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Proposal – Summer 2010

Knowledge as Power: A Community Library in Buena Vista, Honduras

Background

Honduras is the second poorest country in the hemisphere, with 50.7% of the population living below the poverty line.¹ As such, it is overflowing with Peace Corps volunteers and various nongovernmental organizations.² The recent coup and embattled presidential election have tipped an already unstable country further off balance. One of the effects of the coup to extend up into the mountains is the massive cutback of foreign development aid. The reduction in vital aid money makes a project focused on a village in this isolated region that much more important.

Buena Vista is a small village in the northwest of Honduras, a community of indigenous people, the Chorti, descendants of the Maya. They have been denied the rights to their ancestral lands and have been pushed up into the mountains where they successfully reclaimed enough land to build their village and begin farming at a subsistence level. The people of Buena Vista are motivated and organized as a strong community unit. Currently, they are working with Heifer Project International and the Presbyterian Church on a house-building project. Having already addressed their most basic needs, they are ready to tackle another important issue – education. According to USAID, “The quality of basic education in Honduras remains low relative to international standards. Fewer than 50% of Honduran students can read and write at grade level.”³ While the children of Buena Vista do go to school, they lack adequate resources to fully take advantage of what they are learning. Accordingly, the people of Buena Vista have expressed the desire for a library, a place where their children can access the materials essential to their education.

Proposed Project

I propose to work with the people of Buena Vista to build a library. The parents of Buena Vista want their children to have a place where they can hone the reading skills they are learning in school and access books that they otherwise would not be able to afford. The library would have sets of textbooks, which the Honduran government specifies by grade level, to be used for schoolwork. It would have reference books – dictionaries, atlases. It would also have reading books at different levels for children and adults. Adult literacy is low in Buena Vista, and without books to encourage reading it will not improve. The library will also double as a community space, a place to gather or have meetings. Buena Vista currently has no such space. The children attend school in the middle of the village under an open-air covering with several wooden benches, and there is no library anywhere nearby.

¹ CIA World Factbook

<<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ho.html>>.

² Peace Corps

<<http://www.peacecorps.gov/index.cfm?shell=learn.wherepc.centralAmerica.Honduras>>.

³ USAID Honduras <<http://www.usaid.gov/hn/education.html>>.

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Implementation

As supervisor of this project, I will oversee the design and construction of the library. Some of the men in Buena Vista have learned, through the housing project, valuable construction skills. They have already successfully built many houses in Buena Vista. Together, we will design and build the library.

Funding from the Davis Projects for Peace will be used to: (1) Purchase construction materials for the library building. Through the housing project, the village already has a relationship with a local hardware store where all the supplies can be purchased. (2) Purchase supplies to furnish the library. Shelves will be built using supplies purchased at the hardware store. Tables and chairs will be purchased in the nearest city. The New York Society Library has already agreed to donate Spanish-language reading books to the Buena Vista Library. Reference and textbooks, as well as additional reading books, will be purchased in the capital and brought out to the village.

Personal Experience

I worked in community-based development in Honduras, including in Buena Vista, from February 2009 to May 2009. I visited villages all over the country and worked extensively on housing projects at different stages of completion. As a result, I got to experience each of the different phases of a project, from participating in community meetings about project design to unveiling finished houses. Because each project truly belongs to the people, projects tend to be run in different ways. I got to see many projects and many strategies, allowing me to see what worked and what did not.

I continue to be involved with Buena Vista, having raised over \$5,000 that was used to help build new houses. I am in contact with the family I lived with in Honduras, who work for Heifer Project International and also implement their own small-scale projects. They are currently working in Buena Vista and helping me stay connected with the village.

Expected Outcomes

A library is a big house, a place where books live, where knowledge lives. For Buena Vista, a library would also be a place where community lives. It would serve as a gathering place for sharing knowledge – knowledge the adults have found through organizing and building, and knowledge the children will find in the books that building will house.

In addition to the knowledge found inside the library, much will be learned in the process of building it. The people who already know about construction will use the library as an opportunity to teach others in the village valuable building skills. These new skills will allow them to find paying work in nearby towns. They will also pass on the knowledge they have acquired to neighboring villages, teaching others and multiplying the positive effects of the initial project. All of this sharing – of construction skills, of book knowledge – will be centered around the library, turning it into a source of community power, vital to a place like Buena Vista.