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Author: Warren, Patrizio

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# MDG Activism and *Campesino* Detachment

Patrizio Warren

## Can They Walk at the Same Pace? Field Observations in the Uplands of Jocotán, Guatemala

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Since its founding, the United Nations has included among its goals poverty eradication, food security, “health for all,” universal literacy and education, protection of the environment, and the end of social discrimination. Special international mobilizations for one particular goal (or a particular set of goals) have taken place several times during the past 50 years. The UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) movement is the latest and perhaps the most politically committed of these initiatives. UN summit declarations and subsequent international activism are beneficial at all levels: as a result of their momentum, policies are enhanced,

funds raised, and programs implemented. However, there are sometimes unintended effects at the field level, where great pressure is put on project managers and staff to change approaches, invest money, scale up activities, and get “visible” results in a short time. The present case study illustrates such side effects in the context of the FAO Special Program for Food Security (SPFS) in Guatemala. The study argues that poverty and hunger reduction require long-term fieldwork and steady impact monitoring, and that the MDG-related “scaling-up” of development projects and programs should be adjusted to the local pace.



### The agrarian question and the development industry in Guatemala

At the beginning of the third millennium, Guatemala is still confronting the economic, social, and ethnic conflicts that dominated its history until the end of the 20th century. This legacy is particularly evident in the countryside, where poverty is widespread, land inequitably distributed, and

the natural resource base increasingly degraded. Rural areas are home for 81% of the 6.3 million Guatemalans living below the poverty line, and 93% of those living in extreme poverty. Most of these people are indigenous *campesinos* living in mountain or upland areas and owning hillside *microfundios* of less than two *manzanas*, ie 1.4 ha (Figure 1). As these plots are insufficient to meet family needs, house-

**FIGURE 1** Hillside with *milpa* clearings. (Photo by Patrizio Warren)



## What is SPFS?

The Special Program for Food Security (SPFS) is FAO's flagship initiative for reaching the goal of halving the number of hungry in the world by 2015. Currently, 852 million people in the world face food insecurity. Through projects in over 100 countries worldwide, the SPFS promotes effective, tangible solutions to the problems of hunger, undernourishment, and poverty. To maximize the impact of its work, the SPFS strongly promotes national ownership and local empowerment in the countries where it operates.

Since 1995, US\$770 million from donors and national governments has been invested in FAO-designed food security programs. The SPFS initiative helps to achieve food security in 2 ways: by assisting national governments to run focused, well-planned *national food security programs*, and by working closely with regional economic organizations to develop *regional programs for food security*, which optimize regional conditions for attaining food security in areas such as trade policy. The SPFS is not a 'stand-alone' initiative. The goals and vision that guide the SPFS have been integrated into major international efforts, including the Comprehensive Africa Agriculture Development Program of the New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD). Food security programs are also major contributors to achieving the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Source: [www.fao.org/spfs/](http://www.fao.org/spfs/); accessed on 9 November 2005

hold farming in Guatemala is intrinsically "dual." Millions of *campesinos* shift seasonally from the production of staple crops on their small upland parcels to wage labor on the lowland plantations. As elsewhere in Central America, rural-urban and international migration are also widespread.

Following the 1996 Peace Agreements, national and local governments made significant efforts to address the agrarian question. Hundreds of rural development projects are being implemented and a controversial "market-based" land redistribution program is allotting plots of land to some of the thousands of landless households. However, these efforts to counter rural poverty have been hindered by a series of shocks and negative trends in recent years, including Hurricane Mitch, a major drought, a drop in coffee prices, and declining banana exports. Thus it is not surprising that, notwithstanding a huge flow of international aid, food insecurity has increased in post-war Guatemala: in 1990–1992, 16% of Guatemalans were undernourished; by 2000–2002, the proportion of undernourished had risen to 24%.

To address the emergency of increasing hunger in the country, Gran Alianza Nacional (GANAN), the coalition that won the political elections in February 2004, specified food security and rural poverty

alleviation as top priorities on the national political agenda. International agencies and donors, inspired by the MDG movement, joined the new Government of Guatemala in this endeavor. The international effort to improve the lives of rural Guatemalans included a commitment from the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, *Agencia Española de Cooperación Internacional* (AECI), to support an ambitious "scaling-up" of the FAO Special Program for Food Security (SPFS; see Box 1).

## SPFS Guatemala and its "good practices"

During its initial phase (1999–2004), SPFS was a relatively small program, aimed at pilot-testing and validating a number of "good practices" in household food security, alternative crop production, livelihood diversification, and grassroots organization in 2 selected locations (Sololá in the Northern highlands and Jocotán in the South Eastern hills; Figure 2). In early 2004, during negotiations for the second phase, the Government, FAO, and the donor decided to link the program with MDG 1, ie *halving extreme poverty and hunger* (which is explicitly recalled by the program's development objective). This entailed rapidly extending the program to the 43 most food-insecure municipali-



ties scattered in 8 different departments of the country.

