in Smithsonian magazine about a 1,000-mile camel drive from the Sudan's Kordofan Province north to Cairo, Egypt.

A RECIPE FOR SWEET SUCCESS

Consensus and Self-Reliance in the Alto Beni

Kevin Healy



Robin Bowman

The IAF's original Congressional mandate called for supporting the growth of democratic and autonomous grassroots organizations throughout the hemisphere. Nearly two decades later, "participation" has become a development catchword, often invoked but equally elusive. In the concluding segment of a two-part study, Kevin Healy examines how a Bolivian peasant federation, El Ceibo, has evolved workable structures to make participation into an engine for equitable rural development.



George Amado's famous novel *Cacao* painted a grim picture of peasant life in Bahia, Brazil, during the 1920s. Barely surviving on a large plantation ironically named "Fraternidade," Amado's bedraggled rural folk were trapped by illiteracy and debt bondage. Mired in squalor, they lacked hope for themselves or their children.

Sixty years later and half a continent away, peasant cacao growers in the newly colonized Alto Beni microregion of Bolivia stand in startling contrast. They have formed an obscure collection of cooperatives into a powerful federation—the Central Regional de Cooperativas Agropecuarias Industriales, El Ceibo—that markets and adds value to their crops, an enterprise which has culminated in a budding industry to manufacture chocolate products for sale in La Paz and overseas. The vibrancy of the federation is on daily display in the village of Sapecho, El Ceibo's rural headquarters. In one section of the compound, young bookkeepers and accountants methodically thumb through recent sales and transport records. Clerks sell farm supplies and seeds from a consumer store, while agricultural extensionists, in the back room, chat about a recent problem with a member's cacao trees. Across

the yard, a few workers are using rakes to spread cacao beans on large drying platforms, while others are shoveling dried beans into bags, which are loaded into wheelbarrows and hauled down a ramp to a warehouse. In the president's modest office, a secretary sits at her typewriter, finishing a letter to the sales representative in La Paz. In the community center, 50 representatives from local coops sit quietly in an accounting class. All the while, messengers on bicycles are arriving and departing the grounds.

An article in the previous issue of *Grassroots Development* (see "From Field to Factory," Vol. 11, No. 2) told the story of the federation's drive to overcome long odds, including record rates of hyperinflation in the national economy, in order to increase incomes and deliver diversified services to over 2,500 small farmers and their families. This article tells the story behind that story. It examines how the peasants of El Ceibo have invented and institutionalized innovative methods of operation to make broad participation into a reality, ensuring that services reach the membership and preventing small cliques from seizing control or embezzling federation assets. It also looks at how El Ceibo has consciously chosen to invest in



Kevin Healy

the future — sponsoring ambitious training programs to harness the energies of the region's youth.

RETOOLING COOPERATIVE PRACTICES

Many cooperatives in Bolivia are curious hybrids, reflecting two streams of influence in their origins. On the one hand, Christian churches have taken a prominent role in promoting new coops, imbuing them with a mission of service that evokes an idealized sense of community. The actual structure of a new coop, on the other hand, often draws upon the practical, business-oriented tenets of the Rochdale model, which originated in England, was adapted by North American farmers in the 19th century, and has been widely promoted by USAID and other assistance agencies in Latin America since the middle of this century. (For a fuller discussion of the impact of these two influences, see "The Well-Tempered Capitalist" in *Grassroots Development*, Vol. 8, No. 2.)

At first glance, El Ceibo resembles most other Bolivian cooperative structures, except that it is unusually successful.

One soon learns, however, that established practices have been carried to unusual lengths, and often given innovative twists. In doing so, the federation has developed a distinctive operating style that weds pragmatism and zeal.

Nowhere is that difference in style more apparent than in El Ceibo's federation assemblies. Most Bolivian male multicompany cooperative organizations hold an annual assembly, in keeping with the Rochdale statutes. Many of the meetings are overcrowded and hurried and have ambitious agendas, making widespread participation in discussions a practical impossibility. The final result is often a mere rubber-stamping of programs proposed by the organization's managerial board.

El Ceibo has taken several measures to ensure that its affiliates have an active role in determining policy. Instead of one annual assembly, there are three. To make sure that everyone at the meetings is heard, each local coop may send only three delegates: a coop officer, a male member, and a female member. The assemblies often last three or four days, and the delegates are provided with overnight lodging in the workers' dormitories in Sapecho. Detailed records of each meeting are kept, often yielding as much as 20 pages of



After a recent meeting, members of *Cooperativa El Tropical* pose in front of the coop store in the village of San Antonio in Bolivia's remote Alto Beni region.

commentary. The minutes are forwarded to all 35 affiliated coops for examination and discussion.

A European volunteer who sat in on a recent assembly described what he witnessed this way:

The meetings tended to last until midnight as delegates passionately debated thorny issues. Everyone took part, even the cook, who voiced strong opinions not only about the kitchen but the whole range of services in Sapecho. Participants clearly stood on equal footing. The level of interest and patience people displayed trying to build solutions through consensus was amazing.

Sometimes, of course, issues arise that cannot be adequately dealt with during an assembly. Instead of simply delegating responsibility for the issue to the federation's administrative leadership or postponing consideration to the next trimesterly meeting, El Ceibo has invented its own solution—the "seminar." Seminars bring together, in Sapecho, about 50 men and women delegates from local coops for two or three days of in-depth discussion of an unresolved issue that requires a consensus decision. Recent seminars have focused on plans for organizing communal work teams to develop a tract of virgin forest received from the Bolivian government, reorganizing the federation's transport section to balance the interests of far-flung coops, and increasing women's participation in El Ceibo.

To ensure that policies are implemented and to increase accountability, a recent assembly put new teeth into a cooperative institution—the vigilance committee—that all too frequently seems designed to be seen but not heard. El Ceibo's three vigilance committee members are now outfitted

with federation bicycles, have a private office in Sapecho, and receive a daily wage and food allowance. In addition to practical experience in local cooperative activities, committee members are required to have the technical ability to monitor the bookkeeping of individual service sections in Sapecho and review the accounting practices of the federation's administrative council itself.

Even more unusual for Bolivia, committee members are not confined to the role of internal auditors, but are empowered to spend considerable time on the road collecting grievances and suggestions from local coops. Findings from these field trips range from reports of delayed payments for cacao shipments to the family quarrels of coop members, providing valuable feedback that keeps the federation's workforce and leadership on its toes. And since its members have practically unlimited exposure to all 35 affiliated coops, the vigilance committee has become a launching pad for peasant leaders with presidential aspirations. For example, 35-year-old Francisco Molle, this year's vigilance committee president, was recently elected to be president of the federation in 1988.

When Molle assumes office, he will join a management team that is conscious of the need to preserve the federation's autonomy. To avoid dependence on outside experts and to foster its own esprit de corps, El Ceibo has chosen to keep top management tasks within its elected administrative council, believing it to be of the utmost importance for young peasant leaders to acquire the skills needed to run a complex of service operations. Foreign volunteers have provided valuable technical back-up from the beginning, but federation leaders have always believed that accepting responsibility for decision-making was basic to grassroots development.



To ensure that policies are implemented and to increase accountability, a recent assembly put new teeth into a cooperative institution — the vigilance committee — that all too frequently seems designed to be seen but not heard.

Learning requires hands-on experience, and El Ceibo's self-reliant approach to management has fostered a willingness to experiment continually with administrative structures to find what works. The current division of labor within the administrative council, for instance, is a homegrown creation unlike any other coop's in Bolivia. The president oversees the agricultural and transport programs; the vice president manages the various sections in La Paz (including the cocoa factory and all export operations); the treasurer supervises the main financial and accounting division; the first *vocal* administers the Sapecho complex; and the second *vocal* looks after a second fermentation plant in the village of San Antonio. The entire council meets monthly in Sapecho or La Paz to share information and coordinate the federation's diverse activities. At first sight, this collegial approach to administration might seem like a recipe for chaos, but as the following section makes clear, the federation's reliance on active participation and consensus-building rests on several solid supports.

CULTIVATING CONSENSUS

In many Latin American service cooperatives, managers and full-time employees are difficult to dislodge once they are installed. This self-perpetuating power structure can lead to a kind of institutional arteriosclerosis, diminishing one of the greatest assets new cooperatives possess — the enthusiasm of members eager to improve their lives and their communities. Unchecked power can also lead to misuse or misappropriation of coop funds. The story of a rural cooperative's or federation's organizational decline can often be summed up in terms of the automobiles, trucks, two-story homes, and other real estate that ex-officials begin purchasing in town soon after leaving their organizations. A similar, if less dramatic, pattern develops when coop workers are hired and become a vested interest group pursuing better salaries and other benefits rather than increased services to small farmers.

To avoid creating a privileged, entrenched leadership and staff divorced from the basic social conditions and interests of its peasant membership, El Ceibo has devised a system for frequently rotating leaders and employees, and paying all workers equal wages, regardless of skills or responsibility. The rotational system was not adopted as a reform measure to correct abuses by early federation leaders. Many of those leaders, however, had prior experience with *sindicato* federations and other cooperative structures in both the highlands and the Alto Beni, and they may have wanted to limit the potential for abuse when it became apparent that the federation needed a stable workforce to administer expanding infrastructure. The rotational system dates from the time the federation opened its first cacao fermentation plant and embarked on an expanded marketing program, when the decision was made to limit job assignments to one-year terms. The practice continues to this day, although the length of

tenure has varied at times to meet specific organizational needs.

The federation's top leadership on the administrative council is not exempt from the system. Only one federation president during the past 10 years, for instance, has served a second term (see box on page 37). Since this office carries the heaviest work load, however, El Ceibo in recent years has instituted an innovative apprenticeship period to give the president-elect a head start. Elected in June, he assists the sitting president until January, when the new president's one-year term officially begins.

El Ceibo's rules do allow leaders to move laterally within the council to serve an additional term in a new post. After that, leaders usually return to their local coops where they remain for at least a year before returning to the council. This constant rotation has allowed 54 people to hold the top leadership positions in the federation since 1977.

The federation also limits the tenures of its 80-member staff in Sapecho and La Paz, including accountants, sales representatives, bookkeepers, plant managers, factory workers, and a variety of other skilled and semi-skilled positions. Workers are either male or female members recruited from local coops, or the sons, daughters, and wives of members. Most are in their teens or early twenties; approximately 60 percent are married and have families. Most job tenures are for one year, although some assignments are for two years, and a select few, beginning in 1986, are for four years. For instance, workers in the La Paz chocolate factory change annually, while agricultural extensionists and educators serve for four years, with the first year devoted to on-the-job training.

