

Exploring an Unconventional Movement: projecthonduras.com

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In a world where conventional development approaches have often not worked in the way we would like them to, and indeed have often been heavily criticised it is still difficult to find alternatives that are making a genuine difference in people's lives, although academics and development practitioners around the world continue to be engaged in searching, and in discussions and debates about how a post-development world might look. This paper outlines my PhD research proposal, based on one possible alternative, a network of people and organisations actively trying to do something different.

The network is called projecthonduras.com. It is a self-described alternative model and unconventional movement. Essentially a website and online forum providing information on ways to help Honduras, it aims to assist individuals and groups to share information, network and link resources.

The hub of the network is the projecthonduras.com website. Set up nearly 10 years ago by two Honduran-Americans, it was originally conceived as a means of linking the skills and resources of Hondurans in America with needs in Honduras. It quickly broadened to a more general audience, and now involves an eclectic mix of Hondurans and "friends of Honduras", based both within and outside Honduras.

The main focus of the network is the forums. Links on the main website link to the main forum lists on Yahoo groups, with lists for education, healthcare, community building, and for the annual conference. More recently groups have been started on facebook as well, however the core of the network continues to be the general online forum on Yahoo. Both the Yahoo and Facebook forums are used for asking questions and sharing information, and for requests and offers of help.

Projecthonduras.com also organises an annual conference in Honduras, drawing around 200-300 people each year. The aim of the conferences is to present and exchange information on current and proposed grassroots volunteer projects to help the people of Honduras, and to explicitly encourage networking and relationship building between individuals and organisations- in practise this means great coffee and lots of time for mingling and chatting between sessions.

Within the website there is also a clickable aid map of Honduras, long lists of organisations doing charitable and aid work in Honduras, and various essays written by the site's founder.

The projecthonduras.com network is based on the philosophy of Opposite George. This philosophy is based on an episode of the Seinfeld show that screened in the 1990's entitled "The Opposite". In this episode the character George Costanza decides that every decision he has ever made in his life has been wrong, and that his life is therefore the opposite of what it should be. He tells Jerry Seinfeld this, and Jerry convinces him that "if every instinct you have is wrong, then the opposite would have to be right". George then resolves to start doing the complete opposite of what

he would do normally. He suddenly begins to experience good luck, getting a girlfriend, moving out of his parents' house, and even landing a job with the New York Yankees.

What does this have to do with development? The founder of the network, Marco Caceres (2000) argues *“it is human nature to be negative and critical. It assumes that it is our nature to be argumentative and wary of our differences. And it assumes that it is natural for us to prefer to talk about the big issues outside one's realm of influence rather than physically get involved and address the "do-able" stuff.*

If we are to stand a chance in heck to make a true difference in Honduras, I submit that we have to adopt a new way of thinking and acting toward one another in order to remain a movement. We have to learn to follow a philosophy that, to many of us, seems unnatural. If we don't, then we become just another group of individuals with some good intentions, but not really with any unique approach to dealing with Honduras' problems.”

The philosophy therefore is one of thinking, saying and doing things that are positive, constructive, and non-divisive, consciously choosing to focus on and build from the strengths of what is already being done.

This approach is clearly very challenging for practitioners in development. It also left me with somewhat of a problem when designing a research project. The problem is that I am somewhat of a critic and a sceptic, particularly when it comes to development. Reaching into my past life as a nurse and volunteer in Asia and Latin America, it is all too easy to dredge up stories and experiences that made me question the concept of development and more particularly the role of outsiders in developing world contexts. I ended up in development studies as a direct result of those experiences and the questions they inspired. They formed the background to Master's research, and in hindsight, coloured the results a monotonous shade of grey.

In turn, these ‘findings’ cast a shadow over my proposed PhD research. While I liked the idea of exploring an “alternative model” and an “unconventional movement” and was very interested in investigating these claims further, I was somewhat unsure about whether I would be able to find anything other than the same collection of organisations and individuals doing the same old things that that I had been criticising for years.

The answer of course, is in the concept of Opposite George itself. Rather than doing what I normally do and taking the critical stance, I have chosen to take an explicitly strengths-based approach to guide the data collection. While still trying to reconcile this with rigorous academic enquiry, my hope is that this will facilitate relationships with network participants, and preserve the positive energy of the group. It does not mean I will leave the critic at the door, rather I that I am choosing to engage with the challenges and criticisms in a positive and constructive manner. In this have been much inspired by the thinking of the proponents of Appreciative Inquiry, an organisational development and research approach based on social constructionism.

