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# Tracing a long history of the Habitat International Coalition and the social production of habitat

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**Maria Silvia Emanuelli**

Habitat International Coalition – Latinamerica (HIC-LA)

*in conversation with*

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## **Abstract**

**Enrique Ortiz** was HIC Secretary between 1988-1999 and HIC President between 2003-2007.

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I met Enrique Ortiz and Maria Silvia Emanuelli at the HIC-LA office in CDMX. I arrived just in time to share a *Rosca de Reyes* cake with the office staff. Before we began recording, Enrique told me about a video in Spanish that explains a great deal about the conditions and international presence of HIC. He mentioned that, after viewing it, we could better understand HIC's origins. The film is about Father Pichi, a highly dedicated priest working in Argentina. For Enrique, watching the film clarified the connections between Latin American movements and liberation theology. During the interview, Silvia was present, attending to the necessary bureaucratic tasks for HIC and occasionally contributing with a comment, fact-checking, and sharing her own experiences.

## **Keywords**

Coalitions, housing, habitat, movement history, social production of housing, internationalism.

## **The origin of HIC**

**Ana:** Enrique, can you tell us a little bit about the history of the Habitat International Coalition? How did it come to be? How would you describe the process of coalition making?

**Enrique:** It was a very long process. It was not only about creating the coalition. The coalition is a result of radical processes happening at more or less the same time. There were a lot of changes in the sixties and a very strong student movement in Europe, in Mexico, and in many other countries. In a way, this was a reaction to the program developed by the Congress of the US, supposedly to defend Latin America from communism after the triumph of the Cuban revolution in 1959. The Alliance for Progress developed specific proposals in many fields of action to prevent socialism, stop the influence of the Cuban revolution, and make space for the private sector. In housing, for example, they were promoting cooperative housing.

**Ana:** Cooperative housing?

**Enrique:** Cooperatives, yes, but what kind of housing cooperatives? Housing cooperatives that were conceived as private enterprises, promoting individual ownership for middle-class families.

**Ana:** What were the places with radical initiatives at that time, to which you had connections?

**Enrique:** From 1962-1965, we were already working in many countries of Latin America. Among the oldest and most significant organizations were Cinva in Chile during the times of Paulo Freire, before Allende; Copevi in Mexico, which started in 1962; and Desco in Peru in 1965. The experience in Chile was particularly intense. There were many *campamentos*, as they were called, where organized groups of people invaded plots and swiftly built provisional housing. This was mainly supported by the Communist Party and grassroots organizations and was assisted by *El Hogar de Cristo* in Chile, coordinated by Josse van der Rest.<sup>1</sup> He was the son of the owner of the main asbestos factory based in Belgium. The initiative existed before his arrival, but he expanded it to many countries. He was a Jesuit, and the Jesuits had very active members connected to him in Asia. In Chile, *El Hogar de Cristo* was responsible for producing provisional wooden housing components. This process and its distribution were highly systematized. They could send



**Figure 1 & 2**

Cooperative Palo Alto 1960s, Mexico City.  
Image: Enrique Ortiz.

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<sup>1</sup> And later, SELAVIP, the organization that continued the legacy of Josse van der Rest.

the components for five houses in a truck to the occupied sites and assist the community in assembling them in just a few days. The participants would also place a Chilean flag on the house to prevent the police from desecrating this national symbol.

**Ana:** When did you started being involved in movement for housing justice?

**Enrique:** In 1965, Copevi was legally established as a civil association. Six months later, after I received my professional degree, I joined this very interesting group of architects and social workers. It was there that I met my wife, a social worker and one of the founders of the organization. We learned a lot from each other. This group stemmed from an experience that was connected to the renewal movement initiated by John XXIII. His vision made a significant impression on many groups in Latin America. At that time in Mexico, the organization responsible for the church's social pastoral work promoted the creation of many workers' pastoral groups and civil society organizations to help the church serve the poor. The Chileans were very advanced in comparison to Mexico at that time. Carlos Núñez, an architect from Guadalajara, and I were invited to Chile in 1969. During that visit, I became acquainted with a communist organization called Violeta Parra, which was involved in many land occupations.

