

## APPROACHES TO THE REGULARIZATION OF INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS: THE CASE OF PRIMED IN MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA

*John J. Betancur*

### Background

Medellín is the second largest city and urban economy in Colombia. Capital of one of the most populated states in the country, the city hosts major activities serving the region and beyond. Profiting from the earnings of gold mining and coffee production, local notables carried out the first major industrialization drive in the country. As a result, the city industrialized in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of a significant number of large manufacturing quasi-Fordist plants and many middle-size and small industries.

The extreme concentration of jobs, education and opportunities turned Medellín into the major migration magnet for the northwest region of Colombia. A growing process of land concentration largely related to the reorganization of farming around production for the market freed up a growing mass of peasants. Lastly, a civil war fought mostly in the countryside between the late 1940s and 1950s precipitated a large mass migration to the city while intensifying the process of land concentration in the countryside. Medellín grew from 138,266 people in 1938 to 358,189 in 1951, 1,151,762 in 1973, 1,698,777 in 1993 and an estimated 2,093,624 people in 2005<sup>[1]</sup> or 15 times the 1938 figure. Moreover, the population of the metropolitan area — excluding Medellín — grew from 77,759 in 1938 to 853,301 in 1993 and to 1,324,804 in 2005 (DANE 2005). The immigration process has intensified since the 1980s when guerrilla and paramilitary activity — and the actions of the army — terrorized the countryside sending hundreds of thousands of refugees to urban centers while producing a further wave of land concentration.

Although the local economy did well in absorbing immigrants — compared to other Colombian cities, it was never able to provide formal jobs to a large and ever growing proportion of them. The city started losing its industrial advantage in the 1950s when protectionism helped other cities catch up and take industrial and economic activity away from Medellín. Although still growing in absolute numbers, the city's aggregate industrial value as a percent of the nation declined from 22.6% in 1966 (Gouset 1998:14) to 18.1% in 1994 (Cámara del Comercio 1999). Similarly, the city's national share of jobs decreased from 24% in 1966 to 21.2% in 1991. A generalized economic crisis in the last three decades added to this problem. As in most countries with a "Fordist" industry, manufacturing lost its role as the main engine of economic growth. To survive within a deregulated and increasingly competitive globalizing manufacturing activity, the industry engaged in a process of restructuring based on labor downgrading and subcontracting that added to the poverty and generalized economic crisis. All local industries have cut their wages coming closer and closer on average to the minimum established. The informal sector has continued growing: in 1984, it provided an estimated 50.2% of all jobs; the figure went to 51.8% in 1992 and to 55.7% in the year 2000. The rate of open unemployment has oscillated between 12.5-14.7% in the period 1973-82, to 14.2-16.8% in 1982-88, 11.5-15.2% in 1990-96, 16.3-22.2% in 1997-2000 and 15-20% in 1998-2005.

The economic crisis was accompanied by a generalized loss of faith in the economy and government and the emergence particularly since the 1980s of multiple "alternative" initiatives on the part of organized forces such as the Medellín drug cartel, intensified paramilitary (both government sanctioned and underground) and guerrilla activity especially in low-income neighborhoods, and multiple other criminal activities (e.g. murder and kidnapping for profit, blackmailings, 'vacunas', and 'paseos millonarios').<sup>[2]</sup> As a result of these activities and similar others by the police and the army, Medellín was the murder capital of the world (as measured by violent homicides per 100,000 people) in the 1990s and still remains one of the most violent cities in the world. With 7% of the national population, the city reported 25% of public order problems in the country in 2001 (El Tiempo 2001: 1-3).

Under these circumstances, the Presidency established a special program in 1990, Consejería para el Área Metropolitana de Medellín, to address the problems of violence, governability and social decomposition in low-income neighborhoods. Along with this, local and national governments have engaged in various initiatives to address the crisis including a recent emphasis on militarization but also physical and social programs in such neighborhoods. PRIMED and Consejería were the major two efforts in the latter group. A process of constitution writing in the early 1990s that included a wide range of sectors produced the proper enabling legislations and mandates for development of urban plans and programs attempting to address the crisis (See Appendix). PRIMED was a forerunner in these fronts. Proposed by Consejería, the program was part and parcel of the general effort to confront the generalized problems of violence and social decomposition in low-income neighborhoods.

### **Integrated Slum Upgrading Program of Medellin (Programa Integral de Mejoramiento de Barrios Subnormales en Medellín<sup>[3]</sup> - PRIMED)**

The process of urbanization of Medellín included high levels of informality particularly since the 1950s. Whereas, for the most part, neighborhoods of the upper and upper-middle sectors of society had their homes and neighborhoods built according to codes and established norms, the rest of the city developed via self-housing. Land invasions and illegal subdivisions produced unregulated settlements with high densities and lacking the proper street systems and minimum public facilities and spaces. Judged by this, nearly 2/3 of the population currently lives in barrios that do not comply with the minimum standards and that lack the proper facilities. Over time, the administration and public utilities agencies managed to establish services and institutions in many of them<sup>[4]</sup>; then, the city decided to incorporate much of the growth under the category of 'normalized' neighborhoods, categorizing the most extreme and recent settlements as 'subnormal'.<sup>[5]</sup> Given the large presence of refugees, these barrios became strategic: not only did they include people displaced by guerrilla, paramilitary and military action, but they also housed cells and groups carrying the work of the former two groups in the city — along with others. Also, they occupied high-risk terrain that could result in major tragedies caused by mud slides. Lastly, they lacked any presence of the state in the form of institutions or even a minimum of compliance with established regulations.

