

FAILED PROJECT LEADS TO SUCCESS

Chile 1968

Sometimes failed projects teach us more than successful ones. Here is an example. In 1968, a group of squatters (Los sin casa) took over formerly forestry land on the outskirts of Puerto Montt, Chile and began erecting their homes. They adroitly named their development Poblacion Teniente Merino after a Chilean border policeman killed in a border skirmish with Argentinean police. For when the police came to expel the squatters, upon seeing the home made sign bearing the name of the fallen comrade, they saluted and did not evict the squatters.

The illegally seized land had been a former forestry preserve but several years before the trees had been cut down for firewood with the resulting erosion of the hillside to the north and increasing flooding from the rains.

Working with the leaders of the squatters, we devised a plan of reforestation of the hillside. It was my task to get the approval of the local authorities and obtain trees for planting from the provincial forestry officials. The squatters agreed to provide the volunteers to plant the trees. After months of haggling with the various officials, the trees were finally delivered (even obtaining trucks to transport them from the nursery was a major hurdle) and as promised, local volunteers showed up and the trees were planted. Two weeks after celebrating the successful reforestation project, I visited the development, noting progress in the construction of homes by the squatters but a hillside bare of trees.

Obviously, we had failed to obtain buy-in as to purpose of the reforestation and no one had thought through a plan to insure that the trees were not vandalized or removed. I had failed to involve Chileans in creating an organization that would successfully implement the project and rather had concentrated on the project.

All was not totally lost, since after my initial shock and dismay, I noticed that many of the saplings had found new homes in the plots behind the squatter's houses.

Although the reforestation project had not succeeded as I had hoped, my efforts were rewarded by the trust gained with the leaders of the squatters (sharing meals with them during many an evening also helped). The fact that someone cared about their plight was more important than the success of the project. The trust gained allowed me, along with my Chilean counterpart, to convince them to allow a surveyor to stake out the property and we then prepared a development plan. In 1972, when I returned to Puerto Montt, as a planner with the Chilean Housing Ministry, one of my first visits was to Poblacion Teniente Merino. Flimsy shacks had been replaced by substantial homes, a few two stories high, several storefronts had been established and muddy paths had been replaced by paved roads along with potable water and sewers.

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September 10, 2010

