
Advocacy case studies

LAND REGISTRATION FOR INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS IN HONDURAS

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| COUNTRY: | Honduras |
| THEMES: | Corruption; land and property; violence and threats |
| ADVOCACY APPROACHES: | Church and community mobilisation; government officials: meeting with; legal mechanisms |

The Mennonite church Iglesia d'Amor, Fe y Vida (Love, Faith and Life Church) is located in the Flor del Campo urban slum area on the edge of the Honduran capital, Tegucigalpa. This area used to be an illegal squatting settlement, plagued by high levels of gang violence, crime, drug abuse and unemployment.

Over many years, the church sought the transformation of the area so that the people there could flourish. The pastor began to teach church members about integral mission using Bible studies to explain the fullness of the church's role in society and the world. As they learnt about it, church members started to consider what this meant for them, and to identify issues in their community that required action. As many people within the community were living in improvised shack dwellings, with no rights to the land and very few public services, they decided to begin their work by addressing the issue of land registration.

Fortunately, the pastor and various members of the church already had good relationships with local authority officials, so they had access to people who could help them to become the legal owners of the land on which they lived. However, they had not anticipated the difficulties they would encounter - including, a wealthy man in a neighbouring community, who claimed to be the landlord of the whole of Flor del Campo and who was charging community members extortionate rent. The church wanted to seek legal advice about how to respond, but found that it would cost more than they could afford. It was only when Tearfund and its partner Asociación para una Sociedad más Justa (Association for a Fairer Society) started to work with them that they were able to get the advice they needed for free.

As the church began work on the issue, they received many threats from people associated with both the government and the mafia. Three local authority presidents were killed for speaking out on the issue in support of the church. When other churches saw what was happening, they refused to work with Love, Faith and Life Church, fearing what association with the pastor and his congregation might mean for them. This was a great source of frustration for the pastor, who wanted to teach other

churches about integral mission, whereas they saw spiritual and social work as separate and unrelated.

The legal battle that followed took a long time, with the man who claimed to be the landlord of Flor del Campo demanding that each member of the community pay him a huge sum of money to gain the rights to the land. On the advice of their lawyer, the community challenged him to prove his legal claim, a tactic that worked, as he was unable to provide the court with legal documentation that demonstrated his ownership of the land. The court concluded that the rent he had been receiving was illegally obtained, and because he had never owned the land, he had no say in the transfer of its ownership.

Eventually, the case was settled and each household, regardless of its size, paid only a small sum to the City of Tegucigalpa –just over a quarter of what the ‘landlord’ had threatened to charge.

Unfortunately, when community members finally received the paperwork giving them rights to their land, the local authority president took all the credit for the victory in the media. But it was the church that had succeeded in getting the community’s land rights upheld and legally acknowledged.