Semillas del Futuro: Cultivating the Seeds of Leadership Among Mayan Youth

Peace is not merely the absence of war, but the presence of justice – Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Background: Thirty-six years of civil war in Guatemala resulted not only in over 200,000 deaths,¹ but also in a legacy of violence, discrimination and marginalization. For indigenous Guatemalans, this legacy of violence persists to the present day in the form of rampant poverty and extremely poor health conditions. Seventy-five percent of indigenous Guatemalans live in poverty, and social development indicators such as infant mortality, chronic child malnutrition, and illiteracy are among the worst in the world.² Nowhere are the lingering consequences of the civil conflict more evident than in the town of Rabinal, (Department of Baja Verapaz, Guatemala) the site of our proposed project. Between the years of 1980 and 1982 a campaign of state-sponsored violence was waged against the indigenous population there, killing approximately 5,000 individuals, the vast majority of whom were Mayan.³ Today, the Mayan population of Rabinal continues to suffer from discrimination and limited access to healthcare and education.⁴

Despite the active presence of hundreds of non-governmental organizations dedicated to improving conditions of the poor in Guatemala, poverty and poor health conditions continue unabated. According to Michael Bakal, director of our collaborating NGO Voces y Manos, this failure is associated with the inability of many aid agencies to break a cycle of dependency on outsiders:

When Mayan youth see that the experts who come to provide ‘poverty relief’ for their communities do not look like them or speak their language, an implicit message is sent to young Mayans: “‘you’ are recipients of aid, whereas ‘we’ are providers of aid.”

Until poor and indigenous community leaders are empowered to identify their own problems and generate their own solutions, and until the “us/them” dichotomy is transformed, it will be difficult to achieve sustainable social and economic uplift in Rabinal.

Objective: The aim of this project is to provide a series of trainings that will empower alumni of the Voces y Manos/Fundación Nueva Esperanza scholarship program (all Mayan youth ages 16-22) to form a student-led community development association that will help break the pattern of dependency on foreigners by creating sustainable, youth-initiated agriculture projects.

Project Description: This project for peace will provide four capacity-building workshops to the motivated students involved in the scholarship program run by Fundación Nueva Esperanza and Voces y Manos. During the second of these workshops, the full group of students will elect five students who will form the Board of Directors of the Student Association. This newly elected Board will receive an additional four-day intensive workshop that will prepare them to skillfully and effectively operate their Student Association.

The content of the five workshops is summarized in the following table:

---

¹ Human Right’s Watch: <http://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/related_material/guatemala_0.pdf>
² State Department Country Note: Guatemala: <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2045.htm>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Workshop Title</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Lead</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inter-cultural Dialogue</td>
<td>Youth participants and <em>Voces y Manos</em> volunteers engage in a series of hands-on activities and conversations that will lead to greater appreciation the cultural diversity of participants while recognizing and celebrating their common humanity (40 students)</td>
<td><em>Voces y Manos</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Training</td>
<td>Participants learn to identify and embody the characteristics of effective, democratic community leaders (40 students)</td>
<td>ASECSA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Rights Education and Advocacy</td>
<td>Participants will learn basic human rights advocacy techniques such as testimonials, education projects and community-based research (40 students)</td>
<td>Macias and Saldivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New-Media and Storytelling</td>
<td>Participants will develop basic and transferrable blogging, photography and film-making skills to generate support, marketing and visibility of student’s projects. (40 students)</td>
<td>Macias and Saldivia</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Management and Institutional capacity-building</td>
<td>Leaders will learn the basics of project management and budgeting, essential skills they will need to master so that they can teach these skills to fellow youth. Leaders will also learn basic operations and protocol for non-governmental organization, with emphasis on management of financial resources (Intensive workshop offered to 5 elected Board Members of the Student Association.)</td>
<td>Fundación Nueva Esperanza</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Sustainability:** The project will be self sustainable since the Student Association is based on a “youth-teaches-youth” model. The leaders of the Association we train will transmit their knowledge to younger scholarship recipients so that they too can develop community service projects. This project for peace will provide with the initial set of skills and resources the Association will need to initiate and then sustain their work. Following the capacity-building workshops, we will provide the newly-formed Student Association with a sufficient supply of seeds, fertilizer, and small saplings to carry out their first year’s worth of agricultural projects. In addition, we will provide them with a video camera so that they can record footage of their work, and produce videos that narrate their endeavors. These videos will be shown to raise awareness to members of the community, local government, potential donors, and *Voces y Manos* website, helping raise funds needed to sustain the projects of the Association once seed money from the Davis Project for Peace runs out.

**Expected Outcome and Impact:** In video footage recently collected by *Voces y Manos*, 18 year-old scholarship participant Macario Vasquez Reyes articulated his hopes for the Student Association as follows:

> *We have a huge dream we want to accomplish, and our dream is to create an Association...We want to create something important, a great vision: To provide our support to the communities. The association for us is like a seed that we must germinate, that we must cultivate in order to give fruit*” [December 24, 2011].

We anticipate that within its first year of operation, the Student Association will give fruit to five community projects that will benefit at least 200 families. Within its second year, we expect the benefits to extend to 600+ families. In the long-run, this model could result in constructive and sustainable peace since members of the communities will be able to break their dependence on foreign aid and become the primary agents of conflict transformation.