Surprising Trends in Land Invasions in Metropolitan Lima and Quito

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by

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Photographs by James Lerager

Study of land invasion organizations in Lima and Quito reveals six surprising trends that differ by metropolitan context. Specifically, invasion organizations tend to differ with respect to building materials, original land ownership, the difficulty and consequences of acquiring land titles, strategies for acquiring electricity, and types of neighborhood regimes. A more general contrast also emerges: Lima organizations are more likely to encounter quick initial success followed by gradual decline, while the success of Quito organizations is often more gradual, resulting in long-term organizational survival. These citywide trends can be explained by three factors—public policy, local democratization, and geography and climate—that are often neglected in favor of neighborhood-level explanations.

Keywords: Social movements, cities, squatter settlements, Peru, Ecuador

In 1994, a bold and enterprising group of 2,000 Peruvian families invaded a stretch of public land in southern Lima. Relying on cheap and flimsy construction materials, they founded an illegal settlement named Oasis de Villa. Although the Oasis settlers encountered a number of setbacks, they rather swiftly obtained legal title to their illegally seized land. As the settlement grew, it was governed by a democratic neighborhood organization1 that succeeded in acquiring electricity service (paid for out of the residents’ own pockets), but ultimately collapsed before it could acquire other services such as piped water. A 1990 invasion settlement called Camino a la Libertad

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(Pathway to Freedom), founded by 500 families in Quito, Ecuador, differed from the Oasis invasion in several respects. The Camino settlers invaded privately owned land, built sturdier homes, were largely unsuccessful in their struggle for land titles, and were governed by an authoritarian neighborhood organization that both delivered a wide array of important services and also consolidated its control of local neighborhood governance. What accounts for these differences? At a glance, the contrast appears to demonstrate little more than the great diversity of outcomes among land invasion organizations and other types of urban movements. The sheer variety of these outcomes seems to point to the need for examining individual settlement organizations to identify varying causes of success and failure.

The merit of this approach is borne out by previous scholarship on invasion settlements and an important segment of the social movements literature. Whether focusing on explaining movement strategy selection (Gamson, 1975: 41–49), movement success (Lipsky, 1968; McCarthy and Zald, 1977), or movement survival and development (Hirsch, 1990; Gamson, 1995; Klandermans, 1997), many scholars have emphasized the importance of examining movement-specific—or, in this context, neighborhood-specific—factors. Considering scholarship focused specifically on Latin American settlement formation and development, this emphasis is echoed by a number of valuable studies of specific neighborhoods (Godard, 1988; Stokes, 1991; Burgwal, 1995; Flores, Lingán, and Cayo, 2002; Sosa and Flores, 2002). Some of the most influential studies (Collier, 1976; Stokes, 1995) have complemented a neighborhood focus with careful consideration of the role of the state, but only a few (e.g., Dietz, 1998) have integrated neighborhood- and metropolitan-level analysis.

Neighborhood-level factors cannot, however, account for a series of striking similarities that emerge when analyzing the land invasion phenomenon within each individual metropolitan context. Therefore, on the basis of data collected from 10 invasion settlements in Lima and Quito, I argue that the differences between Oasis and Camino are illustrative of differing citywide trends. Despite great variation among invasion organizations in both Lima and Quito, a key difference emerges: Lima’s organizations are more likely to get off to a strong start and then falter, while the success of Quito settlements is typically more gradual and more often leads to long-term organizational survival. Examining neighborhood-level trends in building materials, organizational competitiveness, and demands for land and electricity also reveals surprising consistency within each metropolitan context. Neighborhood-level factors account for part of this variation. What broader factors help explain these citywide trends?
To answer this question, I begin with a brief overview of the evolving phenomenon of urban land invasions in Latin America, with specific attention to the institutional settings of Lima and Quito. I then describe and analyze six contrasts between the invasions and invasion organizations of the two cities. Although neighborhood-level factors contribute to these differences, three national or citywide factors emerge as important explanations of metropolitan trends: public policy, local democratization, and geography and climate. However, while city-specific findings represent an important contribution, they are most notable for the questions they leave unanswered. Public policy may help us understand organizational strategy and success outcomes with respect to land and electricity, but what explains variation with respect to demands for other services such as piped water and sewer drainage? And if public policy is such a powerful determinant, what explains the existence of organizations whose success or failure “goes against the grain” of their cities’ policies? Hence, although a neighborhood-level analysis remains beyond the scope of this article (but see Dosh, 2004; 2006), the conclusion that national- and metropolitan-level analysis can explain only a handful of outcomes in this context confirms the sustained importance of neighborhood-level factors.