Do you know who Violeta Parra was? She was a singer who focused on the struggle for political and social change. At that time, she had already committed suicide, but we had the chance to meet her daughter and son, also musicians. Her son had composed a song in solidarity with the Mexican movement of 1968.

Carlos had studied housing cooperatives in Germany. He was an architect with a deep social vision. We met a lot of interesting people from Uruguay at this meeting and decided to go there to see what they were doing. In Uruguay, we saw wonderful urban housing experiences and spoke with people who were providing technical and social assistance to the cooperative movement. It gave us a very clear idea of what to do. Already in 1968, they had a relevant housing law promoted by Juan Pablo Terra, an architect and a member of the Christian Democratic Party who was working in a coalition with all the left-wing parties. This law has more than 50 articles related to cooperative housing, including alternative forms of tenure, legal, technical, financial, and participatory instruments.

Then we went to Bolivia to meet Luis Ramírez, an architect leading an NGO focused mainly on rural areas in a very interesting way. In Peru, we saw the government changing its perspective and beginning to work with homeless people who were invading plots by granting them land—just land, with no services. People were organizing there to work on that. We also went to Colombia where we connected with people associated with Camilo Torres, a priest who was killed because of his involvement in the social struggles and political processes of the left.

**Ana:** Were there any other encounters at that time?

**Enrique:** In 1971, I returned to Chile with my wife. During those days, Fidel Castro arrived in Chile. He stayed a month, trying to convince the left-wing government that infighting between the parties was leading to their loss. They did not heed the warning. Two years

later, with many economic and political interests at play, Allende's dream of social change was destroyed.

On that trip, we visited many cities in Colombia, Venezuela, Brazil, Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, and some countries in the Caribbean Islands, where we contacted numerous organizations dealing with issues in our respective fields of action. We learned a lot from them and established many lasting relationships that remain a very active and significant part of our HIC Latin American network.

**Ana:** How did you get resources for these trips?

**Enrique:** I sold my old car, received some support from my mother, and the solidarity of our friends in the various places we visited, who invited us to stay in their homes. I remember I was able to negotiate a ticket using miles from Los Angeles to Buenos Aires, which gave us the possibility of making 35 stops. At Copevi, we started to work with a new perspective that was more critical and clearer, striving to work with organized groups of people. We learned that organization was fundamental and that we should not individualize the processes, but rather collectivize them.

**Ana:** How did the idea of forming an international LA network emerged?

**Enrique:** The idea of creating a network in Latin America emerged after working for eleven years at Copevi, at the first United Nations meeting on human settlements in Vancouver in 1976. We were invited there to talk about our experience. We were part of the parallel meeting, not the official one. In Vancouver, we contacted many people who were thinking the same way we were, of course, with the specific cultural and political differences of each country.<sup>2</sup> We also met Han Van Putten there, one of HIC founders, during a time when many South American countries were living under dictatorships. He was coordinating discussions among civil society on housing and human settlements in general. We were very critical of their approach, but Han's democratic vision helped us strengthen our points of view and to appreciate his openness.

When we returned from Vancouver, because of our active engagement in the process, I was invited to join and lead the group that was working on the first National Housing Program in Mexico. The acceptance was a very difficult decision for me because I had been fighting with the government before that. But many of the people involved in our work were telling me, 'You have a chance to make a difference. Do it.'

After we finished the plan, I told them I wanted to return to Copevi to implement some concrete experiences to make it happen. My boss didn't agree with that. He wanted me to assist with the international work and sent me to a meeting convened by SELA (The Latin American Economic System) and the government of Ecuador. SELA, created by the governments of Venezuela and Mexico, was in charge of promoting committees to

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<sup>2</sup> HIC was established as a result of these exchanges parallel to Habitat I, in Vancouver in 1976, already as a global network, of which HIC-LA is a crucial part of. For more information about this origin, see: *Habitat International Coalition and the Habitat Conferences 1976-2016*, available at: <https://www.hic-net.org/habitat-international-coalition-and-the-habitat-conferences-1976-2016/>

create programs on different issues with the participation of interested countries from the region.

