

# Reconstructing social capital in a poor urban settlement: the Integral Improvement Programme in Barrio San Jorge

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**SUMMARY:** *This paper describes how the continuous support provided by an external team over a ten year period in a low-income informal settlement in Buenos Aires (Barrio San Jorge) resulted in a development process which helped to improve living conditions, to change the inhabitants' relationship with society and to reduce the deprivations normally associated with low income. Over time, and with each new initiative seeking to build on the momentum achieved by previous initiatives, considerable improvements have been achieved, including improvements in housing quality, access roads, land tenure and provision for water and sanitation and for child health and development. Perhaps as important has been the development of a representative community organization within the barrio since no such organization had existed previously. This, in turn, has helped change the relationship of this settlement's inhabitants with the rest of society - the settlement is no longer "illegal" as the inhabitants are acquiring legal tenure of the land on which they live, as provision for water and sanitation is now managed by the official utilities and as an engagement has developed between the inhabitants and government agencies at municipal and other levels. This case study suggests that many low-income illegal settlements need a long and continuous support programme to allow the many kinds of deprivation and illegality their inhabitants face to be addressed. Poverty is not "solved" through one or two quick, sectoral interventions. Action is needed on many fronts. But this case study also shows the important catalytic role that international funds can have in helping low-income communities develop their own representative organizations. This is important for allowing them to address their own problems but it is also central to them being able to successfully negotiate with their own local governments and utilities for the infrastructure and services to which they are entitled.*

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1. This case study draws on several documents, reports and papers, especially the paper by Hardoy, J.E., A. Hardoy and R. Schusterman (1991), "Building community organization: the history of a squatter settlement and its own organizations in Buenos Aires" in *Environment and Urbanization* Vol. 3, No. 2, October.

2. "Social capital" is considered to be the norms, trust and reciprocity networks that facilitate mutual beneficial cooperation in a community (Moser, C.O.N. (1996), *Confronting Crisis: A Summary of Household Responses to Poverty and Vulnerability in Four Urban Communities*, ESD Studies and Monographs Series, The World Bank).

## I. INTRODUCTION<sup>(1)</sup>

**BARRIO SAN JORGE** is one among a large number of poor settlements in Buenos Aires (and other Latin American cities) in which the inhabitants survive with inadequate incomes, very poor housing conditions and a lack of basic services. In 1987, when the support team began work there, absolute poverty and insufficient and inadequate external support had eroded social capital.<sup>(2)</sup> Barrio San Jorge was also one among thousands of low-income settlements in Latin America where, despite many speeches, promises and programmes, there had been little support from government programmes and projects. Like most other low-income settlements, it also lacked a community organization - or at least one that was representative of its population.

What makes Barrio San Jorge unusual is some features of the intervention by one external agency, the Community Support Programme of IIED-América Latina. This support programme has been working continuously in Barrio San Jorge for the last ten years, promoting initiatives in different sectors, seeking support from government agencies, international funders and private sector sources, and seeking to involve the different actors who are affected by these actions. Continuity, the integration of actions and partnership with stakeholders have been the principles on which a development process has been built to confront poverty in San Jorge. The main challenge for IIED-América Latina has been to support the reconstruction of social capital within the settlement to address the needs and problems of the inhabitants that could not be tackled at an individual or household level.

Two points should be stressed at the outset. First, this case study does not claim to be a "success story"; it is not intended as an example of "best practice" or to provide a blueprint about how things should be done. This case study seeks to provide an insight into what has happened in one informal settlement over the last ten years, what has been achieved and what was learnt through the involvement of an external team. This includes a description of the complex and constantly changing relationships between Barrio San Jorge and different government agencies and different external funding agencies - and the difficulties in achieving a good match between community directed improvements and external support. The paper also outlines how the lessons learnt from working in this settlement form the basis for similar support programmes for other informal settlements nearby. The second point that should be stressed is that the authors of this case study have both been part of the support team working in Barrio San Jorge and, as such, are part of the story that follows.

If the approach taken by IIED-América Latina's Community Support Programme working in Barrio San Jorge and now in other informal settlements is considered one that should be tried in other settlements, it implies the need for new forms of support from international donors. The first is an acceptance that external support is often needed over a long period and for many kinds of intervention - so that as one successful intervention is

completed, the community organization and mobilization it achieves can then be capitalized on to tackle another problem. In virtually all informal settlements, there are many needs that have to be addressed and "poverty" is not solved through single sector "projects". Yet most international donors support single sector projects and, having supported one initiative in a settlement, prefer not to support another. The second is that funding must be provided in ways which match the rhythms and possibilities of community based organizations - and this often means a slower use of funds than that sought by funding agencies. The third is perhaps the most difficult - the recognition that community support programmes provided by local NGOs, such as that provided by IIED-América Latina in Barrio San Jorge, usually demand a large amount of time from professionals. We believe that it is the constant presence of staff from IIED-América Latina in Barrio San Jorge over the last ten years that has helped the inhabitants overcome their well-founded scepticism about any useful role for an external agency and to begin to work as a community rather than as individual households. We also know that reducing poverty and deprivation in any informal settlement also means changing the relationship between that settlement and many public agencies. This negotiation - in the case of Barrio San Jorge, with the municipal authorities, the provincial government, the water agency, the electricity utility and many others - is very time-consuming. It has required a considerable amount of staff time from professionals within the NGO support team. But this negotiation has brought benefits that external funders could not provide or sustain such as the regularization of land tenure, the improvement in garbage collection and the connection of the settlement's water supply and sewer system to wider networks. External funding can often play a valuable role in supporting community organizations and the NGOs that work with them in negotiating with national, state and local authorities for land rights, credit, infrastructure and services and in building their capacity to sustain achievements. This is such an important part of moving an informal settlement "out of poverty". Yet few international funding agencies are able or willing to fund this process, especially the staff time needed within community organizations and NGOs to achieve this.

## II. BACKGROUND

*"...el que no llora no mama y el que no afana es un gil..."*

(Those who do not cry do not suck and those who do not rob are fools)

Tango Cambalache

*"Con la democracia se come, se cura y se educa."*

(With democracy, it is possible to eat, to cure and to educate)

Raul Alfonsín, President of Argentina 1983-1989

*"Si paramos de afanar durante dos años, se arregla todo."*

(If we stop stealing for two years, everything is solved)

L. Barrionuevo, union leader and former official of the present government

**ARGENTINA'S POLITICAL HISTORY** in recent decades has been plagued by military coups with military dictatorships alternating with weak elected governments. Between 1930 and 1989, only two governments could complete their mandate. Constant political change has meant that social policies have been erratic even within the lifespan of a single government.

Argentina's largest concentrations of poverty are within the Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, especially in precarious neighbourhoods and squatter settlements, most of which are in the peripheral municipalities.<sup>(3)</sup> They are known as *villas miseria* or *villas de emergencia* - the term *villa* being used ironically since it comes from the Italian word which implies a high quality house. Under the military governments for the period 1976-83, many illegal settlements were bulldozed and the development of new illegal settlements prevented, at least in central areas. Where the state did intervene in poor neighbourhoods, generally the intervention was limited to the education and health sectors. Successive governments neglected broader support to low-income settlements as they were considered problems of the emergency which would be solved as soon as the country overcame the crisis that had its roots in the exhaustion of the import substitution model since the 1960s.

Local and provincial governments in Argentina have long mistrusted community organizations and the non-governmental organizations that work with them. The fact that so many promises by political leaders go unfulfilled led to apathy, as the inhabitants of the *villas* were continuously discouraged by the failure of each successive government to address their needs. Few such settlements benefitted from public projects and programmes at the level of individual settlements.

Barrio San Jorge is located in San Fernando, the least populous municipality in Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area. In 1991, San Fernando had 143,000 inhabitants and one of the lowest rates of population growth among the 19 municipalities and the Federal District which make up the Metropolitan Area. This is largely explained by the very limited employment opportunities available within the municipality. It is also the result of the poor environmental quality of the areas within the municipality which have not yet been urbanized, the shortage of local government resources for the implementation of social programmes and the low level of investment from the provincial government.<sup>(4)</sup> San Fernando has one of the highest infant mortality rates among the municipalities within Greater Buenos Aires - which at 30 per 1,000 live births in 1991 is twice the rate in the Federal District.<sup>(5)</sup>

The proportion of the population with unsatisfied basic needs in the municipality of San Fernando is above the average for the Metropolitan Area.<sup>(6)</sup> On the western side of the district, where the largest poor settlements are found (including Barrio San Jorge), over half of all households have unsatisfied basic needs.

