

Sustainable Development Case Study
Romero Memorial Tree Project
El Salvador



Theory & Practice of Sustainable Development
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INTRODUCTION

Our case study will undertake an analysis and critique of The Foundation for Self Sufficiency in Central America's (FSSCA) Romero Memorial Tree Project. The FCSSA has worked in partnership with Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa to undertake this project.

First this paper explains the context of the project. The recent history of El Salvador, as well as the environmental conditions found there, will demonstrate a perceived need for development projects in certain areas of El Salvador. Then, the relationship, ideology and background of the organizations involved will be explained; following these explanations the dynamics of the project itself will be described. After the background information has been delineated, an analysis and critique of the project itself will be pursued. The framework that will be employed to analyze the project will be the discourse of Women, Environment and Development (WED) as well as Participation and Helping critiques.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In both 1972 and 1977 the elections that took place in El Salvador were considered to be fraudulent; this contributed to the military coup that took place on October 15th, 1979 by members of a military junta and led to a civil war. By the end of the civil war in 1991, Sundaram and Gelber (1991) report that 75,000 Salvadorans, most of whom were civilians, had been killed and one in four children were malnourished. The political and military influence exerted by the United States has been tremendous and is thought to have helped to fuel the conflict.

The hardships of the civil war allowed a place for women in society that had not existed previously. Women were at the forefront of many of the political movements to defend themselves against unfair government policy. Thompson and Eade (2004) question whether the empowerment of women by transforming them from victim to social actor will give women the confidence to move from the conflict towards a more development-oriented agenda. This question could be extrapolated to include the poor who have been adversely affected by conditions of environmental degradation and disasters; this idea will be integrated into the participation section of this case-study.

Oscar Romero, the namesake of the project we are studying, was an advocate of the poor and victims of the civil war. He is also one of the promoters of liberation theology; this movement has been defined by Phillip Berryman, as referred to in Wikopedia, who wrote a book by this name, as, "an interpretation of Christian faith through the poor's suffering, their struggle and hope, and a critique of society and the Catholic faith and Christianity through the eyes of the poor." (Berryman, 1987, Overview, para. 1). This theological movement was an impetus for the spreading of "base communities" throughout Latin America in which those who are poor and on the margins of society gathered in small groups or communities to discuss, critique and take action on their local situations. Proponents of this theology have suffered tremendously because of their efforts. Archbishop Romero was assassinated on March 24, 1980 and three nuns and a layworker were assassinated on December 2, 1980. The project that is being analyzed commemorates some of the ideals of liberation theology.

Development Projects and the Environment

Unjust land distribution has contributed to the degradation of the environment. Ninety-five percent of all the original forests have disappeared, which has caused massive floods, landslides and droughts that exacerbate poverty (Sundaram and Gelber, 1991). Hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the earthquake of 2001 devastated many areas in El Salvador. Some of the degradation has been more deliberate. According to Thompson and Eade (2004), members of the military led a scorched-earth policy that displaced and disabled many people.

These conditions have served as a rationale for many of the development projects taking place in the region. The Assistant Director of the FSSCA, Sean Hale, is of the opinion that many of these projects have created more dependency (Hale, personal communication, 2005 December 2); the Romero Memorial Tree Project aspires to decrease dependency and set the framework for the communities they endeavor to help to become more self-sufficient.

ORGANIZATIONAL FORMAT

In order to look at the project that will be explored through a critical eye, it is necessary to look at the backgrounds of the organizations. The FSSCA grew out of an earlier organization in El Salvador, called ITAMA: the Institute of Technology, Environment, and Self-Sufficiency, founded by José Chéncho Alas. To better work for economic development and social justice for his country, he helped establish the FSSCA in 1996 as an independent U.S. non-profit. The mission statement of the FSSCA is as follows:

The Foundation for Self-Sufficiency in Central America (FSSCA) works in partnership and solidarity with low-income communities in Central America organized to achieve environmental sustainability, economic self-sufficiency, social justice, and peace. We assist in providing the financial, technical, and moral support needed for these communities to carry out their plans. The vision, initiative, organization, and

implementation of the projects we support come directly from the communities with whom we work. (FSSCA Mission, 2005)

Since 1998 the FSSCA has worked exclusively with the Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa (Coordinadora). The Coordinadora is a Salvadoran *campesino* peasant movement established by thirteen communities in 1996 in order to respond to the annual flooding of the Lempa River (The Coordinadora's History and Accomplishments, 2005). It concentrates on building a sustainable, environmentally sound economy for the peoples of the region. This is done through many programs including peace-building efforts and Dialog and Reflection Circles (CIDIRE) as well as various community-level committees. Today, more than 80 communities comprise the Coordinadora. Representatives are elected from the participating local communities and comprise the decision-making structure of the organization.

