



Mexico's urban popular movements

A conversation with Pedro Moctezuma

Born in Mexico City and an economist by training, Pedro Moctezuma has been active in grassroots movements since 1973. He has taken part in the foundation of several movements including the San Miguel Teotongo Colonos Union of Mexico City, Association of Colonos, Tenants and the Homeless Libertad (UCISV-Libertad), the Emiliano Zapata Popular Union (which brings together 25 organizations in the Metropolitan Area of Mexico) and the Benito Juárez Homeless Movement. He is a member of CONAMUP's regional directorate for the Valley of Mexico and lectures at the postgraduate course on metropolitan planning at the Autonomous University of Mexico. As a member of UCISV-Libertad, he also participated in the El Molino low-cost housing programme, in which state credit was used to build 1,087 homes on a 50 hectare site in the east of the Metropolitan Area of Mexico City.

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THIS SPECIAL ISSUE on "Community Organizations" would be incomplete without some consideration of the larger federations of community organizations or grassroots groups which have developed in many nations. The National Co-ordinating Body of Mexico's Urban Popular Movement (CONAMUP) is one of the largest and most innovative of these federations; it is an umbrella organization for dozens of community organizations throughout Mexico. It claims to represent the interests of around one million of Mexico's poorest urban inhabitants and to do so with political autonomy from the powerful and monolithic Mexican state. Set up in 1980 in the city of Monterrey, it is now active in many different cities and regions. It is involved in many fields, including community planning and the construction and management of large housing projects, managing co-operatives for the distribution of foodstuffs and initiatives to control domestic violence, drug abuse and alcoholism in low income settlements. It is also very active in voicing its members' demands to the government and in seeking political change.

CONAMUP's size, its structure (which seeks to turn the conventional, hierarchic, pyramid on its head) and its innovative proposals in the areas of settlement planning, social organization and autonomous production, give it considerable significance in any context. CONAMUP can be seen as posing a serious challenge to the Mexican state which is severely restricted in the scope of its social and political actions, as a result not only of several years of fiscal and economic crisis but also of a crisis in political representation. CONAMUP and its many members are seeking to develop more realistic, participatory and implementable solutions to the severe urban problems confronting poorer groups in Mexico and to do so rooted in the knowledge and experience of that particular society. For all these reasons, urban grassroots movements, and more specifically the experiences of CONAMUP, in the second most populous nation in Latin America (with some 80 million inhabitants in 1986) are worth documenting and examining further.

This paper comes out of an interview of Pedro Moctezuma, a member of the National Directorate of CONAMUP (and one of its ideologues) with Julio D. Dávila, editor of *Environment and Urbanization*. In the course of this interview, Mr. Moctezuma describes how CONAMUP developed, the areas in which it works and its structure. He deals with both community level issues such as participatory

1. The period before the arrival of the Europeans in the Americas is often referred to as the pre-Columbian era (Christopher Columbus first arrived there in 1492).

2. The term the Valley of Mexico (*Valle de México* in Spanish) is often used to describe the Metropolitan Area of Mexico. This is a legally defined area consisting of the 16 local government areas (*delegaciones*) of the Federal District (*Distrito Federal*) and 53 municipalities located in the adjacent state of Mexico. The Metropolitan Area is spread over 7,860 square kilometres. The continuous built-up urban area covers only about 15 per cent of this and is spread over 17 of the 53 municipalities. By the late 1980s, the population of the Metropolitan Area was estimated at some 18 million people. See Garza, Gustavo and Programa de Intercambio Científico y Capacitación Técnica (editors) (1987), *Atlas de la ciudad de México*, Departamento del Distrito Federal-El Colegio de México, Mexico City.

3. For a historical description and analysis of Monterrey's Land and Liberty Popular Front, see Vellinga, Menno (1989) "Power and Independence: the Struggle for Identity and Integrity in Urban Social Movements", in Schuurman, Frans and Ton van Naerssen (editors), *Urban Social Movements in the Third World*, Routledge, UK.

organization and project work, and the larger issues of the federation's work programme and its dealings with the state. The discussion at community level explains how the federation and its members seek to cope with such problems as domestic violence and rape, alcoholism and drug abuse. It also includes a discussion of how a large federation can remain directed by its members and its programme can remain rooted in the needs of individuals and communities. Mr. Moctezuma also discusses the federation's relationship with the state, how it articulates the needs and demands of its members, and how it seeks to promote political change. Although the interview concentrates on the work and experiences of the federation, among the other subjects discussed are the role of the professional in a social urban movement, the advantages and disadvantages of involving non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in CONAMUP's programmes, and the constitutional potential and political significance of an organized mass movement.

I. THE DEVELOPMENT OF CONAMUP

E&U: Where would you place CONAMUP in the recent history of the Mexican urban popular movement?

