

Union de Vecinos - Community and Civic Engagement

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### **Literature Review Introduction**

In Latin America a socio-economic structure exists which is out of balance and unequal in regards to income and wealth, where persistently high levels of poverty exist. Subjugation of populations to a struggle between authoritarianism and democracy have left many citizens depleted in numerous ways because of the tyranny of totalitarian and militarized regimes which began to take root in the 1950's, increasing into the late 70's and early 80's, and influenced by Cold War impacts as well as early effects of globalization. The resulting conflicts, accompanied by political torture and other atrocities, have created a massive loss of human life, destroying assets and property (Montero, 2007; Solimano, 2004).

This review of the literature presents models of influence that have developed as a result of the political strife. Their objective is to find solutions to liberate the conditions and repressive environments of the oppressed populations in Latin America.

### **Paulo Freire**

One of the main influences on liberation theologies, liberation psychologies, and Latin American community social psychology is the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. Much of what Freire developed was adopted into Latin American social and community psychology by Ignacio Martín-Baró and other social psychologists and scientists. Freire introduced his idea of popular education in 1964 as a form of education for adults. Introduced to develop literacy, the goal was to also promote the expansion of individual consciousness with the intent

of enhancing perceptions about social conditions. It is the act of knowing where education creates the practice of freedom (Tonsing, 2010). The goal is transformation with an emphasis on the rights and duties of the individual within a societal context so that the individual becomes consciously aware of living in an oppressive environment while subjected to the imposition of decisions made by the oppressors. Terms and concepts introduced by Freire include liberation, de-alienation, de-ideologization, problematization, praxis, and conscientization. Influenced by Marxist theory and responding to Franz Fanon's "*The Wretched of the Earth*" . . . his concerns are about problems with education and social issues. (Montero, 2007; Tonsing, 2010).

Cognitively and emotionally conscientization is about attaining awareness of situations that influence people's living conditions. It is about the development of the individual's ability to become aware of and denounce oppressive relationships. It is critical consciousness coming about through the process of praxis (Montero, 2007). It requires awareness of alienation and promotes that action must be taken to change the situation (Tonsing, 2010).

Praxis is a process of reflection and action that must occur in order to create social change. Without it the oppressed cannot achieve independence from those that oppress. Praxis leads to conscientization and the expansion of critical consciousness. It is the development of critical consciousness that leads to the process of liberation and is a first step allowing people to manifest as free human beings who are able to take action against their oppressors (Todd, 2011).

Problematization is the doubting and rejection of institutionalized truth that has been taught and presented as an essential aspect of the world. It puts into question notions and beliefs that have been naturalized as acceptable. Denaturalizing these beliefs is a starting point for liberation. The eventual creation of new notions and explanations comes as a result of the processes of de-

ideologization and de-alienation where de-ideologization is the conduit for making naturalized social truths transparent. It is the breaking down of the dominant ideology that confines the oppressed to an unjust sociopolitical environment. Related to alienation and ideology, de-alienation is about the process of seeing the influences between historic and social conditions that people live in and then seeing how roles are acted out and constructed (Montero, 2007).

### **Liberation Theology**

In the larger context liberation theology encompasses multiple theologies of liberation whose commonality reflects the experience of oppression. The most notable of these theologies of liberation revolves around poverty and class conflict in Latin America. Additional theologies of liberation that have emerged exist as a result of marginalization and oppression attributed to social group membership and include Black Theology (racism), Feminist Theology (sexism), Womanist Theology (race, class, and sex experienced by Black women), Palestinian Liberation Theology (based on Palestinian Christian oppression) and more. The common theme of these theologies is taken from a reflection on oppression as seen through the lens of religious faith, practice, and experience with the primary purpose being that of liberation and social transformation (Todd, 2011).

Liberation theology coming out of Latin America is complex in origin, influenced as far back as the Church Fathers (Roman Catholic), it includes aspects of Vatican II, political theology based in Europe, Paulo Freire's educational philosophy, and Christian-Marxist dialogue occurring in the 1960s. Historically, Catholic Social Teaching is known to have condemned social injustices occurring in the 1890's in Europe as a response to the abysmal living conditions experi-

enced by the urban poor. This was followed by successive Roman Catholic Popes denouncing European liberal capitalism who were looking to improve the conditions of the poor and disadvantaged (Kuruville, 2010).

