

Sustainability and Encroachment Into the Hinterland in Southern Texas

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by

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Thank you very much for having me here today. The first day of this Congress has proven to be very interesting and enlightening. I am afraid that what I have to contribute to the vast expertise assembled here *es muy pequeno. Me espanol is muy mal. Un million perdons por me pobre intento hablo espanol por favor.* I better stick to English before I cause an international incident. This is a very unusual talk for me. I usually speak pretty much extemporaneously, but because of the translation I will attempt to stay pretty close to the written text. At least that way the translators will be happy... even if everyone else is bored silly.

I am going to share with you here today some thoughts concerning a different kind of "disaster." This disaster is a long-term, chronic problem, which is in stark contrast to the acute problems most often discussed as disasters. These chronic slow moving events consist of extreme urban poverty set in an essentially rural settings, which creates a vulnerability that is beyond simple poverty, as if poverty is ever simple. These disasters are often thought of as small scale, impacting 5 to 500 households, but they are wide-spread and end up impacting thousands in not millions of people.

The Texas Water Development Board estimates that more than half a million people in Texas live in, what are termed colonias along the border with Mexico. Colonia, as it used here, means a poor rural subdivision, with substandard public health, transportation and housing infrastructure. It never ceases to amaze me how a term, like colonia, which literally means colony, a place *en la frontera*, synonymous with prosperity, growth, progress, and all that is good in the new world, can take on such a negative connotation. And while the knowledge about these places is rather limited, policy makers are told of the starkest of conditions. Service providers take decision makers and the media on "tours" of these communities to help lawmakers, regulators and potential assistance providers understand the problems of the area better. But unfortunately they often make their point of the need for their own services by showing policy makers the worst conditions. And please do not get me wrong, this is not to say that conditions are not that bad. As the conditions ARE bad!

Let me just touch on some of the many structural conditions that give rise to the development and continuation of the colonias in Texas. First, and perhaps foremost are the economic conditions, of a people searching for a life-long dream of land-ownership and home-ownership; and land owners finding a market for marginally productive lands. Second, a market-place that has a limited capacity for low-cost housing. Most one-or two-bedroom apartments in nearby urban areas are two-and -a-half to three times more expensive to rent rather than colonia lots are to buy. Third, the natural tendency for people with common interests and culture to cling together. These factors come together to push lower income Hispanics in Southern Texas toward marginal lands that are often flood plains, vulnerable to hurricane surge and agricultural runoff. When I these areas are floodplains I under state the problem. Every year during the rainy season the school buses refuse to enter many of the colonias because of the standing water. Many school students wade through 12

to 18 inches of water for up to a mile to get to an area where the school bus can pick them up. And finally, some social services create dependency rather than independence. Field personnel noted that some residents were not available to work because they would earn just enough to make them ineligible for assistance programs that worth more income to them.

Lee Meril wrote a book entitled The Poorest Americans about people in these areas. Some of you may have read it. This book details life in the lower Rio Grande Valley. The book is full of anecdotes of people in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Far from hollow these anecdotes are rich with the first hand experience of living in "the valley" and trying to help people attain a higher education or complete high school. He not only paints the contrast between the "haves" and "have nots", he begins to examine the structural conditions that give rise to the perpetuation of the colonias. Not the least of which is a people caught between two ways of life. The selfless Latino culture based on ascription and strong family ties that often have to be broken to attain a better future centered around self and your immediate family. A people caught between two political systems, one characterized by institutionalized corruption and patronage, the other by cumbersome and often inefficient bureaucracy. A people caught between two economic systems, one using Mexican pesos, the other U. S. dollars, but that is just the tip of the iceberg. One man told us that he had been lucky. He was thankful that he had a steady job as a janitor at a local school. He was grateful that the patron had obtained the job for him. Not that he had done a good job, worked hard, and deserved steady employment, but that he was beholding to the patron for getting him the job. Like a gift from on high. Caught between the old ways of Mexico, including religion, language, culture, and family and education, and those of the United States. Caught between urban and rural ways of life, with subdivisional characteristics in the hinterland. Not enough property to support septic systems in many cases, but far enough from town to create practical logistic (e.g., transportation) problems which are not handled by municipal services. Rural hinterlands far enough from town to be problematic, but with lots that are not substantial enough to raise animals or have gardens sufficient for a the family. And often caught between the efficient bureaucracies that operate in a written world of record, which are mostly in English, and a verbal, face-to-face world, which is almost entirely in Spanish.