PM: The roots of Mexico's grassroots self-help movements go back to the pre-Columbian era⁽¹⁾ It is a tradition which Spanish colonization was never able to eradicate completely. CONAMUP itself has its immediate origins in the late 1960s when various movements sprang up as a result of a combination of poor workers' movements on the outskirts of several cities, with activists coming from the student movements of 1968 who sought to integrate themselves into the communities. At this time, there were several different groups, nearly all of which believed in the importance of becoming integrated with the people.

In 1977, representatives from 12 low income neighbourhoods (*colonias*) in the Valley of Mexico⁽²⁾ visited Monterrey (capital of the state of Nuevo León in the north of the country) where the Land and Liberty Popular Front had been founded.⁽³⁾ This was where contact between different regional mass movements was first established on a national level. Three years later this was to lead to the foundation of CONAMUP.

There are two aspects to the origins of CONAMUP. On the one hand, there was the rise in people's struggle from 1979 onwards, brought about by the government's austerity policies and a fall in living standards which for some years had been affecting the inhabitants of the poorest *colonias*. We calculate that today 39 million Mexicans live in poverty, but this is not recognized by the state, so there are no official statistics about this. In this context, popular urban, peasant and teacher movements prepared the ground not only for CONAMUP, but also for a national co-ordinating body for workers in the education field. There was a consensus among political organizations about the need to support mass struggles.

On the other hand, between 1974 and 1981, some sections of the urban popular movement began to fight against the chaotic subdivision of urban land, a result of the illegal sale of plots. This led to specific suggestions for organization in Sierra de Santa Catalina and

San Miguel Teotongo in Mexico City, projects which greatly differed from state housing programmes. Since then, the issue of housing has been central to our struggle.

The formation of CONAMUP marked the beginning of a new stage. This began in 1981 when an attempt was made to rationalize and extend the experience acquired over seven years, building also on the experience of mass organizations in the north of Mexico. In the case of the CONAMUP's branch in the Valley of Mexico, we looked for a large area of land which had a legal owner and we began a process of community development involving the future inhabitants of a settlement in the management of the project and its construction. In this first project - known as El Molino⁽⁴⁾ - more advanced ecological and cultural criteria than had been used in previous projects were put to the test in an attempt to create a model settlement.

This is still the largest project that we have undertaken. Of course, the scale of the problems resolved there is minimal in relation to the problems of Mexico City and the metropolitan area. The challenge for us today is to extend this process and to look for ways to organize not just in one settlement, but in a whole district of the metropolitan area.

E&U: We will return to the subject of housing projects later, but first could you tell us to what extent the movements which led to the foundation of CONAMUP emerged from institutional political parties? Or were the movements simply community movements with no formal links with party politics?

PM: During the period of their formation, all movements have been non-partisan. From CONAMUP's inception, however, an internal debate about the relationship with the political parties has been of prime importance. But in regard to both these and the state, it has an autonomous structure. CONAMUP sees itself as a co-ordinator of urban organizations, driven by a struggle directed towards action. It strives to be a pluralistic and an open meeting point for organizations from all over the country.

The first confrontation between the social and the political.

Box 1: Acronyms, definitions and Spanish words used in the text

CONAMUP: The National Co-ordinating Body of Mexico's Urban Popular Movement.

Colonia: the term for a low income neighbourhood

Colonos: the inhabitants of a *colonia*

PRI: The "Institutional Revolutionary Party" founded in 1929 which has dominated national and regional politics ever since; see note 7.

Tortilla: a thin flat maize cake which is a staple of the Mexican diet.

Valley of Mexico: a term used to describe the metropolitan area of Mexico City; see note 2.

4. A description in Spanish of this project may be found in Suárez Pareyón, Alejandro (1987), *El programa de vivienda del Molino: una experiencia autogestiva de urbanización popular*, CENVI, Mexico City. This can be obtained from CENVI.

shortly after CONAMUP was established, centred on whether it should take part in elections. Discussions eventually led to the position that CONAMUP's objectives are social and, as such, the organization should not become involved in electoral dynamics. Nevertheless, member organizations of CONAMUP are free to do what best suits their activities and interests. This protects CONAMUP from electoral traumas and political alliances, without restricting the freedom of its members.

II. CONAMUP'S MEMBERSHIP

E&U: How is the figure of a million members arrived at, and does it refer to the number of families, or to the total number of individuals who have benefited from CONAMUP's activities?

PM: This figure is an estimate which we arrived at by counting the number of individuals who are involved in the various regional movements affiliated to CONAMUP. These are located throughout the country, but particularly in the north and the centre. For example, one of the most important is the state of Nuevo León and its capital Monterrey, where 62 organizations are joined together in the Land and Liberty Popular Front, involving about 120,000 people.⁵ Other examples are the Popular Defence Committee in the state of Durango which joins together about 45 organizations and about 100,000 members of urban-rural movements in the states of Morelos and Querétaro. Similar examples can be found in 12 other states.

