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# Changing the Status Quo of Waste Management: Case Study of a Rural Costa Rican Town

Anna Katherine Rodenborg Baker  
*SIT Graduate Institute*

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**CHANGING THE STATUS QUO OF WASTE MANAGEMENT: CASE  
STUDY OF A RURAL COSTA RICAN TOWN**

**Anna Katherine Rodenborg Baker**

**PIM 68**

**A Capstone Paper submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a  
Masters of Arts in Sustainable Development at the SIT Graduate Institute in  
Brattleboro, Vermont, USA.**

**November 12<sup>th</sup>, 2012**

**Advisor: Nikoi Kote-Nikoi**

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Student name: Anna Baker

Date: October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2012

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## Abstract

Costa Rica is a country famous for its efforts in environmental protection. Despite its numerous innovative steps toward the protection of its natural biodiversity and resources, the country has still not yet provided basic environmental services, such as local trash collection, to its entire population. This paper examines the processes of organizing the campaign to petition the Municipality to organize trash collection in Costa Rica. It provides a case study of policy advocacy in sustainable rural development. It is informed by my experience as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Rural Community Development program, during which time the Municipality was successfully petitioned for regular trash collection. The campaign was carried out within the context of a town of about 500 people in northern Costa Rica, which was suffering due to the recent fall in pineapple prices and the closing of a nearby pineapple packing plant. The impetus for the campaign was the national waste management law that was passed in 2010, mandating responsibility for trash collection and recycling on the Municipal level. After first describing the campaign and its context, the paper evaluates its objectives, coalition, and outcomes according to criteria presented by Schultz, VeneKlasen and Miller (2002, 2007). The paper concludes with a reflection on the need for capacity building in policy advocacy, particularly when working with underprivileged populations.

## **Introduction**

The topic for my capstone was inspired by my work as a Peace Corps Volunteer in the Rural Community Development program in Peace Corps Costa Rica. The town in which I lived and worked is a small rural community of about 600 residents called Rio Celeste, named for the famously blue river that passes through it. In October 2010, community members approached me about the organization of regular trash collection. The practiced trash disposal method when I arrived was burning and the community members understood the proper disposal of waste to be a necessary step toward their ability to take advantage of the economic opportunities in the tourism industry. Members from various community groups and I formed a coalition of representatives that was responsible for mounting a local waste disposal campaign, which included proper separation and disposal of organic, recyclables, and inorganic non-recyclable waste produced within the town limits. I worked alongside this group in 2011 to help them motivate the community to start paying attention to their trash. One of the impetuses for this campaign was to hold the local county Municipality responsible for complying with a Costa Rican national law passed in 2010 that mandated responsible collection and treatment of waste. This law had placed the local Municipalities in charge of overseeing this process.

This paper examines the process of organizing the campaign to petition the Municipality to organize trash collection in Costa Rica. This account will serve as an instrumental case study of policy advocacy for rural community development in the Costa Rican context. I will start by reviewing the theoretical framework and research question and giving a brief overview of trash collection practices in Costa Rica. The campaign that occurred in Rio Celeste is then outlined in detail and evaluated using

various criteria in the literature. I will conclude with an analysis of the adequacy of these criteria for use in assessing this particular case study.

### **Context**

The community of Rio Celeste was founded in 1977 and is located in the Canton of Guatuso, near the Tenorio National Park, on the skirts of the volcano Tenorio. Approximately 600 residents live within the town limits. Largely an agricultural community, the economy of Rio Celeste hinges on the production of pineapple. About 25% of the population is at least partially or seasonally employed in the tourism industry; most of these work part-time as guides in the National Park giving tours of the river hike to foreigners. The employment situation in Rio Celeste has worsened significantly in the last two years as a result of a drop in pineapple production after the major pineapple plant APACONA (Asociación de Pequeños Agricultores de la Colonia Naranjeña) in a neighboring town shut down in May 2010. Such a significant percentage of the population had been employed in pineapple production that the closing of APACONA meant that the economy of Rio Celeste suffered considerably.

For the purpose of this paper, the Municipality will be defined as the local governmental organization responsible for the Canton of Guatuso, which is equivalent in Costa Rica to a county. This is roughly equivalent to a county government in the United States. The Civil Committee is the committee of Rio Celeste community members that worked on the campaign to establish trash collection. This Committee was comprised of representatives of other community groups (church, school, health center, etc.). The Asociación de Desarrollo Integral (ADI) is the town government of

Rio Celeste composed of community members who are elected every year in an annual assembly.

