

A Well in Batey Libertad

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1. Project Summary

The purpose of my *Project for Peace* was to create a high quality and sustainable water system for the community of Batey Libertad in the Dominican Republic. This population of Dominicans, Dominicans of Haitian descent and Haitian immigrants, is located about an hour from the Haitian border, in the north-west Cibao Valley of the Dominican Republic. Residents of Batey Libertad face a number of challenges, primarily as a result of their poverty, but compounded by the country's extreme discrimination of and prejudice towards Haitians and those of Haitian descent. A clear expression of this influence is found in the absence of public works within Batey Libertad. Residents, for example, are accustomed to disposing of their trash by either burning it or dumping it in a nearby river. An issue of even greater concern is that of water.

The people of Batey Libertad have always used upon a number of different water sources. This is a traditional practice which helped to compensate for the often unreliable nature of any single source of water. In the past however, residents of Batey Libertad relied almost exclusively upon a system of public tanks and pipes which imported water from the nearest mountain range. About a year ago, this water source was cut off, depriving the community of its primary source of water. Residents were then forced to rely exclusively upon peripheral and secondary water sources.

People collected and used rain water, and the few that could afford it bought bottled and bagged water to drink. The owner of a nearby rice factory, a major source of employment for the people of Batey Libertad, also was generous enough to let the community use the factory's well. The majority of residents though, were forced to use water from the two rivers in the area, which are highly polluted, containing 7,600 cfu/100 mL of E. coli bacteria. This bacteria count is 152 times higher than the World Health Organization's highest level of health risk for water contamination.¹

From May 29th through July 18th of the summer 2007, I lived in Batey Libertad and worked to design and implement a new water system. I first consulted two water specialists to identify a suitable source of water in the area. With this information, I contracted engineer Fermín Fernández of Pozos Tubulares to construct a well, which would then connect to the pre-existing system of public tanks and pipes. The work proceeded in five phases:

- Construction of an equipment shed to house the electrical equipment, pressure tank and voltage adapter (to safeguard these items);
- Installation of well, pump and electrical equipment;
- Evaluation of pre-existing tank and pipe system, connection of the pump to a restored and improved system;
- Negotiation with electric company to establish electric service for the well's pump;
- Work with community residents to establish a committee of elected representatives to oversee operation of the water system.

2. Project Results

As of July 14th, the entire system - consisting of a 100 ft deep well, a submersible pump, a pressure tank, 11 storage tanks placed throughout the community and an automatic feedback system - was fully functioning. In this respect, the project is a success, providing the community with its own localized water system.

There are a number of factors, however, which have yet to test that success. The quality of the well's water, for example, still needs to be confirmed. Though the well draws from a reliable

¹ This information was given to me by Dr. Gary Michels, of Creighton University and its Institute for Latin American Concern (ILAC) which does work in Batey Libertad and throughout the Dominican Republic.

aquifer proven to contain potable water, the water specialist I had consulted returned to the United States before the construction of the well, and was unable to test its water. I hope to have this completed before the end of the year. Additionally, a critical goal of the project was to ensure sustainability of the entire system, which of course can only be tested by time. The expectation is that the physical system will function on its own without problem for at least five years, and for many decades after that, with various small repairs.

Another important factor concerns the stewardship of the water system. The objective of several community meetings and discussions was to have the people of Batey Libertad assume ownership and responsibility for the system. Along with the help of several community members, I worked to organize a committee of people to be in charge of the well's maintenance. Three representatives were elected to collect money for the electric bill as well as for the beginning of a fund to pay for future maintenance fees. Many other community members have also demonstrated their commitment by volunteering during the system's installation, and independently working on repairs. The complete assumption of ownership and responsibility, however, will take time and will also change as the community works to determine the most effective way to maintain the system.

3. Implications

In addition to these more immediate, tangible goals, the greatest hope for this project is that its influence might extend beyond the basic provision of water. Water is a primary element of life, so fundamental that it can be overlooked. The original draft of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, for example, contained no mention of any water concerns. 54 years later, in 2002, the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights amended the declaration, adding that "the human right to water is indispensable for human dignity. It is a prerequisite for the realization of other human rights." More and more emphasis has been placed upon the significant role water plays in issues of poverty, hunger, primary education, gender inequality, child mortality, the spread and treatment of major diseases and environmental sustainability.

With the greatest optimism then, it can be hoped that the installation of a water system in Batey Libertad will serve as a foundation from which to develop all human rights. In the vocabulary of the *Projects for Peace*, this water system could help to provide a more peaceful existence for the people of Batey Libertad, for just as human rights should not be restricted to basic political concerns, peace should not be defined as simply the absence of physical violence. A peaceful existence requires access to the fundamental elements of life. As Batey Libertad, and many similar communities throughout the Dominican Republic work towards a deserved standard of living and level of recognition, attention towards such concerns as access to clean water is critical. This foundation, as articulated by the United Nations, is "indispensable for human dignity" and, accordingly, a necessary prerequisite to confront the other challenges facing this population as a result of their poverty, race, and status as immigrants.

Working on this project was an incredible experience for me that, as I had anticipated, was often defined by unforeseen circumstances. From a nationwide strike, I learned about the separation and disconnect between the Dominican government and its people. From a week without electricity, I learned about the distinction between being resigned and being patient. Additionally, I became familiar with the many organizations working in the area, and with their theory, practice and objectives. Not surprisingly though, I learned the most from being a part of the community and its daily routine. This was my fifth visit to Batey Libertad, but I still had much to learn of the community's dynamics. Especially for this, but as for all aspects of my learning during this project, I am extremely grateful to the people of Batey Libertad. Their invaluable care and support, and the welcome I received, made this project we shared possible. I have learned a great deal from their spirit, resilience and dignity.

