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PUTTING TOGETHER AND COORDINATING A PROJECT TEAM

Much of the variation in outcomes in Honduras and Panama can be traced to the ways in which the project teams were assembled and managed. Three units of personnel were involved: the administration and coordination team, the technical (cartographic) team, and the indigenous community team. These three teams have specialized tasks that must be carried out in smooth, coordinated fashion. This chapter explores the dynamic of the project teams that evolved in the two countries, emphasizing how early assumptions and decisions smoothed the way or led to unexpected difficulties.

ADMINISTRATION AND COORDINATION

As previously noted, in Honduras a single organization, MOPAWI, designed the project and held the reins from start to finish. MASTA, the Miskito federation, was nominally involved as co-manager, but in reality it had little to do with the administrative end because it lacked both experience and capacity in this area. Native Lands was involved in little more than discussions from a distance, and with project funding.

MOPAWI provided the lead Coordinator in the project,¹⁷ the administrative and logistical personnel, and the infrastructure for the workshops in Puerto Lempira as well as an office in the capital city. Those hired for the work were essentially employees of MOPAWI. MOPAWI's accountant, Zaida Calderón, based in Puerto Lempira, and her assistant, Ana Daniel, handled the finances; the Tegucigalpa office was managed by Suyapa Valle, MOPAWI's liaison officer. MOPAWI charged a modest 15 percent of the total project budget to recoup some of its expenses; but its total in-kind contribution of staff time, buildings in Puerto Lempira and Tegucigalpa, equipment (computers, radios, boats, etc.), and miscellaneous expenses was far greater (see Appendix A). Centralization of the project within a single institution — one that was respected and moved easily among communities in the Mosquitia as well as government agencies and NGOs — made management of the process relatively seamless and efficient.

¹⁷ Officially, Leake and Herlihy were “Co-Coordiators” in the project; in practice, however, Leake was responsible for coordination of the entire project while Herlihy concentrated on the technical aspects.

In Panama, by contrast, no single organization had overall charge of the project. In the initial design phase, which lasted over a year, Native Lands brought CEASPA and the Congreso Emberá-Wounaan together to discuss the project. During this period, we recruited Herlihy into the process to again play the role of lead cartographer. Bit by bit the pieces started coming together as we all labored to develop the work plan and put together a budget. CEASPA and Native Lands worked together in an attempt to define the roles of the different institutions and individuals in the project.

Early on, the idea was that CEASPA would hire a project Coordinator who would oversee the entire project. Several candidates were considered and some of these were interviewed. The most highly qualified of the lot, all non-Indians, exceeded our price range, and after a good deal of back and forth a Kuna who had worked with CEASPA was selected. This prompted Herlihy to suggest that an Emberá be hired as Co-Coordinator to balance the ethnic composition of the staff. On the surface, this suggestion was reasonable since a Kuna Coordinator in charge of everything would have had difficulty winning trust and compliance from a field team made up largely of Emberá. At the same time, however, Herlihy was privately voicing his concern that CEASPA was too “political”; by adding an Emberá Coordinator, he sought to diminish CEASPA’s role. The Emberá were not concerned about CEASPA’s political leanings, but they backed this

proposal because they wanted more control over the project.

When the dust had settled, the project had three indigenous Coordinators: Geraldés Hernández, a Kuna, and Genaro Pacheco and Fecund Sanapí, both Emberá. In contrast to the structure in Honduras, the Panama project had no head, no Director or lead Coordinator. Instead it had Hernández, who was largely responsible to CEASPA and the Kuna communities involved in the project, and Pacheco and Sanapí, who were both paid out of the purse held by CEASPA but directly responsible and ultimately accountable to the Emberá Congress — indeed they were both leaders in the Emberá Congress. There was little communication between Hernández and the two Emberá. The net result was to split project leadership into two camps, diluting it to the point where no one had the final say on anything.

As the project became operational, the different parties fell into roles that failed to match their expectations, resulting in resentment and difficult interpersonal relations. With no clear leadership structure, role boundaries blurred and overlapped, and there was no agreed-upon mechanism for resolving disputes. During the initial stage of the project, CEASPA had assumed its experience with group dynamics would figure predominantly as a methodological base for both the fieldwork and the workshops. Lacking the consensus needed to take the lead in either area, its sphere of action was confined primarily to administration of project finances.

