

León XIII: Finding a Cure for Urban Poverty

By Chrissie Long

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Second in a three-part series about President Laura Chinchilla's poverty program

In recent years, León XIII has been the poster child for poverty in Costa Rica.

For many Costa Ricans, it's the capital of crime, drugs and extreme poverty. Its name is synonymous with conflict and marginalization. And, although it's been pumped with aid money and been the beneficiary of the anti-poverty initiatives of several administrations, it continues to live up to its reputation.

Experts say that the 16,000-resident *barrio* on the fringes of La Uruca, on the northern edge of San José, has one of the greatest indices of crime and drug use in the capital, as well as one of the highest levels of poverty. Because of its sustained underdevelopment and chronic poverty, it was selected for an intensive intervention under President Laura Chinchilla's new poverty program, which hopes to lift 20,000 families out of poverty nationwide before 2014.

"The neighborhood has never received this much attention," said Suyapa Cuadra, who works with the Cultural and Recreation Association of León XIII, and who is one of the point people in the creation of an action plan. "It is exciting to see things in motion."

León XIII grew up as a conflicted area. Surrounding municipalities relocated their high-risk residents to the government housing project, set in a grid surrounding a soccer field. As families grew, tin shelters emerged as outgrowths of the existing homes. The neighborhood grew until it flooded the crevice between San José and Tibás, along the Río Torres. Today, it's the most densely populated area in the country.

Living in Fear

More than makeshift housing and lack of resources, most residents of León XIII are concerned for their safety, as crime has gripped the community in recent years. Many adhere to a self-imposed curfew, afraid to be caught outside when the sun goes down. After 8 p.m., doors remain locked while the streets belong to the gangs. Outside, conflicts often break out into brawls, and gunshots sometimes sound.

For years, the only police presence for the community was a three-man outpost from which officers spoke to residents from behind bars.

"A sense of fear seeps into everything," said Ety Kaufman, director of methods



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Marginalized: In the minds of many Ticos, the community of León XIII represents violence, gangs, drug addictions, and poverty. Local leaders hope to change that perception.

and operations for Acción Joven, an association created to prevent students from dropping out of high school. "The residents of León XIII can't trust anyone. This paralyzes them and penetrates into other aspects of their lives."

José Aguilar, executive director of Acción Joven, says he has come across situations that surprise him as existing in Costa Rica. He's worked with children who have adapted to a life on the street. He's visited homes where an entire family crowds together in one bed. He's spoken with teenagers who are constant victims of abuse and who are falling into drug addictions.

Aguilar said one situation perpetuates another and problems are carried through generations.

"Much of this can be avoided, if you offer kids spaces, activities, support, confidence, hope and opportunity," he said.

Building a New Image

At the end of September, community organizers met at a local church to begin hammering together the framework that will allow the *barrio* to move forward.

Following the blueprint of President Laura Chinchilla's new poverty plan, they gathered all the leaders in the neighborhood – the church leaders, the heads of nonprofits, the healthcare workers, the teachers – and they began to take note of what was most needed in the community.

Aguilar, who stepped into the role as facilitator, said the idea was to construct a community map in three or four working sessions, which would eventually form the cradle for an action plan.

"What we are looking for is, How do we come to an agreement together? What are our priorities? What are our principle actions? What do we see as the future of León XIII?" he said. "All institutions, public and private, are undertaking different projects. Our goal is to see how we can work together."

The community-driven solution is a pillar of Chinchilla's plan to remove 50,000 people from poverty nationwide before 2014. She's selected 26 of the country's poorest towns and neighborhoods as focal points for a relief program through which aid arrives to communities in a coordinated fashion, rather than as shots of stimulation from several directions. Plans are being implemented with an ear to the ground to encourage bottom-up development.

"The community members, in the end, are the ones that know the true problems," said Catalina Peralta, who is charged with administering the program from Chinchilla's new poverty agency. "We are working through local leaders to carry out their ideas."

David Crocker, a professor of public policy at the University of Maryland and an expert in ethical development, sees this agent-based approach, through which communities take responsibility for their own development, as critical to success.

"The questions that I would raise would be: Is this going to be a program that in a substantial and ongoing way involves the recipients? Will it really empower them to take over the institutions that are created? Will they be involved beyond the life of the program?" he asked.

"So many [poverty relief] programs are ones that are imposed by so-called experts on people, and they have limited ownership of them. ... It's really important that people run their own lives rather than being the passive recipient of any development program."

He pointed to Brazil and Peru as examples of countries that have had success in developing experiences in participatory democracy and development, where members of the beneficiary communities aren't just looked to on Election Day, but are constantly involved in self-governance. Brazil has designed a process in which citizens form part of the decision-making team for local government budgeting and for health clinics, while Peru has created avenues through which small and medium-sized producers can access the world market and export their products.

"The strategy here is not reducing poverty by getting a handout from the government," he said. "It's reducing poverty because you have a job and you go to work and you produce things that can be sold in other parts of the world."

Chinchilla's poverty plan corresponds with the implementation of a decentralization plan by which, under law, the government must transfer 10 percent of its budget to municipalities.

Decentralization would create more opportunities for citizen participation, Crocker said, but it needs to be done the right way.

Along with greater responsibilities, there needs to be a focus on empowerment, agrees Katya De Luisa, who has worked in social development programs in Costa Rica since the 1980s.

"You have to figure out who are the people who can make things happen; who has enough leadership skills – not necessarily education – to make things happen," she said. "My personal belief is that you change one person at a time and that person has the potential to change 1,000 others."

Away from Band-Aid Fixes

Aguilar said one of the issues for León XIII has been a tendency to focus only on the problems.

He said, "If you focus just on fixing what's wrong, you don't move forward. We want to teach them how to dream and how to aspire to a better community."

Suyapa Cuadra, who has lived on and off in the *barrio* since she was 17, said that most social programs in the past were focused on the alleviation of the symptoms of poverty.

"There was no thought about development or growth until now," she said, explaining her faith in the potential of the new program. "Before, it was all about fixing existing problems." She said there is interest in beginning with elder care and daycare options for single mothers, but also in the creation of safe areas for children to play.

"León XIII has always been marked nationally," said the 38-year-old. "We want to show that we can change and that there are good people here."

A Different Face of Poverty

León XIII experiences a very different kind of poverty than its rural colleague in Chinchilla's poverty program – Parrita – on the central Pacific coast (see the first story in this series, TT, Oct. 29). Here, in the city, there are plenty of opportunities, but drugs, crime and single-parent households handicap access to opportunity.

With trash-clogged streets, tin- and cardboard-walled homes and overgrown park spaces, León XIII wears its poverty on its sleeve.

"In the urban environment, there are much more drugs, a higher number of school dropouts and people who don't work together; it is very much survival of the fittest," said Katya De Luisa. "In rural communities, there is greater cohesiveness and more involvement from the neighborhood."

She added, "Urban poverty relief can be more challenging."

In constructing the poverty program, Chinchilla's team was aware that the differences in community needs and composition make it so that a one-size-fits-all approach doesn't work. The variation has given leaders of Chinchilla's poverty program all the more reason to look to community-driven plans.

"There is not one recipe that applies to all neighborhoods," said Peralta. "The leaders are different and behavior is different."

According to Peralta, León XIII's action plan has progressed more quickly than that of many other communities mainly because there is great enthusiasm for moving forward. Already there have been measures to clean the neighborhood, boost a student orchestra and support women entrepreneurs in daycare initiatives.

"The idea is to have a clear goal. The challenge becomes who does what," Aguilar said. "It's an ambitious project, but we are moving forward." ■

Next week: How poverty affects an indigenous community

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