

# **Community-Based and Non-Governmental Organizations in Urban Development in Mexico City: The Case of San Miguel Teotongo**

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# Community-Based and Non-Governmental Organizations in Urban Development in Mexico City: The Case of San Miguel Teotongo

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## Introduction

Until recently developing countries religiously maintained social welfare models inherited from the colonial era. In the context of these models urban public service provisioning is viewed as the exclusive responsibility of the state. However, the rapidly declining revenue generation ability of municipal governments in these countries has seriously hampered the state's ability to fulfil its professed obligation in this regard. Consequently, there has been a progressive shift away from orthodox planning models especially in the provision of urban infrastructure and of public and social services. Authorities in the developing world now recognize the ability of ordinary citizens to play important roles in the urban development process. This recognition has been given concrete form in the many community self-help projects that have been taking place in urban and rural areas throughout the developing world since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly, the alternative planning models that have recently been adopted in this part of the world possess conspicuous community or citizen participation (CP) elements. In practice, a growing number of municipal authorities not only welcome but actively solicit CP in the urban development policymaking process today. The case study of Colombo, which is also part of Chapter Three of the Global Report on Human Settlements (GRHS) 2009, highlights the tendency to actively solicit the input of citizens in the urban policymaking process on the part of the Government of Sri Lanka in general and authorities in the Colombo metro-area in particular. Self-help community projects can be seen as the involvement of citizens in the urban policymaking process.

Although CP has been growing increasingly popular, as a concept in urban planning, it remains largely unknown. This case-study is intended to shed light on CP as a viable strategy for improving the effectiveness of urban planning. It accomplishes this objective by examining the urban development projects of two grassroots organizations in the San Miguel informal settlement in the Iztapalapa municipality (see Figure 2), which is part of the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (MCMA) in Mexico (see Figure 1). One of the organizations, the Union of San Miguel Teotongo (*Unión de Colonos de San Miguel Teotongo*) (UCSMT), is a community-based organization (CBO) and the other, (*Fomento Solidario de la Vivienda*) FOSOFI is a non-governmental organization (NGO).<sup>2</sup> The choice of these particular organizational bodies is contingent on the fact that they have demonstrated an unparalleled ability to employ unorthodox strategies to tackle complex planning problems.<sup>3</sup> More specifically, the choice of the case-study focus is important for the following reasons:

- knowledge of the urban problems of Metro-Mexico City and efforts to address them can be useful in other developing countries;

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1 See e.g., Anderson (1971); Bah (1992); Kyessi (2005); Madu & Umebali (1993); Njoh (2003, 2002); Nye (1963)

2 As used in this report, a CBO refers to an organization that has been formed in specific community with the stated aim of addressing one or more of that community's problem. An NGO is a non-governmental organization that has been created to deal with one or more issues in a region, or one or more countries.

3 Moctezuma (2001); Magazine (2003); MNSMUP (2006)

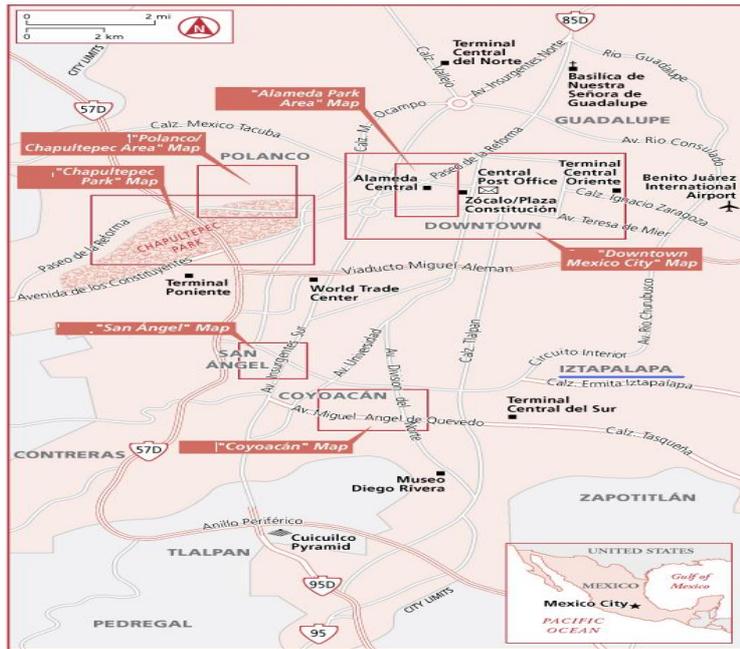
- knowledge of the methodology employed to promote community participation in San Miguel Teotongo, can be very useful to similar efforts elsewhere.
- lessons of experience from efforts of the target community-based organizations (CBOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to fill gaps in urban policymaking left behind by the state in Mexico City can be of immeasurable utility to similar efforts in other parts of the world.

