

# GOLD VI

***Case-Based Contribution  
to Chapter 4: Commoning***  
*GOLD VI Report on Pathways  
to urban and territorial equality*

**Participatory neighborhood improvement  
programs: a way *par excellence* to promote  
greater urban and territorial equity from  
the bottom. Zooming onto Latin-American  
inspirational experience**

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# Participatory neighborhood improvement programs: a way *par excellence* to promote greater urban and territorial equity from the bottom. Zooming onto Latin-American inspirational experience

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## CHAPTER

4: Commoning

## SUMMARY

Latin America has a long tradition in the implementation of participatory neighborhood improvement programs (PMB). Those programs extend well beyond the traditional basic interventions that are land regularization, water and sanitation infrastructure, accessibility and housing improvement. Education, health, economic development and social inclusion are part of the diversity of actions that are now being implemented. Culture in a broad sense is also an important concern. PMB place strong emphasis on citizenship participation and on the co-production of projects with residents. Their purpose is to fully integrate spatially and socially communities and individuals into the city. They can be considered as a very concrete and effective tool for reducing spatial and social inequalities in cities. While Latin American local governments are clearly at the forefront regarding participatory neighborhood improvement, their accumulated know-how is now inspiring national policies. Evidences from the Global North, where peripheral low-income neighborhoods are not informal but composed of social housing, show that local authorities are also the backbone of participatory neighborhood improvement, which rely on an in-depth knowledge of the urban and social circumstances, and on a direct relationship with communities.

**Paquette Vassalli, Catherine. "Participatory neighborhood improvement programs: a way *par excellence* to promote greater urban and territorial equity from the bottom. Zooming onto Latin-American inspirational experience". *GOLD VI Pathways to Equality Cases Repository: Commoning (2022)*. United Cities and Local Governments.**

## Low income neighborhood improvement programs in Latin American cities: much more than just slum upgrading initiatives

Because of the predominance of informality in urbanization processes, slum upgrading programs are being implemented in many regions of the Global South. Hundreds of thousands of informal urban settlements require to be deeply improved, from land regularization to housing, including access to urban basic services. **Latin America has got quite a specific experience in this area.** As its very rapid informal urban growth took place a long time ago (unlike other regions of the Global South), it had to face early the challenge of upgrading a very large number of precarious neighborhoods. In fact, the housing deficit in the region is considered to be much more important regarding quality than quantity.<sup>1</sup> For several decades now, many efforts have been pursued to deal with this major issue.<sup>2</sup> **Interventions in this field have evolved significantly over time.** They shifted from initiatives that first consisted mostly in the provision of infrastructure and basic services, and which used to be mainly top down, to others that have now in particular two specificities. First of all, **the dimensions addressed in the improvement programs extend well beyond the traditional basic interventions in slum upgrading:** land tenure, water and sanitation infrastructure; accessibility; housing improvement. A growing number of actions are now fully included in the field of: education, health, economic development and social inclusion. Furthermore, culture in the broad sense is also an important concern in many programs and art is being used as a tool for enhancing community participation and



appropriation of the improvement actions.<sup>3</sup> **The territorial approach of the programs enables to deal better with the complex challenge of the articulation and the synergizing of sectoral interventions** (which is a stumbling block in the implementation of public policies and also of the SDGs). Secondly, the programs are **highly participatory**. Residents are being involved not only in a dialogue process (kind of an obligatory step nowadays in urban projects) but also in the design and the coproduction of the solutions to be executed in their neighborhood. Indeed, in addition to the physical and social integration of the informal settlements to the city, one of the objectives of many programs is also, in Latin America, to **enable the construction of citizenship in marginalized territories and not to leave anyone behind** both socially and politically. For these reasons, low income neighborhood improvement programs implemented in the region are now

Playgrounds for kids in Barrio La Gabriela, Bello (Antioquia), Colombia, as part of Municipal Neighborhood improvement program  
Source: Programa de Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios, Secretaría de Medio Ambiente, Vivienda y Desarrollo Rural, Alcaldía de Bello, Colombia

1. IADB, 2015

2. Rojas, 2009; Orozco, 2015

3. Campos and Paquette, 2021

much more than just slum upgrading initiatives. Indeed, they have been known for several decades now under the name *integral improvement neighborhoods* programs and policy (*mejoramiento integral de barrios*).

