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# Decentralization, Rural Poverty, and Degradation of Uplands in Central America

Ian Cherrett

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*If current land use practices in the uplands of Central America are not modified soon, rural poverty will persist and lead to environmental collapse. There is a simultaneous need for increase of productivity, improved natural resource management, and recognition of people's rights to the resources they manage. Only when rural families can consider land to be their own, manage resources sustainably, and generate surplus will they be able to trigger genuine change in the system of governance. Top-down attempts to change*

*the system of governance will only succeed in changing the form rather than the content. Until the governed have shaken off traditional patterns of dependency and control from above as well as modified their land use practices, the vicious circle of poverty will remain intact. The proposals for an alternative approach presented in this article are based on more than 6 years of field work in 20 municipalities in the mountains of Lempira, Honduras (Figure 1).*



## The heritage

Mass poverty is the primary determinant of exclusion of the vast majority of Central Americans from meaningful participation in making the decisions and controlling the resources that determine their livelihoods and hence in the exercise of their basic human rights. In large part, mass poverty in Central America is embedded in the region's social and political institutions, which are a heritage of the region's colonial and neo-colonial past. Authoritarian master-slave-like relationships were solidified in a *Latifundia-Minifundia* agrarian structure that has proved extremely resilient despite reform and revolution. The paradox of wealth accumulating side by side with growing poverty and accelerating environmental degradation is particularly acute in contemporary Central America. Mexican colleagues have called it degenerative development, which is the opposite of sustainable development.

In a desperate attempt to escape such dependency relationships, for generations, the peasantry of Central America has been fleeing to the forested hills and mountains and relying on subsistence farming. Unfortunately, this marginal form of production is vulnerable: It reinforces the symbiotic patron-client relationship with the local and national elites on which the rural poor depend. The agricultural frontier continues to move into the remaining rainforest, while land ownership passes to a small elite who rely on current laws to ensure that newly opened lands are registered as theirs. The gap between law and justice remains so great that families feel violence is the

only means they have to defend their land rights.

## Vulnerability, failures of governance, and short termism

Democratizing the society and promoting good governance are difficult tasks. To this day, the superficial changes wrought since the end of the Cold War and armed conflict in Central America are only skin deep. The introduction of an ombudsman, revision of laws, and the creation of a democratic constitution are necessary but insufficient steps. In order to modify relationships between the elite and the poor, the dependency of the latter on the former must be reduced.

Social and political change depends on changes in the predominant land use systems, that is, slash-and-burn agriculture and extensive cattle ranching. Although the former is a system inherited directly from the Meso-American maize culture and differs greatly from the latter, which is a Spanish import, the two systems are now symbiotic. A majority of the rural poor cannot feed themselves from their meager plots and thus have to sell their labor to make ends meet. This vulnerability, coupled with their isolation and lack of education, leaves them dependent for their survival on the local intermediaries, who stand between them and the national power structure. These intermediaries control the offices of local government and positions in congress, through which they direct the patronage systems created by parliament and managed by the government of the day.



**FIGURE 1** Location of the Department of Lempira in Honduras.



**FIGURE 2** The “fast food outlet of Meso-America”: slash-and-burn agriculture in the dry Pacific woodlands of Cololaca, Lempira, Honduras. Though burning makes nutrients readily available for the next year’s crop, the cost is high, as eventual loss of nutrients is valued at US\$ 395 per ha per fire. (Photo by Ian Cherrett)

The rural poor feel obliged to accept this system and in return demonstrate their political loyalty because they do not have the confidence that they can feed themselves nor do they even have access to land. Under these conditions, decentralization will only transfer power from national to local *caciques*. This will lead to further fragmentation of a weak state instead of democratizing decision making and replacing the predominant systems of patronage.

In Honduras, only 15% of the country is sufficiently level for mechanized agriculture. The valleys are controlled by a small minority and produce the major agricultural exports, while subsistence farmers who produce basic foodstuffs are found on the steep hills. These 2 systems are not in equilibrium, and the natural resources of the country are being degraded at an accelerating rate. This degradation of the natural resource base is leaving the country increasingly vulnerable to natural disasters, as Hurricane Mitch so drastically demonstrated. It accentuated the fragility of the rural production systems, destroyed infrastructure and crops, and increased poverty.