LAND INVASIONS IN A NEOLIBERAL ERA

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, tens of millions of Latin Americans participated in illegal land invasions (see, e.g., Collier, 1976; Portes, 1989; Eckstein, 1990; Dietz, 1998). In the wake of the 1982 debt crisis, increasing economic vulnerability and an expanding informal labor sector sustained the widespread mobilization that many had expected to decline as metropolitan areas like Lima and Quito simply ran out of available land to seize. During this period, the fundamental objectives of invasion organizations remained strikingly unchanged: reliable electricity, potable water (Fig. 1), sewer drainage, and, often most important, legal title to illegally acquired land (Gilbert, 1998).

Yet despite this seeming continuity in the urban resources sought by settlers, there were several alterations to this otherwise predictable part of the shantytown landscape. The national economic and political context had changed. With the implementation of neoliberal economic reform, Peru, Ecuador, and other nations privatized some urban service monopolies, dramatically altering the strategic menu available to settlers seeking infrastructure improvements. Neoliberalism also eroded traditional left/right distinctions as many leftists were driven to embrace market-oriented poli-
cies (Roberts, 1995: 100; Roberts and Arce, 1998: 219–220). Despite important exceptions such as Brazil’s Partido dos Trabalhadores (Workers’ Party—PT), party systems either faded in importance or, as in Peru, collapsed outright, making political parties less likely allies for settlers. The local political context also changed dramatically. As in many Latin American countries, the 1980s witnessed the introduction of municipal elections in both Peru and Ecuador (Dietz and Shidlo, 1998). While struggles between democracy and authoritarianism continued to dominate the national stage in Latin America, empowerment of municipal government took root and slowly grew, gradually transforming the local political context for invasion organizations (Myers and Dietz, 2003). In Lima and Quito, these changes had varying effects on land invasions and settlement development, differences partly accounted for by contrasting trends of centralization and decentralization.

**LIMA: CENTRALIZATION UNDER FUJIMORI**

Located in coastal Peru, metropolitan Lima is Latin America’s fifth-largest city. A polluted sprawl of over 7 million people, it is divided into 43 districts characterized by great economic inequality and often uncoordinated governance. Urban planning tends to be spread across multiple overlapping public and semipublic agencies, many of which are national rather...
than regional or local in scope. The metropolitan area of Lima includes the province of Lima (the downtown Cercado district and 42 other district municipalities) and the province of Callao (6 district municipalities). These 49 districts, each with its own elected mayor and city council, exhibit striking contrasts between wealthy, working-class, and poor zones of the city. District governments are fiscally autonomous, but with only 10 percent of Peru’s revenues in their hands, their capabilities are severely limited (Huamán, Cubas, and Mora, 1999: 189; Pease with Vargas-Prada, 1989).

All but one of these mayor/council governments are responsible solely for their specific districts. The Cercado district mayor and council (called the Provincial Council), however, also serve as the metropolitan mayor and council, and these citywide responsibilities tend to prevail over concerns particular to the Cercado district. The metropolitan mayor and council are often overruled by national agencies and undercut by Lima’s many district governments. Despite these problems, they directly govern about 12 percent of the metropolitan area and exert uneven influence throughout the city.

After the 1968–1980 period of military rule in Peru, Lima’s district and metropolitan leaders were directly elected, and political decentralization formally ceded some responsibilities to the metropolitan government. The national government, however, maintained informal control of service-related revenues and decisions (Fig. 3). Coordination difficulties over the
few services that were decentralized, such as street paving, fueled reluctance to decentralize further, but many of the 42 district mayors worked together in the 1980s, paving the way (at times literally) for further political decentralization in the provinces in 1989 (Pease, 1994: 112). During this period, district leaders sustained old patterns of unofficially authorizing settlements as a cheap way of dealing with continuing immigration from rural Peru (see Collier, 1976).

In 1990–2000, local service provision became increasingly politicized as Fujimori’s recentralization of some responsibilities provoked political conflict with opposition mayors, especially the metropolitan mayor of Lima. Following Fujimori’s autogolpe (self-coup) in 1992 (see Kenney, 2004: 199–207), his administration wrote the 1993 Constitution, which recentralized some government powers (Pedraglio, 1995). This shift was marked by near-constant conflict because district governments resented the reduction of their already limited decision-making and fiscal powers.

In 2000–2002, Lima’s municipalities began to reassert themselves, but with respect to levels of service provision the situation remained unchanged (Fig. 3). Two decades of robust democratic competition at the local level had consolidated democracy at the district level, but the impact of that consolidation remained limited by the paucity of resources entrusted to municipal authorities. Ecuador also remained highly centralized during this period, but with one important exception: the capital city of Quito.

