



Learning from young people and from our own experiences in Barrio San Jorge

JORGELINA HARDOY, GUADALUPE SIERRA AND
ANDREA TAMMARAZIO, WITH GABRIELA LEDESMA,
LUCAS LEDESMA AND CAROLINA GARCÍA

Jorgelina Hardoy has a degree in Geography from the University of Buenos Aires and an MA from Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey, USA. She has been a staff member of IIED-AL since 1994. Her work focuses on developing multi-stakeholder partnerships to improve environmental conditions and reduce social vulnerability and risk in low-income neighbourhoods, including those related to climate change. She is also currently involved in the upgrading and regularization programmes implemented in Barrio San Jorge and Barrio Hardoy.

Address: IIED-América Latina, Melo 2698, Florida 1602-Vicente López, Buenos Aires, Argentina; e-mail: jhardoy@iied-al.org.ar; tel: ++ (54 11) 4760 3817; website: www.iied-al.org.ar

Guadalupe Sierra is finishing her degree in Anthropology from the University of Buenos Aires, and her research is on youth participation in the process of urban upgrading and regularization in Barrio San Jorge. Since 2006, she has been working with youth in situations of vulnerability in low-income neighbourhoods. She joined IIED-AL in 2008, where she also coordinates the

ABSTRACT This paper brings together the perceptions of three youths from Barrio San Jorge, a low-income settlement located in the municipality of San Fernando in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, and the more technical views of three adult researchers working in the same *barrio* with the Instituto Internacional de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo-América Latina (IIED-AL). It highlights youth's perceptions and aspirations within a context of neighbourhood upgrading and transformation, and discusses some ideas on how best to approach and work with youth, addressing the challenges of integration, participation and commitment.

KEYWORDS integration / participation / urban upgrading / vulnerability / youth

I. INTRODUCTION

From an adult perspective, everyday life in low-income settlements appears to be a constant struggle. In addition to inadequate infrastructure and services, insecure and sub-par housing, unstable and/or insufficient incomes, residents often have to deal with violence, different forms of discrimination, limited safety nets and little access to the participatory mechanisms that would provide them with a better chance to voice their needs and aspirations. However, youth often take a different approach to life's challenges. They can point to positive actions and circumstances that escape an adult's observation. They perceive and live their *barrio* differently.

This paper considers both youth and adult perspectives on Barrio San Jorge, a low-income settlement in the municipality of San Fernando in the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region (BAMR). It combines the perceptions and aspirations of three young people living in the settlement with the more technical view and experience of three staff members from the Instituto Internacional de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo (IIED-América Latina), an NGO that has worked on the general upgrading of Barrio San Jorge since 1989. These three young people collaborated with us, sharing their reflections on their neighbourhood and also talking to friends and family to gather their impressions. Box 1 provides some information on each of them. The voices raised in the paper are by no means representative of the views and perceptions of all youth living in Barrio San Jorge. This is a heterogeneous group of young people, even

though they live in the same neighbourhood; each individual has his or her particular life story, faces different problems, uses different capacities and has access to different opportunities.

On the adult side, we try to discuss some ideas on how best to approach and work with youth. Although in practice we are not a youth-oriented NGO, IIED-AL's long-term involvement in this *barrio* and its young people justifies this paper.

II. BACKGROUND

Barrio San Jorge, located by the River Reconquista, began in 1961 as a resettlement site for about 60 families that had been living in other flood-prone areas in the municipality.⁽¹⁾ Despite the lack of infrastructure and basic services, other families also moved there, attracted by the surrounding vacant land that seemed to present a low risk of eviction. Thus, the settlement's population increased gradually. After 1979, some 200 families who were evicted by the municipal authorities from land where public works were being undertaken also settled nearby.⁽²⁾ They occupied an area that was levelled and sub-divided into plots by the municipality and this became known as Barrio Nuevo ("new neighbourhood"), to distinguish it from Barrio Viejo ("old neighbourhood") with its informal layout and narrow lanes. This historical physical and social division between Barrio Nuevo and Barrio Viejo remains today. Gabriela further describes the *barrio* in Box 2, and today the *barrio* is home to 410 families.

Across the street from Barrio San Jorge is Barrio Hardoy, which originated as the relocation site for about 250 families who had to move

work of women managing microcredit programmes. She is also currently involved in the upgrading and regularization programmes implemented in Barrio San Jorge and Barrio Hardoy.

Address: IIED-América Latina, Melo 2698, Florida 1602-Vicente López, Buenos Aires, Argentina; e-mail: accioncomunitaria@iied-al.org.ar; tel: ++ (54 11) 4760 3817; website: www.iied-al.org.ar

Andrea Tamarzio has a degree in Social Communication from the University of Buenos Aires and is finishing a Master's in Social Anthropology jointly at the Institute of Economic and Social Development and the Institute of Advanced Social Studies of the National University of San Martin in Argentina. She is doing her research on children's perspectives on relocation and urbanization processes. She joined IIED-AL in 2006,

BOX 1

Gabriela, Carolina and Lucas

Gabriela Ledesma is 21 years old. She was born in San Jorge and lives with her mother, father and four brothers. She finished high school two years ago, worked as an assistant in community children's activities and is now looking for a job. She wants to study radiology but she also likes working with children, so she is receiving training in child health. She is a member of the *murga** El Regreso de los Magníficos de San Fernando and was selected as a youth leader for Promeba Joven.

Carolina García is 20 years old. She lives with her mother and five younger brothers. She lived in Barrio San Jorge until she was 14, and then moved to another *barrio* in Bancalari (municipality of San Fernando) and onto Moreno (another municipality within Buenos Aires Metropolitan Region). Four years ago she moved back to Barrio Hardoy, across the street from Barrio San Jorge. She likes to dance in the *murga* and is a member of Los Estrellados de San Fernando; she enjoys activities with children. She is looking for a job and is also a youth leader for Promeba Joven.

