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Author: Stienen, Angela

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Angela Stienen

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During the 1990s, in many cities in Europe district management became an instrument of direct neighborhood intervention, in an effort to foster sustainable cities. District management involves multisectoral, purposeful coordination of public and private resources, as well as local grassroots organizations and citizens, to improve the conditions of life, housing, and environmental quality in segregated and conflictive neighborhoods. The aim is to reintegrate neighborhoods into the urban fabric and achieve social and environmental sustainability. Can such a participatory strategy based on local orchestration of conflicting interests be successful in so-called geological and social high-risk districts in a Latin American metropolis like Medellín? Between 1993 and 2003, 46,418 people were killed in Medellín, most of them inhabitants of segregated neighborhoods. Some answers might be sought in considering the lessons learned from the Integral Program of Subnormal District Improvement in Medellín (PRIMED), cofunded by a German development organization (Kreditanstalt für Wiederaufbau, KfW), and implemented by the municipality of Medellín between 1993 and 2002.

Development of Medellín as a metropolis

Medellín is the capital of Antioquia, a province in northeastern Colombia bordering Panamá and the Caribbean Sea. The city is located in the Aburrá Valley at 1538 m, surrounded by mountains, with an average annual temperature of 24°C. Today it has about 2 million inhabitants, while the entire metropolitan area, with 9 municipalities, has a population of 3 million.

Medellín has always been considered the most dynamic industrial, commercial and financial center in Colombia. In the context of the import substitution development model of the 1950s and 1960s, industry specialized in the production of consumer and intermediate goods for the national market, above all in the textile and garment industries. During the industrial boom (1951–1973), the population of Medellín nearly quadrupled due to immigration from the countryside, reaching 1.2 million by 1973.

Nevertheless, the city and its industries were unable to absorb the uncontrolled immigration of the 1950s and 1960s. Urban planning to control urban growth was unable to prevent the dual socio-spatial pattern of urban develop-

FIGURE 1 Public social housing built in the 1970s. During the following decades, people enlarged their houses by building a second floor. The houses in these planned districts are accessible only via steps and paths meant to stabilize the soil. But contrary to planners' advice, the paths have been built perpendicular to the slopes, in alignment with the grid structure of the city. (Photo by Angela Stienen)

ment typical of many cities in the South. Neither did the otherwise highly efficient municipal public service company (Empresas públicas de Medellín) change this pattern by providing emerging neighborhoods with basic services.

In Medellín the so-called peripheral city, with high rates of informal economic activity and exclusion, expanded to the northeastern and northwestern slopes of the mountains surrounding the Aburrá Valley, whose gradient is between 25% and more than 40%. In the 1990s, 51% of the urban population lived in these neighborhoods. The 'peripheral city' was characterized by the coexistence of different forms of social and economic integration, the spatial outcome of which was a regular pattern of serially planned public social housing for industrial workers alongside a rather chaotic pattern of illegal settlements, and so-called pirate housing, ie unauthorized land subdivisions put up for sale (Figure 1).

In the late 1970s and 1980s, the ongoing process of de-industrialization and the general worldwide economic transition to a new, flexible accumulation model, led to an accelerated process of urban decay. Nevertheless, the growth of the global drug economy in the 1980s, and the fact that Medellín became the headquarters of the Colombian drug mafia, temporarily helped to attenuate the economic crisis, due to a huge influx of money. The penetration of the economic, socio-cultural and political spheres of the city by the Medellín drug cartel was tolerated as long as it 'stimulated' the local economy. The money generated great expectations of quick improvement in income and living conditions, above all in the 'peripheral city.'

The economic crisis and the rise of the drug economy in the 1980s coincided with a decrease in the urban population growth rate and the rate of rural migration to the city, a general demographic trend that has since shaped Colombian and Latin American urban development. Important urban consolidation processes took place in the 'peripheral city' due to demographic transformations and mobilization of large grassroots groups. These called for improvement in public services such as higher education, health care and public transport, as well as for integration in the changing urban labor market, and political participation.

Contested urban territories

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the state made a definite effort to cut the power of the Medellín cartel, the cartel declared war on the state, planting bombs throughout the city in establishments used by the political, security, and justice authorities. The state responded with crude repression, particularly in the 'peripheral city' where armed youth gangs, hired by the drug mafia as paid killers and by Colombian leftist guerrillas as militias to purge the neighborhoods, gradually displaced state control. In many neighborhoods in the city the state lost all legitimacy, and different armed groups established their own form of law and order, turning the neighborhoods into contested urban territories.

