

Slum upgrading programmes based on social inclusion and community participation can promote a local sense of pride, ownership and social integration in new urban infrastructure, as demonstrated by this innovative case study from Villa Tranquila, Argentina.

URBAN UPGRADING WITH SOCIAL INCLUSION: THE CASE OF VILLA TRANQUILA

SUMMARY

The case study of Villa Tranquila (VT) in Buenos Aires, Argentina, shows the power of a slum upgrading process centred on a local policy of social inclusion. The intervention was characterised by an integral approach: urban problems were addressed by a participative-collaborative management structure between the local government and VT residents, and rather than only focusing on infrastructure like roads and housing, social issues were also addressed. This case offers an outstanding model for achieving social cohesion, community appropriation and sustainability in slum upgrading, one that could be applied in other regions as well.

THE VT CASE: BACKGROUND

With 2,100 inhabitants, VT is one of the largest slums in the Avellaneda municipality, a suburb of Greater Buenos Aires. Before the programme, the slum lacked streets and a regular layout, making it impossible for ambulances, cars, waste collection trucks or buses to enter. The slum did not have running water, public lighting, sanitation, electricity lines or gas networks. Most houses were precariously built, made of timber and hardboard, and inhabitants did not have land titles.

KEY LESSONS LEARNED

Implementing slum upgrading from a perspective of social inclusion helps to improve not only the basic living conditions of residents, but also increases social integration and trust, and facilitates new partnerships, both within and with surrounding neighbourhoods.

Leveraging municipal, provincial and national programmes, all within the slum upgrading project, was a cost-effective way to address residents' cross-cutting needs.

The creation of neighbourhood committees to promote and organise community participation in the project enabled its collaborative management.





Slum urbanisation was one of the municipality’s main goals in its 2003 Strategic Plan, so to achieve this goal, it created the VT Urbanisation Plan (*Plan de Urbanización de Villa Tranquila*), which it began implementing in 2005. The Plan called for expanding and reorganising the slum, constructing new roads, improving existing houses while building new ones, and providing access to utilities and land titles to all inhabitants. However, the initiative was unique because from the beginning, social concerns, like building participation and trust, were given priority as well.

The VT upgrading project had to address two main challenges: first, how to build infrastructure and houses in a densely populated territory without free space; and second, how to deal with a neighbourhood characterised by high levels of violence between rival areas, where 80% of the population had unsatisfied basic needs and 60% of youth between 12 and 18 years old were neither in school nor employed.



Figure 1: Old Houses in VT
Source: Municipality of Avellaneda

KEY FEATURES OF VT’S UNIQUE IMPLEMENTATION

VT’s urban upgrading was designed and implemented from a holistic, participatory perspective, bringing together urban planning, social and environmental approaches. It was implemented within a participative management framework to ensure good governance of the process, increase the social capital of the inhabitants, and ensure they would put new infrastructure to its best use and help to maintain it.

The local government decided to work on different types of intervention at the same time, to address the varying needs of the neighbourhood. This included infrastructure, emergency action to attend to precarious housing needs, relocations, and addressing environmental problems like solid waste and local pollution. However, social issues were also addressed; for example, a local [community FM radio station](#) and social programmes for young people and workers were created to

foster trust among neighbours, generate social cohesion, and lower violence levels.

The VT project integrated multiple government programmes, including municipal, provincial and national initiatives that were all coordinated at the municipal level. Personnel from these programmes, from the Urban Upgrading Programme (*Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrios - PROMEBA*), and municipal staff, all came together to form the technical field team.

Creating a diverse, collaborative team was not the only challenge, as the lack of available land required creative solutions. Project implementation was planned in stages; the initiation of each stage depending on completion of preceding ones. For example, the relocation of families was only possible subsequent to the construction of new housing. The participation of community members was of crucial importance, and improving trust between different community groups was identified as being a necessary first step.



Figure 2: News Houses from the integrated urban project in VT
Source: Municipality of Avellaneda



Figure 3: VT Community Hall Inauguration
Source: Municipality of Avellaneda



SOLVING SOCIAL CHALLENGES: PARTICIPATION AND STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY RELATIONSHIPS

From the beginning, the programme's planners recognised that the neighbourhood's violence and poor social integration would need to be addressed alongside structural and infrastructure improvements. Some key design aspects were crucial for diffusing confrontation and mistrust between different neighbouring groups and ultimately to the initiative's success.