Ecuador was the host of an Action Committee on Housing and Social Interest Buildings (CAVEIS).

Upon my arrival, I was informed that they wanted Mexico to chair this Committee. After consulting with my bosses in Mexico, I assumed this responsibility for two terms.

At that time, my Argentine friend, Fernando Chaves from Alahua, was living there, and we worked on both things: strengthening Alahua and this committee as two parallel initiatives. After the Sandinistas won their war against the government of Somoza, we decided to participate in the reconstruction of Nicaragua.

We had no money, but we began talking with other countries, and Venezuela committed to help. Venezuela had purchased houses from a factory owned by the son of the president of Costa Rica, which produced wooden houses, but they were not liked in Venezuela, so 3,000 houses were given to us.

The Mexican government also sent experts to assist in different aspects related to habitat and housing. Luis Ramirez, our colleague in Bolivia, who had already had a successful experience working in Nicaragua, was on his way back from a job in the US and visited me while passing through Mexico. I invited him to coordinate our initiative, which he gladly accepted, remaining in Nicaragua for ten years.

That's why I'm saying we have a long history of building relationships. Also, in Habitat II in 1996 in Istanbul, all the groups from Latin America came together. We had a very intense meeting and produced a document with proposals for the governments. Some of us were invited by our governments because the United Nations asked the countries to also include a group of civil society representatives. Because of that, some of the HIC member organizations were invited. We were there to defend the right to housing against the United States and Japan, who, as part of the 52 countries making decisions in the committee, had a very strong attitude against the right to housing, saying that housing was an individual responsibility and not a human right.

**Ana:** How did you formulate this difference in approach to housing at that time?

**Enrique:** We were defending the idea of human rights. The experience of 1996 prepared us for another way of working in Latin America. After the meeting in Istanbul, there was a meeting in Nairobi to discuss how to include the poor in decisions about the habitat agenda. We organized ourselves and went there to talk with the governments. However, the governments were not interested, and they only sent the Mexican representative to coordinate our meeting. We were very unhappy with that, and it was something that stimulated HIC to work as an independent coalition at the global level, based on a human rights perspective.

Going back some years, at a meeting organized by HIC in the Reichstag in Berlin in March 1987, as a follow-up to an assembly held in Kenya during the 10th anniversary of Habitat

I, some Latin American friends invited me to participate as a candidate to head the General HIC Secretariat.

I needed one more year to consolidate FONHAPO, the National Fund of *Popular* Housing of Mexico, but after many changes a few months later I decided to run for this position. At a Board meeting in India in 1988, they decided to nominate me for that position.

At that time, HIC membership was very weak in Latin America, Africa, and other parts, so we immediately started to build a strong network in our region and activate our contacts in other regions. Besides the already existing relations in Latin America, our common language helped us a lot, even with Brazil, where they have developed *Portuñol*, a practical approach to understanding each other and working together. It was also straightforward to work in Asia, where the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights (ACHR) was already very strong. The Latin American network was already there; we only needed to officially bring them together.

**Ana:** What was the significance of HIC for the local situation? What was happening in Mexico at that time and how did HIC influence what was going on here?

**Enrique:** Well, at that time we didn't worry too much about Mexico. Our main concern was to build the international network. We were primarily working internationally. I was traveling like crazy. I would be in Asia, then come back to Mexico, stay one day here, and then go to Africa. I learned how to avoid jet lag.

**Ana:** How did you do it?

**Enrique:** Trying not to sleep on the plane, waiting until the night of your arrival. You are tired, but you get used to the time difference more easily. I learned how to do that to be able to travel and build the network.

Asia was very strong, and we worked a lot with them. They had a central office based in Thailand. I learned that we had to establish something similar in Latin America to build a stronger coalition. For example, in Africa, all the regional members of HIC in Africa—French-speaking Africa, English-speaking Africa—were located within large NGOs. In the case of Latin America, it was also housed within an NGO in Colombia. I saw that it was much more productive to have a completely autonomous entity to be able to devote all your time to the coalition's purpose and not make it a part of your secondary activities.

