

Community Organization and Territorial Defense in El Salvador: Raising Awareness about Current Issues and Battles



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Project Overview

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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this Fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the Fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the Fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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COMMUNITY ORGANIZATION AND TERRITORIAL DEFENSE IN EL SALVADOR: RAISING AWARENESS ABOUT CURRENT ISSUES AND BATTLES

Fellowship's Rationale and Objectives

Objectives

For my Fellowship, I had the opportunity to get involved in various different projects while working with SalvAide in El Salvador. SalvAide is a Canadian non-profit organization that is dedicated to accompanying Salvadoran's struggle for social justice. The organization was founded in 1985 as a partner organization to CRIPDES, the Association for Development of El Salvador. CRIPDES is a local organization that was founded to support Salvadorans displaced by the civil war as they returned to their homes. Today, CRIPDES is dedicated to strengthening organization in rural communities as they fight for an economically, politically and socially just society. CRIPDES has a variety of projects and missions, ranging from women's empowerment to the defense of the environment. Although I was an intern with SalvAide I worked at the CRIPDES office and the projects that I was involved with were CRIPDES projects.

El Salvador faces many health and social issues, and each region and community has their own priorities and battles. As an environmental health promoter intern, my work focused on promoting peoples' right to live in a physically and socially healthy environment. My role was to work in solidarity with the Salvadoran people by supporting the initiatives and causes that the communities are already working towards. Some of the problems faced by these rural communities of El Salvador are often overlooked and disregarded, and are not well known outside of the communities themselves. Others are exacerbated by Canadian and American industries. The overall objective of my internship was to become well-informed on key issues and bring awareness of them outside of El Salvador. By 'conscientizing' Americans and Canadians about what is occurring in El Salvador, we hope to compel others to use their political power to try to change practices and create better living conditions for the Salvadoran people.

Context

From 1980 to 1992, El Salvador underwent a brutal civil war, which was preceded by years of political violence and repression. The Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN), a coalition of left-winged guerrilla groups rose up against the military regime to fight against social class inequalities, poverty and repressive military rule. However, the government targeted anyone

they suspected of being involved with social or economic reform, including civilians. The military was responsible for several massacres, in which they wiped-out entire villages, killing thousands of people. The United States supported the Salvadoran government with financial and military aid throughout the war, which would not have lasted so long without these additional resources. Reports of massacres were initially denied by El Salvador and the United States, and some of them are still not well documented or acknowledged.

During the war, communities organized themselves to fight against the military forces. When the peace accords were signed in 1992, many of these communities continued to be highly organized and maintained their resistance movements. Although they were no longer fighting against the military forces, these communities faced new threats, many of which are environmental. El Salvador is the smallest and most densely populated country in Central America, and it is undergoing an environmental crisis. The majority of El Salvador's forest cover is deforested and they are currently experiencing a severe water crisis. Several environmental resistance movements have surged in order to protect the country's remaining natural resources and the health and well-being of the people.

Rationale

Due to the extensive missions that CRIPDES is engaged in, I had the opportunity to learn about and participate in a variety of activities. However, my work was mostly dedicated to three main projects, as described below.

Sugarcane in Lower Lempa

Lower Lempa is one of the poorest regions of El Salvador and is the most affected by climate change. The residents of the Lower Lempa are primarily re-populated communities and demobilized guerrilla fighters who were allocated plots of land after the civil war. Since that time, these communities have strived to implement a sustainable development model that includes community-controlled industries such as eco-tourism, fishing, poultry and dairy farms, micro credit cooperatives and several organic agriculture initiatives. However, this community-controlled form of sustainable development is being threatened by the sugarcane industry. The industry is purchasing plots of land to convert to sugarcane monocultures which is having drastic environmental and health consequences on the region that are exacerbated by the use of agrochemicals. Much of the sugarcane produced is exported to Canada and the United States, facilitated by free trade agreements. This is not a sustainable practice and the region is experiencing many detrimental effects due to this industry. Water resources are diminishing, soil is being degraded and there is an epidemic of chronic kidney disease, which is thought to be caused by the agrochemicals used on sugarcane crops.