Lucas Ledesma is 22 years old and was born in Barrio San Jorge. He has finished high school and works part-time as a sports teacher in a local institution that gives after-school support to children and youth. His other jobs include doing maintenance in a sports club and in the municipal programme Tercer Tiempo ("third half"), which involves supporting soccer teams from different *barrios*. He also participates in the *murga* El Regreso de los Magníficos de San Fernando and, like Gabriela and Carolina, was selected as a youth leader for Promeba Joven. He lives in Barrio San Jorge in his parents' house with his wife, who is expecting twins.

*A *murga* is a kind of carnival or popular art form that takes place in the streets and public spaces in many local neighbourhoods; it is a combination of acrobatic dance, rhythmic music and colourful costumes.



FIGURE 1
Google Earth map showing location of Barrio San Jorge

SOURCE: Google Earth (27 April 2010).

from where she collaborates with the Community Library El Ombu and participates in an environmental management research initiative implemented jointly in Mexico and Argentina. She is also currently involved in the upgrading and regularization programmes implemented in Barrio San Jorge and Barrio Hardoy.

Address: IIED–América Latina, Melo 2698, Florida 1602–Vicente López, Buenos Aires, Argentina; e-mail: atammarazio@iied-al.org.ar; tel: ++ (54 11) 4760 3817; website: www.iied-al.org.ar

Carolina García, Gabriela Ledesma and Lucas Ledesma are youths living in Barrio San Jorge. All three are youth leaders and social referents working on the Strengthening Social and Human Capital Initiative of Promeba II.

out of Barrio San Jorge to make space for the upgrading of the area. Barrio Hardoy was constructed on vacant land donated by the municipality of San Fernando to Barrio San Jorge's residents who, through their cooperative, organized themselves to allocate the plots.

Many projects and programmes, led by politicians, priests, the army and NGOs, have been initiated in this low-income settlement with very different outcomes, and since the 1990s, IIED–América Latina has been involved in the neighbourhood's transformation.⁽³⁾ Its work in Barrio San Jorge has evolved around improving housing conditions, basic services and overall environmental conditions, as well as supporting the development of a grassroots organization to represent the *barrio*'s needs and guide the upgrading. Most of our interventions (for instance, installing the water and sanitation network, helping to re-organize the *barrio* layout, reducing overcrowding and achieving land tenure) targeted the whole neighbourhood, not specifically young people. There have been a few activities, however, that have aimed to work with children and youth, such as building a crèche and helping in its initial organization, supporting a children's soccer team, helping to run a community library and, associated with it, a vegetable garden. There has also been an attempt to explore the history of the *barrio* from the perspective of children and youth, and to work with youth on the design of plazas in Barrio Hardoy. These projects are described further in Section VI.⁽⁴⁾ However, we've always had trouble in sustaining long-term programmes with children and youth, especially the latter. There are many reasons,

BOX 2
Barrio San Jorge as seen by a youth

"Barrio San Jorge was formerly known as Villa Latita ('little tin slum') because the houses were small and made of tin.⁽¹⁾ Later, the Barrio Nuevo was made when people living behind the cemetery lost their houses in a fire.⁽²⁾ They brought the people here, to the new section.

Accessibility is good, you have the Route No. 202 where you have several bus lanes, it's near the train, you have a hospital nearby, shops at walking distance...

I really like the *barrio*, it's not what it seems. Before you couldn't go into the *barrio* alone, but now you can, everything is OK, it's more quiet. Before, taxis wouldn't come in because of fear of being robbed. When the neighbour got out at his or her house, the driver would get robbed. Today, the ambulance has problems getting in because of the state of the roads. If it does come in, it comes with three police cars to guard it.

The police don't walk much around the *barrio*. A while back they were posted outside the *barrio* to control the robbed cars coming in. But they aren't stealing so many cars now, so the police have left. If there are robbed cars still coming in, it's from outside people who have arrangements with people within the *barrio* to dismantle the car. It would be great if we could all help each other and defend ourselves because police officers often can't do anything.

The *barrio* is not well taken care of. There is lots of uncollected garbage in waste dumps all around, and public spaces like the plaza are not kept up. On one of the sides of the *barrio* a wall is being built.⁽³⁾ I don't like it, the *barrio* will look like a prison, though we can use it to put our names on and write messages. When it is finished, the *pibes de la esquina*⁽⁴⁾ will also paint different messages and mark their territory.

In general, we all like the *barrio*, it's '*our barrio*'. I don't know one single person that doesn't like it, that would say the *barrio* is ugly. People living in the *barrio* across the street (Barrio Hardoy) think San Jorge is ugly and reject us. I don't like it because they used to live here in San Jorge and now they criticize it...finally I just laugh, what can I say to them?

Here we have good and bad neighbours, you get them all. The ones I like less are the *chusmas* (those who gossip) and drug sellers; then you have those that never get involved in anything. I don't like them either because they never defend a neighbour when there is a crime or when something happens... You also find the good neighbours, the children, youth...I like the *barrio*, it's not dangerous for me."

⁽¹⁾ This would be the section of San Jorge called Barrio Viejo.

⁽²⁾ This is another version of the origins of Barrio Nuevo. Residents don't agree exactly on why and how Barrio Nuevo began.

⁽³⁾ The owner of the plot of land next to Barrio San Jorge is building a wall surrounding the property.

⁽⁴⁾ *Pibes de la esquina* refer to youth who hang out at street corners; see Section III in this paper.

SOURCE: Gabriela Ledesma.

mostly linked to funding and to the pressure on staff to manage the more central programmes that are not targeted at a particular age group but that primarily involve adults as participants. These different experiences have pushed us to reflect on the challenges of working with youth and on our limitations in understanding and working with them.

