

Networking to include all Stakeholders in Yachay, City of Knowledge



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Project Overview

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NETWORKING TO INCLUDE ALL STAKEHOLDERS IN YACHAY, CITY OF KNOWLEDGE

Fellowship Rationale and Objectives

Planned cities have been present throughout history with many reasons behind their conception. In a recent trend, these new cities have been planned in an effort to stimulate the local economy or as a way to leapfrog a nation from developing status to developed, as is the case in Malaysia. Most of these new cities have been in Asia, the Middle East and Africa until now with Yachay, Knowledge City becoming the first one of its kind in Latin America. As a government-driven urban mega-project costing \$20 billion, Yachay is an important development in Latin American urbanism.

One of the challenges with these new planned cities is their negative socio-economic impact on the local populations, particularly on historically marginalized groups. Some of these issues include population displacement, the creation of gated enclaves for elites, and the exacerbation of existing social divides. Some cities are purposely designed to isolate the elite and the majority of the population have little to no access to these cities or the facilities they contain, which in turn continues to deepen the divide between classes and to widen the economic gap. Professor Sarah Moser has been working on the topic of new cities for some time, and arranged to send myself and another fellow, Alexandra Nadeau, to try to understand what was happening with the Yachay project, identify the various stakeholders involved in Yachay, and identify potential opportunities to get involved with local groups who are being adversely affected by the project.

Objectives

One of the objectives of this fellowship is to understand the different methods in which the communities are being consulted and included in the planning process of this new city, particularly as the project is being publicly-funded and government-led. We hoped to gain an understanding of how the project of Yachay, Knowledge City was conceptualized, planned and developed and the impact that it has had on marginalized communities in the area in and around Yachay. This summer we identified key stakeholders involved in the project and set up interviews with representatives to deepen our understanding.

After conducting interviews with the stakeholders and developing primary contacts, our objective was to create a network of contacts including community groups, scholars, planners and other officials in connection to the project. It was necessary to set up lines of communications that can facilitate the exchange of ideas, lessons and case studies from other planned cities around the

world with the people involved in the project. Moreover, networking will help the communities to have a voice in the planning process and be included in the decision-making.

In the long-term, our objective is to get involved with community organizations that are advocating for the welfare of marginalized communities in order to empower them and include them in the planning process of the project.

Background

Before the election of the current president Rafael Correa in January 2007, Ecuador went through a politically unstable period. In seven years there were ten different presidents and very little economic progress in the country. With the election of President Correa and his platform for La Revolucion Ciudadana, or the Citizen's Revolution, the focus shifted from the private sector to the common people. This led to an increase in economic investment in education and local industries and a move towards a knowledge economy.



The new focus on education called for a reform in the educational system of the country by the conception of a new law: la Ley Organica de Education Superior, or the Organic Law of Superior Education. Among the salient points of this law was the creation of four new universities showcasing the shift in economic focus to a knowledge economy, one of them being a university specializing in science, technology and innovation with a research campus that would serve as a workplace for the new university's graduates. This was the birth of the Yachay Knowledge City project.

Unlike some of the projects in Asia and the Middle East, this new city is a public project being built on habited agricultural land. The government expropriated landowners who had farms and plantations that provided jobs for many small communities. This caused many of the residents to lose their livelihoods as they had no job skills outside of agriculture.

Because of the announcement of the new city, the land values of the town next to the site went up more than 1,000%, which made it impossible for the residents of the town or residents expropriated from Yachay to buy any land. Likewise, the development of this new city requires upgrading the roads and sewage of the area according to new specifications, which transferred some of the control over infrastructure decisions from the local government to the Yachay Public Company. Lastly, given the large size of the project, at the beginning of the construction, it was estimated a budget of \$20 billion for the first 16 years, all publicly funded.

As this is the first fellowship conducted in the area, and because the construction of Yachay is still in its beginning stages, there is very little background on the impact of Yachay on the population in Ecuador. This fellowship has served as a foundation for future engagements with those affected by this project.

