



Mexico City, Mexico: Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme (NICP)¹

Name of the policy Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme (NICP)

Start date: 2007

End date: currently ongoing

SOCIAL CONTEXT

The Mexico City Federal District (FD) consists of 16 territorial units called *delegaciones*, or boroughs, which are similar to municipalities.

According to preliminary data from the Population and Housing Census of 2010, some of its characteristics are as follows:

¹The **Inclusive Cities Observatory** is a space for analysis and reflection on local social inclusion policies. It contains over sixty case studies on innovative policies for interculturality, community development, access to basic services, gender equality, human rights, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty, among others. The initiative has been developed with the scientific support of Prof. Yves Cabannes at the University College of London (15 cases) and a team of researchers from the Centre for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra (50 cases), which has worked under the supervision of Prof. Boaventura de Sousa Santos. The Observatory aims to identify successful experiences that can inspire other cities when designing and implementing their inclusion policies.

The Inclusive Cities Observatory was created by the UCLG Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights. **United Cities and Local Governments** (UCLG) is the international platform that represents and defends the interests of local governments before the international community and works to give cities increased political influence in world governance. The mission of the **Committee on Social Inclusion, Participatory Democracy and Human Rights** is to contribute to constructing a common voice for the cities of UCLG in the areas of social inclusion, participatory democracy and human rights. It also aims to guide local governments in designing these policies and to that end, fosters political debates, the exchange of experiences and mutual learning among cities around the world.

For further information: www.uclg.org/cisd/observatory





- Total population = 8,873,017 inhabitants
- of which men = 4,245,993 and women = 4,627,024
- It has a population per km² of 5,936.8 and has 2,462,678 inhabited homes.
- The City is part of the Metropolitan Area of the Valley of Mexico, which has 20,137,152 inhabitants
- Men = 9,743,203 & Women = 10,393,949
- It has a population per km² of 2,559.8 and has 5,320,001 inhabited homes

Mexico City contains 7.9% of the country's total population and 2.5% of its total occupied housing. These figures are only surpassed by the State of Mexico, which has an area of 22,357 km², while Mexico City has an area of 1,479 km².

As the seat of Mexico's federal government and the country's capital, Mexico City has a number of advantages compared to other states; its local government is strong, with a long-standing, community-based and social organization; its population is among the most educated, but is not necessarily rich as a result; socio-economic inequality is more readily apparent; but people generally work towards improving their quality of life and suggest measures to do so.

Governmental decentralization context

The first Public Participation Law in the Mexico City Federal District dates back to 1995, but it was repealed the following year. A second version was created in December 1998 and this version included plebiscites, referendums and popular initiatives and consultations as instruments for social participation for the first time. Amendments to the Public Participation Law were approved on 30 December 2009. The new Public Participation Law was published in the Federal District Gazette on May 27 2010. It also provided for the creation of neighbourhood committees to manage, evaluate and monitor citizens' demands on issues related to public services, road use, changes to land use, public safety and commercial activities. The amendment to the Public Participation Law provides for the creation of citizens' committees consisting of nine members in the 1,740 territorial units of Mexico City. These committees will consist of nine members, who act as representatives of the residents of each territorial unit before the authorities in the capital city for a three-year period. The law also provides for the organization of citizens' assemblies, with decisions that are binding on the residents of the territorial units in which they are carried out.

Under the terms of the previous law, on March 27 the inhabitants of Mexico City will decide on the items and projects to which the 16 boroughs will allocate 706,547,254 pesos of the participatory budget in 1,740 "*colonias*" and neighbourhoods.

The Public Participation Law identifies three areas for the application of funds: works and services, urban facilities and urban infrastructure, and crime prevention.