3. Buenos Aires is made up of the Federal District (the capital of Argentina) and 19 municipalities around it which are within the province of Buenos Aires. By 1991, the whole agglomeration comprised 11.3 million inhabitants.

4. The municipality of San Fernando, like those of the other 18 municipalities within Buenos Aires Metropolitan Area, comes under the provincial government of Buenos Aires.

5. Arrossi, Silvina (1996), "Inequality and health in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires" in *Environment and Urbanization* Vol.8., No.2, October.

6. The National Institute of Statistics and Censuses (INDEC) publishes statistics on the number of households with "unsatisfied basic needs" in each municipality in Buenos Aires; households with unsatisfied basic needs include households with more than three people per room, households which live in housing of an unsuitable type (which includes houses with no provision of piped water inside the house and no flush toilet) and households with any child of school age who is not attending school. See reference 5.

The recognition of these settlements by local government is limited, as can be seen in the maps of the cadastral office, where the only reference to them is by their name on areas classified as vacant or as belonging to no-one.

### III. BARRIO SAN JORGE

*"Barrio San Jorge: en el margen de la marginalidad."*

(Barrio San Jorge: on the margin of marginality)

Local politician

#### a. Origins

**BARRIO SAN JORGE'S** origins are as a resettlement site. In 1961, the government resettled 60 families in houses made of corrugated iron sheets on the site that later became known as Barrio San Jorge, as temporary "emergency relief" because they had been living in areas prone to frequent flooding. Despite the lack of infrastructure and basic services on the site, other households moved there, attracted by surrounding vacant land from which they seemed to have a low risk of eviction. Thus, the settlement's population increased gradually. The neighbourhood had two more important advantages: the government of the Province of Buenos Aires had set up a primary school, kindergarten and health centre in existing buildings, and the area was served by buses which provided connections with other districts of the Metropolitan Area.

After 1979, the settlement expanded into a new section when the municipal authorities evicted some 200 families from a site located near a stream because the land was needed for infrastructure works. The municipality levelled a marshy site adjacent to the existing settlement and sub-divided it into lots. These were provided to the households who were being evicted as were trucks for the transport of their belongings and recouped building materials from their shacks. Since then, Barrio San Jorge has been divided physically and socially between the old barrio and the new barrio. Both arose from the relocation of groups whose previous homes had been affected by floods and both were resettled in lowlands that were also subject to flooding - although the risk of flooding has diminished in recent years because the river has been dredged upstream from the barrio.

#### b. The Situation in 1990

According to a census undertaken in December 1990, there were about 450 households and 2,400 inhabitants in the barrio, giving an average household size of 5.3 persons.<sup>(7)</sup> As is common in settlements of this type, a high proportion of the inhabitants were infants, children and young people (58 per cent were under 20 years old). There were few elderly people (only 6 per cent were over 50 years old). Educational standards were also well below the average for the Metropolitan Area: only 46 per cent of the adult population had completed primary school. Al-

7. Household is defined as those people living under the same roof.

8. Monthly incomes were higher for men; however, if incomes per hour worked are considered, income levels are almost the same for women and men.

though the vast majority of children aged between six and 13 attended school, the quality of their learning process was poor, as demonstrated in the difficulties that some older pupils faced in reading and writing and the frequency with which pupils had to repeat grades. The schools within Barrio San Jorge were appreciated by the adults less for the practical utility of the instruction received and more for the benefits they provided in terms of child care, daily access to meals and occasional health controls.

With regard to employment, the proportion of people employed was high but incomes were found to be very low: 35 per cent of the economically active population's incomes did not cover the cost of a basic basket of food. The high proportion of economically active people was partly due to the incorporation of women and young people into the labour market.

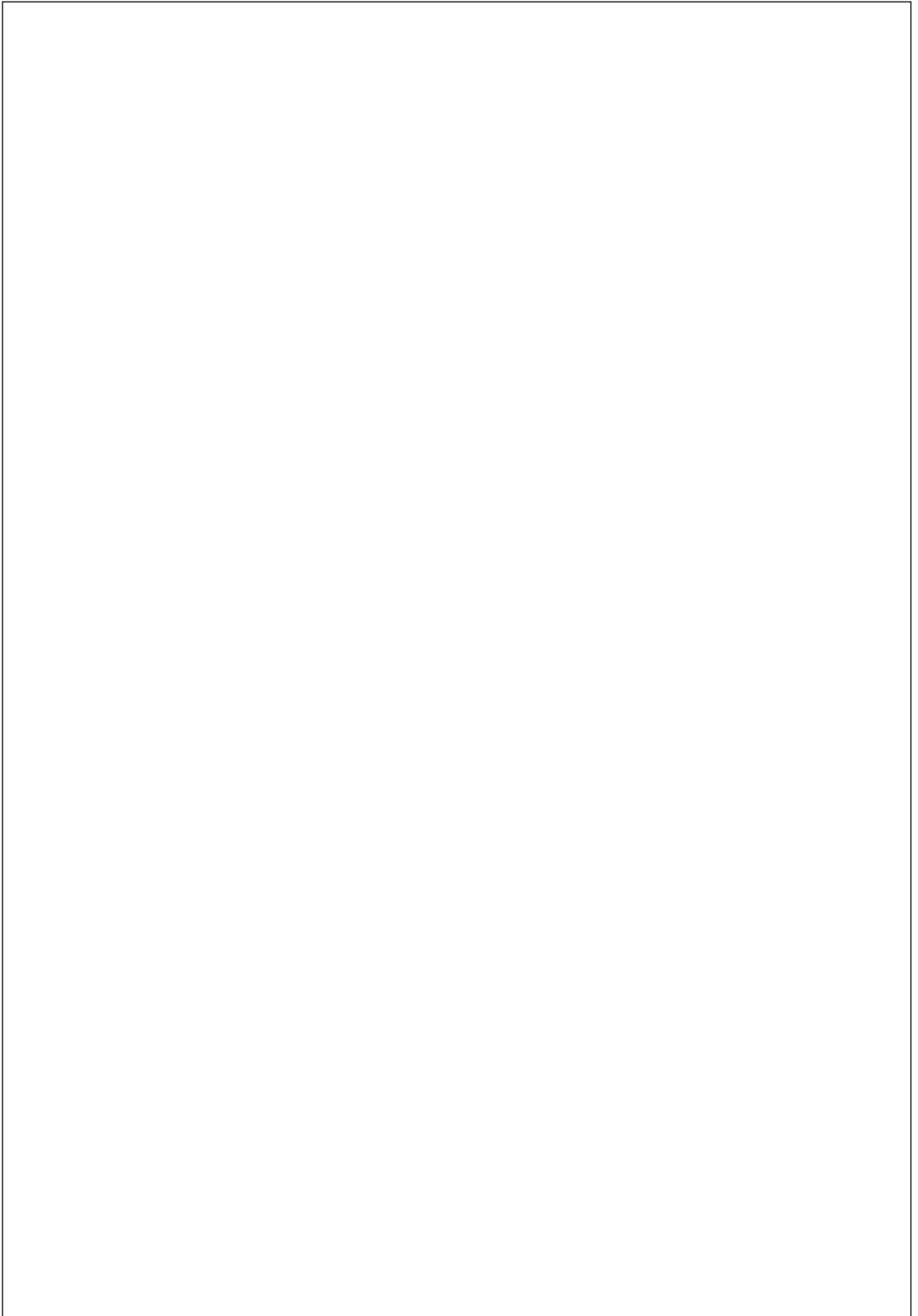
However, data on income levels at one particular point in time do not reveal the broader context wherein most household heads do not have stable incomes and depend on earnings in cash and in kind from outside the formal sector. Virtually all the economically active population faced precarious working conditions and unstable income sources. Despite the many studies from other settlements which show a relationship between wage levels, sex (with men earning more than women) and educational level, no such association was found for the inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge.<sup>(8)</sup>

Interviews with a small sample of residents showed that households' main item of expenditure was food - followed by public transport, bottled gas (for cooking), clothes and housing improvements. The low income levels provide obvious constraints on satisfying these priorities for many residents; indeed, a reduction in the quality and quantity of their diets represents their only possibility for reducing costs.

