

Irrigating the Past, Harvesting the Future: Rain Water Collection System and Community Garden to Ensure Achés' Long-run Food Security and Self-sufficiency

Paraguay, St. Lawrence University,
Facundo Rivarola Ghiglione'14, Paraguay - UWC - Atlantic College, Wales, UK (08-10)

Section I

Project Goals: The main goal of this project was to provide an alternative food supply for the native indigenous community of the Achés, Kuetuvy, located in the eastern forest of Paraguay. The project focused on building a community garden based upon a thorough ethnographic study of Achés' traditional food supply and locally available seeds, as well as building a rain water collection system for irrigation.

Fund-raising Efforts: Funding for this project was provided by the Davis Project for Peace grant award. We worked hard to minimize costs by staying within the budget and by negotiating discounts and donations from suppliers as part of their social responsibility programs. This allowed us to keep costs low and to meet project goals as intended.

Project Overview: The project was originally designed to be developed in a three-stage process; however, due to weather conditions (heavy rains and flooding), the original plans had to be modified. For instance, the original project proposal called for carrying out field studies during the first month of June, but this process was interrupted due to security and weather conditions, including the flooding of the main access roads to the project site. Most of the community members had to be evacuated to the nearby town of Curuguaty. Instead, the project team decided to use that time for training community members while they stayed at the provisory shelter on town. Training topics covered community garden maintenance, multi-crop harvesting techniques, the use of natural fertilizers, soil preservation, and the importance of water supply. The training sessions were carried by the project's agricultural engineer and local volunteers. We were able to continue field studies in mid-July and start construction in mid-August.

On the other hand, the unfortunate weather conditions also generated unanticipated budget constraints such as the need to hire a special tractor to transport construction materials and the working team to the project site through the precarious and muddy rural roads. Although this was not included in the proposed budget, the need to increase transportation costs became obvious early in the project implementation, as the weather forecast became more serious. This actually required a more drastic reconfiguration of the project. Since transportation of volunteers and the agricultural engineer all the way from Asunción, the capital city, to the Achés site was too expensive, I made the decision to find new alliances with local people from around the town of Curuguaty. I was able to contact with a nearby agricultural school that provided technical education in agriculture and agribusiness to impoverished girls. The school put me in contact with one of their graduates, a young woman who was so inspired by the education she received at the school that she went on to finish her university degree in agricultural engineering. I decided to hire her as the project's agricultural engineer, and since she lived in the town of Curuguaty, transportation costs were much reduced. Similarly, we were able to gather young volunteers from the town of Curuguaty, further reducing the costs of transportation and logging. Volunteers were able to go to the Aché site for the day and return home in the afternoon. This helped the whole

development of the project, creating unexpected connections and opportunities for working together among the local people living near the project site. Local volunteers were also able to gain a better understanding of the Achés' cultural and social background. The volunteers were fluent in Spanish and Guaraní language (very similar to Achés' dialect). This led to communication flowing naturally between the volunteers and Achés.

The construction process has been finished, and the first harvest is planned for the end of September/beginning of October. In addition, the irrigation system was installed and benefitted from the year's unusually heavy rainy season, which allowed for enough water to be stored for part of the upcoming summer. There is even the prospect of generating enough food for all 40 families, which make up the 150 community members. We are now working on creating new business opportunities for the community to be able to commercialize some of their harvested supplies with the goal of increasing income and covering garden maintenance costs. These business opportunities will guarantee the project's long-run sustainability.

Section II

Defining Peace: I always conceived the idea of peace as something rather abstract and idealistic: an ultimate goal. However, the experiences provided to me by this project have informed me otherwise. Peace is not an end; it is a process, a joint effort of perseverance and continuous hope. The Aché people know this more than anyone; they have come about a hostile past of displacement, cultural genocide, slavery, discrimination and impoverishment. Besides their horrific past, they have decided (long before this project) to embrace a process of cultural resilience and restorative justice. Peace, for them, is no abstract. It is internalized in who they are and who they want to become. This project was the result of their vision and contributions to peace and not the other way around. It is precisely because of this that the project was not only well accepted by the local community, but it was taken as their own. I humbly believe that this is the most important guarantee for long-term impact and sustainability of the project as a whole.

More precisely, by combining different aspects of the Achés' historical and cultural background, this project has taken a multidimensional approach to peace and community well-being. Similarly, just as the concept of peace suggests, this project was carried in a participatory manner, taking the Achés' vision and contributions seriously at all stages of project planning and implementation. The community garden will help preserve the Achés traditional food supply and the local species that are threatened by soy monoculture, increase biodiversity, and take the most advantage of their local resources. This has also helped with the creation of the first formal documentation of the Achés' great knowledge about their natural environment; something that can be passed down to new generations and to Paraguayan society in general without the threat of being lost.

Personal Statement:

This was not a common community garden and irrigation project. It was more than that. It was part of Achés' long process of cultural resilience and perseverance. It was a matter of self-identity as much as food security and self-sufficiency. A process of irrigating the past and harvesting the future.