Recently, IIED-AL began to collaborate with the national neighbourhood upgrading programme Promeba II (Programa Nacional de Mejoramiento de Barrios),⁽⁵⁾ which is being implemented in Barrio San Jorge. This programme, implemented by local governments, aims to provide basic infrastructure and services and regularize the layout of informal settlements as part of the process of finally giving formal land tenure to residents. In the course of this regularization process, families have to be relocated to a new housing project developed across the street, alongside Barrio Hardoy. Certain public spaces used by the community also need to be relocated. But typically, as in

1. Barrio San Jorge also suffered from periodic flooding until the late 1990s/early 2000s when the government of the province of Buenos Aires finally finished flood control works on the river basin that included rectification of the river. Now the *barrio* is located by the old river course and the new river course runs some 100 metres north of the old one.

2. Hardoy, A and R Schusterman (1997), "Reconstructing social capital in a poor urban settlement: the Integral Improvement Programme in Barrio San Jorge", *Environment*

and *Urbanization* Vol 9, No 1, April, pages 91–119.

3. For more on IIED–AL's work in Barrio San Jorge, see reference 2; also Hardoy, A and Jorge Hardoy with Ricardo Shusterman (1991), "Building community organization: the history of a squatter settlement and its own organizations in Buenos Aires", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 3, No 2, October, pages 104–120; and Almansi, F, A Hardoy and J Hardoy (2010 forthcoming), "Improving water and sanitation provision in Buenos Aires – what can a research-oriented NGO do?", IIED Working Paper.

4. IIED–AL has also participated in youth-oriented national programmes operating in San Fernando, including Programa de Atención a Grupos Vulnerables (PAGV – Attention to Vulnerable Groups Programme) and Programa Jóvenes Incluir (Youth Inclusion Programme). The first, aimed at vulnerable groups, had youth as one of its target populations and aimed to work on participatory planning and thus strengthen participatory mechanisms and the development of social networks. See Shusterman, R et al. (1999), "Reducción de la pobreza en acción. Planificación participativa en San Fernando", *Medio Ambiente y Urbanización* Vol 15, No 54, IIED–AL, Buenos Aires, pages 3–16. Programa Jóvenes Incluir aimed at training youth in project development and basic skills such as carpentry, baking, technology, etc.

5. In the municipality of San Fernando, Promeba I was implemented between 2004 and 2007 and was completed in two neighbourhoods, Barrio Hardoy and Barrio La Paz, just across the street from Barrio San Jorge. Although initially, Barrio San Jorge was going to be included in the first round, hydraulic restrictions postponed its involvement. Since 2009, Promeba II has been implemented in three neighbourhoods along the River Reconquista, namely Presidente Peron, San Martin and San Jorge. IIED–AL participated in both Promeba I and Promeba II.

many other programmes of neighbourhood upgrading and regularization activities that imply an important transformation for the *barrio*, work with youth is not integrated into what is happening.

The municipality of San Fernando, acknowledging the vulnerability of this group, asked the national government to include an extension of the programme to work with youth. The result was a sub-programme, "Promeba Joven" (Iniciativa de Fortalecimiento de Capital Social y Humano – Strengthening social and human capital initiative), which aims to coordinate existing resources (of the municipality, of NGOs and other entities working with youth) with the actual needs of youth, and to build a plan of action in partnership with these young people. The programme, launched in March 2010, is developing a series of activities with the Promeba II team. Initially, all the energy is being placed on developing trust and on training community leaders who are themselves young people or have an especially good connection with them, so that they can act as facilitators and promote youth involvement and integration, both within and outside the *barrio*.

In this context, we have been meeting with young boys and girls who have just started to participate in the programme, exchanging views and ideas and trying to understand the best way to work with them, to incorporate their voice into the discussion and facilitate their integration within the *barrio* and with the rest of the city.

Initially, we had an informal conversation with Gabriela, Carolina and Lucas, explaining that we wanted to prepare this article in collaboration with them. The plan was to talk informally about three aspects of the relationship between youth, the *barrio* and the city, namely:

- how young people get involved with their *barrio*;
- how young people get involved with the areas outside of their *barrio*, the city and other neighbourhoods; and
- how programmes or projects mediate between young people and the opportunities or activities that the *barrio* and the city have to offer.

Later, two of the young people conducted similar interviews, by themselves, with other young friends and family. Finally, we met a few times to discuss the results and to highlight the key points that the paper should make. These are addressed in the sections below and focus on:

- the stigma associated with youth and the places where they gather;
- the capacity of upgrading to address youth issues;
- how youth perceive and relate to the world outside the *barrio*; and
- the programmes and interventions for youth in the *barrio* that have involved IIED–AL.

The last section mentioned above is primarily an attempt to understand our own shortcomings in working with youth in the development process of Barrio San Jorge. The paper concludes with our final reflections.

III. YOUTH CARRY A STIGMA: THEY ARE *PIBES DE LA ESQUINA*

In Barrio San Jorge, youth carry a stigma. They are the group with conflicts, whether with other youth, with neighbours or with the law; and they are marginalized not only by those outside the *barrio* but also by the adults and neighbours within Barrio San Jorge.

A recent survey of young people (15–29 years old) living in informal settlements in the Municipality of San Fernando⁽⁶⁾ show that youth aged between 17 and 19 are the ones who should be finishing school and starting to seek jobs to support their families or pay for their own needs. Many, however, have already dropped out of school, and without adequate education and employment opportunities, they usually find jobs in the informal economy with no stability and low wages. Girls of this age assume more of the domestic responsibilities, and many also become pregnant and start their own families. These realities limit their possibilities for acquiring further skills, developing their capacities and getting out of informality; it doesn't help them generate a sense of the future or to stop living just in the short term. In this context, it is difficult to find a voice and a place in the community that is not linked to vagrancy and crime.