First, the VT Neighbourhood Committee, made up of 12 delegates representing different areas of the neighbourhood, was a crucial actor in building social confidence in the project and was partially responsible for the sustainability of completed public works. At bi-weekly meetings, inhabitants could influence planning and decision-making. Requests were received from community members, in order to seek solutions in agreement with the municipality. These meetings also served as a conflict-solving arena; heated discussions were common before ultimately achieving a collective compromise.

Second, in addition to the visible progress made by the public works urbanisation projects, regular communication with the community, including via weekly programmes on the VT community radio, helped to improve awareness about the progress being made. This helped secure community buy-in and engagement, while at the same time strengthening trust.

Finally, the everyday presence of local government representatives and their engagement with residents through specific social programmes helped spur participation and create social inclusion. They had an active presence in VT, carrying out social work, health and anti-violence campaigns, environmental training sessions, recreational and cultural activities, vocational training and reintegration of youth into the education system. The VT community radio was used to invite residents to participate in these activities. Their high level of engagement paid off: from 2009 to 2010, 1727

inhabitants from various groups participated in 89 training and leisure activities.

WHAT WERE THE RESULTS?

In terms of creating infrastructure and improving physical living conditions, the upgrading project achieved great success:

- Constructed 290 new houses and upgraded another 300 houses
- Built one community hall, two communal play areas and one healthcare centre
- Paved all main neighbourhood roads
- Connected drainage, public water, sanitation and electricity networks
- Installed public lighting

But what is perhaps most noteworthy about this case is the positive impact on social inclusion and cohesion. Throughout the development of the project, the social capital of both the members of the committee and local inhabitants increased. They built social networks, increasing trust between neighbours and they improved communication and links both within VT, and with surrounding neighbourhoods. According to committee members, inhabitants can now walk freely in all sectors of the locality, and community organisations are now developing joint activities for residents such as sports and festivals. Also, schools and sport clubs outside VT are now less reluctant to accept children from VT. Social appropriation of the improvements can be seen in terms of greater care being given to houses and public spaces, reduction of open dumps, and intensive use of the new communal facilities.

Other cities have taken note of the success of the model and adapted it to their own contexts. Both Brazil's slum upgrading initiative, Favela Barrios, and the Integral Neighbourhood Improvement Programme (Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios) of Medellín, Colombia, used the methodology developed in VT.

CONTEXTUAL FACTORS

ENABLING THE IMPLEMENTATION OF THIS INNOVATIVE PROJECT



Some specific contextual and enabling factors facilitated the successful implementation of this innovative approach.

Several characteristics of the local government were important, such as its long-term planning capacity. In particular, its 2003 Strategic Plan gave priority to the slum urbanisation. The local government's commitment to carry out the project, allocating human resources and coordinating municipal programmes, as well as the commitment of the members of the technical field team and their willingness to work directly in the community, was also important. Of course, the vision of the local government to incorporate social inclusion and community trust in the project is what made it especially innovative.

The collaboration of provincial and national government provided important enabling support. In Argentina, local governments have scant resources, so integrating and leveraging national and provincial programmes, like infrastructure, housing, and social initiatives, was necessary for budget reasons and to assure a package of initiatives that addressed the variety of residents' needs.

Finally, VT community-based organisations were recognised and respected by residents, allowing the formation of the Committee, which was seen as a legitimate actor and was the focal point for enabling community participation.

LESSONS LEARNED

1 This innovative case shows that slum upgrading initiatives can go beyond mere infrastructure improvements to provide an opportunity to live in a neighbourhood not only with adequate roads and sanitation, but also with strong social networks and trust between residents. Social inclusion in the implementation process, when combined with specific initiatives to address social issues, helped to increase trust and confidence in the new infrastructure, and foster new partnerships both within and between neighbourhoods.

2 This was made possible because the local government gave priority

to a social inclusion approach. Incorporating national and provincial initiatives enabled the leveraging of funds, while simultaneously addressing VT's cross-cutting needs.

3 The ability of the local government to work simultaneously on medium- and short-term objectives, such as giving temporary solutions to critical housing needs, was an essential contribution to sustain the long-term intervention.

4 Interdisciplinary, municipal teams working permanently in the field, and with direct contact with the community, ensured the credibility of the project, while providing

vital, cross-cutting interventions. In particular, direct interventions with residents on issues related to community involvement in the project, politics of social inclusion of the population at risk, and local participation proved to be crucial in ensuring the social viability of the project.

5 Collaborative project management between local government and VT residents made the governance process possible. Active participation of the Neighbourhood Committee showed how these kinds of participatory mechanisms are important for generating social appropriation, trust and community responsibility for the project.

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