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Sustainable Agriculture in Rural Central American Countries: Grassroots Effectiveness in Initiating Cultural Change

Zach Field

ABSTRACT

This study examines grassroots organizations with respect to their effectiveness in initiating a cultural change in the agricultural practices in Central American countries. This study used qualitative data from a study conducted by Sustainable Harvest Internationals' Honduras Affiliate. The study was done to assess the long-term impacts of the grassroots organization Sustainable Harvest International. They determined that a vast majority of participants had indeed improved their living conditions and were using sustainable agricultural practices. Additional successful grassroots are provided, exemplifying the advantages of grassroots organizations in making change. The success for these grassroots organizations could provide a format for other grassroots efforts across the globe.

INTRODUCTION

Sustainability is one of the most common methods of reducing our impact on the environment. It allows for continual cultivation of natural resources, while minimizing the degradation of the environment around it. With the advanced level of technology that pervades every corner of the United States comes the ability to increase sustainability in our agricultural practices. This is expensive however, and comes at the cost of government subsidies and regulation.

However, many nations around the world do not have the financial ability to subsidize technologically advanced sustainable agriculture. Nor do they have the governmental capacity to regulate the unsustainable practices and inform the people of alternative methods. Even if there is regulation and legislation in place to promote sustainability, farmers often ignore it. As Hellin and Schrader (2003) note, "Farmer adoption rates... are low and many development organizations have reverted to using direct incentives, such as cash payments and food-for-work, to attract participating farmers. Research in Central America shows that whilst these incentives stimulate implementation of soil and water conservation (SWC) technologies, many of the farmers abandon the technologies once the direct incentives are withdrawn."

There are, however, grassroots organizations that work independently of the government and run on the sweat, tears, and support of their members. These organizations

focus on an individual level. They interact with the issues and the people involved, in ways that bureaucratic and institutional organizations never will. Sustainable Harvest International is one of those organizations.

SUSTAINABLE HARVEST INTERNATIONAL

Sustainable Harvest International is a non-profit group, founded in 1997. Their mission is simple, “provide farming families in Central America with the training and tools to preserve our planet's tropical forests while overcoming poverty” (sustainableharvest.org). They, like many other grassroots organizations, focus on the people involved in the issue. The issue here is the slash and burn farming techniques, in which local people cut and burn vast expanses of lush rainforest to provide fertile farmland. Once the land loses its fertility, or erodes, the farmers move to cut and burn another section of rainforest. The people who do this are not mean or malignant; they are poor and uneducated farmers attempting to make a living in some of the most rural areas in the world.

Sustainable Harvest understands this; they understand that these people want to preserve their land. “Desperate farmers longed for practical training to protect local forests and restore degraded lands. Not only concerned with increased agricultural yields, these farmers also wanted to leave a healthy ecosystem for future generations” (sustainableharvest.org). Sustainable Harvest employs people native to each region and trains them. These people then work with the rural communities to educate and train community members on sustainable practices. Sustainable Harvest has programs across four countries, in over 100 communities.

To determine the effectiveness of these programs, Sustainable Harvest conducted a survey in 2010. Overall, Sustainable Harvest is responsible for the planting of nearly three million trees, preventing thousands of acres of clear cutting, and teaching sustainable farming practices to over 550 families. Additionally, they have been responsible for the creation of local Sustainable Harvest groups, cooperatives, and even a number of rural banks. Of the families interviewed for the survey, over 80% had left a portion of their land as forest preservation. Over 75% had stopped slash and burn techniques, and the communities as a whole had mostly given up slash and burn. Finally, all of the families noted an improvement in their livelihood and well-being, citing an average income increase of 39% since graduating the Sustainable Harvest program.

While no one would argue that there is still much to be accomplished, Sustainable Harvest has achieved much over the past 14 years. They sought to change the mindset and the practices of the individuals and were successful. Humphrey, Lewis and Buttel (2002) measure success in an environmental movement as having five key components. It has membership growth, organizational survival and longevity, attainment of goals, acceptance into mainstream life, and acceptance into the political system. Sustainable Harvest has been successful in the first three of these components. The last two components are rather subjective, but the communities, socially and politically, appear to accept Sustainable Harvests’ program and

results, as the data indicates. This has led to the creation of localized groups who focus on maintaining, promoting and educating current and future community members about the benefits and techniques of sustainable agriculture.

Sustainable Harvest reached out to the people, not with just money and food, but with a commitment, a relatable face, and a strategy that has proved successful repeatedly. They are not looking to change the policies surrounding the issues, they are not looking to change the institutions that may promote or ignore unsustainable practices. They look to change the individuals, the communities, and to make a lasting impact on them.

SUCCESSFUL GRASSROOTS EFFORTS

There are plenty of other examples of successful grassroots organizations, which demonstrate the advantages of the grassroots individual approach. From the story of the Riverkeepers in New York, to the Occupy Wall Street movement, grassroots organizations range in size, scope and mission. However, they all have the same methodology in focusing on reaching out to the people and communities to instigate change.

In the case of the Riverkeepers, a group of dedicated individuals, led by Boyle and Richie, fought to rid the Hudson River of all the corporations that polluted it. They were told “we’re dealing with top officials in industry. You just don’t go around treating those kinds of people like that” (Cronin and Kennedy, 1999). They were nothing if not persistent however, and were soon involved in successful litigation against some of the biggest polluters on the river. Richie’s comments before a Congressional Committee typified the movement, saying he was “simply just a citizen who grew up along the Hudson,’ and who, like other who loved the river, was ... ‘simply an American’” (Cronin and Kennedy, 1999). Their movement encompassed individuals from scientists to commercial anglers, anyone with an interest in the river was encouraged to get involved. Today, the Hudson River is one of the cleanest on the East Coast.