PRIMED started in 1993 as a pilot program of cooperation between the city of Medellín and the governments of Colombia and Germany (through the Federal Minister of Economic cooperation, BMZ and KfW bank). It was conceived in 1992 as a form of incorporation of these settlements into the city, both physically and socially. The first phase (1993-1997) intended to move a set of informal barrios from levels 2 to 1; a second phase (1998-2003) would move another set from level 3 to 2.<sup>[6]</sup> Phase one was extended to 2000 due to unexpected delays and the availability of extra funds. PRIMED was terminated on that year. CORVIDE, the umbrella organization housing PRIMED assumed the remaining work for one additional year when a new administration dismantled the agency. The total cost of Phase I was nearly 30,000 million Colombian pesos. The project was financed with a soft loan from the Bank of Development and Reconstruction of Germany (KfW) and a mix of national and local funds. It benefited around 51,000 people (or one-fifth of the total population living in informal settlements) in fifteen barrios. Phase II was planned with funds that became available when KfW waived the 1997 interest payments on their loan. This phase targeted an additional 60,000 people or 24% of the estimated population in these types of barrios. The total projected costs for this phase amounted to 42,569 million Colombian pesos.

Building on programs of government intervention in the late 1980s and early 1990,<sup>[7]</sup> PRIMED developed its own approach and methodology of regularization that differed radically from earlier approaches of slum clearance, isolated paternalistic interventions, crisis intervention, repression of informal settlements, and political clientelism or negligence. Table 1 summarizes the objectives and activities of the program. The diagnostic was based on the study of the dynamics of self-settlement, identification of physical and social deficits associated with this process, and determination of local assets. PRIMED designed its own approach on the basis of the major issues, lessons from earlier experiences, existing legislation and involvement of relevant existing public and private actors and came up with its own administrative arrangements. The diagnostic, as PRIMED articulated it (No Date: 15), emphasized the low quality and marginalization of these settlements reflected in "insecurity and violence, lack of infrastructure and

services, deficits in communal facilities, high risks of mud slides and flooding, overcrowding, low housing quality, and the absence of the proper land tenure." Planning was carefully completed with input from university researchers, people with previous experiences in such settlements, Consejería, and local and national authorities and institutions. The final product was a detailed design including objectives and target groups, community participation, specific improvements (i.e. general infrastructure, public services, public and communal space, home improvements and relocation, land tenure, and geological risks), target areas, institutional participants, costs, and mechanisms of implementation. Briefly stated (Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional de Medellín, 1993: 29),

**Table 1: Major Objectives and Corresponding Activities of PRIMED**

Objectives	Activities	Areas Involved
General: improve the quality of life of subnormal barrios through mechanisms that guarantee the continuity of the program of urban improvements	All	Center oriental zone (COR), Center Western Zone (COC) and North Occidental Zone (NOC)
Superior: contribute to the unification of the city via the incorporation of subnormal barrios and to achieve peaceful <i>convivencia</i> in Medellín	All	
Specific Objectives: 1. Establish the proper mechanisms of planning and implementation;  2. Promote citizen participation  3. Barrio Improvement  4. Home improvement and relocation  5. Legalization of tenure  6. Mitigation of geological risks	1. A decentralized, flexible structure and the proper support mechanisms; institutional agreements; funding sources by component; coordination between government agencies, NGOs and community groups; systems of follow up, evaluation and control; adoption of PRIMED's approach for barrio regularization.  2. Strengthen NGOs and community organizations; identify leaders to facilitate citizen participation; negotiate with the community legalization of tenure, home relocations and community participation; involve the community in project development, subcontracting, administration and evaluation; develop small community programs; and establish mechanisms of citizen awareness.  3. Determine and prioritize needs with the community; improve the area's mapping; negotiate projects related to open public spaces, street layout, and community facilities; coordinate development of public utilities with the entity in charge; and develop projects of environmental control.  4. Identify housing NGOs; promote home improvements and provide the proper credit; train participating subcontractors; establish agreements with the proper entities; home relocation; and project financing.  5. Identify fast track processes; negotiate with landowners and the community; carry out the proper procedures; apply housing subsidies to the process; work with the proper offices to expedite the process; and issue titles.  6. Determine the areas of high risk; develop an infrastructure of stabilization and environmental control; promote the proper technologies and practices to mitigate risk; community education; make sure that all projects abide by environmental priorities and practices	

Source: Author's summary based on PRIMED 1992

[The program] attempts to reconstruct the social fabric and institutional trust initially in the hills of Pan de Azúcar, Picacho and Nuevos Conquistadores through actions that contribute to improvements in the quality of life of residents and the incorporation of these communities into the life of the city via provision of public services, construction and provision of communal facilities, recovery of areas of high risk, legalization of barrios, enactment of home titles, restitution of public space, income generating programs and development of family and social integration. to establish the presence of the state in these areas through an initial, intense intervention, in which the proper institutions of government, under the coordination of PRIMED worked in partnership with the community to address these problems, connect the settlements to the general urban fabric, and get them started on the path to normalization and social incorporation. It privileges interventions with long-term multiplier effects.

## **Administrative Structure and Methodology/Approach**

PRIMED's structure and approach included six major elements: a flexible and relatively independent administrative structure with direct access to the sources of power, inter-institutional cooperation, a clearly defined focus, a comprehensive approach, continuity, and a community participation framework:

**Administrative Structure and Inter- and Intra-Agency Cooperation.** Although operating under the umbrella of CORVIDE, the Housing and Social Development Corporation of Medellín, PRIMED functioned largely as a self-standing entity. Placed directly under the mayor's office, it also had direct access to the presidency via Consejería. A coordinating committee including the mayor and representatives from Consejería as well as all agencies involved in program funding and delivery (e.g. CORVIDE, INURBE, the National Institute for Social Interest Housing and Urban Reform, SENA, the national skill training institute, the confederation of NGOs, the Metropolitan Area administration, PNUD, the United Nations Development Program, EPM, the local utilities company, city departments and a representative from the community) worked with PRIMED's director in the coordination of major activities.