Ensuring that the young people (especially the boys) begin work at an early age was considered the best option for reducing their exposure to criminal activities, drugs and street gangs. There was (and still is) considerable rivalry between street gangs based in the old and the new sections of the barrio. Most residents and houses in Barrio San Jorge have suffered robberies. The responses are limited to individual actions such as keeping children indoors and avoiding leaving the home alone - both of which measures reinforce social isolation and disintegration.

The environmental and housing conditions in Barrio San Jorge were very precarious in 1990. As Map 1 shows, the settlement is located near a river (the Reconquista). This river is heavily polluted by untreated industrial effluents. The northern and southern borders are ditches that are meant to drain water towards the river but which are usually full of household garbage. Vacant lots where garbage is heaped surrounds the site. The foul smell produced by sewage, rotting waste and stagnant waters and the presence of insects and rodents project a depressing picture.

Most of the land site (87 per cent) is owned by the Province of Buenos Aires and the Municipality of San Fernando; the remainder belongs to a private owner (see Map 1). The irregular



land tenure and the inhabitants' previous experience of evictions have discouraged them from improving their houses. Two-thirds of all dwellings require considerable improvements. Two-fifths of all housing had more than two persons per room.

The provision of basic infrastructure and services was very inadequate in 1990. According to the census that year, 55 per cent of the settlers used public standpipes which drew water from a pipeline extended from a nearby cold storage factory and 39 per cent had connected their houses to this pipeline. But this statistic does not present the whole picture since the factory provided water for a couple of hours a day and, during the summer, water pressure usually diminished to the point where the pipe only provided a very small trickle. The households tried various ways of improving the water supply. Some collected water as early as possible when the demand was lower. It was also common to draw water directly from the horizontal pipes (which meant less reduction in pressure) - although this required digging holes in their courtyards in which to put buckets. Many connections to the pipe leaked - and when pressure within the piped system dropped, the water in the system was often contaminated with infiltration from waste waters around the pipe. The amount and frequency of diarrhoea and intestinal infections were a proof of precarious infrastructure and the poor quality of piped "drinking" water.

Regarding sanitation, there was no sewer system. Most households (68 per cent) used cesspits whilst 23 per cent had latrines. Since the groundwater table was only 0.5 metres below the surface in some areas of the settlement, sewage was not absorbed by the cesspits but ended up in the groundwater.

The barrio's internal roads were often inaccessible to motor vehicles. As Barrio San Jorge did not have drains and as 70 per cent of the settlement lacked paved paths and streets, on rainy days these become very muddy. This was used as a pretext for police cars, fire engines, ambulances and trucks that empty cesspits or latrines not to enter the settlement. Only one-quarter of households - those who lived along the main road - had their household garbage collected. The rest of the population used the ditches and the vacant sites around the settlements to dispose of their garbage. But even those living in the area covered by the collection service could not rely on set days and timetables - so their garbage had to be left at collection points within the settlement where it often remained for several days before being collected.

Both the precarious environmental and housing conditions contributed to serious health problems. Acute respiratory diseases were the most common health problem and particularly affected children up to the age of six. The incidence and severity of these diseases were exacerbated by the dampness of the site due to the proximity of the Reconquista river and poor surface drainage and also to the poor quality of the housing. High levels of ambient air pollution from nearby factories was also a serious problem. Diarrhoeal diseases were frequent, especially during the summer, largely as a result of the shortage and poor quality of available water, the lack of provision for sanitation,



drainage and washing, and uncollected garbage. Other infectious diseases such as scabies were also common. The high level of overcrowding also helped the spread of most infectious diseases.

The inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge probably underestimated the scale of their health problems. One reason for this is that the inhabitants understand their health problems more according to their outcome rather than to the specific health problem - for instance the death of a family member, a difficult delivery or the loss of employment due to illness - or any other illness or injury that may keep them away from school or work. Given the limited resources they have to hand and the very poor housing conditions, there was not much margin left for preventive measures.

## IV. THE DEVELOPMENT PROCESS IN BARRIO SAN JORGE

### a. Introduction

**A CONTINUOUS PROCESS** of development which began in Barrio San Jorge ten years ago has involved the participation of members of the community, of government agencies (from municipal and provincial levels), of NGOs and private sector enterprises in various actions, initiatives and projects that seek to improve living conditions. This process can be divided into three periods. The first covers 1987 to 1989, when several small initiatives were carried out and the support team was first formed. The second covers the period 1990 to 1992, when an integrated programme was launched with the participation of various stakeholders. The third covers the period 1993 to 1996, when certain initiatives reached the whole of Barrio San Jorge and expanded into new settlements. Box 1 gives a summary of some of the important dates in this process.

This whole process has had a total budget from other sources over the ten years of US\$ 771,137. Of this, 57 per cent was provided by national sources and 43 per cent by international donors. Two points are worth highlighting. The first is the relatively minor contribution of government agencies which, in total, contributed only 11 per cent of the funding from external sources. The second is the growth in the volume of external financing; the amount of funding increased four-fold from the first to the second stage and almost doubled from the second stage to the last one (See Table 1 and Figure 1).

### b. In The Beginning (1987-1989)

In 1987, after almost seven years of meetings between residents of Barrio San Jorge and members of the local catholic parish, a decision was reached to build a mother and child centre. Such a centre had been a long cherished aim of the neighbourhood's informal mothers' association. This would have the double purpose of improving child health, nutrition and development and allowing mothers to go out to work, since the new

**Box 1: Important Dates in the Development Process in Barrio San Jorge**

• **In the beginning (1987-1989):**

**September 1987** - Begin construction of the mother and child centre

**June 1989** - The Netherlands Save The Children provides a flexible grant for three years

**August 1989** - Some women organized the sewing and knitting workshop

**November 1989** - Purchase of "The House of the Barrio" as a community centre

• **The Integral Improvement Programme (1990-1992):**

**March 1990** - The idea of an inter-institutional programme for integral improvement of San Jorge is submitted to the government of the province of Buenos Aires

**August 1990** - An agreement for cooperation is signed by the provincial and municipal government and IIED-América Latina. The first elections are held in the barrio to constitute a neighbourhood commission

**July 1991** - The commission develops into the cooperative *Nuestra Tierra*

**September 1991** - Changes in the composition of the provincial government and end of its involvement in the Barrio San Jorge programme

**May 1992** - The municipality donates a seven-hectare site to lower density in the barrio

**September 1992** - The provincial government earmarks the site occupied by the barrio for the actual settlers

• **Scaling-up (1993-1996):**

**August 1993** - Beginning of a pilot test for a water supply and sewerage system

**July 1994** - The building materials bank starts operating

**October 1994** - The mayor of the municipality and his cabinet resign

**December 1994** - The water supply and sewerage system is extended to whole barrio

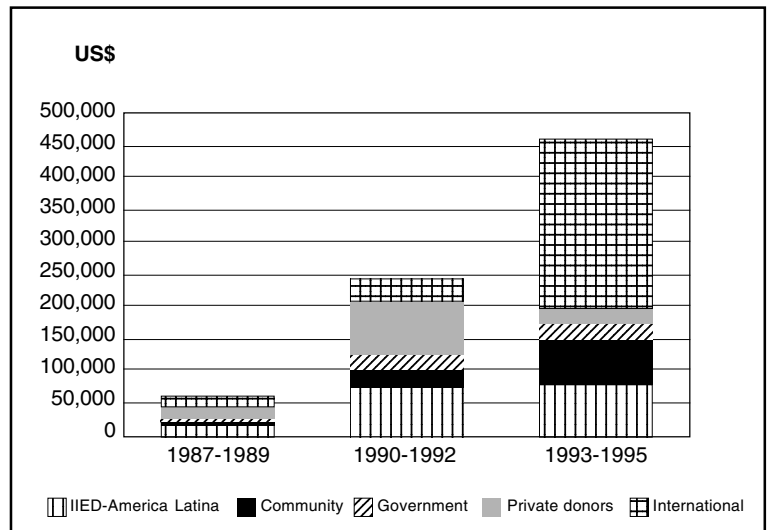
**December 1995** - The new municipal authority supports the work in Barrio San Jorge and its expansion into other settlements