In addition to the Municipality, the Civil Committee, and the local town government (ADI), other groups included the local aqueduct committee (ASADA), the school board and parent-teacher associations, a community security group, the local clinic committee (CEN-SINAI), the Committee of Roads, Committee of Sports, the church of Jehovah's Witnesses, and the Catholic and Evangelical churches.

In 2010 when I arrived in Rio Celeste, the accepted waste management method was to burn all solid waste in a hole in the backyard of every household. According to participants who attended an October 2010 community meeting, the separation of trash was not practiced, and community groups and members had never seriously considered an alternative to burning. Many of the neighboring towns also practiced burning as their primary trash disposal method. The nearest trash collection point was four miles away in Katira, whose town government had received a donated trash collection truck from the Japanese Embassy. At that time, the Katira trash truck was responsible for collecting waste from the towns on the highway between Katira and San Rafael de Guatuso, which is the town where the local Municipality is located. Since Rio Celeste is not located on the highway, however, it did not receive the service provided by the Katira trash truck. The local town government and the Civil Committee opted to petition for the service of the Municipality of Guatuso instead of the Katira service because the service provided by the Municipality was perceived to be more reliable, and it was legally required to provide trash collection and would be less likely to stop the service once it was started. Also, the town government of Katira that owned and operated the trash truck wanted the town government of Rio Celeste to be responsible for collecting the monthly fee from its residents, something that the



Rio Celeste town government did not want to take do. Collecting the monthly fees from the households of 500 people, most of whom are friends and neighbors, would have posed a time consuming logistical challenge as well as a socially complicated endeavor.

In May 2010, Costa Rica passed a national law that outlawed the burning of trash and placed legal responsibility for providing trash collection and recycling services with the local Municipalities. This policy change was the impetus for the campaign in Rio Celeste to organize trash collection because it was the first time the community felt that outside support existed for this cause.

The attitude towards the proposed trash collection service was largely positive when I began working with the community on the issue. According to a survey carried out by the Civil Committee in June 2011, 90% of the population of Rio Celeste supported organized trash collection in their community and were willing to pay a monthly fee of 1500 colones for this service (approximately US \$3). The hourly wage in Rio Celeste was around 800 colones, but most women and children do not work and the men rarely are able to work full time due to the recent failure of the pineapple economy.

Despite this enthusiasm, there was significant doubt by many of the residents as to whether the coalition would be successful in its efforts to convince the Municipality to extend trash collection as far away as Rio Celeste. However, when asked, most people specified that their skepticism reflected more the overall doubt as to the effectiveness and responsibility of the Municipality and less the necessity for the project.

## **Waste Management National Law**

The Ley de Gestión Integral de Residuos (Law for Integrated Waste Management) was passed in May 2011 by the Costa Rican National Assembly. This law was the crucial piece used to argue the right of Rio Celeste residents to receive trash collection in this campaign. The law establishes the rights of all Costa Rican citizens to responsible waste management and places the responsibility of this in the hands of the local Municipalities (Ley de Gestion Integral de Residuos, 2011).

## **Role as a Peace Corps Volunteer**

As a Peace Corps Volunteer, my job description was threefold: 1) to assist with technical aspects of development projects and capacity building; 2) to represent understanding of American culture and values in my host community; and 3) to represent Costa Rican values in the United States (Peace Corps website, 2012 ). The priority of implementing trash collection in Rio Celeste was identified and spearheaded by the community members and was backed by national legislation. Thus, although I would consider responsible waste disposal an American cultural value worth representing in this town, my role in the campaign was more technical than political in nature. As a Peace Corps Volunteer, I conducted background research into current trash collection and waste management practices in the region, established relationships between the Civil Committee and the local Municipality, and motivated members of the Civil Committee to follow the steps of a policy advocacy campaign as I understood them in a way that respected the cultural and political realities of a Costa Rican rural community. Overall, my involvement in this campaign fell under the first of my responsibilities as a Peace Corps Volunteer to support development projects in my community.

## **Advocates**

The group with which I worked on this campaign was formed in October 2010. A meeting of community leaders was called together by the ADI (Asociación de Desarrollo Integral), which is the local town government, to discuss a lack of organization and communication among community groups who were each trying to manage different small-scale projects. The result of this meeting was the formation of the Civil Committee of Rio Celeste (Comité Cívico de Rio Celeste), which was comprised of nine representatives from the following groups: the local town government, the local aqueduct (responsible for water delivery), the school board, the parent teacher association, the Catholic church, the Evangelical church, a community security group, a family-run tourism organization (ADEFATURC), and the Committee for Roads.

The idea behind the Civil Committee was to communicate among community leaders about projects and support one another. Its original purpose was not centered on the trash campaign. However, at the first meeting the members agreed that the trash project should be taken on as the group's first collaborative effort.