### Breaking the vicious circle

Natural resource management requires long-term investment strategies, while the

current sociopolitical structure of Central America rests on short-term, rent-seeking strategies of resource exploitation. It will be necessary to effect a change in the economy of the family in order to break this vicious circle. Families and communities have to invert the existing relationship between themselves and the current power brokers. Once the power brokers come to depend on the rural population as opposed to the rural population depending on the power brokers, the creation of democratic structures and good governance becomes possible. This means changing current land use practices to introduce systems of production that will enable a small farmer to feed his family and produce a surplus.

These systems enable the farmer to stop migrating and begin developing a long-term perspective; this in turn enables the community to think about development and to invest in natural resource management and education. Communities that have such a perspective begin to search for leaders with the same perspective. To be sustainable, such change must rest on access to the market (communication, trade, credit, etc). Moreover, replication of change elsewhere in the country is needed, as models do not survive. Finally, a national policy framework that supports such a process is necessary.

### Local institutions

The key institutions in rural Central America are the family, the church, and the municipality, all of which are characterized by patriarchy or *machismo*. The level of poverty and food insecurity of subsistence farmers in the region obliges the poor to seek a local patron, someone who has access to further patronage in times of trouble: a large landowner, politician, or sometimes the church. External aid, in the form of famine relief, infrastructure, roads, etc, is channeled through these mechanisms, and the poor know that there is a political price to be paid for access to social welfare.

Any attempt to change the institutional structures of rural Central America must thus confront a heavily entrenched socioeconomic and cultural system based



on a well-established patriarchal land use system. This system is no longer sustainable, yet it continues to survive by consuming the region's last intact ecosystems. This increases the vulnerability of Central America to environmental extremes such as droughts and hurricanes. At this point, only outside intervention and investment can prevent complete environmental collapse and consequent social decline, making governance impossible.

### Changing land use practices leads to a change of mentality

The first and most fundamental step in changing land use management is to abandon burning. Slash-and-burn is the "fast food approach to land use; relatively cheap, fast and offering instant gratification." And it is certainly not healthy (Figure 2). Burning cannot be abandoned unless there is a viable alternative on offer; it is irresponsible to promote abandonment unless an alternative such as agroforestry can be offered (Figure 3). A parallel option could be offered to ranchers, enabling them to have their animals semistabled. These systems are being widely adopted in Lempira within the framework of a project funded by the governments of Honduras and the Netherlands and executed by the FAO. They are generating benefits for the farmer in terms of food security, economic advantages, labor efficiency, and environmental sustainability.

Once immediate food security is resolved, local farmers begin to press for other things. These include infrastructure, schooling for their children, adult education, diversification of farm activities, creation of local financial mechanisms starting with the community bank, ownership and management of natural resources, especially water, and participation in the community structures. In Lempira, farmers also tend to demand a mayor with a development focus. Lempira Sur has over 7 years of experience working with over 120 communities, and the process has always been the same. Hence, the conclusion is that the first step in building local institutions is food security at the level of the rural family.

### Obstacles

The obstacles to such changes are not the small farmers, who have the greatest awareness of the loss of natural resources. Nor are adequate technologies lacking: they are well-developed in the region and their positive impacts on natural resources as well as on productivity are known. Even if the local ranchers and the local power structures have been incorporated into a cycle of change, this does not happen overnight: it takes between three to seven years, depending on the project.

The real obstacles are external: To the national decision makers, whose policies are driven by donors and external investors, as long as they too benefit, the bottom line is a total lack of belief in the development potential of the rural poor. This reflects not only existing interests but a top-down policy-making framework that tends to be externally defined and is divorced from the realities and needs of the rural poor.

### The need for a holistic approach

The impact of externally defined, single-issue interventions is often marginal. Successful interventions must be demand-driven as well as inscribed within a holistic perspective. Thus, good governance and decentralization only make sense if conditions are created that enable institution building by autonomous families who want to work together because their own and their communities' interests are self-reinforcing. The creation of the conditions of positive feedback is the challenge facing any strategy of external intervention, whether it is concerned with decentralization, environmental management, or poverty reduction.