Figure 3. In downtown Lima, the 20 de Enero (January 20) settlers remind district mayor Guillermo Tapia of their demands for “their” plot of land in the northern district of Carabayllo.
QUITO: DECENTRALIZATION UNDER DURÁN BALLÉN

Like Lima, Quito is characterized by stark economic inequalities and an authoritarian past. Since 1979, elected presidents have governed, but a pendulum of ideological shifts has characterized national politics. From 1979 to 1996, the office of the presidency regularly swung back and forth between left and right. After 1996, however, these shifts gave way to outright volatility, and Presidents Abdala Bucaram (1996–1997), Jamil Mahuad (1998–2000), and Lucio Gutiérrez (2002–2005) were all forced from office by civil society movements led by Ecuador’s indigenous movement (Selverston-Scher, 2001: 1). Following the 1970–1979 period of military rule in Ecuador, Quito’s municipal mayor and council were directly elected between 1979 and 1993, but the national government controlled provision of most services. In 1993, however, the government of Sixto Durán Ballén (1992–1996) created Quito’s metropolitan government, which assumed responsibility for electricity, water, sewers, and titling throughout the Quito metropolitan area. The 1993 shift represented an increase in decentralization and was remarkable for its smooth implementation (Gangotena, 1994: 39–42; Carrión, 1995: 146–150).

Under the new metropolitan government, Quito’s 1.8 million people remained divided among the city’s 16 administrative districts, but, in contrast to Lima’s elected district leaders, Quito’s district officials remained appointed and not directly accountable to voters. In 2002, despite some successes with metropolitan-level decentralization, Quito was in the process of further decentralizing some service delivery all the way to the district level in an effort to foster greater responsiveness in policy areas where a citywide perspective was not deemed as important (Carrión, 1996: 278). Hence, at a time when Lima was becoming more centralized, Quito became more decentralized but with a weaker commitment to local democratization, meaning that leaders at the submetropolitan level (either district- or neighborhood-level) continued to be either appointed or selected without competition. These contrasting institutional settings provide fertile analytic ground for comparative analysis.

INVASION ORGANIZATIONS IN LIMA AND QUITO

Although the similarities of urban land invasions in both Lima and Quito outnumber the differences, comparison of invasions and invasion organizations across metropolitan contexts reveals fairly consistent contrasts. Specifically, Lima’s settlement organizations rely on cheaper and flimsier
building materials, which makes it easier to initiate an invasion attempt (Fig. 4). Second, Lima groups find it relatively easy to invade public lands, while Quiteño settlers often find public lands difficult to seize. Lima invasion organizations also have an easier time acquiring title to seized lands, but this makes these neighborhoods more susceptible to organizational decline precipitated by a drop in levels of participation by those who no longer fear losing their homes. Furthermore, Lima settlements are more likely to employ self-sufficient strategies in order to acquire formal electricity service. Finally, neighborhood regimes in Lima are more likely to be competitive than their counterparts in Quito.

Although individual cases often exhibit exceptions to citywide trends, the two neighborhood-level cases described in the introduction—Oasis de Villa (in Lima) and Camino a la Libertad (in Quito)—analytically capture all six of the key differences. Although my analysis is based on all 10 of the study’s neighborhood case studies, I refer to these cases because they illustrate the six contrasts most clearly. In the southern Lima district of Villa El Salvador, the neighborhood of Oasis was characterized by (1) cheap and flimsy construction materials, (2) successful seizure of public land, (3) relatively easy acquisition of land titles, (4) subsequent organizational decline, (5) a self-sufficient strategy for acquiring electricity, and (6) a competitive democratic neighborhood regime. By contrast, in the northern Quito district of Cotocollao, the neighborhood of Camino was characterized by (1) a quick shift from flimsy to durable building materials, (2)
successful seizure of private land, (3) a difficult and largely unsuccessful struggle for land titles, (4) organizational consolidation, (5) externally dependent strategies for acquiring electricity, and (6) a noncompetitive authoritarian neighborhood regime. Although no other case studies so perfectly conform to these six cross-city contrasts, Oasis and Camino are nonetheless emblematic of common differences between the two metropolitan contexts.

Three country- and city-specific factors help explain this variation across metropolitan contexts. First, and most important, Peru’s and Ecuador’s public policies regarding land invasions, land titling, and electricity privatization account for trends in land ownership and titling outcomes, organizational survival, and strategies for acquiring electricity. Second, significant differences in the two cities’ degrees of local democratization have influenced neighborhood regime formation. And third, dramatic differences in geography and climate between Lima and Quito account for some of the physical challenges encountered by settlers and their responses.

**EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN BUILDING MATERIALS**

In Lima, the lack of rain permits settlers to build flimsy homes in precarious locations with relative safety, while in Quito mountain rainstorms force settlers to invest in sturdier and more expensive building materials (Fig. 5). This simple difference has significant consequences in terms of the ease with which settlers establish a more or less permanent foothold on seized lands. Although settlers in both cities often employ the same flimsy plastic shelters in the early days of an invasion, Limeños and Quiteños differ when they build their first makeshift homes. In Lima, settlers can get away with using virtually any material that will stay in place, and some shantyhomes made with cardboard last for years (Fig. 6). In Villa El Salvador’s Lomo de Corvina region, for example, a 2002 physical comparison of neighborhoods founded in 1996 and 2001 discovered many homes that exhibited only minimal differences in terms of the building materials used despite a five-year difference in neighborhood age.