The Vatican II and then the 1968 Latin American Bishops Conference in Columbia influenced a number of theologians to criticize the inequality and oppression in Latin America. Among these are Leonardo Boff, Gustavo Gutierrez, and Oscar Romero who saw the political and economic systems as being the cause of poverty and violence in Latin America. Much of this was seen as coming about due to colonialism and neo-colonialism. Latin America's integration into global capitalism led to unfair trade practices and greater inequalities accompanied by the rise of militarized right wing governments (Kim, 2013; Kuruville, 2010). Liberation theology comes about due to these events as Latin American theologians witnessed the reality of social oppression and the resulting misery that was occurring around them. In response they constructed goals to eliminate this misery and create a liberation for the oppressed . . . espoused as a preferential option for the poor (Kuruville, 2010). Liberation theology critiques the structures and institutions responsible for creating the poor where it is apparent that poverty will not be temporary but instead is and will be systematic and structural (Kuruville, 2010). It is not simply poverty that exists but an ongoing condition of oppression that includes violence and the possibility of death (Kim, 2013).

Liberation theology sees working for justice and practical activity as a Christian responsibility (Todd, 2011). Liberation is the first step that includes the priority of praxis and a commitment to the poor. Theology is seen as secondary (Kim, 2013). The act of praxis and the subsequent reflection on action is to occur through what is viewed as the indisputable Word of God and the

Holy Scriptures of Christian faith. Christian commitment is considered as the act of listening, identifying, and living with the poor. It is also about working not just for the poor but also with the poor against injustice (Kim, 2013). For liberation theologians full liberation is indicative of salvation in Jesus Christ (Kuruville, 2010).

Liberation theology questions how religious institutions can also be a cause of oppression through Christian identification with the rich (Todd, 2011). To try and understand why development programs failed liberation theologians began looking at Marxian postulates. Though all Popes since Leo XIII have been seen as strictly conservative and adamantly anti-Communist they were supportive of more moderate socialist efforts (Kuruville, 2010). In the mid 1980's attempts by the Holy See were made to stop liberation theology. Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (later Pope Benedict XVI) criticized many of the ideas of liberation theology and viewed it as a form of Marxism. He considered it threatening to the faith of the Catholic Church, where he saw the idea of the biblical poor being re-characterized as a Marxist proletariat (Kim, 2013). The response for clergy who engaged in liberation theology and related political activities was to be chastised or censured by the Vatican (Kim, 2013). It has also been the case that clergy who have been seen by the those in power as endorsing communities to resist authority resulted in priests being jailed, tortured, and often murdered.

Due to a shortage of priests in Latin America and a need to have laity as active members in the Church small groups were often set up that combined Bible study with participation for change. Known as Christian Base Communities (CBCs) they were grassroots communities that were considered a key representation of liberation theology. With no involvement from the Vatican these groups were created by priests, nuns, and laity mostly in poor communities of peasants

and workers for the purpose of addressing a range of issues concerning such problems as poor working conditions, attacks against unions, and struggles for land rights. Discussions would be centered around the gospels with the goal of interpretation and action as the primary task. In some cases it was extremely dangerous to be involved with a CBC. If found out it could lead to incarceration and death. Eventually with the end of military rule in 1985, CBCs began to evolve and include resistance to environmental and racial justice (Kim, 2013; Kuruvilla, 2010).

Alongside the idea of asking what the causes of poverty are liberation theology also asks how it can be eliminated and questions how power is utilized in the local and global environments. In addition to the church providing a place for sacramental living, liberation theology acts as a place for the oppressed to organize for liberation (Todd, 2011).