Despite having started up in the north, today the greatest concentration of population and organizations affiliated to CONAMUP is in the Valley of Mexico. Here there are settlements like San Miguel Teotongo, with 85,000 inhabitants, which is affiliated to CONAMUP. We estimate that in Mexico City's Federal District⁶ there are 200,000 members. A Regional Co-ordinating Group covers the whole of this territory but, because of its size, it is becoming increasingly necessary to separate the activities of the Federal District and those of the state of Mexico. CONAMUP's political weight is seen in the fact that, in the last local elections, we won all the seats we stood for outside the Federal District.

E&U: What sort of organizations belong to CONAMUP?

PM: They are tenants movements, movements of the homeless, neighbourhood movements, movements grouping together women and street vendors. For example, in Puebla there is a housewives' committee and a street vendors union which have very close links with us. One characteristic of all the movements is that they go through different stages: there are periods of intense activity, when the people go out onto the streets, and there are periods of comparative quiet. The key for CONAMUP is to be a permanent presence in active, mobilized movements. It is with the enthusiasm generated by these that mass organizations are built up. An organization or a movement can be considered as an urban popular movement not so much for its ability to mobilize as for its potential for organization. Bringing people together is not the same as organizing them.

5. See note 3.

6. In 1980, the Federal District had a population of 9.2 million, out of a total population of 14.4 million in the Metropolitan Area. See note 2.

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In nearly all these cases there are elements of organization. In certain situations thousands of people can be mobilized, but this is not a guarantee that there is a permanent capacity for cohesion and organization. There are, of course, enormous differences between different sectors of the population. Some sectors can be said to be very active participants, other are reasonably active while others are passive. The organizations that CONAMUP promotes usually mobilize large sectors of the population at key moments. At other times, only the most active organizations need be mobilized.

E&U: What are the requirements for a movement that wishes to join CONAMUP?

PM: The requirements are simply to participate in CONAMUP's activities; initially as observers, for a period of three months. After this - and this is very important - they can apply to join CONAMUP at the general assembly. The decision to accept an organization as a member is taken by everyone there.

E&U: How difficult is it to achieve a consensus between movements which, in spite of having common objectives, spring up as a result of very diverse local problems?

PM: It has been difficult but if it was not working we wouldn't be talking here. Experience in urban popular movements encourages deep discussion, tolerance and a flexible attitude towards the contradictions that are always present within a mass movement. Because of the nature of the struggle in the *colonias* and the situation in which we find ourselves (complete lack of services, repression, constant violence) we have grown accustomed to assemblies which last 12, or even 14 hours, trying to resolve problems. When this goes to CONAMUP and the situation becomes very tense, we have learnt to manage the dynamics and guide the discussion to the essential points.

The first thing we do is to discuss the minor points, on which everyone is in agreement, so that we can obtain a consensus. Then the points where there are the most serious differences can be discussed without jeopardizing our unity. The process has been a complex one, but, in practice, CONAMUP can be said to operate by consensus.

E&U: Is it desirable, then, for CONAMUP to have amongst its objectives the creation of a democratic forum, an area for debate where differences like these can be aired?

PM: Yes, of course, as this allows a large part of the conflict to be absorbed. In CONAMUP there are organizations whose objective is to build unity within the urban popular movement, but there are also organizations that seek to use the benefits CONAMUP offers for their own ends, be they political or economic. In general, a sense of unity ultimately prevails, because this has a rationale with which people can identify, and it enables the organization and unifying forces to overcome their different obstacles. Those who wish to use CONAMUP for their own ends generally leave when they see that it is not going to be easy. Every year there is a debate, and the organizations that do not want to submit to this leave. This has encouraged

CONAMUP to define its role more precisely in different areas.

III. CONAMUP'S WORK

E&U: What are CONAMUP's main areas of operation? And how are its objectives achieved in each area?

PM: The four main areas of action are: the supply and distribution of goods, land and housing, women's issues, and the struggle for democracy and against repression.

a. The Supply of Goods

PM: In the area of supply and distribution, CONAMUP has helped set up the National Association of Street Vendors in several states in the country. Through the Country-City Co-operative, it seeks credit to buy products in bulk from peasant organizations. This project has expanded considerably but, because of its complexity, it is not yet fully developed.

CONAMUP also fights for its members to be allocated state-subsidized vouchers for purchasing *tortilla* and lobbies for the provision of school meals financed by the state. It also seeks franchises in state-funded non-profit retail stores. Short-term efforts have concentrated on the vouchers and school meals, the others are medium term projects. Finally, in some neighbourhoods community-run kitchens and eating rooms have been set up, as an experiment in community enterprise.

E&U: In a nation where the political system and - indeed - the state are so controlled by a single party - (the Institutional Revolutionary Party, PRI⁽⁷⁾) - how difficult is it for CONAMUP to press for state franchises and how politicized is the procedure?

PM: The state obviously seeks to use instances like these to promote the official party so, initially, these concessions were channelled through the PRI. The communities, however, demand to be given these concessions. It is here that the organizations' capacity to represent and their leverage are put to the test. Today, the most important organizations in CONAMUP have several dozen stores selling essential goods and run by social organizations, civil organizations or *colonia* committees, depending on how the negotiations with the state were worked out. We are still learning to run them, as it is not easy.