An administrative and monitoring group of representatives of such agencies. coordinated PRIMED's ongoing work with the entities involved All institutions involved in particular aspects of the program had a role defined in the general plan and a separate budget for their participation. The structure also included technical support from KFW, selected universities and others as needed. Separate offices coordinated the work in each of the target zones and barrios. PRIMED was responsible for planning, coordination and administration. Government entities, NGOs and subcontractors implemented the respective projects. In this way, the work of the different agencies was incorporated when and as needed while PRIMED focused on the whole. This arrangement generated savings and efficiencies while promoting a culture of cooperation and coordination among them. It represented a unique innovation in an environment in which each agency typically carried out its programs independently of all others.

**Focus.** Initially, PRIMED focused on settlements classified as Level II — settlements in which government had carried out some programs but that were still at a low level of consolidation. The agency chose a contiguous group of barrios allowing for comprehensive solutions at the proper scale along with more specific interventions at the barrio level according to the unique circumstances and conditions of each. Also, it included a fund for smaller projects sponsored by community organizations and NGOs. In this way, the agency could specialize in one approach, maximize results, and go from the general to the particular as needed.

**Approach/Methodology.** PRIMED tried to eliminate the extremes of paternalism, political patronage/clientelism, favoritism, and isolated or crisis interventions. It sought to prevent disasters and the multiple social and legitimacy problems associated with marginalization and exclusion. It assumed an apolitical form of intervention based on high levels of professionalism and efficiency. It operated on the basis of a carefully designed plan and criteria for each of its components. In this way, it was able to attract

an array of social forces (e.g. the Catholic Church, philanthropic entities, institutes and universities) that had been traditionally alienated by the politically charged and self-interested parties commonly involved in this type of work. Moreover, PRIMED had privileged access to the centers of decision-making (e.g. the presidency and the mayoralty), and to international (the German Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation), national, and local entities. This approach allowed the Program to interact with insurgent local groups because it did not represent any political party or individual or the police and army for that purpose — at least not directly. Lastly, the work was carried out in close partnership between different levels of government, German Ministry of Economic Cooperation (BMZ), local agencies, NGOs and the community. Perhaps the most important asset here was the acceptance of informal settlements as a given and the willingness to work with them — rather than manipulate, oppose, ignore or harass them.

**Comprehensiveness.** An effort to tackle multiple associated factors together was at the root of the program. It addressed physical improvements, housing conditions and tenure, employment and training, health, education, the environment, social relations, community building, safety and governability all at once as part of the same package. Certainly, most of the interventions were physical. Yet, they all aimed at improvements in economic conditions and quality of life with long-term social impacts. A methodology of partnership with the community, public awareness, de-politicized action, professionalism, transparency, monitoring and evaluation represented a model of action that could lead to full community support of the projects and the ensuing change in behaviors, and public participation towards a comprehensive partnership of sustained development.

**Continuity and Community Participation.** The program intended to generate a culture of partnership in which the community took charge of the future and continued the work on its own and through ensuing partnerships with government and others. For sustained development to happen, momentum had to be built and taken advantage of for further actions and the community had to gain ownership of the process, multiply the effects of interventions, and continue the effort through the institutions generated or strengthened and the education delivered. The limited, ad-hoc interventions of the past had fallen short in all these fronts. Many, in fact, fell into disrepair or were abandoned (e.g. parks and open space projects). PRIMED wanted community involvement all the way from determination of needs and establishment of priorities to implementation and maintenance. The agency was convinced that if the community did not gain ownership, the Program could not achieve its intended and more intangible goals and would not have much of an impact on the local fabric, namely, the effective insertion of the area into the city, trust in government, its institutions, and the rule of law, and continuation of the work.

**Table 2: Major Accomplishments by Objective**

Objective	Accomplishments	Other Outcomes and considerations <sup>[8]</sup>
1. Establish the proper mechanisms of administration, planning and implementation	PRIMED was able to establish a structure with the characteristics described under administrative structure and inter-agency cooperation (above).	
2. Promote citizen participation	Citizen participation assumed a rather passive/client form; it took the forms of information; involvement of residents in implementation on a paid (subcontracts and employment projects) and unpaid basis (labor provision for specific projects); education on issues related to project maintenance and use; funding of small projects proposed by NGOs/CBOs; subcontracts with CBOs; and negotiations over relocation and conflicts. At the end, on the suggestion of the community, residents appointed a committee to represent them in the process of decision-making and planning.	Reactivation of local CBOs and increase in female leadership; emergence of new organizations and leaders; involvement of local Juntas in the formulation of various projects; establishment of a watchdog committee including citizens; inclusion of community representative in PRIMED's committees at multiple levels
3. Barrio Improvements	Increased the pedestrian infrastructure from a coverage of 40% to 60% (compared to the average of 90% for the rest of the city); brought the infrastructure of streets to 80% of the area (close to the 90% level of coverage for the rest of the city); established health centers in NOC and advanced plans for COR; provided 2,800 meters in parks and open spaces; built secondary education establishments in each of the zones and a school in COC; added 5,500 sq. m. of recreational space with an additional 20,800 projected for development; added 6,000 m. in water pipes sufficient to serve 95% of households; built 1,000 sq. m. for a communal facility and 7 communal restaurants; built 5,000 m. in sewers as part of a projected coverage of 90%.	This was the most visible and perhaps successful outcome; although coordinated by PRIMED, most of this work was actually carried out by the corresponding municipal agencies (e.g. the local utility co. EEPP, the municipality's secretariats of Community Development and Public Works, and Social Welfare and others)
4. Home improvement and relocation	Improvements in over 3,500 dwellings; relocated an undisclosed number of dwellings; worked with INURBE, CODEVI and other low-income housing organizations to increase the use of subsidies and loans for improvement of thousands more	
5. Legalization of tenure	Identification of issues and requirements for legalization under the different existing conditions of land tenure; establishment of process of legalization for those areas in which it was most feasible; legalization of more than 2,100 households or less than 5,180 targeted; establishment of a process that is guiding legalization in other areas of the city	This was perhaps the most challenging aspect of the program; a complex set of issues including existing legislation, land ownership; land condemnation; household ability and willingness to participate, among others.
6. Mitigation of geological risks	Recovery of 5 Ha. and stabilization of 8.5 Ha. or nearly 70% of areas classified as high risk; channeled 640 m. recovering the basins of streams in a high level of deterioration	

Source: Table developed from information included in PRIMED 1992 and PRIMED no date.