### **Ignacio Martín-Baró and Liberation Psychology**

Ignacio Martín-Baró, the pioneer of Liberation Theology in Latin America, was a radical psychologist and academic scholar. Born in Spain in 1942 he joined the Society of Jesus at age 17 and was ordained as a Jesuit priest in 1970 after being assigned to El Salvador by the Church. Following ordination he studied social psychology at the University of Chicago, completing doctoral studies nine years later. His studies took him to different parts of Europe, the United States and South America, while always returning to El Salvador (Montero, 2007; Goodman, Walling, & Ghali, 2010). He was a member of the American Psychological Association and later head of the psychology department at the University of Central America in San Salvador (Goodman et al., 2010). Trained as a social psychologist he considered himself a priest and also a Marxist by

virtue of the fact that he considered Marxism basically a methodology for social and historical analysis (Rosenberg, 2013).

Having written eleven books and more than one hundred articles his work and career exemplified a justice oriented research model geared towards promoting social change and the empowerment of a population of citizens who lived in destitute poverty working on farms and in factories where the subsequent and resulting profit was intended to create wealth only for the powerful elite. Due to corrupt elections, economic destruction, and military takeovers the resulting civil war displaced 30% of the population and decimated the lives of 70,000 people during the years from 1980 to 1992 (Goodman et al., 2010).

Based on the tenets of Liberation Theology and influenced by intellectual and social movements occurring in Latin America in the 1960s and 1970s, including the works of Paulo Freire, Martín-Baró developed his ideas for a psychology of liberation in order to take up the cause of the oppressed poor and marginalized (Montero, 2007; Goodman et al., 2010). Consequently, at the age of 47, he was viewed as an enemy of the military government for his political stance and support of the preferential option for the poor. After six attempts on his life he became the victim of a state-sanctioned assassination carried out in November of 1989 by 30 members of the U.S. trained Atlactl Battalion. Dressed in military fatigues they murdered Martín-Baró and five other priests at his campus living quarters.

Changing perceptions about psychology in Latin America were on the rise during Martín-Baró's time. Taking on a more psychosocial mode, traditional concepts of psychological practice and theory were being criticized, deconstructed, and reconstructed. Along with movements concerning anti-psychiatry and community organization . . . political psychology raised issues about



social identity, developing new explanations about nationalism, ethnicity and culture (Montero, 2007). Martín-Baró put forth the idea that psychology must promote social change and empowerment and saw psychology as a moral project. In order to make significant change to what he saw as the real problem he actively promoted that psychologists must engage with the dynamics of oppression and that of liberation in order to confront the problems that distort mental health in contemporary society. This was about changing the structure of society such that “the welfare of the few is not built on the wretchedness of the many” (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 598).

Martín-Baró was concerned about the potential role of psychology acting as a conduit that endorses rather than negates oppression. For Martín-Baró psychology generated a fictional image of what it means to be a human being because of the dominant historical development of psychology in Europe and North America (Barratt, 2011). In response he promoted a liberation of psychology independent of “western-centric, power-laden theories that served to uphold structures of enslavement and marginalization” (Goodman et al., 2010, p. 597). He sought a new object of study, a new epistemology and a new praxis (Barratt, 2011). Included was a concept of a new social identity obtained through the recovery of historic memory that opposed a negative self image internalized by oppression within the spirit of the individual (Montero, 2007; Barratt, 2011).

Martín-Baró advocated for psychosocial transformation through empowerment of the people which included development of and reinforcement of the positive qualities of citizenship, adding to the construction of a social identity. Based on the qualities of being assertive, self assuring, and taking pride in work and achievement on the individual level this transformation was intended to effectively empower civil society and strengthen democracy (Montero, 2007).

In order to carry out the goal of liberation through transformation he endeavored to create new ways of using psychology. Liberation was to occur internally as well as externally in order for the transformation to be successful and it was assumed that this was not something that was received passively. For this the liberation process required the development of consciousness as developed by Paulo Freire (concientizacion) and it's intent was to inspire the qualities of "solidarity, practical intelligence, resistance, and resilience" (Montero, 2007, p. 522) allowing the people to acquire control and power.