The report is organized as follows. The next section provides background information on the Mexico City Metro-Area, the target organizations and their geo-administrative areas of jurisdiction. Next, it describes the institutional framework for participatory urban planning in Mexico City. A subsequent section chronicles some of the major accomplishments of the target organizations. Finally the report identifies and discusses the factors that have contributed to the CBOs' success and as well as lessons that can be gleaned from the case-study.



**Figure 1: Mexico in Regional Context**

*Source: Lonelyplanet.com (Online)*



**Figure 2: Map of Metro-Mexico City showing Iztapalapa (underlined in blue)**

*Source: Fromers.com (Online)*

## Background

### The Mexico City Metro-Area

Mexico City Metro-Area (MCMA) has a population of 19.3 million, the largest in the western hemisphere and the third largest in the world.<sup>4</sup> More importantly for the purpose of this report, it is a metropolis of striking contrasts. Some of its inhabitants enjoy modern urban amenities comparable to those available to residents of some cities of the global North. Yet, a substantial majority of this population survives literally on the fringes of the urban economy and space. Focusing on one of its most impoverished municipalities, San Miguel Teotongo, affords an opportunity to appreciate the specific forms of struggle that most urban residents of the global South engage in on a daily basis. This report will demonstrate the innovative nature of the marginalized residents of the MCMA and show how they have employed their ingenuity to create independent community organizations through which they mobilize the resources necessary for meeting some of their most pressing communal needs.

The Mexican government's national development policies, dating back to the colonial era, have always favoured the city as a location for industrial activities. This means among other things that the government has dedicated almost its entire public infrastructure budget to the urban areas, particularly the federal government district or the central Mexico City region. However, over the years, while the city has grown demographically and spatially, the state has become less capable of providing the quality and quantity of public infrastructure necessary

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<sup>4</sup> Population figure is for 2005

for urban functioning. Presently, most public infrastructure and services are obsolete and confined only to the city centre, where 20 percent of the population does not have internal plumbing.<sup>5</sup> Areas at the city's fringes, where the poor are crammed in informal settlements have very limited to no access to basic services such as water, sanitation, electricity, educational and recreational facilities. Housing remains one of Mexico City's most nagging problems—one that has pre-occupied both national and international analysts, bureaucrats and politicians during the last half century. The problem is a function of a combination of inextricably interrelated factors, including but not limited to rapid rates of urbanization, unemployment and poverty. The problem tends to manifest itself in many ways, prominent amongst which are the growth and proliferation of informal settlements usually at the peripheries of the urban centres.

The Mexican state's reaction to these settlements has fluctuated since the 1940s. In the 1960s, the Mexican state adopted a policy that was designed to promote an 'elitist' modern urban environment free of informal settlements. This policy dictated the destruction of all informally generated housing, which was considered to be aesthetically unappealing elements of the urban environment. In the 1970s, due to a lack of resources, and pressure from popular or grassroots movements, the state, adopted a *laissez-faire* attitude towards informal settlements. The efforts of grassroots organizations or the *Movimiento Urbano Popular* (MUP) who worked indefatigably to thwart government efforts designed to evict people from informal settlements, were buttressed by those of scholars and researchers such as John F.C. Turner.<sup>6</sup> Citizens working on their own, but mostly in groups, have played the most significant role in the city's housing supply process. Informal housing comprise approximately 50 percent of the total urbanized area of Metro-Mexico City and house about two-thirds of its population.<sup>7</sup>

However, the complexity of some aspects of the housing supply process is often beyond the scope of citizens and citizen groups, thereby necessitating the services of experts. In this regard, citizen groups in informal settlements are well-known for soliciting the assistance of volunteers and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with expertise in building construction and urban land acquisition and development.

