The 'tugurios' of San Salvador: a place to live, work and struggle

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THIS PAPER OUTLINES the different housing submarkets through which poorer groups find accommodation in San Salvador, the capital and much the largest city in El Salvador. It then describes in more detail the origin and scale of the 'tugurios' (squatter settlements) which have become an increasingly important means by which poorer groups find accommodation. This includes the social and economic characteristics of their inhabitants such as their place of origin, income and means by which they earn it. This is followed by an account of how two squatter settlements developed and how their inhabitants organized to fight for the right to remain on the land they occupied and eventually to gain legal tenure of that land. The final sections discuss the broader issue of how and in what form the inhabitants of squatter settlements represent a significant influence on political change in cities of the Third World and in particular the significance of the squatters' demands for land and housing within the complex political context of El Salvador.

I. SAN SALVADOR AND ITS HOUSING SUBMARKETS

SAN SALVADOR IS located in a valley in the central zone of the country at an altitude of 680 metres above sea-level. Founded by the Spaniards in 1525 as a storage centre for agricultural crops, it became capital of the newly formed republic in 1823. Between 1920 and 1960, the city expanded to the west, where wide boulevards and low-density residences for wealthy families were built; to the east, where the main transport stations and industrial zones are now located; and to the north and south, where small towns began to develop. By 1986, the capital city and its 11 satellite municipalities which now make up the San Salvador Metropolitan Area had over 1.25 million inhabitants, a quarter of the country's total population.

As in most Latin American cities, the situation of the urban poor in San Salvador is characterized by inadequate income plus a lack of permanent employment and serious deficiencies in the quality and availability of housing with basic services and infrastructure. The civil war which has been going on since 1980, and a series of natural disasters (especially the earthquake of 1986) have further aggravated the situation. Official figures suggest that only half the housing in the city can be classified as of ac-
ceptable standard, based on criteria for location, materials used and basic services. The majority of the urban poor find shelter in one of four kinds of housing submarket: ‘mesones’ (tenements); ‘colonias ilegales’ (illegal subdivisions); ‘campamentos’ (originally temporary camps); and ‘tugurios’ (squatter settlements).

‘Mesones’ or tenements generally consist of between five and 50 rooms clustered around one or more central ‘patios’. In most cases a poor family rents a single room and has to share water and sanitary services with other families. Most are located in the centre of the city near major areas of commerce and industry. Their inhabitants usually lack a leasehold contract or even a written agreement with the landlord. In 1986, there were about 53,000 ‘meson’ units with approximately 270,000 people (i.e. 22 per cent of the San Salvador population). Most ‘mesones’ are built of mud on a bamboo frame, or adobe. This is the main reason why about 55 per cent of them were severely damaged or destroyed by the earthquake that shook San Salvador in October 1986.

‘Mesones’ were first built in the first decades of the 20th Century to provide cheap dormitories for the labour force needed by the incipient industry established in San Salvador at that time and for housing the domestic servants of wealthy families. By the mid-1980s, according to the U.S. Agency for International Development, most of the ‘mesones’ were apparently owned by top military officers, some Christian Democratic Party officials (the party then in power) and other influential rich families.\(^2\)

‘Colonias ilegales’ are illegal subdivisions of land, a form of land development common in many Third World cities where the legal owner (or developer acting on their behalf) illegally subdivides and sells (or rents) land on which the tenant or purchaser builds a house; the land is not occupied illegally but its use for housing was never approved by the government and the building plots and houses on them rarely meet official norms. In San Salvador, most are small plots with no services, rented to poorer households with the promise of sale in the future. Although officially illegal, they are tolerated and, to a certain extent, stimulated by the government which sees these settlements as a pressure valve to its inability to deliver low-cost housing. Many ‘colonias ilegales’ developed in coffee plantations that surround San Salvador. As coffee prices went down and social unrest increased in the late 1970s, many landowners decided that it was more profitable to convert their land into illegal settlements than to continue growing coffee. In 1977, about 20.5 per cent of the population of San Salvador lived in ‘colonias ilegales’; by 1986, the proportion had grown to 40 per cent of all low-income groups. Households living in ‘colonias ilegales’ generally have higher incomes than those living in ‘mesones’ and ‘tugurios’.

‘Campamentos’ are ‘temporary’ camps built by the government for the victims of the earthquake in May 1965 which eventually developed into permanent settlements. Most are made up of wooden shacks with a living area of about 16 square metres per unit. Most ‘campamentos’ have communal water taps and bathrooms. By 1986, they represented about five per cent of the total housing stock. New ‘campamentos’ have emerged as a consequence of the October 1986 earthquake which severely damaged the poorer neighbourhoods of San Salvador. About a quarter of

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the old ‘campamentos’ were hit by the 1986 tremors and some of the families whose homes had been damaged in 1965 became homeless again.