**February 1996** - The now privatized water company *Aguas Argentinas* takes on the responsibility for the maintenance of the water and sewerage system

**October 1996** - The national government approves finance to implement a housing programme in San Jorge and in four more settlements

**Table 1: Sources of Funding, 1987-1995 (US\$)**

SOURCES	1987-1989	1990-1992	1993-1995	TOTAL
IIED-América Latina	20,000	74,700	79,000	173,700
Community	2,370	21,660	68,000	92,030
Government	1,705	28,950	17,500	48,155
Private donors	19,872	78,500	30,500	128,872
Sub-total: national	43,947	203,810	195,000	442,757
Sub-total: international	15,300	40,950	272,130	328,380
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>59,247</b>	<b>244,760</b>	<b>467,130</b>	<b>771,137</b>

**Figure 1: The Growth in External Funding and the Main Sources, 1987-1995 (US\$)**

centre would care for their children during working hours.

An architect who lived in the parish and who had long experience in the management of construction projects was asked by Caritas, a charity associated with the Catholic church, to plan and coordinate the construction of the centre. Most of the people in Barrio San Jorge viewed the project with apathy or scepticism as they did not believe it would materialize. They had listened to too many political, religious and university groups enquiring about their needs - including many who had made unfulfilled promises.

Initial financial support for the construction of the first stage of the centre was provided by Caritas, with additional funds received some months later from the Canadian Embassy and from private Argentine donors. This allowed the purchase of basic equipment for the centre and the start of a second construction stage. In 1988, the centre received the first group of ten children.

The new centre appeared to be receptive and comments and proposals from those living in the neighbourhood were encour-

aged and taken into account. Given that some mothers now had more time for work because their children were looked after in the new centre, a sewing and knitting workshop to improve their skills and to help them develop a new source of income was proposed. The initiative was supported by the German embassy and 24 women started lessons.

At the same time, other initiatives were taking place in the settlement promoted by FLACSO (the Latin American Faculty of Social Science) and the provincial government. As part of an action research project, FLACSO was involved in the extension of a water supply from the nearby factory. The initiative was supported by what was, at the time, the national public water company, which provided the building materials and contributed most of the labour. The system did not reach the old section of Barrio San Jorge because the households there did not organize and supply the necessary labour.

The government of the Province of Buenos Aires had launched a social assistance and health programme in several settlements including Barrio San Jorge. This included new methods, such as the participation of neighbours in actions related to community health care. The programme was heavily staffed but poorly funded which constrained its implementation.

During 1989, Argentina suffered a severe economic crisis and social and political instability. This included hyperinflation which reached 200 per cent per month. The crisis also provoked assaults on supermarkets and hastened a change in government from that of President Alfonsín (who had been elected as the first President after the return to democracy in 1983) to President Menem. Different initiatives were undertaken in low-income settlements as responses to the emergency. Communal ("popular") kitchens were set up by public and private institutions. In Barrio San Jorge, they were organized by the provincial programme and implemented by residents. A popular store was also set up in one resident's house to sell basic foodstuffs at reduced prices.

The emergency measures revealed the difficulties that external agencies have in working in low-income settlements that lack a representative, well managed community organization. The NGO that sought to support popular stores set conditions that required the store to be run by a legally constituted community organization. The management of the store was therefore allocated to a resident who had papers relating to an inactive community organization that, some years previously, had tried to make improvements in the settlement. In the past, this organization had consisted of one or two people who had made profits from the monetary contributions of residents. In this instance, the store became a short-lived family business and another negative experience in the already eroded social capital of the community. The sewing workshop suffered a similar fate when a local NGO was called in to support the activity. An experienced member of the NGO denied support because the group of women who requested the sewing workshop were not a consolidated organization. In contrast, funding was provided to a group run by the workshop's teacher in her neighbourhood,

which presented more guarantees for the success expected by the NGO and the international aid agency.

In 1989, The Netherlands Save the Children charity provided a donation of U\$ 36,000 - US\$ 12,000 a year over three years. The use of the grant was not restricted to carrying out a specific project in any one sector. It also did not suffer from the condition so often attached to grants that it had to be spent on capital costs only - with none of it being available for recurrent costs. The grant was to encourage a development process through the support of community initiatives. The flexible conditions of the grant allowed for support to be provided to three part-time professionals: an architect and two social workers (who were also members of the health centre). This team supported a steady expansion of the mother and child centre's activities and infrastructure and promoted the participation of children's families in some of these activities. Other initiatives supported by the team were the training of women in the workshop and the improvement of streets through the construction of pavements using waste material from a nearby factory.

The funds were also used to purchase the right to use a lot within Barrio San Jorge, close to the mother and child centre, which had a derelict building on it. This building was repaired by men involved in some of the on-going initiatives and used initially for the women's workshop. The installation of the settlement's first public telephone in this building attracted many residents who "found" a house that could be used as a common meeting place. In this way, the slow process of developing what came to be known as the "House of the Barrio" started.

During this period, the different groups working in Barrio San Jorge slowly came to understand the need to work together more. Different external groups working in a low-income settlement often regard each other as competitors and avoid working together. Slowly, an inter-institutional, multi-disciplinary permanent forum developed with members from our team, from FLACSO, the health centre, the school, the kindergarten, the child centre and a religious group. It included architects, social workers, doctors, sociologists, psychologists, teachers and priests. They shared their experiences and their professional and institutional approaches. The inter-institutional network promoted learning and facilitated the coordination of initiatives and the means of ensuring that the resources from different initiatives and institutions complemented each other. It also created the necessary conditions for launching joint initiatives such as the publication of a bi-monthly bulletin. This bulletin included local news, letters from the neighbours and useful information on health care and environmental improvements. It was used also to report on the progress of different initiatives and to outline future activities.

By late 1989, the inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge had a diverse range of initiatives in which they could become involved. But their participation was subject to their own estimation as to the benefits they could obtain by participating. When community activities meant immediate and tangible improvements in their material conditions of life, many neighbours took part; but

where there were no immediate, tangible benefits, they were reluctant to participate. This was the case for the initiative to improve the streets. When a truck brought materials to build pavements, neighbours organized themselves quickly and worked to improve their street; however, when they were invited to meetings to plan the activity, only a few people helped. At this stage, the activities supported by our team reached only a limited number of neighbours and some of the population's main problems were not being addressed.

### c. The Integral Improvement Programme (1990-1992)

*"Dice que dice y no dice. Hace que hace y no hace."*

(They say that they say but they do not. They pretend that they do when they do nothing) Divididos

In early 1990, a member of IIED-América Latina's team was asked by the government of the Province of Buenos Aires to help in the formulation of a decentralized programme. The municipality of San Fernando was persuaded to take part in the implementation of the provincial programme which sought to improve housing conditions in poor settlements. In August, an agreement of cooperation was signed by the provincial and municipal government and IIED-América Latina to coordinate actions aimed at an integrated development of Barrio San Jorge with the participation of the community. As is usual in Argentina, this political agreement did not include any plan of activities, goals or schedules. Nor did it specify what contributions each party would make - but it expressed a general commitment and a broad distribution of responsibilities. The regularization of land tenure and the transfer of property rights to the occupants was chosen as the programme's first priority; achieving this depended largely on the performance of the provincial government.