Institutional level of policy development: DISTRICT



COMPREHENSIVE NARRATIVE

Background / Origins

The Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme (NICP) originated in the housing policy launched by the Government of Mexico City in 1998, and the Housing Improvement Programme in particular. Furthermore, the design of NICP was an initiative by civil society. The NICP took as its starting point the experiences of the city's Urban Popular Movement in improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of the districts, *colonias* and neighbourhoods of Mexico City, as well as its progress in working capacity - which enabled it to move from a level purely involving protest to one also involving making proposals. The NICP was implemented for the first time in 2007. In June of the same year - as a result of a commitment made by civil society organizations during the election campaign for the Head of Government - the Government of Mexico City, through the Ministry of Social Development, published Guidelines and Operating Mechanisms for the Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme for the 2007 financial year, as well as the Call for the Public Tender for the Selection of Neighbourhood Improvement Community Plans, which led to the implementation of the programme. The reforms and amendments to the Guidelines were subsequently published in the Mexico City Federal District Official Gazette, in order to clarify the operational details that would enable optimum implementation of the programme. Since then, a programme evaluation has taken place at the end of each year. This includes the participation of those involved in the funded projects, government officials and academics, and leads to amendments being made to the NICP guidelines in order to improve its execution and the fulfilment of its objectives.

Policy objectives

Through this programme, the Government of Mexico City is seeking to promote public participation and to foster the exercise of the Right to the City among all the inhabitants of Mexico City, as well as improving living conditions and opportunities for the human, social and cultural development of the inhabitants of the Mexico City's most socially challenged areas and those suffering from the highest levels of urban degradation. In specific terms, the NICP promotes participation by social, civil and community and neighbourhood organizations and groups in Mexico City's *colonias* that are interested in promoting the design, implementation and evaluation of community projects to improve the urban environment which include the construction of social infrastructure and the recovery of public spaces. The programme is committed to:

1. The overall improvement of housing conditions at neighbourhood level, while continuing to work in Mexico City and its Metropolitan Area;
2. Promoting institutional interaction and an administrative transformation, which uses strategic planning to make better use of resources and achieves a more effective interaction between government and society;
3. The implementation of new types of public participation, and support for those already in existence which take the conditions of each village, *colonia* and neighbourhood into

account and emphasize the factor of shared responsibility in resolving the community's problems and needs, and increased participation by citizens in public management;

4. Promoting a new way of "making the city from the bottom up" from a more immediate, self-managing, local perspective which belongs to the citizens themselves.

Chronological development and implementation of the practice

What was then known as the Department of Mexico City implemented the Neighbourhood Improvement Programme in 1981, but it only covered physical/urban issues and was applied on a minimal basis, despite the existence of plans with proposals for each neighbourhood and borough.

Neighbourhood Improvement Programmes were restarted in Mexico in 2003 with the so-called "Habitat Programme" as a means to relieve urban poverty through projects that took social, environmental and physical factors into account. The guidelines of the programme were established by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), which was the financing institution. Mexico obtained further funding from the IDB in 2007 in order to implement the Habitat II Programme nationally, through the Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL).

The NICP was first considered in Mexico City in 2007, taking as its starting point the experiences of the city's Urban Popular Movement in improving the living conditions of the inhabitants of the districts, *colonias* and neighbourhoods.

In this context, the political will and sensitivity of the Government of Mexico City in acknowledging these experiences is of particular significance. It declared that "the Urban Popular Movement is one of the main promoters of the transition to democracy in Mexico City and since its beginnings, the driving force for its participation in the City's social and political work has been its legitimate interest in changing the economic, social and cultural conditions that limit the development of the capital's inhabitants." This principle is fully shared by the Government of Mexico City.

Agents involved

The various social actors involved are:

1. The Urban Popular Movement (UPM), which includes several urban organizations such as the Emiliano Zapata Popular Revolutionary Union (UPREZ), the Neighbourhoods Assembly, the San Miguel Teotongo Residents Union, and the Miravalle Community Assembly, among others.
2. The Mexico City Department of Social Development, which has special links to the NICP. Some borough governments.
3. The UNAM Faculty of Architecture's "Housing, Participation and Gender Laboratory," which is part of the Advisory Council and the Committee selecting the projects that deserve NICP funding. It is related to the UPM through its consultancy work and advisory services.
4. Some government agencies that are involved on a temporary basis, such as the Ministry of Housing and Urban Development (SEDUVI), the Housing Institute (INVI), the Ministry of Works, the Ministry of Culture, etc. These are all in Mexico City.
5. Housing NGOs, such as Casa y Ciudad.