This is not just a characteristic of low-income settlements. Data show that in Argentina, 22 per cent of youth aged between 15 and 29 do not study or work. People under the age of 30 represent 60 per cent of the total unemployed.⁽⁷⁾ Of young women aged 18 and 19, 32.5 per cent have more than one child and 6.6 per cent have more than three.⁽⁸⁾ In the San Fernando area, 15 per cent of young women aged between 15 and 19 have at least one child.⁽⁹⁾

Without support from their families and neighbours, or adequate institutional capacity to design and manage programmes and interventions suited to their needs and aspirations, youth in this context are particularly vulnerable and can get caught in a loop of unfulfilled aspirations. Seldom do programmes and interventions respond in the ways they need, and their opinions and ideas are rarely taken into account.

Young people in Barrio San Jorge, as in many other *barrios*, gather on the sidewalks and street corners, or *la esquina*, so they are called the *pibes de la esquina* ("kids of the corner"). When someone refers to *pibes de la esquina* it implies that they are talking about young people who don't go to school or work, and who spend their time doing nothing. In the words of some Barrio San Jorge youth, the assumption is that they are "...all drug addicts who gather there, good for nothing, we're all drugged." (Victoria and Federico Ledesma, 19 and 14 years old.)

But when you start talking with young people who gather at the corner, you realize that it is not fair to associate them only with "gangs" with police records. It is much more complex. The corners actually fill a huge gap in the *barrio*: they are a place to meet and socialize with others. For youth they are the only place where they can meet and hang around, just as any group of young people would do. They need to socialize and be part of a group.

The *esquina* is also used by children and sometimes even by adults. Time on corners, sidewalks, waiting outside school to pick up children or queuing outside the health centre are all moments to socialize, talk, gossip and play. These places are strategic points of interaction and observation, where it is possible to learn about what is going on in the *barrio*. In neighbourhoods where plot size and houses are small, these places are important extensions of people's homes.

Although most of these young people are not involved in crime and drugs, when they hang around the corner to socialize they are deemed *pibes de la esquina*, with all the negative connotations associated with the name. Gabriela, Lucas and Carolina understand very well how the corner functions, who is involved with dangerous activities such as mugging, drug use or the dismantling of robbed cars, and who has gang problems.

6. Unidad Municipal de Estadísticas y Censos (UMEC), Municipalidad de San Fernando (2009), *La Población de San Fernando. Estadísticas Sociodemográficas 2005, 2006 y 2007*, Chapter 4, "Health" by Silvia Mario.

7. PNUD (2009), "Informe sobre desarrollo humano para Mercosur 2009–2010: innovar para incluir: jóvenes y desarrollo humano", available at <http://www.juventudydesarrollohumano.org/index.html>.

8. INDEC (Instituto Nacional de Estadísticas y Censos (2005), *Sistema de Indicadores Sociodemográficos (SESD)*, based on data from Encuesta Permanente de Hogares (EPH), second semester of 2005, INDEC, Argentina.

9. See reference 6.

Some young people know they can walk around anywhere fairly freely and mingle with different groups, while others limit themselves to certain parts of the *barrio* because they know they have problems with other groups. Sometimes it's not the young people themselves who have problems but their families. In Box 3, Gabriela and Lucas describe how they perceive the corner. Each *esquina* is identified according to who meets there and what goes on. One who "walks" the streets of the neighbourhood is one who knows what happens and understands local codes.⁽¹⁰⁾

We consider the neighbourhood to be, in the words of De Visscher and colleagues, a "social-pedagogical" context that has an impact on socialization.⁽¹¹⁾ It can be seen as "...a vector of social change and social relationships",⁽¹²⁾ "...a material carrier of social and cultural meanings."⁽¹³⁾ The neighbourhood both creates and restricts individual and social interactions. Different social relationships occur that allow for different learning opportunities. It is through these relationships, between children and/or youth and the rest of the neighbours or society at large, and how solid these relationships are built, that children and youth get to learn and know the meanings, rules and values of their community.⁽¹⁴⁾ The stigma associated with *pibes de la esquina* is a huge barrier in this regard. It interferes with the implementation of local development programmes and in some ways explains why social programmes fail to reach youth in low-income neighbourhoods. This is discussed further in Section VI.

10. A typical comment heard in the *barrio*.

11. De Visscher, Sven and Maria Bouverne-De Bie (2008), "Children's presence in the neighbourhood: a social-pedagogical perspective", *Children and Society* Vol 22, No 6, pages 470-481.

12. Ben Abdeljelil, Y (1999), "Een sociale kaart: van tellen, opdelen, detecteren, projecteren en afbakenen totplannen", in H Baert, M Bouverne-De Bie, A Desmet, L Hellinckx and L



FIGURE 2
Aerial photograph of Barrio San Jorge showing *esquinas*, Barrio Nuevo, Barrio Viejo, plazas, soccer fields, etc.

SOURCE: Aerial photograph; references based on youth groups and IIED-AL (2010).

BOX 3
Gabriela and Lucas discuss the esquina

"...Most young people meet at the corner. You'll find in the neighbourhood kids here, kids there.... In the corners you find kids of all different ages, older people too. Many are all day playing at 'la bolita',* riding bikes, others block off the street, install goals and play soccer on the street...
 ... Though I'm looking for a job, I also go and meet with friends in the corner...
 ... The corner is a place to laugh, you laugh at everything that is happening around, someone walks by and you laugh at him...
 ... The corner is where we can be. In San Jorge there is no place for youth to meet, be together... there is the church but no one goes there. The soccer fields are used on weekends all day for soccer matches. There is also the Education Centre, but many young people don't go there...
 The main difference from one corner to the other is the gangs that hang out there; if I get along with certain guys, I don't meet with others...
 ...[Neighbours] think that all the young people that meet in the corners are drug addicts who have no future and make no productive use of their time...
 ...but I also talk to some of the guys and ask myself 'Who wants to help them?'
 ...The guys from San Jorge like decisions to be more open, free, they don't like anyone to tell them what to do, they get involved in things they like (like playing soccer)..."