Activities

We received mentoring, guidance and insights about Yachay from our local sponsor, Juan Diego Donoso, who previously worked as a private consultant in the conception and development of Yachay Knowledge City's master plan. He is currently a professor in the School of Architecture and Interior Design in the Universidad San Francisco de Quito, one of the most prestigious in the country, and a consultant in the planning department in the municipality of Quito. He was able to help us with the cultural



specificities of the project and was key in establishing connections with consultants who worked in the different stages of the conception of the new city's master plan, as well as with professionals working in the planning department in the Quito municipality.

After meeting with our sponsor at the Universidad San Francisco de Quito to better understand the people involved in the project, we proceeded to create a list of key stakeholders in the conception, planning, development and maintenance of the project to then create a contact network and interview these stakeholders. The stakeholders included: representatives from the Ministries of Education, Tourism, Culture and Patrimony, International Relations, and Knowledge and Human Talent; representatives from Yachay Public Company, the company in charge of the creation and managing of the project; private consultants involved in the creation of the Master Plan; the Dean of Yachay Tech along with two representatives from the international relations department of Yachay Tech; different teachers currently working with Yachay Tech; lawyers representing former landowners from the Yachay site; the director of the planning department of Urququí; and representatives from existing communities within the project site; local residents in Urququí and in Quito. We were able to establish close contact with representatives of the Urququí government who were eager to continue working with fellows from McGill and even were interested in sponsoring future fellows to help with the upcoming social changes resulting from neighbouring the Yachay Knowledge City project site.

Other activities included additional research about the history of Ecuador and the current political and socio-economic conditions of the country, participation in community activities in Quito, meeting with current students of Yachay Tech, and attending community outreach meetings between representatives from Yachay Public Company and from the different communities that are located within the project site. These biweekly meetings serve to give a voice to the small communities so their ideas and concerns can be heard and integrated within the planning of the project.

Challenges and Successes

Expected vs. Actual Outcomes

We managed to do most of the interviews we set out to do. In general, we succeeded in achieving our goals in terms of creating a network of professionals, planners, government officials and community members. Moreover, we established a connection for future fellows to help the Urcuquí municipality in better managing their geospatial information by streamlining their databases in order to create an efficient system to resist Yachay's influence over the municipality. The Urcuquí municipality has been affected greatly by the project and they are interested in working with future fellows to establish their autonomy as an independent municipality against this national mega-project.

There are certain people we did not have the opportunity to interview due to scheduling conflicts, like the mayor of Quito and of Urcuquí. However, we did have the opportunity to speak to representatives from the mayor of Urcuquí's office in terms of planning, which gave us an overview of the city's opinion.

In terms of networking, we had great success connecting with the key stakeholders, as listed above. We also spoke with expropriated landowners and lawyers who were contesting the expropriation and with members of the different communities within the Yachay site. Other key people that we were able to contact were different professors within the Yachay University, students currently enrolled in the University and various workers.

However, we had little luck contacting non-governmental organizations working with urban development as there are virtually no visible non-governmental organizations involved in Yachay. We were able to make contact a small community organization in Urcuquí that was working with land development for a small group of citizens.

Questions Raised

What worked really well during the fellowship was our capacity to investigate and talk to people. It took a while before we had the authorization from the manager of Yachay Public Company to do interviews but once we had that, everyone was very open and willing to talk to us. They gave us the opportunity to look at the plan, talk to the head of a couple of departments and gave us a tour at Yachay Tech.

In general, all the people we talked to were very helpful and open to talk about the project, particularly people working with the government, as this project is seen as "the President's flagship project." Ecuadorians seem to be very friendly and open to outsiders. However, when we try to discuss how the Yachay Public Company was dealing with the communities located within and near the project site, we didn't receive the same welcoming and openness that we experienced when discussing other issues.

Another issue we had was the time it took to get responses. Because we were working with government agencies, departments and ministries, there was a high level of bureaucracy that we

had to deal with and sometimes receiving replies to emails or callbacks took weeks. To speak to a high-ranking individual, we had to go through a few people before we had the opportunity to talk to them.

Some of the questions we raised were:

How are the various socio-economic classes in the Imbabura province impacted by the Yachay project?

We got information on how the local communities within the project site are being impacted by the project but there was little information on how Ibarra, the largest city and capital of the province, will be impacted as Yachay is estimated to have a population larger than Ibarra.

How are the needs of the marginalized communities being met?

As a large public project, one expects to have an impact on the population in general and not just one socio-economic class but there was little information on what would be done to help the marginalized communities.