Although the systematic ex-post evaluation of these programs remains an important undeveloped area, those are empirically considered as a success on the field. They are, above all, **an efficient tool in order not only to address urban deficiencies but also to promote greater and territorial equity in cities, levelling out social and territorial inequalities.**

## Behind some iconic initiatives, a diversity of programs and mechanisms

Undoubtedly, one of the most recognized experiences in the area of participatory neighborhood improvement in Latin America is the Integral Urban Project upgrading model (*Proyecto Urbano Integral - PUI*) in **Medellin**, Colombia. Implemented from the mid 2000s in 5 peripheral and informal neighborhoods, and fed by a long lasting process of learning by doing. It was first executed as a pilot project in one of the areas. The PUI model, also conceptualized later as *social urbanism*, is a long term strategy that combines multiscale projects concentrated on a delimited territory (neighborhood scale) and urban planning. In fact, the adoption of a city planning oriented approach to slums is considered as the introduction by the municipality of a new paradigm in slum upgrading, “shifting the focus from the neighborhood to the city”.<sup>5</sup> Medellin’s initiative relied heavily on the participation of a large diversity of actors, including academics, who took part actively in the reflection and also the implementation process. Residents were invited to participate in

The “Decalogue for participatory slum upgrading” (*Decalogo para el Mejoramiento integral de Barrios*) launched recently by a large coalition of actors of the region (civil society organizations, social movements, universities, research centers, international and regional organizations), emphasizes the high potential of participatory neighborhood improvement programs, especially regarding social integration. The members of the alliance consider them as “fundamental to respond to immediate needs and also to contribute to a long-term post-pandemic recovery based on the well-being of the population, the realization of their rights and respect for the environment”.<sup>4</sup>

the co-production of the projects to be implemented, in particular through the organization of *imagination workshops*. Each of the 5 PUI consisted in the realization of properly planned integrated projects, combined with broader social sector programs. Although one of the core interventions was the now very well-known cable-car lines connected to the metro system, the neighborhood improvement actions were also largely based on the creation of public spaces. Furthermore, culture in a broad sense was a clear priority, with the construction of 9 big park-libraries within peripheral poor neighborhoods.<sup>6</sup> And as in many current experiences of neighborhood improvement in Latin America, art was used as a leverage to enhance urban transformation, especially through the realization of mural paintings by young residents.<sup>7</sup>

*Barrio 31*, in the autonomous City of **Buenos Aires**, is about to become another iconic reference of participatory neighborhood improvement offered by Latin America to the world. The project, developed by

4. See: <https://www.right2city.org/decalogue-for-participatory-slum-upgrading-programs-in-pandemic-times/>. The Decalogue, composed of ten guidelines and promoted by UN-Habitat, underlines the multiple dimensions that are being encompassed in the neighborhood improvement approach in the region. Far beyond infrastructure provision and housing improvement, they include fundamental issues such as territorial governance, social diversity, solidarity economy, collective care and human security.

5. Acosta, 2016

6. This intervention consisted in 17.000 square-meters of reading rooms and more and 50.000 square-meters of public spaces and green areas.

7. Campos and Paquette, 2021

the city government and funded by both the Inter-American Development Bank (for several decades, the major funder of PMB in the region) and the World Bank, involves transforming structurally, economically and socially the *Villa 31*, one of the largest and most visible slums in Argentina, throughout a wide range of actions: habitat and improvement of living conditions; social integration and human capital (promoting the exercise of rights for all residents and their inclusion in social activities); sustainable economic development (formalizing and empowering small businesses); urban integration, mobility and public space (guaranteeing access to all basic services and connectivity through infrastructure and environment-friendly public spaces). The total project budget from 2016 to 2019 was \$8,280, 44.4% coming from the Buenos Aires city budget, 42.4% from the World Bank and 13.2% from IADB.<sup>8</sup>

Behind a few largely mediatized success stories, **a lot of initiatives** are actually being implemented in the region. They range from modest projects (implemented for instance in peripheral municipalities that are part of larger metropolises but have got reduced human and financial means, as it is the case of *Bello*, 500.00 inhabitants, in the Medellín Metropolitan Area) to **urban strategies and policies experimented by large cities**. Their ambition is to focus on poor neighborhoods (not always informal, as social housing settlements, for instance, also need improvement) but covering the whole city.

The **Mexico City** government has been operating since 2007 its Community-based Neighborhood Improvement Program (*Programa Comunitario de Mejoramiento Barrial: PCMB*). Currently carried out by the local Ministry of inclusion and well-being (*Secretaría de inclusión y bienestar social*), the program consists in the execution of projects focusing especially on public spaces, which are determined and supervised by the residents themselves, guided by professionals and public institutions.

