

## **Building Colonias Land Policy from the Inside Out**

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## Building *Colonias* Land Policy from the Inside Out

In one-half inch letters splashed across the page, the January 6, 1999 Texas edition of the Wall Street Journal declared “Laying It on the Line: the Costs Of Addressing the Border’s Needs.” Though vague as to the object of its assertion, virtually every Texas reader would have known immediately that the article’s reference was the *colonias* stretched out along the Texas-Mexico border.<sup>1</sup> The TWSJ article goes on to explain: “There are more than 1,400 substandard communities, or ‘colonias,’ along the Texas-Mexico border, hundreds of which have no water or wastewater service; other basic services, like fire and police protection, street lighting and road paving are either nonexistent or insufficient.” [TWSJ, 1999: ].

Public consciousness of colonias is quite recent, for several reasons. First, the sheer growth in the quantity of colonias and *colonos* has made ignoring them increasingly impossible. The growth from 1460 colonias and 339,000 residents in 1995,(www.texashousing.org), to 1800 colonias and almost 600,000 residents in 2000, provides a rough sketch of this sudden growth. (maps.oag.state.tx.us) The rapid growth is due to several factors:

- US economy along the border
- increased numbers of laborers working in low-skilled jobs to support NAFTA industries
- increasing land and property prices as a result of NAFTA, which makes it harder for *colonos* to find living space in the border’s growing urban sprawl settings.
- a new land market developing in non-urban, county areas of the border, providing *colonos* with more (economically and socially) hospitable places to settle.

### I. Identifying *Colonias* Conditions Relevant to Sustainable Land Policies

*Colonias* are defined as

- isolated, unincorporated rural settlements, with
- substandard physical infrastructure,
- minimal social, health, educational and economic infrastructure, and
- varied standards of living with a mixture of employment and underemployment

Expanding on this definition, it is the case that throughout the *colonias* there exists:

1. A minimal English language proficiency. Data from a 1993 survey (Rogers, 1993) indicate that an average of 7% of *colonias* residents spoke English at home; and 42% spoke no English at all. Minimal English-speaking skills intensify residents’ isolation.
2. A minimal institutional and organizational density. It is uncommon in *colonias* to find mature, or even developing, institutional structures and community organizations rooted in economic, cultural, social, religious, or political activities.
3. A minimum diversity of social classes. Colonias, almost by definition, have few middle class and almost all unskilled/semi-skilled workers, thereby increasing the proportion of the “truly disadvantaged” individuals and families.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> We recognize that colonias settlements exist along the full expanse of the US/Mexico border and others are some distance from the border; this discussion focuses on Texas border colonias with the anticipation that much of what we assert will apply to *colonias* in other locations.

<sup>2</sup> It is important to note an essential difference between inner-city neighborhoods and *colonias*. The inner city neighborhoods, now so diminished in social and class structure, had a long history in the city. Until the 1970s, these neighborhoods were vibrant, productive communities in their own right. (cf. Drake and

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4. A minimal diversity of work/professional role models. A correlate of social class homogeneity at the lowest ends of the social hierarchy is that work/professional role models are scarce, among the unskilled and semi-skilled *colonos*.
  5. Minimal access to health care (preventive or curative). Health insurance among *colonos* is largely non-existent, for both adults *and* children. *Colonias* are geographically remote from health clinics, hospitals and all social services, making these services simply beyond reach for many.

Peter Ward (1999:165-198) provides a conceptual framework for understanding these infrastructure conditions in *colonias* and conditions for effective, sustainable land policy. He differentiates between *informal social infrastructure* (“networks of communication and the habitual contacts between individuals...”) and *formal social infrastructure* (“the institutional structures that are created externally in order to meet settlement social needs – health, education, recreation, development groups, etc.”). The absence of informal social infrastructure means there are few clubs, community or social organizations that might otherwise serve to engage *colonos* in common projects, or to bring them together for conversation and dialogue.