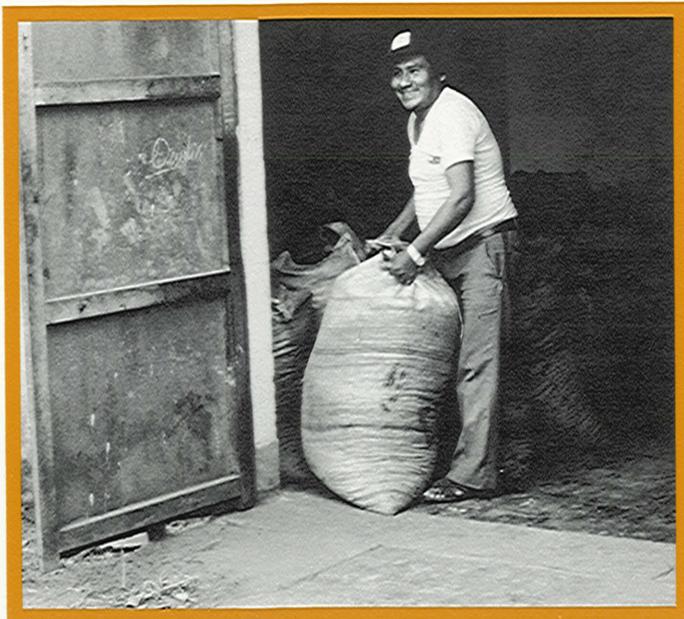
Although the system has helped El Ceibo avoid the pitfalls of an entrenched leadership, one wonders how much the frequent turnover costs in efficiency. The prevalence of several unresolved managerial problems, particularly in the trucking section, which has been reorganized repeatedly, suggests the price may be high. Even the federation implicitly acknowledges the dilemma, since it has chosen to extend the terms of certain workers — such as the La Paz sales representative for exports — who have acquired on-the-job skills that make them difficult to replace. As the federation develops more sophisticated production technologies and business operations, this dilemma can only deepen.

Despite its drawbacks, however, it can be argued that the rotational system is a well-adapted response to El Ceibo's organizational needs. The Alto Beni is a newly colonized microregion with poor roads and widely scattered communities. Federation services require a blend of decentralized and centralized teamwork to succeed. Coop workers collect cacao in pick-ups and larger trucks from local farmers, and then haul it to fermentation plants or to storage facilities in Sapecho where it is processed by the federation's paid workforce. The cacao is eventually shipped to La Paz where it is marketed or transformed into cocoa by still another layer of federation

workers. The rotational system reinforces effective teamwork at both ends of the ladder. It provides local coops with skilled members and leaders who are better equipped to serve their communities by coordinating transportation, agricultural extension, and other services with the federation. It provides the federation with a steady influx of people from local coops who know whether or not snags have developed in delivering services and who are determined to find remedies. And it is this steady interchange that creates the pool of experienced members needed to make the federation's numerous small planning and implementation committees, quarterly assemblies and policy-making seminars work.

The rotational system has also reinforced informal ties among the federation's 35 coops. El Ceibo's staff live in dormitory rooms for the duration of their assignments in La Paz and Sapecho. They are usually not accompanied by their families, although during their terms of office, some members of the administrative council have arranged for their wives to join the workforce. The experience of working and living together produces strong friendships. After returning to their far-flung communities, peasant youth often stay in touch with one another, arranging for social and cultural interchanges among their respective cooperatives. This kind of network-building among young peasant leaders may be one of the underlying factors that explains how federation assemblies and seminars have become increasingly adept at forging consensus solutions.

Kevin Healy



Santiago Limachi, former vice president of El Ceibo, hauls a bag of cacao into the Sapecho warehouse for storage until it is shipped to the chocolate factory in La Paz.

The policy of paying equal wages was one of those early consensus solutions, and it has become an important instrument for building further solidarity within the federation. When El Ceibo began to distribute its cacao profits in the late 1970s, proposals to establish a graduated wage structure for workers in Sapecho stirred up a hornet's nest of protest among local cooperatives. The solution turned out to be an idealistic one that emphasized the notion that federation jobs were opportunities for service rather than profit. All staff members and the elected members of the administrative council would

be paid the same rate, or *jornal única* — \$1.70 plus three meals per day. This practice has endured for 10 years, despite the increasing complexity and diversity of federation activities and a workforce that has quadrupled in size.

This phenomenon cannot be understood in isolation from the job rotation system. Expectations for higher incomes, after all, tend to grow with years of work experience. El Ceibo's exceptions to its own rule bear this out. A skilled worker in La Paz, in a moment of frustration, recently described his feelings about earning the *jornal única* for eight years:

Economically, I am a failure. I have worked at this job for years, and what do I have to show for it? I want to return to my home and help develop a cattle-raising project with my local coop to make some money.

Two things are interesting about this story. First, the worker wanted to return to the Alto Beni and work with his local coop. If making money were his sole criterion, he had the skills to find a high-paying job in La Paz. Second, he has subsequently chosen to stay in La Paz and continue working for the federation for the same wages he has always received. What accounts for such loyalty?

One answer is "dignity." An agricultural extensionist who left briefly to work for a state agricultural research station put it this way: "I had the sense over there that no one knew how to work with campesinos and no one was very interested in listening to this campesino. So I came back to the federation."

The federation, in fact, is a magnet for the most talented youth of the Alto Beni. Forty percent of the federation's members have had some secondary school education, and 20 members have received their high school diplomas. Their educational skills help explain how the federation is able to flexibly manage a host of complex service tasks. El Ceibo has chosen to invest in the region's youth by providing advanced training in a variety of skills, including college educations for some of the workers in La Paz. And the federation provides its young members with the opportunity to put that training to practical use. It offers positions of responsibility in an organization that is on the cutting edge of development in the Alto Beni.

The decision to invest in the region's youth also has its practical side. Cooperatives have opted to recruit young people to run the federation's services because young people seem best equipped to bear the burden. They tend to have newer farms that require less labor to maintain, have fewer family responsibilities, and seem more willing to work for the *jornal única*. As one official of El Ceibo put it, "Young people in the Alto Beni are more idealistic than the older folks, so we can count on them to be service-oriented."

In this context, the *jornal única* can actually work as a positive tool to kindle enthusiasm, and El Ceibo has instituted certain work practices to build on that sense of solidarity among its workforce. In Sapecho, for instance, several hours are devoted twice weekly to *trabajo colectivo*. A bell is rung in the courtyard, and leaders, accountants, cooks, trainees, and other workers gather to work, side by side, to complete a task that requires extra labor.

El Ceibo has also begun to form work teams of young cooperative members to clear a 4,800-hectare tract of land provided by the Bolivian government, and prepare it for planting cacao. The project is in its early stages, and plans have been made to send volunteer brigades for two-week assignments to get the work underway. The agricultural extension

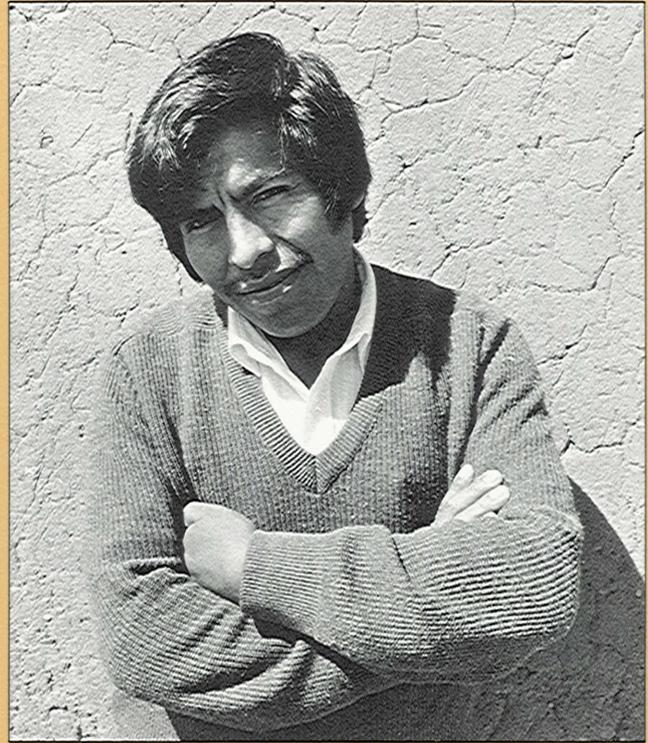
Profile of a Leader

Luis Cruz Mamani is the only president of El Ceibo to be reelected for a second term. After completing the fifth grade, he left his llama- and alpaca-herding community near the village of Berenguela, high in the Andes, for a series of adventures in Chile and Peru, where he worked as a sharecropper, a truck driver's assistant, a cook, and a hotel waiter.

Cruz returned to Bolivia in 1968 for a year of military service as a conscript. He then followed his father and brothers to the Alto Beni, where they were carving small farms out of the jungle.

In 1973, he helped found El Tropical, one of the first coops in the region. He served as president for several years before joining El Ceibo's work force as an agricultural extensionist specializing in cacao. He studied in Ecuador, where he learned how to improve cacao yields and combat a blight that threatened the federation's cacao crop. He was eventually elected secretary of El Ceibo's administrative council, and then president.

A bright, honest, humorous, and esteemed leader, Cruz is proud of his Aymara heritage. He believes that knowledge of this heritage is crucial to the federation's success, and he seeks ways to help the region's youth to understand and appreciate their highland legacy. Activities he has initiated include a weekly "cultural night" during which peasant workers in Sapecho discuss their ethnic roots.



Robin Bowman

Luis Cruz Mamani, twice elected president of El Ceibo.

division also organizes voluntary efforts among members and nonmembers alike to prune farmers' cacao fields. And at the local level, new forms of joint cacao production are emerging within several cooperatives. Local coops are able to consider such ventures because they maintain high internal solidarity, perhaps because of their small size—on average, 25 members.

The fact that consensus plays such an important role at all levels of the federation, however, suggests that some larger force is at work. Dr. Roger Rasnake, an anthropologist specializing in leadership practices among Bolivian Indians, argues that the rotation of leadership, the building of consensus through assemblies, and the use of *aynis* and *mingas*, or community work teams, are basic principles of indigenous Andean social organization. The reappearance of these principles within the federation and its member coops suggests that settlers from the Aymara- and Quechua-speaking communities of the highlands brought that style of leadership with them to a tropical setting. The lack of entrenched elites within the newly colonizing region allowed those principles to take hold and flourish in new and unexpected ways.

TRAINING FOR SELF-RELIANCE

One of the tenets of the Rochdale model stipulates that cooperatives should set aside resources to pay for training programs to improve members' skills and productivity. Most Latin American coops scrimp to make ends meet, and training is considered to be an unaffordable luxury. El Ceibo believes

that broad-based training programs are essential for membership participation, effective self-management, and future growth. The federation currently invests 5 percent of its budget in training programs. Most of the financing still comes from COTESU, a foreign aid branch of the Swiss government, but El Ceibo has channeled these outside resources to make steady progress in training its own members to run a wide range of service operations.