In Quito, however, such cheap construction is often soon destroyed by the mountain weather. In the 1995 Quito settlement of Itchimbía, for example, a fierce downpour during the neighborhood’s first week of existence forced a one-day abandonment of the neighborhood, as the settlers’ plastic shelters were wrecked. Geographic and climatic pressures thus force Quito settlers to invest in sturdier building materials as soon as possible.
Figure 5. Lima’s arid climate facilitates the construction of flimsy shanty homes, even on very rugged and dangerous terrain such as the side of a steep river gorge. In Quito, such precarious homes would soon be washed away by mountain storms.

Since more durable homes better communicate a sense of permanence, one might infer that Lima’s ramshackle homes would put them at a disadvantage in terms of avoiding eviction. The legacy of Peruvian dictator Juan Velasco, however, creates just the opposite effect: Lima settlers have a relatively easy time claiming vacant lands, regardless of the durability or permanence of their initial homes.

EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN PREVIOUS LAND OWNERSHIP

In Peru, the unique legacy of General Juan Velasco (1968–1975) makes it unusually easy for settlers to seize vacant—and especially public—lands, while in Quito a 1993 law decentralizing control of land zoning and titling to a new metropolitan government created incentives for the mayor to defend public land more vigorously than private land. Peru is notable for its history of dictatorships, but Velasco left a particularly significant legacy for invasion communities in the form of pro-squatter legislation that laid out the “rules of the game” for land invasions (Collier, 1976: 113–116). The initial impetus for these laws was a tremendous influx of in-migration from rural Peru to urban Lima, which put continual pressure on consecutive governments to house, employ, and provide services to this burgeoning population. After more than three decades, these laws continue to afford protections to Peruvian settlers that their counterparts in Ecuador and the rest of Latin
America lack. For example, in Peru, mayors and landowners have only one day to forcibly evict settlers. After 24 hours, the settlers do not gain ownership of the land, but they do earn a critical legal shield against a forced eviction. Instead, the conflict becomes a judicial process of arbitration and negotiation. Unsurprisingly, the rules are not always respected, and many landowners hire thugs to intimidate or attack settlers well beyond the first 24 hours. Yet the importance of this legal protection persists.

While Velasco’s legislation makes public lands in Lima ripe targets for invasion organizations, Quito organizations often attempt to occupy private land, in part because of an entrepreneurial city hall in Quito that vigorously
defends its own (public) property while leaving landowners who lack political connections to fend for themselves (Fig. 7). Putting aside the entrepreneurial dispositions of particular mayors (e.g., Quito’s Jamil Mahuad in 1992–1998), Ecuador’s 1993 creation of the Metropolitan District of Quito presents a major policy explanation for this trend. Prior to 1993, the authority of the Municipality of Quito was limited and its initiatives were largely confined to the downtown district. With the 1993 experiment in decentralization, however, the national government decentralized political authority and functional responsibility (see Willis, Garman, and Haggard, 1999) for most major services, including land titling, to the new metropolitan government.\(^8\) This was a major change, as the outlying areas of Quito had previously been governed by provincial administrators whose authority included pieces of the capital city as well as large rural areas outside of Quito. These areas were now governed by an executive (the metropolitan mayor) and the new Metropolitan Council, which included 15 at-large council members who exhibited a sustained interest in exercising their authority throughout the metropolitan area.

Public policies of settler protection in Peru and decentralization of zoning and titling authority in Quito played an important role in creating a situation in which in Lima invasions have become routine and institutionalized while in Quito they are considered aberrations. For example, most settlers in Lima are aware of the Velasco legislation and cite it as both justification and protection for their extralegal actions, and in Quito irate landowners blame the metropolitan government for failing to protect their assets. The commonplace nature of invasions in Lima also points to the lasting impact of the Velasco laws. Controlling for population, Lima’s invasion rate in the 1990s was double to triple that of Quito.\(^9\)