Finally, there are the ‘tugurios’ which have come to house an increasing proportion of the population of San Salvador’s Metropolitan Area. In 1986, about 12 per cent lived in ‘tugurios’ - a total of some 146,500 inhabitants; in 1977, these had just five per cent of the Metropolitan Area’s population. ‘Tugurios’ are most often found in ravines, on river banks, alongside railways or roads, and usually on municipal, governmental or private lands not suitable for construction. Families living in ‘tugurios’ pay no rent to the landowner.

In addition to their scale and increasing importance, there are two reasons why this paper chooses to concentrate on ‘tugurios’. The first is that land scarcity, speculation and concentration of urban land ownership, and inadequate shelter and infrastructure have become critical political issues in the nation’s continuing social crisis. The second is that projects to improve conditions in these squatter settlements illustrate their capacity to stimulate community action and inter-communal solidarity. In this sense, the paper tries to shed light on the issue of how struggles for access to and control of urban land and housing become important elements in the emergence of class consciousness in Third World nations.

The paper argues that in the case of San Salvador, the ‘tugurios’ are not only places where some of the lower-income groups live but also where they work and generate part of their income. This economic dimension is important for understanding the settlers’ search for control over the land they occupy. The paper suggests that, in spite of the heterogeneous ideological and political composition of their inhabitants, issues of land and housing rights have become mobilizing and unifying factors. However, this positive element opens new possibilities and dangers: it can be conducive to further democratic actions that can affect urban policy[3] but, at the same time, it exposes the settlers to pressures from the main political activists of the highly polarized Salvadoran society. This is a discussion to which the paper will return in its final sections.

II. THE ‘TUGURIOS’ OF SAN SALVADOR: A PLACE TO LIVE AND WORK

IN 1986, THERE were approximately 225 ‘tugurios’ (squatter settlements)[4] with a total population of about 146,500 (29,300 families, assuming an average family size of five persons). The number of families per ‘tugurio’ ranges from 18 in the smallest, to more than 2,000 in the largest. However, 71 per cent had less than 200 (an average of 140 families per community).

Since squatters do not pay for the land and only rent in very few cases, the ‘tugurio’ has become the only possible alternative for families who cannot afford to rent rooms in tenements or rent or purchase land in illegal subdivisions. Moreover, judging by their inhabitants’ places of origin, the period when they settled, and the settlements’ age, ‘tugurios’ are shown to be the centres of attraction for poor families expelled from their places of origin by
natural disasters, economic 'development' or, more recently, the civil war (see Box 1).

One of the most relevant factors in the socio-economic conditions in the 'tugurios' is the high proportion of people unable to find formal employment and working in the 'informal sector'. This reflects not only the structural problems of employment in a Third World nation, but also the consequences of the current social crisis. In this context, the communities have become places where people not only live but also work.

Only 39 per cent of household heads are registered as employed and only one-third of the employed receive the social security benefits stipulated by law. Of the employed, 40 per cent work in industry and the manufacturing sector; the rest said they had no income-generating activities. The proportion of unskilled labour is high at 62 per cent of total household heads. About half of all household heads in the 'informal sector' work in their homes. Most of their consumers and clients (92 per cent) come from the 'tugurio' or nearby neighbourhoods.

The following description illustrates the interrelationships between economic activities and the local housing system. "In the poor neighbourhoods of San Salvador ... households are engaged in tiny businesses which often provide 50 per cent or more of a family unit’s income. For example, carpenters and furniture-makers using simple hand tools labour in their homes or in the alleys which separate houses; food-sellers set up small eating places consisting of a small table wedged into a tiny room, with a gas or kerosene stove and, possibly, a refrigerator; candy-makers work on wood-fired stoves using large metal kettles, wooden stirring ladles and cutting boards; street vendors are everywhere, selling fruit, vegetables, clothing and lottery tickets; bottles are collected for resale to bottling companies by people carrying burlap bags or pushing small carts; shoemakers work out of their houses or have a booth in the street; laundry women work at public washbasins or in the home; tailors and seamstresses use treadle sewing machines set up in any available space at home;"

6. This section draws mainly on FUNDASAL (1988), "La Tenencia de la Tierra a Nivel del Area Metropolitana de San Salvador", internal document, San Salvador.