6. Architects, urban planners and landscape architects advising improvement projects.

Beneficiaries

The residents of the working-class *colonias*, neighbourhoods and boroughs of Mexico City, with the beneficiaries preferably being those living in areas with very high or high levels of deprivation (i.e. those people with the fewest economic resources and with no social infrastructure). They are generally areas that emerged illegally or informally and which have subsequently been consolidated, but where investment in urban facilities and infrastructure is minimal. However, the fact that they have had to organize and fight to obtain gives them a basis for access to the NICP funds.

Participation processes implemented

As mentioned above, it was an initiative by the UPM, with the support of various agencies acting on a collective basis (academia, NGOs and some government sectors). There are four NGOs in Mexico City specializing in housing and only two of these work with the UPM. This means that it is academia, and especially the UNAM, that adopts this role, accompanying the proposals for new policies or changes to them.

The traditional means of taking action is social mobilization. However, to paraphrase Fals Borda, this action involves *protesting with proposals*. We are therefore part of the NICP Advisory Council, where "corrections" are made to the NICP operating procedures based on the annual evaluation of the implementation of the various neighbourhood improvement projects. There is also an independent collective which discusses the suggestions that are made to the Advisory Council, so that the proposal is the result of a consensus and not simply personal. This is possible due to the good channels of communication between the programme's officials and the Ministry of Social Development, but this is not the case with those of other agencies such as SEDUVI or INVI.

Institutionalization processes

Given the volatility of budgets, in which social spending is increasingly limited, a *Neighbourhoods Law* was promoted, which reached the Legislative Assembly but failed to pass. The law sought to address this uncertainty about the budget allocated to the NICP, making it into a public policy which would thereby cease to be simply a programme and a series of projects.

Financing

All the NICP funds come from taxes, and no external contributions had been recorded as of 2009. Attempts have also been made to include NICP funds in the Habitat Programme, but the programmes do not have the same approach to public participation and funding methods. They are different approaches, perspectives which despite having similar objectives in conceptual terms are in fact very dissimilar. In 2010, due to economic conditions (inflation, low growth, the effects of the international crisis, etc.), the government of Mexico City slashed the budget, although the number of projects presented increased. In total, the programme had an overall budget of 506 million pesos between 2007 and 2010.

Key results and achievements

The main achievements of the programme were:

At the social level:

- The promotion of community participation.
- Education and training of members of the community in various areas.

In public spaces and facilities:

- The community's appropriation and identification of the works and initiatives carried out.

At the institutional level:

- The creation of links between social, civil, academic and community organisations and neighbourhood groups, and institutions of the Government of Mexico City.
- An institutional effort to understand the importance of participation.

Main obstacles

Despite the benefits of the NICP, there are some factors that hinder its successful implementation and threaten its sustainability:

At the social level:

- The conflicts of interest between community leaders and political patronage and the poor response to calls among young people and women.

In public spaces and facilities:

- The poor definition of the scale of intervention and how to define the neighbourhood, borough and metropolitan boundaries without negatively affecting the community's relations with the territory.
- The relationship between physical and social aspects remains difficult to resolve.

At the institutional level:

- The lack of a social, urban and/or environmental impact assessment on the community.
- The loss of institutional memory due to the political instability of the programme itself, as well as the officials and consultants participating in it.
- The conflicts of interest between officials from institutions with different agendas and the abrupt changes determined by the political and economic agenda.
- The appropriation of community participation spaces associated with the territory, which flood the community with opportunities for participation.