One key to organizational independence is the ability to manage finances. Although El Ceibo decided in 1984 to begin training its own bookkeepers and accountants, the impulse behind that decision began years earlier. As one federation leader explained:

In 1981, we had a cooperative specialist from a private development agency in La Paz. He brought us this sophisticated accounting system, and insisted that we use it or he would quit. It seemed too fancy to us, too difficult and cumbersome. We had a number of meetings, and eventually decided we had to have our own accountants, and trainers who could teach an El Ceibo accounting model that fit our situation.

The federation has now developed its own six-week course to train prospective treasurers and bookkeepers from local coops. Applicants must pass an entrance exam in arithmetic to take the course and must be able to complete a balance sheet of their own coop to graduate. The course is taught by El Ceibo's own staff of peasant accountants and managers, and enrollments are always heavy because of the constant influx of new settlers and cooperatives in the Alto Beni. Nearly one-quarter



When a group of international development experts visited the region they repeatedly heard that “the best agricultural technicians in the Alto Beni belong to El Ceibo?”

of El Ceibo's active membership of 850 campesinos have taken the course, an astonishing ratio for only 35 coops. The surplus of people with accounting skills allows these cooperatives to rotate bookkeeping responsibilities so that they will not overburden one or two people. It also makes the cooperatives and the federation accountable to a more-informed membership, while increasing the talent pool El Ceibo can draw on to recruit future workers for its business offices.

At the same time, the federation realizes that operating a complex service structure and trying to manufacture and market a wide range of chocolate products have created technical needs that exceed El Ceibo's self-training capacity. To upgrade its business management skills, the federation provides scholarships for select members to study at the national university in La Paz. In return, students work part-time at El Ceibo's offices in the capital city, and pledge to work full-time for several years after graduation.

In the case of certain technical skills, however, the federation has had no choice but to move toward training its own experts. Agricultural extension for cacao production is a case in point. Unlike major producing countries such as Brazil and Ecuador, Bolivia lacks a cadre of trained professional technicians and scientists who specialize in cacao. In fact, there is only one agronomist in the whole country who is an accepted authority on cacao. Perhaps because the crop is produced by small farmers in a remote settlement area, the state has shown little interest in developing a scientific research capability or agricultural extension services to increase production.

Consequently, when a cacao blight called “witches-broom” began to threaten the Alto Beni, the local government research station was unprepared. Indeed, station agronomists may have made things worse when they unknowingly supervised the sale of diseased seedlings to small farmers.

Realizing that the basis for their livelihood was endangered, El Ceibo moved into action. With the supervision of a German volunteer agronomist and financing from the Swiss government, the federation established COPROAGRO, an extension division to help members combat witches-broom and increase production. Several campesinos were sent to Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil for advanced training. They returned to spearhead a successful campaign to contain the blight. For example, in 1985, over 500 small farmers were reached, and more than 1,000 hectares of cacao trees were pruned, effectively doubling their yields. Two of those original extensionists have rejoined their cooperatives, and two others, having completed their agricultural duties, are currently members of El Ceibo's administrative council.

The federation now runs its own training program for agricultural extensionists. The selection process is rigorous: Students must be nominated by a member coop, pass oral and written exams, and complete a weeklong introductory course

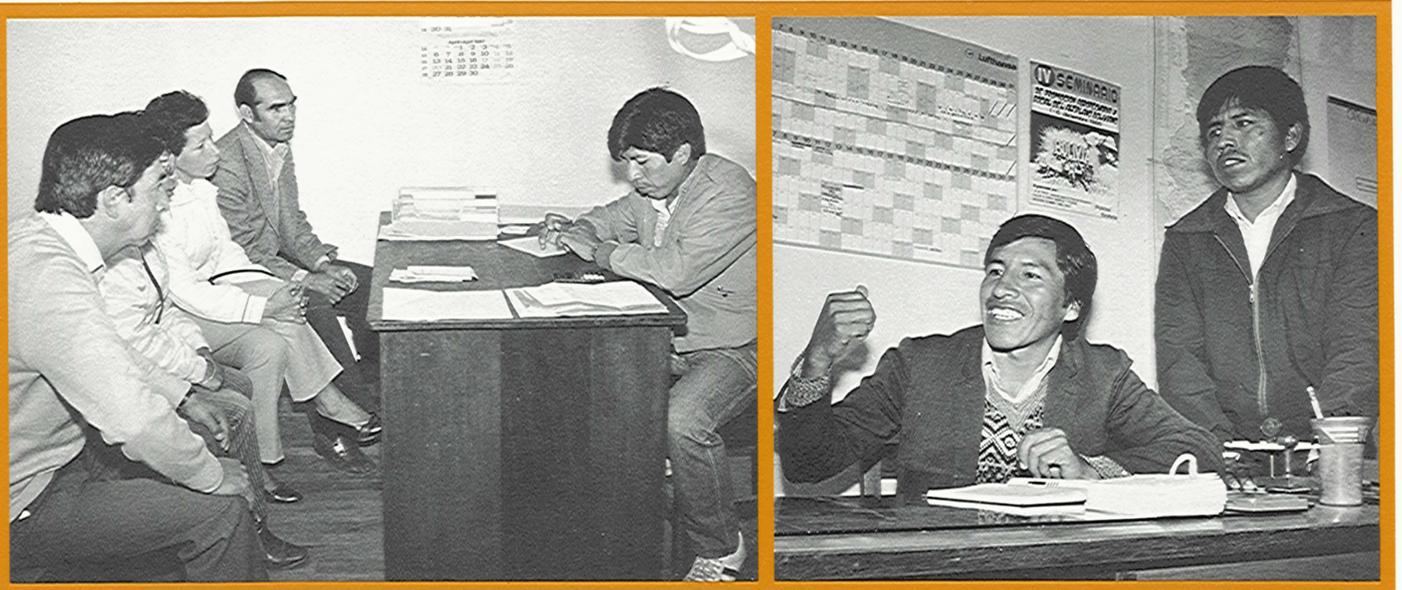
in cacao. The final step is a one-year apprenticeship working alongside accredited extensionists. In 1986, fewer than half of the 19 candidates sent to Sapecho for training emerged as full-fledged extensionists. A recent testimonial confirms the high quality of these graduates. When a group of international development experts visited the region to learn about local cacao production, they repeatedly heard that “the best agricultural technicians in the Alto Beni belong to El Ceibo, so go there for advice about what's happening.”

And El Ceibo is not resting on its laurels. Two coop members have been sent to a cacao research center in Salvador, Brazil, for advanced training. When they return after two years, they will work for another seven years with COPROAGRO to reinforce the training program and improve the extension-service system.

The federation has also decided to add a “popular education” component to its agricultural services program. Extension agents give courses on topics such as environmental protection and vegetable gardening, but they are accompanied by “educators” who use the literacy training techniques pioneered by the Brazilian Paulo Freire to also teach administrative, accounting, and civics courses. The focus of this effort centers on helping the rank-and-file membership develop the skills and self-confidence they need to actively participate as Bolivian citizens in their communities, cooperatives, and the federation.

During the past two years, El Ceibo has tried to extend this development of a “critical consciousness” to its own operations. In 1986, a member of the administrative council joined two members of COPROAGRO to evaluate all 35 cooperatives and all federation service programs. They produced a 200-page document that classified member coops into three categories to help local groups evaluate their strengths and weaknesses to improve their performance. By examining the accomplishments of the strongest coops, groups that were lagging behind could learn how to catch up. Federation managers will be able to use the study to better target service programs.

The lesson of these self-managed training programs is not that cooperatives must learn to do everything by themselves. El Ceibo continues to rely on outside agencies. CENPROTAC, a popular education group from La Paz, has given several short courses for federation leaders and has, most recently, assisted El Ceibo to produce its first periodical to inform members about federation activities. The German volunteer organization Servicios Voluntarios Alemanes continues to provide an agronomist and an economist to serve as technical advisors. And to satisfy specific needs, the federation has hired Bolivian consulting firms to conduct feasibility studies—for expansion of their chocolate factory, to improve their agricultural transportation program, and to provide legal counsel about the effects of changes in national tax legislation.



Left: El Ceibo's sales representative for exports (right) meets with prospective buyers in La Paz. On a recent sales mission to Europe, he discovered a potential market for organically grown cacao. As a result, the federation is moving to perfect organic methods that can be used by small farmers in the Alto Beni. Right: Gualberto Condori, president of El Ceibo in 1987, enthusiastically discusses the federation's service programs.

The point is that the federation's leadership is confident enough of its own abilities to choose the terms of relationship with outside agencies. And it tries to incorporate as much knowledge as it can from its outside contacts. When the federation received its 10 new 12-ton trucks from loans provided by the Bolivian government, leaders decided to make an exception to the rule of hiring only cooperative members. No one had the necessary skills to drive such huge and expensive machines. The federation also decided, however, to build its own garages and to arrange for members to be trained as mechanics. In a few years, these mechanics and the drivers of smaller pick-up trucks will be phased into positions as drivers of the larger truck fleet. Eventually, El Ceibo will be self-sufficient in this area.

It is the self-confidence that derives from such self-sufficiency that inspires El Ceibo to send representatives and educators to meetings, seminars, and conferences for peasant groups in other parts of Bolivia. And coop delegations from throughout the country are coming to Sapecho to see for themselves how El Ceibo's system of self-management works. In 1987, the national federation of agricultural cooperatives conducted a joint workshop with experts from Israel to train dozens of Bolivian peasant leaders. El Ceibo was one of two coops selected as model sites for field visits.

LEARNING BY DOING

El Ceibo has become one of Bolivia's most-esteemed peasant federations, and its rural headquarters at Sapecho attracts a steady stream of visitors searching for answers. What lessons in popular participation does the federation have to offer to other grassroots projects?

At first glance, the Sapecho compound is hardly impressive. The buildings are rustic, with adobe walls and thatched or tin roofs. The processing facilities are functional, but not state-of-the-art. The only source of electricity is from a generator in the nearby town, and that is available only for four hours each evening.

It is the people who remain in a visitor's memory. One of the first things you notice is their enthusiasm. Then their youth. Losing talented young people to urban migration is one of the most intractable problems of rural underdevelopment in the Third World. El Ceibo has an abundance of talented young members because it has opened a path for them to learn valuable skills that can be put to practical use in positions of responsibility. Admittedly, the prolonged economic crisis in Bolivia's cities has reduced their magnetic pull, but El Ceibo's success in marketing and adding value to cacao, coupled with the federation's broad-based training and service programs, has made it easier for the Alto Beni's young farmers to stay home.

This opportunity exists because the federation has developed a practical system of self-management through member participation. El Ceibo's history has been one long lesson in learning to work together. The institutional structures supporting participation — more frequent and longer assemblies, seminars to resolve complex policy disputes, representational democracy through delegates, apprenticeships for presidents, the rotation of leaders and workers, the *jornal única* — are all possibilities that other coops might wish to replicate. Yet there may be a larger lesson behind these institutional innovations. El Ceibo has shown the utility of avoiding rigid formulas — from the Rochdale or any other model — and having the flexibility and self-confidence to experiment with organizational design to find what works.

