Early Experience with a New Program for Rural Development in Honduras

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Abstract

Development projects conducted in rural areas in Honduras have not had the desired impact on rural dwellers’ lives. The recently launched National Program of Sustainable Rural Development was created by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock with the intent of coordinating the interventions managed by a variety of projects in rural areas, with the overall goal of assisting rural families and their communities to reach a sustainable level of development. Rural human resources development will be critical to any sustained efforts in rural areas of Honduras.

The purpose of this paper is to describe and comment on past practices of rural development programs in Honduras and to compare these practices with those of a new approach embodied in the National Program of Sustainable Rural Development (PRONADERS). PRONADERS is trying to incorporate some of the best practices in rural development and extension. Although some strategies remain undefined, the philosophical basis and early experience of PRONADERS look promising. This research is part of a longitudinal study of the program.
Introduction: The Rural-Urban Link

With approximately 70% of the world’s poor living in rural areas, the state of human well-being in this sector is an area of growing concern for policy-makers and development agencies. It is also a concern for urban planners. In the United Nations’ report entitled, *The State of the World 2001*, a stark picture of rural-urban migration and its impacts on cities was presented:

Every day about 160,000 people move from rural areas to cities. Many cities in developing countries face serious environmental health challenges and worsening conditions due to rapid growth, lack of proper infrastructure to meet growing needs, contaminated water and air, and more garbage than they can handle. (UN, 2002a)

Although perhaps intuitively obvious, the level of satisfaction of rural dwellers can have a direct impact on rural-to-urban migration decisions. Many families living in rural areas hope that migration to urban areas will help to relieve some of their problems. Poor access to basic services coupled with a lack of economic opportunities, such as gainful employment, often serve as motivators for people to depart rural areas, resulting in large-scale migration to urban centers. The consequences of this mobilization are generally not positive for either the persons involved or the cities that receive them.

The percentage of citizens living in rural areas is currently equal to or slightly larger than the percentage living in urban areas (UN, 2002a). However, the Food and Agriculture Organization predicts that by 2005 the number of urban dwellers will exceed the number of rural dwellers for the first time in human history (FAO, 2000).

The trend toward urban overcrowding may be a key factor in precipitating greater attention to rural development as a means of stemming the flow “up-stream.” Balanced development and growth of economies in developing countries will require special attention to the development of rural areas. Over time, the success of such efforts may be the most cost-effective tool for dealing with urban overcrowding. Such efforts will require the collaboration of both developed and developing countries, the international development agencies, non-governmental organizations, government development agencies and stakeholders (Valdés and Mistiaen, 2001).

But what new models exist to respond to the growing awareness that rural development is the key to poverty alleviation for 70% of the poor in developing countries, while at the same time producing a positive impact on urban areas? This paper addresses the case of Honduras. Honduras was selected as a case of particular interest to agricultural and extension educators because it has had a long history of traditional approaches to rural and agricultural development, it has experienced very dramatic rural-urban migration, and, most importantly, it now offers emerging evidence on a new approach to rural development.
Purpose of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to describe and comment on past practices of rural development programs in Honduras and to compare these practices with a new approach embodied in the recently launched National Program of Sustainable Rural Development. It was the intent of this preliminary study to document early perceptions of the program as part of a longitudinal study.

Methods

Qualitative methods were employed to conduct research described in this paper. A review of English and Spanish language literature on rural development projects in Honduras was conducted followed by the development of a questionnaire for use in the conduct of the interviews. Group and individual interviews were carried out with stakeholders of rural development projects and programs. Specifically, eight group interviews with a total of 134 farmers were conducted. The mayors of three municipalities and two representatives from mayors’ offices were interviewed. In addition, four non-governmental organization (NGO) staff members, two senior government officials and six government officials that work for the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock were also interviewed. In this preliminary study, interviewees were selected purposefully based on their perceived ability to provide a variety of perspectives on the National Program of Sustainable Rural Development. No claims are made regarding the generalizability of the findings to a larger population.

Discussion

Rural Honduras

Honduras has a population of approximately 6.5 million people and an annual population growth rate of 2.6 percent (World Bank, 2000). It is considered one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere. The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) is $5.9 billion with a per capita GNP of $850. The agricultural sector constitutes 16 percent of the national economy (United States Agency for International Development, 2002).

According to the United Nations (2002b) 64 percent of the population live under poverty conditions, which means that 2/3 of the population have neither the capacity nor adequate access to opportunities to integrate themselves actively into society. During the last few years, the performance of Honduras in areas such as health, education, and income have deteriorated. The human development index of Honduras for the year 2002 was 0.638, a decrease from the year 2000 when it was 0.651.