### **Envisioning and practicing innovative strategy**

**Ana:** How would you describe the works of coalition building in one sentence?

**Enrique:** Well, the main thing is to support people's processes and to create connections among them.

**Silvia:** Maybe you could also explain the strategic objective of HIC?

**Enrique:** While I was the Secretary, I realized that we had to be more consistent. In HIC, there are people from Africa, Asia, Latin America, Europe, and North America. At the first meeting in Colombia, they were fighting among each other because they had different approaches. From this, we learned that we needed to respect the different ways of doing things in the regions and have a common, very simple strategy. It is not necessary to control everything and make a pyramidal organization that will instruct people on how to act. This is a very bad idea that could destroy everything. We had to build a network that worked, recognizing our differences, and that considered difference as something good in the construction of a common strategy.

**Ana:** Did the approach stay the same after you left the position of secretary?

**Enrique:** When I finished my term as Secretary, the next Secretary was from South Africa and a member of a grassroots social organization. However, this approach didn't work so well because they encountered problems dealing with multiple languages. It was at this time that we decided on a strategy based on three main points. The first one is that we are not working for ourselves; we are not an organization working only for its members. Our goal was to work for those who are suffering, for those who lack adequate housing conditions. This is who we have to work for. That was our main strategy, and to make this happen, we had to influence public policies. That's what the second point is about: we need to work with governments to influence policies and build the capacities to do that. Our third point was to reinforce our own network with people who are convinced of our cause, and to forge alliances with other networks and the people working within them.<sup>3</sup>

**Ana:** How many people make HIC? And how different are the groups and organisations?

**Enrique:** A new member from India, for instance, is a social movement with 5 million people in the organization. This is why we have an impact. If you want to know the number of people and organizations that are members of HIC, it depends on how you count them. If you count those that contribute something, there are very few, perhaps only 200. If you count the ones that have been accepted as members of HIC, there are around 400 from 100 countries. But some of them have thousands of members, while others have only three. People respect the way we do things without exerting control, and this is why they join. It is a different way of organizing. One of the things we have learned is not to coordinate the network from the secretariat, but to undertake projects that are done together. Take research, for example. We are conducting research to empower our networks and to influence governments. This helps build strong relationships, and it also teaches you that you have to work with more flexibility, with different ways of doing things, different cultures, and political contexts.

You are not working for yourself or for money; you are also working for your country. This is what has been accomplished in this office. We are working internationally, but we

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<sup>3</sup> From another reflection about HIC's role in strengthening networks, published at RHJ, see: Allen, A., Cociña, C., and Wesely, J. (2020) Habitat International Coalition: Networked practices, knowledges and pedagogies for translocal housing activism, *Radical Housing Journal*, 2(2), 181-192.



are also working here to influence policies in Mexico. If we accept difference as a strong value, we gain very rich experiences from which we can learn. Silvia can talk about what she has been doing to bring people together to think collectively.

**Silvia:** We have regular online meetings with members and also events of specific working groups where we establish priorities and coordinates to promote different topics at the national, regional and international level in order to promote the right to adequate housing. Many years ago, we had a project with Oxfam in which organizations came together to propose policies to financially support the social production of habitat which is a way to realize the right to housing. I'm not sure if you are familiar with the concept of social production of habitat? Enrique can explain it later. Five groups in five different countries were deciding together what to fight for strategically in each country obtaining very interesting results. More recently, also within the framework of a social movement network, SELVIHP (Secretaría Latinoamericana de Vivienda y Hábitat Popular), with which we are very closely associated, organizations in Brazil, Argentina, and Venezuela were thinking together about self-managed laws of popular habitat. They have proposed tree laws, all in the same spirit. I think this is something happening here that is significant. It is not just about how you make good advocacy but what you advocate for. We also fight for the social production of habitat to be recognized at the international level, in the UN Habitat agenda, for example

**Enrique:** We work on different levels: internationally, regionally, nationally, and locally at the city level, for instance. We have an influence on many aspects of our cities in Mexico. We are collaborating with the city government, the national government, and regional government. I think that governments are not in a position to effect change right now. There is a lot of pressure from the world's major powers that prevent them from doing so. We need to actively organize ourselves to promote changes and press governments to support them. In Mexico, for example, there is a long tradition of colonization. People are always criticizing the government and expect it to solve problems but do very little to make this happen. We have to push them to take action. In our field, we are promoting



**Figure 3 & 4**

El Barrio Intercultural.  
Images: Enrique Ortiz.

the social production of habitat as an activity that requires active and committed participation from inhabitants.