Based in Panama City, CEASPA had assigned its project responsibilities to its Research Coordinator, Charlotte Elton. Elton hired longtime CEASPA collaborator Olimpia Díaz as Administrator, and Jorge Villareal as Assistant Administrator. Díaz's husband, Jaime Dri, a certified public accountant, volunteered to set up the project's bookkeeping system and perform audits. CEASPA empowered Díaz to make all policy and procedural decisions needed to do her work.

Since CEASPA's headquarters were cramped, a project office was rented near the center of town and equipped using project funds. This became the urban center for the entire project — it was where meetings were held, materials stored, and mail, faxes, and phone calls received and sent. While the office lent the appearance of project cohesion to outsiders, it helped fuel some of the internal dissension. The indigenous leaders and Herlihy, both distrustful of CEASPA, took the position that CEASPA's duties should be confined to accounting and record-keeping. In CEASPA's eyes, however, the core activities carried out from this office validated a management role that approached oversight of the entire project.

So it was that the early dispute over CEASPA's role was never really resolved, and it kept resurfacing as a series of skirmishes. Herlihy would appear and tell Díaz to cut checks for technical supplies or put an additional technician on the payroll for the mapping workshops. Sanapí and Pacheco, the Emberá Coordinators, would

assemble other Emberá leaders and approach her in a group with bills for logistical and other expenses. In other words, no one asked CEASPA for approval of project expenses; they felt they had the right to tell CEASPA to hand money over. With no higher authority to arbitrate, disputes became personalized. The Indians felt that Díaz was miserly with "their" money (after all, weren't they supposed to be the project's major beneficiaries?); and the cartographer grew increasingly impatient with an administrator whose actions came across as questioning his professional judgment.

What neither Herlihy nor the indigenous leaders grasped was that the finite nature of the project's budget, not ideology or a desire for power, was driving much of CEASPA's decision making. Funds were arriving from diverse sources and therefore required a meticulous accounting of expenditures by donor. Some donors had strictly allocated their money for specific items. Keeping all of this straight not only required long days of tedious work; it also limited what could be spent and when. The fear of shortfall was also fed by uncertainty brought on as funds arrived in dribs and drabs, and not always when a specific component needed support. Managing the limited funds required CEASPA to establish priorities in paying bills. On one occasion the project came right to the brink of bankruptcy, and CEASPA was forced to establish a line of credit to cover expenses while we waited for money to arrive in the account.

In a very vague sense, the Emberá had wanted to be in charge of the project from the outset but were forced to acknowledge that they lacked the administrative skills to manage the funds and handle logistical arrangements.¹⁸ For the moment, they settled into the limited management of the field teams (with the exception of the Kuna component handled by Hernández), contact with the communities, and overall organization and supervision of the nontechnical aspects of the workshops. They were present in force throughout the entire process and were major actors in the workshops. At the same time, they refused to recognize CEASPA, or anyone else for that matter, as manager of the project.

Neither CEASPA, the Indians, nor Native Lands viewed Herlihy as the director of the project, but his role in this mix became further confused after some of the project funds came in under his name as “Principal Investigator.”¹⁹ When it became clear that CEASPA’s expertise with group dynamics would not be put into practice, Herlihy set about organizing various aspects of the workshops. Yet there was ambiguity about his role: he wanted decision-making authority on issues that he felt were important but did not want to (and could not)

shoulder responsibility for overall project coordination.

The reader may wonder why Native Lands did not step in at this stage to clarify the situation. At that particular moment we were going through our own organizational crisis, and no one was clear about Native Lands’ authority in the project structure. Even we were fuzzy on this point. We had been the Central America Program of Cultural Survival when we began organizing the project; but in June, when the workshops were in full swing, we severed that relationship and became independent.²⁰

Temporarily without status as a nonprofit, we could not handle any of the funds for the project, so we had funders route them directly to CEASPA. Because Native Lands had no “official” role in the flow of either cash or activities, and Chapin and Threlkeld from the Virginia office were only physically present in Panama for short periods of time, our involvement, although substantial in a number of ways, was difficult to pin down. We were too busy with our transition from Cultural Survival, which involved poking about for funds to stay afloat, to pay full attention to the increasingly tangled affairs in Panama until the decibel level of discord rose over the threshold. On the other hand,

18 More than a year after the project had ended, after time had allowed tempers to cool, the Emberá Coordinators offered that CEASPA’s management of project finances was a crucial element in the project’s success.