## **The Target Organizations, FOSOVI and UCSMT**

### **FOSOVI**

The Solidarity Housing Promotion (*Fomento Solidario de la Vivienda, FOSOVI*) is a non-governmental organization (NGO) operating in the urban development sector in the Mexico City Metro-Area.<sup>8</sup> FOSOVI was established in 1989. It is an offshoot of another NGO, *Centro Operacional de Vivienda y Poblamiento* (COPEVI), which was founded in 1965. FOSOVI's main role in this sector is to assist residents of informal settlements and other low-income groups in matters such as securing legal title to land they might have initially invaded or occupied as squatters. In this regard, it helps its clients prepare building plans or identify and approach real property development funding entities. It also provides assistance in matters relating to the design of new housing units, and the modification of existing ones. Particularly noteworthy for the purpose of this case-study is FOSOVI's propensity for participatory decision-making. In this regard, FOSOVI has an avowed policy of including members of any

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5 City Mayors (2005)

6 See Turner (1976); Turner (1968); Turner & Fichter (1972); Turner (1968)

7 Connolly (2003)

8 UN-HABITAT (2004); Romero, Nava & Palacios (1994)

given community in planning activities designed to ameliorate living conditions in that community.

FOSOFI is reputed for crafting innovative strategies for addressing the housing problems of impoverished members of society. Its methods for accomplishing its objectives hinge tightly on the principles of participatory planning. In this connection, it designs “houses and neighborhoods in collaboration with the people themselves.”<sup>9</sup> FOSOFI is a member of Habitat International Coalition (HIC) and in Mexico, it is part of Habitat-Mexico as well as the regional organ, Habitat-Latin America. This new approach to producing housing captures the essence of the concept of Social Production of Habitat. The approach counts amongst its many merits the fact that it guarantees variety in the housing stock. In addition, it produces housing in places that are not far-removed from the centre of action. Finally, it permits families to develop and modify their housing units as time, financial and other resources permit.

## UCSMT

The Union of San Miguel and Teotongo Residents (*Unión de Colonos de San Miguel Teotongo*) UCSMT is a community-based organization (CBO) that was organized by the inhabitants of San Miguel Teotongo in 1974/75.<sup>10</sup> As its name suggests, this CBO operates in San Miguel Teotongo, which is an informal settlement that was established in the early-1970s by two main groups.<sup>11</sup> The first groups comprised indigenous migrants who were displaced from the lost Sierra Mixteca town of Teotongo in Oaxaca. The second included individuals fleeing appalling conditions in the city centre characterized by high rents, precarious levels of congestion and crime rates. At the time of its creation, some of the most urgent needs of this informal settlement were the lack of water, schools, health centres and transportation services and infrastructure. San Miguel Teotongo is a rapidly growing community with 80,000 inhabitants occupying a land area of 260 hectares in the Iztapalapa municipality on the southeastern outskirts of the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (see Fig. 3). Iztapalapa has a population of 1.7 million. It is the most populous, densest and least economically developed of the Metro-Mexico City’s sixteen municipalities (also known as delegations, boroughs or districts).<sup>12</sup> The municipality is inhabited mainly by immigrants from the states of Oaxaca, Puebla and Michoacán.

## Participatory Urban Planning in Mexico

A useful approach to analyzing citizen participation in the urban planning process in Mexico is to consider it as consisting of two main variants, namely top-down and bottom-up.