In addition, Ward distinguishes between *horizontal social integration* and *vertical social integration*, both of which are essential to dynamic social organization. Horizontal social integration connects across persons and groups within a social grouping. Vertical social integration ties a social group, its institutions and actors, to a world outside the social group, connections so important to accessing resources that augment those existing with in the social group. One of the identifying traits of *colonos* is their social isolation. The lack of vertical integration makes it difficult for many to have a vision of social change. The lack of horizontal integration in *colonias* prevents them from developing into a community, as Ward suggests in his distinction between *settlement* and *community*. Settlement implies little more than a simple demographic presence of individuals in a social setting containing minimal formal social infrastructure. Community, on the other hand, intends the presence (again in varying degrees) of formal social infrastructure in the social group (institutions and organizations of varied sectors, e.g. economic, social, political, religious, cultural, etc.)

The low levels of infrastructure and integration over time penetrate the social psychological level of individual *colonos*. Mature formal social structures and organization provide existential security; they set free individuals’ visions and abilities to take advantage of opportunities. Social structure ties individuals to social life beyond themselves, both within and outside of our communities. When viable social structures, organizations, and diverse and stable role models, are minimal or missing, people living in such communities experience social and psychological isolation, in addition to the geographical isolation. Social psychological and geographical isolation carry within them constraints on opportunities that provide “...access to jobs and job networks, availability of marriageable partners, involvement in quality schools, and exposure to conventional role models.” (Wilson, 1997:61) Networks are fundamental in daily life. Those with more networks have denser connections to people, institutions, and organizations by which to negotiate their place and movement in society. People who lack them have constraints on opportunities that might fulfill their dreams and aspirations. (Granovetter, 1973)

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Cayton (1968)). Conversely, nearly all *colonias* have never grown to incorporate vibrant communal infrastructure.

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## II. Building Sustainable Land Policy from the Inside Out

### A. Transforming Colonias from Settlements to Communities

We assert for discussion that as long as *colonias* have minimal formal social infrastructure and *colonos* have minimal social networks, the potential of creating an effective, sustainable *colonias* land policy is also minimal. Sustainable land policy requires strong, community-based social, economic, and political infrastructure, and the pathways for getting there require the input from those it is intended to serve. But community residents need the “social capital” skills/ tools to sustain and improve the land on which they reside, in terms of political decisionmaking within the colonia, coming to agreement about processes for dialogue and making and implementing decisions. A community is needed that is capable of forging trusting relationships with local political elites, and or mobilizing public opinion in order to derive ordinances and a regulatory structure will enhance and improve existing land use and policies at the local level.

We propose the following orientation that we believe will help build a strong foundation for a sustainable *colonias* land policy. This proposal is based upon the efforts of the Texas A&M Colonias Program that has been working in border *colonias* for 10 years.<sup>3</sup>

#### Transforming English language proficiency.

In weekly home visits with *colonias* residents, the Colonias Program Promotoras find that inadequate English language proficiency lies at the root of social psychological isolation. Embarrassment and frustration prevent *colonos* from reaching out to communicate with a social service agent, a doctor, a school teacher, or any other ‘expert.’ English language proficiency is essential for developing self-confidence, leadership skills, job qualifications, and participation in activities outside of the *colonia*.

To transform language proficiency, it is essential to create and develop a **systematic and comprehensive set of programs** in the *colonias*. Such programs must include ESL in applied settings to help *colonos* get GED, as well as counseling with immigration and other concerns. Fundamental to every such comprehensive program is that it be created and developed as a partnership, with the *colonias* residents full partners and in leadership positions. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993:5) call this “Building Communities from the Inside Out,” and note the primary reason for its advantage: “all historic evidence indicates that significant community development takes place only when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources....” (see also Keare, 2001)

#### Building institutional and organizational density.

Following the principle of building from the inside out, developing *colonias* settlements into vibrant communities that will implement constructive land use policies (cf. Ward, 1999: 172-3) requires organizing to identify and develop indigenous leadership, and developing social and political consciousness about community development within the *colonias*. We propose a method of dialogism in order to engage members of the settlement in dialogue about matters of public concern. Leaders would be selected from this process on account for their interest and commitment to building sustainable communities, and their abilities to empower others.

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<sup>3</sup> The Colonias Program is a multi-faceted community development organization that works primarily through facilitating partnerships among local, regional and state institutions and organizations (public and private) with *colonias* residents. Its geographical reach is along the Texas-Mexico border from Brownsville to El Paso and the work that it does operates out of sixteen Community Resource Centers along the border.

