

Social Aspects Of Sustainable Development Initiatives Undertaken By The Peruvian Government In The Southern Andes

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This summer I spent six weeks in Peru's Southern Andes region (Department of Ayacucho) investigating social aspects of sustainable development initiatives undertaken by the Peruvian government. I focused on the relationship between officials of the "National Program for Micro-Watershed Management and Soil Conservation" (PRONAMACHCS) -- an agency under the Ministry of Agriculture whose stated mission is "to promote the sustainable use of natural resources in watersheds of the Sierra, to better life conditions for rural populations, and the preservation of the natural environment" --, and peasants in rural communities -- the beneficiaries of the program. I was interested in understanding the perceptions of natives regarding state intervention and wanted to assess how sustainable, if at all, the program really was. That is, to what extent did projects of environmental conservation and agricultural development are continued by the local population once state supervision is no longer present and what did this depend on?

The region of Ayacucho is one of the poorest and driest of the country. It was also one of the areas most affected by the wave of political violence sweeping the Peruvian Andes during the 1980s as a result of the actions of the Shining Path terrorist movement and its consequent armed conflict with the Peruvian military forces. Afterward, the government of President Alberto Fujimori during the 1990s set a precedent for all state development action by engaging in a paternalistic relationship with the rural beneficiaries of so-called "repopulation programs." In these, peasants would ask for help from the national government and receive aid almost exclusively in the form of infrastructure building. There was no emphasis on comprehensive, environmentally sound, and society-empowering development. I imagined that past violent relations with the government would have made peasants distrustful of government officials and that their past experiences with institutions that would simply "give them fish" and not teach them "how to fish," would severely compromise the local sustainability of the projects PRONAMACHCS undertook by making peasants dependent on the continuing presence of the institution's technicians and engineers.

I concentrated on seven small communities (20-50 families) in three districts of the provinces of Huanta and Huamanga, in the department of Ayacucho. Each of these communities had its own "comité conservacionista" or conservationist committee: an organized group of peasants that worked in cooperation with PRONAMACHCS under a "contract" to undertake conservation and development activities such as construction of "slow-formation" terraces, reforestation, construction and maintenance of plant nurseries, construction of irrigation channels, animal sheds, warehouses, and workshops in micro-business and micro-watershed management. The committees agreed to meet once (or twice) a week to work on activities that benefited the community as a whole, sometimes in exchange for receiving food and supplies. A technician from PRONAMACHCS, headquartered in the "agencia provincial," or provincial agency, was

assigned to visit each community on their designated work day, to help plan and supervise activities and coordinate the repartition of materials funded by the institution.

To get a better sense of the mission and goals of PRONAMACHCS and to be able to outline national policies on rural development, I gathered documents and talked to experts at the National Agrarian University in Lima. I conversed with faculty members and also with individuals that had had experience in NGO work in the region of Ayacucho. I even had the opportunity to talk to a former director of PRONAMACHCS. Most of them agreed with that PRONAMACHCS lacked the participatory focus necessary to effectively engage local rural populations in conservation and environmental development practices, and that the institution used a top-down approach in which plans for conservation were made in offices in Lima, the capital, with little to no input from the local beneficiary population. The situation proved to be more complicated than they asserted as PRONAMACHCS did, at least on paper, have a mandate to develop conservation and development plans in consultation with native peasants. However, a combination of factors including lack of funds, external pressure from the national PRONAMACHCS directory, and lack of a deep understanding of the social dynamics of each specific community limited the level of participation of natives in the planning of activities process. These last transpired from both the formal and informal interviews I conducted with officials (technicians, engineers, and administrators) in the departmental and provincial agencies of PRONAMACHCS. Officials also pointed out that in many cases the peasants just “had no interest” in engaging in conservation and environmental development activities. I surveyed technicians and engineers to also understand how they individually related to peasants.

I conducted formal and informal interviews with peasants and farmers in the seven communities. Because I thought that cultural factors (attitudes towards government officials, past experiences with development organizations, level of education, etc.) were the most influential, I asked open questions regarding those issues and encouraged individuals to tell me a little about what they thought of the program, if they knew what the program was about, what were some complaints that they had regarding the program or the technicians, and what they felt their role was in conservation and development activities, among other questions. I also tried to get them to talk about their past experiences with other organizations and with terrorism itself, to gauge whether this could play a determinant role in their attitudes towards PRONAMACHCS. Another topic that interested me was the social dynamics of the comité conservacionista itself. It was not mandatory to participate in the activities promoted by the national program, yet the whole community benefitted from soil conservation and reforestation activities (anyone in the community could ask to be given wood from the reforested areas, for example). I wanted to know how members of the committee felt about this and if this discouraged their commitment to the program in any way.

Natives' perspective of the work they executed with PRONAMACHCS was mixed, but some general observations can be pointed out: In many cases participants in the conservation projects sponsored by PRONAMACHCS would do so because working a certain number of hours was equivalent to receiving a certain number of food supplies under a contract PRONAMACHCS had with the World Food Programme. They would be foreign to the goals and missions of the agency and unknowledgeable of the functions of a conservationist committee. Of approximately fifty people interviewed, only two identified themselves as a “conservationist.” However, about 10 freely expressed that the activities they carried out were “for their own good.” In most cases, it was unclear

whether or not peasants had a complete understanding of the purpose of the activities. It was interesting to see that in some communities, participants had no idea of what organization officials were part of, but were eager to receive “apoyo,” or support, from wherever they were coming from, perhaps a sign of the degree of marginalization these communities had suffered in recent years. There also seemed to be a correlation between how far from a major city or town the communities were located and the degree of understanding of the purposes of the program. For example, in the case of a very specific project: the construction of animal sheds to protect livestock from frost, individuals in the most isolated communities would work making adobe bricks but many did not know exactly what they were building.

Most interestingly, there seemed to be a correlation between how much personal good a specific conservation activity generated and how much effort individuals put on those activities and how much they understood their purpose. It transpired in conversation with both officials and peasant as well as through observation that plant nurseries were the most popular projects. Committees would work every week on them, keep them clean, watered, and organized. Committee members and members of the community could take home plants from the nursery and use them for personal purposes. On the other hand, building warehouses and animal sheds was problematic because the benefits were distributed throughout the community. Committees lacked the organization of who was to use the warehouse or animal shed or when. In some cases, warehouses and animal sheds ended up being used as houses because they looked prettier and felt warmer than the poor peasants’ houses were.

My time spent in Peru did open up other areas of inquiry. It was very interesting to observe that the burning of garbage still constituted a big part of farming practices for peasants in Ayacucho for example, and that little to no emphasis was put by state agencies such as PRONAMACHCS, which is supposedly dedicated to environmental sustainability, in composting (as alternative to burning). I would like to investigate the extent to which sustainable and ecological practices are used in Peruvian state intervention and assess the viability of introducing such practices in the work of PRONAMACHCS.

I would also like to note that the opportunity to interact with both native peasants and state officials in one of the poorest regions of my country was of extreme personal and academic value. I have found that it is one thing to read about rural development endeavors and another to actually experience the social dynamics of these efforts. Real life is much more complex than academic papers and books suggest, so I would recommend that other students try to engage in experiences similar to mine and to the other environmental studies interns.