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9 UN-HABITAT (2004)

10 See Rights & Democracy (Online); Moctezuma (2001); Romero, Nava & Palacios (1994)

11 Consensus is lacking with respect to the exact date on which the settlement was established and which group established it. Pedro Moctezuma dates the settlement’s establishment to 1970 and credits “a small group of indigenous migrants” from “the lost Sierra Mixteca town of Teotongo in Oaxaca” with creating the settlement (Moctezuma, 2001: 118). Meanwhile, a report prepared by ‘The Development GAP’ for the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1995, contends that the settlement was established in 1972 “by poor families that left the centre of the city because of high rents and overcrowding” (Development GAP, Online). See Moctezuma (2001); Development Gap (Online)

12 Pike (2005)

## The Top-down Approach

This approach involves government authorities, often as a reaction to international mandates, assuming a leadership role in efforts to involve citizens in the planning process. There are at least three legally binding international conventions addressing different aspects of participatory governance, including the following: the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR), and the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women. Participatory governance initiatives in some countries may simply be an attempt to adhere to covenants such as these. In this case, the state assumes the leadership role in citizen participation promotion efforts.

An examination of past actions of the state and other stakeholders in the urban policy field will go a long way in casting light on the top-down approach to CP in Mexico. The Federal District of Mexico City's Master Plan (*Plan Director*) of 1980 contains a CP element. The main objectives of the element are to: facilitate the plan's diffusion and create a scheme to promote participation of all stakeholders from the level of the neighbourhood block to that of City Hall, *inter alia*. These undoubtedly laudable objectives, which were stipulated on the master plans crafted for other cities throughout the country in the 1980s, were in response to calls for democratization from international change agents such as the United Nations, the United States Agency for International Development and the World Bank/International Monetary Fund. Thus, the inclusion of CP as an element on urban master plans was mainly meant to respond to pressure from outside, as opposed to within, Mexico. The state went as far as setting up neighbourhood councils (*Juntas de Vecinos*) in all 16 delegations or municipalities that made up the Federal District of Mexico City.<sup>13</sup> Each council had at least 20 members who were all local residents. The president of each council occupied a seat on the Consultative Council (*Consejo Consultivo*). At the Block level, the plan provided for representatives to be elected. These elected officials represented the blocks on the neighbourhood councils.

On the strength of this set up alone, it is easy to conclude that an ample degree of citizen participation took place within the framework of the Federal District of Mexico Master Plan of 1980. However, citizens had no more than a consultative role to play in the urban development policymaking process. Particularly, the state granted citizens the privilege to 'propose,' 'inform,' and 'pass opinions' on matters relating to public infrastructure and services—in short, citizens were granted simply the right to be heard.<sup>14</sup> In Mexico City, as in cities in other developing countries, issues on the urban planning agenda are selected and prioritized exclusively by municipal authorities or other agents of the state.

## The bottom-up approach

This approach is spontaneous and typically involves affected societal groups initiating actions with implications for urban spatial structures in an effort to improve their living conditions. Community participation (CP) of the bottom-up variety usually involves members of affected segments of the population organizing themselves and mobilizing the necessary resources to address their basic needs. In Mexico, such efforts now involve citizens constituting CBOs and

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13 Aguilar (1988)

14 Aguilar (1988)

soliciting the expertise of independent NGOs to complete complex tasks such as the following in the housing production and neighbourhood development process:<sup>15</sup>

- land acquisition and title regularization;
- land and housing development contractor and technician selection/hiring;
- housing credit management;
- savings mobilization;
- management of the housing production process; and
- environmental protection and restoration.

The crucial role of CBOs in collaboration with NGOs and agencies of the state in the aftermath of the 1985 earthquakes demonstrated the potency of the bottom-up variant of participatory urban planning.

## **Projects of UCSMT and FOSovi in San Miguel Teotongo**

### **Basic Public Service Deficiencies in San Miguel Teotongo**

Like other informal settlements on the fringes of the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (MCMA), San Miguel Teotongo experienced a population surge soon after it was founded. The surge resulted from its popularity as a destination for rural dwellers in search of greener pastures and inner city inhabitants escaping high housing costs and severe overcrowding. However, the settlement like others of its ilk, offered no opportunities for formal gainful employment thus, compelling the residents to depend solely on the informal sector. In addition, the settlement lacked basic public services and infrastructure, such as transportation, schools, parks, streets, potable water, and electricity. Also, there were extremely high rates of poverty, exceeding the national level. By some estimates, 50 percent of Mexicans compared to 68 percent of San Miguel Teotongo (SMT) live in poverty.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, the ownership claims of SMT residents over the parcels of land they occupied were not regularized.