* A game that involves aiming small glass balls at a larger glass ball to try and hit it or get closer to it.

SOURCE: Gabriela and Lucas Ledesma.

IV. ADDRESSING YOUTH NEEDS WITHIN A CONTEXT OF NEIGHBOURHOOD TRANSFORMATION

Urban upgrading and regularization programmes such as Promeba are meant to improve living conditions – but young people's reflections on their everyday life raise a contradiction: physical improvements do not necessarily correspond in a linear way to social improvements. Violence and addiction, unemployment and underemployment, low educational levels, difficulties in accessing health systems and discrimination generally persist in spite of upgrading.

Physical improvements are critical to more general development, but they can be overrated in terms of their impact on the more challenging underlying problems – or at least they can receive a disproportionate emphasis in the course of what is intended to be an integrated approach. This is typical of many national programmes. Although Promeba, for example, has a team of consultants working on urban, social, environmental and legal issues in an integrated way, much of the overall effort revolves around the pace of infrastructure work, and most of the programme funds are allocated to this. Infrastructure work is also what tends to generate most expectations among residents; they want to see the physical improvements, although their implementation also generates many conflicts and expectations. Social improvements are much harder to bring about; they are more complex, take more time and are less tangible. Neighbours value or care for the physical improvements, which in many ways will affect them positively; but as the programme evolves, all these other "things" that the programme forgets about begin to generate conflicts, and there is permanent tension within the *barrio*.

Young people also have expectations and opinions related to the *barrio's* physical transformation (although these are generally overlooked). Gabriela believes that:

Verbeke (editors), *Handboek Samenlevingsopbouw in Vlaanderen*, Die Keure, Brugge, pages 547–559; cited in De Visscher and Maria Bouverne-De Bie (2008), see reference 11, page 475.

13. De Rynck, F, L Boudry, P Cabus, E Corijn, C Kesteloot and A Loeckx (2003), *De Eeuw van de Stad. Overstadsrepublieken en Rastersteden*, Witboek, Die Keure, Brugge, 238 pages; also Massey, D (1995), "The conceptualization of place", in D Massey and P Jess (editors), *A Place in the World? Places, Cultures and Globalization*, Oxford University Press, pages 215–239; both cited in De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie (2008), see reference 11, page 475.

14. See reference 11.

15. As part of Promeba II, the *barrio* is being paved, sidewalks are being built and water, sanitation, gas and electricity lines are being installed.

16. In general, neighbours tend to be quite pessimistic; they think the work will be left incomplete. This is in response to the many things promised in the past but not delivered or completed.

“...the *barrio* will look lovely once we have the new pavement.⁽¹⁵⁾ Today, with everything broken, it’s difficult to keep hopes up and work for the *barrio*, you get demoralized... Some believe in the work being done, others don’t.⁽¹⁶⁾ My grandmother, for example, is really happy and believes in all the infrastructure work that is being done, she thinks it will change San Jorge for good. I believe it too.”

However, the local history project we did with young people (see Section VI below) suggested that, although they appreciate having water in their houses, their memories of earlier upgrading revolved much more around the programmes and activities that had to do with sports, recreation and fun activities than all the work done to install the water and sanitation network and the sidewalks.

Neighbourhood improvement programmes can affect the physical and social barriers within a *barrio*, sometimes in positive ways but not always. In Barrio San Jorge there is a division between people from Barrio Viejo and Barrio Nuevo, as mentioned above. They don’t mingle, and youth replicate these divisions. Activities geared to young people have to take place in both the old and the new *barrio*, similarly the soccer fields. The number of different soccer fields and street corners where youth gather reflects this division and the tension between different youth groups (Figure 2); but the pace of programmes rarely allows the time to think about and plan how to take all these issues into account.

The relationship between youth needs and neighbourhood upgrading does not go just in one direction. Gabriela and Lucas both mentioned that a couple of years ago they got involved with other young people and requested support from the municipality to improve a small plaza in Barrio San Jorge. Although they finally managed to recondition the place and install a set of swings and a slide, the whole process was quite frustrating in terms of the time that elapsed between starting to organize, getting help and the final inauguration of the plaza. They mentioned the numbers of times that municipal experts failed to show up for meetings, after telling them that they were coming to the *barrio* to talk about the plaza. They would also tell them that the money for the plaza got “lost” and they had to find alternative resources. Frustrating though this exercise was, it is a good indication of the significance that these young people give to public space.

Lawy and Biesta define citizenship as “...a social practice that is embedded within the day-to-day reality of (young) people’s lives, instead of a fixed outcome of a linear socialisation trajectory.”⁽¹⁷⁾ And De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie explain:

“Citizenship-as-practice suggests that young people learn to be citizens as a consequence of their participation in the actual practices that make up their lives. As such, the differences in children’s presence in the neighbourhood are the effect of the social–pedagogical space in each neighbourhood, created by the physical construction of the neighbourhood, the socially constructed meanings, boundaries and values in the neighbourhood, and children’s agency.”⁽¹⁸⁾

17. Lawy, R and G Biesta (2006), “Citizenship-as-practice: the educational implication of an inclusive and relational understanding of citizenship”, *British Journal of Educational Studies* Vol 54, pages 34–50; cited in De Visscher and Bouverne-De Bie (2008), see reference 11, page 478.

18. See reference 11, page 478.

V. YOUTH WANT TO GET OUT, BE PART OF THE CITY

When youth are out and about, their experiences reinforce their marginalization, that sense of not being part of the *barrio* or of the

city. In a way, they want to show that they are *pibes de la esquina*, that they are from Barrio San Jorge, a neighbourhood with a reputation for being dangerous and tough. It's a behaviour pattern that reinforces itself.

