Subsistence to Sustainability: An Integrated Approach to Community Development Via Education, Diversification & Accompaniment

Guatemala
Suzanne de Berge
Organization type: nonprofit/ngo/citizen sector
Budget: $10,000 - $50,000
Website: http://www.semillasfuturo.org, www.seedsforafuture.org

- Food security
- Education
- Income generation
- Poverty alleviation
- Rural development
- Sustainable development
- Sustainable agriculture

Project Summary

Elevator Pitch

Concise Summary: Help us pitch this solution! Provide an explanation within 3-4 short sentences.

Rural poverty and the social/educational structures which sustain it must be addressed locally. Instead of “top down” economic development, often fraught with corruption, poor administration, political favoritism and broken promises, our integrated, bottom-up approach offers training in teamwork, business and community skills via programs focusing on education, food security and agricultural diversity. Empowering women is a core element, as is fostering education and critical thinking. The community-based model provides a path upward from subsistence, and at the same time supports the development of civil and democratic institutions. In the end, the community of Chocola will become a regional training center and a living model that others can see and apply in their own communities.

About Project

Problem: What problem is this project trying to address?

We work in the community of Chocola in the Department of Suchitepequez on the Pacific Piedmont of Guatemala. Chocola is more than 2,500 years old in the sense that the modern community sits atop a pre-classic Maya city. The modern village of Chocola was established in the mid-1800s by Spanish plantation owners who later sold it to German family business (roughly 1895). It was then nationalized during World War II and run as a government coffee business for 40 years until under land reform in the 1980’s the land was returned to a cooperative of local farmers, which is the current status. Chocola mirrors other impoverished rural villages in Guatemala: wages are about $4.35 a day, when there is work; coffee farmers own small parcels that barely pay their own way and are at the mercy of road side brokers to buy their crops – always at prices far below market value. They are too poor to own their own vehicles to get product to market and so live a subsistence life. Public schools are notorious for their poor quality and most men have but a fifth grade education, women have less, and education prospects for their children are no better. The community is made up of about 2,500 families, unemployment hovers at 45 percent, underemployment at 75 percent. To find work, most young people will leave for large cities or risk immigration to the US or other parts of Latin America. Most end up living in slums. Most of the present residents are descended from laborers imported from other areas of Guatemala by the Spanish and German landowners, and the sense of community is lacking. Political structures are weak and local elected leaders change frequently. Chocola does not have municipality status and thus must request its services and infrastructure needs from a nearby town. On the other hand, they sit atop some of the richest soils in the world and are determined to move forward.

Solution: What is the proposed solution? Please be specific!

Living at a subsistence level destroys the ability to envision a better future because all energy and thought goes to today’s needs and problems. We believe the key to this situation is an innovative locally-based integrated approach that provides immediate economic improvement for a family, while addressing more systemic underlying long-term issues such as education and the social and civic fabric of a community. However, our most important innovation lies in recognizing the human factor in creating sustainability of economic activities, of the social/civic community and of individual self-confidence. Many good programs fail when the agency or NGO leaves because the participants did not believe they could continue. Technical training may be quickly absorbed, but it is the human, social and cultural barriers that inhibit teamwork and success. Helping people believe in themselves is the most important step in sustainability. Programs must include a lengthy, focused period of accompaniment and coaching, which also offers experiences of success. Within the confines of precarious economic situations, one must teach experimentation and the ability to learn from failures, and how to seek knowledge and advice to improve outcomes. A combination of both technical and individual/leadership training is required needed for sustainable success.

Impact: How does it Work

Example: Walk us through a specific example(s) of how this solution makes a difference; include its primary activities.
We currently have programs in 3 areas, education (Library/Community Learning Center); agricultural diversity (Pioneros de Cacao); and food security/nutrition (Huertas Familiares). In each, our principal activities are as follows: *Provide technical training and skills, such as in growing cacao, agroforestry systems, use of native trees for timber and shading cacao/coffee; how to prepare soil, plant and tend vegetables, recipes for use; care of rabbits (family protein), etc. *Encourage Integrated Vision in which farm families recognize the values and interconnection between adopting new crops, post-harvest added-value techniques, general education, vegetable gardening for family nutrition and the values of leadership training and learning to work together. *Provide leadership and democracy training to help farmers identify common goals and develop practical and actionable plans for achieving them. This includes development of institutional structures for planning and decision making -- "Strength in numbers and cooperative action." *Teach post-harvest & added-value production techniques, for example, in the fermentation, drying and preparing cacao for market. *Assist in capitalization for construction of post-harvest facilities such as fermentation and drying/bagging, or for development of group-managed commercial vegetable garden. *Establish and manage a cooperative groups that sell their crops at fair market value and earn a good return for their investment *Provide business management training to help farmers develop plans for reinvestment of profits into business expansion which can lead to employment and development of support businesses. *Foster learning, experimentation, problem solving and critical thinking.