For instance, the traditional Rochdale rules hold that education of members should be a vital and constant activity and that elected leaders shall not be paid. El Ceibo has vigorously and imaginatively followed the first rule, but has modified the second by paying all leaders the *jornal única* instead of hiring professional managers. The notion of service is maintained, but full-time administrators are not expected to live on air while they plan and implement the federation's programs. Rotation of the work force also makes the burden of service more bearable, reduces the likelihood of low morale leading to fiscal improprieties, and encourages direct

participation by members. It adds a twist of Andean egalitarianism to the conventional coop ethos.

To make participation effective, El Ceibo has developed an educational framework that includes on-the-job training as well as specific courses to meet the needs of its membership: whether for improving their crops, protecting a fragile environment, or keeping accurate and honest coop accounts. And each time technical assistance has been needed from outside, the federation has viewed that assistance as stopgap. Whenever possible, coop members have worked alongside the experts to learn what is needed to do the job themselves. Experienced workers then help train their replacements. When those workers return to their local coops, they bring new administrative and technical skills with them. This constant interchange of personnel between the center and the rim, coupled with the bonding and socialization that occurs among workers during their tenures in Sapecho and La Paz, helps explain the dynamic ability of seemingly unwieldy structures, such as the federation assemblies, to function effectively and forge consensus solutions.

Nevertheless, this is not utopia. There is, for instance, a problem that has only been hinted at thus far — the role of women in the federation. Initially, women were entirely excluded from the network for planning and making decisions. A number of wives rebelled by covertly setting aside part of their families' cacao harvests for sale to outside middlemen. Federation leaders realized that this could eventually undermine their efforts to control a large enough portion of the region's cacao to be able to obtain higher prices.

The problem was raised at numerous assemblies. Reforms were made to begin to incorporate women into the federation's activities. Widows and women heads-of-household, relatively small groups, were accepted as full-fledged members. More importantly, wives of members began to attend coop assemblies and voice opinions and began to hold jobs in coop stores and participate in training programs. Eventually, rules were adopted instructing each coop to make sure that one of its three delegates to federation assemblies was a woman.

Thus far, however, compliance with those rules has been uneven, and not one woman has been elected to the federation's administrative council by assembly delegates. Only two women have held high administrative positions in the federation's workforce. Most women staff members in Sapecho and La Paz fill stereotypically female positions as cooks, secretaries, or packagers.

Despite the slow pace of change, there are encouraging signs. Twenty women have been elected to coop leadership posts, and most of the presidents and treasurers in this group were elected in the past two years. When a recent accounting class was offered, several of the applicants were women. Most of them, however, lacked formal training in math and were unable to pass the qualifying exam. Instead of letting the matter rest there, federation officials are organizing a special remedial class. After mastering basic mathematical skills, the women will be able to reenroll in the accounting course and qualify to become treasurers in their local coops.

What is important about the story of women and the federation is not the lack of progress. The role of women is limited within many Bolivian institutions. What is significant is that the pressure to change the situation arose internally, not in response to outside donors or an international development fad. Some Bolivian coops have responded to such pressures by encouraging women to form their own organizations, a strategy that often offers women the appearance of equality

but deprives them of access to the larger material resources of the male-dominated organization. Within El Ceibo, the drive to reach consensus solutions has not led to a narrowing of participants but a widening. Genuine participation, once it begins, is hard to stop. If the women leaders emerging in local coops are able to rise within the federation, El Ceibo can become a trail blazer for women's participation in the whole society.

Participatory organizations are good and justified in themselves as models for helping construct a democratic society, but organizations such as El Ceibo also are important instruments for fostering equitable rural development. For a decade the federation has coalesced new communities and coops to offer the peasants of the Alto Beni a competitive alternative for marketing their crops and buying consumer staples and agricultural supplies. El Ceibo's principles and practices of small farmer participation have contributed to a broad distribution of skills, income, and technology throughout an entire microregion.

El Ceibo's peasants are proud of the self-chartered progress they have made. And other people have noticed and taken hope. Recently, Bolivian agronomist Jaime Cusicanqui and a five-member project team from Food for the Hungry, a development organization working with highland communities, visited Sapecho to see for themselves what was being accomplished. One evening while speaking to a group of federation leaders and members in the assembly hall, Cusicanqui paused, looked slowly around, and said: "Our visit here, seeing all that you have accomplished, makes me proud to stand among you, proud to be a Bolivian." In some 30 years of development work he had seen many failed projects, weak cooperatives, dashed dreams. He had also seen some successes, but not on this scale of self-management, not with this many people. He was saying that here, at last, was proof that Bolivia's small farmers could find their way forward by learning to work together. ◆

*KEVIN HEALY is the Foundation Representative for Bolivia. He is the author of *Caciques y Patronos, Una Experiencia de Desarrollo Rural en el Sud de Bolivia* and of recent articles, in several academic publications, about the impact of cocaine on development in Bolivia.*

When Should PVOs Cut the Cord?

Rebecca Reichmann

In analyzing their overseas development programs, U.S. private voluntary organizations (PVOs) confront agonizing questions. What is the right balance between *imposing our approach* to development and *providing access* to resources? How can we avoid creating dependent relationships? When should we cut the cord?

The way these questions are framed assumes that U.S. PVOs control the pipeline of essential resources, and the trick is learning to regulate the flow: not too much, not too little. The local project may suffer from our decision, but we decide that is in their best interest, too. After all, our business is "teaching a man to fish, not handing him fish." The metaphor breaks down, however, if we are also learning how to fish. And if we are both learning to fish *better*, shouldn't we help each other ask tougher questions, try different tackle, repair the nets?

Before we can learn to cooperate, we have to see "dependency" in a clearer light. The prevailing truism governing relations between U.S. PVOs and local development organizations equates dependency with arrested childhood. This idea taps models of psychological development that stress autonomy and self-sufficiency as "higher" stages of maturity. For years, development practitioners have alluded to the dangers of psychological or cultural dependency, but rather uneasily. Defining "maturity" meant sailing waters close to the reefs of ethnocentrism, which we have tried to navigate by concentrating on making projects financially self-sufficient. This approach ignores the question of technical exchange, of what we can learn from each other.

In fact, much of the debate about dependency ignores the counterdependency of U.S. PVOs. Local projects provide PVOs with a reason for being, a justification for leveraging resources from public and private donors. Sooner

or later, the efforts of U.S. PVOs to avoid client dependency conflict with the need to make projects work. The result is endless agonizing over what actions are appropriate: Do the poorest benefit? Will the project survive without us? Are the leaders fair? These questions are the voices of our own dependency, and they cannot be answered if we talk only to ourselves.

Drawing on its experience with projects in Latin America and the Caribbean, ACCION International, a U.S. PVO based in Cambridge, Massachusetts, has been trying to redefine the terms of the debate in order to improve its own performance. For years, ACCION promoted "specific, short-term technical assistance," with the

objective programming among a network of projects.

A key step in the evolution of this system occurred a few years ago when ACCION decided that monthly monitoring indicators would provide members of the network with feedback about their own project performance and allow the U.S. office to keep track of overall institutional growth. As the monthly reports circulated among all the affiliates, local projects began to gain a strong sense that they were part of a larger — indeed regional — development effort, and they began to "compare notes" among themselves. This horizontal feedback capability has enabled individual groups to maximize scarce resources by dividing up responsibility for solving different parts of the development puzzle. While one project tests out a cutting-edge experimental approach to train-

Our business is "teaching a man to fish, not handing him fish." The metaphor breaks down, however, if we are also learning how to fish.

goal of working itself out of a job. This approach assured that a local project would run on its own steam within a specified time. Although staff members still tend to speak in these terms, it has become clear that the language no longer fits ACCION's reality. Dialogue with project participants has forced us to see that meeting their changing needs is not always possible during the typical two- to three-year funding cycle and requires a different kind of relationship on our part.

As a result, ACCION's role has evolved away from the traditional practice among U.S. PVOs of advising several discrete projects individually. It still facilitates the critical North-South mobilization of seed monies, but ACCION's U.S. office now serves as a clearinghouse for coordinating the exchange of technical assistance, information management, and inno-

ing, for example, another project can evaluate a savings mechanism.

Based on ACCION's experience, the following characteristics appear to be critical for the success of an international network:

- 1) The structure should be interdependent rather than epicentric, with frequent contacts among local affiliates as well as between the PVO's central office and the field;

- 2) The U.S. PVO may have responsibility for leveraging financial resources, but control of those resources should be local;

- 3) The primary product of the network is not financial; it is new and innovative technical knowledge; and

- 4) Since that knowledge emerges from concrete project experience, it should be shared among all the affiliates so that they can learn from each other's experience and the level

Development Notes

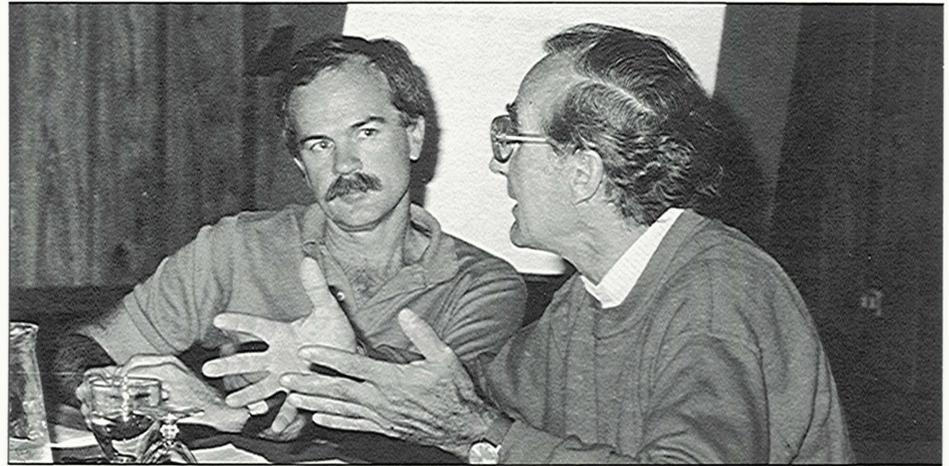
of expertise will rise throughout the network.

During recent years, ACCION's network has increasingly become a system of mutual support that has helped diffuse skills among member institutions and has begun to reach out to other grassroots groups. For example, the assistant to the director of Colombia's Association of Solidarity Groups travels frequently to Peru, Uruguay, Bolivia, and other countries. And all of the members of the network are expected to share their expertise within their countries — whether by teaching a course at a university, serving on the board of another local organization, or advising a community group about setting up a revolving fund. With so many potential benefits close at hand, why let go of a good thing? In this context, the imperative to "cut the cord" seems arbitrary, anachronistic, even paternalistic. It implies that U.S. PVOs have something that local organizations should copy. In ACCION's experience, each actor has an important part in creating the network's final product, but each part thrives only within the whole.