Following this decision, some “good practices” that were partially tested in Sololá and Jocotán were proposed as replicable options for action at the new project sites. Unfortunately, due to tight institutional deadlines, it was not possible to complete the on-going good practice *sistematización* (formative evaluation) before starting dissemination and replication. By mid-2004, SPFS management realized that more information on the socioeconomic impact of good practices in Sololá and Jocotán was needed before going ahead with the scaling-up process. To this end, a participatory assessment was carried out in both locations, with the assistance of the author of the present case study and a post-graduate development anthropology student from the University of Rome. Some of the findings of the Jocotán study are summarized in the following sections.

### The political ecology of campesino livelihoods in Jocotán uplands

The Municipality of Jocotán, close to the Honduras border, corresponds to a sub-catchment of the Copán-Ch’orti’ watershed. Its territory is very rugged and sloped, with altitudes ranging from 300 to 1800 m. The total population is 37,000, with 5,000 settled in the *pueblo* (small town) and 32,000 in a number of small *aldeas* (hamlets) scattered in the countryside. As the overall territory of the municipality is 148 km<sup>2</sup>, the rural population density is about 215 inhabitants per km<sup>2</sup>. These figures reflect the key problems of the Jocotán hills: too many people, with too little land, in a very “dynamic” and fragile ecosystem.

Following Hurricane Mitch and the drought of 2001, the Jocotán hills were often quoted as an example of the high environmental vulnerability of the Guatemalan countryside. However, the root causes of Jocotán’s environmental degradation (and poverty) should be sought in the economic and political relationships that have shaped land tenure and use throughout history.

During the last 50 years, households in the Jocotán hills have endured a continual

loss of natural, physical and financial assets under the pressure of population growth (2.5% per year in the last 20 years) and a subsequent increase in land tenure fragmentation. The shrinking amount of land available has led to overexploitation of the soil and a progressive decrease in yields (the use of chemical fertilizers has only partially solved this problem). Moreover, a lack of cash and labor has made it increasingly difficult for most *campesinos* to invest in soil conservation, water harvesting, and agroforestry activities.

On the other hand, even the patches of sacred hilltop *ocote* pine forest (“where the *angeles* live”) are being degraded by “illegal” timber and fuelwood collection. Vegetation coverage has become inadequate to retain rainfall, humidity, and soil. Delays of one month in the beginning of the rainy season and the *canículas* (cessation of rainfall during the rainy season) have become increasingly frequent. When rain falls, huge amounts of fertile sediment are removed by runoff. The subsequent landslides threaten infrastructure, crops, property, and life.

### The development industry in Jocotán

Since the 1990s, several development projects have been implemented in Jocotán.

**FIGURE 2** Improved varieties of maize sown for seed multiplication. (Photo by SPFS Guatemala)







**FIGURE 3** Jocotán's satellite communication facilities and antenna. (Photo by Patrizio Warren)

Buildings, signs, and posters that bear witness to project activities can be found even in the most remote *aldeas*. In town, most educated people work for some development program or institution. Roads and transport facilities are available in most *aldeas*, and access to education and health-care has significantly improved. Alternative income-generating activities have also been promoted and a greater variety of products and commodities are now exchanged in the Sunday market. Charity organizations regularly distribute food aid to the extremely poor. Many *campesino* women claim gender equity. Ch'orti' cultural identity is being re-vitalized by local pan-Mayan movement activists. Two local radio stations, a cable TV station, and 3 Internet cafés connect the *pueblo* with the rest of the world (Figure 3). In brief, one cannot say that efforts to achieve the MDGs are being spared in Jocotán.

However, the influence of the development industry on local consumption patterns and lifestyles is more visible than its effects on the *campesino* household

economy. Since the 1990s, on-farm income-generating activities—such as agroforestry, sprinkling irrigation, vegetable production, organic manuring, and courtyard animals—have been promoted by the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), FAO, and several NGOs, and some farmers (not the extremely poor) have adopted them as part of a more comprehensive livelihood diversification strategy. Notwithstanding, most rural household economies continue to be based on the dual relationship between conventional rainfed maize and bean farming (*milpa*) for self-consumption, and seasonal wage labor for cash. Project-promoted enterprises are perceived by most *campesinos* as sufficiently *bonitas* (attractive) to be pursued as an additional source of petty cash, but not solid or remunerative enough to sustain significant change in such a “dual” livelihood strategy.

According to the educated development project staff and local government officers, this cautious attitude has a

twofold effect in keeping *campesinos* in the poverty trap: on the one hand, the practice of conventional *milpa* farming further degrades the environment and decreases agricultural carrying capacity; on the other hand, seasonal migration prevents farming households from investing time and labor in land husbandry, water harvesting, agroforestry, and “alternative” income-generating activities. The Ch’orti’ “coolness” (*frial-dad*) towards project-promoted innovation is interpreted as “an attitude typical of their culture,” an “expression of fatalism,” and a “lack of entrepreneurial spirit.” For development workers and government officers, this Ch’orti’ “mentality” (*su mentalidad*) prevents the *campesinos* from reaping the full benefits of new opportunities offered by development projects.