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**Organization:**
Semillas para el Futuro/Seeds for a Future

**About You**

**First Name**
Suzanne

**Last Name**
de Berge

**Twitter**

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**About Your Organization**

**Organization Name**
Semillas para el Futuro/Seeds for a Future

**Organization Country**
, ST

**Country where this project is creating social impact**
, SU

**How long has your organization been operating?**
More than 5 years

**Is the project that you are entering related to this organization?**
No

The information you provide here will be used to fill in any parts of your profile that have been left blank, such as interests, organization information, and website. No contact information will be made public. Please uncheck here if you do not want this to happen..

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**Innovation**

**What stage is your project in?**
Operating for 1-5 years

**Share the story of the founder and what inspired the founder to start this project**

The founders are men and women who were members of an Earth Watch research program helping as volunteers with an archaeological dig of the pre-classic Maya site of Chocola in 2004 and 2005. To make a long story short, many of the volunteers fell in love with the community and developed empathy for residents’ poverty and desire to improve themselves and their community. We organized to help them achieve more social justice, a sounder economic development strategy to help lift the community from subsistence poverty and provide education opportunity for promising young people who could emerge as future leaders. Two organizations emerged: Seeds for a Future for training and economic reform and Amigos de Chocola to support education and health program and provide scholarships. As we have learned about the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and barriers of the community, we developed a core but flexible approach to training and programs. Our organizations’ founders comprise a mix of Guatemalan, United States and New Zealand experts in community development, anthropology, business and conflict resolution. On the community side, we have encouraged the formation of study and work teams who can build local support and get the training needed to sustain the programs in the long run. These include the Pioneros de Cacao (Cacao Pioneers), Asociacion de Hortalizas, Comision de Historia de Chocola and the Chocola Library Committee.

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**Social Impact**

**Please describe how your project has been successful and how that success is measured**
In 2008, 40 community leaders held a lunch beneath the trees, to thank us: "You have taught us that we are not nothing, and we can see that we are our own worst enemies." All pledged strive harder to resolve old jealousies, to plan & to forge ahead. It is hard to emphasize the importance of this in a community where insular families & clan mentality have long kept people from working together.

In agriculture, there is always the possibility of natural disaster, and Guatemala has its share of such problems. Such experiences, approached with patience, understanding and open and positive attitudes can become teaching and learning opportunities in the context of a small rural community can present its own special problems, almost as unpredictable as hurricanes and mudslides. In the next 3 years we will continue to focus on technical training and helping participants strengthen their organization skills, as well as training in better managing their business and production capabilities and finding markets for their products. As participants in our programs experience visible success, others will wish to follow their example, but perhaps in new areas of endeavor. We will continue to apply our basic concepts, but will need to be flexible in responding to the perceived needs and desires of community members who seek our assistance.

We will continue to expand our fundraising and development efforts using professionally designed (provided pro bono) tools such as a brochure, donation website and Facebook page, and expand our grant writing efforts.

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Sustainability

What barriers might hinder the success of your project and how do you plan to overcome them?

Our board and business administration are all volunteers, and we have a good team of paid project workers in the community, but it is a constant and distracting problem to stay in the search for funding. This in turn inhibits our ability to provide the full scope of hands-on leadership training we would like to provide using local experts experienced in community leadership and democracy training. The grant your organization offers would stabilize that part of our budget for three years and provide salaries to workers that are fair and offer a more liveable income.

In agriculture, there is always the possibility of natural disaster, and Guatemala has its share of such problems. Further, working within the cultural and educational context of a small rural community can present its own special problems, almost as unpredictable as hurricanes and mudslides. Such experiences, approached with patience, understanding and open and positive attitudes can become teaching and learning opportunities in the most basic components of sustainability: working together, learning from difficulties, sharing successes. We believe we have the team of people and partner organizations to overcome any such barriers.

The cacao and family gardens programs both survived the 2010 hurricane season without losses of crops or equipment – strong testimony to participants' skills and hard work.