To bring about the process of concientizacion in the Salvadorian people he attempted to overcome the pervasive propaganda established by those in power. This distortion, often occurring through the manipulation of mass media, deflects critical consciousness resulting in a population that is unaware of its own oppression (Barratt, 2011; Goodman et al., 2010). He sought the truth by acquiring verifiable forms of information to overcome disinformation. Mass media was being used to distort public opinion causing Salvadoreños to feel isolated from one another and systematically hiding the most serious problems occurring in El Salvador. Salvadoreños were afraid to share their opinions and felt alone in being disagreeable about actions by the government. Being disempowered to share opinions with others led to confusion and oppression. Due to this social lie they could not see themselves clearly and the ability to transform became diffused.

Martín-Baró's psychological tool to reveal misinformation was the use of public opinion polls. As a research psychologist he asked questions that targeted solutions and in a series of five studies he collected data that created information which was counter to what the government's position on the war in El Salvador was. Through his publications this information was made

available to the Salvadorian people and to the international media, putting the government in a position of being unable to justify the distorted public opinion they had created. Findings showed that the people were not in support of a prolonged conflict caused by U.S. intervention and they were aware of a corrupt electoral system as well. These positions were contrary to what was disseminated by the media. The simple process of asking and reflecting presented concientization to the Salvadorian people (Goodman et al., 2010).

For Martín-Baró research offered a mechanism to reveal the truth and establish the process of concientization, allowing for social change. His concepts influenced social psychology throughout Latin America as well as many other parts of the world. Asking questions to raise awareness of injustice and distortion creates a social psychology that helps to build a just society and imposes upon psychology professionals a moral imperative promoting human life to thrive (Goodman et al., 2010).

### **Community Social Psychology and Participatory Action Research**

Traditional psychology, as put forth by Wiesenfeld, is based on an ideology of authority and has little or no faith in the people. By this reckoning people are assigned to social ranks with unequal access to psychological and material resources. Contrary to this notion is the emergence of Community Social Psychology which is a psychological discipline that has developed autonomously in Latin America (Wiesenfeld, 2012). It surfaced in response to political strife, originally growing “from the efforts of community organizers, activists, and community members” (Gokani, 2010, p. 113), in turn creating a need for academics to address the social jus-

tice issues affecting communities in Latin America. Contributions to theoretical aspects of the discipline have originated from the works of Paulo Freire, Orlando Fals Borda, and Kurt Lewin.

Community Social Psychology opposes the paternalistic tendencies of the traditional models of community psychology which approach community mental health by utilizing a top-down approach to providing assistance where the governmental and non-governmental institution “commands lowering the head before the demands of external agencies” (Montero, 2008, p. 666). In response Community Social Psychology seeks a down-up approach where the grassroots organizations and communities work towards state institutions to a point where “dialogue and negotiation lead the relationship” (Montero, 2008, p. 666). Both traditional and transformational models of community psychology exist together in Latin America.

Latin American CSP puts forth a “theoretical, methodological and applied production” that derives from the multiplistic and complex issues that exist within the context of Latin America. This has allowed for the development of both academic and non-academic practices which is exhibited by numerous university courses at all levels. Approaches and concepts of CSP are utilized and applied throughout the larger context including “health, environment, education, slums, disasters, public policies” (Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 27) as well as the processes of “organization, , participation, critical reflection, consciousness raising, leadership, empowerment, feeling of belonging and identity” (Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 27). Activities include “research, intervention, evaluation, training, negotiation, and prevention” (Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 27). Populations of concern are those that are socially vulnerable and disadvantage economically. Actions take place within governmental and nongovernmental organizations as well as health centers, educational institutions,

community organizations and residential communities. It puts in place a commitment to reduce poverty, inequality and exclusion (Wiesenfeld, 2012).

The seriousness of the situation at hand is highlighted by the data that shows in the Report on the Social Panorama of Latin America (CEPAL 2010), the number of poor in the region at that point amounted to 180 million people of which 72 million experience destitute poverty. This makes up 32% and 12%, respectively, of the population of Latin America who live in inadequate living conditions in population dense environments (Wiesenfeld, 2012). Key to overcoming this poverty is empowerment through community organization and participation which is a primary principle of CSP. Community Social Psychology looks to make psychosocial change of various types. These changes include macro-social processes intended to reduce the “state of dependency, inequality, exclusion, injustice, and oppression” (Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 29) and micro-social processes that address building awareness and enhancing community identity, creating shared emotional bonding, and democratizing leadership to promote transformation (Wiesenfeld, 2012). It also looks to affect institutional bodies that perform community services; building a socially relevant discipline; generating knowledge that combines and creates meaning; developing methodologies and appropriate strategies for addressing the issues; democratizing access to knowledge and information to enhance and strengthen the disadvantaged; and to promote community psychosocial work as a lifelong experience “through training, reflection and exchange of knowledge and experiences” (Wiesenfeld, 2012, p. 29).