At its first meeting, Civil Committee members established leadership with the election of a President, Vice President, and Secretary. Funding was minimal; the ADI agreed to take responsibility for the few costs incurred during the campaign.

## **Policy: Issues and Analysis**

The Civil Committee relied on a new national trash collection law to support its work. According to the General Waste Law 15.897 passed in May 2010, the separation, collection and treatment of waste was already mandated on a national

level when the local campaign in Rio Celeste was started. This meant that the campaign was started not with the goal of policy change in mind, but rather to implement an already existing policy.

The campaign in Rio Celeste was intended not to change policy but to implement a national mandate at the local level. Although the policy change was positive, the Civil Committee was concerned that it would not be implemented in the immediate future. Previously the problem was the lack of legislation mandating trash collection in rural areas and also placing responsibility on the local governments. As of May 2010, the next layer of problems became evident. These were on two levels: first, the Municipality faced logistical and financial challenges to providing the trash collection service; and second, the population had to be coaxed into changing their daily habits to accommodate responsible waste management.

The Civil Committee proposed three policy solutions. On the local level they set a goal of organizing the community to separate trash in order to minimize environmental damage by recycling and composting where possible. Second, on the regional level, the Committee decided to petition the local Municipality to comply with its responsibilities as the regionally designated government unit legally responsible for trash collection under the new national legislation. Third, interventions were also implemented in the form of trainings and events aimed at changing the attitudes and habits of community members about trash disposal. These activities highlighted the importance of the campaign and tried to establish a new social norm so as to encourage the community members to participate in the new trash collection and recycling systems.

Various underlying values supported the work of the Civil Committee. The first was the regional Municipality's desire to comply with their responsibilities as

outlined by the national government. Costa Ricans as a culture are proud of their long history of democratic and peaceful government, and regard their laws and government on the national level as important and worthy. It is important to note, however, that within the canton of Guatuso the general attitude towards the local Municipality was one of skepticism and mistrust that resulted from its history of unkept promises, failure to respond to previous needs voiced by the community and generally poor organization. This fact meant that when communicating with community members about the campaign, a major challenge was the general skepticism about the Municipality.

The Civil Committee carried out a survey of the town of Rio Celeste in July 2011, which found that 90% of the population of the town wanted the service and were willing to pay their share (approx. \$3US per month) to receive it. We assumed that if a population of rural agricultural workers was willing to pay for the service, they placed a significant value on this change in the community. It is also worth noting that this town falls under the constituency of the Mayor, and therefore a failure to provide popularly and publicly requested services would almost certainly hurt his chances of reelection.

When we started petitioning the Municipality for trash collection in Rio Celeste, the Mayor at the time agreed wholeheartedly to provide us with this service. At no point did the Municipality tell us 'no' directly. However, certain logistical and economical realities did prevent immediate compliance with our request. Our first attempt in October 2010 to communicate our position with the Municipality did not reap visible benefits until the first appearance of the trash truck in August of 2011.

The cultural context was an important factor in this campaign. Since Costa Ricans tend to value harmony and avoid obvious conflict in their personal

relationships, there was an obvious, ongoing disconnect between what we were told was going to happen (the prompt arrival of the trash truck to the community) and what would actually happen (noticeable absence of trash truck). In this context, the assumption was that everyone involved in the process was aware of the cultural dynamic at play. If the Municipality said one thing and did another, the next step was to simply remind them what they had said they would do over and over until they did it.

### **Politics: Targets, Allies and Opponents**

The target institution for this policy change was the Municipality, specifically the Mayor of the Canton. The decision-making process with this institution did not seem to be formalized. To the outside, the policy planning process of the Muni was mysterious, disorganized and very affected by personal friendships. For example, the President of the Rio Celeste town government had a friendship with the Mayor who was elected in January 2011 and this notably improved communication between Rio Celeste and the Municipality. Transparency in the Municipality was a challenge, due to organizational limitations and the Costa Rican cultural attitude of informality and flexibility. For example, the surveys containing the names and personal data of the entire town of Rio Celeste that the Committee collected were lost for about a week after they were delivered directly to the office of the Mayor. When pressed on this issue during the course of that week, the Mayor responded casually that if they were not found, the work would have to be done again.

#### **Allies**

The allies of the Civil Committee during the process of advocating for trash collection were numerous and varied in their makeup and size. One allied institution was the Ministry of Environment, Energy and Telecommunications (MINAET), which was responsible for National Parks and environmental education in Costa Rica. This organization was involved in Rio Celeste in the training and creation of a group called COVIRENAS (Committee for the Vigilance of Natural Resources). The formation of this group was part of the Bandera Azul program. This national eco-certification program provided a forum through which communities could become certified for “ecologically sustainable tourism”. Rio Celeste also undertook this project to achieve the first star (out of five) of the Bandera Azul certification at the same time as it pursued trash collection. The trainer for this group attended early meetings of the Civil Committee and helped develop the project plan.