Tell us about your partnerships

We partner with a number of organizations:

- The Riester Foundation; funds for the native tree program
- FundaSistemas; technical training on cacao
- The ARKAY foundation; funds for education and programs for women
- The Riecken Foundation; library training and management services under contract
- Guatemala Ministry of Culture; planning for preservation of historical resources
- The AVNET Foundation; general funding
- Let's Be Ready; sets up and operates pre-schools
- El Sito Cultural; cultural and community consulting
- University of San Carlos, Mazatenango; practicum students
- ANACAFE; information and support for coffee producers
- Pilones de Antigua; seedlings and business advice
- East-West Seeds; seeds developed for tropical climates

Explain your selections

General financial support has been received from friends, family, individuals, foundations and businesses. In-kind and programmatic support has been secured from business and other NGOs. We have received intangible support via evaluation and planning efforts from several departments of the Guatemalan national government but have received no government funds. Although we have approached the World Cacao Foundation, USAID,
the University of Arizona College of Agriculture and the Inter-American Development Bank in the past, and at present we do not have any active solicitations for funds with any government or quasi government agencies. Important intangible support comes from knowledge shared with us by many of these same sources. We will continue our efforts to attract the support – whether financial, intangible, in-kind or via implementation of partner programs – from all the sources listed, and will pursue opportunities to attract government programs where it seems appropriate, and desired by the community. We do not at this time have products to sell to customers.

How do you plan to strengthen your project in the next three years?

Assuring consistency of accompaniment and quality of training are among the most important things we can do to strengthen our project and build self-confidence and decision-making skills among the participants. In addition, we will continue to build alliances with other NGOs in order to multiply our impact, and to broaden the types of opportunities we can make available to members of the community.

We will strengthen our focus on encouraging women to take leadership roles in the program organizations and also business development where great opportunities exist for women to participate and succeed. As our agricultural diversification and food security programs develop, they will help create new employers and thus help reduce both unemployment and underemployment.

One of the major negative influences in Chocola is lack of economic diversity. We are first addressing this in the agricultural sector, since most families already are farmers, but further diversification will be required to reduce un- and under-employment. Working with both public and private sector groups, we hope to assist the community in developing new sources of income such as sustainable community tourism focusing on its historic, agricultural and environmental assets.

Challenges

Which barriers to employment does your innovation address?
Please select up to three in order of relevancy to your project.

PRIMARY
Restrictive cultural norms

SECONDARY
Lack of skills/training

TERTIARY
Other (Specify Below)

Please describe how your innovation specifically tackles the barriers listed above.

A tradition-bound, poor rural people are locked into paradigms: -- fear of taking risks, even though they can see a downward economic spiral; deep suspicion of outsiders who have repeatedly failed to fulfill promises; and lack of self-confidence, one result of a substandard public education system which discourages critical thinking and in which most adults spend only 5 years. Addressing these barriers requires “accompaniment,” wherein technical and human resource training is accompanied frequently and regularly by teachers who counsel participants – answer questions, encourage them and help them solve problems. Without the self-confidence built through accompaniment, people who easily learn technical skills may not apply them when on their own, out of fear of the cost of failure.

Are you trying to scale your organization or initiative?
If yes, please check up to three potential pathways in order of relevancy to you.

PRIMARY
Enhanced existing impact through addition of complementary services

SECONDARY
Influenced other organizations and institutions through the spread of best practices

TERTIARY
Please describe which of your growth activities are current or planned for the immediate future.

-Add agriculturally skilled staff, to reach more people at various learning stages.
-Add consultants for regular classes in planning, basic business organization and management, conflict resolution, group leadership, women’s issues.
-3 more local young people trained by professionals, with the goal that they emerge as community/program leaders.
-Bring added value technology to the cacao program beginning in 2012.

In education we have two primary goals:
-Secure several computers and comprehensive digital education materials for the Library via a new partnership with FUNSEPA.
-Develop an audio-visual learning library of practical skills and knowledge so the large proportion of Chocola men & women with limited literacy can share learning opportunities in the Chocola library.

Do you collaborate with any of the following: (Check all that apply)
Technology providers, NGOs/Nonprofits, For profit companies, Academia/universities.

If yes, how have these collaborations helped your innovation to succeed?

*Ministry of Culture; identify Chocola’s cultural/historical assets (Pre-classic Maya site; 1890-1943 German coffee finca); prepare Master Plan to develop community tourism for new income.
*Fundasistemas, professors from Guatemalan & US universities, agronomists to provide current training in cacao and vegetable production.
*NGO partners whose programs complement ours, such as women’s micro-loans, pre-schools, women/family health care center, reading and library development, pre-school.
*Pilones de Antigua, provides tree & vegetable seedlings; East-West Seeds, provides tropical climate seeds.
*Practicum students from Guatemalan universities; student & educator groups to visit Chocola & review needs, plan & implement projects.