Barcenas (2002) states that the number of economically challenged Hondurans who live on about a dollar per day is increasing at a rate of two persons per minute. More than 50 percent of the economically challenged rural families do not have access to elementary education. Two out of eight children are undernourished. Their parents either lack the means or the knowledge to adequately feed them. According to the Pan American Health Organization (2002), there are 8.3 physicians per 10,000 inhabitants in Honduras.
Barcenas (2002) states that the main causes of poverty in Honduras are the following:

- **High prices of basic foodstuffs.** The government has tried to assure that basic food is available to everyone in the country. However, there is scarcity and speculation compounded by seasonal problems such as extreme dry conditions during summer time and floods during the rainy season.

- **Lack of job opportunities.** The private and public sectors do not offer enough job opportunities to satisfy the demand.

- **Lack of a government strategy to reduce poverty.** The government has not been able to plan and implement along with other development agencies an appropriate strategy that could reduce poverty in the region.

### Past Experience with Rural Development in Honduras

Nearly half a century ago, the antecedents of today’s rural development efforts were born. The worldwide community development movement appealed to policy makers who wished to stem the tide of revolutionary political change and who were seeking an inexpensive approach to satisfying rural needs (Holdcroft, 1984). Numerous rural development projects *per se* were launched in the late 1960s and evolved into integrated rural development projects beginning in the 1970s (Binnendijk, 1989).

During this same period Honduras experienced a similar evolution in rural oriented programs but has little to show for its investments. Projects were deficient in terms of stakeholder input, made extensive use of outside experts, were designed and conducted with limited participation of women, and were constituted with a predominantly agricultural focus. The underlying assumption was that if agricultural productivity could be increased then rural development would take place.

A number of rural development organizations have emerged during this process. These include state agriculture institutions, farmers’ organizations, and non-governmental organizations. The agricultural institutions and projects that have attempted to serve rural development needs have been composed of a variety of national and international, public and private institutions. Specific examples of these institutions and projects include:

- **Special Program for Food Security (Programa Especial para la Seguridad Alimentaria, PESA)**
- **Lempira-Sur Project**
- **National Program for Local Development**
- **Project for Olancho (PROLANCHO)**
- **Guayape Project**
- **Commission for Human Development**
- **Federation for Development**
- **Federation for Xicaque Tribes**

These institutions and projects operate in rural communities and their main focus is to motivate rural dwellers to increase agricultural production. They have been working either independently or with limited inter-institutional coordination (Ordoñez, 1999).

Canales (2001) states that rural-based agricultural programs are not new in Honduras. These programs have been conducted in rural areas in Honduras for many years. However,
the popularity of agricultural development programs has increased during the last two decades. Canales is skeptical about the efficacy of these programs and the motivation behind their popularity. Canales believes that their growing popularity is partly due to the establishment of new agriculture programs independent from the government, thus providing greater freedoms to local and international implementers who prefer to have their own territory in which they can exercise power and influence. Canales points out that this phenomenon of channeling aid outside of the official government channels has been fueled by the lack of trust in the government by the donor institutions that provide support to the country’s development.

Canales (2001) also makes three important observations about Honduras’ experience in development. First, during the last ten years several agriculture projects aimed at reducing rural poverty have been implemented with an investment of about one billion lempiras (approximately $58.1 million at current exchange rates). Second, there is limited understanding of the collective impact of these projects since most did not include an impact evaluation. Finally, many of the projects were neither directed nor administered by Honduran authorities because international agencies lost confidence in the government’s ability to manage funds appropriately and to safeguard against corruption (Canales, 2001).

A New Approach Focusing on Sustainable Rural Development

In response to the needs in rural Honduras and taking into account the lessons learned from previous experience, a new approach called the National Program of Sustainable Rural Development (Programa Nacional de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible, PRONADERS) was launched in 2001 based on a governmental decree of December 2000. This program is administered by the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock.

PRONADERS’ main goals are to:

1) promote human development and the sustainable utilization of natural resources through participatory processes that facilitate the citizens’ access to basic services and infrastructure; and,
2) provide incentives for investment in adequate technology and productive activities.

The main objectives of PRONADERS are to:

1) offer solutions to several challenges faced by rural communities in Honduras, chief among these challenges are the lack of a national rural development program to coordinate and manage project interventions as well as the attendant lack of effective strategies to approach constraints in rural communities;
2) bring government institutions involved in rural development together with the purpose of jointly working to avoid isolated interventions;
3) coordinate and regulate the project interventions in rural areas; and,
4) strengthen the rural economy.