There is also a chain of dairy stores which forms part of the government's popular supply programme. We are one of the organizations which runs the greatest number of units of this kind, and we are also among the most effective administrators.

E&U: What other activities does CONAMUP promote in the area of goods' supply and distribution?

PM: The government has a very strict policy of banning street vendors from public places. This has become an important struggle, because street vending has increased considerably. It is now one of the principal ways through which people deal with the economic

7. The PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) was founded in 1929, a decade after the triumph of the Mexican revolution and the 1917 revolutionary Constitution on which Mexican contemporary political life is based. With few exceptions, since its inception the PRI's domination of national and regional political life has been virtually unchallenged.

crisis. This phenomenon does not fit in with official policies such as attracting foreign tourists or supporting urban renewal and redevelopment; street hawkers are seen as a nuisance, as they compete for the same centrally-located spaces. The National Association of Street Vendors negotiates with the government so vendors can stay in central areas and be given licences. It also puts pressure on government to set up markets in places which suit both the vendors and their customers.

We also have plans to establish urban vegetable gardens in the *colonias* as a step to improve nutritional intake and provide some extra cash to their inhabitants.

b. Land Acquisition for Housing

PM: CONAMUP demands to be given access to urban land reserves, particularly those tracts of land owned by the Mexican state. Since the General Law of Human Settlements was passed in 1976, the state has been buying land reserves in cities for future projects. But these are in danger of being put to political use, and that is why they have not been handed over. CONAMUP has asked for information about the land reserves to be made public and for access to them. The state has no right to deny us this, since these tracts are neither private property nor *ejido* land.⁽⁸⁾ The state cannot object from a legal point of view, because it owns the land, it has bought it. Neither can it argue that this is a violation of planning regulations, as the land is intended for residential use.

E&U: Does CONAMUP believe that this land should be handed over free of charge or should be sold at a commercial price?

PM: It should be sold at prices that are within the reach of most people. The Mexican state has a very conservative land policy. The phase of agrarian reform that Mexico went through after the revolution needs to be extended into an integral urban land reform. Although the revolution actually eliminated the landowning oligarchy as a class, land in the cities was taken over by the families of the revolutionary leaders and by the state. Urban land-use in Mexico is very strictly controlled in a way that not only worsens the plight of the homeless but also has a negative effect on all urban economic activities. For example, when the state wants to build a school or hospital, it does not have information on the land it owns and official agencies often have to buy land at commercial prices.

E&U: Is there no land register or cadastre of state owned land?

PM: Unfortunately not. Party officials usually use land to further their own political ends. This can be seen in the fact that the official party often allows invasions of urban land to take place. CONAMUP, in contrast, seeks to negotiate and buy land legally, whilst pressing for the laws made under the General Law of 1976 to be applied.

This demand for access to land is combined with the demand for access to low-cost housing, defined as housing affordable to those whose income is less than 2.5 times the minimum legal wage. We also have a housing programme in several cities - still in its early stages - with a state body, FONHAPO (National Fund for Low-Income Housing) of which the El Molino project is a part.⁽⁹⁾ This programme

8. *Ejid*os are communal land holdings which had been illegally taken from villages and were then returned to the peasants after the Mexican revolution. In recent years, there has been growing pressure to develop *ejido* land located on the periphery of rapidly-growing cities, although by law it can neither be sold nor sub-divided. The original villagers have been illegally selling off such land to families seeking a plot to build housing. See Varley, Ann (1987), "The Relationship between Tenure Legalization and Housing Improvement: Evidence from Mexico City", *Development and Change*, Vol. 18, No. 3.

9. See note 4.

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revolves around the idea of community-run administration and construction of housing projects.

c. The Women's Support Programme

PM: CONAMUP's member organizations regularly organize campaigns against violence to women and rape, they also have other activities which help bring women together such as nurseries, health workshops, dressmaking, sex education, and events within CONAMUP to promote women's causes. CONAMUP recognizes that women provide the backbone of the urban popular movement. Their active participation must be supported and strengthened. In addition to these activities, it was decided at CONAMUP's Fourth Annual General Meeting to organize a meeting for women of the urban popular movement. These have since been held on a regular basis: in 1983, 1985 and 1987.

There are several women's organizations affiliated to CONAMUP, including the Puebla Housewives' Committee and the Women's League in Monterrey. Women have clear channels for expression within the urban popular movement. But with the exception of the Puebla Housewives' Committee, in the majority of cases the popular organization has come first, and then women's causes have been promoted within the organization.

E&U: To what extent are the problems of the single mother taken into account in CONAMUP activities and, more specifically, in the housing programmes that CONAMUP supports?

