Institute for Central American Development Studies: San Jose, Costa Rica
Proposed Student Research: Northwestern University Community-Based Research Program, 2017

Project:
Social Movements, Communities, and Transnational Pineapple Companies in Southern Costa Rica

Key terms:
Social movements, environmental studies, transnational corporations, rural community tourism

ICADS general description

The Institute for Central American Development Studies (ICADS) has been working for 30 years in Central America to increase understanding of the region within a historical perspective; to develop a theoretical framework for the analysis of root causes, forms and dimensions of underdevelopment and injustice; to stimulate critical evaluation of current development strategies, analyzing their effects on women, children, the poor, and the environment; and to search for alternative methods, policies, and strategies.

The mission of ICADS is two-fold:

- To educate participants about Central America by teaching Spanish and by offering academic programs that utilize a theoretically critical perspective as well as hands-on experience to help students deepen insights into current social, political and economic realities and their effects on the environment and society, especially the poor and marginalized.
- To provide support to organizations and communities throughout the countries where we work; especially to groups that have demonstrated a commitment to learning and/or are dedicated to social justice work in areas such as education, healthcare, human rights, anti-hunger issues, and environmental issues.

ICADS regular programs include internship opportunities with community organizations, and field research to help students explore topics related to social and environmental well-being. A strong staff of people from both Central and North America accompany students as they learn about themselves and the world.

Community-Partner description, Country, City

UNAPROA (Unión de Amigos para la Protección del Ambiente) was founded by deputies of six village communities in the Brunca Region in the year 1995. This association has the ambition of promoting the organic agriculture and green tourism. The most active members live in a community called Longo Mai along the Sonador River in the southern part of the Puntarenas province. The members are mostly campesinos, who husband small fields at the base of the
Talamanca mountains. Meanwhile the community has grown and now embraces deputies of forty villages, one of them indigenous.

UNAPROA began its work organizing against the arrival of the pineapple companies to their region in the southern part of Costa Rica. As time has passed at the pineapple companies continue to expand, other issues have also come to the fore in the region, including proposed hydroelectric projects in the region’s rivers. While these projects are currently the priority issue for UNAPROA, the pineapple fields that surround Longo Mai continue to be the primary contributor to the primary social and environmental reality.

UNAPROA has cooperated for several years with the Austrian magazine Grünen Bildungswerkstatt.

Social issue description

Costa Rica is currently one of the world’s main exporters of sweet pineapple and since the 1980’s, the expansion of large plantations has brought changes in local agricultural practices in different parts of the country. For example, in Buenos Aires, traditional crops such as sugar cane, tubers and plantains have been progressively substituted by pineapple. In many cases, the pineapple companies have bought or rented the land of local farmers putting at risk the food security of their communities.

In addition, there are claims that these companies bring a variety of negative social and environmental consequences such as exploitation of workers, contamination of air and water sources, and chronic health problems in local communities. As a consequence of this, and claims that national authorities impose little regulations to the company, in 1995, the Unión de Amigos para la Protección de la Naturaleza (UNAPROA) has represented the community in the discussions with Pinedeco to conserve the local environmental.

On the other hand, PINDECO is currently the main employer in the region and claims to have respectful and conscious environmental and social policies.

Research project description

The objective of this study is to understand the feelings of the local community members toward the large-scale pineapple plantations surrounding their town in light of social and environmental issues.

Specific objectives include learning about the history of the UNAPROA efforts against the plantations, the current relationship of the community with the company, and perceived environmental and social impacts since the arrival of the company to the area.

Community Partner participation in the project

The community members of Longo Mai and the leaders of UNAPROA often connect with young people, mostly from Europe, who are interested in learning about life in rural Costa Rica. The community members are very welcoming and host students and volunteers in their homes and provide advice on studies and projects such as teaching English in the community. The community will participate in the project by sharing their perspectives as well as contacts and information to learn more about social movements that address environmental and social issues. There are
different perspectives on these topics in the community. Key informants will provide some frameworks for thinking about these different perspectives, and the investigator will work as an objective observer of the different opinions in the community.

**Impact of this project on the community**

As a social movement, UNAPROA responds to social and political realities on a local and national scale, and formulates its strategies to address both external and internal forces. A study on the current perspectives of community members regarding a primary focus of the movement in the past can help UNAPROA to understand the impact of their work as well as possible future steps for the environmental movement in southern Costa Rica. In our larger global community, understanding the impacts of pineapple cultivation for export on local populations will better inform this economic activity that continues to grow in Costa Rica.

**Research Mentor and mentorship structure**

ICADS Research Mentors are Gabriel Vargas, Licenciatura in Sociology, and Kat Peters, M.Ed, with Master's in Rural Development in Progress. The ICADS mentors will be the primary academic mentors during the project, and will help to develop objectives and provide feedback on the review of the literature. The ICADS mentors are based in San Jose and will be in contact with students via phone, email, and visits during the data collection phase of the project.

The community mentors, in this case the leaders of UNAPROA and members of the community of Longo Mai, will provide on-the-ground support during the data collection phase, providing feedback on objectives and methodology, as well as logistical and cultural support during the time in the field.

**Methodology**

This study will be qualitative, employing in-depth interviews and participant observation to gain an rich understanding of the variety of perspectives present in the community.

**Student profile and skills, including language requirements**

The student carrying out this type of research must be proactive and open-minded. He/she must a have an interest in Latin American studies and culture, and a sensitivity toward intercultural issues.

A background in Social Sciences is highly recommended, as well as knowledge in cultural studies, environmental studies, transnational corporations, and social movements.

Intermediate/advanced Spanish needed.

**Dates of Research Commitment**

June 18, 2017 - August 19, 2017