The need to address the afore-catalogued collective needs is the principal reason why residents of the community decided to form the grassroots organization, Union of San Miguel Teotongo Residents (*Unión de Colonos de San Miguel Teotongo, UCSMT*). Although the community's goals were ambitious, they had several factors working in their favour. The first is paradoxical and has to do with the settlement's location. The fact that the settlement is located geographically at the fringes of the Mexico City Metropolitan Area (MCMA) limited the access of its residents to political power, which is located in the centre of the metro-area. This offered the settlers and their new community-based organization an opportunity to be self-reliant—working independently to solve their own problems without any interference from government bureaucrats and local politicians. The second was the presence of NGOs in the MCMA that were actively involved in efforts to provide informal settlements such as San Miguel Teotongo with the technical and other assistance necessary for urban (land) development. It is on account of this that the residents of San Miguel Teotongo, under the rubric of UCSMT, solicited the assistance of FOSovi.

### **UCSMT's Role and Accomplishments**

One of the oldest and most important popular movements in the Iztapalapa municipality, the Union of San Miguel Teotongo Residents has played a crucial role in improving living

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15 Romero, Nava, & Palacios (1994)

16 Heredia and Purcell (Online)

conditions in San Miguel Teotongo. The following are some of the union's accomplishments in the settlement.<sup>17</sup>

- Arranged with the Iztapalapa municipal authorities to extend the municipal truck-delivered water services to San Miguel Teotongo;
- Successfully organized community self-help activities designed to improve and develop basic communal infrastructure;
- Ensured that as much as half of the settlement's surface area was neither illegally sold nor squatted upon;
- Furthermore, despite efforts on the part of the ruling party of the pre-1990s, the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* (PRI), to suppress grassroots movements, the union succeeded in developing a culture of self-management in the settlement;
- Succeeded in democratizing the union's organizational structure;
- Secured electricity for the community; developed access roads to, and a network of streets in, the settlement; and promoted environmental protection and preservation;
- Led efforts to designate some of the land in the settlement as green areas;
- Eliminated ecologically dangerous spots in the settlement;
- Instituted democratic efforts that resulted in women becoming actively involved in the community;
- With the influence of women, the Union developed the Ixchel Health Centre, in the settlement during the earlier phase of its evolution; and
- Succeeded in having 27 more schools, 3 more health centres, 3 cultural centres, museums and a post office built in the settlement.

### **FOSOVI's Role and Accomplishments**

Prior to the involvement of FOSOVI, residents of San Miguel Teotongo possessed no formal land titles while the settlement as a whole lacked a neighbourhood plan.<sup>18</sup> This rendered the residents both as individuals and as a community vulnerable to many adverse factors. One of these was the possibility of being evicted by the state. Another was the possibility of being displaced by other groups equally in search of land within the Mexico City Metropolis. In fact, members of one such group, the *Antorcha Campesina*, notorious for employing violent means to invade land, had forced their way onto a piece of unoccupied land in the settlement in October 1991.<sup>19</sup> This development was irksome to the residents of San Miguel Teotongo for several reasons. Foremost in this regard was the settlers' concern with the fact that because of its connection to the ruling political party, the *Antorcha Campesina* could cause them to be evicted from the settlement. This and other concerns, such as the risk of other subsequent invasions, prompted the UCSMT to enlist the technical support of FOSOVI.

The Union's request to FOSOVI was simple and straightforward. It requested FOSOVI to assist the residents regularize their land ownership status, draw up a neighbourhood plan for the settlement as a whole, and craft an environmentally-friendly plan. Rather early in the life of the settlement, the Union had decided to designate large chunks of unoccupied lands as green areas. This turned out to reflect a degree of foresightedness that was rare in identical settlements of that era. Accordingly, the notion of an environmentally sensitive neighbourhood plan dovetailed neatly into the settlement's extant structure and made FOSOVI's job easier.