8. This section draws mostly on FUNDASAL (1985), Noticias, 1: January-February, San Salvador.

and retailers (small foodstores are most common) sell from shelves in the corner of one room of the home.”

The average monthly income of household heads is 10 per cent below the minimum wage (US$90 in 1986). The average annual income per capita in ‘tugurios’ is one-third of the national average. About 70 per cent of households’ monthly expenditure goes on food with a further seven per cent on transport. About 71 per cent of the households interviewed said that the major problem in their communities was the lack of secure land tenure and basic infrastructure and services: 90 per cent of the houses have latrines, 25 per cent have a sewerage system, and 90 per cent have ‘illegal’ electricity connections.

III. ‘TUGURIOS’: PLACES OF STRUGGLE

AS IN OTHER Latin American countries, the apparent scarcity of land in San Salvador, caused by speculation and the concentration of urban land in the hands of a few private owners, is one of the main obstacles to solving the housing problems of thousands of poor families. Land rights in the Salvadoran legal context are based on a mixture of conceptions and laws regarding ownership, tenure, and use and transfer of land, largely deriving from two sources. The first, based on Roman Law and the Napoleonic Code, recognizes the existence of absolute private ownership of land. The second, based on English ‘Common Law’, accepts restrictions to private ownership and the need for state control over the use of land for social purposes, that is, the concept of freehold and leasehold.

However, the restrictions in terms of the amount of land that can be owned by one person is applicable only to agricultural land. In the case of urban land, outside the formal real-estate and housing market, there are only three ways to obtain land: from a voluntary donation or purchase at a symbolic price; expropriation by the state for public use or social interest; and invasion.

With the exception of some low-income housing projects developed by the Salvadoran non-governmental organization FUNDASAL and the illegal sub-division of land, invasion, usually of municipal or government land (and to a lesser extent of private property), has been the only way by which the urban poor have had access to land for housing. According to the law, it is still possible for a de facto occupation to be legalized, as long as there is a voluntary agreement between the parties or a governmental disposition to expropriate land for social purposes. But until now, the state has never expropriated urban land for housing purposes. Moreover, in the case of the ‘tugurios’, the different governments’ responses to demands to regularize land tenure have been inconsistent and contradictory. The following two cases illustrate how land issues in the Metropolitan Area have generated diverse reactions and responses by government and become mobilizing factors within the squatter communities.

IV. ‘COMUNIDAD’ LUPITA

‘COMUNIDAD’ LUPITA WAS, until 1986, a ‘tugurio’ located in the centre of the municipality of Antiguo Cuscatlan, in the southern
part of the Metropolitan Area. It was founded in 1962, when 30 families living in a coffee plantation nearby were forced to leave their homes after the closure of the plantation and were resettled 'temporarily' on a plot of land which the plantation's owners donated to the municipal authorities. The settlement grew when victims of the 1965 earthquake set up provisional shacks in the area. By 1985, 131 families (655 people) lived in an area of 5,800 square metres. Virtually all the houses (95 per cent) were built of cardboard and scrap material with an average living area of 28 square metres. The municipal government provided communal services for water and toilets, for which the families paid.

Since 1975, the community had sought without success to have their land tenure regularized. On more than one occasion municipal authorities had tried to evict them but spontaneous and organized resistance impeded the evictions. Partly as the result of this process, and also with the advice of Catholic nuns working in a nearby school, the community developed a strong and important communal organization. It also drew from a programme of community action initiated in the 1960s when the 'Acción Comunitaria' programme was established in San Salvador under the municipal administration of the Christian Democratic Party. The idea was to organize neighbourhood community groups to work with the municipality as well as on their own initiative towards solving the city's problems. It became an important means of mobilizing people because, in El Salvador, any attempt to organize anyone other than elites outside the patronage of the central government had been traditionally treated as suspect. (9)

In 1985, the community at Lupita approached FUNDASAL, a non-governmental organization (NGO) dealing with low-cost housing, to see if it could help them acquire legal tenure of the land and develop a project of squatter renewal. FUNDASAL answered positively and, together with representatives of the community, started negotiating with different state authorities.

Municipal elections, held the same year, created a positive atmosphere for the community's demands. Three days before the elections, the Municipal Council agreed to sell the land to FUNDASAL at a symbolic price. FUNDASAL would later transfer the land to the families at the same symbolic price. The municipal decision had to be ratified by the Ministry of the Interior. However, the newly elected Christian Democratic Mayor of the municipality expressed her disapproval of the previous council decision and insisted that the plot occupied by the community was to be used as a market for the surrounding middle class communities. Faced with the possibility of a reconsideration of the municipal decision, the community did not wait for a formal answer and unanimously decided to start the renewal project. From the community's point of view, it was enough that the state authority which they had confronted in the previous decade, irrespective of which party was in power, had recognized their rights to land. In one year the community collectively built 131 cement block houses. In June 1985, the Ministry of Interior ratified the council original decision.

