

Reflections on a small country in turmoil
Don Leonard, RESD 2003

“Freedom Aflame.” “Reaping the Whirlwind.” “Are the Andes Unraveling?” These were the taglines for a June 2005 NEWSWEEK article that I was reading on a recent bus trip to the city just before my one year “in-country” anniversary with the Peace Corps. Accompanied by photo art of riot police silhouetted by burning flames and the bowed head of Bolivia’s most recently deposed President, the article asks readers to consider whether the June 2005 civil unrest sparked by questions surrounding the ownership of Bolivia’s energy resources represents a crisis of democracy, here and in Latin America at large.

Well, does it? I suppose it depends on what your idea of democracy is. Bolivia is a society divided. If you are a mid-to-upper class urbanite your interests usually lie with national stability and the enforcement of rule of law, in which case Bolivian democracy seems to be up a creek without a paddle. If you are a subsistence farmer living below the poverty line in the Mizque valley, where I live, your interpretation of current events and the meaning of democracy may vary a bit.

A teacher for the aristocratic “American School” in La Paz, a prep school for the children of expatriates and Bolivian elites, recently told me that several of his Bolivian high school students, when put the question of how to deal with the poverty in their country, responded by suggesting that impoverished rural areas be “nuked”. This is clearly a grotesque exaggeration of the real anger and frustration that most middle and upper-class “haves” feel towards the social disruptions of some of Bolivia’s “have-nots”; especially those who are organized by Evo Morales—Bolivian indigenous leader, congressman and Presidential candidate of the MAS (Movement Towards Socialism) Party. For those in the political free-fire zone of La Paz/EI Alto and other urban areas, the civil unrest, the turnover of presidents and the transportation disruptions caused by this segment of the indigenous movement are 100% pure bad.

Watching Bolivia from a bench in the plaza of my pueblo on market day, the calculus is a bit more complex. On this day *Campesino* farmers from the surrounding countryside come to sell enough of their crop to keep themselves and their family hovering around the United Nations’ \$2 per day poverty line. The revenues from a good day of selling can leave a bit of money left for a strip of cow fat that gives meat flavor to the vegetable broth that they will eat most the week, a bag of bread, and maybe some batteries for the transistor radios that they sling around the neck for the long walk back to their farms. Put simply, given the choice between lower prices for cooking gas and transportation or increased foreign exchange currency for Bolivia’s current account, the 63% of the population located below the poverty line will generally vote to keep South America’s second-largest gas field for Bolivians.

To be sure, the blockades and civil unrest organized by Evo’s MAS party hurt both sides. City dwellers and pueblo elites will be the first to point out that by leaving their farms to attend to national transportation shutdowns, *campesino* farmers are only neglecting their crop and hindering their ability to bring their goods to market. By depriving the national government of revenue-generating exports, the government coffers to be used for the implementation of Bolivia’s impressive but ill-enforced social laws (such as those which make provisions for access to education and health care) ultimately weaken those government programs which are essential to providing a higher quality of life and greater social mobility for those who live in the rural areas. And had it not been for the technological

assistance of “evil” multinationals, Bolivia’s gas fields would have remained undiscovered under the earthen bosom of *Pacha Mama*. But for the *campesinos* of the Mizque valley most of the glimpses of progress that they have seen after successive decades of political promises come from weekly trips into the pueblo, where the arrival of television and DVD has brought with it a flood of images that depict different ways of living and create new expectations. Media containing Latin pop culture, images of luxurious lifestyles depicted by Mexican and Brazilian soap operas, and a Bolivian national news service which merely serves as a showcase for how the “other half” lives have, for Bolivia’s indigenous groups, reinforced an existing impatience with the “trickle” promised by free market advocates. For these groups, access to social services and affordable basic goods such as gas and water makes for a much greater democratic imperative.

Whose vision of democracy is right? National elections in December will determine whether Evo’s MAS party is able to sell its “have not” agenda to a political majority, uniting enough of Bolivia’s indigenous groups to form a government. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, the historical long-view tells me that something very special is happening among the indigenous peoples of Bolivia. At the most recent swearing-in ceremony for new volunteers the US Ambassador to Bolivia reminded us to be patient with our home away from home and remember the unique place the country is at in its social history. You see, forced labor (slavery) wasn’t traded in for universal suffrage (a political voice) until 1952 for Bolivia’s indigenous majority. This is a democracy in its infancy.

Knowing the story of how it came to be that one of South America’s richest areas in terms of natural resources was forced to pillage itself, often at gunpoint, by colonial and capitalist interests, it comes as no surprise to me that indigenous leaders are quick to bring the colonial past into the present tense when the question of who owns Bolivia’s national energy resources comes up. Bolivia’s vibrant but threatened indigenous culture, currently estimated to be 56-70% of total population, remembers colonialism and the subsequent extraction (theft) of Bolivia’s natural resources. The vast differences between the few rich and the many poor, revealed in social indicators (Gini index of income inequality, infant mortality, literacy, etc...), as well as the lingering social discrimination that is visible from my bench on the plaza, tell me that the symptoms of “Colonial Hangover” are ever-present. One could certainly question the choice of blockades as a tactic, and the wisdom of subsequent calls for the expulsion of transnational corporations and nationalization of public resources and services. But to me the most remarkable thing about living through these interesting times is that, for the first time since their colonization 500 years ago, Bolivia’s indigenous groups have found a political voice. If that’s not democracy, I don’t know what is.