Replicability or adaptation of policy elsewhere

All physical empowerment processes also involve a simultaneous process of social empowerment that is not included in the design of the NICP. This necessarily implies the need to include the NICP in the educational, cultural, environmental, social, etc. programmes in which the inhabitants take responsibility for the use, development and maintenance of their own space. In fact, the level of social and physical deterioration in many areas with high levels of deprivation declines as the physical, material, social and cultural resources of individuals, families and neighbourhoods increase.

The importance of promoting the community's experience in projects creating links between residents' organizations, academic institutions, professionals, civil society and officials from various departments, among other actors, became apparent during the implementation of the programme. This was beneficial for both the inhabitants and the participating institutions. This

enabled the consolidation of interdisciplinary teams that emerged at universities as part of their social work.

It is also important to place the NICP's plans and projects within the city's urban planning and its concept, to prevent projects taking place within the framework of the NICP from creating a "neighbourhood effect" in which at best they end up being a series of projects.

Furthermore, one of the main problems for coexistence and participation for the residents of the *colonias* in many of the projects funded by the NICP was the factor of violence. Coordination of the NICP's actions with other projects by the government (both the Federal government and the government of Mexico City) for the implementation of global policies is therefore essential, because it is essential to coordinate the public responses in the economic, social and urban spheres, as well as the necessary police work, in the medium and long term in the *colonias* affected by the NICP.

SUMMARY

The Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme is an initiative by Mexico City's Department of Social Development, in coordination with the Ministry of Works and Services and the Department of Urban Development and Housing. The programme was implemented in 2007, and is currently ongoing. The NICP enables social infrastructure projects to be carried out depending on the community's needs, such as community centres, cultural centres, parks, recreation and sports areas, improvement of the urban image, site museums, ecological projects, skateboarding tracks, service works, and the expansion or improvement of existing works, among many others.

The NICP is aimed at all social, civic, community and neighbourhood groups interested in promoting "comprehensive, sustained and participatory processes" for the physical, symbolic and cultural improvement of Mexico City's districts, neighbourhoods and *colonias*. The programme's goal is to develop a participatory process for the improvement and recovery of public spaces in Mexico City's districts, neighbourhoods and *colonias*, and especially those with a high level of urban decay or those within the category of medium, high or very high deprivation, according to the Mexico City Deprivation Index. The aim of this process is to promote the exercise of the Right to the City among all the inhabitants of Mexico City, in addition to improving living conditions and opportunities for the human, social and cultural development of the inhabitants of the areas that are most socially challenged and suffering the greatest urban degradation in Mexico City. All the NICP funds come from taxes and no external contributions had been recorded as of 2010.

The main results of the program are related to: the boost for community involvement; education and training of members of the community in the management and implementation of projects to physically and socially improve the urban environment; the community's appropriation and identification of the works and initiatives carried out; the creation of links between social, civil, academic and community organisations and neighbourhood groups, and institutions of the Government of Mexico City.

The main challenges to the NICP are related to: the conflicts of interest between community leaders and political patronage systems; the poor response to the calls from young people in the *colonias*; the poor definition of the scale of intervention and how to define the

neighbourhood, borough and metropolitan boundaries without negatively affecting the community's relations with the territory; the difficult relationship between the programme's physical and social aspects; the lack of a social, urban and/or environmental impact assessment on the community; the conflicts of interest between officials from institutions with different agendas and the abrupt changes determined by the political and economic agenda.

Contact:

Alberto Martínez Flores

Coordinator of the *Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme*, Mexico City

programabarrial@gmail.com

Website:

Neighbourhood Improvement Community Programme:

www.programabarrialsds.df.gob.mx/1pcmb.php

Mexico City: www.df.gob.mx/index.jsp

**United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) Committee on Social Inclusion,
Participatory Democracy and Human Rights:**

Tlf: + 34 93 342 87 70

<http://www.uclg.org/cisdp/>

Acknowledgements / Credits

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