Although in 1984 the municipal authorities of San Salvador had set the precedent of giving land titles to squatter families in two 'tugurios' located in the eastern part of the Metropolitan Area,
there was a clear difference in the case of Lupita. In the two instances in 1984, it was a top-down initiative by the Christian Democratic Party without much consultation with the community. In the Lupita case, it was the community mobilization and internal cohesion that had contributed towards securing of land titles.

V. ‘COMUNIDAD’ JARDIN

‘COMUNIDAD’ JARDIN (which means garden community) is located in the municipality of Mejicanos in the northern part of the Metropolitan Area. It was a ‘campamento’ formed as a result of the 1965 earthquake. The government installed 142 wood shacks for the victims of the disaster in the green areas of a middle class community, also built by a government agency, the ‘Instituto de Vivienda Urbana’ (the Institute of Urban Housing). Some shacks were 34 square metres in area, others 17. In 1986, the community was composed of 160 families. As in Lupita, it had communal facilities but no systems supplying individual households with water or sewers. Social and economic conditions were similar to those described for the majority of ‘tugurios’ although the average monthly income per family was slightly higher than in Lupita.

As in Lupita, the settlers were interested in obtaining legal land tenure. Although they had lived there with the consent of the government, the landowners (the Institute of Urban Housing) had tried several times to resettle them. The reasons given were that a new highway was going to be built nearby and that their site would be used for this. Increased insecurity and uncertainty led the community to look for different sources of help. In May 1985, they approached FUNDASAL who helped to establish contacts between the settlers of Jardin and Lupita and gave them legal advice. The settlers decided to start a renewal project similar to the one in Lupita.

It was not until February 1986, under a new presidency, that the Institute of Urban Housing decided to transfer the land to the settlers and asked Parliament to pass a decree authorizing the equitable selling of the land at its acquisition price and not at market prices as the Institute’s own internal regulations mandated. Salvadoran laws state that government land can be sold only with the approval of Parliament, but it cannot set the price; prices are defined by the Ministry of Finance, based on market values.

However, as in the case of Lupita, the Christian Democratic Mayor of Mejicanos opposed the renewal project. His basic argument was that green areas of a community belong, by law, to the municipality and not to its builders, whether they were private or public companies. According to the settlers, the Mayor was involved in land speculation and was expecting to eliminate the ‘tugurio’ to establish commercial developments there.

As in the Lupita case, the settlers did not wait for the resolution of Parliament to start the renewal project. Tensions between the settlers and the municipal authorities increased. An apparent technical problem became an issue of confrontation that had an enormous impact on the consciousness of the settlers.
to the renewal project, the original shacks had to be demolished to build new cement housing units. This implied that families would need temporary shelter nearby as long as the mutual help process would last. The only available place was a relatively traffic-free street used as a parking lot by a private bus company. The community asked the bus company for permission and this was granted. However, the day the shelters began to be built, the Mayor of Mejicanos, accompanied by the municipal police and armed civilians, appeared and ordered all work to cease, accusing the community of instigating action against law, order and property.

The community reacted immediately. Its leaders approached the media and delegations of settlers rallied support from neighbouring ‘tugurios’ and ‘colonias ilegales’, and even from different government ministers. The next day, representatives from 40 ‘tugurios’ and ‘colonias ilegales’ helped the settlers of Jardin to build their temporary shelters. The project was underway. The Mayor was summoned by the authorities of the Christian Democratic Party and asked to lower the profile of the Jardin affair, which had already stirred up several other communities in Metropolitan San Salvador.

During 1986 and 1987, the community continued to work on the renewal project and organized several public demonstrations in front of Parliament. Finally, in June 1987, Parliament recommended the transfer of land to the settlers. FUNDASAL insisted that the transfer should be made directly to the community and not through the institution. Although it is still not clear which mechanism will be used, the community has finished building all the housing units. (12)

VI. THE EXPERIENCES: REFLECTIONS AND PERSPECTIVES

THE EXPERIENCES OF Lupita and Jardin were important, not only because they addressed the settlers’ demands for land tenure, but also because they opened up new ways for solving problems in the ‘tugurios’ amid the political constraints of Salvadoran society. Between 1979 and 1986 more than 65,000 people died in the civil war in El Salvador. About 55,000 were civilians killed by the Salvadoran Armed Forces or ‘death squads’ financed by the extreme right. (13) It is hardly surprising that community action had been limited within such a repressive environment.