And what is wrong with dependency if it is mutual? That is what mature relationships are all about. U.S. PVOs should acknowledge their dependency upon their affiliates. As long as everyone continues to learn and if the arrangement encourages greater innovation, why not? So far, no one has figured out the one best way to fish. ♦

REBECCA REICHMANN, who holds a doctorate in educational psychology from Harvard Graduate School of Education, is the former director of Training, Research, and Evaluation at ACCION International in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She is currently a program officer for the Ford Foundation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

Opinions expressed in this column are not necessarily those of the Inter-American Foundation. The editors of *Grassroots Development* invite contributions from readers.



Daniel Chauche

Gabriel Cámara (right), a specialist in non-formal education, discusses trends in Latin American grassroots development with Stephen Vetter, IAF Vice President for Programs, at Quo Vadis conference in Antigua, Guatemala.

LISTENING TO THE "BEST VOICES"

"Quo Vadis," a fast-paced conference held in Antigua, Guatemala, brought together a score of IAF staff and distinguished Latin Americans knowledgeable about the Foundation and its work. Discussions focused on trends in Latin American and Caribbean grassroots development and future directions for the IAF.

"The meeting was one of several special events that complement our routine planning in the field and within the Foundation," says Charles Reilly, IAF Vice President for Learning and Dissemination. "We started from the assumption that 'business as usual' is not our only option, but that any changes in our approach should be carefully reviewed with the best voices we have worked with in the region."

The challenges and possibilities facing Latin American nongovernmental development organizations quickly emerged as the central theme of the two-day conference held October 18–20. While their reasons may have differed according to country context, participants all agreed that the role of NGOs in development will be of utmost importance in the near future. In some countries, a number of groups

are being charged with greater responsibility for grassroots development as economic recession or cumbersome bureaucracies force governments to reduce services they previously offered. In others, a return to democracy has offered increased possibilities for action.

In recent years, NGOs have matured in the nature and complexity of projects they can undertake. As a result, channeling funds through NGOs is now "in vogue" among donors such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, and European funders. While discussants were aware of this trend, they also raised a number of concerns. Large development bureaucracies were seen as ill-suited to collaborate with small, often highly specific NGOs. It was also feared that unrealistic attributions and expectations were being generated for these organizations.

Discussants encouraged the IAF to continue to help NGOs sort out their possibilities for greater impact at the grassroots level and to find new ways to collaborate in the development process.

Participants examined the role played by "intermediary" groups, research institutions, and IAF's recently formed In-Country Service (ICS) of-

fices (see "Inside IAF," page 46). They debated the political and social relationship of each of these groups to grassroots (or "base") organizations, and the appropriate relationship of the IAF to each of them.

IAF president Deborah Szekely pointed out: "Although the Foundation is widely known for its grassroots work, in fact the institution has also had a lengthy history of cooperation with intermediary or 'grassroots support' groups. Historically, 75 percent of our grantees have been intermediary organizations, which have received 65 percent of all IAF funding."

Underlying the efforts to distinguish among various development actors was a basic concern for defining the real goals of development assistance. There was general agreement that theoretical concepts of development often have little relevance to the poor themselves, whose primary concern is to meet day-to-day needs and make incremental improvements in their lives.

For development professionals and intermediary groups, however, Quo Vadis participants stated that development as a concept should embrace social goals that enhance the democratization of the region. Discussants cautioned against overreaching in this area, however. Creating "spaces" and accommodating greater freedom of action over time was said to be a modest but realistic achievement, particularly in countries with authoritarian governments.

The balance between IAF's role as a participatory development institution and its role as a "learning" institution was also addressed.

Although the Quo Vadis meeting was not intended to make absolute decisions or even to necessarily find answers to its own questions, many useful suggestions for possible improvements did result:

- Participants encouraged a greater dissemination of the lessons learned from IAF research. They suggested that the IAF not only accumulate information, but look for new ways to

systematize and share what it knows about indigenous development organizations.

- They urged the IAF to fund more projects in urban areas, where an estimated 70 percent of Latin America's population will live by the year 2000.
- They recommended that IAF "education for development" induce greater realism about development processes — their duration and conflictual dimension.
- Youth and the aged were mentioned as two groups about whom more research and support for experimental projects are needed.

Ultimately, conference participants concluded that what may be the most important task in the development process is to promote education on all levels — to produce an environment that enhances poor people's potential for learning.

A complete report on the conference is being prepared. Working papers generated by conference discussion and by individual participants will also be published at a later date.

— *Barbara Annis and Chris Krueger*

MAKING MICROCREDIT WORK

"Colombian microentrepreneurs employ 43 to 52 percent of the economically active population, yet they are characterized by poor housing, malnutrition, and little access to public services," says Carlos Castello of Asociación Grupos Solidarios, Colombia. Castello and development practitioners from India and Costa Rica described their experiences in administering microcredit programs at a forum in Washington, D.C., last September. Sponsored by nine U.S. PVOs, the forum, "Making Microcredit Work," was held to increase understanding of the need for microcredit in developing countries and to gain support for related legislation introduced last spring in the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate.

"Microenterprises provide products and services for all income groups, including the commercialization and marketing of formal sector products," explained Castello. And in contrast to the high cost of creating formal sector jobs, informal sector jobs can be created with an investment of \$200 to \$1,500. However, microentrepreneurs in Colombia and elsewhere have difficulty obtaining credit from commercial banks, and usually must resort to borrowing from moneylenders at exorbitant interest rates.

Groups such as Asociación Grupos Solidarios, the Working Women's Forum of India, and the Foundation for International Community Assistance (FINCA) are approaching the problems of microentrepreneurs by providing very small loans for working capital with short repayment periods. The specifics of such microcredit programs vary and may include savings components, business skills training, and technical assistance. But these programs share one thing: Over 90 percent of their loans are repaid promptly, and in full.

U.S. Congressmen Benjamin Gilman and Edward Feighan and Senator Dennis DeConcini introduced legislation to support groups such as Castello's in reaching the poorest populations of the developing world. Making credit available is seen as a cost-effective way of fighting hunger and disease among the poor. The final legislation provides for a \$50 million microenterprise program. While administered by USAID, emphasis will be on channeling funds through local nongovernmental organizations.

— *Anna M. DeNicolo*

MICROENTERPRISES ON DISPLAY

While policymakers discussed microcredit in Washington, D.C., Asesoría Dinámica a Microempresas (ADMIC) held its first annual convention of mi-

croentrepreneurs in Monterrey, Mexico, revealing, in the process, the organization's success in providing this type of credit. Like the groups represented at the forum in Washington, ADMIC grants loans to small businesses that cannot qualify for credit through conventional financial institutions.

One hundred small businesses from all over Mexico displayed their wares at the trade fair held September 12–20 to provide exposure for microenterprise products, expand existing markets, and open new ones. ADMIC provided booths and exhibit space at no charge. The array of products included ceramic and leather goods, cabinetry and home furnishings, and home burglar alarms.

ADMIC currently has offices in six Mexican cities, and will soon open offices in four others. The organization assists some 1,600 small businesses in the Monterrey area alone. By offering loans with interest rates below market levels, the group helps small businesses to expand or to purchase new equipment or primary materials for

production. ADMIC also provides advice in accounting, marketing, legal assistance, funding resources, the formation of interest groups, and the creation of new microenterprises.

In its six years of existence, ADMIC's overall success has been considerable. Its most difficult task thus far has been establishing markets abroad because the limited production capacity of most microenterprises does not permit them to produce sufficient volume to compete in international markets. Nevertheless, with the number of small businesses constantly growing, ADMIC has the potential to remain a vital force within the Mexican marketplace.

—Michael Plyler

RESPECT IS VITAL

In an age obsessed by high technology and bottom-line skills, leading educators in Latin America are affirming that the *attitude* projected by an

educator may be more important than the technical knowledge transmitted, and that respect for students is vital, especially for reaching dropouts and those who fall through the widening cracks of institutional education.

These themes emerged in a recent five-day seminar sponsored by the education and cultural departments of the Organization of American States that highlighted the role of the educator in nonformal education. Organized as a free-flowing discussion panel, the seminar was rooted in 15 years of hands-on experience in three unique nontraditional education programs in Peru, Chile, and Colombia, all of which have received grants from the IAF. The programs — Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA), Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación (CIDE), and Fundación Servicio de Orientación Juvenil (FSOJ) — were represented by their founders, Vicente Santuc, Patricio Cariola, and Javier de Nicolás. All three have been successful in fields littered with failed attempts to reach "problem populations" such as highland Indians, subsistence farmers, and street children.

The panelists identified common threads in the philosophy and pedagogy that underlies their programs, and the basic faith in people that motivates them. They debated questions of structure, of scale, and of influence on the formal education system. A constant subtheme was the vital importance in today's Latin America of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). In many instances, NGOs offer the only chance for marginal populations to "practice democracy." They are the link between micro and macro, between "small but beautiful" experimental programs and the massive but increasingly brittle public institutions.

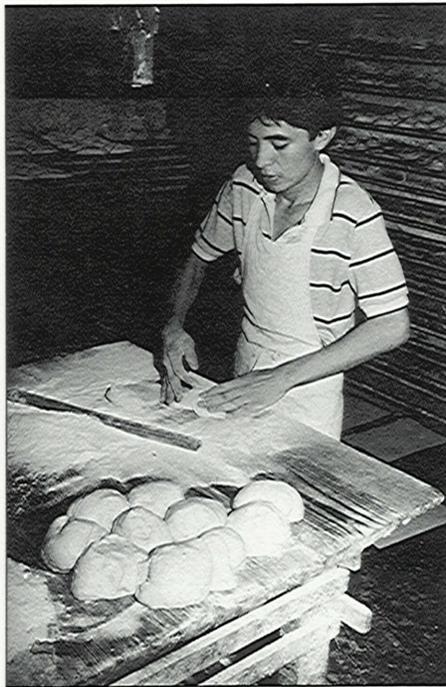
The reflections of this distinguished trio of theorists and practitioners will be edited and published by the OAS technical team headed by Sergio Nilo, Inés Chamorro, and Ana María Duque.

—Marion Ritchey-Vance

photos by Michael Plyler



Left: A young microentrepreneur exhibits shoes and purses at trade fair in Monterrey, Mexico. Right: Behind the scenes, a baker prepares pastries for sale at the fair.





Gamines, or street children, are served by the *Fundación Servicio de Orientación Juvenil* in Bogotá, Colombia. Educators discussed ways to reach such "problem populations" at a conference sponsored by the Organization of American States.

PERU'S INFORMAL SECTOR

Although the informal sector is frequently viewed as a problem because of its lack of regulation, this group has proven to be a highly productive and democratic component of society in Peru: An estimated 48 percent of that country's labor force is employed in the informal sector, producing 39 percent of the nation's GNP.