## **Major Achievements**

This section examines results. Analysis starts with the major outcomes by specific objective to then conclude with a review of the overall objectives, the approach/methodology and the potential of this approach for future interventions.

Table 2 lists the accomplishments of the program as identified by PRIMED. Measured by these results, the program was a success. As per PRIMED, in most cases, the program achieved a high proportion of the projected outcomes. The source of this success comes from the six major components identified earlier, the strong commitment and enthusiasm of the local and national government, the staff, and the agencies involved, a careful process of planning and monitoring, program coordination at all levels, the power entrusted in PRIMED / CORVIDE, the ability of the site teams to stay away from political sectarianism and patronage politics, and the inclusion of the proper parties (from decentralized municipal institutions through citywide NGOs to community organizations). No independent evaluation, however, is available to determine the accuracy of PRIMED's self evaluation and report of findings.

## **Shortcomings and Issues**

Although on the whole, PRIMED accomplished a high percentage of its specific targets, it fell short in its overall effort to move the target areas from level 2 to level 3 in the local scale and to develop as deep a sense of local ownership of the projects as envisioned. Perhaps the major shortcoming was in the issuance of land titles. The process proved too complex and the target too high. The judicial process involved was particularly lengthy and included multiple changes. Local government decided against requiring land expropriations. Home improvements were affected by this as were political factors standing in the way in the issuance of housing subsidies — dependent on national government agencies. The elements that ran most smoothly were those most directly in the hands of local authorities and PRIMED — namely improvements in infrastructure, expansion of public services and construction of facilities. The absence of a data baseline made evaluation of household impacts (e.g. on family assets and employability) practically impossible. Instead, the program conducted a survey measuring the perceptions of participants (discussed later in this paper).

Local resistance/readiness, unexpected factors, lack of experience, organizational difficulties, political priorities, and overly optimistic expectations explain many of the shortcomings. Local resistance came from armed groups demanding payments (e.g. *vacunas*) or participation in the material benefits (e.g. jobs) and from changes in the armed groups controlling the settlement (i.e. each time a new group took over from the other relationships had to be renegotiated). It also came from community disagreements on approaches to the solution of environmental and other physical problems. Unexpected factors included incomplete information, technological difficulties related to the nature and extent of the work, and the difficulty of involving local organizations. Lack of experience applied especially to inter-institutional cooperation, subcontracting with local groups, and the complexity of an approach with so many partners and elements. Organizational difficulties had to do with the nature of previous arrangements based on patronage or paternalism and almost exclusively focused on brick and mortar solutions; they were also related to community organizations' lacking the technical skills required by the program (e.g. institutional accountability, ability to handle subcontracts with highly formal procedures, and limited mobilization power); finally, it included unstable organizations, lack of professional paid staff, and low capacity of local organizations at coordinating the work among them. Political priorities refer to the absence of a long-term commitment to the program of the various levels of government and the slow pace or interest of some of the participating agencies (especially from the national government). Finally, overly optimistic expectations refer to assumptions such as the expected level and form of community participation, the readiness/ability of all agencies involved to deliver at the time and within the terms expected, and the expectation that the interventions scheduled would have the types of social impacts assumed. The next pages specify some of these challenges by the major elements identified earlier:

**Administrative structure and Inter- and Intra-Agency Cooperation.** Although highly successful, the coordination of so many entities involved in project delivery proved highly cumbersome. Location of PRIMED within one of the city's departments affected its standing vis-à-vis other public agencies involved that did not take full responsibility for success of the program. The coordinating committee had too many representatives and operated mostly as an information clearinghouse; distribution of responsibilities among the member institutions was not very clear from the beginning. PRIMED may not have been the ideal organization for coordination with the community as the city had its own department exclusively dedicated to this work. The program was not properly inserted into the general agenda of the municipality and took the form of a free standing, separate project. As such, it did not enter the organic municipal structure guaranteeing its full inclusion in the general plan for the city and the ongoing political process. Separation between planning and project implementation also presented a challenge as each agency had its own institutional approach, technical choices and modus operandi and had difficulty adjusting to or accepting the plans developed by PRIMED at face value. This experience proved that agencies could cooperate within the proper administrative structure but that they did not enjoy intrusion in their particular fields of expertise. In spite of this, participants saw the benefits of working jointly in ventures of this type.

**Focus.** As mentioned earlier, the projects under the responsibility of government institutions and citywide NGOs were quite successful. In contrast, smaller projects sponsored by community organizations and financed at 75% of the total by PRIMED were few (60 proposed and 18 funded and completed) compared to the funding available and the projected total of 240. PRIMED argued that this failure had to do with the lack of experience of local organizations in complying with all the technical requirements involved and in managing the projects within the established stipulations along with the inability of PRIMED to lend them technical assistance. At the same time, community organizations found the process too bureaucratic and formalistic, and resisted extracting unpaid labor from the community to contribute their in kind 25% share.

**Approach/Methodology.** Although the approach proved effective at overcoming patronage, paternalism, sectarianism, natural disasters, and isolated interventions with highly alienating effects on residents and the political process, this same success may have been counterproductive. Political support ended with the first phase and PRIMED was discontinued. Interviewees explained that politicians did not have much to gain from a process out of their reach — given the deeply rooted culture and practice based on the exchange of votes for projects of local improvement. This decision actually may have confirmed how deeply entrenched those factors were in the local practice of politics. Although the crisis had not receded at the time of its termination, the political forces coming to power did not have the same commitment and went back to the old practices. According to a former PRIMED staff person, however, the second phase was discontinued due to disagreements between the national and local government over the municipality's responsibility for the debt incurred for construction of the local metro and the related inability of the city to incur additional foreign debt as well as the unwillingness of new administrations (both locally and nationally) to continue the program. Perhaps the latter is the most important as foreign financing amounted to less than 20% of the total. The experience, however, is still there and is guiding lesser interventions by the municipality. Other cities such as Bogotá have taken inspiration from PRIMED to design their interventions in informal and low-income settlements.