Because of its characteristics Participatory Action Research (PAR) has become a key component of CSP. By incorporating participation within the community social change occurs through work done by the affected people in regards to the circumstances in need of change

(Montero, 1998). It allows for co-research to occur with researchers and community members acting together. This is a consciousness raising action that seeks solutions to problems through collaboration. It is community intervention seeking social change. The result gives meaning and provides a conduit to other emerging and evolving processes that enhance the sense of community and empowerment (Wiesenfeld, 2012).

Participatory Action Research (PAR) brings together community members who are most affected by an issue, joining them together with people who have experienced research skills in order to initiate effective research and evaluate the results. The goal is to create a strategy to resolve negative issues. PAR allows for research to originate from the people most affected and then return directly back to them where they can decide what best use the information can be put to. It can supplement, add to, or replace academic research (Rabinowitz, 2013).

Much of the basis for PAR comes from the influence of both Paulo Freire's critical education processes and from the ideas of Columbian sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, both of whom believed that the researcher must be committed and engaged with the problem, the oppressed people, and the transformation of social goals. This model was created as a new psychosocial practice "oriented towards social problem solving with the participation of the people involved in those problems" (Montero, 2008, p. 665).

There are a number of reasons for supporting this approach and why it can be successful. People in affected communities are more likely to talk openly and give straight answers to researchers they are familiar with rather than with people from outside of the community for whom they do not know. Community members who take part in collecting research data are often more familiar with the issues. It is more likely that they will perceive and comprehend a wider range of

views on the topics of concern. Because of direct exposure to the issues they may intuit more important aspects of the research. It is more likely that while obtaining qualitative research they will understand what might be considered as insignificant, such as offhanded remarks, more clearly than outside researchers would. Community members as action researchers experience the issues regularly. They are constantly exposed to the same issues as the population they are researching and will more likely find information while not openly engaged in research as well. It is also very likely that the findings from the research will receive more support from the community since the research is actually coming from the community, from people exposed to the same circumstances as they are. Additionally by involving community members there is much more visibility reflecting back into the community about the issues of concern and need (Rabinowitz, 2013). Adherence to the guidelines and principles of participation is a primary condition for accomplishing the goals set forth by Community Social Psychology (Wiesenfeld, 2012).

The work of Community Social Psychology through Participatory Action Research seeks to reduce oppression and improve the quality of life. It looks to increase the level of awareness of social problems by members of the community. Intervention is facilitated through research where the resulting information can be used to help mobilize and organize for political purposes. Reflecting upon the research allows for action to become more efficient (Wiesenfeld, 1998). In this way the work of Community Social Psychology can be seen as a form of political psychology. It makes conscious that citizenship is a right and a duty, bonded to fact that as social beings we all live within a society.

### **Master's Project Introduction**

The content of this Master's Project attempts to reflect upon observations, conversations, and video documentation involving the community activist organization Union de Vecinos. Conversations, interviews, and documentation with staff members of Union de Vecinos and involved community members from Boyle Heights and Maywood, Ca. provided a perspective on how Union de Vecinos approaches a solution to confront issues of social, political, and environmental injustice in what are sometimes referred to as disadvantaged communities. On going there is an expansive array of issues to confront. What is observed is that solutions do not come about quickly and require extended time and effort to complete. Solutions are not always transparent and where one is solved another may arise. Union de Vecinos attempts to inspire a constant vigilance to solve problems as well as empower individual community members. They take actions that assist in solving the issues of concern to the community. Through this empowerment process they create and enhance both individual and community identity as both preventative and promotional solutions.