In November, specialists gathered at a conference in Lima to examine the informal sector from a multidisciplinary point of view. The meeting, organized by the Instituto de Desarrollo Económico of the Escuela de Administración de Negocios para Graduados (IDE/ESAN), explored how concepts of law, social behavior, economic redistribution, and political participation have been created that parallel established norms. Fernando Fuenzalida, anthropology professor at Perú's Catholic University, characterized the informal process as a "rupture of the established social contract that has brought about a new legality — meshing traditional values and informal ways." In addition, there is an essentially democratic element to the process, which is based upon non-discrimination, collective contracts, competitiveness, and a pragmatic sense of justice.

Conference participants also addressed the role of women in the informal sector. For many poor families, the wages women earn through work in this sector are essential for survival. Women's participation is especially noted in the sale of retail goods and processed foods — activities in which they account for 54 percent of the total vendors. As a result, new patterns of male-female relations are emerging, offering greater equality in opportunities for women.

In light of the current economic crisis that plagues Peru as well as many of its neighbors, those attending the conference viewed informal sector activities as a positive force, a survival strategy of the poor that contributes to the overall quality of life. They also stressed the need for further study of this phenomenon with a focus on its repercussions — especially in terms of social behavior, political participation, and popular organization.

— Miguel Guzmán

MAYA LINGUISTS AGREE ON STANDARD ALPHABET

The Ninth Maya Linguistics Workshop (IX Taller de Linguística Maya), held in Antigua, Guatemala, yielded exciting results for the region's linguis-

tic community. Following discussions among four Mexican and Guatemalan Maya linguistics organizations, the Guatemalans adopted a standard alphabet developed in part by Sna Jtz'ibajom, a Mexican writers' cooperative supported by the Inter-American Foundation and the Smithsonian Institution. Their decision was then signed into law by Guatemalan president Vinicio Cerezo.

During the June 1987 workshop, Sna Jtz'ibajom exchanged ideas with the Academia de las Lenguas Mayas de Guatemala, PRONEBI (the Guatemalan government linguistic agency), and the Asociación de Escritores Mayances de Guatemala, reporting on its bilingual publication activities and Tzotzil literacy program. The group also presented puppet and live theater performances.

As a writers' cooperative, Sna Jtz'ibajom, or House of the Writer, has three functions. First, it collects customs and folktales from elderly Mexican Indians and publishes them in bilingual (Spanish/Tzotzil or Spanish/Tzeltal) booklets for distribution to Indian communities. It performs puppet theater dramas based on the contents of the booklets, as well as on topics such as bilingual education, alcoholism, and medicinal herbs. Finally, it conducts a literacy program in Tzotzil. So far, three teachers have awarded 75 diplomas to students ranging in age from 10 to 60. Fifty additional students were expected to graduate in December 1987.

Sna Jtz'ibajom recently traveled to the United States to perform at K'inál Winik, a festival of Maya art, language, and culture held at Cleveland State University. Following the festival, the group presented its puppet theater in Washington, D.C., at an event sponsored by the Smithsonian Institution and the Mexican Embassy.

Sna Jtz'ibajom is scheduled to host the Tenth Maya Linguistics Workshop in San Cristóbal, Chiapas, Mexico, in July 1988.

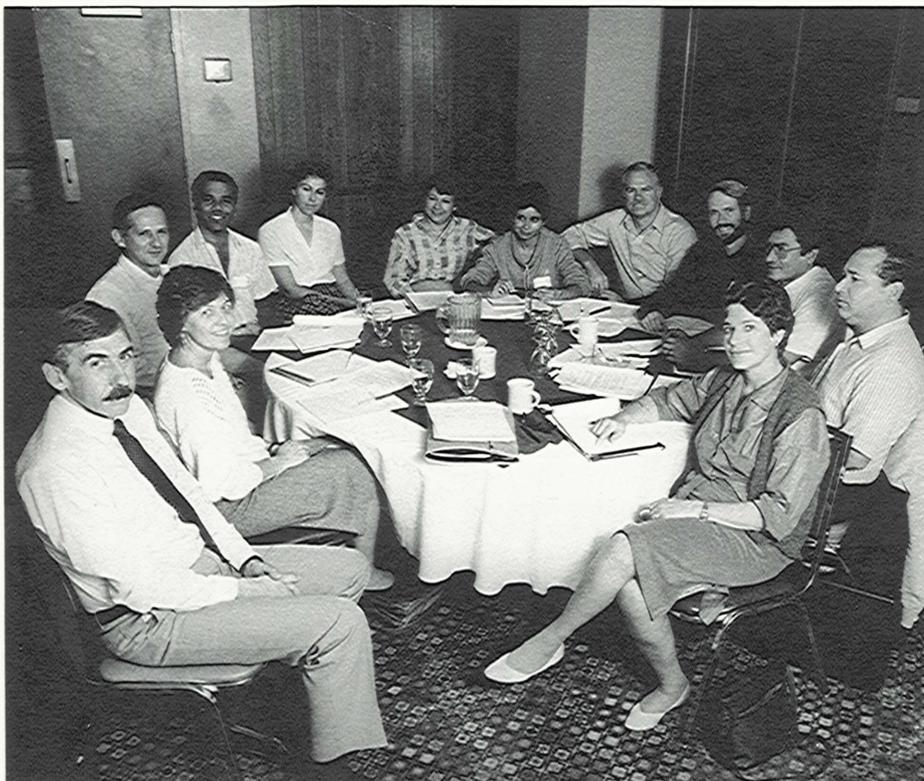
— Robert Laughlin ◆

Inside IAF

Bridging the Gaps

Edmund Benner

Miguel Sayago



Participants in one of several working groups at IAF "In-Country Support" conference held in Washington, D.C., last October discussed ways to improve support to grantee organizations.

Although many days are quiet carbon copies of each other at the Inter-American Foundation office, today would be different. The field representative knew it as soon as he opened his first letter from the morning mail and began to read a report from the project consultant in Peru. The letter struck a sad and troublesome note:

When I arrived for my second visit, the members of the honey producing cooperative received me with the usual courtesies, but it was obvious that they were troubled. And rightly so. For reasons unknown, their bees had suddenly stopped producing honey at the levels of the previous two months. Production has now dropped by half in all the

hives, and I'm at a loss about what to tell these people who have invested so much money and hope in this community project.

After reading the full report, the representative knew the project was not proceeding nearly the way he had described it would months ago to the review committee that approved funding after an enthusiastic exchange of lofty development rhetoric. Concerned, he immediately telephoned the Peruvian consulting firm that had prepared the report as part of a recent agreement with the IAF to assist selected grantees. What he heard was encouraging. Since the letter had been mailed, the consultants had learned about an expert

on honey production in Paraguay who might be able to provide technical help. The representative immediately authorized the consulting firm in Lima to use special funds so that the expert could visit the honey cooperative in northern Peru.

Two weeks later, a cable from the cooperative manager was received by the representative. It read: "Problems resolved; production level returning to normal. Many thanks."

A year ago, this scenario would have ended on a much different, and much more dismal, note. The representative who visits his assigned country about once every two or three months and is responsible for tracking more than 50 projects in process while studying new grassroots development proposals received by the IAF, would not have been made aware of the beekeepers' dilemma — certainly not in time to do anything about it. Further, even if he had known, there was no rapid funding method to provide emergency assistance.

The successful outcome in Peru and the many similar stories throughout the hemisphere are the result of efforts by the Inter-American Foundation to bridge these gaps. Recognizing the importance of providing quality follow-up to funded grants, the IAF has initiated during the past three years 23 formal agreements with consulting firms comprised exclusively of local professionals and technicians. Such field-based technical assistance programs, which are known as "In-Country Support" (ICS), are now available to grantees in every country of Latin America and the Caribbean.

Because each country is different, the projects funded and ICS systems have distinguishing characteristics also. These differences were readily apparent during the first meeting of the directors of the 25 ICS offices held in Washington, D.C., in October 1987. During a full week of meetings to discuss ways to heighten sensitivity and improve support to grantees, both IAF program staff and the ICS directors

Reviews

emphasized the need for flexibility in the design and methodology of monitoring grantee projects while at the same time stimulating grantees to strengthen their organizations through better communications and participation.

These discussions also revealed the diversity of services that qualified professionals can provide. Several ICS offices, for example, already assist with pre-grant project analysis. Others are involved in sectoral studies and expanded learning about such issues as the growing importance of the private sector in development, the networking of grassroots self-help initiatives, and new models of development administration.

The birth of the ICS program within the IAF was neither easy nor uniform. Concern about careful stewardship of funds; fears of exaggerated paternalism that may encourage dependency or, worse, stifle "learning by doing" for the grantees; and the disquieting belief that the ICS systems may make relationships with IAF representatives less personal and thus more like traditional development agencies were among the many themes discussed during the conference.

Importantly, the question now asked within the IAF about the utility of local ICS programs is no longer "whether" they should exist, but "how" they can be more effectively implemented. While encouraged with the initial feedback from the Peruvian beekeepers and other projects, the IAF knows that it must cautiously but optimistically "monitor the monitoring" to ensure that the nascent ICS systems provide a pace and scale of development that remain in tune and in touch with local needs and desires. ◆

EDMUND BENNER, who was a Foundation Representative for Peru from 1974-80 and Peace Corps Director in Ecuador from 1981-84, is currently IAF Program Analysis Officer.

DEVELOPMENT AND DIGNITY: GRASSROOTS DEVELOPMENT AND THE INTER-AMERICAN FOUNDATION by Patrick Breslin. Rosslyn, Virginia: Inter-American Foundation, 1987.

Guillermo O'Donnell

The Inter-American Foundation has a Congressional mandate to serve as a unique development institution. Since its creation, the Foundation has weathered changes in leadership, and not a few political storms, to channel resources directly to grassroots populations who are the very core of poverty in Latin America. To make its task even more difficult, the IAF has steadfastly tried to enhance the personal self-respect, the sense of social awareness, the organizational capabilities, and the social and technical skills of its grant recipients and their communities. These objectives have usually allowed the Foundation to act in a politically unbiased manner, but they are also intangible and not easily verifiable.

These criteria defy the once prevailing view that technocratically oriented aid is the only or the primary way to assist development and, ultimately, social justice. Technical assistance can generate tangible symbols of success — bridges, roads, and the like — but it too often conceals the hidden social and cultural costs of projects that tend to ignore real people and cultures. On the other hand, the achievements of IAF grants are often subtle, indirect, even unmeasurable. What constitutes success or failure is less immediately obvious than in projects that embody tons of steel and concrete — particularly for people who can only think in such terms.