**Comprehensiveness.** This aspect suffered from the absence of a social intervention as extensive and aggressive as the physical portion of the project. In the words of a PRIMED employee, "too much cement and a bare bones social process." Similarly, the project was limited in its scope: it was unrealistic to expect that a limited local action like this could make a dent in the larger issues of income and employment. As PRIMED itself (no date: 68) explained in the plan for the second phase,

PRIMED would be strengthened in the achievement of its objectives with the definition and implementation of complementary municipal policies aimed at the reduction of those problems that the Program cannot confront directly, including: violence and armed conflict, unemployment, low educational and health levels as well as deficiencies in cultural and youth strategies and attention to children and the elderly.

### **Continuity and Community Participation**

As the methodology claims, success depended largely on a sustained effort and on the assumption of ownership of the projects on the part of the community responsible for taking care of them, developing a culture of conservation and environmental sustainability and taking charge of the process after PRIMED. This did not occur. As a PRIMED interviewee indicated, "When the project was over, the committee folded." The community was absent from the initial planning and decision-making process. It was included mostly in those aspects of the implementation in which local consent was required, residents had to play a role, or community collaboration was a *sine qua non*. In some cases, this type of participation was achieved through the cooperation/cooptation of local organizations, educational presentations to convince residence of the convenience of the intervention, or negotiations with the parties most directly involved. Other than this, participation included educational workshops, cultural and sports events, legal consultations, and program information and publicity. For home improvement and relocation, participation included negotiations with the families involved, counseling, sweat equity (in the form of unpaid labor mostly), and related. People resented involvement in the form of unpaid labor.

The stated intent of the project — to instill among residents a sense of citizenship, to entice their participation in the city's development, to get them to participate in PRIMED's activities, and to *legalize* the settlement — may be heavily biased towards the priorities and agendas of government. Some residents expressed that government had come to them with a predetermined plan that did not take into account their conditions and meet their needs. For instance, the legalization plan and goals did not consider the ability (or lack thereof) of residents to comply with the expenses and terms of a legalized property (e.g. disposable income for taxes, utilities and costs of legalization). One resident went as far as saying that what people needed was a decent job allowing them to pay their way and access educational opportunities for their children. Others, however, did not go that far, were highly supportive of the program and were of the opinion that cooperation was a way of getting what they could not buy with their meager incomes.

In its analysis of experiences from Phase I and the proposals for the second, PRIMED (no date: 67) defined participation as "the process of sharing with the community the planning, financing, implementation and evaluation of the different interventions." The term *sharing* can have top-down connotations. To its credit, PRIMED valued participation very highly and tried to make it as meaningfully as possible. For the second phase, PRIMED established a process of workshops to develop the capacity of representatives of community organizations and leaders involved in Phase I to participate in the formulation of the more specific plans by neighborhood. At the end of the process, PRIMED presented its general diagnostic for each zone and facilitated a process of feedback incorporating the results in the final document. After this, participants were organized into 4 groups (participation, infrastructure and facilities, housing, relocation and mitigation of geological risks). Following presentations of the corresponding diagnostics by PRIMED staff, the group identified priorities and programs. PRIMED staff addressed issues related to the feasibility of the proposals, came up with potential scenarios and engaged the community in the determination of the final scenarios.

At the same time, in its diagnosis of the community, PRIMED (no date: 26) alludes to deficiencies in their level of organization (e.g. low levels of leadership, authoritarian leadership, paternalistic relationships with NGOs, limited management and cooperation capabilities among the leadership, limited ability to bring the community along and lack of coordination among local organizations). The underlying expectation here may be one of fully developed NGOs with all the technical capabilities and willingness to cooperate unconditionally or within the terms of government institutions. It is important to take into consideration that community organizations often represent an independent voice calling for self-determination or fighting for frameworks and policies that allow them to reach their potential respect or to access the same opportunities as the middle class. They have been often alienated by government practices, public institutions and politicians. Moreover, their organizations are largely based on volunteers and participation competes with household and survival obligations often absorbing an inordinate amount of their time and effort. This raises questions about financial support allowing them the time to engage in these collaborations, to hire staff, or else.

It is rather unrealistic to expect that these communities will either work under highly formal frameworks and requirements or that they will follow passively the lead of institutions even as well intentioned and down-to-earth as PRIMED. Rather, projects and programs need to meet them at their level, take into account the real possibilities of their organizations and then, lend them the support necessary to grow. PRIMED's model for the second phase attempted to do this. In fact, in the design of Phase II the entity was able to garner the support of the leadership through incorporating them as partners in the planning process

## **Were the Larger Objectives Achieved?**

From the way in which objectives were formulated, achievement of overall objectives is a function of the achievement of the more specific ones. PRIMED conducted a survey measuring the social and economic impacts of public sector projects completed in this phase.<sup>[9]</sup> Survey results were highly positive. Ninety-six percent of respondents indicated that their quality of life had improved. The highest levels of satisfaction came from home improvements (66%), public spaces (49%), and legalization of tenure (36%). The lowest levels of satisfaction came from health services (15%), legalization of tenure (10%) and improvements in the environment (10%). A high percentage (70%) agreed that their travel time had decreased, that access to transport had improved (92%), and that they were better linked to the city (91%). The increased presence of the state was recognized by 76%; 93% knew about PRIMED; 64% give the organization credit for home improvements, 21% for barrio improvements, 11% for skill training, 10% for legalization of tenure and 10% for development of Parks. In fact, PRIMED had the highest credibility among government entities at 48%, followed by the utility company (14%) and by the city's department of community development (13%). A total of 84% have some level of participation in local government projects; 68% indicated that citizen participation had increased; 69% believed that the community had the ability to participate in project identification and design, and 75% believed that it had the capacity to establish organizations for its own development. Similar percentages indicated that residents had the ability to watch over and respect the established norms (77%), to see that public spaces were not invaded (63%) and to take care of the infrastructure and public facilities (69%). They indicated that relations among neighbors improved (81%), that safety had improved (86%) and that risks of natural disasters had diminished (99%). These results, however, have to be taken with a grain of salt as two-thirds of respondents had received benefits from the program — in the form of home improvements. In this way, they represent the most direct beneficiaries of the program and their responses are likely skewed by their level of benefit and exposure to PRIMED.

