I. Introduction

According to the Global Report of Human Settlements, the urban population of Latin America and the Caribbean was 78.3% in 2009, while an estimated 70% of new housing production in Latin America and the Caribbean was informal. This development represents a significant threat to the green agenda of policymakers and environmental planners (2009: 127). Research has shown that rapid urban growth has provoked spontaneous invasions of rural-urban migrants in the urban periphery. This process has increased the establishment of informal settlements with poor access to government services such as piped water, sewage treatment, and garbage disposal, which in turn threatens the natural environment that surrounds cities.

The Dominican Republic has not been an exception to this development. According to the United Nations, in 2001, 66% of the Dominican population was urban, and 38% of the urban population was living in slums (2008). In 1993, the Dominican government created a greenbelt for the city of Santo Domingo in order to regulate urban growth and the expansion of informal settlements, and to ensure the improvement of the quality of the urban natural environment (Presidential Decree, 1993). With eight environmental zones defined by local fluvial systems, the Santo Domingo greenbelt surrounded the city and originally covered an area of 14,331.48 hectares (National Council of Urban Affairs, 2000: 4). However, as a result of weaknesses in environmental planning and policy-making in Santo Domingo, the greenbelt has not been successfully maintained. Now, 20 years later, big portions of the Greenbelt have been occupied by informal settlements, new residential projects, and other unauthorized land uses.

II. Research Questions

My principal research questions are: 1) Which have been the principal challenges to the implementation of the greenbelt in Santo Domingo? 2) What lessons can we learn from environmental planning decisions made regarding the Santo Domingo greenbelt? and 3) Which are the key factors to consider when making urban environmental planning decisions in Latin American cities? In sum, my research attempts to illuminate the political and economic processes shaping the development and management of the Santo Domingo greenbelt in order to understand the most important challenges to integrating environmental, urban and land-use policies in Latin American cities.

III. Methods

My research will begin with a review of relevant literature in environmental planning and urban political ecology to examine the relationships between environmental, social and political aspects of greenbelt development in Latin America. Next, in order to understand the current situation of the greenbelt and how it has evolved, I will collect secondary data about the greenbelt in Santo Domingo. Because I am taking the Latin American Planning Studio offered by Dr. Sletto, I had the opportunity to begin
collecting data about the greenbelt and to make field observations in one of the principal parks, the Mirador Norte, during my first trip to Santo Domingo in January 2012.

In March 2012, I will again travel to Santo Domingo to complete requirements for Dr. Sletto’s Latin American Studio. During this second class trip, I will dedicate three days to identifying key stakeholders who will help me understand the principal challenges facing the greenbelt. I will visit the principal public and private organizations that are charged with the development and maintenance of the greenbelt in Santo Domingo, especially the General Direction of Land Use and Territorial Development (DGODT). In addition, I will conduct at least two pilot interviews in order to fully develop the interviews for this summer.

During the final phase of my research in Santo Domingo from May 14 – May 26, 2012, I will draw on contacts established during my visit in March and conduct at least 10 extensive interviews with environmental planners and policy-makers, representatives of environmental NGOs, and scholars to fully develop my understanding about the challenges facing the greenbelt and the implications for urban planning in Santo Domingo. This will lay the foundation for my Master’s Professional Report, to be completed by August 2012. I therefore seek funding to cover my travel expenses to Santo Domingo, as well as part of my lodging and daily expenses while in Santo Domingo.

IV. Importance

It is well known that social, political and environmental issues are strongly interrelated. However, in many Latin American cities, environmental planning decisions are often made without considering urban social and political structures. This research attempts to contribute to the discussion about urban environmental planning in contexts marked by socioeconomic inequalities. Finally, drawing on solutions from environmental governance practices and literature, this investigation will analyze the management challenges of the greenbelt of Santo Domingo in order to better understand the causes for disconnect between social and environmental aspects in environmental planning.

References