This is often hard to change; it is difficult to get these young people to view things differently, to put aside all those hundreds of comments and actions that have placed them in a marginal position, and to begin to participate differently. They constantly say that adults don't want to hear them, that adults have preconceptions, that nobody offers them anything, that their opinions are not valued. In the words of Carolina: "*To take young people out of the esquina, the proposal has to be different. You have to show them other places, other points of view, show them there are people who support and believe in them.*"

Some activities manage to get young people motivated and wanting to become involved in something besides spending time on the *esquina*. One example is the *murga*, a kind of carnival or popular art form that takes place in the streets and public spaces in many local neighbourhoods, a combination of acrobatic dance, rhythmic music and colourful costumes. The local *murga*, known as El Regreso de los Magníficos de San Fernando ("The return of the magnificent from San Fernando"), is an old *murga* that died out some time ago and is now being refloated within the *barrio*. It's happening with almost no outside support and many neighbours of all different ages are involved.

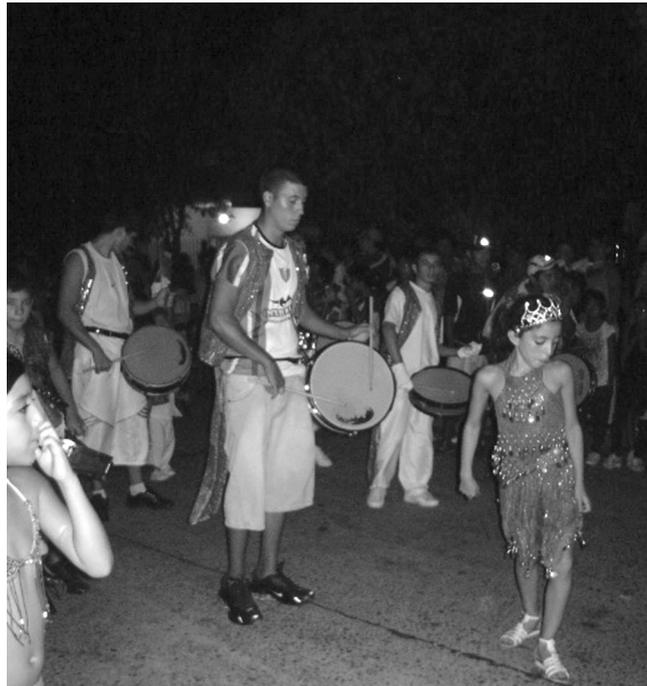
A *murga* project integrates people from within the *barrio* with people from other *barrios*, since different *murgas* get together to present their show. Neighbourhood codes are respected and the need to work together helps erase differences. It makes young people reach out to the city. It is a project that requires schedules, rehearsals and responsibility. It involves people of different ages and different capacities, and there are activities to suit everybody; some dance or are part of the parade, others play instruments or design costumes, etc. It offers opportunities for wide participation as there is a role for everyone (Box 4).

BOX 4

Murga – by getting out we can erase differences

"Nobody knows what to do with them (youth), nobody wants to get involved with them. But for example, the *murga* is something really impressive... children of all ages participate... everybody likes the *murga*, it is a way to express yourself, we do it because it is a form of expression, we like to dance, when we are dancing we feel free... We practice every day from 8 until 10 from Monday through Friday. We had to adjust practice time because some neighbours complained and we had to cut the rehearsals earlier... In the *murga* the differences get erased, the important thing is to be in the *murga*, it's not important that you are from here and you from there, no! Be part of the *murga* and that's it... We are more than 150 participating, more than half are young people. With the *murga* you leave the *barrio* and show other people that you can do other things, that you are not useless, it is a way to express yourself with the body, with art."

SOURCE: Gabriela Ledesma (who participates in *murga* El Regreso de los Magníficos de San Fernando, which operates from Barrio San Jorge) and Carolina García (who participates in *murga* Los Estrellados de San Fernando, which operates from Barrio La Paz and Barrio Hardoy). Both *murgas* work similarly.



PHOTOS 1A AND 1B
Youth and the *murga*

© Gabriela Ledesma

VI. IIED-AL PROJECTS AND ACTIONS TARGETED AT YOUTH IN BARRIO SAN JORGE

As mentioned earlier, IIED-AL's main work hasn't evolved around youth programmes. Initiatives targeted at youth have always been somewhat on the margins. However, we have learned from these experiences and have capitalized on them; some ended a long time ago, others continue and some are just beginning. A few of these initiatives are summarized below.

a. Soccer team

The soccer team was established in 1991 and ran for a couple of years. The project's main activities were setting up the team, arranging practice, and a calendar of local matches. It also involved organizing side activities with the group (including a sewing workshop, the reconditioning of a *casa de los jóvenes* (house for youth) and the construction of play spaces). The programme was very popular with children and youth because soccer is always in demand and it involved visiting other neighbourhoods and other parts of the city.

Different institutions working in the *barrio* (e.g. health centre, kindergarten, school, crèche, municipal social workers, etc.), all committed to the social integration effort; all became involved in supporting the soccer programme and thus for the first time, a network was formed in the community. Over time, the network stopped meeting and finding projects in which all could collaborate, although recently it has started functioning again and there is quite a commitment from all the institutions to keep it going.

The soccer team was set up with only a small seed fund from UNICEF and it was impossible to generate long-term support to keep the activity going (from other donors, government, parents, other institutions, volunteers, etc.)

b. Recovering the history of the neighbourhood (*barrio*)

This project was taken up during the winter of 2004 as a way to recover, from a youth perspective, all the different things that had happened in the *barrio* over the course of its existence. It was undertaken with no funds and just the support of young people from the *barrio* and IIED-AL. The young people were involved in planning and developing the project; they sorted out old pictures, took new pictures of the same places to see how they had changed, prepared posters and a short film, and finally presented the work to the community.

