In Central America, as anywhere else, you need money to live and to enjoy yourself. But in Central America, as anywhere else, some people do not even have the money to live, let alone enjoy themselves. The economic crisis of recent years has definitely done nothing to heal certain old social wounds. The result: once again, the people hit the hardest are those living on a low income, particularly in large urban centres. The outcome of this situation is what is known today as "marginalization."
One mother in her fifties explained it in these terms: "Aquí la vida es más dura, no podemos soñar." "We couldn't even if we wanted to." No longer able to spend a few hours dancing, go to the movies, or even have a simple meal in a local restaurant, this woman is not living. She is just surviving, catching the eye on the normal activities of others in a shantytown outside San José, the capital of Costa Rica.

There is such a proliferation of studies on the shantytowns of Central America that one more may seem a useless repetition. Yet we do not appear to understand fully how marginalized (or simply poor) populations survive in the face of the recent economic crisis affecting the region. Moreover, statistics cannot give an accurate picture of the situation. For this reason, INRC has joined the Confederation Universitaria Centroamericana (CSUCU) and the Teach- ing Institute on Social Work of the Universidad nacional autonoma de Honduras to study the varying income structures of these families, their spending patterns and the factors influencing them, and to assess the role of community organizations. They also hope to provide public, private and community organizations with the most accurate description possible of the situation in order to improve programs and projects and adapt them to the needs and characteristics of the underprivileged.

San José in Costa Rica and Tegucigalpa, Honduras are the capital cities chosen for this study.

San José is a city with two faces. Its relatively modern appearance deceives the eye. Street vendors, beggars, cripples, alcoholics, and people plying trades of every kind are part of the daily scene, but where these people come from is hidden. The shabbier sectors of the city are elsewhere, far from the eyes of the majority. Despite its handsome exterior, San José is adapting little to the whims of the market that dictate that people move from one section to another, depending on the times, underprivileged sectors of the population can exert fairly strong pressure. As a result, they receive occasional aid according to the good will and resources of governments, municipalities, political parties, private organizations and the church. Often they will wait for this aid rather than take responsibility themselves, because poverty is synonymous not only with a lack of money, but also with a set of attitudes born of a certain type of environment and education.

In San José and in Tegucigalpa, all the poorer sectors are not necessarily the same. The quality of life differs from one sector to another, depending on the existing conditions - for example, water, streets, electricity, sewers, dump sites, housing, violence, the crime rate, and so on. Even within the slums there are class struggles and rivalries. Some people, for instance, may have a two-story or concrete house that they want to protect. Others may be struggling to find wood and cardboard to build a shelter. The inhabitants form a heterogeneous population. They are of all ages (although most are young) and all levels of education.

In today's economic crisis, the people living in Tegucigalpa's poorer sectors come mainly from the country's rural regions. The shantytowns often serve as buffer zones between the rural areas and the urban centre. People move there not only to increase their sources of income or to benefit from essential services missing in the country, but sometimes to follow the whims of the market that dictate that corn, for example, shall cost less in the city than in the country.

San José is a separate case. Rural-urban migrations have given way to a type of intrasurban movement so that people move from one sector to another, mainly because the quality of life in the city has diminished considerably in recent years. They usually seek to avoid paying rent by owning their own homes instead. They also want to spend less on electricity, gas and water. Consequently, although most shantytowns are created by people squatting on the land, they often grow out from themselves, day after day receiving the latest victims of the breakdowns of urban life.

In both capital cities, vacant urban lots are not taken over just because of a lack of housing, but because of a lack of money to pay for a decent home. Construction costs are high and interest rates difficult to meet. Appropriation of government land has assumed such political importance in Honduras that the phenomenon is labelled "land recovery," rather than squatting. For the squatters, public land is not theirs by right, in Honduras, as in Costa Rica, a series of legal and moral battles have ensued between private owners, governments and squatters, all of whom are more or less prepared to negotiate according to the mood of the times. The whole problem they must tackle is one of subdivision, rents and "illegal" owners.