For its part, the **Bogota District** is currently running a sophisticated strategy of integral neighborhood improvement using a complex quantitative methodology in order to identify and target the areas to be intervened on. The *Mejoramiento Integral de Barrios Program* is implemented by the District Ministry of Habitat (*Secretaría Distrital del Habitat*) and aims at enabling residents of informal neighborhoods “to benefit from the same quality of life as the rest of the city”. As in other experiences of PMB, its components are diverse, ranging from legalization of land to the use of art in order to improve neighborhoods and facilitate appropriation by the community (the *Conectate con tu barrio initiative*). Evidently, housing improvement, public spaces, accessibility and social integration are part of the actions that are being implemented. Active citizen participation, which is a pillar of the strategy, is considered by Bogota District authorities as necessary in order to implement adequate projects but also to provide an important concrete feedback regarding needs and necessities of the residents, which can, in turn, help improve public policies in general.

8. See: <https://use.metropolis.org/case-studies/the-urbanization-of-villa-31-an-informal-settlement-in-buenos-aires#casestudydetail>

## Local governments are clearly at the forefront and now inspiring national policies

Given the large number of initiatives that exist, providing an exhaustive overview of the PMB programs currently implemented in the Latin American Region is a difficult task. The creation of a regional observatory in this field, desired by many actors, would indeed be quite useful. In addition to the existence of the common features already mentioned, something that needs to be pointed out is the fact that those programs and policies are **almost always carried out by local governments**, with very little (or no) specific formal support from the national level. Indeed, national strategies regarding low income households' living conditions use to remain very sectorial. Regarding housing, national governments focus mainly on the production of social housing (an important trend in the region over the last two decades). And when it comes to improving, programs are targeting mainly both the legalization of land and the housing improvement dimension, the urban improvement dimension being seldom attended as such.

For a long time, Chile has probably been the main exception in that respect. The country has been carrying out a recognized poor neighborhood improvement program as a national initiative since the mid-2000s, involving local authorities quite minimally. Its Neighborhood Regeneration Program (*Programa de Recuperación de Barrios*), also known as "I love my Neighborhood" Program (*Programa Quiero mi Barrio*) has been implemented since 2006 by the national Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (MINVU). 570 neighborhoods with problems of

urban and social deterioration, as well as socio spatial segregation, have been improved through the implementation of multi-dimensional projects largely centered on the issue of public spaces. Art has been used to foster community appropriation regarding urban transformations. Although citizen participation is mandatory, municipal governments are little involved in the process. The program, as many others in Chile, is being implemented from the central level.

However, recent evolutions are showing that **some national governments are willing to integrate participatory neighborhood improvement within their national action lines**. Colombia, in particular, has been recently launching the "Decent Housing, Decent Life" Program (*Programa Casa digna Vida digna*), which includes, in addition to housing upgrading actions as such, interventions aiming at improving the urban environment and the neighborhoods. Capitalizing on the important accumulated know-how of Colombian cities in the area, and especially the one of the leading metropolis of Bogota and Medellin, the program (still partly under construction) will be relying on municipalities, both for the selection of the neighborhoods and for the implementation of the multiples actions. **Local governments are definitively the backbone regarding participatory neighborhood improvement**, which must be based on an in-depth knowledge of the urban and social circumstances, as well as on a direct relationship with communities.

# Integral neighborhood improvement in the Global North: the case of France, where local governments are also at the forefront in order to address territorial inequalities

Poor peripheral neighborhood improvement programs are not limited to the Global South. They also exist in developed countries, in the form of public initiatives for deteriorated social housing settlements. Because of the political, social and economic contexts, which are radically different from what is happening in developing and emerging countries, frameworks of operation differ a lot. Nevertheless, evidence from one of the countries that has developed the most extensive experience and know-how in this field is showing that local governments are also playing a crucial role in the implementation of poor neighborhoods programs.

In order to reduce its enormous housing shortage, France has carried out a massive social housing production after the Second World War and until the beginning of the 1970s. In that context, a huge number of very large and peripheral neighborhoods were built, which were rapidly affected by a process of urban and social deterioration, with large concentrations of poverty. In order to face this major issue, a succession of public initiatives was carried out since the 1980s and a "National Urban Regeneration Program" (PNRU) was finally implemented from 2003, as well as a dedicated public agency in charge of its implementation (ANRU). The objective of this national mobilization, which is still going on with the current "New National Urban Regeneration Program" (NPNRU), successor of the previous program, is to **bridge the gap between poor social housing neighborhoods and the rest of the cities**. Based on

the idea of diversifying the housing stock (and thus, the resident population) within the neighborhoods, the program also seeks to improve them through a diversity of actions, ranging from physical to economic and social interventions. It is thus a fully integral approach to neighborhood improvement.