PRONADERS is directed by both a Consultative Council and a Board of Directors.
The directors of 18 projects participate in this Consultative Council. Their participation has helped to develop inter-institutional communication, something that was lacking before PRONADERS brought the projects together. Coordination among these projects has improved, but there is still some room for improvement in order to avoid duplication of action in rural areas.

PRONADERS operates through two decentralized branches: The National Directorate for Rural Sustainable Development (Dirección Nacional de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible, DINADERS), and the National Fund for Rural Sustainable Development (Fondo Nacional de Desarrollo Rural Sostenible, FONADERS).

DINADERS has the following functions: promotion, coordination, regulation, facilitation and organization of rural development processes. In addition, it designs new policy proposals and evaluates and provides follow-up to rural-based projects. FONADERS is the financial arm of the program. It negotiates new projects to define the investments (credits, transfers, and the capitalization of funds). Both branches work in a complementary manner.

In addition, PRONADERS has created five Centers of Rural Facilitation (CEFARs). These centers are in charge of improving the coordination of activities of rural development as well as strengthening local management through the implementation of participatory processes. The CEFARs also provide support to strengthen local capacities, municipal governments and grassroot development organizations.

PRONADERS is funded mainly by the Honduran Government. Some of its projects are funded by international donors and financial institutions such as the Inter-American Development Bank, the Swiss Commission for Development, and others.

Table 1 (below) shows the differences between the design and early experience of PRONADERS and the previous, more traditional rural development programs in Honduras. The table is organized according to key criteria identified in the rural development literature such as scope, stakeholder input during planning stages, involvement of external experts, attention to social concerns, attention to environment, attention to post-harvest and marketing, women’s participation, gender and development perspective and other variables.
Table 1. **Differences Between the Design and Early Experience of PRONADERS and Previous, More Traditional Rural Development Programs in Honduras**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria</th>
<th>Traditional Programs</th>
<th>PRONADERS</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scope</td>
<td>Regional</td>
<td>National&lt;sup&gt;a&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stakeholder input during planning stages</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Improving, but still limited in some projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Involvement of external experts</td>
<td>Extensive</td>
<td>Extensive, but domestic experts are also consulted.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to social concerns</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Considered, but more focus is placed on agricultural production as a foundation for economic development.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(household water, roads, electrification, child care)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to environment</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Designed to include an environmental component.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attention to post-harvest and marketing projects</td>
<td>Few</td>
<td>Working to introduce these components to the projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women's participation</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Designed to include gender emphasis. Intends to be extensive.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender perspective</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Intends to increase focus on equity of opportunities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination among projects</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Designed to include coordination mechanism. Intends to improve.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Designed to be more accountable to stakeholders.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Measure of impacts</td>
<td>Limited</td>
<td>Evaluation plan has been designed. Projects working with PRONADERS will be included.</td>
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</table>

<sup>a</sup>Honduras is composed of 298 municipalities. Of the 298 municipalities, 238 have a human development index below 0.6, placing them in the category of extreme poverty (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Censos, 2001). PRONADERS works with municipalities in which extreme poverty exists.

**Experience to Date**

During 2001, PRONADERS started its operations with 18 projects that were operating individually under the umbrella of the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock. Processes to harmonize activities, such as workshops and group planning meetings, were conducted with both the executives and technicians of the projects and stakeholders of the projects (producers and non-producers).

Throughout these processes, more involvement of stakeholders has been achieved and their active participation makes the difference between PRONADERS and previous approaches. Researchers, program planners, and rural technicians learned that there are many problems yet to be solved. For example, agricultural productivity is still very low with farmers producing mainly for self-consumption, selling only in cases of emergency. The few farmers who have surpluses are forced to sell them through intermediaries because of extenuating circumstances. As a result, most of the farmers do not have enough food to feed their families. As one farmer stated:
“When one of our kids gets sick, we need to sell part of our production to get money to take him/her to the doctor, then we have to buy back our food at more expensive prices.”

Two PRONADERS programs have increased the participation and involvement of rural dwellers. These are “Local Management Strengthening” and the “Rural Economy Reactivation Program, RERURAL.” Technicians and stakeholders have determined that one of the main agricultural problems is the lack of irrigation systems that would allow the community to produce food during the dry season. Most stakeholders, many of them small producers, have shown enormous enthusiasm for the program: “We feel empowered. We were asleep, now we can manage and solve our own issues.”

Through this new way of approaching their communities, producers feel they can learn how to be responsible for their own development. For many years they have seen so many projects come and go, most of which developed activities without taking their opinions into consideration. Now they can speak their minds and organize themselves:

“Many projects have come to visit us, they have asked about our needs, then the projects come back with the money, at the end we have seen that others have received benefits that were ours. Of course, they do some little things here and there, just to justify the funding. Definitely, they have used our names to get money that helps people that do not need more, but that’s the way that things have been done here.”