The project highlighted their perception of the *barrio's* transformation and what was important to them in this process. For instance, as noted above, they placed greater emphasis on programmes that had involved trips, soccer and having fun than on all the infrastructure work that had been done in the *barrio*, even though they had sometimes participated in this, helping their parents. The chance to make a presentation to the rest of the community allowed them to show they cared and had a lot to say about their *barrio*. As with the soccer team, however, there was no financial support, and it was impossible to continue the work so that it could evolve as a space for further participation.

c. Designing plazas

During 2006, there was an opportunity for young people to get involved in the design of a big plaza in Barrio Hardoy, part of the urban upgrading work of Promeba I. A youth working group was established and met regularly, along with two volunteer experts on landscape architecture. They walked around the site of the future plaza, visited public spaces in other cities and organized a public consultation to get a sense of what the *barrio* residents wanted. After a lot of brainstorming and discussion, they finally came up with a design that, among other things, incorporated the needs of children and young people, and they prepared a model at a scale of 1:100. This was presented and defended in front of municipal authorities.

There were certainly challenges, mostly around the struggle with adults over the use and control of the plaza. The municipal authorities failed to realize the importance of a youth design for a plaza, and this translated into insufficient support for the plan to materialize fully. The design was not well reflected in the actual implementation, and construction of the plaza was also delayed. Certain key operational aspects were also affected by the lack of support, such as water taps to water the plants and the organization of maintenance work.¹⁹⁾

19. In the frame of Promeba II, we are planning to work with young people in the design of public spaces in Barrio San Jorge.

d. Vegetable garden

Noting the good youth rapport in the participative design of the plaza, in 2007 we took advantage of a small grant opportunity offered by the World Bank to set up a vegetable garden next to the children's community library. In addition to basic gardening skills, the small project aimed to train youth in project organization skills that could be useful for future employment opportunities. As well as contributing fresh vegetables to their own households, there was also the possibility of selling produce. As a way of contributing towards the time dedicated to this project, we set up a system of small grants for young people. Their tasks included preparing a work plan, designing the vegetable garden, planting and maintenance.

Several working groups were set up and trained in basic gardening skills. Groups that included friends, or youth from families who knew each other seemed to work better. There were a number of challenges, however. The project was funded with a seed grant for only one year, on the assumption that later, the vegetable garden would maintain itself. Looking back, this was not very realistic. Grants were so small that there was not much of an incentive for young people to stay with the project. The constant turnover within the groups prevented strong ties from forming. The vegetables also turned out to be difficult to sell because of the social divisions within the *barrios*. Certain youth could not go to certain areas or visit another nearby *barrio* because of problems with other youth. This affected the chances of promoting and selling the products and in the end the project petered out. In 2009, however, the project was re-launched and is currently functioning without funds and with three different groups, targeted at adults, children and young people.

e. Reflections on the projects

All these small projects, whether successful or not, helped us learn about what works in engaging young people. We have always known that this

is a particularly vulnerable age group and, over time, given the local and national context, their capacity to develop fully as individuals and citizens has been ever more quickly undermined. We haven't been quick enough to respond, and problems with the law, violence, drug abuse, early parenthood, school dropout and unemployment are just some of the issues that cross the lives of youth throughout the country. Most youth programmes are very narrow in their scope; they address one or two issues – for example, youth with addiction problems. Seldom do you find programmes that from the outset involve youth in their planning and get them to work as active stakeholders on processes that are important to them. We have not managed to do much better on this front – there have always been barriers in trying to work with youth in the *barrio*. We have never managed to generate long-term funds for youth projects or develop processes planned and led by youth that would encourage their later involvement within the general work carried out in the *barrio*.

When we talk with youth about what they would consider the “key to success”, the following suggestions are made: “...*make proposals interesting*”; “...*walk the barrio*”; “...*go to the corners, invite people there*”; “...*make projects that involve all the neighbourhood,*⁽²⁰⁾ *not that divide people*”; “...*drink mate, dance, make activities entertaining, fun*”. And when you ask them where the ideas or initiatives should come from, they say: “*From any side is good, just give us the opportunity to work with you, because there is nobody better than us to know what we want.*” (Testimonies from young people interviewed by Lucas and Gabriela Ledesma.)

Programmes should start by reaching out to young people in the places where they feel comfortable, not forcing them to be part of something else no matter how good and fun we think it is. It is an obvious but usually forgotten first step that we need to build trust, so that young people can feel secure; we also need to talk to them, to learn with them about their needs and priorities, to think together about ways to make things happen. Later, it may be possible to work on integrating these young people with the rest of the community and the city through different activities. As Lucas Ledesma explains:

“Some projects work, others do not [...] but many young people are unaware that these programmes exist. For example, Juventud⁽²¹⁾ has Tercer Tiempo;⁽²²⁾ the people from Tercer Tiempo spend time in the *barrio*, walking, inviting, that is the way it must be done. I do not know if they are afraid...”⁽²³⁾

Once you reach out to youth, especially youth that feel marginalized like the *pibes de la esquina*, and propose an activity or a programme, a process starts that needs constancy and patience: “...*you need to push them, be there, support them.*”⁽²⁴⁾ But often, initiatives do not have sufficient funds, human resources and time to back them up and sustain them in the long term. It's difficult to get young people off the street corner and out of the *barrio*; they feel – and most of the time they are – marginalized and stuck in a cycle that is not easy to break. There is also the fact that in a *barrio* like this, people come and promise many things. These young people have grown up in this paternalistic and clientelistic culture, which conditions in them a level of mistrust. You have to fight against saying “I will get for you”. As Sergio Vidal explains, you may be depending on some third party to deliver, and you get trapped by that, and then later

20. This refers to youth from both Barrio Nuevo and Barrio Viejo.

21. Youth Department of the municipality of San Fernando.

22. Tercer Tiempo (“third half”) is a municipal programme that organizes soccer matches and tournaments involving youth from different *barrios*.

23. Lucas refers to the programme leaders regarding how they walk the *barrio*.

24. Interview with Sergio Vidal from “Codo a Codo”, a Youth Department municipal programme that deals with youth addictions, 6 October 2009.

