

Addressing the Maquila

IDRC Project 96-0801-07/03056 - 07.

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Project Title: Addressing the Maquila

Project Objectives

1. research working conditions in the garment industry in the free trade zones of Mexico and Central America, linking findings with data on the regional production activities of Korean companies and the market destination of that product, to build a knowledge base enabling improvements;
2. inform and engage concerned South Korean non-governmental organisations about the overseas employment practices of Korean firms in the free trade zones of Mexico and Central America, to build their capacity to make constructive and usable policy contributions on employment issues; and
3. link organisations in South Korea, Mexico, Central America and Canada interested in working conditions in South Korean factories in the maquila of Mexico and Central America, to build inter-regional understanding of and strategic responses to problems created by an inter-regional economic process.

Activities

This was a joint project of CoDevelopment Canada and the Trade Union Group, with CoDev being responsible for supervising the research and Central American portions of the trip and TUG taking primary responsibility for the Canadian visit.

Phase 1 The research component of the project was carried out from January, 1997 to Fall, 1998. A methodological workshop on the carrying out of proper participatory research projects was organised for Guatemala and carried with some support from the IDRC project. It quickly became apparent, however, that the research funds provided were not sufficient to adequately research all of the countries initially indicated, so research was confined to the four countries of Central America (Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua) identified in the original proposal.

Research was carried out by local women's organisations active in the maquila zones of their respective countries. It was complemented by the hiring of a CIDA Youth intern for a period of eight and a half months who brought the various studies together in one and who deepened the work by carrying out additional research both in Canada and in the region. This comprehensive report is attached to this project report.

Phase 2 A representative of the organisation, Korean Working Women, Maria Rhie visited Central America in November of 1997. A former maquila worker herself, Ms. Rhie is internationally recognized for her work of more than twenty years with women workers of her country and of the Asian region in general. She was also one of the key leaders in the Korean pro-democracy movement of the 1980's. She also worked for two years with the Committee of Asian Women, a Hong Kong-based group that monitors working conditions of workers in free trade zones, or maquilas, throughout Asia.

In Central America, she visited Guatemala and Nicaragua, including having the opportunity to exchange points of view with maquila workers, women organizers and government officials (including the Minister of Labour in Nicaragua). Women representatives active in the organisation of women maquila workers in Honduras also travelled to Nicaragua in order to give her a perspective on the situation of maquila workers in that country. During her time in Central America, she travelled with Linda Hargreaves, a Board member of the Trade Union Group and an Executive member of the Hospital Employees Union (HEU), one of the largest unions in British Columbia with approximately 40,000 members.

Phase 3 In late November-early December, 1997, Ms. Rhie and Suleyma Argueta of the **Women's Coordinating Group (COM)** of El Salvador travelled to British Columbia for two weeks. They had meetings with a number of communities and organisations in the province, including: the B.C. Federation of Labour; the HEU; the Canadian Auto Workers (CAW); the Health Sciences Association (HSA); various high schools and colleges; UNITE (international garment workers union); the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC); a number of public meetings; and the Executive Assistant to Raymond Chan, Secretary of State for Asia. Both visitors were also key participants in the People's Forum of the APEC Summit being carried out at that time in Vancouver. (see attached Executive Summary and Agenda for complete listing of activities)

Results

Phase 1 The studies carried out by the various women's groups in the four countries of Central America varied greatly in quality, in part a result of the inexperience of these groups in carrying out such studies and in part a result of the relatively small amount of funding available for the research. For example, the study done by the Nicaraguan women's group, the **"Maria Elena Cuadra" Movement**, was excellent: approximately 2,500 interviews with maquila workers and other relevant persons were carried out and the end result was very comprehensive. However, only US\$1,000 came from the IDRC project while the balance of approximately US\$39,000 came from other international organisations. Professional assistance in the form of two international cooperants also contributed to the depth of the study in this country. In El Salvador, on the other hand, the COM was unable to complete its research and used up the available funds (US\$2,500) in the initial planning stage. The research carried out in both Guatemala and Honduras was adequate given the preparation and resources provided.

Additional research assistance was arranged to complement the research carried out by the women's groups. A CIDA Youth Intern was hired for eight and a half months and the project was fortunate in finding a person of considerable research skill, capacity in Spanish and knowledge of the region. She spent two months in Canada doing background research on the maquila question and a further five and a half months in the four countries of Central America supplementing the research carried out by the women's groups, including carrying out interviews with key parties (workers, private companies and government officials) and reviewing existing documentation on the issue. The overall result of the research is a very complete picture of the structure and functioning of the

maquila zones in Central America, putting it into the context of globalized production and detailing working conditions. The report also contains a comprehensive bibliography of studies done on the issue and a listing of groups (both private companies and non-governmental organisations) that are related to the theme.

The final section of the research is perhaps the most interesting and relevant, given that it deals with the emerging role of women's groups and the key strategies being utilized to effect positive change in the maquila zones. In particular, it highlights the formation of the **Central American Network in Solidarity with Maquila Workers**, a Central American formation that attempts to coordinate education and lobbying strategies in order to effect change.

