Communities Count in Costa Rica

by Jonathon Molina

From Costa Rica, Lorena Aguilar Revelo pursues a professional mission inside her small country and around the globe. Her goal is to demonstrate that real community participation is a vital step in achieving sustainable development.

After a decade of intensive field research in the rural communities of Central America, Ms. Aguilar has gained considerable recognition as a messenger for a new way of working with communities. Her method is to integrate gender research, participative methodologies and sustainability.

This 34-year-old woman, the mother of three children, is considered by her colleagues to be a tireless and creative professional who has made important contributions to research on development. Apart from her valuable professional contributions, she is appreciated for her personal style in her work with communities, described as the warmth of friends in the words of one small farmer in Costa Rica.

Lorena Aguilar's academic credentials include an undergraduate degree in anthropology from the University of Costa Rica (1980) and a Master's degree in anthropology with a specialization in cultural ecology from the University of Kansas (1982). Currently, she is Regional Director for Latin America of the Asociacion Internacional sobre Sistemas de Abastecimiento de Agua de Lluvia.

Aguilar's views about the critical importance of participatory methods in development research were solidified through her experiences in several peasant communities in the north zone of Costa Rica. Between 1986 and 1988 these communities participated in the project Technologies for Water Supply, financed by IDRC, to evaluate the adaptability of a manual water pump in rural communities. Aguilar's role was to develop methods to ensure community participation and give training workshops on organization, administration, health and environmental sanitation.

Following success in that project, Aguilar became principal co-researcher in a larger project, also financed by IDRC: Participatory Strategies for Water Supply.

Community integration

The main principle that has guided her research has been the full integration of communities during all stages of projects. The work is always done with men, women, youth and children, learning about their needs, roles, and responsibilities and defining goals in agreement with the researchers.

According to Aguilar, "we cannot talk about sustainable development without having in mind the immediate improvement of living conditions, the establishment of mechanisms of equality and, above all, that local men and women should be trained as promoters of these ideas to their own communities."

In her view, projects should be born, executed and evaluated by local people. The role of technicians
should be simply to provide knowledge in areas where the communities feel weak in order to carry out the project objectives. Researchers must know they are only facilitators who in the end will be discharged. Knowledge must be transmitted to locals as soon as possible, so they can assimilate and transmit the ideas to their own people, in a two way communication process. "We have seen", she explains, "that when knowledge is communicated by a local instructor, the level of assimilation is higher than when it is transmitted by an outsider."

The creativeness of her research programs in Costa Rica motivated IDRC to provide the means for Aguilar to spread her knowledge to other countries. Through conferences and workshops in Canada, Central America and the Caribbean, Malaysia, Morocco, the Philippines and the United States, she promoted the importance of incorporating participatory research in sustainable development projects.

Besides IDRC, other international organizations have been interested in the experience of this researcher. Therefore, she has been a consultant of the German Agency for Technical Cooperation (GTZ), the International Red Cross, the Tropical Agronomical Centre for Research and Education (CATIE) in Costa Rica, the International Technology Agency, the World Health Organization, CARE International, and the World Conservation Union.

Despite growing interest in participatory methods in development, Aguilar observes that many agencies are directed by technicians who do not always accept that social phenomena are a fundamental aspect of development programs. She questions the fact that many resources end up in the hands of people who claim to be working for development, but who have become a kind of international mafia living on development funding. There is often no interest in incorporating community participation. Researchers and professionals involved in development programs do not always like field work. However, Lorena Aguilar believes there is a great need to go back to fieldwork.

Her own professional development in community participation was not straightforward. There was little literature on the topic when she began. She and her colleagues had to solve problems as they arose since they were executing projects that had been planned from a technical perspective. Collaborating with a multidisciplinary team presented its own challenges and compromises. Now, Aguilar tries to share her experiences both with younger researchers and established peers, hoping to spark greater interest in the benefits of participatory methodologies. Her commitment to this approach has come at the cost of some criticism for dedicating too much time to her work and, in the process, sacrificing her family. She says she has overcome these criticisms mostly because of the strong support of her husband Eric, a graphic designer and teacher.

**Gender**

In the course of her work, Lorena Aguilar has formulated her own views on gender and development. Some theorists in this area insist that reforms be centred primarily on satisfying women's strategic interests. This approach is based on the assumption that projects aimed at satisfying women's practical needs usually reinforce traditional unequal relations between men and women, whereas a focus on strategic interests can create more equal relations over the long-term.

Lorena Aguilar's position is that women's practical problems should be solved in the context of a strategic vision that combats female subordination. Given the poverty of the developing world, she says it would be contradictory to focus exclusively on strategic concerns when the population is struggling for its very survival. "Our reality is one of men and women struggling to survive, fighting for daily food, for education, housing, for better living conditions in general", says Aguilar. "It is urgent that immediate answers to survival needs where self-esteem is important be found so that women feel capable of participating". At the same time, Aguilar recognizes that if larger questions such as legal structures in Central America as they affect women are not addressed, little can be done in this area.

Aguilar's most recent professional challenge is to attempt to incorporate the experience of local projects in national policies in order to promote community participation throughout the nation. In this as in her other
endeavours, Lorena Aguilar's outlook appears to have been influenced as much by untutored farmers in villages throughout Central America as by her academic peers. "Constant invitations to conferences and workshops are important for my professional growth," she says, "but can never be compared to what I feel when I see the results in the communities. I see how people grow, and that my work has been useful. There is no doubt that if each one of us would learn to give a little more, things would be much different."

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