Another supporting organization was the UNED (National Distance University), a university that holds classes in towns to facilitate accessible higher education in Costa Rica. A professor from this university was conducting research in Rio Celeste for a project to promote the documentation of traditional rural Costa Rican recipes and met one of the leaders of the Civil Committee as a community contact for his research. This individual helped form the message and identify tactics for the project with the members of the Committee in a series of three meetings held in 2010 before the campaign was officially started. Upon request by the leader of the local tourism group in Rio Celeste, he also gave several trainings in the community pertaining to sustainable tourism and responsible environmental practices. Additionally, he served as liaison in various Bandera Azul projects such as a reforestation effort in which community members planted several hundred new trees in the community.

The local high school was also an ally for the trash campaign. The principal of the high school was interested in trash collection because she needed it for the Bandera Azul program in the school (separate from that of the community) and attended meetings in the first part of the year. She also wrote letters soliciting the trash collection service on the behalf of the Rio Celeste School.

### **Opposition**

The only real group opposing this campaign was the town government in Katira, a neighboring town that wanted the ADI, on behalf of the town, to buy their trash collection services instead of those that were provided by the Municipality. Representatives from the town government of Katira presented their service as an alternative to our plan to petition the Municipality in the early stages of the campaign. The decision was made to seek the service of the Municipality truck instead of the using the Katira service because the Civil Committee assumed that the Municipality, once actively providing trash collection in Rio Celeste, would be less likely to stop the service without notice because it was legally obliged to be providing the service. In contrast, the service provided by Katira was perceived to be liable to stop unexpectedly if the business suffered losses. The stake held by this group was economic and also they were under contract with the donor of the truck, the Japanese Embassy, to maintain use of the truck and provide service to the surrounding communities. The communities for which they were responsible for providing service included Rio Celeste, but they had never complied with this in the past. There was never any action taken by the opposition to prevent the Civil Committee from accomplishing its goals. The only step taken to try and steer it towards using their trash collection service instead of that of the Municipality was a presentation by the



Katira town president to the ADI of Rio Celeste to convince the ADI of Rio Celeste to choose the Katira trash collection service.

## **Strategy and Tactics**

### **Coalition building/Networking**

The Civil Committee of Rio Celeste worked together with the MINAET (Ministry of Tourism), the MAG (Ministry of Agriculture), the UNED (Open State University), the ASADA (local aqueduct committee), the Bandera Azul program (through the National Aqueducts and Sewer Systems government organization), and with the Rio Celeste school to create petitions and project plans to communicate with the Municipality the importance of supporting the campaign and also of complying with their responsibilities on the project. These alliances were formed through connections of the community leaders involved in the project, who took advantage of outside expertise to ask for advice on how to organize and execute the campaign. I also encouraged the committee to seek out support in institutions outside of Costa Rica, with the idea that these connections would be sustainable in the long term as the community became involved in other projects and campaigns.

### **Messaging**

The message presented to the Municipality was twofold. First, the Civil Committee clarified through letters written by community groups, the school and local businesses that the legal responsibilities as stated in Law No. 15.897 mandated that the service of trash collection and treatment be given to all residents in the Canton. Second, based on a survey conducted by the Civil Committee of the residents of Rio Celeste, the vast majority of this town not only wanted this service, but also was willing to pay the fee to receive the service. Coming from a poor agricultural

constituency, a willingness to pay for the service was especially surprising to me personally and was a powerful part of persuading the Mayor of the Municipality.

The message for the public of Rio Celeste was and continued to be that “In order to protect our national resources, maintain a socially appropriate and healthy level of cleanliness in the community, and comply with national law, we must begin to change our habits as producers of trash and learn to separate the waste that we produce and ensure that it is disposed of properly”. (Juan Carlos pilot project)

There were no attempts made to engage the local media in this campaign, although the group had discussed it as a possible next step had the Municipality not complied when it did with the requests of the Committee. The fact that there were no media involved in this campaign is a reflection on the lack of resources and organization. In fact, media would be very beneficial in communicating the successes of the community to non-profit organizations interested in sustainable development projects in Costa Rica and to the tourism industry.

