

Ecuador - A rural town faces the reality of globalization

By Jeremy Lee

This is a short story of how a small town in the middle of the Andes Mountains in Ecuador is being forced to face globalization. As a Peace Corps volunteer, I was a first hand witness of how a town on the grass roots level is being shaken to its foundation by a four letter acronym called the FTAA (Free Trade Agreement of the Americas). The FTAA is a proposal that is essentially an extension of NAFTA (North America Free Trade Agreement) that aims to abolish trade barriers between 34 countries in the Americas by the year 2005. What this agreement means to the small Andean village of Principal, Ecuador is organize and bring competitive prices and products to the market, or else face the consequences. The people continue with their daily lives, but deep down they live in fear that their livelihood could be in danger.

On my first ascent up the narrow dirt road in the local bus, the bumps and inherent danger of the bus clinging to the mountain slopes had little to no effect on me. The reality of my surroundings was mesmerizing, and the thought that I was going to be spending two years as a Peace Corps volunteer submersed in everything I was seeing was an exciting and intimidating thought. Around every bend, women walked with loads of dried corn stalk miraculously strapped to their backs. If not in motion, women were stoically perched on their balconies as if they were frozen in time. Others were simply breastfeeding newborns or calmly walking with small infants tied to their backs by colorful shawls. They all wore bright skirts and long black braids and no matter what they were doing at that present moment, they all had one thing in common. They were all weaving panama hats, a tedious process of turning straw into a wonderful work of art. Kids chased each other around their homes and playfully rolled around with pets. Men, those not working the field harvesting the year's corn with machetes, were assembled in groups alongside the road, conversing and passing around a bottle of trago (locally made sugar cane liquor). Everywhere I looked, the Andean culture penetrated the landscape and filled it with color and activity beyond anything I had ever seen.



Women Weaving Panama Hats

Principal is a small town of approximately eight hundred people, worthy of most people's vision of mountain paradise. Tucked deep in a high mountain valley at about 9,000 feet above sea level, an ancient volcano keeps watch over it. Aside from the overwhelming natural beauty, it is apparent at first sight that the people live a rather simple life. For the most part, they are sustainable farmers and grow a good majority of what they eat, keeping all their crops fertilized with a diverse array of animal droppings, guinea pig included, for maximum production. The staples are corn and a variety of beans. Around September, the mountainsides begin bursting with color as thousands of fruit trees go into flower to remind everyone of another fruit harvest soon to come. On the side, people take their family gardens very seriously, which provide a variety of fresh vegetables for consumption. The fruits and vegetables not consumed by the locals go to market. The more affluent families tend daily to a few head of cattle usually kept a half hours walk up the mountain valley. Life is simple, sustainable and stress free, at least up until now.

As the elected town leader, Matilde Suarez made sure the locals knew that their peaceful way of life was soon to be threatened. Matilde knows that by opening up the doors to free trade amongst several countries in the Americas she may some day be able to buy cheaper items such as kitchen appliances or even clothing. An agreement such as the FTAA has the potential to connect rural Ecuadorians with a number of goods that are currently out of their monetary reach. With cheaper prices due to increased competition, acquiring these things could eventually increase their quality of life. Matilde is the first to say that is a good thing. However, when considering the livelihood of the people of Principal and how they make a living, Matilde knows the overall effects of the FTAA could be grave.

She explained it quite clearly the first time I heard her. Volunteering to give sermons on Sundays, Matilde takes advantage of peoples' undivided attention by commonly weaving political and economic themes into her sermons. Initially, I was shocked to be hearing her preach about the possible effects of a proposed international trade agreement while I was sitting in

church. Mixing politics with religion is serious taboo where I come from, and I was honestly disappointed to hear her doing it so blatantly. Plus, it seemed like something so far detached from the daily lives of the people of Principal. Contemplating a quick exit, I stayed put and listened. I am now glad I did because Matilde had some very powerful things to say.



El Centro en Principal

First of all, the people's foremost concern is to produce food for themselves. Whatever is left over goes to the market in a bigger town an hour away and is sold for a small profit. This usually provides enough income to buy whatever other staples the family may need such as butter or rice. Some of the biggest profits come from apples and the other fruits Principal has been blessed with by the dark, rich soil and steady hands that planted hundreds of trees years ago. Secondly, production is very small scale and nobody is organizing enough or processing any of the fruits in order to bring either a lower cost product or unique product to market. Therefore, when local markets are opened up to countries like Chile, which produce apples in mass, they will inevitably see cheaper, non-organic apples appearing at much lower prices. By opening up local markets to large-scale corporate producers of such fruits, the selling power of Principal families will be sacrificed and so will the ability of those families to make ends meet. So the question then put forth was, "What do we do?"

Matilde struck a chord. The reaction of this small, sleepy mountain town where everyday life is lived one day at a time was inspirational. Action was needed and action was taken. From that night on, dialogue blossomed throughout the town. In town meetings, people talked about the FTAA like it was something that was about to bang down their front door. Within weeks, the town was organizing itself. United by a cause, they contracted a local bus driver and rallied individuals to accompany them to Cuenca, the provincial capital, where they joined hundreds of other campesinos in a collective effort to march and protest against the FTAA. In numbers, they only hoped their voices would be heard.

I was amazed. The majority of adults in Principal only have a sixth grade education. What courage it must have taken them to assemble and put up the first line of defense in opposition to something that is being driven by such powerful interests. For the sake of their livelihood and that of their children, they know it must be done.



Maria Cambisaca in Principal

What impressed me even more was that the people of Principal are realists. They recognize that the first line of defense is to oppose the FTAA. But they realize this may only buy them time, time to organize and be entrepreneurial. What they need to do in order to go with the grain of globalization is think of alternatives that will allow them to participate in it and take advantage of it. There is now talk of starting a cooperative which would ultimately unite landowners in order to produce more and control the quality of their fruits. There is talk of starting a factory to process some of the fruits to make jams. One project I was involved in aims to plug Principal into the economy through eco-tourism. There is now a hostel, a restaurant and trained tour guides. The tourists are coming but it is a slow process. Nonetheless, the important part is that there is an identified common interest. Through action, this interest has the potential to insert Principal as a player in the global market as opposed to being cut off from it and at odds to make ends meet.

Principal is a wonderful lesson. The idea that people must be the agents of their own development is a long-standing and commonly held development philosophy. In times of

globalization this needs to ring true more than ever. Yes, Principal has a long way to go to really benefit from new trade agreements that they currently are strongly opposed to. However, the ultimate solution for them to be beneficiaries in the new world order may be for them to change their lives. They are seriously considering many ways of doing so at this very moment. If some of these ventures come to life soon, there may come the day when the people of Principal are exchanging their very own fruits for the fruits of globalization.