Union de Vecinos is a Los Angeles based community activist and non-profit organization that came into being eighteen years ago in response to the need to protect public housing in Los Angeles. In particular it came out of the struggle to protect the Pico-Aliso Housing project in Boyle Heights. Demolished and rebuilt by the Housing Authority of Los Angeles, the original



Pico-Aliso Housing project was replaced by a significantly reduced number of housing units. This resulted in a large displacement of residents into other existing housing units located out of the immediate area.

Originally founded by residents, Union de Vecinos consists of more than twenty four neighborhood committees. Largely immigrant led, coming out of Central America and Mexico, the priorities and leadership are mostly focused on the needs of extremely low income people. With two office locations they address concerns in both the Boyle Heights and Maywood areas of Los Angeles and surrounding areas. Addressed issues of concern include healthcare, education, tenants rights, housing rights, immigrant rights, neighborhood improvement (improving existing parks, creation of new public spaces, cleaning alleyways), social justice, and environmental justice (cleaner drinking water, clearing toxic ground pollution). It is also about reclaiming neighborhoods from gentrification, protecting the local economies, and making the neighborhoods safe and clean by utilizing social engagement. Through community actions it seeks to bring dysfunctional city government back to its original role of caring for the needs of the people that it is meant to serve.

Established initially in Boyle Heights it was the experience with public housing that attracted the attention of an already existing grassroots community organization in Maywood, Padres Unidos de Maywood (PUMA) who requested help from Union de Vecinos to address tenant and landlord conflicts within the city. It was through these initial contacts with the residents that they began to see larger issues of concern involving unfair city governmental practices including corruption within both the city council and the established police department.

Maywood is a 1.18 square mile city located just southeast of downtown Los Angeles. The official 2010 U.S. Census shows the population set at 27,395. Union de Vecinos believes that the unofficial number is over 40,000 because of undocumented immigration. The population is 96% Latino. Spanish is spoken by 90% of the residents. Sixty percent of the population speak English less than very well. Median income as per the same census exists at \$35,000 per household. Seventy five percent of the population are renters (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

Membership for Union de Vecinos is approximately 1,200 members total including both Boyle Heights and Maywood communities. Funding comes through donations, grants, and fund raising. Each office maintains up to six paid staffers at each location and consists mostly of people who live in the community. The Board of Directors is made up of the leadership of the individual committees who come together throughout the year to set goals and priorities for the entire organization. The Union de Vecinos offices provide a space for meetings where staff members, organizers, and committees get together on a regular basis to discuss and assess current and potential issues. The office also provides space for numerous local events that involve a wide range of activities for both youth and senior populations. There is always an open door policy.

Union de Vecinos acts largely as a source for organizing and educating members of the community on how to take action to make changes in the community. Organizers are trained and educated to work with varying projects that the community wishes to address. It is the job of paid staff and organizers to be on the street, canvassing the neighborhoods, talking to people about potential and ongoing related activities, researching community concerns, organizing neighborhood committees and informing community members about related meetings.

In this way Union de Vecinos acts as a catalyst for bringing together different groups and concerns within the city and it is their philosophy and belief that citizens must be involved in their own communities and are therefore active participants that give shape to the world they live in. Within this belief is the idea that Union de Vecinos acts as a facilitator whereby the residents of the community make decisions about what issues must be addressed. They take no steps unless the community is involved. For Union de Vecinos there is an individual and organizational component that must be established in order for action and reflection to occur to initiate positive and lasting change. It is the community that defines the problems and issues through the establishment of boards and committees.

Philosophically and structurally Union de Vecinos takes an approach that originates from Liberation Theology, Liberation Psychology, and Community Social Psychology. Participatory Action Research is also a utilized approach that engages the community in action and reflection.

### **Video Documentation**

The video content of this project is a reflection and documentation of philosophical, theoretical, and pragmatic approaches utilized by Union de Vecinos in order to address social injustices. As described in the review of literature Union de Vecinos applies liberation theology, liberation psychology, community social psychology, and participatory action research as a methodology to empower both individuals and community to create a historical identity. What is attempted in the videos is a documentation of ideals that aspire to empower individuals through both preventative

and promotional approaches. Solutions to problems have been ongoing and at times confrontational in regards to confronting the issues at hand, more often with success than without.