### **Education of the Public**

The education of the community members of Rio Celeste was a complicated process that was still underway when I left the community in May 2012. A significant change in habits and lifestyle was required in order to maximize the benefits of the campaign’s success in bringing trash collection services to the town. Many of the residents of Rio Celeste had burned trash all their lives and although they liked the idea of having a trash collection service, they were initially unmotivated to change their habits. We were able to start changing the initial public attitude through trainings and presentations by various educational institutions, activities with children in the local free lunch program, kindergarten and schools, and word of mouth. Although this

change was and is a slow process, it is the aspect that will most notably reflect the sustainability of the project in the long run.

### **Tactics of Influence of the Target Institution**

The advocates first lobbied the Municipality with data from a survey taken of all the households in Rio Celeste. Community advocates and I went door to door in order to meet with all the residents in person. This survey said that 90% of the town population was in agreement with bringing the trash truck to Rio Celeste and was willing to pay the required fee to the Municipality in order to receive this service. After receiving the data from the survey, the Mayor told us that the next required step was the official census of the population to register residents of Rio Celeste so that when the trash collection service was started, the Municipality could immediately begin charging the fee. The information collected in the census was more technical in nature than that from the survey; and included information that could only be found on the deed to the land. This presented a new challenge because many of the houses in Rio Celeste were rented and the residents had to communicate with the renters. Although this was clearly under the responsibilities of the Municipality, the Civil Committee decided to cooperate and went door to door again to collect the additional information. Throughout the entire campaign, I joined in several meetings with the Mayor and various representatives of the Civil Committee and the Rio Celeste school Principal. Additionally, the Civil Committee, the elementary and high schools, the local health clinic, and local businesses all sent the Mayor letters soliciting the trash collection service and stating their support for the campaign.

## **Tactics of Influence of the Community**

The primary tactic of influence used in Rio Celeste was door-to-door conversations to spread the word and collect signatures for petitions. The community leaders that comprised the Civil Committee each communicated the actions of that group to their respective groups. This word of mouth tactic was very efficient and helped us communicate the important and new idea of trash collection to the general public in a way that was non-threatening.

## **Recommendations to improve the campaign**

### **Evaluation of Outcomes**

Gabriel Watson identifies three dimensions under which to evaluate the outcomes of an advocacy campaign. These three dimensions are policy impact, governance impacts, and civil society impacts (Watson, p. 238).

The first of these, “Policy impacts, which bring changes in specific policies, laws, programs, or practices to benefit excluded groups” (Watson, p. 238), is applicable to the campaign in Rio Celeste because this campaign resulted in the application of a law that had not previously been applied in the community. The implantation of a policy is a listed indicator of success and this was achieved on the community level. This achievement was seen on both the instrumental level as trash collection can be seen as a civil society gain and on a structural level because the policy was implanted on the community level, including excluded groups who would not have otherwise received the gains from this campaign. The practice of trash collection is now a regular occurrence because of the efforts of the Civil Committee.

The second criterion is “Governance impacts, which open and consolidate channels of participation, voice, and power for civil society to engage in decision-

making processes affecting their lives” (Watson, p. 238). This criterion was accomplished; since the national mandate that had not previously been applied to Rio Celeste has now been applied. The legislation pertaining to the issue of waste management was already in place when the community members in Rio Celeste started their campaign, but the implementation of this legislation was not previously realized. Furthermore, some of Watson’s indicators for success were met during the process of carrying out the campaign, most notably the augmented credibility of the participants in the community who facilitated change in the daily lives of their fellow community members.

The third criterion was impact on civil society: “Civil society impacts, which increase the ability of civil society organizations to fight for their interests with powerful actors and to create internal cultures, practices, and structures consistent with their social justice ideals” (Watson, pg 237). This criterion was clearly met in the case of Rio Celeste. The players in this campaign had to organize in a new way to work towards their objectives around a topic that had been not traditionally been used by community members and the local government.

The new skills learned by the participants in this coalition are evidenced in the subsequent project to develop a recycling program in 2012, soliciting financial and logistical support from the Municipality as it is due under the same law that mandated the collection of solid waste (Ley de la Gestión Integral de Residuos, 2010) (Proyecto Manejo de Desechos, 2011).