Were other welfare programs cut to provide for funding for this new city? How did the balance within the budget change to give place to the new city?

We did not get specifics on the other programs, simply that they had the funding require for the new city from the state.

How will the community of Urucuquí remain independent vis-à-vis the new city?

Already municipal power is shifting from Urucuquí to the Yachay Public Company in terms of new infrastructure designed to handle the influx of residents in the new city. If Yachay expands beyond what is planned, Urucuquí might lose independence and become a suburb of Yachay and its residents subject of the new city.

What did you learn?

Personally, the biggest impact this fellowship had for me was learning about the importance of education. I had the opportunity to learn a lot about Ecuador's tactics to promote and better the educational system in the country and how the improved management of education can really move a country towards a more prosperous future. I learned that in the last few years, Ecuador has really put a huge emphasis in education in the hopes of shifting the economy towards a knowledge economy and become a renowned hub for knowledge production and high-tech industries. While the Yachay Knowledge City project is problematic in many ways, it was impressive to see the faith the government has in education as the key to their success. This has even led me personally to think about my future career and perhaps involve myself in an educational venue to try to address some of the issues with Canada's current educational system.

Something else that I was able to learn from this experience is the different ways people approach a problem. Having the possibility to immerse myself in a foreign culture, albeit similar to the one

in which I was raised in Venezuela, helped me to understand different ways that an issue can be resolved. There is no 'right' and 'wrong' or even 'normal' and 'abnormal' way to do things but there are different ways that are equally valid and important and allow us to perhaps think outside of our own experience to find new solutions and progress as society.

Having the opportunity to study a national urban mega-project like Yachay Knowledge City revealed insights about the unevenness of such projects. While mega-projects can benefit particular segments of the population, they can also further marginalize others and leave them with no voice. It is these marginalized groups that require more attention and assistance as it is often the case that they lack the tools and skills to have their voices heard.

In general, the way Yachay Public Company is currently working with the rural communities located within the Yachay Knowledge City site is a sign of progress as this is an exception to the way other new cities around the world have dealt with their smaller communities.

As to what I would do differently, I would have liked to be more assertive in talking to people in the street and having random conversations in order to better understand their feelings and opinions about the project and about their country in general. At times, I was really shy or apprehensive to talk to people and ask their opinion as I saw myself as a foreigner that had no place in their community. However, as time went on, I came to see their warm and inviting personalities, which allowed me to be less shy.

Community Implications and Further Work

The work I carried out in Quito and Yachay will make it easier for future research and social projects to take place. Ideally, our work will provide a foundation for longer-term engagements with communities affected by the Yachay project. Our contacts in Urcuquí, a poor community close to Yachay, have outlined specific help they need that could be provided by future McBurney Fellows. They particularly mentioned the need for expertise in geospatial databases using GIS in order to streamline their urban, agricultural and rural processes within the Urcuquí municipality. The Yachay Public Company has been doing this for the new city, and I think the opportunity of having future fellows help to consolidate Urcuquí's geospatial information into GIS databases and sharing this expertise with them will benefit the community and help them remain independent from the Yachay Public Company.

Setting up such relationships and establishing contacts in Quito and Yachay's neighbouring communities will help mitigate the potential negative effects of this urban mega-development. As mentioned, skills in GIS to manage geospatial databases will strengthen the neighbouring communities and allow them



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to formalize control over their land in the face of growing pressure from Yachay. GIS mapping will allow marginalized communities, such as Urucuquí, to strengthen their land use claims and reduce Yachay's interference and influence. Since Yachay is using technology as a tool to rationalize land use policies, Urucuquí and other marginalized communities will potentially be able to stand up to Yachay through adopting similar technology-based tactics.

Next Steps

Given the conversations we had with the project stakeholders, we see that their community involvement strategy is working well for those communities directly within the Yachay site, as they have these biweekly meetings with the heads of the different communities located within the Yachay Knowledge City site. This has allowed for the communities to express their opinions and for the Yachay Public Company to clarify certain issues that the community has or might be facing in the future. Constant cooperation between the communities and the Yachay Public Company can definitely help the easy integration of these communities to the new city. However, there should be more people involved with the marginalized communities located within and nearby the Yachay project site who are also affected, in order to guarantee the constant presence and participation of the communities with the development of the new city.