PM: In the housing programmes this situation is considered, we aim to support single mothers by ensuring greater flexibility, tolerance and providing a space for reflection. Up until now, the women's movement has concentrated primarily on the fight against violence. This is not only domestic violence within the home because official repression is often directed specifically against women. For example, the police and members of the PRI in San Miguel Teotongo violently attacked people attending a women's meeting in February 1988.

Another area where important advances have been made is in education. In many settlements, it has proved possible to put an end to cases of rape, thanks to the active participation of women, wardens and popular surveillance methods.

E&U: How have you dealt with the problem of violence in the home?

PM: As part of the housing programmes, we encourage discussion on the nature of relationships, oriented towards ending violence in the heart of the *colonia* and the home. If a woman complains that she has been beaten, the community intervenes.

E&U: Bearing in mind that many women experience intimidation from their partners, how often are the partners denounced to the community?

PM: In cases of violence, the woman usually talks with the people in her block, and the matter is dealt with by the community. Commit-

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tees are set up to speak with the partner, and they try to convince him. It is important to have a social environment which sets sanctions and discourages violent men. In such an environment there is no prestige attached to beating a woman and dominating her as there might be in an environment where it is encouraged, and where men feel that violent behaviour improves their image and identity within the community.

The only occasion when the organization does not intervene is when there is violence in the home and the woman does not complain. It is not the organization's place to intervene where it hasn't been invited. It does not seek to establish control over people's private lives at home. If there is violence outside the home, in the street, for example, then the community intervenes automatically. Women are supported through workshops which give them the strength to deal with these situations.

d. The Struggle for Democracy and Participation

E&U: To go on to the fourth main area of CONAMUP's activities, what are the principal points of the movement's struggle for democracy?

PM: We promote activities both inside and outside the movement. Inside the movement the principal points are mass participation and taking decisions in assemblies. There are small assemblies which are familiar with and discuss local issues and problems (in the *colonia* or district), and general assemblies, where information from local organizations is centralized. General assemblies are the highest authority and take all kinds of decisions for the movement. Here the executive councils, which are subordinate to the assembly, co-ordinate the execution of the various mass decisions that have been made. This is a cycle of participation which generates a tremendous capacity for action and unifies the movements.

In activities outside the movement, we seek greater participation in municipal life through local power structures. For example, in the 1989 elections for mayors, organizations affiliated to CONAMUP won two town councils in the state of Durango (one of these was at the cost of a life, as there was a lot of resistance from the PRI). Through this channel, we try to democratize the base of Mexican civil society - the municipal government.

We also took part in the elections for the Consultative Council of Mexico City's Federal District. It is bizarre that, as inhabitants of the Federal District, we do not have the right to elect the authorities that govern us. In spite of being the largest city in the world, Mexico City is governed by a mayor appointed by the President of the Republic. The only control structure in the Federal District ("control" because it is not one of democratic participation) which has any contact with the people is the Consultative Council. This is formed by one representative of each of the 16 local government area councils (*juntas delegacionales*) that make up the Federal District. These councils are made up of representatives from neighbourhood associations in each of the *colonias*. Each association, in turn, is made up of the heads of each block.

Thus, the 44,000 blocks which make up the area of the Federal District are represented by the 16 members of the Consultative Council. Not only is it a pyramid-like structure but it is also only an

The potential for the democratic exercise of municipal power depends on the existence of true community participation

advisory body with no decision-making powers. The election of these "representatives" passes through four filters. But, even so, for grassroots organizations it is a way of expressing feelings. Despite being a structure which the official party has controlled for decades, to win anything in this kind of system demands an impressive capacity for development and local support.

For example, in the city centre, in the *colonias* worst affected by the 1985 earthquake, CONAMUP's organizations lost badly in the elections. Grassroots groups not affiliated to the official party rarely take part in these elections as they can seldom defeat the official machinery. Nevertheless, we always win the elections in the *colonias* where we have been working consistently. In these places our colleagues have become presidents of the neighbourhood associations, although we have never got as far as the local government area councils, as this is still more closely controlled by the PRI. And we participate there to prevent the government from imposing someone from the official party as a *colonia* representative and to avoid duality between the *colonos'* organizations and the puppet representative. In this way we ensure more effective action.

E&U: To turn to another topic: how are environmental problems co-ordinated with the four main areas in which CONAMUP works? Are they seen as a sub-theme of the others, or do all the areas have an environmental component?

PM: In addition to the four main areas of action already described, there are further points of action. In the environmental field there are two areas of activity: global and local. On a global level, in the last general assembly it was decided to give priority to the fight against the nuclear plant in the Laguna Verde. In this we have sided with several groups, including Christian associations, ecologists, peasants and teachers, to oppose the plant, as it presents a high risk of a nuclear accident.

On a local level, most affiliated organizations make demands of an ecological nature: to save rivers and areas of woodland, to prevent the dumping of refuse, to create ecological parks, alternative drainage systems, and so on.

IV. CONAMUP AND THE STATE

E&U: What has the movement's experience been after winning the municipal elections? How do you perceive the potential for change from within local government and in what way has a foothold in local power benefited the mass movement?