The principles of AI are:

- **The Constructivist Principle**
This comes directly from social constructionist theory and states that our thoughts about the world are developed through interpretation and construction rather than simple recording of phenomena
- **The Principle of simultaneity**
States that inquiry and change are simultaneous, and that an inquiry is an intervention in the way it stimulates reflection and thought.
- **The poetic principle**
Contends that people author their world continually, choosing the parts of their stories that they are most interested in at the time and experimenting with different “plotlines”.
- **The Anticipatory Principle**
Suggests that the way in which people think about their future will shape the way in which they move towards the future. If they see the future as full of possibility, they will move towards these possibilities, if they see the future as hopeless they will feel there is no point in wasting their energy.
- **The Positive Principle**
States that a focus on asking positive questions engages people more deeply and for a longer time, as people naturally turn towards ideas and images that provide nourishment and energy.

(Reed, 2007, pp. 26-27)

Appreciative Inquiry (known as ‘AI’) as it is known is used in organisational development as a 4-stage change process. While at this point I don’t anticipate that I will be utilising the full AI research cycle, these principles, have become important guides in my research planning.

While I am only just coming to the end of my first year of PhD study, I have been fortunate enough to take a pre-fieldwork trip to Honduras. In October this year I was able to attend the annual projecthonduras.com Conference in Copan Ruinas, Honduras. During and after that conference I conducted 12 interviews with a variety of people involved in projecthonduras.com, both organisers and participants. Where possible, I structured the interviews based on AI principles, looking particularly for stories of success, asking questions such as: what are the highlights of your involvement with projecthonduras.com? What core factors make it work? And where do you see the network in 5 years time?

Although at a very early stage of the research process, there are a few points I can already pull from the experience.

Firstly the interviews were easy. Of course, it is usually not too difficult to get people talking about projects and ideas they are passionate about. But unlike past interview experience where I was actively searching for problems, this time I was happy just to sit back and let people tell their stories, their way. AI literature indicates that that these interviews are often easy ones to conduct as people like talking about success, and I found it to be true. It also engendered a considerable level of trust and rapport, which made the whole process much smoother.

Secondly, while a broad range of experiences and perspectives came out in the interviews- not unexpectedly given the range of people interviewed, some key concepts emerged clearly as likely areas for focusing the research.

Firstly the network, and therefore this research, is about People.

The first page of the website states that

“We are an engaged network of individuals and groups working on grassroots responses to the country's social and economic needs, leveraging our time, energy, expertise, experience, creativity, talents, contacts, and willingness--"human capital"-- as catalysts for change.”

Although there were some participants, most noticeably local Honduran NGO representatives, who indicated a need to raise money rather than to find more people, most joined the network and interact online or come to the conference because they can see the benefits of networking.

The people who participate in projecthonduras.com are incredibly diverse. While the network was originally formed to link Hondurans in the United States, the forums and the conference are open to anyone with an interest in ‘helping’ Honduras. The attendees at this year’s conference were a good example of this. Although most conference participants represented an NGO, and about half were religious-based, there was a huge variety of organisational and project types, including education, health, children’s homes, water and sanitation and small business development. In addition there were representatives from universities and student groups, private businesses, rotary clubs, and church groups. Each year the organisers also invite government representatives, from both Honduras and from the USA. A few years ago the then-President sent two of his daughters. This year was the first time the conference had a US government presence, as the new ambassador not only agreed to attend and give the opening address, but came with a party which included the director of USAID in Honduras and representatives of Joint Task Force Bravo, a US military task force based in Honduras that also provides humanitarian and civic assistance projects. I have yet to investigate and figure out the full implications of this but my point here is to emphasise that projecthonduras.com is clearly a diverse group of organisations and individuals.

So what does projecthonduras.com do?

Networking

At it’s most simple the aim of projecthonduras.com is to get people together to talk. It makes no claims about solving all the world’s- or Honduras’- problems of itself, but rather bases its claims to being an alternative model of development on simply getting people talking, on getting people actively choosing to network and share. This is done through both on and offline networking. Networking was an area I had identified early on as key concept, and which I have further refined as active or conscious networking. Those who choose to join the network by in large do so because they see the benefits of meeting and being in contact with others working in the same geographical area. For example people consciously choose to attend the conference primarily to mingle, meet and talk. They are reminded several times in conference information to bring lots of business cards and information about their

organisations and projects and to give it all away over the three days of the conference- and most of them do.