Rural food security is, understandably, among the first needs to be addressed. However, almost as a reminder that not all rural needs are agricultural, it is important to point out that most of the projects that have been proposed to RERURAL by the rural communities are social projects. Few of them focus on actual production agriculture. This trend is consistent with some of the current thinking at FAO’s Sustainable Development division as evidenced by the paper by Gasperini and Maguire (2001) in which it was argued that the rural poor need education and training in a number of areas in addition to agriculture.

Through PRONADERS’ intervention, the level of motivation among villagers has increased. However, rural dwellers show some skepticism about the different projects, because the process of getting funding from RERURAL takes time. For example, rural dwellers need training on how to write their own proposals that are reviewed and prioritized at the municipal level. This is a new way of doing business for rural people and they can get discouraged.

One of the problems detected in past projects is the lack of an evaluation plan that measures the impacts on targeted communities. Honduras has typically used a variety of evaluation models, none of which seems to be appropriate. PRONADERS has created an Evaluation and Follow-up National System, that is composed of categories, variables and neutral indicators. It is intended that the projects affiliated with PRONADERS will include this system within their program plan.
According to one PRONADERS senior official, the program needs to develop consensus on specific operating procedures.

“There is not a defined policy that can allow the Program to have a window to negotiate with projects and obtain an agreement . . . there is not a clear way to approach rural areas. There are not important changes in the way of promoting development in rural areas, there are not enough capabilities, and there is not enough interest. However, it is expected that by the year 2004 PRONADERS will have its policies very well defined. This will be possible with the continuous support of the Government.”

In contrast with the previous comment, DINADERS’ executive director expressed the following:

“The how to do things is already defined, what we need to do is to put concepts into practice . . . It is expected that through the introduction of a new component that will be called “Improvement of Processes,” the operation of actions will be achieved . . . This component will be charged with defining strategies to plan research, carry out activities, document and train . . It is important to systematize processes to elaborate strategies . . PRONADERS is still an institution under construction; we are making adjustments on the road.”

As one measure of the sincerity of the Honduran government toward making progress on rural well-being it is noteworthy that Honduras is among the first 10 countries in the world to complete a full poverty reduction strategy paper (PRSP). The PRSP serves as a roadmap for the development of anti-poverty policies and programs and opens the door to investment by the International Monetary Fund and World Bank. The Honduran PRSP specifically identifies improved economic competitiveness of the rural sector as a key component. Through the PRSP the government intends to improve infrastructure, market support services, technology and financing (Ames, Bhatt, and Plant, 2002).

In the year 2002, PRONADERS was able to merge its policies with those that guide the national strategy to reduce poverty. The main results of this coordination have been the development and prioritization of rural development project profiles (food security, technology, production, transformation and modernization of the agricultural sector).

To date, the 18 PRONADERS projects have provided assistance to 94,872 families, representing approximately 569,232 rural dwellers. For the year 2002 PRONADERS and its projects approved a total of 587 million lempiras (approximately $34 million) to fund projects. However, only 285.3 million lempiras (approximately $16.5 million) was actually spent (Secretaría de Agricultura y Ganadería, 2002).
Observations and Future Directions

2) A considerable amount of money has been invested in development programs in Honduras. Many programs are working to overcome a single problem in a community, thereby leaving other problems without solutions. Duplication of efforts has to be avoided in order to attain uniform and sustainable development. It seems that partnerships among government agencies, local governments and NGOs is an approach worthy of careful examination since it can help the Ministry of Agriculture and Livestock shoulder the burden of program implementation.

3) Rural human resources development will be critical to any sustained efforts in rural areas in Honduras. Given that farm size is limited among the rural poor in Honduras and given the need for rural dwellers to add value to the basic (and generally low value) commodities they produce, any rural development program will have to go beyond an agricultural development focus to include rural agro-based enterprises (Gasperini and Maguire, 2001). Training in off-farm enterprise development, small-scale forest-based businesses and effective investment of remesas familiares (remittances from family members working abroad) should be offered.

4) PRONADERS is trying to incorporate some of the best practices in rural development and extension. Although some strategies remain undefined, the philosophical basis and early experience of PRONADERS look promising. This program is worthy of observation over the next few years as part of a longitudinal study.

5) Once the program develops a well-defined set of policies, PRONADERS’ will provide greater coordination and minimum standards and a philosophical framework for all project implementers.

6) Recent investments by the Inter-American Development Bank, World Bank, and International Monetary Fund should give this new approach to rural development a chance to succeed. Major investments are in progress in rural roads, electricity, schools/education, processing facilities for agricultural goods, access to land, and debt relief.

Bibliography


