1. Project Summary:

Our project took place in a poor neighborhood of Buenos Aires, Argentina, during June and July of 2007. The participants were core members of Mujeres Unidas en Accion, a local women's activist group, and Cooperativa Mujeres Unidas, a women's crafts cooperative started by Mujeres Unidas en Accion. We received additional funding from Georgetown University community members, Diana Rowan Rockefeller, and Patricia Altvater. The scope of our work was social, economic, and political. Our long-term goals were to end gender-based violence, stimulate local employment, and empower marginalized women. We aimed to do this by raising a women's shelter, formalizing Mujeres Unidas, connecting Mujeres Unidas to donors and fair trade outlets, and employing local young men.

2. Project Results:

We raised a women's shelter, and the city government sends women to it when they have no other place to go. We employed local young men in the shelter construction. While several of them were able to learn key construction skills, the local labor market is structured in such a way that their employment on shelter construction was sporadic. The shelter also doubles as a community center, the cooperative's workshop, and the group's headquarters.

Although we did not carry out a grassroots activist campaign, due to the women's lack of time and inclination, I believe that we did something more important; we consolidated and strengthened the group. We enumerated the rights and responsibilities of Mujeres Unidas' members in a constitution. With help from local professionals, I trained Liliana Liendo as an accountant, Guillermina Baez as the cooperative coordinator, and Liliana Lenguaza, Guillermina Baez, and Tatiana Chocobar in computer and internet skills. Guillermina and Liliana Liendo opened a joint bank account for the group, thus strengthening the group's transparency and enabling power decentralization.

We separated the crafts cooperative from Mujeres Unidas to increase transparency, and clarify group identities (which are the basis for productive action). The cooperative chose not to formalize itself yet, since the process is expensive and would require splitting profits equally. They decided instead to build their experience working together. The cooperative wrote its own constitution and membership regulations, and agreed to be paid according to the products made, to encourage maximum productivity.

Finally, I got Mujeres Unidas connected. Mujeres Unidas is now registered with the city government and working closely with the Women's Secretariat to secure professional counseling and legal services to victims of domestic violence. The group is also connected with CIEE, an American study abroad program, which has offered to provide funding for the shelter in return for a Mujeres Unidas' coordination of a service-learning program. The Mujeres Unidas Cooperative is now in contact, via email, with fair trade student groups to coordinate winter sales this year. All this means that they have access, the power to use resources for themselves.

3. Implications for Peace/Future Prospects

Our project's implications for peace are far-reaching. First, the project has strengthened community networks of mutual support. The shelter is the space that allows exchanges of ideas and activities to happen outside of the private sphere and kin networks, which is critical for building social capital and communal trust. For example, Francisco, one of the shelter's construction workers, a former violent drug addict, asked Rosa, the group's leader, if he could somehow get involved. He is now a volunteer drug counselor in the center. In another example, Tatiana and Florencia, local
youth leaders, now coordinate daily after-school homework help and non-alcoholic parties for neighborhood. The shelter is a space of possibilities, and, as its name implies, a space for constructing peace from the inside-out.

By narrowing the gaps between government and civil society, the project has strengthened institutional support for social change. For example, the shelter has received a Bolivian woman, sent by the city government, who became homeless after she left her abusive husband. She now has the temporary support and professional resources that she needs to piece her life back together. Bringing key sectors of national life together, in a common endeavor to save women's lives, is the structural key to constructing peace in Buenos Aires.

The shelter will continue to be a focal point in Mujeres Unidas' activities. The shelter is important because of the concrete services that will be able to be given from it, and as a psychological bolster for the group's identity. Liliana Liendo, the group's treasurer, said, "we are happy because we are going to have our own house which we will share with everyone. Everyone will be welcome. The achievement is finally having our own home without having to depend on anybody." While Mujeres Unidas is now making claims on their government (for professional resources and logistical support) this is quite different from the exploitative patron-client relationships that have been the norm for generations.

Rosa is confident that the locale will be a key catalyst for greater community and government involvement in group activities. She said, "I think that after this, there will be what you call empowerment. There will be more people. Before, we were sort of all over the place, here, there... now the people will come to us." The locale helps to separate personal and professional identities, spaces, and resources, and is a real, physical space of possibility, and hope.

The formation of Mujeres Unidas Cooperative and its development is an important stepping stone for constructing citizenship and grassroots democracy. The women in the cooperative not only learned new skills, such as accounting, budgeting, analyzing profits, studying the market, and organizing production, but also experienced an increase in self-esteem stemming from a newfound sense of agency. This sense of being capable of making things happen, taking their lives into their own hands, and achieving success, even slowly, carries over into intra-household power dynamics, and is a nucleus for civic engagement at a higher level.

Through this project, Mujeres Unidas and I learned that resources and careful plans by themselves do not make dreams come true. The foundations for change are solidarity, common goals and visions, disciplined organization, and commitment. A strong charismatic leader must be supported by an equally committed group, and the group must be supported by official institutions, to ensure access to power and resources.

I learned to trust the women of Mujeres Unidas and the cooperative. They were my guides, and the ultimate drivers of our project. Our actions, the flow of the project, derived from meetings and dialogues, where we re-worked our strategies to achieve their goals. They patiently taught me, by allowing me to make mistakes, and learning from our divergences in perception. If development projects intend to create a more just and equal world, then their processes must also be just- based on dialogue, negotiation, and compromise.