The Lempira Sur project started with a problem of food insecurity. Ensuring food security remains a high priority, but the project has had to invest heavily in building institutions to promote good governance. After 4 years, the results were visible. But institution building would not have been so successful had the project not invested heavily in changing the local systems of production at the same time. The local population has now gained confidence and

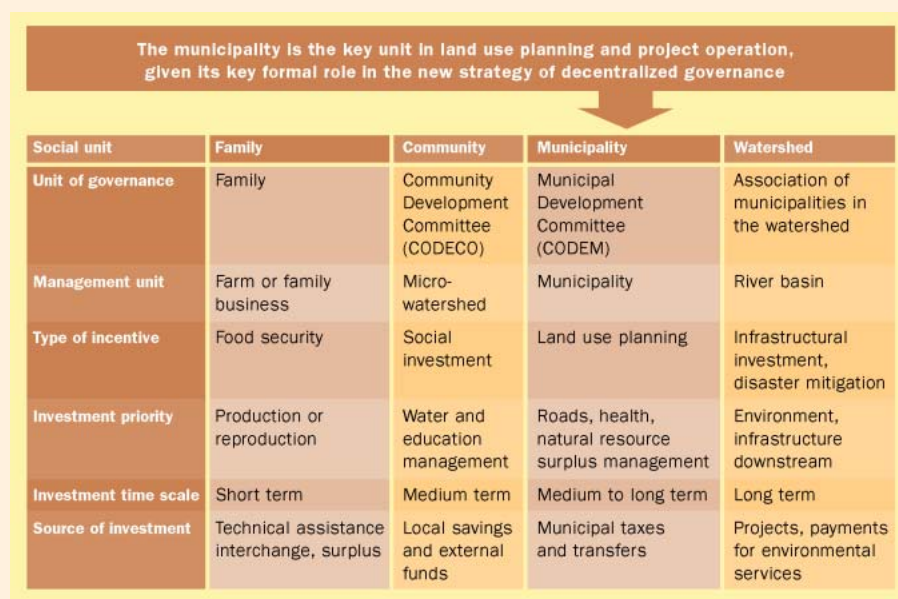


**FIGURE 3** Dry Pacific forest in Candelaria, Lempira, under agroforestry management. A maize crop was harvested from this land 1 year earlier. Under agroforestry, yields are twice as high as with slash-and-burn and are sustainable. (Photo by Ian Cherrett)

## Elements of a strategy to promote decentralization and good governance

1. Support for the construction of local government, starting with the community (CODECO: *Comité de Desarrollo Comunal*) and incorporating the municipality (CODEM: *Comité de Desarrollo Municipal*).
2. Transfer of technology to promote the adoption of sustainable land use practices.
3. Support for natural resource management, where increased productivity is linked to internalization of environmental costs.
4. Education of adults and children, which implies complete revision of the education system so that it becomes responsive to the needs of the local people.
5. Involvement of women in all processes.
6. Management principles that guarantee transparency.
7. A nationally endorsed land use strategy in which ownership of resources is formally recognized at the level of the community before formal national recognition takes place.
8. A strategy of capitalization by external actors (with regard to human, financial, institutional, infrastructural, and natural resources).

**FIGURE 4** Project framework strategy for Lempira Sur showing the municipality as the key unit.



**TABLE 1** Aspects considered in the provision of services to generate sustainable development processes in the rural uplands of Central America.

| Analytical focus                  | Fundamentals of an operational focus   |
|-----------------------------------|--|
| Production systems                | Family household and its natural resource base, including the farm   |
| Natural resource management       | Social organization starting at the community level; the key management issue is water                     |
| Strengthening of local government | Key role of community in the municipal strategy  |
| Land use management               | Final project phase when changes in land use and social organization generate a vision of future potential |

is self-reliant. The former local government *caciques* have been voted out because the cycle of dependency has been broken. This process is not yet irreversible, but it does enable the identification of a series of steps necessary to ensure that many separate causes of failure are avoided (see box).