In our work in Barrio San Jorge, we had sought not to raise false expectations and had avoided becoming involved in actions associated with the activities of political parties. This was also consistent with the resistance of most inhabitants in the barrio to participate in any proposal where *"hay política"* (there are politics). The inhabitants of the barrio had a long and painful experience of being manipulated by politicians - to gain their support but in exchange for promises that were often unfulfilled. Although an agreement between IIED-América Latina - with whom the support team had merged<sup>(9)</sup> - and the government implied the raising of expectations which might not be fulfilled (and over whose fulfilment neither the inhabitants nor IIED-América Latina had control), we decided to take the risk. The regularization of land tenure was a long cherished priority among the inhabitants. This, in turn, could encourage large investments by the inhabitants in their homes and their participation in neighbourhood-wide improvement initiatives; given the commitment of the provincial government, this seemed feasible.

The Integral Improvement Programme of Barrio San Jorge was

9. The team began as an independent unit. In 1989, it became convenient to integrate it into the *Instituto Internacional de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo - IIED-América Latina*.

launched at an assembly held in the settlement. This assembly had the largest number of inhabitants of any meeting in recent years (150 people). Members of the government required the organization of the community and the creation of a formal, legally recognized entity in order to integrate the Programme and fulfill the necessary procedures to achieve land tenure. Elections were held in Barrio San Jorge for the first time. All residents voted for candidates in their block. As a result, 16 neighbours were democratically elected to represent the interests of the whole community. They formed a Neighbourhood Commission which would be the first organization committed to prioritize the neighbours' main needs over the interests of external political, religious and aid groups.

Although the Commission arose not so much as a community initiative but more in response to a demand from the government, most elected candidates and representatives were people who had taken part in activities supported by the institutions working in Barrio San Jorge. This Commission formalized a process of building up community organization which had been in progress through small, continuous and diversified initiatives over the previous three years. In Barrio San Jorge, the community organization was neither the result of a pure bottom-up process controlled by the population nor a top-down decision of external agents but rather a combination of the two.

Members of the Commission and staff from provincial and local government, IIED-América Latina and other institutions working in Barrio San Jorge took part in a one-week workshop on participatory neighbourhood development. The workshop was run by the German government's technical assistance agency (GTZ) which applied the ZOPP methodology to elaborate an integral development plan for the settlement. Among a large number of ambitious goals set for the Programme, priority was given to the improvement of infrastructure, basic services and environment and, in particular, to the transfer of land ownership from the government to the inhabitants.

Some months later, the Commission developed into the cooperative *Nuestra Tierra* (our land). Its name reflected the reason for its foundation and its main concern. The Cooperative obtained massive support from the inhabitants, since 85 per cent of the families were members, and most began to pay a minimum quota towards its running costs. Both the emerging community organization and our team put most effort and hopes into land transfer.

The Cooperative and IIED-América Latina undertook several activities to support the legal and physical regularization of the site, such as the control of plot sales, a land and topographical survey, a study of housing quality and an analysis of zones which needed to be reorganized prior to being transferred. The emphasis on land regularization became one of the Cooperative's main strengths for motivating the community. But it was also one of its main weaknesses, as time passed and the hopes of achieving the transfer of land faded because of endless bureaucratic procedures.

The main constraint against land regularization was that the

site occupied by Barrio San Jorge was below the minimum height required by the Hydraulic Provincial Direction for the protection of permanent settlements from flooding. The requirement was based on old analyses and there was no record of any adjustment due to the improvements from the dredging of the river and other infrastructure works. In the last decade, Barrio San Jorge had suffered only one flood and this had not affected the settlement significantly.

Another major constraint was the lack of commitment by the provincial and municipal governments to respect the agreement of cooperation that had been signed in 1990. The civil servants responsible for taking the lead in the transfer of land ownership did not have a complete picture of the necessary procedures and of the large number of technical, administrative and legal requirements. The slow progress achieved towards the transfer of land ownership to the inhabitants was the result of constant pressure from the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina. However, the effectiveness of such pressure was limited by the large amounts of time needed to keep this pressure up and the distance (80 kilometres) between Barrio San Jorge and the provincial government offices.

Although the intended goal was not met, the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina accomplished one important task. The provincial government earmarked the site occupied by Barrio San Jorge for housing programmes for the actual settlers which virtually eliminated the risk of eviction. Nevertheless, the failure to complete the transfer of land ownership eroded much of the community's trust in the Cooperative and also left a heavy burden of frustration among its members.

During this period, the Cooperative had begun to be recognized by most inhabitants as the institution of reference for the needs and problems that could not be addressed by individual households. The Cooperative became involved in many everyday activities such as repairing the water pump, demanding that the nearby factory provide an uninterrupted water supply, and the provision of bulbs for public lighting. Other initiatives sought to improve living and environmental conditions, including campaigns for garbage collection, the construction of wire baskets in which households could place their garbage for collection by garbage trucks, and constant pressure on the municipal government to ensure that the waste trucks came to collect the garbage and that machines were provided to clean ditches. IIED-América Latina supported these and some other actions through a daily presence in the settlement and continuous work with the community to promote the active participation of its members.

Since 1990, the mother and child centre has been self-financing. A campaign to obtain one scholarship for each child (US\$120 per year) had a quick and positive response from Argentine donors. The continuous support from the Fundación Antorchas and other private donors has allowed the centre to increase its capacity and the quality of its assistance. The building has been gradually and constantly extended to provide the necessary infrastructure for 100 children. The centre also expanded



its activities by giving additional training to some 70 pupils identified by the local primary school as having learning difficulties.

The inter-institutional network continued to prepare and publish the bulletin and launched a programme for children and adolescents. This included three activities: a sewing course for girls, training in football for boys and a workshop on creativity and artistic expression. The activities aimed to support initiatives proposed by children and young adolescents aged from 8 to 16 years - an age group which is usually left out of community priorities.

All activities supported by IIED-América Latina did not follow a fixed list of priorities but rather were implemented according to opportunities of securing funds. The long-term development plan of the Integral Improvement Programme was not put into practice because of the mismatch between the activities identified and the resources available to carry them out. However, the attention given to many small-scale initiatives needed a broader framework, otherwise the impact could have been fragmented. This strategy was essential for not discontinuing every action, because when some activities run out of funds, others would start or continue.

#### **d. Scaling-up (1993-1996)**

From 1991 onwards, IIED-América Latina increased the search for funds to sustain on-going activities and launch new initiatives in Barrio San Jorge. A large number of contacts with local and international donors were made, and several different project proposals were submitted to different donor agencies. In 1992, the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) approved an action-research project for the study of the relationship between health and habitat in low-income urban settlements. The project had three main aims: a diagnosis of the settlement's habitat and health conditions; the introduction of changes to the habitat through the implementation of social intervention; and an assessment of how health conditions had changed or could change as a result of the intervention.

Barrio San Jorge was selected as the place where the project was to be implemented. Based on a participative health diagnosis and the priorities identified with the community during the summer of 1992-1993, a decision was taken to improve the water supply and sewerage system. The limited funds allocated to the social undertaking (US\$10,000) could only help a group of 25 families. The strategy devised by IIED-América Latina was to use the intervention as a pilot test for a new water supply and sanitation system that could later be extended to the rest of the settlement.

The undertaking meant a difficult technical and social challenge for the Cooperative and the NGO. The lack of a reliable source of potable water and a high level of groundwater meant that there was a need to apply innovative technologies to both water supply and sewerage. The water supply required the use of a double system: one system connected to the existing network which would provide small volumes of potable water

subject to operation by the factory; and another which could draw on more readily available groundwater sources that were too salty for drinking and cooking but which could be used for house cleaning, laundry and personal hygiene. The sewage system was based on the combination of cesspits within each household (that retained the solids) and a small-bore sewage pipe network.

After long delays due to technical and social problems and climate conditions, the undertaking was completed successfully. The pilot test provided several lessons; one was that inhabitants' priorities change in response to changing circumstances. Soon after the end of the summer, problems due to a deficient water supply decreased and, when several heavy rainfalls made paths and roads muddy, the target group shifted their priority to building sidewalks instead of pipelines. This initiative was added to the sanitation works and financed by contributions from the inhabitants. This also taught us that even the poorest households could afford small repayments, if financial conditions for loans or for repaying capital improvements were adequate to their scarce saving or income capacity.

