



SAT tutors and students merging indigenous and scientific agricultural knowledge. Photo: Pascal Molineaux

Strengthening Local Economies and Community Identity

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All over the world, the increasing force of social and economic globalisation has undoubtedly been a phenomenon of great impact in the community-sustaining network of human relations during the last decade. Numerous studies demonstrate how human relations inspired in an essentially competitive spirit with market oriented values - actively promoted by global enterprises whose only goal is short-term maximisation of economic profits - are penetrating into the social and cultural value systems of people, displacing traditional values and eroding essential community-based identity structures.

Historically, the human being has always had a deep-rooted communal identity. Constructed through a complex network of interdependent human relations, based on common beliefs and value systems, trust built through social interactions, a common history and spontaneous solidarity, this identity until very recently still gave orientation and purpose to life. A child grew - and should continue to do so - embedded in and protected by a nuclear family, itself within an extended family in which cousins, uncles and grandparents play a fundamental role, and a healthy community of neighbours and friends. It is in these three social contexts - of the close family members, distant family members and community - that the child develops a sense of belonging, a sense of identity and purpose in life. These, each in their own particular way, serve to educate and guide the child through life.

Organisation and knowledge - cornerstones of education

It is in this context that FUNDAEC's (Foundation for the Application and Teaching of the Sciences) grass roots experience in strengthening local economies and community identity can be analysed. Fundamentally, this experience is centred in the creation and evolution of locally based learning institutions and economically oriented structures that belong, in a true sense, to the local communities themselves. Organisation and knowledge are considered by FUNDAEC as the two main elements needed for people to take charge of their own development and interact as equals with the outside world. The learning institution that evolved in the pursuit of achieving this purpose through education is called the Rural University. It is a community-based system for the development of human resources. The Rural University sets in motion a series of learning processes in which the knowledge generated by rural people helps to create and increase the forces necessary to resist social disintegration and, eventually, to achieve positive change.

Tutorial Learning System (SAT)

The Tutorial Learning System (SAT in Spanish) is a high school equivalent curriculum embedded in the reality and needs of rural life. It is now approved by the Ministry of Education in Colombia and has close to 40,000 students in Colombia and another 2,000 in seven other countries. It offers an interesting experience in the creation of a locally rooted (and relevant!)

educational system connected to a national – and now international – movement of NGOs, public institutions and communities. The local SAT groups, of 15-20 students, guided by a trained tutor from the same community, have demonstrated their potential, as they apply the service oriented principles and concrete knowledge gained through the study of the SAT texts, to become active groups in the strengthening of a community identity. Their activities – which reflect an enormous diversity – cover educational activities with younger children, environmental activities, education, artistic, cultural and sporting events – and directly or indirectly foment a sense of community, of belonging. These activities have shown a great potential, especially among the participants and other youth in the community, in developing a sense of worth, a sense that rural, community based life is possible. This is remarkable in the context of a country known for its high rate of violence and insecurity, accelerating an already high rate of rural outmigration. No doubt, such a feat is, in each local context, a much-needed contribution to peace and understanding.

Moreover, the SAT educational movement strives to connect the participating students and institutions – now close to 50 NGOs and public institutions in Colombia alone – to the reality of a world advancing towards greater levels of unity. Achieving this, which is at once the promise and challenge of globalisation, we believe, can only be done, if the local, regional and national identities and value systems are strengthened and recognised. If not, globalisation will continue to cause havoc in the local economies, traditional value systems and community rooted identity, as it has been doing everywhere. Giving the SAT students – most of them living in marginal and isolated rural villages – access to modern knowledge systems is indeed a tremendous challenge, as this has to be done respecting their own empirical understanding of life's purpose. This is, in essence, what the programme strives at: providing a social learning space in which the students, with their own life experience, can participate in generating and applying knowledge in their own social and cultural contexts.

Positive results

And indeed, the programme is seen as truly revolutionary, providing very positive results. Graduates of the SAT programme emerge with comprehensive knowledge in agriculture, animal husbandry, soil chemistry, and other fields traditionally associated with rural vocations. They also come out with knowledge about how to create micro enterprises and have a greater consciousness of living in and serving their community. As such, they can, and do, initiate and participate actively in community development processes. Rural youth, who would otherwise have left in search of work, are now staying back and setting up small enterprises within their own communities, and earning their own living. SAT graduates have, in many communities, begun to take up some of the key public posts, like running the public telephone office, the public library, the local pharmacy, the kindergarten programme etc. These are the types of positions for which, in the past, the municipalities had to (and still do in many cases) find people from outside the community.

Solidarity groups

The other programme in which FUNDAEC has developed a noteworthy experience is in the creation and strengthening of solidarity groups in a wide variety of rural communities. The programme started in 1990, inspired by the example of the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh, with the help of a long-term loan from the InterAmerican Development Bank. The credit was used as an excuse to create local solidarity groups, in the belief that the traditional values of reciprocity, interdependence, trust,

mutual help could be strengthened and thus contribute to enhance, in each community, a sense of collective identity. No doubt the increasing presence of a market-oriented economy and values emphasising the competitive, individualistic spirit have contributed to the erosion of such a collective sense of identity. As the programme has grown, the groups have shown great potential, each group receiving a basic training in solidarity-based value systems and the technical aspects of the productive project they plan to implement. On the one hand, the small productive projects have increased the welfare and given a greater sense of security to the participants. On the other, they have helped to foment, or strengthen, in the participants those essential values that gave – and must continue to give – meaning to the concept of community.

Return to community values

Members of solidarity groups support each other by sharing resources, knowledge and labour. Solidarity, in this case, is not confined to a group, but reaches out to other groups and the community at large. A few examples will suffice. One group member, in the village of Padilla in the Cauca department of Colombia, became aware that an elderly woman, living in a small house, in very poor conditions, had a leaking roof. The rainy season was soon to start. The group decided to provide a helping hand, as they had previously established a small solidarity fund. They all participated, during a whole day, in rebuilding the roof – the women preparing juice (the day was hot!) and food in abundance, each group member bringing some contribution for the reconstruction of the roof – nails, wood, tiles. In one day, the elderly woman discovered she was a member of a community that cared for her, the participants rediscovered how powerful the principle of unity is, and the community recuperated a long-established tradition of mutual help – MINGA – that had of late been abandoned to a great extent. Another nucleus of five solidarity groups, in the neighbouring village of La Arrobleda, decided to pool their resources to buy a bull for their thirty or so milking cows. One person was responsible for taking care of the bull and costs were shared amongst all. They also decided to make the bull available to any community member who might need it, for a small fee. In another community, one of the group members lost her cow as it indulged in the sugar cane based sweet she produced. The group members and other members of solidarity groups in the community chipped in, and she was able to renegotiate the reimbursement of credit she had received to buy the first cow and get more credit to acquire a second cow. Again, this was possible because the network of human relations which make up community life and identity were alive and strong, thanks in part to the solidarity based groups established in the community.

Strengthening local communities

FUNDAEC's experience points clearly at two essential aspects to be considered if local communities are to confront the great – and potentially destructive – force of social and economic globalisation. Providing access to knowledge, in all its modern complexity, along with its generation and application as it interacts with locally based knowledge systems, is one. Efforts to create local structures that serve in strengthening local economies, within the context of a community value system and identity, is the other. And they go hand in hand. ■

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More information on FUNDAEC and the Rural University can be found on the following websites: www.bcca.org/services/lists/noble-creation and www.onecountry.org