Two counterpoints deserve mention. First, in the case of Quito, the breadth and enthusiasm of opposition to land invasions exhibited by the first metropolitan mayor, Jamil Mahuad, may lead to an exaggeration of the importance of decentralization policies. At the same time, efforts by three consecutive mayors (Mahuad, Roque Sevilla in 1998–2000, and Paco Moncayo in 2000–2004) to evict or relocate a settlement known as Itchimbía from public land support the claim that public lands in Quito are often vigorously defended. Second, in the case of Lima, a sustained effort by Villa El Salvador Mayor Michel Azcueta to drive a settlement known as La Encantada off of public land in 1996 (Fig. 8) appears to challenge the claim that public land is more easily invaded in Lima. Although the land was ultimately deemed public, it was being used by Agrosilves, a private agribusiness firm with ties to the mayor. Azcueta also opposed the Oasis de Villa invasion of land zoned for future construction of a university, but the point remains that public lands are easier to invade than private lands in Lima.\(^10\)
Although Peru’s settler-friendly laws clearly invite more frequent invasions, comparison across cities reveals remarkable similarities in the obstacles encountered despite contrasting institutional contexts. This surprising finding points to an important observation: while Peru’s laws significantly ease the process of seizing land, they exert considerably less impact on subsequent struggles for services. The major exception, unsurprisingly, is the related struggle for land titles.

**EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ACQUIRING LAND TITLES**

In Peru, President Fujimori implemented a plan to formalize 2 million informal homes, making it much easier for settlers to gain legal title to seized land than in Ecuador; in Quito, this trend was sometimes magnified by the metropolitan-level decentralization discussed above. Beginning with Velasco’s creation of the Sistema Nacional de Apoyo a la Movilización Social (National System for the Support of Social Mobilization—SINAMOS) in 1971, Peruvian settlement policy aimed both to promote development based on self-help and to create and sustain political support (Collier, 1976: 106–111). Since then, four major policy changes have marked the evolution of regulations for settlements seeking land titles: the
1979 Constitution’s law guiding the expropriation of land, the 1993 Constitution’s amendment of those rules, the 1996 creation of the Comisión de Formalización de la Propiedad Informal (Commission on Formalization of Informal Property—COFOPRI), and the 1999 Law of Prescriptions, which altered the rights of both settlers and owners of invaded lands.

Under the 1979 Constitution, expropriation of land was permissible for public necessity, national security, and “social interest,” which included formalization of informal property. The constitution also gave the Municipality of Lima responsibility for land titling in the capital city, and about 30,000 titles were granted to informal landholders in the 1980s. The titling process remained politicized, however, and many titles were not well done in technical terms (e.g., measurement), which led to subsequent disputes over ownership of lands located in archaeological zones, privately owned parcels, and high-risk zones (e.g., steep hillsides).

The 1993 Constitution retracted some of the power that had been given to the municipalities, especially the Municipality of Lima, which was controlled by opposition mayors throughout Fujimori’s decade in office. It also eliminated social interest as a legitimate reason for expropriating land. This element was not replaced with a concrete alternative until 1996, with the creation of COFOPRI. Founded on the work of the Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto, COFOPRI had the ambitious goal of granting 2 million land titles to informal landholders in Peru. De Soto believed that these 2 million homes represented “sleeping capital” that could not be accessed

Figure 8. Founded in 1971 on a stretch of empty desert, Villa El Salvador began as a settlement of 25,000 people, but a continuous stream of invasions has swelled its population to over 200,000. Here the human rights activist Jesús Valencia points to La Encantada, the invasion that he cofounded in 1996.
because the homes existed outside the domain of formal property (1989). With the granting of titles, he hoped that settlers would, for example, use their homes as collateral to take out loans for various initiatives and thus stimulate the economy (2000).

Although it was conceived as a nonpartisan effort, supporters and detractors agree that the Fujimori administration often employed COFOPRI for political ends. Said one COFOPRI official of Fujimori’s political tampering in the district of Villa El Salvador, “[Villa El Salvador] was unusual because they had a [zoning] plan. They are right that we have messed up their plan. We really tried not to, we are a young organization and a political one and have made mistakes” (interview, March 13, 2002). However, despite the intrusion of political favoritism into some of COFOPRI’s work, the sheer scale of its operations meant that most titling occurred independent of the political process. Under COFOPRI, settlers suddenly found it much easier to acquire land titles. Although titling still required a detailed bureaucratic process, the fact that the process was run by an office deeply committed to de Soto’s vision meant that settlers often had the state government in their corner. While some Lima invasion organizations complained that COFOPRI was unwilling to expropriate private land on behalf of settlers, the granting of over 1 million titles in five years suggests that most settlers had a quite easy time with the process.

While the creation of COFOPRI was the most significant event in Peruvian settlement policy since Velasco, the 1999 Law of Prescriptions modified the rules to favor land invaders even more. Under the law, COFOPRI could declare previous ownership claims “extinct” after 10 years under certain conditions. For example, if settlers could demonstrate a prior good-faith belief that they were invading public lands and if the landowner had not contested the settlers’ occupancy at the time of invasion, then after 10 years of occupation the settlers gained a right to the land. The settler would still have to pay the owner, but the owner would now be obliged to accept a price determined by the COFOPRI arbitration process. Furthermore, although this new law technically applied only to certain settlements, it lent a veneer of legitimacy to all settlements over 10 years old, helping them with their various legal struggles. By 2002 COFOPRI had already granted over 1 million titles—nearly half its goal—and after a brief political scuffle between the provinces and the state under interim President Valentín Paniagua (2000–2001) it was back in business under President Alejandro Toledo (2001–2006).