19 Herlihy had not been given this title when the project began. One funder contacted by Native Lands made consideration of a proposal contingent on designation of a Principal Investigator (PI). A solution was worked out by sending the money directly to CEASPA, while naming Herlihy as *pro forma* PI.

20 Initially we formed under the name Rights & Resources. After six months, we changed our name to Native Lands. On the credits for the map of the Darién, we are listed as Rights & Resources.

Nicanor González, our Regional Coordinator, was present in the project throughout, working as a member of the technical team and also serving as intermediary among the different ethnic groups during the workshops; but he had no authority over the project as a whole.

Despite this paralysis of leadership, a working arrangement — which was more like an unspoken truce — was finally reached and the project straggled forward. During the first stages, things progressed on schedule without any serious hitches. This was due in large part to the level of commitment stirred among the participants to the mapping process. Later on, as the pace of work accelerated, things became more and more chaotic and irregular.

THE TECHNICAL TEAM

In Honduras, the technical team was led by Herlihy, who at the time was Assistant Professor at Southeastern Louisiana University. He had done land use mapping in two areas of the Mosquitia and knew the region well. Assisting with the cartographic work were two employees of the Honduran Instituto Geográfico Nacional, José Ramiro Andino and Héctor Ramírez.

In Panama, Herlihy was again in charge of the technical team. He had done research for his doctoral thesis in the Darién in the early 1980s (see Herlihy 1986), and had crisscrossed much of the region on foot. Although he was not personally acquainted with most of the Emberá leadership, they had heard of him and had confidence

in his technical skills. His intimate knowledge of the terrain and the fact that he had worked among the Emberá were both extremely valuable to the project.

None of the backup technical staff (five people) had more than passing field experience in the Darién. Draftsman José Aizpurúa was recruited from the Panamanian Instituto Geográfico Nacional (IGN). Aerial Photograph Interpreter Erasmo González came from the Contraloría General de la República and stayed through the second workshop. Sebastián Sánchez, also an Aerial Photograph Interpreter, came from the University of Panama; Hugo Solís, a retired Aerial Photograph Interpreter from the IGN, worked a few days at the beginning. Finally, Nicanor González, a Kuna cartographer from the contiguous region of Kuna Yala, was working with Native Lands.

González would eventually play a key role in the project. An architect by training, he had been a member of

Figure 7. Members of the technical team in Panama, from left to right, Sebastián Sánchez (University of Panama), José Aizpurúa (National Geographic Institute), and Erasmo González (Treasury Inspector's Office).



Nicanor González

Traditional Antagonists

In both Honduras and Panama there was considerable potential friction among the different ethnic groups, many of whom had been outright enemies until very recently, and still today they are not precisely what one would call “friends.” In centuries past, the Miskito made a business of capturing the Tawahka and selling them into slavery as far south as Panama; and in the 17th century the Spaniards enlisted the Emberá to run the Kuna out of Darién. Many of these differences and antagonisms continue into the present. Today the Miskito dominate the other groups in the Mosquitia, while the Kuna are an almost overwhelming force in the indigenous politics of Panama, cornering what amounts to a lion’s share of available national and international assistance.

The mapping project was the first time the different groups in both countries had worked in close quarters on a complex enterprise over a period of months. In this setting, there was room for bad feelings to ripen and break forth, yet nothing of this sort got very far. While there were squabbles, the process in both countries was characterized by a strong sense that indigenous peoples were working together toward a common objective, and that this objective was important for their survival as indigenous peoples. This was the glue that held the projects together.

the PEMASKY technical team from 1983 through 1987.²⁰ In that capacity he had learned cartography, drafting all the project’s maps. He had worked with indigenous groups in other countries and was particularly skilled at resolving interethnic frictions. He worked well with all the Surveyors (Kuna, Emberá, and Wounaan) and helped ease the inevitable tensions that would arise in the mix of project participants.