The Network has had some impressive successes. In Nicaragua, it signed a **Code of Ethics** (see enclosed copies in Spanish and English) on working conditions with the Minister of Labour and all 23 maquila owners in the country in February, 1997. It is presently in the process of monitoring compliance. In Honduras, the **Honduran Women's Collective (CODEMUH)** has established a working relationship with the Honduran Maquiladora Association and has even been provided with some funds to provide training to maquila supervisors on proper treatment of workers. They are also members of the Independent Monitoring Team in the Korean-owned KIMI factory. In Guatemala, the **Feminist Group for Women (GRUFE)** has regular meetings with the Minister of Labour and his staff and is increasingly seen as an important player in on-going discussions among government, maquila owners and the non-governmental sector on how to resolve issues related to working conditions. The Network now has a web site to update interested parties on advances in the work in the region.

Engagement with Canadian government officials, both within CIDA and the Department of Foreign Affairs, has been regular since the beginning of this project. Additional funding for the work of the women's groups and the Network has been secured from CIDA as one result of this project. As well, a number of international organisations, including Canadian ones, have begun to support the work of the Network. The Network members are now, among other things, regular invitees to international meetings on how to address the issues of acceptable working conditions in the context of the globalization of production and have attended approximately one dozen international conferences on this issue in the Caribbean, Europe, the United States and Canada on these issues over the last 18 months. The recent decision of the Canadian government to form a national commission to examine the question of working conditions in off-shore Canadian production facilities (the majority of whom are in Asia) is an indication of how concerted effort from a number of sources can have an impact on government policy in the north.

CoDev is presently in the process of editing the comprehensive study done by Ms. Bensted, the CIDA intern. It will then be translated into Spanish and distributed to key organisations in Canada, Latin America and Asia.

Phase 2 The opportunity to exchange points of view regarding the practices of Korean and other Asian maquila owners was invaluable for the women organizers in Central America. In particular, Maria Rhie was able to clarify that the supposed "acceptable cultural practices" of beating women workers and sexually harassing them were no more acceptable in Korea than in any other country. She was also able to detail the history of the struggle of Korean women to improve working conditions in their Free Trade Zones from the 1970's on, and the Central American women were able to get a clearer understanding that their interest in improving working conditions is part of a global process that has been on-going for the past thirty years. Finally, there was much discussion about the efficacy of codes of conduct (NB. a Code of Conduct, translated into Spanish, for Korean-owned companies operating abroad was provided to the Central American women's groups by CoDev; along with a partial list of Korean companies operating in their countries), with Ms. Rhie of the view that unless they had some power of enforcement, they were really only transitional steps and of limited value.

For Ms. Rhie the value of the trip was in seeing how the globalization of production had spread from Asia to Latin America. Of particular note for her, was the repetition of patterns of treating workers that had not been seen in Korea since the mid-1980's. She was able to inform herself of the efforts at changing conditions and made a commitment to share this information with the Committee of Asian Women. She also made a commitment to coordinate campaigns with the Central American women, should they so desire, on specific Korean companies operating in the maquila zone. She believed that given the heightened awareness of acceptable working conditions in Korea and the cultural importance of "saving face" in her country, there was a real possibility that such public campaigns in Korea might have a significant impact in influencing improvements overseas. Unfortunately, the inability of the two groups to communicate directly with each other because of language has hampered the possibility of such a collaboration to date.

Phase 3 The visit of Ms. Rhie and Ms. Argueta to Canada was excellent. The ability of both visitors to speak from their respective experiences about the changing phenomenon of globalization and how it impacts women workers in some of its most severe forms increased awareness among Canadians significantly. Organisations representing some half-a-million workers in British Columbia were made aware of the situation of women workers in the free trade zones of Central America and Korea. The B.C. Federation of Labour officially endorsed the project in support of women maquila workers of Central America. As well, a concerted effort was made to visit high schools with a view to increasing awareness among teenagers about the conditions under which their clothing is made. As well, media interviews were done with two radio stations and a number of newspapers. Exposure to the issues was heightened dramatically through the combination of these efforts.

CoDevelopment Canada and the Trade Union Group were well-pleased with the results of this visit. A number of organisations made commitments to incorporating support to this project in their activities, including the PSAC, which became a TUG member for the first time as a result of the work of this project. As well, a number of individuals were attracted to sign up for the TUG awareness campaign, including a number of high school students. CoDev also decided to heighten awareness on some of the issues highlighted by this project by developing a curriculum unit for high school social studies students on child labour. The result, "**Child Labour: Costly at Any Price**", has been very well received in B.C. schools, with approximately 250 copies being sold to B.C. schools and other interested organisations.

Changes to Project

As mentioned above, the project was unable to carry out research in Mexico and Korea due to the limitation of resources. However, the Korean visitor spoke good English and funds from the IDRC project were able to be redirected towards improving the methodology of the research carried out as well as expanding support to the actual research in Central America.

Three persons travelled to Central America and around British Columbia (Korean, Central American and translator), instead of the projected two, and this increased costs somewhat in these budget lines. Health insurance was not purchased for the Central Americans as they were unable to locate an insurance provider

Funding

In addition to the IDRC funding, resources were received from the **Social Justice Fund** of the CAW, the **Global Development Fund** of the B.C. government, the **United Church's International Program** and the **Youth Intern Program** of CIDA. (see the Financial Report below for a complete breakdown of contributions)