In Ecuador, the 1993 creation of the Metropolitan Government of Quito decentralized land titling authority from the state to the city, but throughout the 1990s the situation on the ground remained unchanged, and informal property holders often waited 15 years to establish legal ownership. Many
communities simply gave up, unwilling to persist in their efforts for such a minimal gain because they were already de facto homeowners. Without a title, however, it was difficult (and illegal) to sell land. In November 2001, the metropolitan government created the Oficina de Tierra y Suelo (Land Office), which centralized the titling process in Quito and, in several important ways, emulated the mission of COFOPRI in Lima. In its first year, Tierra y Suelo formalized 33 informal neighborhoods (not all of them founded by invasion), or about 11 percent of Quito’s 300 settlements. Tierra y Suelo lacked the zeal of COFOPRI and often rejected settler petitions on the basis of lands being located on dangerous terrain or in ecological zones, but the office’s creation in 2001 nonetheless marked a major change in Quito settlement policy. While it is too early to assess the specific impact of these recent policy changes, the more general difference in ease of land titling has already had a clear effect on the survival of neighborhood regimes.

EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ORGANIZATIONAL SURVIVAL

Ironically, Peru’s eagerness to formalize informal settlements through state-granted land titles often undermined the very organizations best positioned to pursue settler needs. Many Lima organizations found that once land titles had been acquired, attendance at community meetings and protest marches plummeted, as settlers no longer felt insecure despite a continued lack of basic services like piped water (Fig. 9). This phenomenon is better explained at the neighborhood level (see Dosh, 2006), but because a key determinant of property security—land titles—varies by metropolitan context, it is important to comment briefly on the citywide trends.

After 1996 it became much easier to acquire land titles in Lima than in Quito. Unfortunately, this also made it easier for Lima organizations to lose momentum and even collapse, as acquisition of titles often led to a drop in rates of neighborhood participation. In Lima, for example, both the Oasis and Encantada invasion organizations invaded public land, acquired land titles, experienced a drop in participation, and became moribund, unable to pursue the remainder of their agendas such as acquisition of piped water or a comedor popular (communal soup kitchen) (Fig. 10). In Quito, by contrast, both the Pisulli and Itchimbía organizations invaded public land, failed to acquire individual land titles, maintained high participation, and consolidated their control of neighborhood governance.

Two additional factors also eroded some of Lima’s invasion organizations: political violence and the paternalism and centralism of the Fujimori
era. In the 1970s and 1980s, neighborhood “base” organizations in Lima were vibrant and productive (Dietz, 1998: 112–113), but terrorist attacks by Sendero Luminoso (Shining Path) often targeted local organizations if they were not aligned with the guerrillas (Zapata, 1996: 243–246). Sendero

Figure 9. In northern Lima, hundreds of settlers gather each month to debate the future of their 15-year-old community, Olivos de Pro. Continued uncertainty over the legal status of their land sparks regular debate between those wishing to pay off the legal landowners and those agitating for a political solution.

Figure 10. Comedores populares (communal soup kitchens) are a mainstay of most invasion settlements. In addition to providing subsidized lunches, Villa El Salvador’s Comedor Keiko Sofia also provides information on women’s health and community issues.
killed neighborhood leaders and destroyed community organizations through both attacks and fear. Said one settler whose organization was targeted, “We were caught between Sendero and the state forces, which also targeted us” (interview, president of the human rights committee in Villa El Salvador, February 24, 2002). Fujimori further weakened local organizations through centralization (interview, Michel Azcueta, February 24, 2002), and relationships between state officials and base organizations became more paternalistic (Dietz and Tanaka, 2002: 216–218). The causal link between demands for titles and organizational survival outcomes requires a neighborhood-level analysis that is beyond the scope of this article, but the fact remains that citywide trends play an important role in this causal process. In addition to provision of land titles, Lima and Quito also differ in their provision of electricity.

**EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN ELECTRICITY SERVICE DEMANDS**

Although settlers must often pay some or all of the costs of publicly provided electricity, privatization both forecloses the possibility of successful externally dependent strategies (e.g., demanding or petitioning the government for services) and also makes self-sufficient methods less feasible because of price hikes. Of the principal services sought by invasion organizations—electricity, water, sewer drainage, and land titles—only electricity was privatized in Peru, and none of these services was privatized in Ecuador (though in both countries titles to indisputably private lands are, in effect, “privately provided” by the legal owners, often through a judicial process). Between 1999 and 2002, Ecuadorian Presidents Mahuad and Noboa attempted to privatize electricity provision in Ecuador, but both efforts were foiled by political opposition from indigenous organizations, unions, and local governments (Gerlach, 2003: 135, 215).