### SPFS “good practices” in *campesino* livelihoods

Evidence of the economic performance of some SPFS-promoted “good practices” in Jocotán suggests a less “essentialist” and more controversial version of this story. In June 2004, when the scaling-up process gained momentum, SPFS management asked an agricultural economist to estimate the costs and benefits of selected good practices.

Based on historical performance data, this *ex-ante* economic assessment forecast an average benefit/cost ratio (B/C) of 1.73 for “greenhouse vegetable production” (Figure 4), 1.62 for “agroforestry plantations,” 1.2 for “improved maize and bean seed multiplication,” 1.0 for “court-yard animal modules,” and 0.9 for “cattle feed production.” Thus, 2 out of the 5 “good practices” under examination were found to be unprofitable (B/C: 0.9 and 1), and one was found to be only slightly profitable (B/C: 1.2). These data were considered not fully reliable by project staff, who eventually decided to go ahead with implementation and replication of the above good practices as planned. SPFS staff in Jocotán became increasingly involved in the program scaling-up process, and spent most of their time in start-up activities in second-phase project sites. Thus, there was a decrease in on-farm monitoring of good practices, techni-

cal assistance, extension, and in-kind subsidies to participant farmers in Jocotán.

In light of the above, and with the aim of getting a clearer picture of the socioeconomic impacts of good practices, SPFS management promoted the aforementioned assessment. Based on a combination of ethnographic, economic, and participatory research methods, this study focused on the 2003–2004 agricultural season performance of “improved maize and bean seed multiplication” and “greenhouse vegetable production,” the 2 good practices that were perceived as particularly critical by local staff.

The findings of the economic analysis were disappointing. Among sampled adopters, the B/C ratio for “seed multiplication” ranged from 0.2 to 1.7, with an average of 0.8 (a loss); for “greenhouses”, it ranged from 0.7 to 1.8, with an average of 1.1 (a negligible profit). Findings suggested that the 2003–2004 economic performance of both good practices was not only lower than expected, but also highly variable, with some farmers getting significant profits (B/C: 1.7–1.8) and others ending with major losses (0.2–0.7). In interviews and group discussions, participants ascribed this variability to the relative exposure to erratic natural risk factors, such as pests, frosts, dry-season water shortages, and dengue disease. However, there is also evidence to suggest that participants living closer to project headquar-

**FIGURE 4** Greenhouse vegetable production: one of the best practices identified. (Photo by Patrizio Warren)





14 **FIGURE 5** Ch'orti' women mobilize against domestic violence. (Photo by Patrizio Warren)



ters and with a higher likelihood of getting technical assistance and extension services performed better (and faced lower transaction costs) than those living in the most remote *aldeas*, which the program was no longer able to visit.

In light of the above findings, it is difficult to blame the Ch'orti' for their caution in engaging in SPFS-promoted good practices, and it is unfair to portray them as "backward" conservative people. Like many other rural people in the world, the Ch'orti' appear to be experienced and wise managers of their scarce household endowments. They are interested in testing potentially profitable innovations, but are also resistant to making major investments until these small-scale tests prove successful and sustainable. Thus, risk aversion is not part of the problem; it is part of the strategy, allowing the *campesinos* to survive in the unpredictable political ecology of the Jocotán hills. It is also a very detached way to deal with development industry processes, which the Ch'orti' perceive as "hasty" (*apuradas*), "hectic" (*aceleradas*) and "very transient" (*muy de paso*).

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#### Achieving the MDGs in Jocotán

There are obviously many initiatives that the Government, international agencies, and donors can take to improve *campesino* livelihoods and eventually facilitate the achievement of the MDGs in Jocotán (and elsewhere in the Guatemalan uplands). Serious land tenure reform and access to water and other natural resources are obvious priorities to reduce poverty and seasonal food insecurity at the national level. The Municipality might be assisted in operating the integrated watershed management and emergence preparedness scheme, established by the Spanish NGO *Acción contra el Hambre* in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. Imbalance in downstream/upstream linkages within the watershed might be corrected by introducing some form of payment for environmental services to hillside *campesinos*. Chor'ti' household farming economies could be revitalized and strengthened by refining and validating incremental technologies and activities under tests (or "under trial"), including some SPFS good practices. Access to national and international trading networks and commodity chains can be facilitated, and the impact on the local economy of the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) buffered by appropriate marketing of local products and rural tourism. Importantly, there is also scope for enhancing education and health services and supporting the Ch'orti' women's movement against domestic violence and discrimination (Figure 5).

However, the case study described here suggests that none of these actions could be completed in a short time, nor fit easily into the standard donor-assisted five-year project format; none of them would work without steady extension and fieldwork; none of them can avoid engaging in sound social impact monitoring.

#### AUTHOR

**Patrizio Warren**  
Via Grazia Deledda 100, 00137 Rome, Italy.  
p.warren@mcclink.it

Patrizio Warren teaches Development and Applied Anthropology at La Sapienza University in Rome. He works as an independent consultant for various development organizations. He is currently collaborating with FAO's Forestry Department.

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