

Bolivia: Struggle for the Right to Collectively Own Land

by María Belén Choque

A community of 1000 low-income families on the outskirts of Cochabamba city, Bolivia, is currently in a historic struggle to maintain their constitutional right, the right to own property collectively.

The right to collectively own land appears in the new Bolivian Constitution (adopted in 2010) mainly because some rural communities retain their centuries-old custom of collectively owning land, particularly pastoral land. The *Comunidad María Auxiliadora* has found that there are also many benefits in owning urbanized land collectively. However, these benefits, and the existence of the community in general, is currently threatened by a small group of residents who want to profit from selling their houses, and are fighting a dirty war in order to be able to obtain private ownership. This group is supported by a mafia, including corrupt local government officials, who profit from buying and illegally selling land.

You might imagine that such a community would be supported by the MAS (*Movimiento Al Socialismo*, Movement towards Socialism) national and local governments, as it ticks many of their boxes. It offers an alternative to the use of land as a commodity, for making a profit. It is undoubtedly part of the *Proceso de Cambio*, the process of chang-

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ing society from one where the indigenous majority had no access to, or representation in, any decision-making state processes and where indigenous people were treated like second-class citizens, to a society where there is equality at all levels. Giving the opportunity to low-income indigenous and mestizo people to own their own house, to live with dignity in adequate housing, to develop their community according to their necessities, this is the *Proceso de Cambio*.

Another policy of the government is *Vivir Bien* (Live Well), i.e., having basic material needs met but also valuing other aspects of life: the social and spiritual, being healthy, living in harmony with nature. President Evo Morales often talks about the value of “community,” and the majority of residents of the *Comunidad María Auxiliadora* perfectly understand the benefits of living in a community where there is mutual self-help and solidarity. They know that their community is very different from other peri-urban barrios, where children roam the streets while their parents work, where there are teenage gangs, where people are frightened to leave their houses empty during the day in case they are robbed.

While various people in authority have visited the community over the years and said it is a model for all peri-urban areas in Bolivia, these are empty words, as there is little real support due to the powerful lobby that is threatened by the success of the community and the possibility that it might be replicated in other areas. The Constitution, the law, government policies and the truth are 100% in favor of the community. But those opposing it are using outrageous lies, corruption and violence to gain what they want: to make money. Indeed, they are using all the well-tried methods of the political right in their campaign: economically, through not paying their water bills to the community; politically, using corrupt local government officials and representatives to stall any community transactions and projects and to further their own; legally, denouncing the founder of the community and managing to (corruptly) have her put in prison while awaiting trial; through consistently lying to the media; using violence, attacking members of the community *Directorio* (Committee) and then reporting them to the police.

So, what is this community that has changed the lives of hundreds of people? It was founded by Bolivian Rose Mary Irusta, and has been in existence for 13 years. She managed to convince the owner of a dry hillside on the outskirts of the city to sell the

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land, and that she could pay for it bit by bit as people paid to enter the community.

The principles of the community are as follows:

- The land is collective. All residents are owners of all of it, so each family does not own their individual plot, although they have a legal document that

gives them the right to live on that plot, to build a house, to leave it to their children. The rest of the land—roads, green spaces, areas for public services, etc—and the services such as water supply and sewage, are collectively managed.

- The community is for low-income families who do not own any house or land in Bolivia. As in most Latin American countries, there are millions of families in Bolivia who live in 1 or 2 rented rooms, with no prospects of ever improving their quality of life or having decent, adequate housing. Most of the adults in the community work selling in the market, washing clothes, cleaning houses, driving taxis, as night guards or in the building trade. Many are recent immigrants from the countryside.
- The land is for living, not for profit. The cost of entering the community is low (\$600) and does not go up. It can be paid in installments over one year, and is returned if a family wants to move out of the community. Once allotted a housing plot the family must live there within six months, be it in a temporary shelter. The community is for families who really need somewhere to live, and the money saved by not paying rent elsewhere can then go into constructing a house. Very importantly, the plot cannot be sold or rented to others.

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- Traditional forms of organizing found in indigenous rural communities in Bolivia are recuperated: community work, *ayni* (a group of people all help one family, then another), *kermeses* (a festival where all the community pay for a collectively prepared meal, so raising money for the community), etc. These activities unite the community and allow people to get to know one another. The community has built its own water system, sewage system and treatment plant, community office, children's nursery and library, all with community work.
- Women's leadership is actively encouraged, recognizing first that mothers in Bolivian society, as in many others, are usually more involved and concerned than fathers about the welfare of the children, and second, that the participation of women is usually undervalued. The president and vice president of the community are always women. Families with single parents are particularly encouraged to join the community.
- There is a *Directorio* (Committee) elected every two years, which manages different aspects of the community. There are subcommittees for basic services, for managing the accounts, for supporting families with problems. Participants in the compulsory monthly *asamblea* (community meeting) for all residents have the final word in decision-making.

