

## Session Demographic. Urban and Social safety in World Cities

### **Social participation and urban-environmental sustainability in a Latin American city**

Patricia Avila-Garcia\*

The process of urbanization in Mexico has been characterized by the concentration of population in a few large cities. However, along the past three decades, medium size cities have experienced a demographic dynamism. Morelia is an example of these cities: population tripled in 30 years.

The city expanded into areas with ecological and productive relevance, and to both natural and anthropogenic high-risk zones. However, since 1983, the city counts with urban development plans and decrees for ecological protections, which due to economic interests have been partially enforced by local and state governments.

To face the deterioration of quality of life in the city (high levels of poverty, high vulnerability due to flooding, water pollution and landslides), the citizenship has mobilized to argue of natural areas. An example is the conflict that rose from the protection of the only remaining natural forest in the city, which is also a natural protected area. Under the economic pressure from real estate and building developers, the local and state governments violated legality by proposing a road project there. Its relevance is that it shows how organized citizenship becomes articulated with academic work and a strategy of legal defense to revert an unsustainable urban project. The conflict was solved when, by means of scientific and legal arguments, the citizenship demonstrated that their social and environmental rights were violated. Among these were: the relevance of forested area in carbon capture to reduce levels of environmental pollution and provision of ecosystem services to city (water supply, flood control).

---

\* Dr. Avila-Garcia is researcher of Center for Ecosystem Research of the National Autonomous University of Mexico. Email: pavila@oikos.unam.mx

## **The growth of cities and urban-environmental planning**

The process of urbanization in Mexico was based on the growth and concentration of population in a few large cities (Mexico City, Guadalajara, Monterrey), cities that since the 1940s had ventured into industrialization (Garza, 1985). However, in the 1960's and more so in the 1980's, there was a trend to urbanization, with medium sized cities (of less than one million inhabitants) beginning to grow significantly, some of them also becoming industrialized (Aguilar, Graizbord and Sánchez, 1996). At present, large and middle cities have shown a tendency to the "tertiarization" of their economies (i.e., the expansion of the tertiary sector) and deindustrialization, concentrating nearly half of the total country's population: Mexico City alone has a population of 20 million of the little over more 100 million Mexicans.

The growth of cities during the 1940's was the result both of natural populations increase as of social growth. However, since the 1980's large cities stopped being the sole receivers of rural population, which migrated to middle-sized cities, in particular, those in central Mexico, and across the northern U.S.A. border. The urban-environmental problems associated with the scarcity of land, housing and urban services for a growing population became the main challenge to face (Schteingart and d'Andrea, 1991).

In that scenario, the State made attempts to orient the growth of cities through urban planning and environmental regulation policies. During the 1970's and 1980's a strong impulse was given by the State to planning using urbanistic and environmental criteria. At the same time, the State tried to orient the expansion of cities by regulations directed towards the prevention of social conflicts such as the expansion of irregular settlements or the invasion by unordered growth of productive or ecologically relevant areas (Azuela, 1993).

Morelia, the subject of the present essay, is an example of a middle-sized city with nearly 700,000 inhabitants. Its growth was accelerated since the 1980's, when it was provided with urban and environmental planning policies to revert problems already present in large cities, thus ensuring a better life quality to the population. Thus, the first plan for urban development was approved in 1983 with a 20-year horizon. The planning criteria adopted were social, such as the creation of urban patrimonial (low-cost land, services to the poor) and environmental (strategic protection areas to avoid environmental deterioration) reserve zones.

Such policies were implemented by the State by strengthening its legal and institutional frameworks, emitting decrees to protect reserves and ecological preservation zones. One of these natural protected areas was the Loma de Santa Maria (a forested area in contact with the city of Morelia), decreed reserve due to its importance in the recharge of aquifers, climatic regulation and control of flooding and landslide risks. The decree was approved in 1984 and was ratified in 1993, forbidding any type of urbanization, road construction and urban infrastructure (Avila, 2004b).