**Silvia:** Can you tell us a little bit about the social production of habitat? I don't think that people in Europe are very familiar with that concept.

**Enrique:** I will tell you. It is quite simple in a way. There are two main ways of housing production. The first one is the profit market production of housing. There is also public production of housing. For instance, in Mexico, a big housing project, Nonoalco Tlatelolco, was produced in the 1950s by the government. This is a large housing unit for 65,000 people. But after the entrance of neoliberalism, the government has been supporting only private production and stopped supporting public production. We introduced the idea of social production in the first National Housing Program in Mexico. We created a national fund (FONHAPO) to give money to the organized production of housing by the people.

Social production is a form of production controlled by the people, by the same people that are going to live there. Most of the popular housing in Latin America is produced individually by the families, with little or no government support. They need 15 to 30 years to build their homes. Another option with strong transformative potential is to produce homes in an organized way. You have to press the government to support policies that will provide credits and subsidies. In this model, people have control of the process. People are the ones who say what kind of housing they want, interacting with their technical and social assistants. The best way to do it includes the adoption of consensual decisions taken by the assembly.

New approaches questioning the common practices ruled by the system need permanent attention to keep all members informed and aware. Palo Alto, one of the most famous housing cooperatives in Mexico, recently had a big fight because they forgot about many of these things. Decisions have been made in an assembly from the beginning, not by the president of the cooperative. The cooperative was an instrument created by the assembly, and the president of the cooperative was in charge of bringing the decisions made by the collective to action. This is something many of the members forgot. They didn't prepare the young people to understand the importance of their struggle, this form of tenure, and collective decision-making, and many of them started to be moved by economic interests. Gossip is frequently used to divide by economic and real estate interests. You make someone a scapegoat, and then people start to be suspicious of that person and start to fight among themselves. It is unbelievable, absolutely unbelievable. After nearly 30 years of working together and defending their place, this is what money is doing. The owners of the big buildings in front of their community gave 10 million Mexican pesos to the cooperative to diminish their impact. The president of the cooperative gave part of it to the members of his team and tried to improve the roof of their main meeting room. They demolished the original roof, but the remaining money was not enough to rebuild it. They lost their meeting place; they lost their organization, and they lost consistency because they forgot many of the principles that have governed this cooperative for nearly 50 years.

**Figure 5**  
Cooperative Palo Alto in  
the present.  
Image: Enrique Ortiz.



This is something you have to control very closely. What we want in social production is for the control to be in the hands of the people and for you to be producing for living, not for profit. This form of production implies a collective effort that builds conscious and active citizens, and also helps them fight together with other organizations to promote policy instruments that help face other habitat, economic, and social challenges. We have the recognition of housing cooperatives in the Constitution of 1917, and for 106 years, our authorities have not been able to legislate on this issue and build specific instruments to expand its social impact.

They are recognized like any other cooperative, which creates total confusion. People cannot defend themselves. You cannot defend Palo Alto because there is no legal framework. Palo Alto was a great experience; now it faces the risk of falling into a great disaster. But perhaps they will find their way out of this.

What we perceive now more clearly is that the social production of habitat has a strong capacity to help the transformation of society. Many interconnected crises are taking the world to a disaster. The way we are dealing with nature, the way we are building inequality, the way we inhabit the world makes no sense. We are destroying life on our planet and we are destroying our communities, stimulating violence, dispossession, and hopelessness. Social production of housing can contribute from the perspective of our field of action to transformation if it is well-managed, accepted by the people, and in interaction with other new approaches.