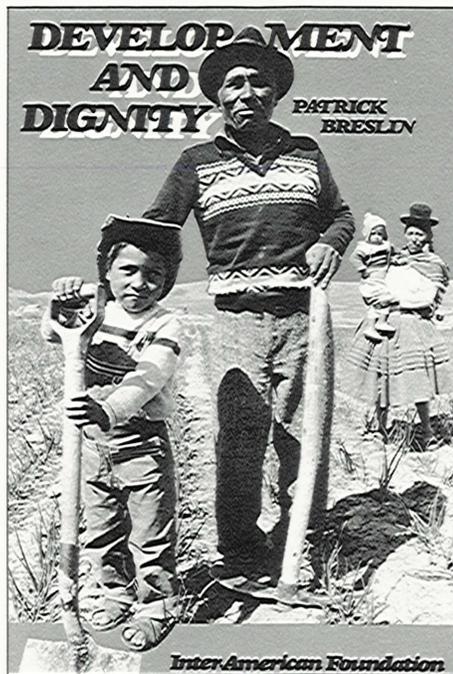
In other words, the Inter-American Foundation's institutional mandate is a guaranteed recipe for trouble. As a Latin American, I have watched, again and again, the earnest representatives of the Foundation, and have admired their passionate commitment to humanistic and social justice as they

struggled desperately to reach the people who most need assistance. I then watched as they tried to assess the effectiveness and sincerity of the often indispensable mediators between themselves and grassroots communities. At times, the almost missionary zeal with which representatives pursued their quest for ironclad guarantees of sincerity was irritating, but I always admired their motivation.

Such a zealous approach could only lead, I felt, to a range of experiences — to many successes, to some (how many?) failures, and to many outcomes that would be neither one nor the other. These hybrids, however, might ultimately provide the most interesting and the richest learning experiences.

The many wonderful stories that result from the IAF history of trial and error, travail and success, are aptly recounted in *Development and Dignity* by Patrick Breslin. The stories in the volume are not just isolated events, as the author correctly argues. They add up to a development pattern that can make a difference. Stories of specific projects blend with the history of the IAF to repeatedly and consistently reveal one of the best sides of the United States — a side all too often concealed by the realities of power politics and the coldly technocratic approaches to some development assistance.

Because it is well written — incorporating a passion for the mission of the Foundation that does not blind the author to the many problems, obstacles, and numerous ambiguities that must be faced by this unorthodox approach to aid — Breslin's book deserves a wide audience. I admit, however, that when I finished reading it I still felt the author owed me something. Even though Breslin mentions the clear failures of the IAF as well as the Foundation's efforts to learn from them, the book does not really analyze them. The problem is not the existence of failed projects. Such failures, even a relatively high rate of failure, are to be expected given the difficulties, subtleties, uncertainties, and most of all, the



and looking toward a challenging future.

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LISTEN TO THE PEOPLE: PARTICIPANT-OBSERVER EVALUATION OF DEVELOPMENT PROJECTS, by Lawrence F. Salmen. New York: Oxford University Press (published for The World Bank), 1987.

Charles A. Reilly

Reading this book led me to conclude that Michelangelo's approach to sculpture and Larry Salmen's approach to the evaluation of development projects may have much in common. The great Italian master contrasted two approaches to sculpting — *giving* form to a mass of marble, and *freeing* a form hidden within it. In the field of development, the outside bankers or planners who diagnose a set of needs and proceed to implement a solution often take the first path — they impose form. The second choice, Michelangelo's own liberating style, is reflected in a participant-observer approach that permits the aspirations, values, priorities, and needs of the people themselves to emerge.

Listen to the People is a tidy book with a clear and uncomplicated message for development managers. It expands the "participant-observer" approach familiar to anthropologists, then translates its core elements for managers of development projects. Salmen's con-

clusions are based on observations of a World Bank-supported experiment to find out from the beneficiaries how housing and community development projects in La Paz, Bolivia, and Guayaquil, Ecuador, could be improved. The experiment also included training local people to show that listener-evaluators could be taught in the field.

"Participant observation evaluation as described in this book is an eclectic blend of techniques designed to interpret the real world of the intended project beneficiaries — their perceived needs, hopes, and frustrations — so as to contribute to the decisionmaking needs of project managers," writes Salmen. While acknowledging the usefulness of quantitative data and systematic interviewing techniques, the author places still higher value on information and insights gathered from "conversational interviewing" and the observation of daily activities.

The book includes some subtle indictments of the way development projects are frequently imposed: "There is often an assumption among development professionals that a good development project sells itself. The project is seen to have a viability apart from the people for whom it is intended." The author asserts that this is a problem "endemic to the nature of development work itself when people of very diverse status and experience attempt to work together without first establishing the common ground necessary for mutual understanding and dialogue."

There are, however, remedies. For example, Salmen's discussions with a community in La Paz led the group to hire its own part-time technical experts — what Salmen calls "peoples' professionals" — to serve as counterparts to those from the implementing agencies. "These 'peoples' professionals' could help ensure better execution of the project, better response to community needs, better communication between community and executing agency, and ultimately greater satisfaction on the part of community residents."

experimental character of the Foundation's activities. The only way to avoid failure (without simply concealing the fact, as many organizations do) would be to ignore or to profoundly distort the Foundation's mandate. The fact that Foundation leaders and officers have not chosen to play it safe by bureaucratizing their operations and their goals is a great credit. Nevertheless, we may all have been denied important lessons by not having a more thorough examination of failed projects and initiatives.

Taking risks and assuming a certain rate of failure is a necessary condition for learning. Finding what doesn't work, and why, are sometimes important steps toward finding what does work. The ability to deepen and broaden these lessons in ways that are consistent with one's institutional mandate is the acid test for measuring the vitality of any organization.

The initiative that led to Breslin's book, its content, and the debate it will surely provoke are all welcome signals that learning continues at the Inter-American Foundation. The IAF is alive

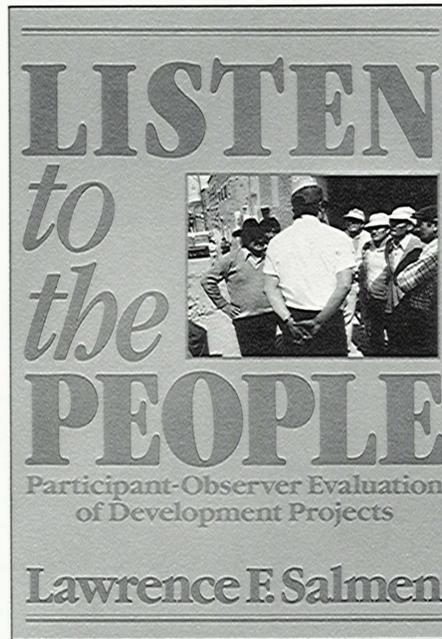
Resources

Vivid descriptions of three communities where Salmen lived and worked are particularly engaging. The accounts of his stays (which averaged five months) are what cultural anthropologist Clifford Geertz calls "thick description." Through time and talk, Salmen learned such things as how much people really value drinking water through standpipes and spigots, and the problems participants encounter with "expandable core" housing projects that leave major construction tasks to the potential residents themselves. Specifically, he found that residents of one community rejected clean drinking water because they were badly informed about the project. The negative interpretation, he writes, was ultimately traced back to "community leaders" of one political party who were unwilling to associate with municipal authorities from an opposition party.

Salmen concludes his argument for participatory development with a set of precepts for participant-observation. His suggestions for development managers are not simply to be nondirective and responsive. He urges them to learn the project setting well; be adaptable; blend quantitative and qualitative information; focus on issues useful for project managers; be aware of project goals without being bound by them; have profound regard for *confianza*, or trust, in relationships with people; and, finally, to see oneself as a bridge between the project manager and beneficiaries.

Listen to the People effectively sums up a nontraditional development approach that is, nevertheless, familiar to many nongovernmental development organizations. One wonders, though, why Salmen makes so few references to the anthropological works that spawned participant-observation techniques. Even more serious is his inattention to excellent studies by Latin Americans. For example, while Paulo Freire's work may be unacceptable to some development institutions, it has had great impact throughout the hemi-

sphere and should not be ignored. The bibliography and references, in general, could also have been richer—but then—the book might cease being tidy. The essential message can be delivered without appeal to such authorities.



Yet, after four decades of development assistance, it is sad that this message needs sending at all, sadder still that there is something of a eureka quality to its announcement. People are indeed the measure, but quantitative data and national income statistics have too long constrained the imaginations of development professionals.

CHARLES A. REILLY, former IAF Representative for Brazil and Mexico, is now Vice President for Learning and Dissemination. ◆

Development education is a hot topic these days in development circles. Increasingly, those who work in development are becoming aware of the need to better inform themselves and the U.S. public of the issues involved in foreign assistance, and to provide quality educational resources for those both here and abroad.

The material in this column was culled from the growing collection of information on this subject. The editors of Grassroots Development welcome suggestions for other new material that might be reviewed in future issues.

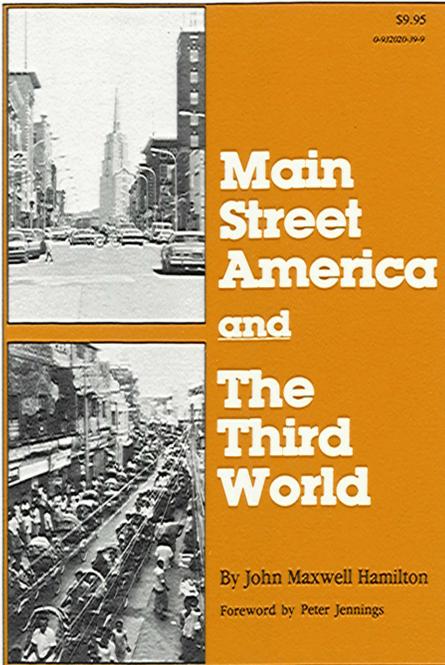
Explaining how U.S. and Third World interests are intertwined has become an important priority for a number of development organizations, and a plethora of publications now stress the links between well-being in the United States and the developing world.

Main Street America and the Third World, for example, vividly illustrates U.S.-Third World interdependence through the presentation of case studies drawn from life on Main Street, USA.

Written by John Maxwell Hamilton, a former foreign correspondent and World Bank official, the book presents 23 stories about how U.S. farmers, data processors, longshoremen, and many others depend on foreign countries for their livelihoods.

The stories are drawn from newspaper accounts around the country and are chock-full of supporting data. Frequently the articles present one side of the import-export story, then the other. For example, "Imports Posing Threats to Jobs in Blackstone" describes the effects of Brazilian and other shoe imports on a small manufacturing town; but "Third World Imports: Good Business" talks about the savings consumers realize from cheaper imports.

A useful appendix, entitled "Bringing the Third World to the Classroom," makes suggestions on how to use *Main Street America* at the college level, and



suggests that it is particularly suited to journalism classes.

Another appendix provides additional useful resources, including the findings of two public opinion polls showing how the U.S. public views Third World news, along with 27 charts, and numerous maps, tables, and photographs.

The Carnegie Corporation and the Ford and Benton Foundations provided funding to Sigma Delta Chi (a research affiliate of the Society of Professional Journalists), which sponsored the two-year project. The book is available for \$9.95 from Seven Locks Press, P.O. Box 27, Cabin John, MD 20818.