So how do these social upheavals affect the life of a humble Peace Corps volunteer tucked away in the fertile valleys of Cochabamba? Not very much, you’ll be happy to know. The vast majority of anti-Americanism occurs in the poor suburbs of the capital city of La Paz and in the coca-growing region of the Chapare. Peace Corps recognizes this and does not place any volunteers in these social battle-grounds. Living in a “bread basket” valley, for me the blockades are a mere inconvenience—canceling excursions and briefly limiting the flow of essential goods like toilet paper and beer. And while the disruption of national transportation networks certainly hampers some objectives of my primary project, Community Tourism, there is still plenty of work to be done in demonstrating to Bolivians the value of their own rich history and natural beauty. After all, the archaeological sites and towering waterfall of Mizque belong first and foremost to *Mizqueños*. The gringos can come later.

My work on the Community Tourism project entails visiting surrounding communities which have some type of tourist attraction to offer (archaeological sites, nature excursions, cultural exchanges, etc...) and helping them plan for the development and protection of their resource, development and improvement of tourism services (hostels, restaurants, guides, etc.), as well as working with the municipal government to develop a planning document and promotional materials. Apart from my primary project in Community Tourism I am also working with a group of Artisans in a nearby community called K'uri to help them turn their traditional wool weavings into a new source of income. Finally, I have become involved in a community project to create a library that will service the 3,000 persons that live in my pueblo, as well as those from the outlying communities that visit the pueblo on market day. I am particularly excited by the prospect of creating a collection of reference and multimedia resources for the school teachers of the municipality. In all, these teachers service approximately 1,600 students in the region. Often working with ten year-old texts and little to no access to documentary video materials, such a collection could have a tremendous impact on the quality of instruction offered by this ever-resourceful team of faculty. As is, even the best and the brightest of Mizque's students are rarely able to pass University entrance exams without long and costly prep-courses in the city.

Lastly, for those who have an interest in big-d Development I have accumulated some observations about the great endeavor during my short time in the "developing world":

1. There is dignity in poverty. Despite the obvious disadvantages in terms of access to education and health care, as well as the general sense of vulnerability to crises that impoverished families endure, the people who live below the \$2 per day marker often have lives filled with warmth and laughter. Imagine if you will the faces of grandmothers, parents and children lit by the glow of a small fire as they huddle alongside their small adobe house and watch the sun go down on the same Andean mountains that their ancestors have eked a living out of for centuries. Imagine the smiles as they share the stories of the day...how the bulls got loose and dragged the boy across the field for 10 minutes...and then explain to me the term "underdeveloped".
2. Process matters. There are two kinds of development assistance that I have seen: that which empowers families and communities with the capacity and resources to develop themselves, and that which reinforces a culture of powerlessness and dependency. Fly-by-night development passes through our valley daily as NGOs armed with a fat checkbook, the latest sexy development model and a lot of good intentions enter into communities, decide for the community what is needed, and execute projects which don't make time for either meaningful community participation or an honest assessment of long-term feasibility/sustainability. Mizque's communities are littered with latrines, micro-enterprise incubators and water systems that have fallen into disrepair because the communities weren't fully onboard and project managers didn't have the inclination or the time to ensure that projects were executed in a manner that *truly* gave ownership to the local community.

3. Universities rock! In nearly every aspect of municipal development planning in Mizque, community leaders draw upon and benefit from the knowledge of the regional public university. Additionally, in Bolivia the majority of post-secondary professional programs require a fifth year practicum, whereby students take their studies into the field and apply them in a community that is in need of technical assistance. Often supported financially by international organizations, these student interns are responsible for an amazing amount of “technology transfer” in areas ranging from improved agricultural production to the creation of local media programs that showcase local culture.
4. Decentralization matters. The number-one reason why national governments and NGOs are reluctant to transfer resources and decision-making to local actors is the belief that they aren't equipped with the capacity to manage projects. This is changing in Bolivia with the gradual implementation of the Law of Popular Participation, which transferred real budgetary and decision-making power to local governments. To see a Bolivian municipal government in a rural area struggling to execute an annual development plan, all the while learning from mistakes and responding to the demands of their constituents, is to see true development in action. In the end, it seems to me, the advantage of local knowledge makes their learning curve no steeper than that of an outside development organization armed with PhDs and theoretical models.
5. Capacity-building is better than bridge-building. Whether you are talking about courses in water systems maintenance or self-esteem workshops for expectant mothers, the positive impact of a dollar spent on development activities that focus on the realization of human potential easily outweighs the benefits yielded by a multi-million dollar World Bank infrastructure project. That being said...
6. There is no single panacea for the kinds of challenges faced by development organizations and the communities they serve. It is meaningless to act on education without providing the kinds of economic incentives required to justify children taking time away from manual labor. If basic needs like nutrition and health care are not meaningfully addressed first, any other endeavor ends before it begins. Development is a holistic process requiring many actors working on many fronts to insure that all boats rise in such a way that projects reinforces one-another.

The past year has been marked with difficult learning experiences and rewarding moments of understanding between my Bolivian neighbors and me. It continues to be difficult to be so far away from the country and the people that I care about so much, all the while coping with barriers of language, culture, and the adjustments of “third world” living. But as I recently told a group of arriving volunteers, for me the opportunity to observe and be a part of such a unique and culturally rich community makes my Peace Corps service by far the most selfish thing I've ever done.

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