PM: The potential for the democratic exercise of municipal power depends on the existence of true community participation. Without it, municipal power can be counter-productive, because in countries like Mexico the opposition's budget is cut when it is in power. Ironically, to win is often to lose, because you forgo the prestige and the capacity to influence that you had when you were in opposition.

We will have to talk again in two years' time about the municipalities we have won; it is too soon to make an assessment. At present, everything I could say on the subject would be speculation.

E&U: How would you define the relationship between CONAMUP and the state? Why does a very powerful state and an official party with a formidable ability to co-opt or demolish its opponents allow a vast but autonomous umbrella organization like CONAMUP to exist?

PM: The state does not like the fact that CONAMUP exists. CONAMUP has grown up at the margins, in the cracks of the system the PRI controls. It has emerged "dispassionately", in contrast with the workers' and peasants' unions which emerged "passionately" as part of the rise to power of Cárdenas in the 1930s.¹⁰ The "official urban grassroots organizations" controlled by the PRI emerged gradually after 1943 when there was a resurgence in the popular movement, particularly with the creation of the National Federation of Popular Organizations. This Federation is omnipresent on a national level within the urban popular sector. CONAMUP emerged in 1980, representing a direct challenge to this Federation's control of the masses. This became possible because the Federation has lost credibility and its capacity to represent, unify and develop.

CONAMUP has matured through its opposition to a form of state control which has lasted for over 45 years. This is in contrast to what has happened in Peru and Brazil where there are no state-controlled urban popular organizations. So while the national slum and squatter settlement associations of these countries are growing rapidly, organizing people who have never been organized before, in Mexico CONAMUP has had to grow and develop by overcoming the limited and vertical forms of representation of an existing official organization. Because of its origins, CONAMUP is smaller numerically, but the quality of its experience is better.

The type of leadership and the features of organizations elsewhere in Latin America are those which existed in Mexico 40 years ago: the presence of a single, vertical and rigid structure of representation and political manipulation. The role of the individual leader in Mexico's urban popular movements has gradually been superseded by a democratic structure of representation, with a collective leadership. We seek to avoid a one-person leadership.

The state uses different methods to relate to the urban popular movement. One method is by co-opting the leaders into the PRI (it has succeeded in one case) or to isolate them from their bases. It also tries to undermine the movements by giving in to popular demands although outside of negotiations with CONAMUP, in order to give prestige to the state or some other intermediary agency of the state.

Also, in extreme conditions (for instance, when the dynamics of a regional movement lie beyond its control), the state is repressive. During some periods there is greater control than during others. For example, between October 1983 and February 1984, various leaders were taken prisoner in Acapulco and Monterrey. It was there that one of our colleagues "disappeared". There was a lot of tension in several of Mexico City's local government areas, partly because workers, peasants and the self-employed poor had formed an association and had called for a national strike.

We believe that CONAMUP must open a constitutional space and that the state should recognize urban grassroots organizations as part of the so-called "social sector" of state action. Fortunately, in Mexico, the national constitution of 1917 is very advanced and flexible. It defines the existence of three sectors in society: private, state and social. The social sector has, traditionally, referred to

10. Lázaro Cárdenas was a charismatic popular leader and a president of Mexico between 1934 and 1940. In that period, he did more than his predecessors to further the social and economic aims of the revolution, including the implementation of the agrarian reform, large-scale expropriation and nationalization (including oil production), and setting up workers' confederations.

...we look for a method where the decisions are processed and the directorate serves the people at the base of the movement. We seek to turn the pyramid-like structure of representation on its head

"trade union bureaucracy", trade union workers controlled by the state. What we have been demanding since 1987 is that we should be considered constitutionally as part of the social sector, as this sector has a series of concessions and privileges which allow it to operate more freely. The problem we face is who is to take the initiative against the state? The state's tactic has been to strike at and weaken the movement, and then to make some concessions but these are concessions of which movements cannot take advantage precisely because they are weak. Our main challenge is, while maintaining an autonomous position, to be able to accept state proposals and play for time to allow for an internal debate and a dialogue with the state to develop.

V. CONAMUP'S STRUCTURE

E&U: What sort of internal working structure can help strengthen CONAMUP in this respect?

PM: In Mexico, leadership has always been exercised from the top downwards and decisions are taken by those above. In CONAMUP we look for a method where the decisions are processed and the directorate serves the people at the base of the movement. We seek to turn the pyramid-like structure of representation on its head. This is why we have small assemblies where information is received and issues debated. These are made up of groups of 15 to 30 families, so that there is a certain degree of confidence and intimacy in the process of reaching agreement. The assemblies take decisions on the local level, but they put forward proposals to the general assembly, which is the highest authority. All the important agreements are made there. In the general assembly there are executive councils which implement the agreements, of greater or lesser complexity, depending on the organization.

E&U: Does CONAMUP impose this organizational structure on affiliated organizations?

