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Not just a house - participatory approaches to  
housing and capacity building in Chile

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## Not just a house – participatory approaches to housing and capacity building in Chile

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In collaboration with communities living in extreme poverty, housing projects facilitated by youth-led Latin American NGO TECHO address the fundamental human rights to adequate living conditions and livelihoods.

When housing provision is addressed in a participatory manner, the process has significant potential to target many social issues and be an instrument of long-lasting positive change. In Chile however, the opportunity to tackle diverse social issues through housing provision is not always taken up. The outcomes of housing provision projects by the youth-led NGO TECHO demonstrates that a practical and participatory approach can help communities build capacity, increase social capital and overcome poverty.

### Housing provision in Chile: housing as an end

In line with the increasing trend toward urbanization in Latin America, Chile is a highly urbanized country. Almost 90 per cent of Chile's 17 million citizens currently live in cities (OECD 2013; UN-Habitat 2011). With one of Latin America's fastest-growing economies, consolidated macroeconomic stability and a strong, reliable institutional economic framework, Chile was the first South American nation to join the OECD (World Bank 2013). While Chile has made impressive economic progress, reduced poverty and increased the provision of housing in recent decades, it ranks lowly in several key indicators of the OECD's Better Life Index, particularly in the areas of housing issues and inequality (OECD 2013).

Aiming to reduce the number of informal settlements and the accumulated housing deficit, Chile restructured its social housing subsidy system in the 1980s to adopt a market-based provision approach through public financing mechanisms (UN-Habitat 2011; Posner 2012). From 1980 to 2006, the Chilean government used the well-known tripartite strategy (comprised of a one-time subsidy, mandatory savings and an optional loan component) to produce social housing on a massive scale (UN-Habitat 2011; Rodriguez & Sugranyes, 2011; Posner 2012). The resultant housing policies, however, were too focused on volume and neglected aspects of social housing that are integral for long-term sustainability (OECD 2013).

Key criticisms of the provision of social housing during this time, which contributed to dissatisfaction among beneficiaries, included physical issues – such as poor quality and design and inappropriate location selection, and social issues – including insecurity, lack of space, marginalization, intensified social stratification and a decrease in collective action and unity (Rodriguez & Sugranyes 2011; Posner 2012; OECD 2013b).

Given that the housing problem in Chile was no longer solely quantitative in nature, in 2006, and later in 2011, the Ministry of Housing and Urbanism (*Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo*, or MINVU) launched important changes to housing policy. These changes shifted the emphasis of social housing to focus on the poorest 20 per cent of the country's population, who were largely unable to access previously implemented programs (UN-Habitat 2011). In addition, the Housing Solidarity Funds Program (*Fondo Solidario de Eleccion de la Vivienda*) allowed social and private organizations to work together with municipalities to provide housing, as well develop solutions for other neighbourhood social issues (Burgos 2011). This program is multipurpose in nature and seeks to overcome poverty by reducing Chile's housing deficit, providing a quality housing product, ensuring community participation in project design and consolidating the participatory management of the public system (Guernica Consultores 2012). Nevertheless, housing provision is still predominantly seen as an end in Chile. This approach neglects to take advantage of the participatory processes involved in the provision of housing and the potential for capacity building in the poorest areas of the country.

### TECHO and the value of the housing process for capacity building

*Un TECHO para Chile* (TECHO) is a youth-led not-for-profit organization created in 1997 that is now established in 19 countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. TECHO

started working together with families living in extreme poverty and volunteers to overcome poverty in slums and produce concrete solutions to their specific problems.

TECHO's community intervention model is organized in three phases: (1) engaging with slum communities and diagnosing families' needs; (2) implementing solutions related to liveability, education, labour or other areas that may need to be addressed; and (3) implementing lasting and sustainable housing solutions, including basic services such as property regulation, the provision of infrastructure, new housing projects and connecting families with relevant government institutions.

### **TECHO's housing process: effective practice for capacity building**

TECHO works as a housing facilitator entity (EGIS/EP) and provides technical and social assistance to families to access government subsidies and develop permanent housing solutions through a robust, participatory approach. Adhering to this approach, TECHO delivered 3,981 housing units in Chile between 2006 and 2012. The housing provision process is seen as an instrument to engage with the larger community and target other social issues that can positively impact on community members' lives. Left unaddressed, these social factors can detrimentally impact the overall potential of a given housing project.

TECHO's participatory model consolidates community self-management through four areas of intervention – community organization, education, employment, and habitability. This participation applies to all the stages of TECHO's intervention model, but it is intensified during

the implementation of lasting and sustainable housing solutions.

The following are some of the innovative approaches that TECHO has adopted in the different areas of intervention:

#### **Community organization**

Activities are developed for families to get organized and create a sense of community, ownership and responsibility to overcome poverty. Empowering local leaders is a key focus of TECHO's participatory approach, ensuring that community leaders have the tools and resources to promote the best interests of the people they represent. The specific tasks and challenges of a housing project present great opportunities for communities and leaders to learn how to arrive at a consensus, look for the collective good, connect with existing support networks provided by the government, get empowered and become change agents within and outside their community.

#### **Education**

The general objective of this area of intervention is to tackle the educational disparities that exist in Chile and create learning spaces for community development. TECHO focuses on different target groups, including school children, who receive tutorials to support their formal studies, and adults, who are invited to participate in workshops to develop employment skills. Engaging families in educational programs during the life of a housing project has the potential to increase the social impact of a given project in the long term and improve the knowledge and tools of community members.