### **Evaluation of the Objectives**

Schultz writes that objectives should be dramatic and compelling, small enough to achieve in 1-2 years, and lay the groundwork for future advocacy

campaigns by creating the atmosphere of political change (Schultz, p. 73). The objectives of the Civil Committee were numerous and diverse, and touched on all of the requirements presented by Shultz. For example, “Establish routes and schedules of collection of waste” and “Create one or more recycling centers” were dramatic objectives in the context of rural Costa Rica; for members of the community who had burned their waste all their lives this was a high standard. However, the coalition did manage to achieve the first of these objectives, which according to the Committee was the most important step towards building the trust and awareness in the community needed to take future steps towards the more complex objectives, such as “Generate profits with the sale of recyclable waste to better the infrastructure of this recycling center”. Although the objectives pertaining to recycling were not met, they did serve to raise the bar for accomplishments in the overall campaign so that there was some room for compromise in order to meet the primary objective, which was to organize trash collection. This is in keeping with Schultz’s suggestion to ask for more than the coalition is willing to settle for, in order to have bargaining room during the advocacy process (Schultz, p 74). The objective of trash collection was included because it was vital to y the overall campaign, but specifically because it was recognized as an achievable piece that would build credibility and trust among community members as recommended by Schultz in his second criteria for effective objectives (Schultz, p 74).

It is important to note that some of the objectives clearly fall under Schultz’s third criteria, promoting an atmosphere of political growth and organizing for future campaigns. “Establish mechanisms of awareness building in the population”, Achieve the cooperation of community groups in the community”, and “Promote volunteerism

to develop the process of recollection of waste” were all are capacity building objectives that were achieved to at least a certain extent.

Specific Objectives (Objectives, also under long term goal)

- Establish mechanisms of awareness building in the population
- Achieve the cooperation of groups in the community
- Advance the Bandera Azul project and continue implying it in Rio Celeste
- Promote volunteerism to develop the process of collection of waste
- Establish routes and schedules of collection of waste
- Create one or more recycling centers<sup>1</sup>
- Generate profits with the sale of recyclable waste to better the infrastructure of this recycling center.

### **Evaluation of the Coalition**

According to Schultz, there are five major elements that contribute to the success of a coalition: leadership, decision-making, communication, organization of work, and handling conflicts (Schultz, p 126). The coalition of groups that formed the Civil Committee benefitted from well-established leaders who had gained experience through each of their groups in the community setting. In the context of Costa Rican culture, a more direct and ‘take-charge’ approach in leadership is certainly beneficial to offset the non-confrontational nature of most Costa Ricans. For a group that was essentially trying to change the status quo of waste management, there were several moments during the course of the coalition’s life during which three individuals – the President of the town government, the President of the local aqueduct, and the leader of the tourism group – would volunteer to take charge of certain jobs that required

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<sup>1</sup> When discussed in a context this local, recycling center means a station where materials are collected as opposed to a treatment plant, although the Spanish wording used in the objectives says treatment plant.

more direct communication with outside players. Schultz recognizes this willingness to step up as a necessary aspect of an effective leadership style (Schultz, p 126).

The Civil Committee also follows Schultz's recommendation to have a "clear, well-understood process for how decisions get made" (Schultz, p 126). The Civil Committee made decisions, such as the order of priorities in the multipronged waste management campaign, by voting after a discussion allowing members to state and defend their opinions.

The following three criteria were highly affected by Costa Rican culture. Communication among the members of a committee in small towns in Costa Rica is informal and often second hand. Cell phone etiquette holds the receiving end of texts and voicemail less responsible for the content of these messages than does that of the United States. Face to face communication is passive and includes a series of pleasantries that can cloud the message being conveyed. Furthermore, many Costa Ricans will opt for one on one communication over communication with a group about issues or questions that they perceive as controversial. These characteristics held true in the Civil Committee of Rio Celeste. Organization of work was affected by logistics; because the town was an hour away by car from the Municipality the errands to the office fell to the members of the committee who had cars. Furthermore, because some of the committee members were partially literate or illiterate the responsibilities for letter writing or solicitations fell to those members of the committee who were literate and who had access to a computer.

There were no major conflicts within the group during the process of soliciting trash collection. Minor tensions were handled passively, in keeping with the Costa Rican style of communicating.



The considerations for coalitions recommended by VeneKlasen and Miller are: Be clear about the advocacy issue, develop membership criteria and mechanisms for including new members and sustainability, resolve what the coalition will and will not do, select a steering committee, establish task forces to plan and coordinate different activities, assess progress periodically and make whatever changes necessary, develop a code of conduct to ensure mutual respect and responsibility (VeneKlasen and Miller, p 315-317). The coalition of groups that formed the Civil Committee was clear about the advocacy issue, but beyond that they were not very well organized by the standards of VeneKlasen and Miller. Despite this, it functioned in its capacity as an entity moving towards a concrete change.