The FSSCA's main contributions to the work of Coordinadora have been in the form of fund-raising, relationship-building with local and international partners, and the recruitment of volunteers to provide technical assistance for the projects (FSSCA History, 2005).

ROMERO MEMORIAL TREE (REFORESTATION) PROJECT

The FSSCA's Romero Memorial Tree Project is one of various projects in El Salvador focused on reforestation in El Salvador. Severe deforestation in El Salvador contributed to the amount of devastation incurred after the aforementioned natural disasters that hit El Salvador. The loss of forests is a major cause of preventable natural disasters such as landslides and flooding (Concern USA, 2005). Between the years 2000-2005, El Salvador lost about 26,000 hectares of forest. The rate of El Salvador's total deforestation from 2000-2005 was about 1.7% per year, meaning it lost an average of 5,000 hectares of forest annually (Rainforests, 2005).

In response to deforestation and its impact on El Salvador's land and people, the Monsignor Romero Foundation of San Salvador, proposed a reforestation project to plant one million trees throughout El Salvador during 2005, the 25th anniversary of the martyrdom of Romero. The Coordinadora decided to participate in this project and together with the Ray's of Light School (a Salvadoran arts school which provides youths with an enriching alternative to being on the streets) and FSSCA their goal is to sow 50,000 trees in the Bajo Lempa Region. The Coordinadora is implementing the actual project, with Ray's of Light School providing the tags for the trees and the FSSCA raising the funds needed. The objectives of the Romero Memorial Tree Fund are to commemorate Monsignor Romero's martyrdom, raise awareness in El Salvador and the international community of Romero's contribution to peace, justice and a dignified life, reestablish harmony in nature and to improve the social and ecological conditions of the people and the country through a massive reforestation program.

As a method of sustainability, the project will plant native trees that have been determined appropriate for local conditions. The Coordinadora del Bajo Lempa will identify the appropriate plant species and sites for planting. In addition, the Coordinadora will grow the seedlings in their nurseries and distribute the seedlings to the appropriate sites. The sites will include schools, mangrove swamps, roadside parks and any other locations where the trees can contribute to the people and biodiversity of El Salvador. The Coordinadora will also organize local volunteers to plant the trees. (Project Description: Romero Memorial Tree Project, 2005)

Funding for the trees will come from local and international donors. Each tree will have a tag identifying the donor and memorializing Romero. Any surplus funds will be dedicated to additional sustainable development and environmental recovery projects in El Salvador.

ANALYSIS and CRITIQUE

From the material we were able to obtain as well as email contact with pertinent staff involved in the project, we know that the Romero Memorial Tree Project takes a different approach than many traditional international development projects. When asked if this project was a conscious choice to do development differently than traditionally structured projects and if there were previous negative experiences in the participating communities of such international development projects, the Assistant Director replied:

Many traditional development/aid programs create dependency and provide a disincentive to work. They've [the local communities involved in Coordinadora] seen how destructive that can be. After Hurricane Mitch, they worked with relief organizations to convert traditional assistance into seeds and training in diversifying their crops. As far as the organizations that insisted on the traditional handouts model, they requested, after their communities were able to get their first harvest in that those organizations leave. There were some communities in the region where people didn't work for two years because they knew that every month a truck would deliver a bag of rice, beans, sugar and cooking oil. (Hale, personal communication, 2005, December 2)

This temporary dependency created by such traditional development projects was something the communities of the Coordinadora did not want, and so they are creating alternatives for themselves. The Women, Environment and Development (WED) model seems to describe best some of the elements of the approach this project takes: emphasizing true participation, “sustainability” in the sense of equity as well as balance between economic and ecological needs, sensitivity to the particularity of the situation (culture and local ways of knowing) and development as encompassing the total quality of life and not just economic growth.

Participation

FSSCA and the Coordinadora's approach definitely is in direct contrast to the dependency and colonial models and more closely resembles, or incorporates elements from the

feminist perspectives on development models. Take for example the concept of participation. Participation is “the action or fact of par-taking, having or forming a part.” (Rahnema, 1992: 116) This is supposed to be a free and voluntary exercise where people contribute their time and resources out of their own will in trying to achieve a specific objective. There is no manipulation and people are not asked or dragged into it but act out of their personal conviction in full recognition of the importance of their actions. They partake in the process with a clearly defined purpose. The desired goals are very positive and they are the driving force for people to take action. It is a spontaneous process from within the people and this might lead to the formation of groups or committees in order to effect their actions in a cohesive and efficient manner. “Participation and participatory methods of interaction are seen as an essential dimension of development” (Rahnema, 1992: 116). Project design and implementation requires the project clients or beneficiaries to be involved in designing, implementing and/or evaluating all the project activities. Participation in these has a great impact in determining the success of any development project dealing with local people and their communities.