From their perspective and from visual evidence, it is clear that the target areas were incorporated better into the city via streets and paths. The local infrastructure improved significantly. Open spaces were created and public facilities and institutions developed or improved. Many households were able to improve their houses and legalize land tenure — even if this meant incurring debt and new monetary obligations.

Meanwhile, interviewees indicated that the jobs generated by the program were temporary and the skills developed through them and through workshops were useful but did not lead to "real" jobs. This is in part a result of the absence of programs such as job development and placement and skill training in well paid occupations and the absence of higher level (municipal, statewide and national) interventions expanding the job market or making dramatic improvements in access to professional education and health services. Most importantly, efforts to curb violence belong to a different level. PRIMED stayed away from this issue: had it confronted armed groups, most likely it would have not been able to enter the community and engage in the process it did.

PRIMED's overall strategy certainly corresponds to the belief that violence can be curbed through a mix of state presence and legitimacy, reintroduction of hope, proper youth programs or policing. *Consejería* intervened in some of these barrios with youth programs, funding of small cultural, educational, and entertainment programs, communal forums, and other initiatives of participation and self-help. Yet, their limited scale and the mass level of need made these interventions largely symbolic. Recently, the state opted for high levels of policing as its preferred alternative to defeat violence. Violent deaths have

decreased in the city although they still are among the highest in the world. Altogether these types of strategies, arguments and expectations have not been and perhaps cannot be evaluated. Informal economic activities, drugs, and multiple criminal activities have emerged as economic alternatives in a country and city with growing levels of poverty, unemployment, and underemployment. Tackling such problems calls for other interventions beyond the barrio, PRIMED succeeded in physical improvements and utility connections as well as in the provision of public facilities and services. This may actually be the easiest and cheapest problem to resolve, considering the high levels of poverty and unemployment and the meager educational and skill levels of a majority of the population living in the city.

As mentioned earlier the program was discontinued for a number of reasons including the election of a new administration committed to a different agenda and priorities, the limited electoral capital that could be derived from of a rather de-politicized/technocratic process as this had become, funding, an isolationist culture between city departments, and the ad-hoc nature of this intervention.

Based on program figures and assuming 5 people per household, the program appears to have spent US \$2,940 per household (at an exchange rate of 1,000 Colombian pesos per us dollar – the approximate average exchange rate for the first phase of 1993 to 1997 ). This cost is very similar to that for slum upgrading programs in much of Latin America. For example, integrated slum upgrading programs in Brazil and most other middle-income Latin American countries, which have many of the same components as this program in Medellin (including community participation and complete physical upgrading of basic infrastructure) cost US \$3,000 to \$5,000 per household. By no means is this figure financially sustainable if we take into consideration the average household income in the region (or in Colombia for that matter), the size of the problem (and hence the total amount necessary to upgrade just the neighborhoods in the most extreme levels of need), and its ever growing dimensions.

Summing up, PRIMED was a very good beginning. Unfortunately, this was yet another case of one-time, ad hoc interventions at the whim of political forces in power. Documents and conversations with the staff along with plans and processes in place for Phase II suggested significant improvements especially in community participation and process. One crucial element of the intervention was an ongoing process of evaluation inspired by a deep commitment to learn from experience and to adjust the methodology accordingly. But all of this aborted when the program was discontinued and the team dissolved. PRIMED is a proven testament that physical slum upgrading that works. This evaluation shows some of the limitations and the conditions required for success. Its discontinuance, however, points also to the major challenges of political will, institutional coordination, corruption and political clientelism, true community participation, and comprehensiveness, among others. The bottom line, however, is cost. Virtually no Latin American country at this point has the resources or commitment that are necessary to make a dent in the slum problem (with the exception of Chile and Costa Rica, both of which are atypical countries within the Region). Perhaps only sustained economic growth can feed create the virtuous circle necessary to increase substantially the proportion of the population with meaningful employment and that can generate the resources to expand upgrading to ever more areas of cities in the Third World.

## **Appendix: Relevant Colombian Policies for Informal Settlement**

Most low-income immigrants to Colombian cities availed themselves of housing through land invasion or acquisition of illegal land partitions and self-settlement in the urban periphery. Thus, illegal forms of tenure, precarious dwellings, and violations of established regulations and codes characterized most of their settlements. Local governments could not intervene because they would be violating private land property rights or their own rules. Hence, improvements depended largely on settlers. Eventually, government developed a mechanism of intervention based on the distribution of construction materials and the loan of heavy equipment to settlers who then carried out the work. Meanwhile, government policies addressing the housing needs of the poor evolved from direct development of public housing to the provision of subsidies. This section provides a quick survey of these policies.