"Marginalized" people rarely have fixed incomes. Wage-earners usually work in traditional industries such as food production, wood-working, footwear, and textiles. The self-employed are normally bakers, shoemakers, carpenters, tailors or small shopkeepers. Women, the majority with families, generally stay at home because they must care for children or they lack the training necessary to work outside. They cook for other people or do some craftwork. The children, compelled to forgo their youth, wash cars, shine shoes or become street vendors. Everyone works at all times of the day and, very often, every day.

Most people work at odd jobs or, as they say there, "camaronean." Men with carts pick up old newspapers and glass and plastic containers for resale, or carry stone and soil for gardens. As one of them put it, "When you have no training, you do whatever work others have for you." Other people also rent out empty rooms in their own homes as one way to increase their incomes. In Tegucigalpa, large houses in the inner city are rented out by the room to big families. More often than not, these houses hide miniature shantytowns behind their walls.

Living in this way, people have simple expenses: food, housing (water, electricity), clothing and transportation. Milk, eggs, meat, vegetables and fruit are treats for holidays. The alternatives are simple as well: bread, coffee, legumes, tubers, starves and basic grains.

**Organization**

Depending on the times, underprivileged sectors of the population can exert fairly strong pressure. As a result, they receive occasional aid according to the good will and resources of governments, municipalities, political parties, private organizations and the church. Often they will wait for this aid rather than take responsibility themselves, because poverty is synonymous not only with a lack of money, but also with a set of attitudes born of a certain type of environment and education.

Many people have resigned themselves to their condition. They are so little inclined to plan for the future that their thoughts are fixed on the present. They live in an environment where psy-
Although permanent development organizations are firmly established in Costa Rica’s urban communities, ad hoc committees for water, housing or education are the most frequently found. People band together and share duties according to the needs of the cause and the moment, but the group dissolves once the problem is solved.

Community organizations in both countries had their greatest impetus in the 1950s when unions, cooperatives and women’s groups sprang up and flourished. As in the past, the local priest now finds himself in the role of initiator. He invites people to meetings, suggests ideas for projects and gives advice. Local media are active in some communities: neighbourhood newspapers, bulletins, pamphlets and so on. San José even has a radio station serving poorer areas on the south side, Radio America, a community station, provides a political forum and a flea market as well as entertainment for its listeners.

One fact that arises is that people seem more inclined (by habit or lack of various resources) to form groups to assert their rights, rather than set up organizations to create new sources of income, such as cooperatives. However, they do not want free aid. They want work and an income so they can solve their problems on their own. According to some people, “Instead of having reformist and utopian dreams, it is better to think of concrete ways to earn a living, get training... but maybe this means halting the system, having a revolution.”

Revolution aside, developing small- and medium-size neighbourhood businesses is an idea that appeals to the region’s planners and intellectuals. Such businesses can easily be geared to the characteristics of low-income groups and their method of working. In any case, there are few alternatives. Either nonagricultural employment is developed or everyone is sent back to the country to work on the farms. Setting up neighbourhood businesses seems the most plausible solution, but to do this, authorities must consider increasing access to sources of financing, training, and community work, and rethink certain laws. This is long-term work.

Meanwhile, the marginal people live in the city, adding what little meaning they can to their lives, even when they have the physical and mental capacities for “success.” It is not by accident that the play “El Premio Flaco,” “The Meagre Prize,” a comedy by Cuban author Hector Quintero, ended with the line, “Para qué vivir, para qué! ‘What’s the use of living? What’s the use?” The play is set in the hovels of a shantytown. During its long run in San José, as the audience poured out of the theatre laughing after the show, a lone man could be seen sweeping the street. This man probably never knew that the play was about him and his life. The audience, for the most part, never noticed the street sweeper. He was not one of them.

Denis Marcheterre is a freelance journalist living in Costa Rica.

The frustrations of living on the edge: housing protest in San José.