PM: It is a structure which was born of experience, over a period of 20 years. Nearly all the organizations tend to follow it. It is a kind of organization of the social fabric which is, in part, consciously formed but is also partly intuitive. Generally, the popular process of organization begins with a central movement. For this to become an organization it has, of necessity, to break up into sections and go beyond its district. If it goes further and achieves certain goals, it must then break down into blocks. A movement which isn't rooted in the blocks is a superficial movement and could die. On the other hand, if it has its roots in the blocks and the families, it is unlikely to die.

VI. WORKING AT PROJECT LEVEL

E&U: Urban grassroots movements generally emerge around very specific demands, usually at the place of residence, for example, access to affordable housing, access to land for housing, tenure of the land already occupied and public serv-

ices. In rather crude terms, one could say that the immediate thrust behind these movements is the satisfaction of individual needs through collective demands. I would like to ask you two questions in this respect. First, how does an organization like CONAMUP ensure that individual household needs are made part of a continuous collective struggle? And second, how can you prevent the movement from losing its initial thrust, and with it the aims for social and political change, once the immediate needs are satisfied?

PM: In the first place, the way that CONAMUP works is based on the need to combine individual needs with the needs of the community, to make the needs of the community part of the social conscience. When we as an organization come to a settlement, we present the inhabitants with a project and the opportunity to own a dwelling in a neighbourhood where there are no gangs or drugs, but children playgrounds and community participation instead. People don't suffer only from the lack of a roof over their heads; they suffer because they are attacked by their neighbours, because they can't go out into the streets where there are drug addicts, and a young girl cannot be sent to buy *tortillas*, because she is molested. These are things which make people suffer. But they resign themselves to it, because they think it is normal, that life is like that.

When the families decide to fight for housing, we don't only present them with the particular problem of a plot of land, but also with a picture of all that could be happening around that private area. This acts as a filter. The real drunkards and reprobates don't rate the project, because they think it's too puritanical. So they leave.

With the people that remain, we plan the physical environment: the location of the store, the auditorium, the park, the design of the block. Community plans and individual housing take shape simultaneously. Then everyone joins in the process of collective construction, not just of their own house, but everyone's house. In the construction stage, the most active people have already taken charge of the project, which now also deals with the issues of public space, community needs and social relations, and these people are prepared to defend it. In this way we combine individual needs with the needs of the community. Although this is a general scheme which we apply in all communities, what I have described applies particularly to the Association of *Colonos*, Tenants and the Homeless Libertad in Mexico City. As we have had control of this project from the beginning, our experience here is deeper.

E&U: What happens when the movement goes into an existing community where housing has been built, and an environment has been created, but where there are, nevertheless, other kinds of individual and collective demands?

PM: There are certain ground rules which you find in nearly all settlements and districts where the popular movement is active. For example, consumption of alcoholic drinks in the street is not allowed, and there are no drugs. In some communities they do not even allow the public sale of alcohol. There are no bars, although people drink at home, of course. But at least the streets are free of drunkenness. People are better off. Alcohol is replaced with sporting and cultural events, less fearful families, stronger women,

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children who have a little *tortilla* and milk in their bellies. Many people who were drunkards and violent husbands before arriving at the *colonia* have changed, as the change in living standards brings about changes in the individual. Bad habits become isolated.

You will find this dynamic in any organization, because the organization that does not set this up will collapse under its own weight. Alcoholism causes violence, frustration and disillusionment, and the more profligate organizations don't live for long. Mexican people are very violent, and before long, out come the fights and the pistols.

E&U: At present how many "utopian projects" (to coin a phrase for the projects which aim to build a settlement up from nothing) does CONAMUP have? How big are they? And how fully developed?

PM: There are projects funded by state credit (from the National Fund for Popular Housing, FONHAPO) whose plans are finalized in the cities of Veracruz, Nuevo León, Monterrey and Durango with another five in the Valley of Mexico. Of course every year there are dozens of new settlements which we are involved with in some way. The largest are in the Valley of Mexico, with between 1,000 and 1,200 families, and in the provinces they are of between 400 and 200 families.

Urban planning for each project is the responsibility of each organization. For example, the *El Molino* project, in the Iztapalapa local government area in Mexico City, is a scheme for 1,087 families where the houses face each other and share a common patio.

VII. RELATIONS WITH NGOS AND OTHER OUTSIDE AGENCIES

E&U: From your experience of urban popular movements such as those we have mentioned, how much scope is there for, and what is the potential role of, a group of organized professionals, be it in the shape of a support group or a non-governmental organization (NGO)?

PM: NGOs behave like NGOs and not like social movements. NGOs often must decide between two alternatives: to seek a positive insertion as intellectuals or to become part of a negative cycle in which the NGO rides on the prestige, the power and the resources of the movement. The issue is whether to strengthen the NGOs in order to turn them into something along the lines of the new bureaucracies, or to position the NGOs within society where they help to consolidate the social movements.