In the 13 years of its existence the improvement in the quality of life, particularly for children, young people and women, is very noticeable. Emma is a good example. She never attended school, lost her parents at the age of 11 and had to start work wash-

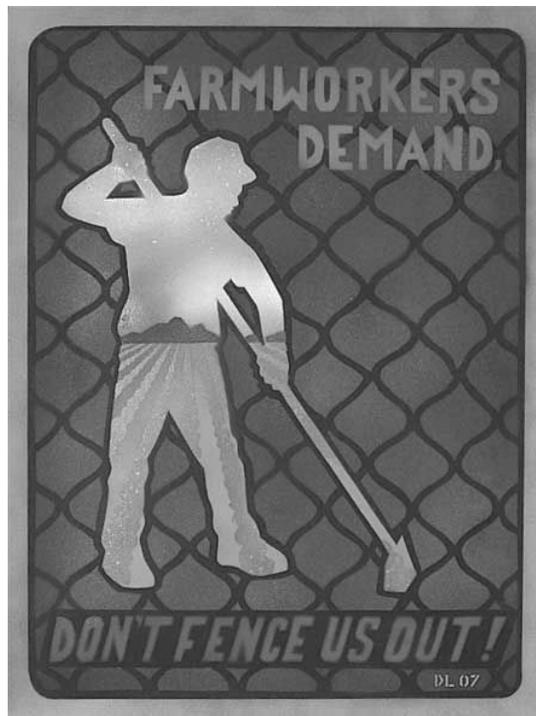
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ing clothes. She faced the difficulties of raising two children on her own with no help from the state or her ex-husband, working as a maid, washing clothes, or selling in the street. It was difficult to find even one room to live in; landlords don't like to rent to single parents as they are financially less stable. Owning her own house was just a dream. Emma, now in her 60s, has a nice house in the community with running water, electricity and sewage connection. Her daughter lives nearby and the grandchildren spend half their time in her house. She makes and sells cakes and herbal creams, and is a respected member of the community, part of the Family Support Committee of the *Directorio*.

Collective ownership is crucial to the success that the community has achieved. First, the price of obtaining a housing plot in the community can be maintained at a low price so that it is always in reach of low-income families. The price is \$3 per square meter of plot, compared to the current price in the neighboring barrio of \$45.

Second, the community as collectively owned has authority that it can use to protect everyone's human rights, particularly children and young people. There is no tolerance of domestic violence, and in 13

years four men have been asked to leave the community by the *asamblea*, the monthly community meeting. Alcoholism is a problem in many barrios, but in the community it is prohibited to sell alcoholic drinks. Private ownership would remove these conditions and the authority of the community, and families would have to rely on state intervention, which is rarely effective. Private ownership would also mean that houses could be rented out, unknown people would be living in the communi-



ty, and a valuable asset would be lost: that everyone knows everyone, strangers are asked who they are looking for, and therefore there is no robbery or gangs in the community.

Third, and very important, collective ownership means that the community feels united, as the residents work together, know each other, show solidarity and help each other when a family has problems. These social assets are very important to low-income people, as they rely on each other day to day and especially when there are shocks and stresses in their lives, because they do not have the financial assets or borrowing power of wealthier families. For example, the father of a family, a builder, fell from a roof and couldn't work for many months. There was a collection in the *asamblea* to help the family, and neighbors brought food for them every day. "We are one big family" is a phrase often heard in the community.

The residents of the *Comunidad María Auxiliadora* have chosen to live communally, and want to continue to do so. They are fighting for the survival of the community because they know that a home is not just four walls but also what goes on inside and outside those walls. They were offered the chance to

have their own house, and at the same time found something just as important: a community.

In some ways what is happening in the community reflects what is happening at a national level in Bolivia, what is putting the brakes on the *Proceso de Cambio*. Bolivia has suffered 500 years of colonialism, oppression and corruption, and it is difficult to change all that in the few years the MAS government has been in power. There have been structural and social changes and programs that have positively affected millions of people, but keeping up momentum is difficult given the still powerful elites and lobbies, given the global capitalist paradigm. In addition, there are many people who do not have a socialist ideology jumping on the bandwagon of a government that has a very high percentage of the vote.

It looks like the battle to save the community will be a long and hard one, but Bolivian people have shown much resilience over the years. As the residents shout on their marches:

¡*Que viva la Comunidad María Auxiliadora!*
¡*Que viva la propiedad colectiva!*

<http://www.zcommunications.org/bolivia-the-struggle-for-the-right-to-collectively-own-land-by-mar-a-bel-n-choque>