Project *Emati*, 140 families in Estacion Central in the Metropolitan Region of Chile. The TECHO approach to community participation in housing projects has been developed through the NGO's many years of experience working with youth volunteers and families building homes in impoverished communities in 19 countries across Latin America. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

## Employment

Training initiatives aim to improve the employability of community members, as well as support and increase entrepreneurship within communities. Given that 30 per cent of households in slums work independently, TECHO encourages innovation and the creation of new employment sources within the communities it works with, taking into consideration the capacities and backgrounds of individual entrepreneurs and the particular characteristics of each community.

This approach builds on the connection between housing and income generation (Onyebueke 2001). Home-based enterprises (HBEs) are significant for income generation, particularly for women living in low-income communities who are looking to increase their employment opportunities (Tipple 2004). HBEs also have the potential to contribute to the provision of skills to young people (Ezeadiche 2012), bring services and goods closer to people (Tipple 2004), assist with financing, attend to maintenance and improvements of dwellings (Strassman 1987) and promote neighbourhood integration with surrounding communities.

## Liveability

TECHO supports families throughout the process of looking for sustainable, lasting and dignified housing options. TECHO's approach to housing design not only considers families' preferences and ideas but also allows TECHO to give them a general understanding of their housing rights, subsidy possibilities and common social housing issues.

More recently, in light of Chile's current energy insecurity situation – high prices and scarce resources – and potential impacts related to climate change, TECHO has implemented energy efficiency features in selected housing projects. The housing complexes of Lo Espejo and Cumbres Kilimanjaro, for example, have been fitted with structural insulated panels, a versatile technology that has good thermal and structural qualities, is resistant to fire and insects and reduces labour costs. In addition, the community of Lo Espejo obtained a subsidy for hot water solar systems and fundraised for energy saving light bulbs (Mazzone 2011; Moye & Horne 2013).

At present, TECHO's architects are working closely with the Chilean Energy Efficiency Agency (*Agencia Chilena de Eficiencia Energetica*, or ACHEE) on the design of additional energy efficient features that could be incorporated into housing projects. A new pilot program will also be run by ACHEE in some of TECHO's projects, which will involve energy use workshops for community members.

## Outcomes, challenges and lessons learnt

TECHO's community engagement approach has proven to be an effective way to build capacity in communities and overcome certain housing issues, such as house abandonment and dissatisfaction. It has also empowered communities and encouraged their leaders to become change agents, allowing for the development of permanent solutions for their immediate problems.



Project *Un Sueño para Vivir*, 64 families, in Cañete, Bio Bio Region, Chile. Image: Global Compact Cities Programme.

Improvement in quality of life is the most significant outcome of TECHO's housing projects for families. While strong economic improvement does not always occur within communities, employment, upskilling and capacity building related to TECHO's processes allows families to transition from slums to housing developments and cope with increased living costs, such as paying bills not previously incurred. Furthermore, it allows community members to connect with broader society and access an increased range of city networks, institutions and services, thereby encouraging families to take responsibility for their own development.

In relation to the physical aspect of housing, aside from everyday challenges such as budget constraints and community cooperation in maintaining housing, TECHO's Habitat Development Team approach the challenge of closing the loop of their work with communities by carrying out a post-project evaluation. The evaluation phase specifically takes into account how families are modifying their houses and how this knowledge can be incorporated into the design phase.

The modifications and extensions families make to their homes influences their home's functionality. Modifications made to allow family members to carry out commercial activities and spatial modifications affecting energy use are particularly relevant. While home-based businesses provide a range of benefits, potential detrimental effects on the broader community also need to be considered. Drawbacks include negative impacts on residential environments, decreasing residential quality or dwelling value, the creation of hazardous waste and inappropriate working conditions (Tipple 1993). Moreover, if carried out improperly, spatial modifications using low quality materials can affect the efficiency of any existing energy saving features in a house. For instance, leaving cracks and draughts or blocking sunlight may affect thermal insulation and result in a colder and less comfortable home. Rather than condemning these modifications, TECHO regards additions and changes as issues to deal with during the participatory design process of housing projects. Through such a process, the goal is to achieve the optimal integration of business and extension opportunities and avoid detrimental alterations.

By carrying out a post-project and post-occupancy evaluation, TECHO can incorporate knowledge of how families are actually modifying their homes into the design phase in order to prepare spaces for expansion or modification. For example, designating space for local businesses and storage facilities in community areas could allow families to work outside of their homes, yet within their own community, enabling them to still take care of dependent relatives without having to modify their houses. Furthermore, the smart designation of areas for modification and expansion could allow families to save on energy bills while having comfort and the flexibility of using the spaces as needed.

## Conclusion

Chile's strong economy, reliable public institutions and competitive housing policies have allowed private and not-for-profit organizations to be involved in the provision of housing. TECHO has taken up this challenge and sees public housing provision as a sustainable way to overcome poverty and engage low-income families in creating permanent solutions to their immediate problems. TECHO's innovative community participation intervention model creates the opportunity for effective capacity building. Community organization through leadership, involvement, empowerment and education are significant and tangible aspects of TECHO's model. The improvement of employment opportunities and designing spaces that promote habitability create long-lasting impacts for community members. The transition from living in slums to housing complexes presents design challenges for TECHO. Post-project evaluations allow TECHO to develop designs that allow for the expansion and modification of premises in accordance with families' needs, while avoiding detrimental impacts such as discomfort and energy poverty within communities.

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