**1940-1970.** This period included creation of institutions and regulations, and a mix of tolerance and selected interventions to discourage and punish invasions. Institutions included EEPP, a decentralized institution in charge of public utilities in Medellin (1955); Casitas de la Providencia, a local low-income housing NGO in charge of collecting funds to build housing especially for relocation of squatters from the downtown area (1956); ICT, a national public agency in charge of housing development and rehabilitation (1942); Comité de Barrios EEPP, in charge of home improvements and utility connections in informal settlements in the city (1958),<sup>[10]</sup> the Planning Department (1960), Acción Comunal (Communal Action), a local office working with local juntas in the physical improvement of barrios (1965);<sup>[11]</sup> and Fondo de Habilidades de Barrios (Fund for Barrio Improvements), a committee of the assessor's office to prevent the emergence of new non-compliant settlements (1964). The most relevant interventions charged city council with the responsibility of determining and reinforcing urban perimeters (1962); gave Superintendencia Bancaria (the banking regulatory authority) the power to stop further development of informal settlements; ordered the eviction of invasions in strategic locations of the city; and directed government institutions to develop public housing. In short, this period sought improvements in long established informal settlements in the periphery, prevention of further settlement, eviction of squatters in central locations, and development of public housing. In spite of these measures, settlements accelerated as a result of mass migration and public housing only served a small sector of the better off among the poor along with the middle class.

**1970-1983.** During this period, government worked with the private sector to consolidate the construction and mortgage industries. Public policy included strengthening of previous regulations, establishment of adjustable rate mortgage institutions, a series of institutions and regulations concerning the environment, and interventions in geological areas of high risk in cities. CORVIDE substituted Casitas de la Providencia (1975). Defensa Civil (Civil Defense—1971, 1974 & 1979) and Centro Habitacional para Calamidades Públicas (housing Center for Public Calamities—1975) were created to address tragedies caused by mudslides. Law 61 of 1978 enabled municipalities to enact development plans making room for areas of self-construction within the confines of established land property laws and regulations. National law 1306 of 1980 required that municipalities developed integrated development plans. In 1981, Medellín established a green ring (cordón verde) to control urban expansion; this decree reinforced local opposition to further informal settlement. In 1982, the national government created Comité Nacional de Emergencias (National Committee for Emergencies) to coordinate a national effort to identify areas of risk and develop plans to deal with them.<sup>[12]</sup> In December 1982, the city of Medellín issued a housing amnesty to legitimize self-help informal housing construction. This measure freed owners of any penalties associated with self-construction while giving utility companies and the city the ability to engage in the necessary corrections and to inventory these properties. In short, this period continued the emphasis on regulations but opened the doors for private experimentation and legalization of informal dwellings without offering a public solution. As a result, entities and individuals proposed legitimization of the informal settlement process and development of public support structures to improve upon it.

**1983-1990.** This period opens with dramatic urban tragedies caused by quakes, mudslides, flooding, volcano eruptions and others. National and local governments respond with legislation to engage in efforts of prevention and relief. In Medellin, the office of planning estimated in 1986 that 87,000 people living in 15,000 dwellings in 48 neighborhoods were at a big risk from such natural disasters and insisted on the need to engage in preemptive and relocation activities. Ensuing city council ordinances of 1986 and 1987 ordered local government to work with communities around these and other problems of informal settlements, to limit city growth and to integrate settlements to the city fabric. They instructed the city to work in the provision of informal settlements with utility connections and basic infrastructures and to relocate high-risk settlements. Finally, they charged COVIDE with coordination of these efforts. Initiatives included development of low-income formal barrios for relocation of settlers in high-risk areas. Interventions in areas of disaster emerged as the flagship, best-integrated programs in informal settlements and provided the foundations for PRIMED. The 1989 development plan for the city included provisions for relocation and rehabilitation of informal settlements. Other decrees created institutions for disaster relief and prevention. The national government (1987-1990) engaged in a policy of elimination of absolute poverty that included systematic intervention in informal urban settlements. Multiple other efforts and ordinances sought regularization of areas of self-construction and the recovery of high-risk areas. To

sum up, this period committed the city to partnerships with informal communities around minimum processes of regularization and to address areas of risk. At the same time, however, it continued insisting on efforts to prevent further growth of informal settlements.<sup>[13]</sup> This was also a period of isolated actions without a clear goal. In Medellín, this period marked the official recognition of a formal/integrated and an informal/segregated city.

**1990-today.** The national Urban Land Reform of 1989 made local governments responsible for addressing these issues through development of mandatory local development plans. It mandated "integration of subnormal settlements to the formal city," development of the proper inventories, and establishment of norms for the informal city, around improvements in the quality of life, environmental control and community participation. Particularly emphasis was placed in this period on the alleviation of social decomposition and on urban safety. The main vehicle was the Presidential Advisory Committee for Medellín and its Metropolitan Area (Consejería). This body was explicitly created "to coordinate the actions of national institutions serving the city and its metropolitan area and to facilitate mechanisms of agreement between national, state, metropolitan and urban authorities to unify objectives and carry out programs contributing to peace; promote fundraising from international entities; coordinate the search for solutions and give advise to the national government on social policy for the region" (Facultad de Arquitectura 1995: 27). In 1997, the national government created INURBE to replace ICT and preside over programs of social interest housing. Particularly important here is the replacement of public housing for subsidies to households. Equivalent to a maximum of 15 minimum monthly salaries, these subsidies could be applied to home construction or improvements (including relocation and legalization of tenure for the case of relocation and programs of barrio regularization). Since 1992, local ordinances expand the urban perimeter of the city to include settlements complying with a minimum of infrastructures, facilities and conditions proper of the formal city.

This enabling legislation provided the foundations for the design and implementation of PRIMED. As part of its efforts to improve the legitimacy of the state and address some of the causes of social decomposition, *Consejería* formulated this program in October 1982. PRIMED integrated the schemes developed for interventions in areas of tragedy and ecological risk with those oriented to the regularization of informal settlements in general. It added housing improvements to come up with the most comprehensive intervention to date in informal barrios in the city. Lastly, it did this work within a framework of community development that PRIMED refined significantly.

---

**John J. Betancur** is an Associate Professor in the College of Urban Planning and Public Affairs at the University of Illinois at Chicago. A native of Medellin, Colombia, he is working with various Colombian universities and research institutes conducting research on improving urban informal settlements.