In Lima, electricity provision was fully privatized in 1997, changing the menu of feasible strategies available for demanding service (Fig. 11). Prior to 1997, settlers could employ both externally dependent strategies and self-sufficient strategies, but with privatization only the latter could succeed. Given this contrast, we expect to see no difference in strategies for demanding electricity between Quito and pre-1997 Lima, but after 1997 we expect Quito settlers to continue using both self-sufficient and externally dependent strategies while Lima settlers should begin to rely exclusively on self-sufficient methods (or should at least fail if they attempt an externally dependent strategy). Furthermore, we expect even self-sufficient strategies to become
less feasible in post-1997 Lima because of privatization-driven price hikes, which make service unaffordable for many settlers (Inter-American Development Bank, 2004). Analysis of 17 attempts to acquire privately provided service appear to support these hypotheses. While 6 of the 8 self-sufficient attempts to acquire service succeeded, none of the others did. Again, this does not demonstrate that privatization constitutes the whole causal story, but it does hint at the importance of including this kind of national-level factor in any analysis. In addition to differences in service demands in Lima and Quito, the organizations themselves differed with respect to the competitiveness of their neighborhood regimes.

EXPLAINING DIFFERENCES IN NEIGHBORHOOD REGIMES

In Lima, the introduction of district-level democratic elections supported neighborhood-level democracy, but in Quito the rule of local bosses persisted in a context of appointed district administrators whose actions were often circumscribed by provincial—and later metropolitan—authorities. With respect to neighborhood regimes, this meant that Lima invasion organizations were more likely to have competitive regimes while their Quito counterparts were likely to have noncompetitive ones.
While district municipalities were granted significant responsibilities in the 1980s, Fujimori recentralized some of this authority, especially that of the metropolitan government of Lima, in the 1990s. By one count, Fujimori created as many as 40 laws regarding taxes, licenses, and other minutiae that, cumulatively, reduced the power of the metropolitan government (interview, Michel Azcueta, February 24, 2002). Local-level democratization thrived, however, and all of Lima’s districts maintained a two-decade string of fair and competitive local elections (Dietz and Tanaka, 2002: 194). Furthermore, with Fujimori’s exit from Peruvian politics in 2000, Lima’s districts slowly began to reverse some of the centralization of the 1990s as national-municipal-government relations recovered.

At the same time, there is reason to consider the possibility that municipal empowerment actually weakened neighborhood-level democratization. With the introduction of district-level municipal elections in 1980 (Dietz, 1998: 209–210), local politics focused principally on party interests. Neighborhood leaders began to dialogue with candidates, but this sometimes weakened their community relationships. The new political elite sometimes did not see the importance of local base organizations, and this made them seem a mere extension of the broader political structure (interview, Michel Azcueta, February 24, 2002).

While both perspectives are important, the cases examined in this study better support the contention that district-level democratization in Lima fostered neighborhood-level competition while a lack of district-level democratization in Quito left the rule of neighborhood caciques, or bosses, generally unchallenged (Fig. 12). Of the Quito organizations studied, all had noncompetitive neighborhood regimes, and of the Lima organizations studied, only one was noncompetitive. However, of the six contrasts presented in this article, this finding is perhaps the most tentative. Although the project’s 10 principal case studies, as well as cursory examination of 18 other invasion organizations, appear to confirm it, detailed study of a larger sample of cases could weaken the conclusion that noncompetitive regimes are more prevalent in Quito. Nonetheless, this difference in neighborhood regimes, as well as the other five differences identified between Lima and Quito, helps provide a richer understanding of land invasions and invasion organizations.

CONCLUSION

I began with the claim that three factors—public policy, local democratization, and geography and climate—best explain a series of six surprising differences between land invasions in Lima and those in Quito, yet it is
apparent that of the three factors public policy is by far the most important. Although geography and climate explain differences in building materials and local democratization helps explain contrasting trends in neighborhood governance, it is national and metropolitan public policy that serves as the chief explanation for most of the citywide trends analyzed above. Specifically, public policies regarding decentralization in general and informal housing in particular explain trends in previous land ownership, ease of acquiring land titles, and methods of acquiring electricity. Public policy also constitutes part of the explanation for differences in the long-term survival of invasion organizations, but a full explanation of survival outcomes requires a neighborhood-level analysis.

Collectively, these differences have resulted in an important contrast between land invasions in the two cities. In Lima, a continuing history of permissive settlement policy allows fledgling invasion organizations to score early victories more quickly than their Quito counterparts with respect to land occupation and land titles. This easier attainment of property security, however, means that Lima organizations are also quicker to reach the point where participation drops. The fate of individual invasion settlements also rests importantly on neighborhood-level factors, but this citywide trend speaks to the complementary influence of national- and metropolitan-level factors.