COMMUNITY TEAM

In both countries the community team consisted of a group of Surveyors whose work was supervised by a small team of Coordinators. In Honduras, Leake took the lead in coordinating the field team. He had been working in the Mosquitia since

1989, spoke fluent Spanish, and knew the region and the people well. He was assisted by Adalberto Padilla, a Ladino,²¹ and Aurelio Ramos and Nathán Pravia, both Miskito. All of them were employees of MOPAWI.

In Panama, all of the Coordinators were indigenous. Sanapí and Pacheco were both selected by Emberá tribal authorities; Sanapí was a Regional Chief from the Sambú area and Pacheco was a leader in the Emberá Congress. Hernández was initially screened by CEASPA and later approved by the Kuna network in Panama City.

Indigenous leadership was a key element in both projects, for work at the community level demanded solid diplomatic skills and a clear under-



Figure 8. Members of the community team from Honduras.

MOPAWI

²⁰ The Study Project for the Management of Wildlife Areas of Kuna Yala, or *Proyecto de Estudio para el Manejo de Areas Silvestres de Kuna Yala (PEMASKY)*, which ran from 1983 through 1989, was a Kuna-run initiative to set aside and manage a 60,000-hectare forest park within Kuna territory (Chapin 1998, 240–278).

²¹ Ladino is a term used in Mexico and Central America to denote a person of mixed Indian-European descent. Another term is mestizo, or mixed.

standing of local politics. The Miskitos Pravia and Ramos played this role in Honduras as senior staff members, while the Panama project had indigenous Coordinators. The indigenous coordinating staff in both countries were respected leaders able to communicate with tribal authorities; they had a clear voice in community councils; and they commanded the respect needed to effectively supervise the Surveyors. They were all thoroughly convinced of the importance of the mapping; they were dedicated to the work; and they were physically and mentally strong enough to travel to the remotest corners of the territory being mapped.

In Honduras there were 22 Surveyors, while in Panama there were 21. These were the primary data gatherers at the community level. They all resided in the “zones” for which they were gathering information. Ideally, they were well-regarded people who knew the forest, had a minimal level of literacy, and were committed to the objectives of the mapping project. The selection process in both countries is described in the next chapter.



Figure 9. Members of the community team from Panama.

DISCUSSION

Project coordination is perhaps the most critical element in projects of this sort. In Honduras, the institution in charge — MOPAWI — was efficient and had the capability to manage project activities. The roles of team members were clearly defined and the lines of authority were understood and accepted by all; decisions on important as well as more-trivial matters were made without fuss; there were no confusions regarding the administration of funds; and there was a minimum of confusion and delay on logistical matters. Most important, there was a high level of trust and respect among team members. Conflicts were easily resolved and things moved along with relative ease.

In Panama, by contrast, there was no clear structure to the project team. No specific institution or person was in charge of operations. Put simply, a situation arose in which all of the major actors on the scene emerged, in one way or another, as pretenders to the throne, but no one was crowned. As a result, decision making was murky, contentious, and ineffective; pressures built up on several fronts until antagonisms among project staff almost brought the project to a halt; and although the maps were in the end produced, the entire enterprise was

saturated with ill feeling. Today it seems somewhat baffling that no attempt was made at any time to bring all of the parties together, hammer out a coherent description of duties and responsibilities, and write it down in a joint memorandum. This should have been done right at the start, when the team was being formed. But it wasn't, and any attempt to sort things out once the project was rolling would have been risky and difficult, if not impossible — especially after polarization had set in.

With a strong institutional framework in place, the different components — the administrative team, the technical team, and the community team — can be given a relative amount of autonomy. The technical team will have its own particular constraints and needs and will have to work within the context of the country and the region in which the indigenous people live; and the community team must be designed to deal with local political, social, and cultural realities, something that can only be done by local people (with assistance from other members of the project team). At the same time, all of the teams must be synchronized with each other. This is most effectively achieved with an efficient, coherent leadership structure.

