

Almanac of the Future

A STORY OF SUCCESS

Motivational experience No. 16



Urban Slopes



Human settlements on the outskirts of Lima

URBAN SLOPES

Human settlements such as Virgen de la Candelaria, on the outskirts of Lima, are a very frequent phenomenon in large cities. Low-income families are looking for a place to live close to the apparent economic and educational opportunities of the metropolis. Selective laws and norms result in the consolidation of these neighborhoods and make the progress of their habitants extremely difficult. These conditions force majorities in large cities to find an informal housing solution, dealing with a perverse logic of laws that are not made for those who have been taken to critical circumstances by the development model. This situation ends often in a paradoxical picture: majorities of the population excluded by laws that protect the interests of the system instead of responding to the needs of the majority.



Diligents as ants, Santos and the Virgen

Santos Quispe is the name of the general secretary of the administrative board of the neighborhood, who awaits us in our visit to the settlement Virgen de la Candelaria. Some of the families who live today in Virgen de la Candelaria had already established in different places on the mountains of the district of Villa María del Triunfo in the south of Lima. They decided to join the group to work together on the informal settlement. Even for a larger group, it is a long difficult road to reach gradually drinking water, energy, sewers and access roads. A single family would have had no chance.

The settlement has grown since its founding 7 years ago, in the meantime, there are 160 plots of land and about 600 people living in Virgen de la Candelaria, being the majority children. "The first thing we did was to get together and choose a board of directors. This entity is the one which gives settlers a piece of land" says Santos Quispe and continues; "at the beginning our situation was critical, we had neither an access path nor drinking water supply. We were very isolated". Julia Flores came to Virgen de la Candelaria with her family as a teenager. Today she is 24 years old, has a son and is one of the most active participants in the community; besides, provides support as an advisor on child nutrition. During the meeting, Julia says with a smile on her face: "The people from the neighboring settlements had different opinions about our council. Some said our meetings were a waste of time. But others said the people in Virgen de la Candelaria are diligent as ants"

Meanwhile the board of the community accepts no more new arrivals. The still vacant land is reserved for those who came here as children with their parents.



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What to do without legal recognition?

One of the first victories of the Board of Directors, led by Santos Quispe, has been his relationship with the district mayor of that time. In this way, the recognition of the human settlement by the local government was achieved. "It was a lucky case to convince the mayor of the district, Juan José Castillo Ángeles, to approve the settlement plan. Today this procedure would no longer be feasible since local governments have lost this capacity. Today the former mayor has to defend himself at court; it is obvious that he interpreted laws to the benefit of socially excluded people. With his recognition families were able to be recognized as owners of their lots and their settlement. The process for obtaining property titles, a prerequisite to get help from public authorities is long and uncertain, since it depends on a much more complex administrative process. At the moment, this possibility is closed because of the lack of political will of the corresponding authorities to declare some sort of amnesty to open the way to legalization. As long as the land of the settlement does not have titles of property, there is no possibility to request or access state support for issues such as electricity, potable water system, drainage and other urban infrastructure.

The members of the neighborhood board and the community speak with pride about their achievements. With their own resources and innumerable days of shared works, the land road that connects the settlement with the neighborhoods, hill below, was opened. Then the electricity of homes was achieved. Perhaps the most important has been the installation of a communal water collection site.



In seven years, thanks to the constant initiative of the organization, it was possible to obtain a certificate of possession, as well as electricity, water, road, steps, sports court and playground.

"Before we obtained drinking water from the neighboring settlements, connecting our hoses, but they were usually broken in winter, without roads the terrain became very slippery," recalls Julia. The families of Virgen de la Candelaria agree about the improvements of the neighborhood. In seven years, thanks to the constant initiative of the organization, it was possible to obtain a certificate of possession, as well as light, water, road, steps, sports court and playground. Considering not having a legal status these are transcendental achievements.



Encouraging participation and recognition

The organization in Virgen de la Candelaria is strong and very determined. "There are very few who do not participate in communal work. In this case, our rules are simple, those who do not help, do not have access to water", explained different members of neighborhood council. There are several settlements where this mechanism is applied and gives result.

Later we visited the water collection site, where the hoses of several houses of the settlement are seen waiting their turn to be connected. Each home has its own storage tank. The drinking water project and drainage system, another major initiative of the organization, is about to be concluded. As soon as each house has its direct water supply, possibly not everyone will be willing to participate as regularly as now on the working assignments. Santos Quispe is sure that people will continue to respond to the calls of the council. "The important thing is that every project and initiative of the neighborhood counts with the consensus and approval of the assembly where all have voice and vote. That's how we decided on the purchase of the cement mixer."

The families of the settlement have a clear prefer to rely on their own initiative rather than waiting for public sector support. In addition to cement, donated by the cement factory located in the same district, and the support of the municipality by sending heavy machinery, were mainly the contributions of each family, in money and in labor have made the progress possible. The NGO DESCO assisted in the installation of the playground. But the most important support of DESCO and other institutions has been the technical assistance and the self-help initiatives.

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The neighborhood council is democratically elected every two years. In Virgen de la Candelaria, the population has ratified the council, over and over again. The achievements are the respect and trust the community has in its leader. Santos has shown valuable skills in relating to decision-makers, assuring that the settlement's demands are attended. "The current challenge is to achieve greater presence of women on the board", says Santos.

Paradox – the most needed remain excluded

People and families migrate from the countryside to the city for the apparent opportunities offered by the metropolis in terms of employment, education and services. It is a population group with few economic resources who are unable to access housing in the market. For many, the only feasible option is to settle on the peripheral hills of the districts far from the center of the capital. The testimony of several people concurs in their suffering and the slow process of generating a sense of belonging to the new place. Virgin of the Candelaria is not

the exception in this sense. Laws do not help, as they do not allow public authorities to support settlements that lack property titles. The logic behind these regulations is to avoid land invasion and chaotic urbanization. Those who by necessity and lack of alternatives participate in an organized way in human settlements are victims of a legal apartheid. They are excluded from the State's attention because they cannot legalize their housing situation. Thousands of families in the peripheries are in this situation, which turns into a vicious circle.

The road that leads to Virgen de la Candelaria remains a headache for its inhabitants. Motorcycle or taxis transportation is expensive, public school and health services are located below, in more downtown areas of the district. There are minors in school age who, due to the lack of resources of their family, do not attend school. The paving of the dirt roads, constructed by the neighborhood council, corresponds to the public sector, who excuses itself in the legal barriers that do not allow the necessary support.

These reflections help to understand better the relevance of Santos' farewell words: "How much we have grown"





Messages to the future

- Adverse situations and excluding laws regarding housing strengthen organizational ties and awaken self-help initiatives that lead, as shown by the example to tangible improvements and to the empowerment of the people in the public sector.
- Social leadership and competence, and information about the enforceability of your own rights are often decisive factors in overcoming obstacles whose main purpose is to maintain the “status quo”.
- An organized group, fighting for its environment can achieve collective conquests despite an adverse context. The common good of the community is a valid path for individual progress.

The text, which is based on visits and discussions on site, was created by Jorge Krekeler (Misereor adviser), but initially made consensual with the people visited. Special thanks go to Santos Quispe and other members of the Neighborhood council of Virgen de la Candelaria and Ramiro García and to DESCO's Team for the “Programa Urbano.”

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