We have two main recommendations:

1). The Mayor of Urucuquí and the director of planning have stated their interest in having a future fellow to help with the consolidation of the municipality's geospatial information into GIS databases. Having training and skills in the management of their geospatial data can help the municipality assert their independence from the influence of the new city. Since the Yachay Knowledge City project is a national mega-project and President Correa's flagship project, they have been able to manage the geospatial information in a highly efficient and self-serving manner. Giving Urucuquí similar tools will allow the Urucuquí community to remain resistant to Yachay's influence and not succumb to the neoliberal developed agenda of Yachay's political and technocratic elite. Creating the GIS databases and training workers in Urucuquí on how to use the databases to maximize efficiency and formalize their property rights and land use claims will definitely help this small community against the influence of Yachay Knowledge City.

2). Along with the expertise in geospatial database management, the Yachay Public Company has also created an urban code to dictate every aspect of the development of Yachay Knowledge City. The practice of urban codes is very new to Ecuador and not found in smaller communities in the country. In light of the growing influence of Yachay, Urucuquí seeks to create their own urban codes for development, including the construction of new roads, managing existing infrastructure and zoning. By doing so, Urucuquí and other marginalized small municipalities can remain independent from the hegemony of Yachay Public Company's codes.

These two recommendations emphasize the need of gaining new skills to create policy in order to remain independent. We believe that as Urucuquí shows their ability to manage their own affairs, it will be difficult for the Yachay Public Company to exert such a strong influence on Urucuquí and other small communities.

Program Evaluation

Furthering of Academic Goals

For me, the McBurney fellowship provided the opportunity to conduct social science field research and was an opportunity to apply the theories and concepts that I have been learning about for the last few years. It was also a way to better understand the conception and development of a new master-planned city. I was able to see how certain urbanism principles worked and didn't work when they were applied and how a mega-urban development can affect the lives of various people.

Having the opportunity to do this work in Latin America helped me to understand the difference in work environment in a different cultural setting. My academic goals have somewhat shifted since the fellowship. In my interactions with communities next to Yachay, I realized how these marginalized groups require technological expertise, such as geographic information science, that I have developed during my Bachelor's in Geography at McGill. I see opportunities to apply my knowledge of Latin American urbanism and GIS to real-world contexts to help communities to develop.

What I really valued about the fellowship was the opportunity to talk to citizens about how they feel their government is working for them. Personally, coming from Venezuela, a Latin American country in a very bad political and socio-economic situation, it allowed me to better understand how my country of origin came to such dire place, what can be done to better their situation and the ways in which I, as an educated Latino with technical expertise, can contribute. I value how the fellowship made me realize the possibilities for connecting with marginalized communities in Latin America who are often have little say in the ways their government spends money.

However, something else that I also valued was working with a project on such a massive scale, which impacts not only the immediate community, but the whole nation. I saw the potential opportunity the Yachay Knowledge City project has to help a large group of people but also the potential to squander an unprecedented amount of resources.

Advice for Future Fellows

My advice for future fellows is to be able to adapt to their situations. In our particular fellowship, we had to go between two different cities almost every week and have the capacity to adapt to the different environments. Going from the big city to very small rural areas, gave me the opportunity to better understand how people live and move in these places and how personal interactions happen. It is important to be open-minded to how people live in the city and towns to understand the different challenges they face. Something else to take into consideration is having an understanding the country's history, which helps enormously to understand the contemporary situation and power dynamics. In our case, we had the opportunity to talk to various ministries that, while not directly involved with the project, allowed us to understand the current socio-political condition of the country and the various views of different stakeholders, which then helped us to see how the project fits into the big picture at the local regional and

national scale. It is important for future fellows to understand the differences of scale and power dynamics when dealing with this project.

Interaction with Other Fellows

In my case particularly, it was a good opportunity to have a fellow along with me in the country because it allowed us to see things from different points of view and complement each other in terms of how we performed our job. I think that having two people while working on the project allowed us to see things that the other one missed, which also allowed us to have a clearer understanding of an issue as we sometimes had opposing takes on it. In general, I think it was useful to see others' perspective and experience in their relative field as it allowed us to cooperate one with another in the way we approached certain challenges.