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<sup>17</sup>Pike (2005); Moctezuma (2001); Romero, Nava & Palacios (1994)

<sup>18</sup> Romero, Nava and Palacios (1994)

<sup>19</sup> Romero, Nava and Palacios (1994)

As is typical of similar NGOs, FOSOVI adopted a participatory approach to crafting the settlement's neighbourhood plan. In a way, this is in line with recent political reforms that have occurred in Mexico as a whole and Iztapalapa in particular, which is currently governed by a democratically elected mayor. This notwithstanding, it was clearly a major challenge to proceed from the old system in which the political leadership provided services in exchange for political support, to one relying on citizen participation. The specific approach that was adopted comprised three phases as follows:<sup>20</sup>

- Drawing up a proposal for the use and design of communal areas. The role of the advisory team at this stage was to assist the union craft a proposal assigning different uses to different parcels of land in the settlement. Efforts in this connection assigned 44 percent of the land in the settlement to self-help housing, 25 percent to highways, and 31 percent to public facilities and green areas. As part of this phase, the plan for land use and allocation was also drawn up based on results of social, economic and physical surveys mentioned above. Various meetings involving a team of residents and founders of the settlement were held at which these issues were discussed. In addition, a permanent process of training and evaluation was developed through which active participants in the process were offered training in survey, mapping and other technical domains. The final part of this phase involved FOSOVI leading the process to negotiate the plan's approval for land use allocation. The negotiation was between the residents represented by their union and agents of the state with FOSOVI assuming the role of facilitator. It is during this segment of Phase One that land invasions within the settlement were brought to an end. Success in this regard was assured through "the permanent mobilization of the inhabitants to physically defend the green areas and to put pressure on the authorities to prevent them from fostering or favouring their occupation by groups close to the official party (PRI)."<sup>21</sup>
- Taking advantage of a pre-existing self-help management capacity, within the framework of the union in SMT, specific projects such as an ecological park, public infrastructure, housing improvement, and the preservation of culture were initiated and negotiated.
- Establishing a Regional Bio-project consortium for the Sierra de Santa Catarina Region of which San Miguel is a part.

## Analysis and Discussion

### Determinants of UCSMT's and FOSOVI's Success

Based on the foregoing narrative, the CBO, the UCSMT and the NGO, FOSOVI, comprising the focus of this case-study have significantly contributed to urban development in San Miguel Teotongo. The question that must be addressed if this discussion is to be of any utility to others wrestling with issues of participatory planning elsewhere relates to factors accounting for the CBOs' success. These factors are:

- specificity;
- inter-organizational networking;
- inclusiveness;
- democratization; and
- foresightedness.

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<sup>20</sup> Romero, Nava & Palacios (1994: 5)

<sup>21</sup> Romero, Nava and Palacios (2004: 6)

## Specificity

A common thread running through the two organizations is their ability to specifically identify their target issues. The need to be specific is amplified in situations characterized by resource scarcity. At first glance, most planning problems appear gargantuan, seemingly insoluble and recalcitrant. However, once the problem has been deconstructed, the various components are reduced to manageable proportions. Consider, for example, social tensions and disputes characteristic of developing economies. On the surface these problems appear overwhelming. However, once it is understood that the tensions and disputes are not haphazard but over very specific scarce and strategic resources (e.g., water, land and minerals), the problem becomes less overwhelming. This line of thinking is at the root of the organizations' support for the genre of incremental urban development process characterized by the metaphorical 'baby steps' that occurred in San Miguel Teotongo. This philosophy also explains why the organizations succeeded as they did in the community.

## Inter-organizational networking

From the mid-1970s, UCSMT developed lasting relations with organizations in the urban policy field within the Mexico City Metropolitan Area.<sup>22</sup> For example, the union established viable communication linkages with national and regional coordinating networks such as the National Coalition of Urban Popular Movements (*Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular—CONAMUP*). The linkages that the union created and maintained with other like-minded entities as well as municipal authorities are credited with the union's success in many respects. In fact, it is arguable that the union would have been rather too weak to have any meaningful influence on the political process were it not for its political alliance with the coalition. This lends credence to the old adage that 'there is strength in numbers' or the converse slogan that 'divided we fall.'

