

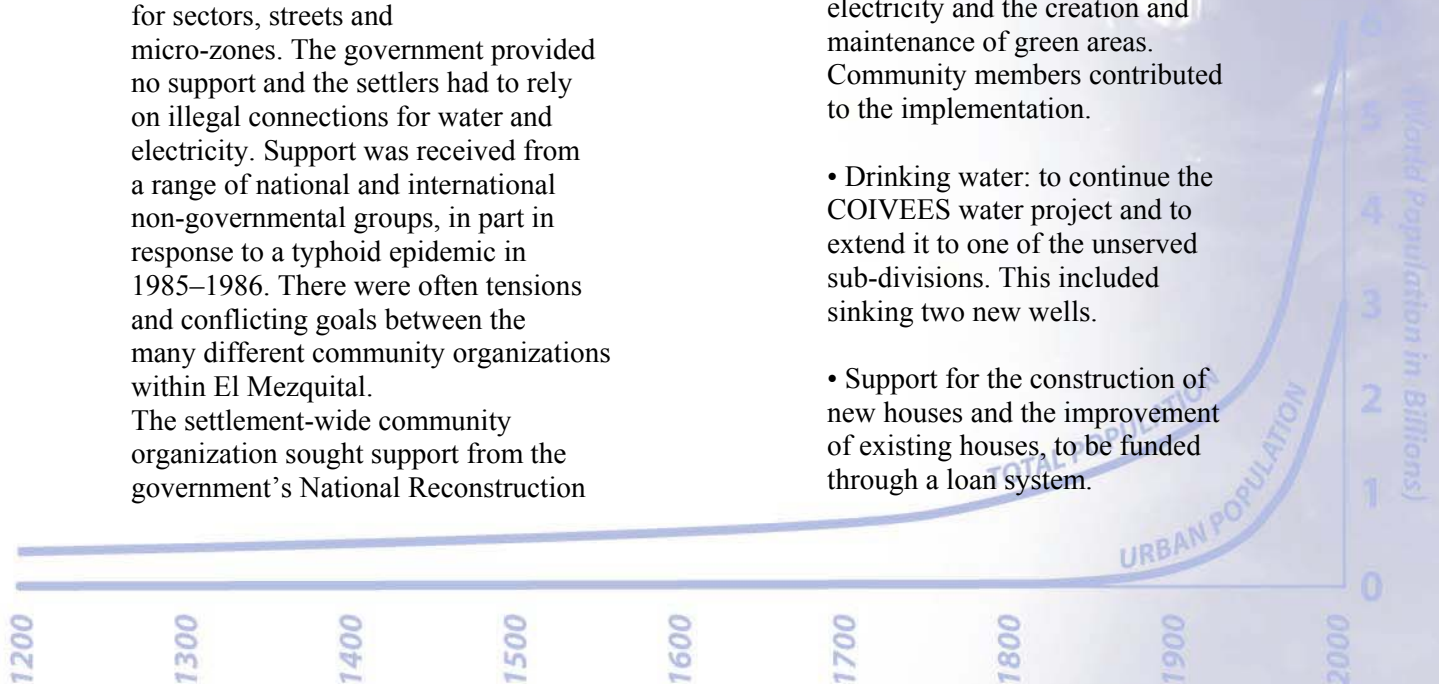


## Resource Box A Community's Struggle For Development

El Mezquital is a large informal settlement in Guatemala City with over 20,000 inhabitants. Externally funded, community-based programmes have brought considerable improvements in housing, infrastructure and services since its formation by a land invasion in 1984 by some 1500 families, who moved onto a 35-hectare site next to an existing residential settlement. They succeeded in resisting attempts by police and local residents to evict them, and this was the only successful land invasion in Guatemala City at the time. Many families who came to El Mezquital had also taken part in land occupations in 1982 or 1983 but had been evicted. When attempts to evict the invaders failed, the settlement attracted more settlers and expanded and consolidated, with community management boards set up in the different sub-divisions. Each management board had representatives on a settlement-wide association and there were various other community organizations for sectors, streets and micro-zones. The government provided no support and the settlers had to rely on illegal connections for water and electricity. Support was received from a range of national and international non-governmental groups, in part in response to a typhoid epidemic in 1985–1986. There were often tensions and conflicting goals between the many different community organizations within El Mezquital. The settlement-wide community organization sought support from the government's National Reconstruction

Committee to develop the first programme for urban improvement. Relatively little support was received and progress was slowed down by the dissatisfaction among many residents with what the government offered. The residents developed their own cooperative (COIVEES), which organized the construction of the first well and two large water tanks with support from UNICEF and the Swiss government. This cooperative also developed a piped water distribution system. The Catholic Church, which had supported many community initiatives, provided the land for the well and the tanks. In 1994, support was provided by the World Bank, UNICEF and the National Reconstruction Committee for a programme for the urban development of El Mezquital. This included:

- Infrastructure, including sewers and sewage treatment plants, rain water drains, pavements for pedestrians, the introduction of electricity and the creation and maintenance of green areas. Community members contributed to the implementation.
- Drinking water: to continue the COIVEES water project and to extend it to one of the unserved sub-divisions. This included sinking two new wells.
- Support for the construction of new houses and the improvement of existing houses, to be funded through a loan system.





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- The relocation of families who lived in areas that impeded development to areas with similar conditions within the settlement. 350 families were selected for moving and two fully urbanized new sub-divisions were developed for them, and were integrated into the settlement.

After 15 years of community work, almost all the families in El Mezquital have access to good quality piped water supplies. The settlement's cooperative supplies a much better, cheaper and more reliable service than that provided in most residential areas in Guatemala City. 95 per cent of families have electricity in their homes and virtually all houses have sewers and drains. El Mezquital is also well known for its communitybased integrated health programme.

This was based on the work of elected community health workers, called *reproinsas*, within each micro-zone (each of which had around 50 families). They work part-time and were trained to provide basic health care, including immunization, oral rehydration for diarrhoeal diseases, health advice and support for groups with particular health needs (including children and pregnant mothers).

The *reproinsas* also supported other initiatives, including literacy programmes. This served as a community-based health care model that was expanded into other informal settlements in Guatemala City.

However, there are important limitations to these improvements. These include the incapacity or unwillingness of government agencies to respond to the needs of the community (for instance, the state water agency refused to supply water because the settlement was illegal) and their under-estimation of community capacity, which included

opposition to the work of the community health workers. The support from international agencies and NGOs allowed considerable improvements in infrastructure and service provision. It also supported important processes of community empowerment, including greater status and possibilities for women. However, there were also limitations to most of the international support, including the limited scope provided by many international agencies for community participation, especially in project design. Most external agencies' strategies have been top-down and non-participatory, with no transparency in terms of how decisions were made and resources allocated. There are also the different perceptions of the external agencies, who regard their work as done because the project is finished, and the inhabitants, who still face many deprivations. In the absence of effective, accountable local government institutions able to provide continued support, the inhabitants feel abandoned. Seeing poverty reduction in terms of a single project-based intervention fails to recognize the importance of supporting long-term processes within low-income settlements that allow one success to stimulate and support others.

Source: Cabanas Díaz, Andrés, Emma Grant, Paula Irene del Cid Vargas and Verónica Sajbin Velásquez Díaz (2000), *El Mezquital: A Community's Struggle for Development*, IIED Working Paper 1 on Poverty Reduction in Urban Areas, IIED, London.

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