### **Evaluation of Effectiveness of the Process and Outcomes**

#### **Achievements**

One of the major achievements in this campaign was that people from the community initiated and carried it out themselves instead of outside interests coming in and trying to initiate it. During the two years I lived there, Rio Celeste was the beneficiary of governmental programs aimed at involving youth in community development, women in community development, and several farming initiatives in cacao, corn for biofuel, and cucumbers. All of these programs were started from the outside and although they enjoyed initial interest from the community members, none of them saw successful long-term outcomes. I believe that this is because it was outside leaders instead of community leaders who provided the energy and direction for these programs and in order to have long term impact, it is necessary to have dedicated and empowered people on the inside of a community for there to be any

real change. Outside individuals or organizations, including the Peace Corps, are not able to correctly identify the needs and priorities of the community as are the people living there. It is only through working *with* the people from the very first step of assessing needs were we able to identify a cause that community members connected with and worked to follow through on. The campaign was widely supported by the Rio Celeste community and recognized as long overdue, based on verbal feedback in surveys and during the door-to-door census. We managed to get the trash collection organized and incite interest in the campaign enough to motivate new leadership to organize a recycling campaign that was more realistic in its goals than that which had been previously included in the original project plan. The campaign was well documented, and organized meetings were held regularly in 2011 to communicate updates and evaluate our process. Another achievement was the fact that the campaign drew on a variety of different community groups in Rio Celeste to petition the Municipality for trash collection, thereby involving many different leaders who then communicated the messages back to their respective communities.

### **Limitations**

The limitations in this campaign were both structural and cultural in nature. One of the main limitations was that organizing recycling for profit as had been written in the original project plan was logistically challenging. In the moment, the Municipality didn't have the financial or structural resources to handle collection of recyclable materials, and so the bulk of the organization of this phase of the campaign fell on the shoulders of the community members. The way to organize collection of recycling in rural communities, based on the experiences of other Peace Corps volunteers in rural communities in Costa Rica, is to coordinate with larger companies

to pick up materials as part of their recycling plans or environmental initiatives. For example, the company Dos Pinos that produces dairy products has a waste management branch that donates to small recycling programs and offers free trash pickup of recyclable materials. The obstacle to our participation in this was the large weight requirement for a direct community pickup; there is no location in Rio Celeste where the quantity of materials needed to justify a pickup could be stored. The situation in Rio Celeste is similar in this regard to that of other communities in Costa Rica - a community is located 6 kilometers away from the nearest highway on a poorly maintained dirt road would have to collect enough weight to warrant a recycling materials pickup on its own, whereas communities located on the highway could take advantage of the routes that are already established between major recycling centers in larger towns.

Another limitation in the process of organizing the campaign was the very indirect style of communication commonly practiced by Costa Ricans. Costa Ricans are notorious for their tendency to speak around the point when discussing topics that could possibly produce conflict, using pleasantries and avoidance to cushion bad news or disagreements. “Raised voices are seldom heard, fights rarely seen, and Ticos will nod or say “*si*” even when they don’t mean it to avoid conflict” (Biesanz, p 7). These cultural qualities were evident in both Rio Celeste and in the Municipality. This characteristic of Costa Rican communication was evident in my daily work with community members. Although more prevalent in rural areas of Costa Rica, it is commonly accepted that it is typical throughout the country. For instance, community members would frequently tell me that they could attend a meeting on a certain date despite already being aware of a scheduling conflict simply to avoid having to say no to me, and then ask me afterwards what had happened in the meeting and apologize

for not having made the meeting. I witnessed this behavior amongst community members frequently, leading me to believe that it is not simply reflective of my foreigner status. Another example of this was when I was personally directed to the houses of community members that were known to be opposed to the efforts of the campaign to implement the survey because the group members working with me wanted to avoid the interpersonal conflict with members of their own community. This mode of communication was detrimental to the campaign in two ways: first, it negatively affected efficiency and second, it undermined the role of social pressure in the change of habit that the campaign advocated. Since I was a foreigner, I was less able to convince community members of the need to change this habit than members of the committee who had lived in Rio Celeste all their lives.

The communication style also held true when communicating with the Mayor of the Canton in Guatuso. I went with representatives from the Civil Committee to directly speak with him several times and each time received slightly different set of instructions for how to go about facilitating the implementation of the trash collection. For example, the first time we went we were told to carry out a survey to evaluate interest in paying for the service. Upon doing so and returning the results to the Mayor's office, we were told that we needed to take on the responsibility for the door-to-door registration for payment of the trash collection service in the entire community. It could be assumed that this situation was caused by poor organization or lack of manpower. However, the way it was communicated hindered our work more than if communication had been clear from the onset.

There were many habitual limitations at work during this process. Community members dealing with economic struggles, especially those in the older generations

had spent their entire lives burning their trash and were reluctant to accept the idea of having to collect and separate their household trash.