In September 1986, representatives from both Lupita and Jardin and leaders from five other communities took part in the organization of the First Meeting of Marginal and Popular Communities of the Northern and Western Zones of San Salvador. (14) More than 800 delegates from 80 communities, including ‘tugurios’, ‘mesones’ and ‘colonias ilegales’ gathered to discuss the problems they shared and how to implement co-ordinated action in terms of their demands for regularization of land tenure and the provision of infrastructure and services.

The October 1986 earthquake, in which 60,000 families from the popular settlements of San Salvador Metropolitan Area were
made homeless (12,000 in 'tugurios') re-emphasized the acute problems of these settlements, especially regarding the issue of land tenure. It also exposed the failure of previous government strategies to address the problems of the urban poor. Yet, the possibilities of turning the population of popular settlements into a social force that can press and lobby for solutions to their demands are strongly conditioned by the nation's polarized political situation.

On the one hand, government can see the destabilizing potential of urban unrest aggravated by the earthquake. It has tried to co-opt the communities by establishing a programme aimed at regularizing tenure in all the 'tugurios' settled on land owned by the municipality of San Salvador. Land will be sold in individual lots to each family for approximately US$1.60 per square metre. Each family will have access, if it wishes, to a credit for materials to build their own houses but by the end of 1987, the municipality had not designed the legal and technical mechanisms to implement the programme.

On the other hand, two months after the earthquake, the insurgency movement against the government stressed the need to radicalize the demands of the urban masses. Furthermore, they said that it is necessary "...to sever the contradictions and conflicts between the people, and the government and the dominant classes in order to provoke a situation of revolutionary crisis." Their document calls for "...the invasion of suitable unused urban land and to organize their defence." Moreover, it denounces the government's aspirations to change the mood of dissatisfaction of the masses through the regularization of land tenure, and considers these measures as part of the overall counter-insurgency strategy and, therefore, stresses that they should be boycotted.

It is still not clear what the effects of each strategy will be. In a context of military and political stalemate, each side will scrutinize very carefully any mobilization of the 'tugurio' inhabitants which escapes its control. It is also possible that 'tugurio' settlers will be more cautious, although not necessarily more moderate, in their demands. Thus, 'tugurios' have become an arena of confrontation where access to and control of urban land continues to be an important issue in the Salvadoran context.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

THE IMPORTANCE OF analyzing a specific housing submarket in San Salvador is twofold. First, it illustrates how the 'tugurios' of San Salvador are not only places where lower-income groups have a home, but also a place of production and a market-place. Secondly, it corroborates what the literature on Third World cities suggests about how urban areas are becoming arenas for confrontation between, on the one hand, private capital plus the state and, on the other, an increasingly restless, though still largely unorganized, majority; a confrontation which represents a challenge to governments' current economic strategies and to the political control of the urban elites. At the same time, it has generated debate among progressive forces about the potential for using


urban and residential issues as a way of encouraging popular participation and organization to change urban policies and contribute to broader structural social and cultural changes.\(^{20}\)

In spite of the fact that squatters are a heterogeneous social force in, among other things, their income levels and ideological allegiances (and as such can display contradictory political behaviours), the experiences of Lupita and Jardin show that it is possible to find common interests that unify and create organization and participation.\(^{21}\)

It also shows that large sections of the population excluded from welfare, social security or trade union schemes seek improvements in their living conditions and future security elsewhere, namely in land tenure and residential property.\(^{22}\) In this sense, it confirms that the possibility of secure land tenure is often a precondition for community participation although not necessarily for action for broader social change. It may also be that squatters’ drive for legal tenure represents their best possibility for acquiring a valuable asset which provides at least some security for their future.

The conflicts with the authorities helped to raise consciousness in the community and promoted them to act. In this sense, it confirms that the possibility of land ownership can be a pre-condition for community participation,\(^{23}\) although not necessarily for action for broader change.

The experiences also confirm that national governments are not always unified in their attitudes towards squatter areas and assume different positions towards the issue of providing squatters with land tenure. It also shows how, in a situation of political crisis, the government tries to exploit housing and land issues to legitimize itself\(^{24}\) and not necessarily to alter power relations in society.

Finally, with regard to the present Salvadorean context, the positions of the revolutionary movement and the government suggest that the dilemma between land-ownership and access and control to land still remains unanswered. Clearly, there are comparable contradictions in other Third World societies, although the struggle to resolve them is not necessarily so polarized.