Against mining in El Salvador

There is a long history of resistance against metals mining in El Salvador. The Canadian-based mining company, Pacific Rim, had started exploring for gold in El Salvador in 2000 until the country placed a moratorium on mining in 2008. Now, Pacific Rim is filing a lawsuit against the government of El Salvador for rights to mine in the country under the Dominican Republic-Central American Free Trade Agreement. The lawsuit is currently taking place, and this crucial timing has led to a widespread resistance movement against metals mining in El Salvador. A recent study showed that 79.5% of the Salvadoran population potentially threatened by metals mining believes that the country is not suitable for this industry.¹ CRIPDES is involved in organizing forums, discussions and workshops in rural communities that could be potentially affected by mining, as part of campaign for territories free of mining. Many communities in the northern department of Chalatenango are forming resistance movements and instituting legal measures to prevent mining companies from entering their land. However, there remains a lot of work to be done to prevent the entry of this extremely powerful industry in El Salvador.



San Jose las Flores, a community in Chalatenango declared free of mining with the President and former President of CRIPDES

Historical memory of Sumpul Massacre

The Sumpul River Massacre was a horrific attack on civilians by the Salvadoran military force that occurred in 1980 in Las Aradas, which is located at the border of El Salvador and Honduras. About 600 people were brutally killed in this massacre, including elderly people, pregnant women, and children. For many years, the Salvadoran and Honduran government denied that the massacre even occurred, and the survivors were never given an official apology. Many of the survivors of this massacre are open to talking about their experience of living through this event, and want to reveal the truth of what they lived through. Most survivors of this massacre feel that they have not been given justice for the pain that the government has caused them, and they want to share their stories with the rest of the world, and remembering the massacre is an important part of the healing process for many.

Activities

I attended various meetings and conferences to become well-informed on each of the three main issues that I worked on, as well as other current events in El Salvador. I also went on numerous trips to the communities to have conversations with the people that are directly affected by these issues and get a first-hand perspective of their experiences and opinions. Although these were the three main activities of my internship, I also assisted with various other tasks as they came up. For each of the three issues, I was responsible for completing the following tasks:



Meeting about pesticide use in sugarcane production in Lower Lempa

Sugarcane in Lower Lempa

Conducting a literature review on the topic of sugarcane production in the Lower Lempa region of El Salvador and writing an article to submit to a Canadian/American magazine.

Against Mining in El Salvador

Participating in anti-mining activities, such as assisting with meetings and consultations, and reading articles and writing summaries for the website of the International Allies Against Mining in El Salvador.

Historical Memory of Sumpul Massacre

Assisting in a qualitative research study documenting the historical memory of the Sumpul Massacre. I brainstormed with the rest of the research team about the interview questions, and worked on transcribed interviews conducted with survivors of the massacre.

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Challenges and successes

I am happy with how the Fellowship turned out in the end; however, there were several challenges along the way. Before I left for El Salvador, I thought that I would be working on an anti-mining project, but I did not know exactly what my involvement would be. When I arrived, I soon realized that there was no clear job set out for me to do. The lack of structure and organization was very challenging for me at first. However, in the end, this enabled me to learn about a lot of different issues, and to get a solid background on the context of El Salvador before starting work on a particular project.



A mural in San Jose las Flores, Chalatenango

Once I had learned a bit about the issues that are faced by El Salvador and CRIPDES's involvement within them, I sat down with my supervisor to lay out some clear goals and expectations for my internship. This was very helpful for me to have a clear purpose for my time working with CRIPDES. Mid-way through, we went over these goals and expectations, and revised them according to the work that I had done. In the end, I was able to accomplish almost everything I set out to do. I have stayed in contact with my supervisor and I am currently working on the last edits for the paper that I wrote about the sugarcane industry in the Lower Lempa before submitting it to a magazine.

The amount of time that I had to finish my Fellowship was also a challenge. It is hard to accomplish something substantial in two months, especially because it takes time to get established and adjust to living in a new country and cultural setting. Although I am satisfied with what I accomplished while I was here, I think that I would have been able to do a lot more if I had more time. I would recommend that future Fellows, if they are able to, take a minimum of three months to complete their Fellowships.

