

I LOVE JUÁREZ

Posted on 20/04/2010 by Naider



Although the title of this post may sound contradictory in a city which is all the time on the news due to horrendous crimes or corruption, as well as being the battlefield of a war between the Federal Government and those involved in the highly profitable drug business, I think it is time to send a different message. A message that would of course talk about the challenges that Juarez is currently facing, but also about the positive assets and particularly the ways in what has been called as "the perfect storm", can

be addressed.

Juarez is located literally on the border between Mexico and the US. During the 1960's it became the center of US investment in manufacturing due to the generous tax exemption program set up seeking to promote foreign investment in the area. Juarez was also well-known as a center for shopping and leisure which attracted thousands of visitors every year from the other side of the Rio Bravo. Even the worldwide famous 'margarita' was first served here, a popular cocktail made with tequila, the national drink.

Economic development linked to the rise of the manufacturing industry brought many new residents to the city from other parts of Mexico, which quickly raised the population from 262,000 to 407,000 in only a decade (1960-1970) and up to over a million by the late 1990's. Meanwhile, the lack of planning and complementary social and infrastructure investment provoked a chaotic growth of the city, with little attention given to aspects of actually building a community or providing the cultural, health or education services that any city requires for a healthier development. There were plenty of jobs available for anyone and that was it.

Juarez also between the 60's and 80's became one of the most important routes of drug access to the US. Even today, it is said that 70% of what is sold in North America comes through the Juarez-El Paso border. That created a wave of new rich that was widely accepted by the community, as they also made philanthropic contributions for the improvement of the city.

As a result, that was not the best city in the world but it worked. At least up to the last two years, when it seems that everything has come up in what is called by the proper Juarenses -Juarez's citizens- as the "perfect storm". On the one hand, economic downturn has supposed the rise of unemployment up to a 20%, from the past 4-5%, causing a huge social crisis in a place with a desperate need of social protection and policies. On the other hand, the last few years we have also seen the sharp increase of crime coinciding with the start of the war between the Federal Government and the local drug cartel. Those new phenomena have therefore shown the real challenges of a city that needs to build its future on different grounds.

Luckily though and from my point of view, Juarez has also strong positive strengths which must be taken on account. First, it is one of the most competitive cities in Mexico with a vibrant economy (when the US demand grows) with the popular 'maquilas', an example of an advanced manufacturing industry, clearly able to even challenge the Chinese powerful competitive advantage. Moreover, decades of specialization have also created a highly qualified labor force and universities that stand among the most relevant in certain fields in Mexico.

Local people also, as I could confirm in a recent visit, have strong relations with the US, are highly welcoming and aware of the need for change. Years of lack of government commitment to social and educational needs have also created a tight network of social groups involved in a rich variety of initiatives seeking to work for a better city to work but also to live.

So we have the resources, due to a powerful local economy that would definitely be growing and creating jobs in the future, and the people, so we need that money to be spent in Juarez in a way that would address real needs, such as grassroots social and educational infrastructure or new

rules and means to enforce they would be respected by everyone.

There are positive signs also on that way. Indeed, The Federal Government and the President Calderon have been increasingly involved in an initiative that seeks to listen to local needs and promises have been made of new public investment in the area. That might be a good starting point, although we should be more demanding. Juarez needs the resources but also a new governance structure which, with the leading role of the National Government, would also get other regional and local institutions to join the action plan as well as make sure that the money is properly spent.

It is hard work and there would be difficulties on the way, but Juarez has the capacity to overcome and find its way to build this time a better Juarez for all.

There are no comments yet.