**Video #1: Maywood Walking Tour (viewing time- 17 min.)**

“In true zapatista fashion it doesn’t matter who governs, as long as they obey.”

Leonardo Vilchis, Director Maywood Union de Vecinos

Recorded in August of 2011 in the city of Maywood, CA. this was a public event, attended by activists, artists, students and more. People were led through the different neighborhoods of Maywood where stories were heard from “residents about the community-led struggles for environmental justice, fair housing, legal protections for renters, successful campaigns against police corruption, and attempts by the residents to take over the local water utility companies.” The tour begins at Maywood Riverfront Park, which is located next to the fifth largest superfund clean up site in the United States, where a resident talks about organizing to force the city to clean up public restrooms at the park. Amongst her concerns are how the unsanitary conditions will effect her children. More from this same resident are her concerns about the lack of follow through on the part of the city to dispose of large polluted mounds of dirt located across from her home. Residents believe that this heavy pollution, attributed to chemicals dumped by the military during World War II, is causing cancer to occur at higher rates in their city. Though the Environmental Protection Agency is working to clean out the pollution there is fear about the quantity of

various pollutants in the drinking water. Drinking water samples also indicate a failing water delivery system which is controlled by three separate and private water companies.

Another situation of great concern to the citizens of Maywood was police abuse. One example explained occurred thru the use of illegal and excessive police checkpoints meant to impound vehicles belonging mostly to immigrants. This activity netted up to four million dollars a year for the tow truck company involved. That money was used to pay off or bribe city council members, police, and more.

As the tour continues we hear from one of the staff members of Union de Vecinos and a resident about how the Los Angeles Unified School District has claimed eminent domain over an area that effects about 140 families, the purpose being to tear down the homes of these families in order to build another school. In the process the community has fought the efforts of LAUSD and have offered up other sites that could be used instead and not effect the community.

Towards the end of the tour Leonardo Vilchis, the Union de Vecinos director for Maywood, talks about the election strategies used to change the city council in order to create more accountability and enhance the application of the democratic process, allowing for strategic alliances with council members that have led to successful solutions to community problems. The process of organizing included changing the minds of those that were in favor of change but were apprehensive about women being involved in city government as council members. In the process two women are elected to city council for the first time. In the years to follow with new council members in place the city was declared a sanctuary for immigrants, the illegal check points were eliminated, the ineffective and abusive police department was replaced with Los Angeles County Sheriffs, and a campaign to cleanup water was put in place.

In spite of the changes in city government it is felt that the city council members often have an antiquated vision about what it means to govern and what government is for a city. Conflicts and needs for solutions still persist. Nonetheless Union de Vecinos takes the viewpoint that it is not up them to mediate all the dialogical processes. For them it's important that the citizens develop "their own relationships locally" with city council . . . expressing and communicating what it is they want.

**Video #2: Maywood Water Workshop (viewing time- 27 min.)**

Shot on September 17th, 2011 this community meeting in the City of Maywood was billed as a Water Workshop, the purpose of which was to engage and inform the community primarily about concerns regarding drinking water quality as well as the progress and results of the Pemaco superfund cleanup site at Maywood Riverfront Park. In addition to attendance by up to 150 members of the community, representatives of the three private water companies that provide drinking water to the city, plus agency representatives from the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Army Core of Engineers, the Watershed Health Council, and Maywood city council members were present. This workshop was initiated as part of the Watershed Health Council's Disadvantaged Community Outreach Program. Disadvantaged Communities are defined as areas that contain neighborhoods that have a median household income below \$37,994.40. The intent is to engage the community in order to increase participation, add multi-beneficial projects, and address concerns about drinking water quality and waste water. Union de Vecinos was initially chosen as the outreach contractor whose purpose was to hear more di-

rectly from the community about perceived water quality and environmental concerns. This included one on one and door to door canvassing by Union de Vecinos members and staff as well as individual neighborhood meetings.