### **Globalization, urban-environmental deregulation and corporative elites: the city merchandise**

As a result of economic globalization and the imposition in Mexico of a neoliberal economic model, in the late 1980's the State launched a strategy to ensure the insertion of the country into the corresponding lineaments by reforming several articles of the Political Constitution, opening the way to the privatization of land, until then of social land tenure, as by the ejidos. A speculation wave raised in ejidos that were near the cities, corporative elites acquiring considerable extensions of land at very low prices. These corporative elites soon controlled the urban land market, which lead to the subordination of urban expansion policies to the logic of short-term maximum profit (Avila, 2004a).

However, urban and environmental regulation policies stood on the way of private investment in housing projects, because the short-term maximum profit rationale was incompatible with an environmental rationale to contribute to long-term urban sustainability. Corporative elites begun to apply political pressure to modify the legislation and the urban development plans, in order to promote deregulation and the consequent expansion of the city (Avila, 2004b).

The results were unfortunate in social terms, given that in less than a decade the city expanded in several directions having effects on natural and rural areas, including in ecological protection zones. What is interesting about this process is that the urban expansion was not the result of demographic expansion but of the speculative strategy of real estate corporations, who contemplated the city as highly profitable merchandise. From that perspective, with the only goal of maximizing profit and regardless of social and environmental costs of their strategy, new housing projects were built for the high- and middle-income population, shopping centers and gulf courts were established on areas that

were decreed as ecological protection zones (including forest, lacustrine and agricultural lands, together with areas presenting risks of flooding or geological faults) (Avila, 2004a).

This speculative urban growth process prospered through an alliance between the members of the corporative elite and the State, given that the latter assigned public resources to provide urban services and infrastructure to the housing projects built by the former. The problem was that such support from the State was not equally granted to the rest of the city, given that in the areas where most and poorest of the population lives the social lags in terms of housing, services and infrastructure are still prevalent (Avila, 2004a).

### **Urban-environmental conflicts and social actors**

The new urban development projects, with housing projects including gulf courses, shopping centers and hotels mostly for affluent consumers, have come to be in contradiction with standing urban and environmental norms, and in the absence of a watchful attitude of the State to enforce their compliance. In summary, in the city there has been a constant violation of legality and of the rights of its inhabitants arising from attempting against their natural patrimony and their exposure to scenarios of increased urban and environmental risk and vulnerability.

In that context socioenvironmental conflicts have raised that express the tensions and fractures in the social network due to pressures of private and State investments on ecosystems and natural resources when executing their urbanization and speculative housing projects. The arisen conflicts evidence the problematic of urbanization in this neoliberalism and economic globalization stage, revealing the high social and environmental costs that the inhabitants have been made to assume, both in rural and in urban spaces.

An example of such tensions have been the civil initiatives, mostly of ecological activists groups, to defend the natural reserves and ecological preservation areas that since the 1990's were seen to have been contracted by their invasion by housing speculators. However, the effectiveness of these civil initiatives was minimal due to the concentration of power by the elites and the absence of spaces for the active participation of civil society in decision-making processes. Thus, the pressure of the housing sector grew bigger until

being consolidated by the modification of urban development plans and changes in land use: from ecological preservation to urban. According to our estimates (Avila, 2004b), in only ten years, the green areas were reduced by a 70%, attempting against the natural patrimony of the city's inhabitants.

The scenario of the conflict appeared to change during the present decade, when a more ample sector of society began to take consciousness of the relevance to the city of green areas and ecological preservation areas. In front of the threat to build a road over the only remaining forested area of the city, which is in addition protected by a decree, the civil society organized and mobilized its defense during the years 2006 and 2007. The conflict was onset when corporative elites exerted pressure on the State to build a road to directly connect with the city their housing and commercial projects, proposing to build it within the Loma de Santa Maria natural protected area. In addition, interest existed in urbanizing the zone, given that the construction of the road would increase the land value of "forested and ecological" areas.