Participation is now perceived as an instrument for greater effectiveness as well as a new source of investment. Participatory processes bring to development projects what they need most in order to avoid the pitfalls and failures of the past, that is: (a) a closer knowledge of the ‘field reality’ which foreign technicians and government bureaucrats do not have; (b) networks of relations, essential both to the success of ongoing projects and long-term investments in rural areas; and (c) the co-operation, on the local scene, of organizations able to carry out development activities. (Rahnema, 1992: 117)

In this context, grassroots organizations are becoming the infrastructure through which investment is made, or they help provide the human ‘software’ that makes other kinds of

investment work (Rahnema, 1992). In looking at participation in the Romero Memorial Tree Project, exact percentages of the composition of involved individuals are unknown. However, Mr. Hale reported that currently while local men hold many of the leadership positions, as women find it harder to spend time away from home, the gender gap is decreasing as more women are becoming involved especially at the local level. This is due in part to one of the Coordinadora's programs. "The Culture of Peace Team's Dialog and Reflection Circles (CIDIRE) are impacting the 11 pilot communities, particularly the female participants. As one woman put it, "we're breaking the culture of silence and learning to speak for ourselves!" (FSSCA Annual Report, 2002: 9) Women are transcending previous victimization to become social actors.

Former FMLN guerillas as well as former armed services members are also involved. This would indicate an openness to representation and participation of broader sectors of the population and is in keeping with the feminist call for "gender-sensitive rather than a woman-only approach." (Parpart, 1995: 235)

In addition, the very way the Coordinadora is structured facilitates this positive kind of participation. It is comprised of all the communities that voluntarily decide to participate, with one or two representatives elected for this goal. Local Groups have organized at the grassroots level to help maintain ongoing participation and these form the foundational structure of the Coordinadora. These Local Groups form within geographic areas and are comprised of communities who share specific problems and wish to work together toward common solutions. To address specific aspects, several committees and associations have formed within the Coordinator, such as the Mangrove Association, CIDIRE, shrimp producers committee, youth committee, farmers groups and women's committees. It is the people themselves, coming

together through Coordinadora that make the decisions regarding this reforestation project: i.e. which tree species to grow and where they will be planted. There is much interest among the schools regarding the part of the project to plant fruit trees in schoolyards. The schools themselves approach the Coordinadora requesting to be recipients, rather than being selected by the organization.

Helping

Along with the concept of participation, it is good to explore the overlapping notion of “helping” and how it is viewed in this project. According to Marianne Gronemeyer “the times in which helping still helped, certainly in the form of development assistance...are irrevocably past” (Gronemeyer, 1992: 53). The main problems she mentions is that help is not unconditional anymore and that the need for help is not determined by the one who needs help but by external and usually western standard of normality.

The Romero Memorial Tree Project is a development aid project that has a motivating approach to help. As explained previously, three organizations have partnered to work on this project, with the FSSCA raising funds to make this project possible. These three organizations are very deliberate about whom the ideas and plans are coming from as described on the home page of FSSCA.

The vision, initiative, organization, and implementation of the projects we support come directly from the communities with whom we work (FSSCA Home Page, 2005).

José Chenco Alas describes in their Summer/Fall 2005 Newsletter a good example of the kind of “helping” approach utilized by these organizations. Eight or nine years ago he went for a workshop to Isla de Mendez. In the morning before the workshop he found the beach full of garbage, dead animals and human waste. He decided to reach out to the community through the

Bible, the source of the community's core values and principles. During a break he took the community for a walk on the beach and asked them to journal anything they'd like. The people from the community, through their own initiative, guided the rest of the workshop towards what they were going to do about the beach. A couple weeks later the community had organized and cleaned everything up.