The online aspect of the network is significant. While most NGOs now have a web presence these are often static websites, or interaction is limited to signing up for a newsletter or email updates. However over recent years there has been an explosion of new technologies for communication, often called web 2.0. The web 2.0 phenomenon is about human to human contact over the internet and includes video sharing, social networking sites such as Facebook and MySpace, blogging, online auctions, Wikipedia and Skype. While the use of such sites has exploded in the last couple of years, it seems to have hardly reached the consciousness of many in development- with perhaps the exception of the increasing numbers of student volunteers blogging from internet cafes in buried corners of the developing world. Projecthonduras.com is actively using some of these technologies and looking towards spreading into new forums and web spaces in the future.

So why are people networking through projecthonduras.com?

My initial impression was that the website and forums were there to attract volunteers and match them with projects, and although that happens to a limited degree, it seems the main reasons people get involved in the network are for learning, sharing and raising awareness.

Frequently, when asked about the benefits of being part of projecthonduras.com, interviewees talked about how much they had learned from talking to others in the network, about mistakes avoided because they listened to someone who had already been there, and about learning where and how to get things done in a country where corruption and bureaucracy are the norm.

People also use the network to share not only knowledge but also actual resources. For example sharing shipping containers or storage space to reduce costs, finding specialist health services for specific cases, sharing already developed contracts and protocols with new organisations, matching the needs of one organisation with the resources of another. In Honduras and the world at large there has been significant criticism about the duplication of services, and of the lack of coordination between development organisations, and it seems possible that projecthonduras.com may have an answer to this.

Finally, the network is used in various ways to raise awareness. For example Individuals and organisations use it to let others know, 'hey, I'm here, this is what I'm doing'. On another level, the involvement of the ambassador and embassy staff at this years conference was seen by the organisers as a way of showing the new ambassador just how many different volunteer organisations are working in Honduras and just what they are capable of.

Another form of awareness raising being experimented with is Facebook, a social networking site initially set up for college students, and used largely for posting personal updates and interacting with friends. While most see it as a purely social activity, projecthonduras.com is joining a growing number of political, business and civil society groups who are beginning to see the powerful networking potential of

these sites. In the case of projecthonduras.com, the facebook groups are seen as a means of creating awareness of social justice issues in Honduras as well as opportunities to help. Even after a few months this has had results. While most participants in the network are established professionals, retirees and long-term volunteers, this year's conference was the first attended by some Honduran students; young, educated Hondurans who may never previously have considered volunteering.

While this all fits with the objective of finding the strengths, as I indicated earlier, it does not indicate that I have left the critic behind. Indeed, in asking the positive questions, it doesn't take long to also hear the other issues. For example language is easily identified as a problem- at this point the website is primarily in English, with only a few portions translated. Another issue is the dominance of Americans. Despite the diversity of participants, and despite starting as a diasporic group Americans now vastly outnumber Hondurans. The idea of mobilising people for change seems noble, yet there one wonders what say locals have in defining the goals, when for example there are clearly some for whom money rather than more people is their primary need. Clearly the diversity of organisations also means a diversity of practises, meaning that the network may in fact be supporting models of development that have more in common with conventional development methods. There are also issues of power related to the involvement of American government agents (particularly in the context of Latin America), and also of access including access to technology. These were key concerns I had going into the research. However from the early interviews it is clear that these issues are in fact known to and acknowledged by key participants in the network, and discussion is underway as to how these may be addressed. I will be following these discussions closely over the next year or two. As far as practical I am also open to the possibility of becoming involved in some form of action research to order to address these concerns in a constructive and positive manner.

Networking, the use of ICT and the mobilisation of people over capital are all very 21st century ideas, and they certainly appear to have the potential to provide an alternative to conventional approaches. While there may be some individual organisations within the projecthonduras.com network are doing the same old things that development academics have criticised for years, there is already some indication within this research that by providing a structure for networking, projecthonduras.com may well be providing an alternative form- not so much of 'doing' development but of managing it.

Rahnema (1997, p. 394) argues that "*the post-development period will distinguish itself from the preceding one if it is able to bring about the 'good, the compassionate and the authoritative'- if the (good people) everywhere cultivate new relationships of friendship, and thereby discover themselves and each other, and learn the arts of listening and being attentive (i.e. to attend) to each other.*"

As the founder of the projecthonduras.com told me, the aim of the network at it's simplest, is to get people talking. The value of the network could well be in it's ability to bring people together, to learn from each other and to cultivate those relationships which could indeed be the herald of a more positive and hopeful future.

References

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