NGOs face the dilemma of being either an *ad hoc* subordinate of the state, acting as a bridge with the popular movements that the state has not managed to control, or becoming a part of society. As we are in favour of the NGOs becoming integrated, we have democratic mechanisms of selection, supervision and control for the NGOs that wish to work with us. When there is a project, we put it forward in an open competition to which the NGOs are invited. The winner of the competition is taken to the general assembly where its participation is approved or rejected after a general vote. If it is

approved, an agreement is made with the NGO.

To work with an NGO, we set up a team of internal consultants, generally made up of active members of the movement who are paid, but elected by everyone in a secret ballot in the general assembly. In this team we have a social counterbalance to the NGO, so that it does not have to manage everything by itself, and so that the people in the organization learn and acquire a capacity for autonomous development. With this arrangement, problems are avoided because both the NGO and the team are responsible for maintaining contact with the general assembly.

In the NGOs there are, of course, people who do not put personal interests first, who are genuinely prepared to help and are hard working. But there are also people who want to make money out of the movement, to travel the world, to have power and influence, to negotiate with the government. This creates tension within NGOs. Interestingly, the most significant efforts by the Mexican state to co-opt are not directed at CONAMUP, but at CONAMUP's legal and technical consultants, which are NGOs.

E&U: Are the technical parts of the project always contracted out to NGOs or do you also use private consultants?

PM: Always NGOs. We have avoided private consultancies as they have to make a profit and this increases the costs. We absorb indirect expenses through the internal consultants.

E&U: Does CONAMUP have a permanent, salaried staff?

PM: No, CONAMUP has not become bureaucratized. The management consists of an annual general meeting - the highest authority - which is held in a different region each year. There are also bi-monthly assemblies which also rotate. So everyone is required to host meetings, paying for the cost of the meeting, including food and lodging. We are still debating the problem of creating a central headquarters. A curious thing is that NGOs are very keen for CONAMUP to be permanently located, to be anchored.

E&U: Does this mean that people like yourself and the others who work for CONAMUP must have alternative sources of income?

PM: Yes. Generally the work is voluntary, unless it is part of a social project as with the members of the teams of internal consultants who are elected by the assemblies as I have described. With this scheme there is employment without bureaucracy. 'Caste' interests are not created, because once the project is over the job is over. If the members of the team become involved in another movement and the people re-elect them on the basis of their merits, then they can continue to work. This ensures that they continue to work and do not put funds to personal use.

The economic problem is an important one. We have noticed that even in our small factories, the direct solution to the problem has to do with addressing bureaucratization and corruption. There are cases where, once a person feels sure of his or her job, he or she begins to work less and become corrupted. The assembly acts as a control mechanism in these situations.

The Editors would like to thank Yves Cabannes of the Human Settlements Cell of the Groupe de Recherche et d'Echanges Technologiques (GRET) in Paris who suggested and then made this interview possible.

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E&U: On a more personal note, how do you as a professional, an intellectual, a university lecturer, fit into the urban popular movement? What has been your personal evolution in the movement's changes and achievements?

PM: My role has been to become integrated, to live the experiences of my colleagues in the movement, and to theorize on the basis of this experience. My aim is to give shape to ideas which help give cohesion to the movement and help improve the quality of practical experience.

This is because from the first moment, practical experience is very much subordinated and codified in terms of the dominant ideology. After analyzing these ideas on a theoretical plane, they can be returned in a purer form, so to speak, before they are applied to specific situations. My relationship with the movement is one of give and take, but between equals, which is important. You need to have mutual respect: there should be respect for the function of the masses and the masses should respect the role of the intellectual as something which is irreplaceable. Likewise, the intellectual must remember that a self-managed movement cannot be substituted by bureaucratic directorates or leadership, or personal considerations.

E&U: How important are funds from sources outside Mexico in the housing projects that CONAMUP has developed?

PM: They have been important, because it has generally meant credit on very favourable terms. For example, CONAMUP has received credit from the World Bank through FONHAPO. In this instance, it was a combination of the government's measures plus the individual prestige of the (then) director of FONHAPO and his network of acquaintances. He convinced the World Bank of the "good intentions" of the Mexican government, which had previously been suspected of being corrupt.

E&U: But an experience like that depends so much on a single person. How far is it possible to reproduce this in other circumstances?

PM: That was in 1985. More recently, with the (U.S. Government's) "Brady Plan" and the renegotiation of the Mexican debt, the World Bank's image of the new regime has improved a lot. Once the way had been opened (in 1985), the regime was able to maintain and extend its relations with the World Bank. The hurdle we could face is that the state might not be inclined to support the type of project which FONHAPO formerly supported or that the Bank might impose conditions of repayment which become unacceptable to poor borrowers. The greatest danger is that the funds may go largely to middle-income groups, who often benefit from "social-sector" policies.

E&U: What kind of pressure can CONAMUP exert to guarantee that this does not happen?

PM: We need national strategies for that. I am not clear about this yet.