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Expanding diversity of social classes.

Organizing to establish work and professional opportunities lies at the core of moving from settlements to communities. Two foci are crucial – job training and job creation. The first is a focus on job training and education with an eye to expanding the opportunity structures. Currently, in the state of Texas are Work Force Boards. In the discussion we will provide examples of how community residents, community leaders, and community activists can come together to establish Workforce opportunities within *colonias*.

The second foci is job creation in the form of creating avenues and organizational means for *colonias* residents – individually and collectively – to ‘grow’ indigenous microenterprises as well as connect *colonias* entrepreneurs with enterprise opportunities outside the *colonias*. Coalitions of academics, advocates and *colonos* are required here to collaborate in an ongoing critical pedagogy. Again, we will provide examples of how this can be done.

Expanding diversity of work/professional role models.

Working to accomplish #3 results in expanded job and enterprise opportunities and diversification of work/professional role models. In addition, it is essential to proactively create opportunities for *colonias* residents to become role models. We will present one example of such a program – the creation of a systematic, widely distributed ‘universal promotora’ (outreach workers) program that selects and trains residents from *colonias*.

Accessing comprehensive health care (preventive or curative).

Access to health requires a systematic organizing to do two things: first to organize a wide range of currently existing health care opportunities in such a way as to make them ‘visible’ to *colonias* residents, and second, to create formal institutional infrastructure within the *colonias* to optimize access to health care within the *colonias*, as well as outside. In addition, there is the need to forge social and political networks to assure that policymakers at the local, state and federal levels consider the knowledge, needs, assets, and rights of *colonos* as they broker policy.

**III. Building on What Already Exists: There already exists some infrastructure on which to work in the *colonias***

If we accept the proposition that building from settlement to community and fortifying formal social infrastructure are essential to creating sustainable land policies, then there is some very good news already emanating from the *colonias*: *colonias* have two qualities that make them eminently ripe for community development and sustainable land policy.

First, unlike their urban counterparts, rural *colonias* already have a land ownership base from which to build land use policy. Moreover, the fact that *colonos* own a piece of land lends a **personal meaning of ‘place.’** Place implies something substantial, property that symbolizes stability, a geographical location in which they root some hope for a future. Place is key here. *Colonos* often moved to the *colonias* subdivisions because it was much more affordable; in addition it afforded them their own a plot of land. This is an essential point: land ownership is valued highly in the US because it symbolizes status → *colonos* could own a piece of land even though they did not have many other material possessions → these plots of land takes on a significance of ‘place’ in a new land at the same time that they experience multiple forms of discrimination and ‘outsiderness.’ Thus, there exists already a social psychological and a physical base for creating a sustainable, community driven land policy for the *colonias*.

Second, *colonias* have a vibrant, expanded family system at work. Family systems form one horizontal integration base upon which additional, sustainable institutional infrastructure can be built. Family systems provide a sense of security and rootedness on which sustainable land policy can build.

#### IV. Building Sustainable Land Policy from the Inside Out

Kretzmann and McKnight stress the point that “Each community boasts a unique combination of assets upon which to build its future.” (1993:6) The key is “to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness...” (1993:5) *Colonias* have just such assets (Section III) on which to begin to build formal horizontal and vertical infrastructure (Section II). Our conclusion is that:

- Out of the *colonias* can arise a sustainable land policy rooted in existing *colonias* assets – family systems and land ownership – and complemented by on-going horizontal and vertical community development.

Note that in this conclusion, and throughout this essay, lies a covert assumption: **the objective of sustainable land policy for the *colonias* is to build vibrant communities from and within existing *colonias*, to create strong communities in which current citizens want to remain and future citizens will choose to reside.** We emphasize this point to counter a prevailing perception of *colonias* – i.e. that they lack

- a *political* legitimacy in the minds of public because they are viewed primarily as a set of physical problems to be dealt with and diminished as quickly as possible with no eye to long-term economic and community development, and
- a *social* legitimacy because the public generally perceives *colonias* as steeped in poverty and populated by illegal migrants. (Ward, 1999)

A sound, sustainable land policy views *colonias* as nascent, vibrant communities with existing assets, and *colonos* as integrated participants, out of which a rich social, economic, and political infrastructure can be raised.

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