### **Lessons Learned**

Criteria evaluating outcomes is helpful, but underemphasizes the capacity building necessary to mount an advocacy campaign in international settings or where the population is poor or underprivileged. I posit that while evaluation of outcomes is necessary, it is important to also take into account the capacity building element when evaluating a campaign in certain contexts – most notably those in which political participation is undeveloped, such as rural areas or developing countries.

It is clearly important to evaluate the direct policy outcomes affected by an advocacy campaign such as the one in Rio Celeste. However, traditional criteria for evaluating policy outcomes seem to undervalue capacity building as a goal when the campaign involves underdeveloped and underprivileged populations.

Capacity building is a term used often in the Peace Corps and in development organizations worldwide. It refers to the transfer of knowledge, skills and attitudes necessary to move forward in development. The training and education of the people is a key piece in international sustainable development because it allows progress to continue independently of the international development workers or organizations.

“In its broadest interpretation, capacity building encompasses human resource development (HRD) as an essential part of development. It is based on the concept that education and training lie at the heart of development efforts and that without HRD most development interventions will be ineffective.” – Food and Agriculture Organization

Often when policy advocacy campaigns are evaluated, the assessment criteria focus more on campaign outcomes and less on the people involved. While this is a problem in any campaign, it becomes even more serious when the people affected by

the policy are undereducated and underprivileged. When these same criteria are applied to a campaign run by pineapple farmers in a developing Latin American country, they fail to capture the capacity building element of a campaign such as that which was carried out in Rio Celeste.

The people who worked on the Civil Committee in Rio Celeste are extremely poor by Western standards. None of them have a college education, most read and write at the sixth grade education level that is the average across Costa Rica. The man who was the President of the Committee does not read or write, and had earned a reputation for being unintelligent both because of his complete illiteracy but also because he touted his ideas for recycling in the town for ten years prior to the organization of this campaign without achieving results. He and the other members of the committee learned how to organize petitions, write letters to the Municipality, talk to their neighbors about the issues, and about the process of speaking at the board meetings of the Municipality to raise awareness of the campaign.

Watson includes an element of capacity building at the organizational level. Civil society impacts include the abilities of organizations to work on campaigns effectively. This is an appropriate and necessary component of an effective set of criteria, but lacks the individual level of capacity building that must distinguish the first step of international development workers. The Guide to Measuring Policy and Advocacy, written by Organizational Research Services, also includes in its criteria capacity building. This includes leadership development and communication skill building, both of which were critical to the campaign at both the individual and organizational levels in Rio Celeste because in order to organize a committee, we first needed to establish leadership and teach the members of the committee how to convey the message to their neighbors, organizations, and the Municipality. Shultz includes

very pertinent capacity building skills at the individual level that are necessary to work in advocacy: leadership, decision making, community organizing of work and the handling of conflicts.

Capacity building is a crucial element of sustainable policy advocacy (and development in general) because it provides the tools needed to achieve not only the current goal of the organization, but also future goals and campaigns that might arise. This is often overlooked in campaigns that are mounted by local people aimed at local governments, perhaps because the capacity building is more implicit in these cases. However, when international development workers participate in advocacy they are often made into the leaders of the campaign. These individuals represent the group of people affected by the policy change and it is not necessary for those people to learn the skills and abilities needed to carry out a successful campaign. When the campaign ends and the international development worker(s) leave, the skills, knowledge and leadership that enabled the campaign leave with them.

Ideally, the international development worker(s) play the role of facilitator when involved with an advocacy campaign. If the locals who want to see change in the policies that affect them lack the knowledge, skills or abilities to work effectively towards this change, sometimes outside contributors can provide these as needed to ensure the success of the campaign – but it is important to empower the locals to be leaders on their own issues. When evaluating the campaign in Rio Celeste, the aspect from which I thought the people grew the most was the opportunity to create change in their community – while trash collection itself was a substantial need, they also needed to learn that it was possible to be effective without the help of outsiders. Although my presence in the community was a catalyst towards the initiation of the campaign, I was careful to work alongside the members of the committee in every

step of the process - I did not do any significant work for the campaign without direct help from at least one other member of the committee.

### **Conclusion**

To conclude, the campaign in Rio Celeste was a success on many levels. The Civil Committee successfully petitioned for the regular collection of trash and organized trainings on trash collection and recycling as part of a community wide eco-tourist certification that will become part of the groundwork for future sustainable moves towards a tourist economy as well as provide immediate relief from the environmental and health risks associated with the burning of trash. The community members started changing their waste management habits, learned the benefits of trash collection and recycling for the well-being of their community and are now supported in these efforts by the local Municipality. However, the most important gain made through this campaign was the capacity building of the local individuals and organizations involved, who learned through this experience many of the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to create change in the future.



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