In 1992, the Center for Housing and Urban Development at Texas A&M University undertook a project to assist colonia residents, to do *buena cosa en las colonias*, to do "good things in the colonias." My concerns at the time were centered around the lack of information or empirical evidence that could be used to describe existing conditions in the colonias. Fortunately, and some could argue for all the wrong reasons, I argued that the center could "do good things in the colonias" all they wanted and they would never know whether they had helped unless they examined conditions prior to intervention and then assessed the conditions after their efforts. As a result seven community surveys were conducted in seven areas along the border with Mexico, from near Brownsville and the Gulf of Mexico in the east to El Paso at the western edge of the state. In conducting these surveys, and analyzing the resulting data we have learned a variety of things, but perhaps most important among them is that as soon as you think you know the characteristics of colonia residents, you come to understand that you don't. Just as I would be wrong if I said all of you are 5 foot 6 inches tall or 150 pounds in weight, colonia residents are different from place to place and within each place. While there are lots of "mostlys" (e.g., mostly Hispanic, mostly poor, mostly Spanish speaking, mostly Catholic), there are also lots of exceptions. Moreover understand that these exceptions and sometimes misunderstandings have very real and often stark impacts on the effectiveness of public programs and policies in response to the colonias.

Perhaps the most consistent finding across the seven areas we have studied concerns the overwhelming need for jobs. Suffice it to say that the concept of unemployment does not sufficiently capture the concept of employment in the colonias. Distributionally unemployment would be considered high if it reached double digits (e.g., 10 to 12 percent). This would be a five- to seven-fold underestimate for the areas we studied. Unfortunately it does not stop there. If colonia residents are lucky enough to get jobs, they are often temporary, part-time jobs, that are often

seasonal, carry no benefits to speak of, and often they serve at the discretion of a patron or hefe, which adds a degree of vulnerability that few in this room can fully appreciate. Thank goodness! But even here there is considerable variation. Some areas have people working only about half the available work life, while others seem to be characterized by four out of five people being employed in near full-time employment. Granted, sometimes this relative stability comes in the form of several jobs that are located in different locations and require considerable travel time between jobs. But if the main wage earner happens to be working in the maquila doras employment is not the largest problem faced.

Interestingly enough every approach to help people in the colonias, makes important assumptions about the nature of the problem. These assumptions are often at least partially in error. While based on fact, these facts have varying shades or degrees of truth. Not because people are intentionally misleading policy makers and programs, and mostly not because people are trying to exploit colonia residents, although there is certainly some exploitation going on. Sometimes quite to the contrary! For example, a program to help migrant farm workers is started for whatever reasons. So some providers argue that these programs apply to colonia residents since at least part of the historical roots of some colonia areas stem from migrant farm labor. By showing these roots some service providers can achieve a measure of assistance for colonia residents .

But to characterize colonia residents as migrant farm workers is in error, and it can have devastating social policy implications. When we first started our surveys in the colonias, service providers told us that most colonia residents were migrant farm workers and would not be available to interview during the seasonal migration. In fact we were told that starting about April 15th about one in four or five households would be unavailable for interview among colonia residents in the lower Rio Grande Valley; and that right after school ended in mid-May this would climb to over half; and that by mid-Summer it would reach seven of ten households boarded up with the residents being unavailable until the migrant season was over in the Fall.

Now imagine you are a service provider for colonia residents and this is the knowledge you possess of the colonia life. I ask you, would you supply colonia residents with summer programs for children for example youth activities, team sports, day camps? Well perhaps you would, but you would certainly gear your program to but a few participants. Most likely you would choose to spend your limited resources on some other program more likely to assist most residents. We decided that we would go ahead and conduct our research in the Spring and Summer months of 1992, and keep track of households that were unable to participate because of migration; the houses are easily identified because they are usually boarded up and look abandoned. And they could be revisited in the Fall if the problem became serious. In the five colonia areas in the lower Rio Grande Valley only one area reached double digit migration (of the variety where the house was boarded up and no one was available to interview), and it was only 11.5%. The other areas were well under 10%!! Moreover, when we added the total agricultural worker populations to these, the maximum number of farm workers (either migrant or non-migrant) in any given area reached only about one in three. The point is not that we were lied to; the people that told us of the migrant farm worker issue were well intentioned and probably believed that their statements of fact truly characterized the situation, but they did not! If you are a program manager or a policy maker. the nature of the programs offered to residents in the summer under these two dramatically different situations varies tremendously.

Last Spring the local chapter of the League of Women Voters and the Just Peace Institute organized a forum on immigration. There were noted academics, demographers and political scientists, as well as private sector institutes and the executive director of the Presidential Commission on Immigration. A distinguished panel to be sure. The academic participants detailed the nature of the growth, its magnitude and implications for population in the near future. The private sector representative detailed the fear that large numbers of immigrants engender, and called for greater protection. The representative from the Presidential Commission presented a policy of

electronic surveillance that would "surely stem the flow illegal immigration" into this country. One of my colleagues who is here at this Congress, Ben Aguirre, pointed out to me that not one of the speakers mentioned, let alone addressed the motivation of immigrants. No one discussed why people come to the United States from Mexico! And he is right. The point is that history tells us that bigger walls do not stop the flow of immigrants. Making bigger walls through electronic surveillance is unlikely to stem the flow of immigrants as well. The real solution involves helping Mexico develop economic conditions that reduce the differential between conditions in Mexico and conditions in the United States. Only this kind of development will help Mexicans to a productive life in Mexico, which, by the way, is where most would rather be anyway! In short, we have to change the motivational structure!