<sup>[1]</sup> Colombia has not had a census of population since 1993. The 1993 figures, meanwhile, are not reliable as the government itself established. Most people agree that the population of the city is much larger but this cannot be determined until the country carries out a new and more reliable effort.

<sup>[2]</sup> "Vacunas" is a payment imposed by armed groups in exchange for 'protection' or non-aggression. 'Paseos millonarios' is the name for a practice in which an individual with an ATM Card is retained by criminal groups and forced to withdraw the maximum per diem amount of money allowed until the accounts are emptied out. At that point, the individual is dropped anywhere or killed.

<sup>[3]</sup> Integrated Program for Improvement of Subnormal Barrios in Medellín.

<sup>[4]</sup> Most of this work was done under a scheme of local patronage (clientelism) in which the city provided materials, heavy machinery and technical assistance, and residents provided unskilled labor on an unpaid basis. Working with the customary local *juntas* required by for this process, politicians often ‘godfathered’ particular neighborhoods intervening to facilitate the process of improvements in exchange for votes.

<sup>[5]</sup> Public figures from the Administrative Department of Municipal Planning put the number at 87 informal or subnormal settlements with 250,000 people or 14% of the population in 1997 (PRIMED no date: 15).

<sup>[6]</sup> The city divides subnormal settlements into three kinds. Level one barrios are those with a sustained level of government intervention that have come close to meeting the basic standards of normalization. Level two includes barrios with some previous—although discontinuous and incomplete—government intervention; Finally level three includes barrios with no previous government intervention and an incipient infrastructure and inventory.

<sup>[7]</sup> The first of these interventions was precipitated by the closing of a garbage site, Moravia that had become home to 15,000 people, many of them dedicated to recycling. In consultation with residents, the city carried out a process of environmental improvements, regulation of water streams, legalization of land tenure, provision of public services, and physical improvements. A second intervention responded to a tragic mudslide in Villa Tina, an informal settlement in the Western mountains of the Valley. It included home relocation, control of streams, reforestation, and development of a basic infrastructure of streets and service connections. This same approach was extended to Trece de Noviembre, another settlement in a high-risk location. In all cases, the city provided materials, equipment and qualified labor asking that the community provided unskilled labor on an unpaid basis.

<sup>[8]</sup> These are 1997 figures provided by the agency. No figures were available for 2000 when the program was completed on the basis of an extension. Informants suggest that most pending projects had been completed.

<sup>[9]</sup> Entitled Measurement of the Social and Economic Impacts of Public Sector Projects in phase I, PRIMED conducted a survey of a random sample of 300 households (from a universe of 10,465). Conducted in 1999, the survey measured impacts on life quality, physical improvements, governability, community participation, barrio and neighbor relations, housing, legalization of tenure, mitigation of ecological risk and environmental improvements. Participants were selected on the basis of their time in the target areas, participation in community organizations and groups, participation in local development projects and the projects, and participation in the benefits of any of PRIMED’s projects. The survey was a partnership of PRIMED staff and consultants from a local university, Universidad de Antioquia

<sup>[10]</sup> In 1964, this committee was replaced by a Fondo Rotatorio de Habilitación de Barrios (Rotating Fund for Barrio Improvements) and a División de Habilitación de Vivienda de EEPP (EEPP’s Division for Home rehabilitation).

<sup>[11]</sup> First created by the national government in 1959, *juntas* were legally incorporated NGOs to channel public resources to barrios; each barrio had one; although by definition they should stay away from partisan politics, eventually these groups became the main mechanisms of patronage as they worked with individual politicians to attract resources to their neighborhoods; in turn, politicians demanded support in elections from the barrio.

<sup>[12]</sup> Over the years, Medellin registered major tragedies caused by mudslides in 1938, 1961, 1962, 1973, 1979 and 1992. However, the city only started paying organized attention to this matter since the 1980s.

<sup>[13]</sup> This is most explicit in elements of the proposed 1989 Plan including the freezing of lands for potential urban expansion, reenactment and enforcement of the green zone surrounding the city, sanctions against violators and formalization of low-income neighborhoods.

## References

CORVIDE-PRIMED. 2001. *Propuesta Aprobación de Reglamento y Recomposición Mesas de Trabajo Sectoriales CICOZ Zona Nororiental*. Medellín: PRIMED.

Facultad de Arquitectura, Universidad Nacional de Medellín. 1993. *Sistematización de la intervención de la Administración municipal de Medellín dos Barrios Localizados en Zonas de Riesgo*. Medellín, Alcaldía de Medellín and United Nations (November).

Ministerio de Desarrollo Económico et al. 1996. *Habitat II Estambul 96: Colombia un Equipo para Volver por lo Básico*. Bogotá: Comité Nacional Preparatorio para Habitat II.

PRIMED. No Date. *Propuesta de Intervención PRIMED FASE II—1998-2003*. Medellín: Alcaldía de Medellín—Es Hora de Actuar.

PRIMED. 1998. *Resumen Ejecutivo Plan Parcial de Mejoramiento Integral PRIMED FASE II. Zona Centro-Oriental*. Medellín: Alcaldía de Medellín—Es Hora de Actuar.

PRIMED. 1999. *Medición de los Impactos Económicos y Sociales de los Proyectos del Sector Público en Fase I* (Measurement of the Social and Economic Impacts of Public Sector Projects in Phase I). Medellín: PRIMED.

PRIMED. 2001. *Proceso de Fortalecimiento del Consejo Integral de Desarrollo Comunitario Zonal*. Medellín: PRIMED.

PRIMED. 1992. *Programa de Mejoramiento de Barrios Subnormales en Medellín: Estudio de Factibilidad*. Medellín: PRIMED (October).

Final Note: This author followed PRIMED from its inception through available published and unpublished documents, materials shared by staff persons, visits to the projects, observation of meetings, and conversations with residents after these meetings or in tours of the communities. This presentation and analysis are based on these materials and experiences along with the author's own insights and study of documents.