In Washington State, a community came together to work as a cohesive unit, united under a simple idea. They want to create local jobs, sustainable business, and keep the money in the community. They organized to “reconnect farmers with eaters, investors with entrepreneurs, and businesses like this one with the communities and ecosystems that they serve” (Fixing the Future, 2010). Their focus is promoting sustainable living, sustainable business, and sustainable agriculture. This community, as the documentary points out, is not just working but thriving.

Finally, the Occupy Wall Street is a grassroots organization that is successful in much the same way the aforementioned movements were. They are still very early in the stages of “grassroots-dom,” but the very fact that they have brought to light a topic that was taboo is a success in itself. Income disparity, ever present, has now become a popular topic of conversation, whether around the dinner table, or around legislation committee tables. They seek institutional change, but maintain a grassroots organizational base. They have spread, they

have grown, and as they say, they continue to evolve (occupywallst.org). The other movements all started out by framing the issue, gaining an audience and enlisting support. The Occupy movement has done the same, and as one of their many goals undoubtedly is, they seek to end the corporate exploitation of the environment.

One might critique these movements as focusing too much on changing the policies surrounding these issues. However, there is a distinction, though perhaps subtle. These groups are focusing on changing the perceptions, framing the topic to gain support, to inform and mobilize for a cause. In the case of the Riverkeepers, the policies were already in place to regulate pollution; no one was enforcing the policies. The Riverkeepers worked to change public views on the issue, to take the matter into their own hands (Cronin and Kennedy, 1999).

BUREAUCRATIC EFFORTS

While many of the grassroots movements do ultimately result in legislation and bureaucratic changes, the initial grassroots effort shapes the process and discussion surrounding the changes. These grassroots efforts are what instigate a cultural change, they are the most effective at creating an atmosphere that promotes and sustains a cultural change, which policies only supplement. Granted, there are examples of successful initial managerial changes that result in cultural changes. However, they are infrequent.

A case in Cuba successfully demonstrates this, when in the mid-1990s, the state turned parking lots into organic gardening, turning businesses into co-ops. These cooperatives now make up a majority of the agricultural output of the Cuba. The State, due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, no longer had an abundant supply of oil, and needed a way to maintain agricultural production. This is an instance of cultural changes following bureaucratic ones (Cuba: The Accidental Revolution, 2006).

However, it is often the case that managerial changes prompt cultural ones. The Riverkeepers is ironically an example of this. In 1899, the federal government passed the Refuse Act, which was then never enforced. It took a community to take action before the Refuse Act was enforced.

Jared Diamond's book, Collapse, illustrates the lack of influence a managerial approach has to creating environmental sustainability. In his example of Haiti and the Dominican Republic, he talks about the Haitian government attempting to stem the massive clear cutting of the precious little remaining forests. The government imported alternative cooking fuels, to curb the coal creation that resulted in massive deforestation. However, the poverty was so pervasive, that this did not work; the people did not stop, their lives depended on it. Across the border, a similar situation was taking place. While the government was largely much more successful at preserving the forests, there was little commitment from the rural communities to follow the dictators' wishes. While some may consider this a success, the fact that many poor

rural farmers continue to clear-cut is an indication of a disconnect between the instituted managerial changes and the individual cultural needs (2005).

Devra Davis, in her book, When Smoke Ran like Water, illustrates how the government struggled to institute change in the automobile industry. The automobile industry fought for decades to keep lead in gasoline, as it helped maintain the integrity of the car engine. Even with the litany of evidence showing the disastrous effects of leaded gasoline, it was not until the mid-1990s that last gasoline became lead free. Every step of the way, regardless of evidence, the automobile industry has fought change. The corporate interests are more powerful and overrepresented in the government legislation than the interests of the people. The effect is a slow and cumbersome process that, if eventually implemented, then requires dutiful regulation and oversight (2003).

Institutional change is often ineffective because it is difficult to implement, regulate, and enforce. Individual needs often trump institutional demands, corporate greed often stymies legislative processes, and institutions often do not have the resources to enforce positive legislation.

CONCLUSION

Grassroots organizations however, are the counter balance to individual needs, corporate greed, and resource depleted institutions. They focus directly on the individual needs and desires. They get to the core of the issue; they frame the issue and rally support to either make change themselves, or present a strong case for institutional change. Sustainable Harvest works directly with the individuals to improve their economic, social and environmental situation. These changes have resonated with the communities where they take effect, ultimately creating a community of sustainability and economic purpose otherwise unattainable.

Grassroots organizations change the culture of the issue, they reach people in relatable ways, and they serve the interests of communities. Occupy Wall Street exemplifies how quickly grassroots organizations can spread in this day and age, as well as how a previously taboo topic can become a common topic of discussion almost overnight. The community in Washington State shows how cooperation and a commitment to sustainability can benefit the entire community and promote growth. These are all evidence of how effective grassroots organizations can be.

The examples of Haiti, the Dominican Republic, and the automobile industry show the difficulties faced by institutions in attempting managerial changes. Whether through ineffective implementation and regulation, or through insistent individual needs, institutional changes face difficulty in changing the cultural attitudes, particularly in poverty-stricken areas.

That is not to say that grassroots organizations do not have their difficulties. They often are limited in scope, and focus on one specific issue, in one specific area. They often remain small, are limited to specific locations, and their achievements usually limited.

However, they are still much more effective than larger, more cumbersome, managerial changes. The future of grassroots organizations is boundless. In fact, following the grassroots model portrayed by Sustainable Harvest, it would be interesting to see implementation in Africa and parts of Asia. Sustainable Harvest has done what institutions have not been able to do; they educated rural communities and introduced sustainable agricultural practices. They understood, worked with, and met the needs of these communities in ways that bureaucracies never could, and that is why they are so effective.

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