In 1993, the UK charity Homeless International provided financial support to establish a building materials bank. Its purpose was to support housing improvements by selling materials at lower prices and having the materials available and close by. One of the constraints that the inhabitants faced in building and improving their homes was not only the cost of the materials but also transporting the materials to their house site. The building materials bank could also remain open during evenings and week-ends when conventional building material suppliers were closed. The building materials bank also provided the inhabitants with materials on credit, and technical training and advice in design and construction.

Despite the broad consensus between the Cooperative, IIED-América Latina and the external donor, Homeless International, about the importance of working in partnership with local government, this project showed the limitations of working with certain sectors of government at certain times. The construction of a store for the materials on a site just next door to Barrio San Jorge could not begin until the site had been cleaned, filled and levelled. This needed heavy machinery and the municipality was to provide this. After a long period of delay, during which much lip service was paid to the need for local government participation, IIED-América Latina had to take over responsibility for this task (and in so-doing eat into project capital).

The operation of the building materials bank between 1994 and 1996 has contributed much to the improvement of 180 houses in Barrio San Jorge. It has also helped low-income households improve their homes in other low-income settlements in the area - as the use of the building materials bank was not confined to the inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge. The high rates of repayment achieved for credit provided for the purchase of building materials confirmed that when financial conditions are suitable, poor households can engage in credit schemes and a

substantial part of the costs can be recovered. In addition, the support given by the staff responsible for the bank, and the availability of a structure to store building materials was also invaluable for storing the equipment and materials needed for extending the water supply and small-bore sewers to most of Barrio San Jorge.

During this period, two external interventions in Barrio San Jorge revealed the real interest of some members of local and provincial government. The first was the purchase of private land by the Municipality of San Fernando. A small part of Barrio San Jorge is on land owned by a private landowner and the municipality purchased half of this from the owner at a cost that was five times higher than the market price. The second was the provincial government contracting private companies to construct new buildings for the local school and health centre. Even though the existing buildings required substantial repairs, the new ones involved a higher investment and a lower quality end-product. Other members of government had a different approach to Barrio San Jorge as was shown by the donation to the Cooperative of seven hectares adjacent to Barrio San Jorge (on the opposite side of the main road).

Also in 1992, after long negotiations, the German agency MISEREOR donated U\$131,000 to provide water and sewers to the 325 houses which occupied public land. IIED-América Latina and the Cooperative had to overcome the aid agency's disinclination to support a project in a settlement which did not show solid signs of success. Barrio San Jorge could not present real guarantees such as land titles to demonstrate the permanence of the settlement. In addition, it was acknowledged that the site was at risk from flooding and there was not the complete consensus among the inhabitants necessary to encourage the massive involvement of community.

Local government support for the provision of basic services was regarded as essential by the aid agencies. But once again, the local authorities' commitment to supporting the barrio proved volatile. In mid-1994, when the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina were making the final preparations before the implementation of the project, a private company unexpectedly appeared in Barrio San Jorge and started building a water network. The company had carried out similar works in 115 low-income settlements throughout the Metropolitan Area, as part of a national programme. Since it was proving impossible to work with local and provincial government at that time, IIED-América Latina withdrew from the agreement of cooperation.

Four months later, it became evident that the private company's water network would remain unfinished. As such, it simply followed the pattern of many other works sponsored by this national programme - in the vast majority of settlements where the networks had been laid, they never worked. IIED-América Latina and the Cooperative then launched "their" project.<sup>10</sup> At this time, two events occurred that were to have a great influence on the work in the barrio. The first was the fact that the Mayor and his cabinet had to resign as a result of allegations of corruption and a different internal sector of the same political

10. According to the company's architect responsible for the works in Barrio San Jorge, in only five settlements had networks been completed by neighbours and were in use. In the remaining 110 settlements where that company intervened, the systems have not been finished and are practically abandoned.

party took office. This sector gave more support to the work of IIED-América Latina and the Cooperative. The second was that the newly privatized water company Aguas Argentinas was extending the potable water network to an area close to Barrio San Jorge. IIED-América Latina and the Cooperative had begun negotiations with the company two years previously when it was still a government company. Given the fact that the water supply network to be installed by the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina would operate much more easily if it could be supplied by the conventional water distribution system, increasing pressure was brought to bear on the water company to extend their water system to Barrio San Jorge.

However, initially, there was no response from Aguas Argentinas. Despite this, the project was launched. Unlike most community initiatives, where the inhabitants are invited to meetings in the House of the Barrio, in this case the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina went out to meet them. The strategy stemmed from the idea that if the community did not reach out to the community organization, the organization should reach out to the community. Open meetings were held in all streets of the neighbourhood. At these meetings, members of the Cooperative and IIED-América Latina explained technical aspects of the project and proposed a form of organization for the implementation based on the lessons provided by the pilot test. Many inhabitants overcame their fear and reticence about taking part in a community activity by coming to those meetings. When some of them expressed scepticism and mistrust about the project, meaning that it could be a new unfulfilled "promise", we sought to persuade them with the concrete evidence we had: 25 houses having access to water and sanitation, hundreds of pipes and cesspits stored in the building materials bank, a group of hired workers laying the main pipeline, and many years of permanence in the settlement, sharing not only achievements but also frustrations. We made no promises. The success of the project depended essentially on joining community forces and working together.

Although there was no certainty that the service would provide potable or salt water, a first group of neighbours decided to take the initiative in their street. The following week-end, three groups of neighbours laid pipelines in their streets. From those initial groups, the impulse spread all over the settlement. Many streets had to postpone their contribution to the installation of the pipes, as the technicians were not able to assist more than three streets at a time. With such community mobilization, it was possible to provide pipelines for 250 houses in three months. This should be compared to the pilot test where it had taken 6 months to provide a pipeline for 25 houses. Given the lack of any decision by the water company Aguas Argentinas, IIED-América Latina contracted out a company to drill a well from which to draw (salt) water for the piped water network. The work became unnecessary when, one week later, Aguas Argentinas confirmed that an extension of the piped potable water system would reach Barrio San Jorge.

Since April 1995, most of Barrio San Jorge's inhabitants have

running potable water within their homes. Many have started to improve their bathrooms and kitchens, to buy sanitary devices and to fix tiles on the floor and walls. There used to be dozens of buckets in evidence in and around most houses - now they are no longer there. It also appears that health problems have diminished considerably. According to doctors in the local health centre, health problems associated with poor quality and inadequate water and back pains associated with fetching water have decreased sharply. According to teachers from local schools, the children now go to school in a more hygienic condition. Involvement by the newly-elected local government and the private water company in the last phase of the project allowed an agreement to be reached for ensuring the maintenance of the network. Aguas Argentinas took over the operation, maintenance and repair of the system and the families have to pay the agency at a fixed rate. This was Aguas Argentinas' first experience of working in partnership with a low-income community, an NGO and a local government. The firm acknowledged the merits of the innovative technology applied within Barrio San Jorge and is currently applying the same methods in other low-income settlements. The national government also awarded the project with second prize, out of 600 cases presented, in a competition on social innovation.

During 1995, IIED-América Latina and the Cooperative continued to work on on-going activities such as regular action to improve waste disposal and collection, and fund-raising. The building materials bank has reached a volume of sales and credit repayment that almost covers its operating costs. It also obtained financial support for launching housing credits for households who are building new houses on the seven hectares donated by the municipality. This site is being used for the relocation of families who occupy private land in an area identified by an environmental diagnosis of the Barrio San Jorge as being in great risk.

#### **e. Expanding The Work Outside Barrio San Jorge**

Work is now underway in locations other than Barrio San Jorge. This includes developing the seven-hectare site just across the main road from San Jorge where some households from the barrio are being relocated. It also includes support for initiatives in other low-income settlements nearby.

To develop the new seven-hectare site, the households who are to be relocated formed a commission which works to promote their relocation within the Cooperative. In a public assembly, they named their future settlement "Jorge Enrique Hardoy" in honour of the founder of IIED-América Latina and its president up to his death in 1993. The plan of activities consists of filling and levelling the site and gradually relocating families. Some families have already moved to the new site to protect it from occupation by other settlers. Eleven families who had invaded the site some years previously and who had lived there ever since were relocated and incorporated into the plan. A house

11. The five neighbourhoods are San Jorge, San Martín, Presidente Perón, La Paz and J. E. Hardoy. San Martín, Presidente Perón and La Paz have a population of approximately 1,300 families and are located near the Reconquista river, within a kilometre of a major road; they also suffer conditions similar to those described for Barrio San Jorge.

has been built as a prototype to be replicated in the design and construction of new houses.