Although this was not directly related to the work I was doing, another big challenge for me was the violence and insecurity in El Salvador. Although I myself did not experience any form of crime, there is a widespread fear throughout the country due to extreme problems of gang violence. Many people do not feel safe within their own city and even their own homes. At the beginning, it was difficult for me to understand what was safe and what wasn't safe to do, because people gave me different advice about what precautions are necessary to take. However, after living in San Salvador for a few weeks, I had a better knowledge of the city and I had a better understanding of what I was comfortable doing and not doing.

What did you learn?

First of all, I have learned the importance of flexibility. Plans change all the time in El Salvador and that's something that I had to get used to. At first, it was frustrating because I would be informed about a conference or trip that same day, and would never have been able to plan out anything ahead of time because plans would constantly change. However, once I got used to this adaptable lifestyle, I realized that although plans were not made in advance, I was still able to accomplish a lot with last minute plans. In the end, I enjoyed the unpredictability of each day and I feel that I was able to do a lot more without having a planned, rigid schedule.

I have also learned a lot about socio-political and historical context of El Salvador. By reading, having discussions and researching about the issues I was studying as well as current events, I have learned so much about the country. Before I left, I knew very little about El Salvador other than the violence and now I can explain various current issues taking place in El Salvador, and even throughout Latin America. One thing that I would have done differently is to learn more about the history of El Salvador before coming. I had bought and read excerpts from several books about the civil war before arriving, but it would have been good to have a more thorough knowledge of current events.

I also learned a lot about the influences of decisions made by the governments of the United States and Canada on their Central American neighbors. I already knew that there are many problems associated with free trade agreements such as the NAFTA and CAFTA but I did not realize the extent of the damage that they can cause. Unfortunately a lot of the Canadian and American governmental involvement in El Salvador has been detrimental to the self-sufficiency and sustainability of the country. However, I very much appreciate the solidarity model that CRIPDES follows. Instead of considering Americans and Canadians as part of this negative influence to El Salvador, they believe that Salvadorans and North Americans can work together in solidarity to try to provoke change.

Community Implications and Further Work

By raising awareness about the issues that are taking place in El Salvador right now, I hope that we will be able to improve the health of Salvadoran communities. The people that I talked to were eager to talk and share their stories. Many expressed that by communicating and spreading the word about their experiences they hope to create change. The following are the impacts that I hope will be seen for each of the projects that I was involved in:

Sugarcane in Lower Lempa:

I will be submitting an article to a Canadian or American journal on the topic of sugarcane production in the Lower Lempa. By bringing awareness to this important problem, I hope to motivate people to want to make changes. Firstly, there is a huge lack of research on the impacts of the sugarcane industry in the Lower Lempa and El Salvador. Therefore, I hope that by exposing this problem, people will become interested in the subject and researchers will want to investigate it further. Additionally, if Canadians and Americans read about this issue and obtain

an understanding of the impact of free trade agreements in enabling the sugarcane industry to be so powerful, they may rethink their opinions of such agreements.

CRIPDES is planning to start a campaign on this topic, and this is why they asked me to conduct a literature review. Here is a brainstorm of the different stakeholders that I developed which will be important when considering who to target, and may be important as a starting point for the campaign:

- The agricultural workers, since the sugarcane industry does provide jobs for many people in the area of the Lower Lempa. Those that work for the industry (some of which are the same people being affected by pesticides) must be considered
- Monsanto provides most of the seeds used in sugarcane production in El Salvador, as well as the pesticides
- The sugarcane industry since sugarcane is one of the top four exports of El Salvador and the industry has a lot of power within the country
- The community members who are being affected by the agrochemical spraying, which is likely a factor in causing health issues, and is contaminating the local water sources
- The government, which is a big supporter of the sugarcane industry
- The US, China and Canada, which are the top importers of sugar coming from El Salvador

In order to translate the research findings into policy action, a clear target stakeholder would need to be identified. Although a clear campaign is not yet set, I know that many local organizations are interested in the issue and want to get involved. This would be the next step to instigating change for the region. However, what I have discovered through my literature review is that there are gaps in research on the impacts of the sugarcane industry in the region. Although research exists on some of the effects of the sugarcane industry, data on other aspects (economic, social) is not available and a lot of what we know is based on oral testimonies. Therefore, I believe that the next step would be to make this issue more well-known. Before I came here, I did not know about the issues of the sugarcane industry and the association between pesticide use and chronic kidney disease, the second highest cause of death for men in El Salvador. I think that information about this urgent issue needs to be shared and more research needs to be concentrated on uncovering the true impacts that the sugarcane industry has had on the region, economically, environmentally and socially.