Originally the Watershed Health Council was to manage the actual workshop but asked Union de Vecinos to supervise the meeting with short notice. Held at Maywood City Hall the workshop generated a lot of emotional response and became controversial and argumentative. People pointed fingers and laid blame. Out of concern Los Angeles County Sheriffs were asked to make a presence in order to help quell a tense situation. The meeting also occurred just after one of the three water companies had raised rates, adding more frustration to community members in attendance. It also became apparent that many did not understand the general purpose of the meeting.

The meeting started off with introductions by a city council member and then a dual language powerpoint presentation by a representative from the EPA. Translation equipment was provided for both English and Spanish speakers to listen to one another. The initial presentation is followed by a questions and comments session. The Mayor of Maywood makes a point that he does not support the meeting and will therefore not stay for a number of reasons and that he feels that Union de Vecinos misleads the public. He ends up staying after a heated interaction with community members. The director for Union de Vecinos, Leonardo Vilchis, steps forward throughout the meeting to facilitate and keep focus on the tasks at hand. During the workshop session thirteen breakout groups are created with the intent of putting forth and answering questions of concern from the community regarding city parks, the mounds of possibly contaminated dirt next to the clean up site, water concerns, water pipes, water quality, consolidation of the

three private water companies into one public water company, and more. These break out groups were monitored and kept on track by staff members from Union de Vecinos. In these groups questions and answers are written down for the purpose of further discussion. This is followed by presentations from each of the groups to the entire meeting, the end purpose being that the involved agencies will create reports addressing concerns and possible solutions, bring the reports back to the community for feedback and input, and then present a final report with recommendations and reasonable solutions including the possibilities of finding grant money to improve water systems.

Union de Vecinos was chosen to help facilitate and design this meeting because of their tight focus on the community and their strategies. They utilize an approach to the community that works by being a constant outreach continuum that is separate of contracts and external funding resources. This allows them to focus on the issues revealed through this process rather than give attention to single fixed issues. It thus allows them to remain flexible to the changes and concerns of the community.

As a result of the education and reflection that occurred in the water workshop community members have become better informed and have been able to alert the California State Legislature to the needs of the community. Results are gradually being put into place that will effectively resolve the issues.



**Video #3: Los Angeles Rent Control Protest (viewing time- 8 min.)**

The Los Angeles Human Right to Housing Collective is a network of resident-led organizations and committees that have joined together to form a city wide tenants movement, the purpose of which is to build a base of power for promoting and influencing the human right to housing in Los Angeles area housing policies. Active member groups include Comunidad Presente, LA Community Action Network, LA Anti-Eviction Campaign, Legal Aid Foundation of Los Angeles, POWER, and Union de Vecinos.

On May 20, 2011 members from these organization, including residents served by Union de Vecinos living in Boyle Heights and Maywood joined together in solidarity to protest against unfair housing practices at Los Angeles City Hall. The issues of concern included rent stabilization reform, protection for public housing, and the rights of tenants to be included in the decision making and participation processes that effect them regarding these issues. This video documents the protest which begins with a gathering on the steps of City Hall to listen to speakers, then moves to the street directly in front of City Hall and then finally into City Council Chambers where many involved in the protest spoke out in support of these issues, voicing there concerns to council members (though this part is not included in the video). This was also a protest against attacks by officers of the Los Angeles Police Department who ejected tenants from Council Chambers a year prior.

The scuffles that broke out with over 60 LAPD officers using excessive force the previous year occurred after council members had backed off on a promised rent increase moratorium.

The 4-month moratorium being considered by City Council was in part a reflection of many months of work by tenants and supporting organizations (Union de Vecinos) to reform the rent stabilization ordinance. When tenants began chanting against the betrayal by council members the council president ordered police to remove them by force.

**Videos can be viewed at the following internet locations:**

Video #1: Maywood Walking Tour (viewing time- 17 min.) <https://vimeo.com/85306057>

Video #2: Maywood Water Workshop (viewing time- 27 min.) <https://vimeo.com/86475271>

Video #3: Los Angeles Rent Control Protest (viewing time- 8 min.) <https://vimeo.com/85305433>

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