

Davis 100 Projects for Peace Final Report - Summer 2007

Title: Perceptions of Civil War and Peace in San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala
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Project Summary

The project was conducted in the Guatemalan towns of San Lucas Toliman and Santiago de Atitlan during the months of June/early July (five weeks). Participants in Guatemala included Father Greg Schaffer, a local parish priest in San Lucas; Adela Chuc, a teacher; and 19 survey participants (17 from San Lucas and 2 from Santiago). The Davis 100 Projects for Peace grant provided the majority of support for this study with personal funds making up any differences.

Guatemala suffered a Civil War from 1960 to 1996. The indigenous population of the Guatemalan highlands was the most affected by this violent period. We knew that in Santiago de Atitlán 457 Mayas had either been murdered or "disappeared" but that San Lucas Tolimán, only ten miles away, was able to escape the brunt of the violence with fewer than 25 deaths. We were aware that the Kakchiquel Luqueños (of San Lucas) were more passive people and that the parish priest, Father Greg Schaffer, was very diplomatic in dealing with both the military and guerrillas during the civil war. On the other hand, the Tzutujil Atitecos (from Santiago) led by an activist American priest who resisted the military presence, were more restive and aggressive. Because of this difference between the two neighboring villages during the civil war we wanted to attempt a comparative study on whether different experiences during war time shaped one's perceptions of war and the subsequent peace. With the help of Father Greg and Adela Chuc, a local teacher, we planned to interview an equal number of Luqueños and Atitecos on their war time experiences and their current understanding of the peace process.

Project Results

We found out the hard way that experiences of violence and terror shape perceptions of war and peace, and of the surrounding world. Thus, due to the widespread casualties in Santiago, our subjects were reluctant to share personal experiences with outsiders, and those who agreed to be interviewed were withdrawn and guarded with their responses. This prevented us from conducting our comparative study of the two neighboring villages. We therefore refocused our project to understand why San Lucas had been less affected by the civil war and what the Luqueños understood about the concept of peace.

We conducted our study through a simple questionnaire given to 19 participants with both open-ended and quantifiable questions. We audio taped each interview and photographed each participant. Of the nineteen participants, seventeen were Luqueños and two were Atitecos.

To protect San Lucas from the ravages of the Civil War, Father Greg fed and gave health care to both guerrillas and the military whenever they came into the village. He also focused on the basic needs of his people by starting a small clinic and nutrition center and a parochial school system. He purchased land from wealthy land owners and gave it to the poor and helped them build housing. These living improvements discouraged Luqueños from joining guerrilla groups and thus kept the military at bay. An orphanage had been created to shelter the children of Civil War victims by the School Sisters of Notre Dame. It was one of several Civil War projects promoted by Father Greg that helped protect the village from guerrillas and the armed forces.

The military didn't leave San Lucas totally unscathed. We heard the brave story of Chona, the San Lucas Parish cook, whose husband was taken by the military for allegedly supporting the Revolutionary Organization of Armed People (ORPA). Chona was left alone to raise their three children.

Although the armed conflict ended with the Peace Accords in 1996 and perhaps brought about a sense of tranquility, 67% of our interviewees said that the town is not at peace. Tranquility is a component of peace. One participant defined peace as "being able to live in tranquility with yourself and with others, being able to live without fear, and having the liberty to say what you want."

Violent crime and poverty plague Guatemala. It was evident that gang violence, drug trafficking, murders, corruption, and lack of job opportunity and education are not conducive to peaceful coexistence. All these problems were aggravated by the Civil War.

However, due to Father Greg's Civil War and post Civil War social projects there has been far less suffering in San Lucas than in most small highland towns. Currently over 90% of the population is literate, the parish clinic is accessible to all who need it at a very low cost and most children have been vaccinated, the parish has purchased numerous fincas (farms), which now belong to the people of San Lucas and which, with government help, have a solid infrastructure of water and electricity. While most houses were once made of corn stalks, new housing is built with cement brick. San Lucas crafts are exported worldwide and the village also produces fair trade coffee for export. Father Greg's projects are highly participatory and reflect a deep understanding of the Mayan culture and their definition of basic needs. He was recently awarded the Order of the Quetzal by the president of Guatemala for his work toward peace and development. In view of these improvements why do 67% of Luqueños claim there is no peace? It is possible that the negative national picture of poverty and crime affects local perceptions. In addition, it is a known fact that rising expectations lead to greater dissatisfaction with the current situation. Thus, socioeconomic improvement in San Lucas could lead to more demands.

Implications:

Cultural acceptance and understanding are essential to achieving peace not only in multicultural Guatemala but also in our world that is becoming more intertwined through communication, technology and globalization. Our project not only identifies what peace means for San Lucas, but also the entire world. Peace does not just mean an absence of conflict. Indeed, only 52.9% of our subjects thought that the Peace Accords had helped Guatemala. Peace entails a full commitment to intercultural understanding and to meeting the basic physical, educational, and emotional needs of all people. As one participant said, peace means that "your stomach is full and you are healthy. You live in harmony with others who also want peace. You treat others well and they treat you well."

We shared our understanding of peace in San Lucas with Americans volunteering at the Parish. We did so by giving a presentation on what we learned from our interviews in San Lucas. We asked our audience to write their definitions of peace before and after the presentation. Many were not aware that meeting basic needs and advocating cultural tolerance are essential to achieving a true and meaningful peace. We hope to give another series of presentations at the College of Notre Dame in the spring of 2008 to further spread our message of peace to a larger American audience.

100 Projects for Peace Summer 2007
College of Notre Dame of Maryland

Top: College of Notre Dame students - Sion Jung, Catrina Aquilino, Lauren Ackerman and Steffani McQuerrey with Father Greg Schaffer of San Lucas, Guatemala

Bottom: Church in San Lucas; highland countryside of Guatemala