Sugarcane field in the Lower Lempa region

Against Mining in El Salvador

Similarly to the sugarcane industry, the mining is a direct result of Canadian and American involvement in El Salvador. Canadians should care about this issue because the biggest mining threat to the country of El Salvador is a Canadian company. By updating a website about mining in El Salvador, people who are interested in this topic globally will be able to visit it and learn about the current situation and the resistance movements that are taking place. They can pressure governments to change their current practices and leave El Salvador free of mining, as demanded by the Salvadoran people.

Historical Memory of Sumpul Massacre

The research that I worked on is a qualitative study where survivors of the Sumpul massacre were interviewed and asked about their memories and feelings about the massacre. Some survivors explained that talking about the event with others was a part of their own healing process. Other survivors just wanted to share their experiences and stories so that people could learn from their past. Various interviewees mentioned the importance of remembering in order to not repeat the past. By documenting an event that is not well recognized, and sharing the story of these people, I hope to bring them more acknowledgement and support.



A mural in Arcatao, Chalatenango depicting the Sumpul massacre

Overall, by sharing and communicating the current events taking place in El Salvador with North Americans, I believe that together we will be able to fight for social justice and bring positive change to Salvadoran communities.

Program evaluation

I very much enjoyed my Fellowship and I would recommend it to future McBurney Fellows. I was very happy with the flexibility of the Fellowship, and the freedom that it gave me to choose and alter my internship goals. As a McBurney Fellow, I learned a lot about El Salvador, about international relations between Central and North America, about living in a foreign country, and about myself and my future goals.

Before my Fellowship, I already knew I wanted to pursue a Masters degree in public health. However, the internship has reinforced my interest in research, and has opened my eyes to several extremely important public health issues in El Salvador and globally. I also have been shocked to see the lack of research available on certain public health issues that affect so many people in El Salvador. I feel that I now know a lot about the historical, social and political context of the country and I could see myself coming back in the future to do my Masters thesis.

The Fellowship has also made me realize the importance of politics in understanding any issue, whether it is a social justice, environmental, or public health issue. The history and socio-political context of a country has so much to do with the current problems that it faces and one cannot try to solve a problem without contextualizing it. Therefore, a piece of advice that I would give to future Fellows is to learn as much as you can about the country that you are visiting before you leave. Read about the history and the current politics so that you have an idea of key issues before you get there. But, most importantly, discuss these topics with local people once you get to the country because this is likely how you will learn the most about the country and the issues it faces. At least for me, by having discussions and asking people questions, I learned a lot about Salvadoran history and politics.



A sticker against agrochemical use made by MOPOA, an organic agriculture movement in Lower Lempa

I would also tell future Fellows that flexibility and open-mindedness are key. Some of the most interesting things I have done here have been last minute plans that came up. It was difficult to get used to it at first, but by the end I knew to always be ready to pack my bag because I never knew when I would be offered to go on a trip somewhere in the country to work on a new project. By being adaptable and open to changes, you can take advantages of any opportunity that comes your way.

The only thing that I would suggest to improve the program is to have a more extensive orientation before leaving. I think that it was very important to be well prepared for a trip to a new country, and I think the initial orientation could have been more thorough. I thought it was great to have a meeting with all the other Fellows, but I think it is difficult to have an orientation for Fellows that are going to different countries in Latin America at the same time. However, I really enjoyed receiving email updates from all across Latin America throughout my Fellowship. The email updates was also a great opportunity to be able to reflect on my work and share what I had learned.

Lastly, the main piece of advice I would give future Fellows is to enjoy it! Take advantage of every opportunity you get to learn from the local people, get involved in a new activity or explore a new part of the country. Every new thing that you try will teach you something, and will useful for the work you are doing. My Fellowship flew by and before I knew it, it was over, so take advantage of every moment- you won't regret it!

i Opiniones Y Percepciones Hacia La Minería Metálica En El Salvador. Rep. San Salvador: Instituto Universitario De Opinión Pública, 2015. Print.