IIED-América Latina's community support programme is now drawing on its experience in Barrio San Jorge and in Barrio Jorge Hardoy to develop comparable support programmes for other low-income settlements in the area. The Integral Improvement Programme for Barrio San Jorge is becoming the Integral Improvement Programme for Five Neighbourhoods in San Fernando.<sup>(11)</sup> The objective of this programme is to improve their populations' living conditions and their organization and participation in community initiatives and projects in different sectors. The Programme also seeks to show the possibility and utility of working in partnership with state agencies, the private sector and organizations of civil society. In October 1996, the Social Development Secretary - a national state agency - approved finance to implement a housing programme for the five neighbourhoods which includes the improvement of 1,000 existing houses and the construction of 240 new houses, and the provision of a water and sewerage network in Barrio Jorge Hardoy.

## V. LOCATING THE WORK IN SAN JORGE WITHIN BROADER SOCIETAL CHANGES

### a. The Constraints on Community Organization

**IN 1991, OUR** reflections after four years work in Barrio San Jorge were concerned with some fundamental issues in the life of Barrio San Jorge: the mistrust of the population, the relationship between paternalism and passivity, and the relationship between power and inhibition. When our team began work in Barrio San Jorge, only some neighbours linked to the mother and child centre were interested in developing new initiatives. The vast majority of residents were reluctant to become involved in any proposal from a group of neighbours or outsiders for the improvement of their settlement. Many of them were resigned to surviving through strategies based on family or close friends' income-generating activities and any eventual support from government (mainly food supply).

These attitudes were rooted in general and particular historical circumstances. Since the 1940s, the attitude of many urban poor in Argentina has been to expect the state to provide for their basic needs. Good personal connections with political leaders and political committees were the way to solve many problems: obtaining a bed in a hospital, a seat in a classroom or corrugated iron sheets. This attitude was promoted by the state and also by the church and private charities. Politicians have long seen in these approaches a way of securing votes and advancing their political careers. This "social welfare" orientation with the provision of "welfare" determined and implemented by external agencies and the paternalistic approach of those with political power undermined the organization of residents in low-income settlements. It also helped to encourage in many people the development of an attitude of avoiding their responsibilities

and of trying to benefit freely from the efforts of others without getting involved. The importance of political patronage on the possibilities for low-income groups to obtain certain key resources or services was further heightened from the 1960s, as the possibilities of social advancement started to decrease for most Argentinians.

The particular history of Barrio San Jorge is closely linked to the hierarchic and paternalistic attitude and activities of a priest from the church of Antioquia. His attitude towards the inhabitants - sometimes positive but frequently negative - gradually destroyed any attempt by the community to get organized. This priest lived in the settlement for 20 years. He had close links with a senior functionary in the last elected government of Peron and of his wife (1973-1976), and with members of the armed forces during the last military dictatorship (1976-83). Conscious of the political support he had, he ran Barrio San Jorge as a military camp. He even imposed a night-time curfew. He decided which families could come and live in the settlement and which families had to leave if he judged their behaviour to be at fault. He decided when streets should be cleaned and houses should be painted. He even managed to change the original name of the Barrio and renamed it after him, for he was called Father Jorge.

In 1983, the return to democracy brought a national government which began the slow and painful process of rebuilding the country's representative institutions. In the municipality of San Fernando, the elected mayor was a charismatic local politician who was re-elected twice. For 12 years, almost all senior positions were filled by political appointees who reinforced the paternalistic assistance oriented approach. Some of Barrio San Jorge's inhabitants tried to launch different initiatives to improve living conditions in the settlement and raised funds from residents but few achieved satisfactory results. The mistrust of the population grew, since most people assumed that anyone who wanted to encourage a community initiative had hidden interests and would profit from people's contributions.

Since 1990, Argentina has been undergoing a process of substantial change, characterized by the dissolution of the paternalistic state and the adoption of the mainstream macro-economic policies of the time. The reform of the state has been backed by the largest number of decrees ever sanctioned by an elected government. In 1995, two more records were achieved: the level of inflation was among the lowest world-wide and the rate of unemployment reached the highest level ever recorded within Argentina. In a context of economic recession, support to low-income sectors through individual political patronage is diminishing as the budgets managed by decentralized local governments also diminish. And the struggle for scarce resources is increasing individual responses, fragmentation and social disintegration.

## **b. Reflecting on What has been Learnt over the Last Ten Years**

Looking back on our work of ten years in Barrio San Jorge, we realize that our main challenge has been to support the rekindling of community action and organization and, in so-doing, to support the reconstruction of social capital based on the promotion of solidarity and reciprocity between neighbours. The activities of IIED-América Latina in Barrio San Jorge over the last decade have maintained one overall objective: to help improve living conditions in Barrio San Jorge by means of the organization and participation of the inhabitants in a comprehensive development process. This approach implies a questioning of the traditional approaches to poverty reduction in Argentina by governmental and non-governmental organizations, which are generally short-term, sectoral and top-down programmes and projects.

Our work in Barrio San Jorge was based on two main strategies: the promotion of a more integrated and long-term approach, which builds on continuous and complementary improvements; and the involvement of stakeholders, who were identified as individuals, groups, organizations and institutions whose interests could be affected by the initiatives undertaken.

The first strategy stemmed from the acknowledgement that the inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge (and other informal settlements) have multiple and diverse needs and problems. Virtually all are rooted in a common cause: poverty. Most are closely interrelated. The development of a more integrated approach to these multiple and diverse needs did not mean that there was a need to implement projects in every sector but rather that an integrated perspective in every initiative in which we were involved had to be developed. This perspective was based on the recognition of the inter-sectoral nature and effects of all interventions and how their coordination can often ensure that they complement and reinforce each other. The building materials bank is an example of this approach. Not only does it support housing improvements but it is also used to give advice on construction techniques and design. It serves to disseminate information on the relationship between habitat and health and developed a credit system which allows the inhabitants to purchase materials on credit which, in turn, helps them learn how to manage credit. As noted already, the building materials warehouse was also essential for storing materials for the water and sewerage project.

One other advantage of having many initiatives in different sectors was the possibility of tapping different funding sources - as many external funders will only consider providing support for particular sectors. This also meant that if one initiative was interrupted, it was possible to continue with other initiatives. Achieving continuity is important for maintaining the community organization; the inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge have experienced several interventions which were triggered by political interests - mostly before a local or provincial election - but which after a short period were of little or no value. The



extension of the water supply from the nearby factory, which had been carried out partly because of the political aspirations of its president, was an important achievement but the lack of maintenance of standpipes created drainage problems and pools of stagnant water. On one occasion, the main street of Barrio San Jorge was filled with soil and levelled but it was not compacted and so, after the first rain, it became so muddy that it restricted the use of motor vehicles for several days. The local government had wrongly trusted the weather forecast which had announced rains for two days after the elections rather than two days before. Most such interventions are short-lived and the inhabitants have to take over the maintenance and repair despite their limited resources and the difficulties they face in doing so.

The continuity of actions in the long term and the achievement of tangible results have been crucial to the community and its morale. For instance, the construction of the mother and child centre and its further development encouraged a growing interest in small groups of residents who supported the project - mostly women - to initiate new activities. Another example is where several groups went on to develop sidewalks after they had laid pipes for water and sewage. The inhabitants of Barrio San Jorge needed support not for one or two development projects but for continuous actions that supported a long-term development process.