The *NGO Networker* is a new newsletter published by World Resources Institute (WRI). It was initially intended to provide ongoing communication for participants from some 80 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) who took part in WRI-sponsored tropical forestry workshops.

Before the first edition was printed, however, the newsletter had expanded

far beyond tropical deforestation to embrace a broader range of environmental and development topics — especially the question of how to involve organizations of the poor in finding solutions to local problems. Topics in the first issue, which came out in September 1987, range from brief reports on meetings NGOs held with the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank to a description of a new network of environmental groups in Central America (REDES); to an editorial by WRI president Gus Speth; to a calendar of future conferences and a list of publications.

According to its editor Bill Nagle, the *Networker* is offered in the spirit of “willingness to learn from and listen to each other,” and members of the NGO community are welcome to quote, borrow, and reproduce its contents.

A free quarterly publication, *NGO Networker* will be offered in the future in Spanish and French as well as in English. To obtain a subscription, contact: World Resources Institute, 1735 New York Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20006. (Tel: 202/638-6300)

The Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies, among its wide range of activities, sometimes takes a playful but nonetheless serious approach to development education. *Bullets and Ballots: A Learning Game on Central America* is one such example.

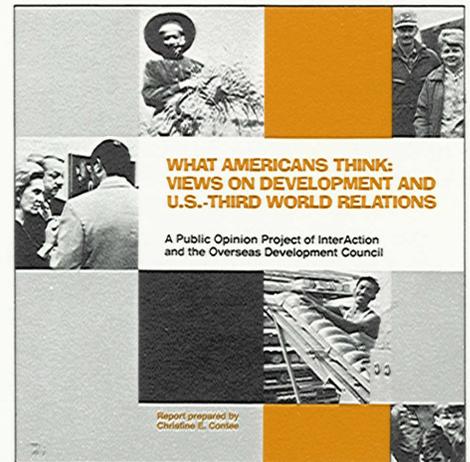
The board game assigns roles (you are the government of Guatemala, you are the United States, you are the campesinos, you are the guerrillas) to be played through a variety of simulated events. Players are forced to make decisions that reverse usual roles and biases, leaving them with a greater understanding of the complexities of Central American regional problems.

The nonpartisan policy study center has also produced a *Central American Primer*, which attempts to provide an easily read, objective, country-by-country account of the events leading

up to the current situation in Central America.

Both *Bullets and Ballots* and the *Central American Primer* are available from the Roosevelt Center for American Policy Studies (Products Department), 316 Pennsylvania Avenue SE, Suite 500, Washington, DC 20003. (Tel: 202/547-7227)

What Americans Think: Views on Development and U.S.-Third World Relations, A Public Opinion Project of InterAction and the Overseas Development Council makes a strong argument for development education in the United States.



On the down side, the survey finds strong negative perceptions among U.S. citizens about Third World governments and the efficacy of development assistance. It finds that U.S. policymakers perceive public support for economic assistance to be weak; that the public is poorly informed about foreign policy in general, and particularly about Third World development; and that many North Americans are concerned about the over-involvement of the United States in the affairs of developing countries.

On the other hand, the survey also finds that a majority favors efforts to assist Third World countries with development; that they believe economic relationships between the U.S. and developing countries hold potentially

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mutual benefits; and that they strongly support foreign assistance for humanitarian purposes.

The report is available from the co-sponsoring organizations for \$8.95. Write to: InterAction, 200 Park Avenue South, New York, NY 10003, or the Overseas Development Council, 1717 Massachusetts Avenue NW, Washington, DC 20036.

If it were necessary to select only one resource on development education, one might well choose *ACCESS: The Information on Global and International Education*.

This cooperative newsletter (prepared by Global Perspectives in Education, Inc., the National Council on Foreign Language and International Studies, and the Council for Intercultural Studies and Programs) provides comprehensive and detailed information on international educational resources and news.

The publication organizes resources according to the group for whom the materials are intended (for example, university students or elementary school pupils); it discusses development-related issues involving the U.S. government; and it reports on local and state development activities, including grant and scholarship awards.

ACCESS also provides timely articles on global education issues such as "New England in a World Economy." Among other development-related statistics, this recent article informs readers that New England has \$15 billion in export-related manufacturing activity, 2.8 million acres owned by foreigners, and a third of its trade with multinational companies. The article stresses that competitiveness requires knowing the competition and the way they work, and describes the importance of cross-cultural communication.

ACCESS is available, for \$25 per year, from Global Perspectives in Education, Inc., 45 John Street, Suite 1200, New York, NY 10038. (Tel: 212/732-8606)

— Barbara Annis ◆

We read with great interest Albert O. Hirschman's book *El Avance en Colectividad (Getting Ahead Collectively)*, which was reviewed in Vol. 10, No. 2 of your journal. It satisfies a tremendous need: the recognition of work being done by grassroots organizations throughout Latin America and the Caribbean.

Hirschman hits the mark — what he has to say is both accurate and positive. Truly, we feel as he does that "education is but the first link in a chain of events that leads to integrated development."

The book will be read and discussed in courses at the Federación para la Capacitación Organizativa de las Comunidades (FUNCOG). It shows once again how well the Inter-American Foundation understands grassroots organizations in Latin America.

HUGO AND LEONOR ACEROS
FUNCOG
Cartagena, Colombia

Thank you for publishing Daphne White's item on the Red Latinoamericana de Documentación en Educación (REDUC), which appeared in Vol. 11, No. 1.

I would like to add that in addition to the regional abstracts published through the Centro de Investigación y Desarrollo de la Educación (CIDE) mentioned by the author, centers affiliated with REDUC also produce summaries of research conducted in each member country. This means a total annual production of some 2,500 summaries. To date, over 12,000 documents have been compiled by REDUC.

Full-length studies, summaries, and indices are available at each REDUC center, or they can be obtained by mail. In the near future, researchers will also be able to access the summaries by computer.

LUIS A. BRAHM
CIDE
Santiago, Chile

I recently came across my first copy of *Grassroots Development*, which I found stimulating and informative.

I am particularly interested in its subject matter, since I am aware of no other publication devoted to solving the problems of development through the use of local resources. It is refreshing to find there are others who believe that huge sums of money from outsiders will not solve the Third World's development problems.

THOMAS J. MONTGOMERY
New York, New York

We are readers in Asia who benefit very much from articles in *Grassroots Development*. What we find useful for our own work at the grassroots level is the specific experiential base upon which the authors of the articles draw their insights and conclusions.

The other sections, such as Forum, Development Notes, and profiles of IAF scholars, also reinforce the practical and motivational orientation that we, in another part of the globe, nevertheless can appreciate and learn from.

ANTONIO L. LEDESMA
Director

Center for Development of Human
Resources in Rural Asia
Manila, Philippines



Postscript

With this issue, *Grassroots Development* proudly enters its second decade of continuous publication. From a small, basically in-house newsletter launched in 1977, it has grown into a well-respected professional journal with a circulation of over 13,000 readers around the world.

Over the past 10 years, scores of articles written on dozens of topics by leading authorities in the social sciences have appeared. However, information is only as useful as it is accessible, and the need for a detailed index became more acute with each new issue.

Although it proved to be a monumental task (back copies of some issues were almost impossible to locate), the process of compiling the following index revealed much about the course of grassroots development in Latin America and the Caribbean over the past decade. From an early emphasis on cooperatives and community development, the focus then changed to such topics as self-help housing, credit, and culture as the journal — and grassroots development — evolved. While continuing to examine these crucial issues, today's contents also re-

flect increasing interest in subjects such as the environment, microenterprises, and development education.

Indeed, this backward glance prompted many a discussion as to future directions for the journal. Before considering any changes, however, we decided that a readership survey was in order to find out exactly who is receiving *Grassroots Development* and what they think about its contents.

A questionnaire was designed and sent to a random sample of 1,000 subscribers, including recipients of both the English and Spanish language editions. According to the profile that emerged, the typical reader of both editions is a male between the ages of 40 and 50 (Spanish readers are somewhat younger). Most English subscribers work in academia and development organizations, while Spanish readers are likely to be actively involved with development projects.

Response to specific questions showed that the journal is seen most often as an "idea source," "cultural information," "news source," "relevant," and "educational," and least often as "too scholarly," and "not useful." Generally speaking, the survey confirmed

that *Grassroots Development* enjoys a quite positive image among its primary constituencies — university professors and development professionals.

In addition to the journal, other materials produced by the Inter-American Foundation are also being favorably received. *Hopeful Openings*, an IAF-sponsored study of five Latin American and Caribbean women's organizations written by Sally Yudelman, was a candidate for the 1987 World Hunger Media Award, and its publisher, Kumarian Press, informs us that it is currently their bestselling title in bookstores. Two IAF videos, "The Women's Construction Collective" and "The First Step," also received accolades recently when they were selected as finalists and shown at the XII Reseña Mundial, an annual Latin American film and video festival held in Acapulco, Mexico.

We wish to thank those of you who participated in the readership survey and hope other subscribers will let us hear from them as well.

Kathryn Shaw

grassroots development video series

1 THE WOMEN'S CONSTRUCTION

COLLECTIVE OF JAMAICA (Running time 12:45 minutes)

A fast paced, upbeat motivational story about 10 unemployed, young black women, selected from the ghettos of Kingston and trained in the construction trade skills. They are currently operating their own construction and carpentry business and working on commercial construction sites.

Format Requested: NTSC Secam PAL
 1/2-inch BETA 3/4-inch Broadcast/Professional 1/2-inch VHS

2 A COOPERATIVE WITHOUT BORDERS: THE FIRST STEP

(Cooperativa Sin Fronteras: El Primer Paso)
(Running time 21 minutes)

A Cooperative Without Borders: The First Step depicts the Mexican migrant workers' struggle for survival and new hope for the future. The cooperative's peasant members are working with U.S. citrus growers and funding organizations to improve economic conditions in rural Mexico as an alternative to migration.

Format Requested: NTSC Secam PAL
 1/2-inch BETA 3/4-inch Broadcast/Professional 1/2-inch VHS

3 Currently in Progress . . .

A peasant community in the north central Andes of Peru repopulates its communal highland with alpacas. Available after April 1, 1988.

YES, I wish to receive video 1 2 in English Spanish and will pay \$15 (U.S. money order made payable to West Glen Films) per video ordered for postage and handling only.

NAME (PLEASE PRINT) _____
ADDRESS _____
CITY _____ STATE _____
COUNTRY _____ ZIP _____

Clip order form and send with payment to: Inter-American Foundation, Grassroots Development Video Series, 1515 Wilson Blvd., Rosslyn, Virginia, U.S.A 22209.

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For convenient reference, the Index has been divided into categories by authors, titles, subjects, and IAF grantee organizations. Names in parentheses refer to authors of book reviews or shorter notes.

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