**Ana:** What are examples of social production of habitat here in Mexico?

**Silvia:** The Urban Popular Movement of México, for example, has built on Chapultepec Avenue through social production of habitat, housing for the indigenous population.

**Figure 6**  
Cooperative Palo Alto in  
the present.  
Image: Enrique Ortiz.



These indigenous people are part of the movement, and they still organize as a collective. They hold assemblies and make decisions together around all the project. On Chapultepec Avenue, a very central and important location in Mexico City, they were able to achieve the expropriation of an abandoned plot and get financial support from the government to build a housing unit with an assembly space, a temazcal (traditional ceremony/bathing place), and other collective services.

**Ana:** What kind of loans did they get?

**Silvia:** Well, the Instituto de la Vivienda del Distrito Federal, an institution built thanks to social pressure, granted credit for this project and other instances subsidies. It is a combined effort.

### **We need a major change**

**Ana:** I spoke with some younger people here in Mexico City who are now being displaced by the processes of gentrification, driven by the migration of a mobile workforce from richer countries, especially the US. They told me that they don't see social production of housing as a solution for their situation. They perceive it more as a solution for groups that already have a specific lifestyle or live in more peripheral parts of the city.

**Enrique:** Yes, because there is a lack of consciousness. If you really understand what is happening in the world, not just what is happening in your little town, then you see that we need another way of living. Even people with money are changing. I spend a big share of my time in the Valle de Bravo area. There are a lot of young families moving from Mexico City and trying to live in a very different way, but still, much has to be done to change our attitudes, awareness, and dependence.

**Ana:** I also heard opinions that people displaced by Airbnbs are reluctant to resist evictions. How do you see this situation?

**Silvia:** I think that things are changing. On November 17, 2023, we had a mobilization that was organized by *Gatitos contra la desigualdad* (Kittens Against Inequality), which is a group

of young people with a significant presence on Twitter (more than 70,000 followers). They called for mobilization against Airbnb and gentrification. For the first time, we had a call coming from a Twitter group. Our office, which has worked extensively on this issue, supported the mobilization and participated in the drafting of the document that was delivered at the end of it to representatives of the Secretariat of Urban Development and Housing of Mexico City. The authority said they would give an answer in 15 days, but there was no response.

**Enrique:** We need a big change. With these partial and isolated actions, we can't change anything. What I noticed at the World Social Forum is that in all the fields of action, you have very interesting experiences, but they are isolated and invisible because the system doesn't want to show them, or they are shown by changing the meaning of what they do. For example, social production. The former government identified prefabrication as social production and gave most of the money to those businesses, and very little to the real social production. People now, after COVID, want to go back to normality. I tell them that we need to go to abnormality, not normality. We need to change completely. This is an opportunity to change everything. But we will lose if people don't unite. The challenge we have in HIC is how to connect different groups that are working on social economy, social issues, and solidarity. This is not socialism. No, you have to build your own community. You have to link these communities. This is a different structure. But to do that, we need to come together and start working. The purpose of making houses is not to publicize them in an article. We want to change society, really, to help society change deeply.

I am very tired now, and I think I need to go home...

**Ana:** I think this is a good place to put a comma in this conversation. I don't want to say full stop because I am sure it will continue in this form or another. I agree with you that that it is time for a big change. Thank you so much for your time and for this very important conversation, and I wish you the very best in your struggles.

### **About this Conversation's participants**

The **Habitat International Coalition** (HIC) is a global network committed to the promotion, protection, and realization of the human right to a safe and secure home and community, in harmony with the environment. Established in 1976 to address the pressing housing and habitat issues, HIC has been actively engaged in advocacy, research, and grassroots action for several decades. **Enrique Ortiz** was HIC Secretary between 1988-1999 and HIC President between 2003-2007. Currently a wisdom keeper of the organization. **Maria Silvia Emanuelli** is the regional coordinator of HIC-LA, based in México.

**Ana Vilenica** is a feminist, no border and urban activist and organiser from Serbia currently living in Italy. She is a core member of Beyond Inhabitation Lab and a member of the Radical Housing Journal Editorial collective and the Feminist Autonomous Centre for research (FAC research).

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