The second strategy consisted of working in partnership with the different actors involved in or related with the development process of Barrio San Jorge, i.e. not only community groups but also local and provincial government agencies, other NGOs, the private sector and donors. Interaction with such a wide range of organizations taught us several lessons:

- No organization is completely inflexible and it is important to establish where and with whom common goals can be developed. The involvement of any institution depends heavily on the particular and variable roles, needs and circumstances of some of their staff. With some organizations, it takes a long time - 10 years in the case of the municipality - for a good working partnership to develop.
- Working with different organizations requires a time-consuming exercise of persuasion, lobbying and bargaining to make compatible different views, rationales and priorities.
- These negotiations with local actors, although time-consuming, produced important results - including results that international donors could not provide. For instance, the long negotiations with the municipality resulted in the donation of seven hectares of land adjacent to Barrio San Jorge - which allowed some of the barrio's inhabitants to resettle, allowed the removal of houses from the land areas most at risk from flooding and reduced density. But, at the same time, partnership also implies taking considerable risks and having to bear the consequences when the results are negative, such

as the failure to get the transfer of land-ownership and the frustration this provoked among the inhabitants.

- Although the development of partnerships with other organizations is important, given the unpredictable performance of some organizations, our experience suggests the need to analyze the costs and benefits. The experience in Barrio San Jorge also shows the need to make alternative provisions for instances where partners do not deliver on their promises. The building materials bank could only be launched after the plot had been filled and levelled. The provision of a piped water supply and the installation of the sewage system "had" to follow a list of priorities, i.e. had to wait until the ownership of the land was transferred. These are two among many possible examples of delays because one partner (in this case the government agency) failed to deliver on its promise - and this caused not only considerable delay but also an erosion of motivation in the community and its leaders.

### **c. The Changing Nature of Participation**

The participation of the community broadened both quantitatively and qualitatively over the decade - partly in response to the different approaches taken by IIED-América Latina and partly because of the characteristics of each project. At the outset, when the team working in Barrio San Jorge had a more assistance oriented approach, participation was based on limited consultation with the community. When the proposal by some mothers to build a child centre was approved by the church, the group was consulted about their needs and expectations, and two architectural projects were presented for their selection.

Subsequently, at the time of formulating a long-range comprehensive programme for the improvement of the settlement, elected representatives from the community took part in the diagnosis of problems, the identification of working objectives and the planning of activities. They also started to become involved in negotiations with provincial and municipal government, private companies and local donors. In the water supply and sewerage project, almost all street-based groups within the barrio negotiated with IIED-América Latina for some changes - such as adopting organizational models and systems which matched their preferences better than those proposed by technical staff - as well as providing labour for project implementation.

### **d. The Partnerships with Government, Donor Agencies and Other Actors**

The partnership with government was constantly changing, with different results achieved with provincial and municipal governments, with different sectors within the same government and the same political party, and with different politicians and civil servants. The tangible benefits achieved as a result of these numerous negotiations have often been much influenced by limi-

tations such as the scarcity of qualified technical personnel, the absence of a broad view of local problems and the lack of political will among decision makers. Until 1995, politicians within the local government office were rarely committed to working in Barrio San Jorge as it was never seen as a worthwhile political goal. Since then, the change in municipal government has been of great importance in accelerating the expansion of the support team's work into other settlements.

Participation by the private sector was also variable. Some entrepreneurial groups simply refused to work as partners in the development process of low-income populations. To them, who had so often been associated with power structures such as civil and military governments and the church, an assistance oriented approach was more functional. Eventual partnerships with recently privatized utility companies had to follow the pace of organizations in the process of restructuring, from which disparate results were obtained. Long negotiations to regularize the electricity system failed because the company did not comply with what had been previously agreed - the installation of individual electricity meters. In contrast, the intervention of the privatized water and sanitation agency, Aguas Argentinas, allowed the barrio to overcome a problem that had impeded the supply of water for more than ten years. They provided a water main to an area close to Barrio San Jorge which, in turn, enabled the extension of a piped water supply to the settlement. A group of entrepreneurs is currently supporting the process of relocating some families from Barrio San Jorge to Barrio J.E. Hardoy. They have facilitated contacts which allow the households to obtain building materials at lower prices and have provided a house prototype. Two of the private donors who support the child centre have provided US\$100,000 and a financial study on how to implement revolving credit for housing construction and improvement.

Four aspects are worth noting with regard to donor participation. First, the flexibility that most funding agencies allowed in the use of funds according to the variable needs and priorities of the community was crucial for carrying out several projects in Barrio San Jorge. This room to manoeuvre became indispensable in most projects, allowing necessary adjustments to the original proposal. In part, this was due to the long delay between applying for funds and obtaining them - during which time priorities changed. Second, most financial aid was provided only on the condition that there was a solid community organization which could ensure the achievement of a project's expected results. This requirement that an informal or illegal settlement have a formally constituted and effective community organization might imply the exclusion from funding of many or indeed most of the low-income settlements in Buenos Aires which, like Barrio San Jorge in 1987, had no representative community organization. Third, the support provided to Barrio San Jorge was mostly for short-term projects. Only the funds provided by Save the Children (Netherlands) and Homeless International (UK) were devised to sustain an initiative for more than a year. Despite so many international agencies advocating

sustainable development processes, negotiations with a wide range of donor agencies for support for Barrio San Jorge reveal the extent to which aid is "projectized". By and large, the aid given to Barrio San Jorge mismatched the continuity required to generate a sustainable development process. The discontinuity of aid had to be offset by a permanent concern by IIED-América Latina for fund-raising - a very time-consuming process which was rarely acknowledged by agencies; our team has never come across an agency willing to finance fund-raising. Staff costs for fund-raising are usually funded with hidden spending from the budgets allocated to projects. Finally, most donors were interested in supporting initiatives to achieve visible products, and granted funds to cover capital costs, but few of them recognized the need to help cover operation and maintenance costs including the necessary technical assistance to produce those achievements. Our experience with supporting long-term community processes and negotiating with different government agencies reveals the need for large amounts of staff time from both community organization staff and support teams such as ourselves. However, very few international donor agencies are prepared to recognize this in the support they provide.

## VI. SOME CONCLUSIONS

**WHEN OUR TEAM** began work in Barrio San Jorge, there was no community organization. The most frequent reactions among most of the inhabitants to any community initiative for the improvement of living conditions were passivity, scepticism and mistrust. In large part, this was the legacy of decades of paternalistic and authoritarian approaches and the lack of experience with any form of democratic process. Community reciprocity, representation, accountability and participation were alien principles and practices and they were not easily or quickly instilled.

In our experience, it was necessary to initiate and then sustain a process to modify these attitudes. The first group of neighbours who joined the mother and child centre expected to receive a benefit without giving anything. This is what they sought from external agencies and, for many experts, these were not the best circumstances in which to launch a development process. Working in low-income settlements where there is already a well managed, representative community organization is much easier. But we believed that the attitudes we found in San Jorge were typical of those found in most communities suffering absolute poverty in Argentina and, within San Jorge, it was this group of mothers who were the best partners with whom to launch initiatives for alleviating poverty.

The implementation of many different community initiatives in different sectors over a number of years has enabled the building of a development process which has contributed to improving living conditions and reducing poverty, or the deprivation associated with it, in Barrio San Jorge. Our conclusion is that it is not only possible but also necessary to support the genera-

tion and consolidation of neighbourhood organization and participation in low-income communities in order to address those needs and problems which can never be addressed by support for individual responses.

This has important implications for donor agencies (and government agencies) which seek to work in participatory ways with the inhabitants of illegal or informal settlements. In many such settlements, there is little social capital at the community level; it has generally been eroded by the pressure of absolute poverty and the lack of adequate support. This has broken down trust and the basic social networks. The reconstruction of social capital could take a very long time, even longer than NGO support staff will stay in communities, than aid agency officers will remain in office, or than development banks and governments will sustain their own policies. The rekindling and nurturing of the sense of community implies changes in personal and societal attitudes.

Many of the inhabitants in Barrio San Jorge exhibit this change of attitude. For instance, they are paying part of the costs of the water and sewerage project which will be applied in a similar project to benefit the neighbours who had to be relocated. They showed solidarity with those families in the worst situations, giving priority and support to help them move to the new site. Members of the Cooperative are actively involved in negotiations with local government and private companies.

Over the past ten years, we have found no shortcuts for accelerating this process. Many a time we have been tempted to give up and move to work in a community with a high level of organization, located in a municipality where local government is more responsive. Only our commitment to working with people who not only live in absolute poverty but also are least likely to receive support from government agencies and international donors prevented us from doing so.