The civil reaction was immediate, above all, that of neighbors directly affected with the construction of a road in an extremely geologically fragile area. Because the road would be built near an active geological fault, both their material patrimony and their lives would be put in risk in the eventuality of a landslide. Likewise, ecological activists groups joined the defense of the Loma due to its ecological relevance to the city. The civil movement continue to grow, gaining adepts from sectors that until then had never participated in environmentalist causes, such as university students and social organizations like *Otra Campaña* (The Other Campaign), linked to the *Ejercito Zapatista de Liberación Nacional* (Zapatista National Liberation Army). A number of collective actions to protest the construction of the road were taken, including from marches and permanent blockades in the area of conflict to artistic events and citizen activities with the spontaneous participation of children, who tied white ribbons on the trees under the threaten to be cut down.

The academic sector played a substantial role, several researchers and experts in several social and natural science disciplines sharing robust scientific arguments to demonstrate the negative impacts, both over the natural protected area and to the population in general, that building the road would imply. Among their main arguments were: The relevance of forested areas surrounding the cities in climatic regulation, carbon

capture and the provision of a number of ecosystemic services including water supply, flooding control, natural habitat for animal and plant species, recreation and aesthetic enjoyment for the population. Their strategy was through lobbying authorities in charge of urban and environmental planning, as well as high decision-making level governmental officers, both at the Federal and at the State levels.

The civil movement initiated a legal defense strategy with a team of experts in environmental law and carried on the procedures to acquire juridical certainty of the illegality of building a road in a natural protected area. By other process, the movement was given a favorable dictamination from the *Comisión Estatal de Derechos Humanos* (State Human Rights Commission), stating that building the projected road in the Loma de Santa Maria would violate human rights of the city's inhabitants by damaging their natural patrimony and expose them to a risk given the high geological instability of the.

The conflict was eventually inclined to the civil society's side, in as much as establishing a strategy integrating social mobilization with academic and legal argumentation. The alliance of general citizens, academics and layers was key in defending a common cause: the defense of a strategic area of the city for its ecological and geological importance.

### **Final considerations**

The importance of social participation in the environmental management of cities is in that it acts as a counterweight to corporate power, based on unsustainable urban practices that also lead to higher risk and vulnerability scenarios. In a similar amount, the population's consciousness of environmental problems in cities prompts them to assume a more active role in the defense of natural spaces, given the voracious insatiability of capital. Today, corporate elites allied with the State are plotting another communications project nearby the natural protected area, disregarding the arguments of scientists and lawyers of its inadmissibility. The capacity of civil organization to start a continued and endless struggle is perhaps the biggest challenge faced by cities in the neoliberal period to guarantee their sustainability.

## References

- Aguilar, Adrián G., Boris Graizbord y Alvaro Sánchez Crispín (1996), Las ciudades intermedias y el desarrollo regional en México, UNAM-CONACULTA-COLMEX, México.
- Ávila, Patricia (2004a), “Municipio, poder local y planeación urbana en la era neoliberal: el caso de Morelia” en Ciudades, núm. 64, octubre-diciembre, Red Nacional de Investigación Urbana, Puebla, México, ISSN 0187-8611. pp. 15-20.
- Avila, Patricia (2004b), “Especulación del suelo y deterioro socioambiental en la ciudad de Morelia” en Catherine Ettinger y Alfonso Iracheta, Hacia la sustentabilidad en barrios y centros históricos, SUMA-UMSNH-Red Mexicana de Ciudades hacia la sustentabilidad, México, pp. 39-53.
- Azueta, Antonio, coord. (1993), La urbanización popular y el orden jurídico en América Latina, UNAM.
- Garza, Gustavo (1985), El proceso de industrialización en la ciudad de México, 1821-1970, El Colegio de México, México.
- Schteingart, Martha y Luciano d’Andrea, coord., (1991), Servicios urbanos, gestión local y medio ambiente, El Colegio de México, México.