

Housing: rural roots to urban problems

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Photo: Jaime Rojas

Urban housing shortages and crowding slums spring from a lack of opportunities in rural areas.

Although frequently at odds and often engaged in mutual recriminations about their problems, the city and the countryside are inseparable. Urban housing problems, for example, cannot be explained without looking at the living and working conditions in rural areas.

An analysis of housing and urban underdevelopment in Colombia, carried out by a group of researchers with financial support from IDRC and under the coordination of the Interamerican Planning Society (SIAP), clearly shows the connection between urban problems and the countryside. Housing problems are explained as the result of the free market form of development that prevails in most Latin American countries.

One must, in fact, go quite a distance away from today's overcrowded, ill-equipped, slum-ridden cities to discover, in agriculture and farming, the origins of the housing problem. In the 20th Century, as industrialization occurred in the cities, the pattern of large colonial land holdings slowed down the modernization of agriculture and placed it in secondary position to industry.

In 1948, Colombian agriculture began to respond to the demands of industry, particularly for raw materials needed in textiles, food and beverages manufacturing. (In 1950, these products accounted for 76 percent of the aggregate industrial value.) This sector of agriculture became modernized and mechanized.

Agricultural production for direct consumption developed more slowly, however, resulting in low capital investments in this sector as compared to the high investments in industry. Small farmers were thus forced to migrate in increasing numbers to the city in search of work.

In the cities, the process of industrial development could not absorb the large supply of unskilled labour arriving from the rural areas. A large labour pool was formed, with the effect of keeping industrial wages low. This low wage situation was reinforced by industry's adoption of capital-intensive, labour-saving technologies that limited job opportunities.

How does the urban housing situation reflect this process? Because of the concentration of population in the cities, the housing demand is large. High rents and costly land prices produce progressive crowding and a housing shortage. Many families, unable to find adequate housing at a price they can afford, are forced to improvise their own shelter in outlying urban areas, using any available scrap as building materials. As these slums, devoid of services, are formed in the peripheral city area, downtown areas also undergo deterioration and crowding. In 1972 in Bogota, for instance, 59 percent of the total population of almost three million

lived in squatter neighbourhoods.

The construction industry further aggravates the housing problem. In Latin America this industry was slowly transformed from an artisanal phase when building was done manually, using rudimentary tools, to today's modern industry. With the modern phase came monopolistic prices that are beyond the means of low wage earners. Very limited capital and credit opportunities are available. But while the price of housing has risen sharply, people's real incomes have not.

Certain urban development or urban renewal initiatives have contributed to the housing problem. The Integral Project for the Urban Development of the Eastern Sector of Bogota, for example, had to be abandoned because of the serious consequences it would have had: thousands of low-income families living in the area would have been uprooted.

This situation was quite common in Europe during the Industrial Revolution. Friedrich Engels, socialist philosopher and industrial theorist, noted in the mid 1800s that when large masses of rural workers were suddenly attracted to the growing industrial centers, the arrangement of buildings in the cities no longer responded to the needs of industry and traffic. Old streets had to be widened and new ones built. New transportation and urban development projects were begun "exactly at the same time when workers were flowing into the cities; this was precisely when the massive demolition of workers' housing occurred."

The housing shortage is both an absolute shortage and one that mainly affects the low-income residents — independent workers, small merchants and craftsmen. It is estimated that the shortage affects as much as 75 percent of the economically active population in the main cities of Colombia, and 66 percent in Bogota. As the researchers point out, the shortage will disappear only over the very long term when ideal conditions of full employment exist as a result of greater productivity, thereby creating higher income levels and reducing the relative cost of construction. □

The study focusing on housing in Colombia was one of a number carried out in seven Latin American countries under an IDRC-supported Low-Cost Housing project. The findings of national studies, now all completed, have been published by the countries concerned. SIAP is completing the publication of a three-volume synthesis covering comparative studies, government policies, and land and urban reforms in Colombia, Costa Rica, Guatemala, Mexico, El Salvador, Paraguay, and Venezuela. (SIAP, Apartado Aéreo 21573, Bogotá, Colombia.) This article is adapted from Colombia: Vivienda y subdesarrollo urbano (Housing and urban underdevelopment), published in July.