In this context, a new migration pattern developed during the 1980s. Inner-urban migration took place due to the crisis of the urban economy, growing violence, inter-generational and gender conflicts within families, newly emerging family models and urban lifestyles, and illegal business with the increasingly limited urban land in the Aburrá Valley.

In the rich neighborhoods on the flat terrain of the valley, the response to scarcity of urban land and socio-cultural transformation was to increase the density of the built environment. Everywhere so-

FIGURE 2 Use of land for spontaneous settlement, a problem being addressed by PRIMED in the so-called high-risk districts. (Photo by Angela Stienen)

called 'gated communities' were built, ie apartment towers fenced in and tightly controlled by private security forces. In the 'peripheral city' on the slopes of the valley, however, the response to scarcity of urban land, violence, and demographic change was expansion into higher altitudes in the mountains and construction of new settlements in so-called geological high-risk zones at the very edge of the city (Figure 2).

A 40-year-old man born in the 'peripheral city' explains this process in the following manner:

> One day I heard that land was being used on the higher slopes of the mountains. I went there and bought a hut on a plot 10 by 15 m. The owner was a woman who already had a nice house in a nearby neighborhood, built in the 1970s by the municipality as social housing. Now she invaded new land to make money. That's why I say: the clever ones always progress. I bought the land because I wanted a place for my family. I could no longer afford to pay rent, and we couldn't stay with my parents. A lot of people settling here were single mothers displaced from other neighborhoods by violence.

The politics of reconciliation

In 1991, when violence in Medellín reached a climax with 7376 assassinations in one year, the Colombian government intervened in the city to establish a special entity, the Consejería Presidencial para Medellín. The Consejería was charged on the one hand with transferring resources from the national budget and international cooperation to social projects in the city, with the aim of mitigating the root causes of social conflicts and urban violence (Figure 3). On the other hand, it mobilized civil society and the public and private sectors of the city to engage in negotiating the material and political conditions of conciliation and peaceful conviviality at public Round Tables and Forums that were set up in the city.

The Consejería strengthened the processes of decentralization and modernization of the state initiated by the new constitution of Colombia, which was approved in 1991. Designed by a Constituent Assembly elected by popular vote that consisted, among others, of delegates from grassroots organizations, ethnic minorities and demobilized former leftist guerrilla organizations, the Colombian Constitution of 1991 is widely considered the most progressive in Latin America. Some of its main principles are decentralization and autonomy of territorial administrations (even at the district level), participatory local planning, and the civil right of participation.

This wider context gave birth in 1993 to the Integral Program of Subnormal District Improvement in Medellín (PRIMED), implemented in the neighborhoods that appeared in the geological high-risk zones of the mountains during the 1980s.

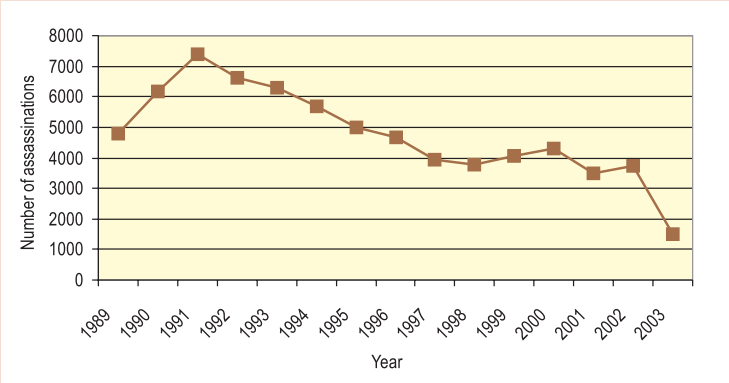

FIGURE 3 Assassinations in Medellín, 1989–2003. (Source: Veeduría del Plan de Desarrollo de Medellín. IPC et al 2004, pp 77–79.)

Inclusion of the urban peripheries

PRIMED was managed by the mayor of Medellín and aimed to integrate neighborhoods in the high-risk zones into the city. PRIMED coordinated purposeful territorial investment of financial and technical resources provided by German development cooperation, the entities of the nation-state and municipality, the private sector, NGOs, universities, grassroots organizations, and the self-help efforts of citizens; it thus orchestrated multiple interests.

PRIMED was in part a strategic answer to the environmental risks to which 'subnormal settlements' were exposed, owing to topographical characteristics such as high gradient, low soil resistance and infil-

tration of water, which led to landslides that killed several people. But the program was also a new local strategy to confront urban land scarcity. In a city with such a high rate of violence, and where the urban periphery was under the control of armed groups, the usual strategy of violent expulsion of settlers from informally occupied land would have generated even more violence.