I bring this up because some people assume that the problem with colonia residents is that most of them are illegal aliens, or at least immigrants from Mexico. First off I would like to point out that it does not make any difference. If they live in Texas they have rights to most services provided by the State of Texas. This assumption leads us to the bigger fences, better detection, and deportation policies of the United States INS. The data here is fuzzy at best and questionable at worst. Imagine for a minute that you are an illegal resident living a Texas colonia. An interviewer, with a clipboard, comes to your door and at some point asks whether or not you are a legal resident. If you are an illegal resident you are left with little choice but to lie. You cannot trust that this "agent of the government" will not at least attempt to deport you. Most researchers ask about legal status in just about this way, including the U. S. Census Bureau. These data indicate that about three out of four colonia residents have legal status. So this perspective is at least partially correct. We asked residents a series of questions about drivers licenses, vehicle registrations, place of birth, and bank accounts to get indicators of legal status. While these indicators cannot be used to determine the rate of illegal residents in the colonias, they do indicate that approximately two out of three residents were born here. About one in six have Texas bank accounts which is a pretty good indicator of legal status, because banks require a social security number. More than half have at least one licensed driver and/or register their vehicles in Texas. One thing for sure, policy makers cannot assume that colonia residents are illegal aliens.

One recent attempt to help colonia residents consists of making considerable efforts to construct water and sewage systems in the colonias. Unfortunately, many residents cannot afford the hook-up fees and costs. One piece of legislation tried to legislate away the problem by closing the loop-hole in the system to make rural development illegal unless water, sewage, and roads are provided. Unfortunately, this was applied only to plots of five acres or more, which has led to the development of many 4.99 acre colonias. The point here is that the structural conditions (needs and processes) are strong enough to engender the continued development of the hinterland in spite of legislative and regulatory efforts to limit the colonia development.

One of the points I am trying to make here today is that sustainable policies have to be informed policies to be effective. Sustainable policy needs to be tailored to the needs of the people it is designed to assist. If we have learned anything from our research in the colonias we have learned that, policy makers cannot assume that people working in the environment know what the problem is. Sustainable policies have an obligation to be long-range policies so research must be focused on the "big picture" or the whole. The problem with service providers can be, it does not have to be this way and many are able to avoid this problem, but service providers are often so close to the problems that they fail to see the overall problem; in short they fail to see the forest for the trees. They often fail to see themselves as part of the problem and its solution, but rather focus on themselves as the solution. Sustainable policies have to be considered in terms of their own impact, which can often be negative in the long-run.

So research is needed for policy to be informed sustainable policy. But unlike an athlete involved in a quick duration event like a sprint, sustainable policy requires ongoing research because needs, the environmental conditions, and resources change over time. Consider an athlete

involved in an endurance contest like a marathon or swimming the English Channel. At first the athlete is simply replacing oxygen and perpetuating motion, but as the activity wears on the body begins to crave fluids. That is the needs change. In order to sustain performance the athlete has to be concerned about replacing fluids, and if it continues long enough there may be a need to replace energy producing foods as well. Unlike the endurance athlete communities cannot have repeated experiences with their own future, so they must continue to collect data and conduct research to identify changing community needs, environmental conditions and resources. In addition, communities must learn to take advantage of what they can learn from the experience of other similar communities, where ever they occur. We cannot afford to repeat the mistakes of the past simply because they were some other community's mistakes.

The problem with sustainability research is that it is about the future, but our research methods are ill-equipped to analyze alternative futures. An other problem with research about sustainability is that temporally sustainability is very long, yet our research method and data are temporally short in character. Another problem stems from the holistic nature of sustainability, but our data, theory, and in fact knowledge is specialized. I first became aware of these problems when I was trying to interpret social survey data in a sustainability frame-work. Right away I found sustainability to be inter-generational, at a minimum, but social surveys are instantaneous by comparison. Yeah, sure we can ask about concerns for the future, but the answers are often hollow. This means we need new theories, to allow us to examine elements of the problem and assemble them in meaningful models of sustainability. Over time I came to understand that our existing data was perhaps best in terms of empowerment, and yet even here the traditional concepts of political and social participation limited the concept of empowerment and self determination.

Dennis Mileti asked us yesterday to move beyond our old solutions, that do not work, to address the disaster we will experience in the future. I concur with his call to the future, but advise caution about forgetting what we know, like "that losses are still rising in spite of our solutions," and press for a renewed effort to use our knowledge-based insight to examine both long-term and short-term implications of our actions before we take them. For it is only when we examine the whole, ... holistically and preemptively, that we will begin to discover sustainable solutions to our vulnerable disastrous future.

Thank you very much