Unlike what is currently beginning to emerge in Latin America, where the impulsion in the field of neighborhood improvement clearly comes from the bottom and now tends to percolate at the national level, the French model is based on a top-down approach. However, local governments (first, municipalities, and now, urban communities) are invited to elaborate and submit multi-stakeholders projects, and are then in charge of their implementation. Despite the challenge that these issues pose (and especially their huge complexity), the French experience is considered to be quite successful and local governments are showing an increased innovation capacity in their approach to poor neighborhood improvement.

**Miramas** (26.000 inhabitants), one the 92 municipalities of the Aix-Marseille Provence Metropolis, is developing a neighborhood improvement program in an area composed of two social housing neighborhoods, *Maille 1* and *Mercure*, built during the 70's. The current population is 1.200, mostly living under the national poverty line. The neighborhood improvement program, signed with the National Urban Regeneration Agency and other partners, consists of actions regarding the

housing stock (demolitions, reconstructions, rehabilitations) as well as the physical connection and integration of the area to the city. It also contemplates new public equipment and projects in order to foster economic development. The health of residents is an important and transversal concern, as a pilot project. An important emphasis is

put by the municipality on the issue of the participation of the residents, which used to be a real weakness in French neighborhood improvement programs. Mechanisms of co-construction have been introduced in the projects and residents are directly taking part in the definition of the actions to be implemented.

## Neighborhood improvement programs in Latin America: a commoning practice?

A review of the many existing initiatives in the region shows that the approach of the Latin American neighborhood improvement programs is often to improve the living conditions of poor residents *as a community* much more than *as individuals*. Certainly, neighborhood improvement programs include actions that are focusing residents as individuals. Poor residents are thus receiving individual support regarding land tenure (regularization, a compulsory step for implementing thereafter other kinds of public interventions in urban services) and housing improvement, which are basic components of the neighborhood improvement process. New public transportation and mobility infrastructure, which are also a key issue in these programs, also enables residents as individuals to access the many amenities provided by the city (employment, culture, health, etc.) and to feel part of the city at a larger scale.

However, **Latin American neighborhood improvement programs are with no doubt targeting above all places (neighborhoods) and communities which are living in them, rather than individuals.**<sup>9</sup>

That is why the term “neighborhood”, or *barrio*, is so important: it is not only an urban perimeter but

a place where neighbors are living and which they share. Latin American neighborhood improvement programs are based on a territorial approach: they consist in implementing a set of multi-sectoral projects in a defined district, articulating them so as to generate a significant improvement of the living conditions and quality of life of the population, within the neighborhood and also within the city as a whole, to which they are being connected and integrated physically, socially and symbolically. The best example of this territorial approach is the experience of **Medellin**, which integrated within a former plan (PUI) all the actions to be realized in the neighborhood.

Neighborhood improvement programs also aim explicitly at fostering social links within the neighborhoods and developing a sense of community. They are doing so by providing collective facilities (especially cultural and for sport) as well as public places, which are *commons* for the neighborhood. Those projects are generally co-decided (and even co-designed) by the community. These facilities are not only crucial in order to enable residents to have access to culture, or health, within their neighborhood (which is a way of tackling social inequalities in the cities). They also

<sup>9</sup>. They are therefore leaning against the current trend of housing policies in the region, which mainly consists in granting personal subsidies to households, in order to accede to homeownership or even to improve their housing conditions.

enable the development of social links between the neighbors, especially in marginalized areas, where domestic spaces are very limited in size and cannot allow people to gather. They provide the community with safe places where residents can meet and where activities can also be organized with the youngest in order to prevent violence, which is a crucial issue in many Latin American cities and especially in their low income settlements. Indeed, in Medellín, *social urbanism's* first purpose was explicitly to *pacify* marginalized settlements throughout the comprehensive improvement of the living conditions of their residents.

Medellin library parks are much more than just green spaces and a library providing access to books: they integrate many rooms that can be used by the neighbors for a large range of activities. So are the community facilities built through the Mexican neighborhood improvement program or the houses of culture built in Barranquilla, Colombia. **Neighborhood memory consolidation is also part of the objectives of many Latin American neighborhood improvement programs**, throughout the realization of mural painting (as in Chile, with the *Quiero mi Barrio* Program) or the creation of permanent exhibitions (as in *Moravia* neighborhood, in the center of Medellín, which used to be a very large waste landfill and where many exhibit panels remind of the past and of the residents struggle in order to transform their neighborhood).

