



The Integration Paths of the Barrios in Caracas, Venezuela

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VIEW OF JULIAN BLANCO

Introduction

The Integration Paths of the Barrios of Caracas is a two years research project supported by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and conducted at the Department of Spatial Planning in Developing Countries. It deals with the evaluation of upgrading policies implemented in informal settlements in Caracas as a means to integrate

them into the urban fabric of the city. Major elements are infrastructure development and organised participation of the communities in the planning and implementation process.

The project started in November 2004 and will finish at the end of 2006.

The Barrios of Caracas

The city of Caracas, Venezuela, has one third of its inhabitants living in informal settlements, known as barrios. These are precarious settlements developed outside the framework of urban regulation and growing continuously on invaded and non-urbanised land on hazardous sites. Built by the inhabitants themselves these settlements have gone through a consolidation process which assures their permanence in the urban landscape.

The inhabitants of the barrio, being spatially segregated and socially excluded from the surrounding formal city, must not only struggle with the lack of access to urban basic services and infrastructure, but also with insecure property rights, ambiguous citizenship, unemployment,

high crime rates, and powerlessness in the urban decision-making process.

This situation poses spatial integration and socioeconomic inclusion of the barrios as major challenges to urban planning and politics. Urban governance must ensure justice and equal access to the benefits offered by urban development to all urban dwellers, especially to those who have been deprived of their basic human rights since decades.

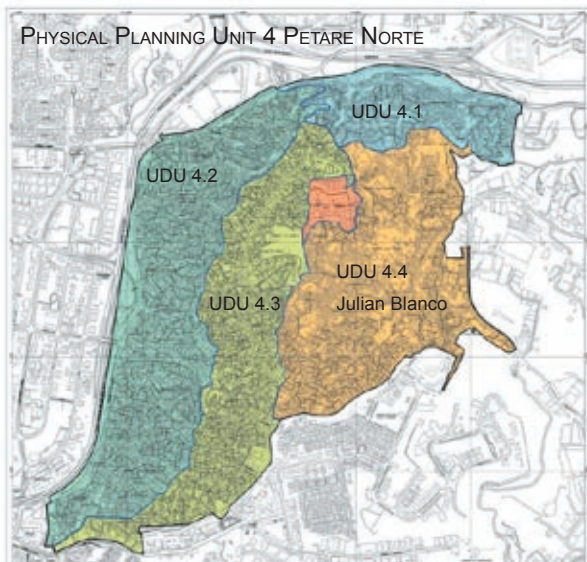
Objectives

The main objective of the current research is to evaluate the participatory component in the planning process as a path to urban integration underlying the many upgrading projects in Caracas. It intends to contribute to the scientific debate on the meaning of socioeconomic and spatial integration by assessing the impact of upgrading strategies on those inhabitants who are victims of spa-



HOUSING IN JULIAN BLANCO

tial segregation and social exclusion using the barrios of Eastern Caracas as a case. The final objective is to formulate a theoretical and analytical framework to assess the impact of spatial and socio-economic integration of informal settlements through upgrading projects.



Case Study

The upgrading project selected is “Caracas Mejoramiento de Barrios” (Upgrading of Barrios of Caracas). It is a joint venture between the government of Venezuela and the World Bank, which started in 1999 with the objective to improve the living conditions in two large agglomerations of barrios in eastern and western Caracas, identified as the Physical Planning Unit 4, Petare Norte (PPU4), and the Physical Planning Unit 10, La Vega (PPU 10). These PPU are further divided into Urban Design Units or UDUs, which are formed by several barrios or sectors.

The case study chosen is the UDU 4.4 Julian Blanco which belongs to PPU 4 and consists of nine barrios with a total population of ca. 35.000 inhabitants.

Research was conducted with four Focus Group Discussions in the UDU 4.4, two household surveys and 10 in-

terviews with community organizations, barrio leaders, barrio inhabitants working for the project, project implementers, government officials related with the project and academics engaged in barrio research. On two conferences professionals and barrio inhabitants discussed the meaning and the process of integration activated by upgrading projects.

The project has hosted the student project seminar F 04 of the Faculty of Spatial Planning in the academic year of 2005/06.

Findings

Two major categories of findings can be derived at the current state of analysis. Conceptually it can be observed that the integration of barrios is an ever changing process with a complex set of interrelated factors which must be adequately understood in order to be able to assess whether the process points into a positive or negative direction or if it is stagnant altogether. Based on the outcome of this assessment strategies have to be selected to sustain the positive or redirect the negative



development direction or mobilise the status quo. Perfect integration will remain utopia; rather it must be understood as a process which needs to be directed towards sustained enhancement of living conditions and reduction of poverty. Strategies must be conceived contextually based on an adequate understanding of the complex economic, social, spatial and political situation prevailing in the barrio. They have to enhance participation of



the residents in defining the right path towards integration.

Empirically, numerous conclusions can be derived from the case study in relation to the upgrading policy implemented. The organisation and empowerment of the community is fundamental for the sustainability of the upgrading process, but barrio communities can be both a hindrance and a potential to achieve it. Awareness and education are, therefore, of extreme importance to turn the restraining forces into driv-

ing ones. Only with the integration process starting from within the stigmatisation of the barrio through the formal city will be overcome.

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