Talking with some rabbi friends about this experience, we saw that a workshop on the environment wouldn't have motivated the community to keep the beach clean. A seminar on human health or hygiene wouldn't have done it either. Instead, the key was helping the community connect its core values and principles to their daily life. When they saw that they were out of tune with their own values, they formed a rock-solid commitment to fixing the situation. (Chencho Alas, 2005)

This resonates strongly with Rahnema's observations about "beyond participation" when he states:

"As a rule, the necessity for a spiritual dimension, and for the revival of the sacred in one's everyday relationships with the world, seems to be rediscovered as a basic factor for the regeneration of people's space. Wherever this spiritual dimension has been present, it has, indeed, produced a staggering contagion of intelligence and creativity, much more conducive to people's collective 'efficacy' than any other conventional form of mass mobilization. (Rahnema, 1992: 127)

Part of the help given by FSSCA and the Coordinadora is in this realm of reconnecting the people with this spiritual dimension which in turn produces creativity in solving the problems before them. This is also in keeping with the roots of liberation theology as well as WED's perspective of respecting different local forms of knowing.

Furthermore, the Coordinadora is conscientious about not giving help to people or organizations who don't need or want it. With this concern in mind, we asked Sean Hale the Assistant Director of FSSCA: "Who chooses which schools, for example, will receive fruit trees?" He responded:

So far they've [the Coordinadora] been responding to requests from local schools rather than seeking them out. There's plenty of demand that way and it's better to work with schools where there is a sincere interest. (Personal Communication, 2005, December 2)

Many internationally known environmental organizations gave up any hope to be able to improve the situation in El Salvador because of the desperate social and environmental conditions. More than 40% of the population has more concerns about their daily survival than about the long-term consequences of impact (deforestation for firewood, burning garbage, polluting water...). Prohibiting activities that hurt the environment does not work in the face of that dimension of poverty. Coordinadora, on the other hand, works with the communities to find sustainable alternatives to overcome the poverty with different projects. This organisation is very concerned about long-term effects and rejects any help that could cause disincentive to work (like handouts of staple food).

Sustainability

The WED approach to development besides emphasizing true participation, also promotes a focus on “sustainable development” including the notions of equity, reducing waste and pollution, and a “balance between economic and environmental needs...” (Peet 1999: 190) In other words, WED does not see “economic growth” as the sole measure of “development” but rather they look at the overall quality of life. The FSSCA and Coordinadora organizations have a similar vision. They have other programs promoting knowledge and levels of technology appropriate to the culture that work in tandem with ecological projects such as this reforestation one. This promotes a more holistic vision for the participating communities in El Salvador. Especially important is this project’s respect for the ecosystems of the area, so that only native species of trees are considered for the project and they will be planted in the areas most conducive to their growth.

The very name of the foundation highlights the approach of “self-sufficiency” – helping the communities to obtain the knowledge/skill sets they request in order to have meaningful livelihoods while balancing this with environmental limitations and also being sensitive to the particularity of the situation. It is the communities themselves who decide what it is they need in order to have a satisfying quality of life and this may not always be equated strictly with “economic growth.” The way this project is carried out and its long-term effects on the social and ecological well-being of the communities is taken into consideration in this reforestation project.

Efficacy

Mr. Hale related that funds to plant nearly 6,000 trees have been collected so far. In reality they have been able to plant more than that number, including some 15,000 mangroves in the environmentally sensitive Bay of Jiquilisco and hundreds of fruit and shade trees for farms and schools. The FSSCA pays the Coordinadora to produce the trees in their nursery, and with the profits they're planting a lot of extra trees. With the mangrove planting done this past spring with delegations, thousands and thousands were planted because it's not particularly time consuming. (Hale, personal communication, 2005, December 13) Recipients of the trees are then responsible for the ongoing care and maintenance of the trees.

When asked about any changes they might wish to make to the program, Mr. Hale replied:

My main goal for next year is to improve our fundraising for this project. This is a great and easy project for groups and individuals to support. For \$2000, a church group could plant 200 trees around a school, for example. I think we could find many student and other groups to participate as well. (Hale, personal communication, 2005 December 13)

One of the main objectives of the project was to reestablish harmony in nature and to improve social and ecological conditions of the people and country. It appears as though the FSSCA and the Coordinadora are doing exactly that. Another objective was to raise international awareness about Romero's contribution to peace, justice and a dignified life. This, too, seems to be happening as records that were available showed donors from outside of El Salvador, i.e. the Esperanza Club of Edgewood College in Madison, WI and the Youth Group from St Edmund's Episcopal Church in San Marino, CA.

CONCLUSION

We have determined that reforestation projects in El Salvador can be desirable due to the historical and environmental conditions that have predisposed the country to environmental degradation; however many projects have done more harm than good by creating dependency. The Romero Memorial Tree Project seems to have overcome some of these challenges, by encouraging broad participation at a grassroots level, and by fostering sustainability through self-sufficiency. An indicator of the success of the project is that communities have approached Coordinadora and FSSCA to ask for their help.

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