## Inclusiveness

Both FOSOFI and UCSMT have avowed policies of encouraging the active participation of traditionally excluded members of society, especially women, in all discussions and activities relating to their projects. The organizations recognize that women are almost always in the majority and are often more adept than their male counterparts with respect to many community-based issues. Thus, encouraging the active participation of women is not only considered a response to international calls to empower women in society but a sensible planning strategy. Women in the planning process usually raise questions and concerns that transcend traditional gender and generational divides. Witness for instance, the role of women at the forefront of activities to develop schools, parks, daycare and health centres in San Miguel Teotongo. In fact the women of this settlement have been able to liaise with other local women organizations to form a regional coalition, the *Coordinadora Regional de Mujeres del Valle Mexico*.<sup>23</sup> Inclusiveness in the context under review here can also be appreciated in terms of the self-reliant or self-help community development projects that the union has been organizing since the settlement was founded in the early-1970s. Apart from its obvious economic value, inclusiveness, particularly when it enlists the active participation of citizens in community development activities, serves to provide citizens a stake in their community.

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22 Moctezuma (2001)

23 Moctezuma (2001)

## Democratization

The union of San Miguel Teotongo's organizational structure has been undergoing serious revamping since 1982.<sup>24</sup> Presently, the structure, which until 1982 was autocratic, has been democratized. The union's matters are currently presided over by a collective council. Among the many advantages accruing to the union from this restructuring effort is the fact that its members are no longer far-removed from the decision-making process and are empowered to actively participate in this process. Democratizing and by extension decentralizing the union has also meant that it is better able to respond to the demands of its rapidly changing environment.

## Foresightedness

As stated above, FOSovi and the union paid great attention to environmental concerns during the course of the settlement's neighbourhood plan development process. Prior to drawing up the plan, the union had, as far back as the 1970s, designated and preserved certain parcels of land as green areas. That environmental sustainability was at the top of the union's agenda at a time when the environment commanded far less attention than it does today is indicative of a degree of foresightedness uncommon in informal settlements. The joint action of FOSovi, UCSMT and members of the community to prioritize the issue constituted a potent bargaining tool *inter alia*.

## Lessons Learnt and Conclusion

There is much to cherish in citizen participation in the urban planning process. However, such participation is not without blemish. As the case-study reported here shows, the input of experts, particularly those of FOSovi was sought only after a lot of informal land development had already occurred. This means among other things that the decisions regarding the location of many structures and facilities in the community were based on anything but expert knowledge of the area's geographic, geological and other relevant features. Yet, such knowledge is a *sine qua non* for efforts to promote sustainable development. Also, despite its intuitive appeal, citizen participation in the planning process raises a number of questions that are yet to be adequately addressed. One of these questions relates to the dubious sagacity of summoning unpaid labour for infrastructure building and other community development projects. One cannot but ponder the quality of projects that are executed with the use of unpaid labour.

However, the foregoing and cognate criticisms of citizen participation in the execution of urban development projects have an inherent Western or Euro-centric bias that tends to ignore one important fact. Self-help of the "mutual self-help" and "community self-help" variants date back to antiquity in most non-Western cultures such as Mexico. One important lesson to be gleaned from this case-study is that cultural context matters in urban development policymaking. Mexico's culture is conducive to self-help development strategies. This explains the fact that use of the strategy under the auspices of an NGO and a CBO registered positive results in San Miguel Teotongo (SMT). The Habitat International Coalition uses this case to showcase the positive impact on a community of CBO/NGO partnership when it is properly orchestrated.<sup>25</sup> Success in the SMT case is a function of three main factors, a genuine

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24 Moctezuma (2001)

25 HIC (1992)

CBO, the generous support of an NGO and a government that tolerated a bottom-up policy-making model.

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