The involvement of the community in the elaboration and realization of the projects (throughout the realization, for instance, of the so-called *imagination workshops*, where residents are working with urban specialists who guide them in the definition of urban projects; or even throughout the management of the realization of the projects by the community itself, as in the

Mexico City program) fosters their appropriation by the community. The latter should contribute, in turn, to the sustainability of the projects, as the community is feeling more concerned by the maintenance of the facilities.

Due probably to the lack of resources of local authorities (who implement those programs), ex-post evaluation of neighborhood improvement programs barely exists. Nevertheless, evidence from the field is showing that the facilities built are being highly valued by the communities and maintenance is satisfactory. Likewise, the gentrification process that tends to occur in many neighborhoods after the implementation of improvement projects (and which seems inevitable in traditional urban regeneration projects in more formal urban areas) is not being observed, or is quite marginal. The development of the sense of community throughout the implementation of the neighborhood improvement project, as well as the habitat construction process, mainly based on auto-production, might explain this situation.

Indeed, neighborhood improvement programs are dealing with an important urban issue which has become crucial in cities all around the world: urban regeneration. But they are proposing an alternative to the increasingly controversial experiences of urban regeneration that take place in formal urban spaces, which tend to be conceived mainly in order to attract new residents and activities and are usually resulting in the expulsion of poor residents. On the contrary, Latin American neighborhood improvement programs are focused on existing residents and communities.<sup>10</sup> **They are tackling urban inequalities through a territorial approach which consists in improving their living conditions, also connecting them also to the city and fostering community development.**

10. Campos & Paquette, 2021

## National government's support: a requirement to develop and scale up neighborhood improvement programs

In the view of many Latin American local governments, there seems to be two main limitations to the current neighborhood improvement programs: **the lack of ex-post evaluation that could provide clear and systematic evidences about the achievements and the difficulties of the programs, and the issue of maintenance in the medium- and long-term of the facilities built in the neighborhoods.** Local governments should work on these two main issues. However, in order to do so, they would need financial and also technical support from the national level. The role of the national government would be to provide local governments with resources in order to improve the programs and their systematization, as well as the number of neighborhoods in which they intervene. It would also be essential to provide local governments with a national flexible framework for the implementation of neighborhood improvement programs, which could set the main guidelines without being too constraining. The French scheme of the *city contracts* is interesting in that respect. The national government could also help local governments to share their experience. Some large cities, such as Bogota, are currently working in that direction in order to capitalize and share their experience.



Development banks (especially IADB) have played a very important role in the development of neighborhood improvement programs in Latin America, funding some of the most emblematic experiences (*Favela Bairro* in Brasil, financed by IADB; and Bogota's neighborhood program, funded by IADB during the 2000). It is now time for national governments to integrate programs for neighborhood improvement within their national housing policy framework. **Although the housing deficit in Latin America is mainly qualitative, many national housing policies do not consider this issue and address mainly the quantitative housing shortage.**

Community center built in Barrio 17 de Septiembre, La Serena, Chile, as part of the Quiero Mi Barrio Neighborhood improvement program  
Source: MINVU (Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo de Chile), 2021

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This paper has been produced as a Case-Based Contribution to the sixth Global Report on Local Democracy and Decentralization (GOLD VI): the flagship publication of the organized constituency of local and regional governments represented in United Cities and Local Governments. The GOLD VI report has been produced in partnership with the Development Planning Unit (University College London), through the programme Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality (KNOW). GOLD VI focuses on how local and regional governments can address the local manifestations of growing inequalities and contribute to create “Pathways to urban and territorial equality”. The GOLD VI report has been produced through a large-scale international co-production process, bringing together over a hundred representatives of local and regional governments, academics and civil society organizations. This paper is an outcome of this process and is part of the *Pathways to Equality Cases Repository*, which collects the over 60 Case-Based Contributions produced as part of the GOLD VI report.

In particular, the present paper has contributed to Chapter 4 on “Commoning”, which focuses on the trends and pathways in relation to the governance, planning and provision of access to housing, land and basic services. The chapter explores how local and regional governments can promote approaches focused on collective action that contribute to urban equality.

Supported by:



**Funded by  
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**Diputació  
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This document has been financed by the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency, Sida. Sida does not necessarily share the views expressed in this material. Responsibility for its content rests entirely with the authors.



**UK Research  
and Innovation**

This document was produced by UCLG and the “Knowledge in Action for Urban Equality” (KNOW) programme. KNOW is funded by UKRI through the Global Challenges Research Fund GROW Call, and led by The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, UCL. Grant Ref: ES/P011225/1