25. See reference 24.

nothing happens.⁽²⁵⁾ So young people end up believing you only if you are able to bring about solutions quickly; if not, you are just a “liar”. Since any process takes time, and change is not just about getting the goal poles and nets, young people quickly feel discouraged. This shouldn’t surprise us. They have seldom experienced or participated in processes that need to be built together with different stakeholders, where different views and opinions are discussed. They are seldom taken into account as active members of the community. Their time frames need to adapt to programme possibilities and realities.

VII. FINAL THOUGHTS

Most of the reflections presented in this article emerge from our past experiences and from the insights shared with us by youth. In all these processes, young people demonstrated that they have a lot to say and that they need to be taken into account as legitimate stakeholders. Moreover, they exemplify approaches to life’s challenges that can escape adult observation. They perceive and live their *barrio* differently, often with a more positive point of view. As Carolina, Gabriela and Lucas explained, where adults see the *esquinas* as sites for crime and vagrancy, young people see them as a place to meet friends. They also see the *esquinas* as the place to start in helping young people enlarge their lives, a place where social programmes should go to build on what is positive. In Barrio San Jorge, young people’s community presence is mostly group related, and the *esquinas* seem to be a means of marking identities and forging ties across the neighbourhood, or for reinforcing divisions. They show us the importance for young people – as well as children and adults – of living in a place that has a strong social identity but also a physical identity.⁽²⁶⁾

Looking back, we are conscious that we haven’t given sufficient analysis to the different activities we embarked on with young people. Funding was always a challenge, and it was also difficult to get the support of youth specialists, or to find youth programme coordinators to plan and work from scratch with the *barrio*’s youth – rather than coming in with a closed and defined youth programme. Experience shows that these kinds of programmes and activities too often fail to actively involve youth and gain their commitment.

The lives of youth are crossed by so many urgencies that it is not easy to get a grip on all of them. Since they were born, these young people have lived and experienced at first hand their parents’ frustrations in trying to find a suitable job, improve the house and make ends meet. Like their parents, they live with the stigma of being from a low-income settlement, especially one with a reputation like Barrio San Jorge. Gabriela recalls having friends at school who came from other *barrios*, 25 de Mayo, Villa Hall and Villa del Carmen (all low-income settlements), “...but I would say I come from San Jorge, and everybody would look down.”

During our years of work we have heard neighbours comment over and over again that they can’t give their real address when they apply for a job, that they are often badly treated when they go to hospitals and health centres, to public offices and even sometimes at school. To this we have to add the number of programmes of different colours and sizes that have been promised and have never been implemented, or just partially

26. Nespor, Jan (1997), *Tangled Up in School: Politics, Space, Bodies and Signs in the Educational Process*, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, New Jersey.

implemented, just like the many programmes meant for youth that didn't work out and only raised expectations and caused frustration.

One of the main criticisms made by youth of past programmes relates to their feeling that adults don't listen to what they have to say or respect their opinions:

"You can learn from what they have to say, and older people may reconsider their beliefs, or join both forces into something good [...] youths' opinions have to be listened to..." (Testimony from young girl interviewed in 2004 within the context of the *barrio* history project.)

This was very clear, for example, in the design of the Barrio Hardoy plaza. Youth don't want to be told what to do and unfortunately that is what adults usually do, be it their parents, other neighbours or programme coordinators. Youth want to be with other youth, and want to create activities that generate group identity and a sense of belonging.

Youth commitment is hard to maintain and participation levels are quite low (with a few exceptions). This is true not only of youth; the whole *barrio* finds it difficult to participate. Past frustrations and the possibility of being criticized are important contributing factors.

It is also clear that youth participation in formal projects doesn't automatically guarantee future commitment; this is important to highlight. Young adults who participated in different youth activities are today not particularly involved in neighbourhood programmes or activities. And the sons and daughters of community leaders are no more inclined than others to participate and become involved in youth-led programmes:

"All of a sudden you are an adult and have to assume responsibilities, give opinions, fight, but you were never taught to or given the opportunity to learn..." (Testimony from young girl, daughter of community leader, interviewed in 2004 within the context of the *barrio* history project.)

Working with young people clearly raises many questions and we are far from having even some of the answers.

At the same time, we are forced to acknowledge the energy, cooperation and staying power that young people can show in the context of the *murga* – and, for instance, the degree of initiative taken by Gabriela, Lucas and other young people when they decided to take on the plaza in Barrio San Jorge. Clearly, their reluctance to be involved in formal projects is not just a matter of apathy. There is some disconnect here between what adults, ourselves included, have been able to offer these young people, and what level of commitment they are capable of bringing to an issue.

We realize that we have to be particularly cautious, and open to youth. They have a very low threshold of frustration and patience, and when answers and actions are not quick enough they immediately feel let down. Our capacity to help transform their reality is probably tied to being able to offer a space that is open to all of them, where they can discuss and negotiate, with rules, roles and responsibilities, but that is also sufficiently flexible to adapt to their needs. Young people have expressed that they care for the *barrio*. They can point to many different actions that in their eyes have been positive for the *barrio*, even though from an

adult perspective these actions might not have been important or meant much. Youth perceive and live the *barrio* differently, and this reality should be taken into account in any programme that aims to improve social conditions and inclusion. It presents both an opportunity and a challenge. We also need programmes that take into account the time needed to help youth understand that processes take commitment, that solutions don't come magically. The *murga* happens quickly – but most projects involving collaboration with NGOs or government take time and patience, and recognition of pace, priorities, schedules, formalities, etc. It is a balance: youth need to build and strengthen (positive) group identity and be recognized and respected for it; but they also have to work on emerging from the isolation they are in (placed there both by the community and themselves) and becoming active members of the community. To achieve these necessary changes programmes need to capitalize on all past mistakes.

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