## The implications of a bottom-up approach in the rural areas

The smallest legal administrative unit in Central America is the municipality, which must therefore constitute the starting point for external intervention strategies. At the same time, the role of smaller social units such as the family and the community must be taken into account. Democratization must begin at this level. At the lowest level, intervention must focus on the role of families as producers and managers of resources.

Any intervention must be based on an analysis of local conditions. Instruments and policies must facilitate responses at the level of (i) the family unit, (ii) the community, (iii) the municipality, (iv) the watershed, and (v) the country. While instruments do not have to be geared for all levels at the same time, it is important for projects and institutions to at least take them all into account.

A logical framework (Figure 4) was developed as a guide for the interventions in Lempira Sur. It illustrates these relationships and has made it possible for the project to develop a strategy for promotion of local governance in the south of the Department of Lempira. Another tool is a checklist of aspects to consider when operationalizing ideas for capacity and institution building:

- Creation of a multidisciplinary team.
- Permanent presence in the community with a facilitation team office.
- A participatory demand-driven approach from the first day of intervention.
- Participation of all actors from the beginning.
- Creation of coordinating networks among all active institutions.
- Emphasis on local leadership formation.
- Creation and participation of junior professionals.





## Development

**FIGURE 5** A Lenca woman in front of a typical Lenca house, Municipality of Santa Cruz, Lempira. The dwellings of the Lenca, the poorest people of Honduras, are associated with a variety of health problems. (Photo by Ian Cherrett)

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ects and systematizing results should generate the feedback required to impact policy and thus enable policy makers to undertake the required changes in policies, laws, decrees, and administrative and operating structures.

It should not be forgotten that mountainous countries have complex ecologies, and too much of the negative impact of policies reflects decision-making processes that do not take account of the reality upon which policies impact. This is especially true for weak states with little capacity to contest the external wisdom of bilateral and multilateral agencies.

## Conclusions

The experience of Lempira Sur has shown that long-term improvement of the quality of governance requires an integrated approach. In particular, efforts to improve governance must not be divorced from attempts to alleviate rural poverty, mitigate social and environmental vulnerability, and introduce decentralization (Figure 5). Parallel interventions in all these areas are necessary.

Indeed, good governance requires good husbandry. Good husbandry requires a population that understands its ecosystems and has the social and cultural values required to manage them. This is a virtuous cycle. Unfortunately, Central America has inherited a desperate cycle with weak institutions, weak civil society, and a weak state. If that cycle is not broken, environmental collapse is imminent. Building alternative virtuous cycles is not easy and requires complementary interventions.

Various positive experiences exist in Honduras and Central America; Lempira Sur is one example. These experiences need to be reproduced. As they are still too small and vulnerable to be sustainable, their lessons must be absorbed at the national and regional levels. In Honduras, a national Program for Sustainable Rural Development is being developed as part of the national Anti-poverty Strategy emerging from the National Program of Rehabilitation and Transformation, generated in response to the impact of Hurricane Mitch. This is a start.

- Systemic process of participatory revision of work and priorities by all participating actors.

Moreover, in the case of Lempira Sur, special attention was given to 4 aspects when providing services to generate sustainable development processes in the rural uplands (Table 1).

## Projects as policy experiments

A clear framework of reference and a *modus operandi* are not sufficient, if there is a failure not only to systematize and draw lessons from experience but also to report this to policy makers and influence their decision making. Projects are too often divorced from decision making. There are many reasons for this that reflect badly not just on governments and NGOs but above all on donor countries and multilateral agencies, which are too busy defending bureaucratic, political, and ideological interests.

There is a need for quantitative and qualitative data to be systematically collected and translated into information that can facilitate the generation and revision of decision making at the local, regional, national, and international levels. As policy experiments, field projects could play an important role, and donors should stop running away from them because they have failed to manage them adequately in the past. Monitoring proj-

*Good governance requires good husbandry. Good husbandry requires a population that understands its ecosystems and has the social and cultural values required to manage them.*

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Further information on this project may be obtained from Ian Cherrett at the above address. A resume of the project can be found on the FAO web site. The author of this article is solely responsible for the opinions expressed here.