

CLAG Field Research Grant Report: El Caño Martín Peña: Roots of Land-Based, Intergenerational Struggle

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Abstract

As urban informal settlements face increasing threats of dispossession, residents and planners are looking to the Community Land Trust (CLT) model as a tool to promote community control and affordable housing preservation. The Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust (CMP-CLT) in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was the first CLT designed from within an informal settlement in Latin America and has become a beacon model for similar land-based struggles. More research is needed to better understand the role community organizing can play in CLT/informal settlement developments, as a tool to strengthen and maintain community control over valuable urban land. Because community control is understood to be a vital principle of the CLT model, I argue that engaging a land-based community organizing praxis is an impactful tool to maintain and strengthen community control in CLT/informal settlement developments. In this qualitative case study, I demonstrate ways that leaders in the Caño Martín Peña Social Movement (CMP-SM) have designed a community organizing praxis, guided by land-based knowledge formations that place high value on intergenerational reproductive security. I reveal how the CMP-SM organizing praxis is facilitated by critical pedagogy and civic participation initiatives that promote conscientious local leaders as an intergenerational practice to maintain community control in perpetuity. I engage Marxist theory and transformative organizing theory to help understand how the production of capital works to threaten urban informal settlement stability and how the CMP-SM is organizing to resist such threats. This research contributes to an on-going conversation about what community control can look like through CLT/informal settlement development that has been integrated with a land-based social movement for two decades. This research helps to broaden the on-going conversation about how community control is maintained and increased in CLT developments over time. My findings offer other CLT/Informal settlement developers, organizers and scholars insight into a case that models the vital role that land-based community organizing praxis can play in such developments.

Expense Report

The funds from the CLAG Filed study grant were on travel, room and board costs on an 18-field study to San Juan, Puerto Rico. Additional funds were raised to cover equipment costs and to pay research participants.

Research

In recent decades, broad literature has been developed on the many strengths of Community Land Trusts (CLTs) as solutions to instabilities in urban informal settlements, including research relating to the Caño Martín Peña Community Land Trust (CMP-CLT) case in San Juan Puerto Rico. This case demonstrates a successful model for other CLT/informal settlements

developments in the Global South, most notably, favelas of urban Brazil. More literature is warranted that addresses how community organizing functions within CLT/Informal settlement developments to promote community control. In my research I analyzed findings on the Caño Martín Peña Social Movement's (CMP-SM) organizing praxis, highlighting ways that this praxis centers land-based knowledge formations, embraces intergeneration practices, and is evolving amidst a new generation of youth leaders who came of age as participants in the Youth Leaders in Action (LIJAC) critical pedagogy program. From this research I wrote a professional paper which argues that engaging land-based community organizing is a vital tool to strengthen community control in CLT/informal settlement developments. The paper presents findings from qualitative data I collected from local archives, participant observations and from interviews with community leaders which spotlight the CMP-SM's land-based community organizing praxis. I focused attention to the movement's intergenerational practices in critical pedagogy and civic participation, demonstrating how these practices have been instrumental in the promotion of an emerging generation of conscientious leaders. I explore ways that these new leaders are shifting organizing traditions in the movement by engaging new self-governance practices and asserting a collective critical voice that embodies de-colonial and anti-capitalist discourses and values. The paper presents a theoretical analysis of the social movement's organizing praxis illuminating its structural function as a tool for strengthening community control and spotlighting its potential as a guiding model for other CLT/informal settlement developments engaged in similar land-based struggles. This research helps to broaden the on-going conversation about how community control is maintained and increased in CLT developments over time. It also initiates new conversations on how community organizing in CLT/informal settlement developments serves to maintain and increase community control.

Methods

In my field work I utilized qualitative methods that centered community leader voices as primary sources. In my archival work and fieldwork, I sought stories that reflected how land-based knowledge traverses and transforms across generations of residents, and how such knowledge has helped shape the CMP-SM's community organizing praxis. Storytelling is an integral component of CMP epistemology that functions as an education and mobilization tool shared broadly through the Raíces del Caño (Roots of the Canal) newspaper, media campaigns, video shorts, oral histories archives, and at community meetings/events. My investigation of the social movement story followed these methods.

1. Semi-structured interviews with internal and external movement leaders
2. Archival analysis of the Raíces del Caño newspapers, literature, video, governing documents, and oral histories publications
3. Participant observations of community meetings and events

Interviews

During my 18-day visit to El Caño I conducted 14 semi-structured interviews with local leaders, ENLACE and Land Trust staff members, and external organizers. Interviewees were accessed

through a gatekeeper who is a staff member at the CMP-CLT. This person directly connected me to some participants and welcomed me into community spaces, such as the CMP-CLT office and community events, where I engaged other interviewees. Nine of the interviews were video recorded, and interviews took place in varied locations like in homes, at a Land Trust-owned Park, and in the ENLACE/Land Trust office. All interviews were semi-structured around themes related to the following question: How have local ways of knowing and imaging land (land epistemology) impacted CMP-SM organizing praxis across generations? In most interviews, I asked participants to talk about their relationship to the communities, and to the land starting from their youth. I also gave special attention to themes of community organizing and youth critical pedagogy initiatives. Interviews ranged from 60 minutes to 90 minutes.

I conducted 11 interviews with two local community leaders from two different generational groups:

- The senior group. The senior group included many who had participated in the CMP-SM since its inception in the early 2000s as community council members, activists, and G8 board members. These leaders were all over 50 y/o.
- The emerging group. The younger leaders are under 30 y/o. The younger participants had all been involved in the Young Leaders in Action (LIJAC), presently and/or in their youth. LIJAC is a leadership program for youth that engages them with critical pedagogy and civic participation.

I also spoke to some CMP-CLT staff members about their insights and experiences in the social movement. Of the 14 interviews, 3 were with external organizers who are not from the CMP barrio. These people included the LIJAC Coordinator, a former director of the CMP-CLT, and a lawyer/University Professor/community organizer. These individuals helped give insight into the technical functions of the movement and important historical content.

Participant Observation

While in Puerto Rico, I observed multiple community events, where in some instances I took photos and video, and in others I observed and took notes. I attended a neighborhood meeting on the Maritime Development Zone, a participatory planning meeting revising the Master Development Plan, a youth critical pedagogy hip-hop workshop and a G8 board meeting. In this paper I discuss my observations of the LIJAC-led hip hop workshop that was co-facilitated by two of the young leaders I interviewed. Many of the leaders I interviewed participated in these activities, allowing me to observe the roles that they play on the ground.

Conclusion

The CLAG Field Research Grant allowed me the chance to conduct important field research and also offered me the chance to build long-term solidarity relationships with community organizers from within El Caño. The CMP-SM strongly values international solidarity as a strategy to strengthen their movement for land tenure and environmental justice, and to support other movements through offering technical knowledge exchange. My contribution as

a researcher and an international comrade with the CMP-SM goes beyond my professional paper. In the months ahead I will offer a presentation of my work to the community members of El Caño and will design and deliver a dual-lingual zine to be shared with residents. I also captured extensive video footage of interviews and community events during my travel to be used in a future film project. In coming months, I will be seeking grant funds return to Puerto Rico and complete this documentary project. Furthermore, I plan to maintain my friendships with the El Caño leaders, and engage in future collaborations related to knowledge sharing, solidarity and research.