The program put more flexible norms of urbanization and standards of 'normality' into effect, accepting that informal acquisition of urban land is a valid means for poor (and impoverished) urbanites to gain access to their rightful place in the city. Thus people were allowed to continue living in the settlements, and the program strengthened the legitimacy of the state in promoting peaceful conviviality.

The main aims of PRIMED were to:

1. Mitigate geological risks by microzonal planning and interventions to stabilize slopes (Figure 4);
2. Improve the built environment, adapting houses, infrastructure, and public buildings to local environmental conditions;
3. Provide secure land tenure by individual land titling for all family members;
4. Promote educational projects that attempted to change the attitude of people towards their natural environment and strengthen civic participation and the emergence of an urban culture of law and respect for others.

In 1998 a member of one of the neighborhood offices of PRIMED stated:

> The most difficult thing is to convince people that the collective right to public space determined by the Colombian Constitution of 1991 must be prioritized over the individual right to property. When this land was invaded, people fought for every meter of the mountains for individual appropriation. Now people are becoming more and more aware of irrational and dangerous land use, and they donate part of their individually appropriated land for the construction of public spaces, which helps to stabilize the soil and at the same time consolidate peaceful conviviality.

Material and discursive public spaces

An important strategy of PRIMED was to promote participatory local diagnostic and planning processes and management of projects by grassroots organizations in the neighborhoods. This was advocated in order to gain legal status and establish constitutionally determined conditions for negotiating project funding and implementation with the municipality, NGOs, and private actors. The local diagnostic and planning processes meant that inhabitants would traverse the neighborhoods, to socialize knowledge and construct a collective vision of the future (Figure 5). This generated important discursive public spaces in the districts, the outcome of which was a far-reaching potential for

FIGURE 4 Participatory district improvement. Houses in the improved PRIMED districts are still only accessible by steps and paths due to environmental fragility. Residents continue to dream of driving cars to their homes, however. (Photo by Angela Stienen)

FIGURE 5 A new public area built by residents of the district. People in the PRIMED districts developed many ideas for open public areas: parks with benches, playgrounds for children, etc. (Photo by Angela Stienen)

reflection among the community members. A member of a local grassroots organization put it this way:

> We discussed a lot about the future of this district. But the implementation of our first projects turned out to be very hard. The first two weekends, people were very enthusiastic, working the whole day on the building sites, and we had a lot of fun. But 3 weeks later nobody appeared. This was a big problem because we have to stick to the norms of the contracts, and the grassroots groups that negotiated the project were sanctioned for the delay. It was a race against time. People complained of not being paid for their work. A lot of people here are unemployed, or work as construction workers, street vendors, or subcontractors in the garment industry. They work very hard. So this kind of voluntarism and self-help is an idealistic idea of international cooperation, not yet adapted to the new conditions of this city.

District management and war dynamics

PRIMED had an important symbolic impact in Medellín and showed how coordinated action can change the attitude of the municipality and the citizens towards districts on the slopes of the mountains. Nevertheless, two difficult lessons have been learned:

1. The program had no income-generating strategies. Since land titling and physical improvement led to an increase in prices, at the same time that economic crisis in the city was becoming more intense, the poorest inhabitants had to move.
2. District management programs such as PRIMED will have the intended impact only if they are part of wider peace-building strategies, as during the 1990s, when governmental and international resources were transferred to Medellín specifically to mitigate the root causes of violence. Intensification of the civil war in Colombia under the government of Alvaro Uribe Vélez led to heavy armed confrontations between paramilitary, guerrillas, and the army in PRIMED districts in 2001. These confrontations seemed to confirm what an urban planner of the municipality of Medellín stated in 1997: the urban peripheries are contested territories used by war actors as starting points from which to permeate the city. Of course, PRIMED was not able to influence the war dynamics in the country; today the (physically) improved districts are under the control of the paramilitary forces, who impose their own law and order and forms of peaceful conviviality.

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AUTHOR

Angela Stienen
University of Berne, Department of Teacher Education, Brückenstrasse 73, 3005 Berne, Switzerland.
stienen@ethno.unibe.ch

Angela Stienen has a PhD in social anthropology from the University of Berne, Switzerland, and is currently working as a researcher and lecturer at the Department of Teacher Education at the University of Berne, and at the Human Rights and Research Institute (Instituto Popular de Capacitación) in Medellín, Colombia. She is an independent project evaluator for the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). Her research interests include globalization and urban development, international migration, territory, identity and conflict dynamics.