Returning to the broader theoretical question of neighborhood- and metropolitan-level analysis, it is important to underscore the earlier points
that (1) these are citywide trends, not deterministic predictions, and (2) although national and metropolitan factors appear pivotal in explaining them, neighborhood factors prove critical in explaining most other outcomes. With respect to the first point, many exceptions occur. Some Lima organizations promptly turn to the use of sturdier construction material, some Quito organizations have an easier time invading public land, some Lima organizations fail to obtain land titles, and so on. With respect to the second point, it is important to keep in mind the many outcomes that do not vary by city, among them strategy selection for services other than electricity (e.g., piped water), the success of attempts to acquire services other than land titles (e.g., sewer drainage), and dimensions of neighborhood governance other than competitiveness (e.g., degree of inclusiveness or power sharing).

Scholarship focused on neighborhood-level processes remains at the core of understanding the emergence and development of land invasion communities and the neighborhood regimes that govern them, but this focus, though always necessary, is only sometimes sufficient. In a number of outcomes—here I have identified six in particular—the neighborhood-level approach must be complemented or even superseded by a national- or metropolitan-level analysis in order to understand the sometimes surprising differences that characterize urban land invasion organizations in Lima, Quito, and likely other Latin American cities as well.

NOTES

1. A “democratic” neighborhood organization is one that holds competitive elections for neighborhood leadership posts. By contrast, “authoritarian” neighborhood organizations also hold nominal elections, but they are not competitive, and the same candidates are always “reelected,” sometimes for as many as 10 consecutive terms.

2. This article draws upon an original body of data collected in 2001–2002 through research on 10 invasion settlements (7 in Lima and 3 in Quito). During a period of 12 months I conducted 105 structured and open-ended interviews with past and present settlement leaders, as well as government officials, landowners, and other relevant parties.

3. For example, the 1993 Constitution formally codified previous executive decrees that centralized power in the national executive and eliminated the brief 1989 episode of political decentralization at the provincial level.


5. As late as 1994, the Ecuadorian government was continuing to centralize in most respects. Quito remains the only city in the country whose spending exceeds its revenue. Thus, although it is decentralizing internally, it is also the hub of a larger centralization process. The final 1993 version of the Metropolitan District Law decentralized most services but centralized management of urban transport and the preservation of the environment (Gangotena, 1994).
6. Just as the concept of “regime” helps us understand political changes at the national or municipal level, neighborhoods founded by invasion routinely exhibit regime characteristics. In many urban neighborhoods, local leadership structures are irregular and are viewed as unimportant. In the context of Latin American squatter settlements, however, precarious living circumstances and an often hostile municipal regime combine to make the local invasion organization the sole neighborhood governance structure through which residents channel neighborhood administrative matters. The term “neighborhood regime” thus refers to the invasion organization itself.

7. An exception may be Brazil, where President Lula da Silva has enacted pro-settler legislation, but this change remains too recent to permit assessment of its impact on Brazilian settlers.

8. This experiment was limited to the capital city.

9. This estimate is derived from the synthesis of government census data, news articles, and consultation with government officials and academics in Lima and Quito.

10. For example, in 2001–2002, several invasions of public land in southern Lima attracted little media attention, while a pair of invasions of private land in northern Lima drew extended news coverage and opinion pieces defending private property.

11. After Fujimori’s exile in November 2000, Peru’s provinces demanded that the state return power (including titling authority) that had been centralized by Fujimori. To prevent COFOPRI from being disbanded, Paniagua created the Provincial Commission on Formalization, which in some ways gave the provinces what they wanted. Under Toledo, COFOPRI reopened its doors and continued to control the process of titling informal lands throughout Lima (interview with COFOPRI official, March 3, 2002).

12. In the case of Camino a la Libertad, four settlement leaders were imprisoned for selling land that did not legally belong to them. Although such prosecutions are rare, recognition of the sale of untitled land as a crime is commonplace.

13. In the case of Pisulli the organization acquired titles but individuals did not, while in the case of Itchimbía the settlers eventually built self-help condominiums on new land but never acquired title to their original invasion site.

14. Fujimori did move to privatize Lima’s water and sewer drainage provision in the early 1990s, but the effort failed, though he was successful in privatizing a large number of state-owned enterprises (Alcázar, Xu, and Zuluaga, 2002).

15. In November 2003, President Lucio Gutiérrez initiated partial privatization of the electricity sector through three-year management contracts for 13 of the country’s state-owned electricity distributors, but this did not include Quito (Energy Information Administration, 2004).

16. The law initiating privatization was passed in 1992, and sale of state-owned electric companies began in 1994, but in the Lima districts examined in this study full private control was not achieved until early 1997 (Inter-American Development Bank, 2004).

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