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Globalization and Local Structure”

Information, Consultation and Participation in the Implementation of International Development Projects. An Analysis of the Plan Puebla-Panama

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Abstract

The Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP) is a development project to economically tie eight southern states of Mexico with the seven countries of Central America. The PPP will invest millions of dollars primarily in physical infrastructure, highways, ports, and electric interconnections among countries. However, this mega project also anticipates investment in human and sustainable development and natural disaster relief. Though due to the project's nature, it is facing increasing public opposition, particularly in the south of Mexico. This part of the world, also known as the Mesoamerican region, is nearly 375,000 square miles and has 64 million inhabitants. While the Mesoamerican region is rich in terms of culture and biodiversity (10% of world's biodiversity), its development indicators lag behind the rest of Latin America. Mired in crushing poverty amidst biological splendor, infant mortality in Chiapas and Oaxaca is twice that of Mexico City. In southern Mexico, illiteracy is the highest of the country and the life span is eight years less than the national norm.

Despite the fact that participation and consultations with civil society and public information are key elements in the plan and there are verbal and written commitments from the Inter-American Development Bank and the PPP's executive committee, representatives from governments, civil society, and international organizations have acknowledged that a major problem with the PPP is the lack of a participation plan. For this reason, this research seeks to analyze the PPP's process and development, which now is being executed in the Mesoamerican region. The motivation for this research is to identify whether or not citizen participation through local and regional structures are playing a leading role in auditing the PPP's costs and benefits. If so, are local structures capable of influencing globalization in the highly conflicted region of Mesoamerica. In order to achieve this goal, I have been doing research in Tulane University and the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean from the United Nations in its sub regional office in Mexico City during the year 2002. I have also been using perception audit research technique (PA) and interviewing people from the governments, civil society, private sector, and international agencies that have direct relation with the PPP. As it is frequently difficult to allocate the time and resources necessary for detailed community surveys and in-depth studies, I have been using perception audit (PA) through key informant interviews as a reliable method of social data collection.

My project is motivated by two preliminary questions: What are the social and political implications of globalization in a highly conflicted region such a Mesoamerica? What is the relevance, role or function of participation and consultation through local structures in the development of international projects, which face public opposition? These questions

illustrate the importance of studying the PPP and how it deals with public opposition in southern Mexico and in Central America. Public opposition to the PPP in Mesoamerica presents unique and valuable opportunity to gain insight information to understand the relationship between local structures and globalization. The following facts illustrate this: **(1)** Southern Mexico is the first step to go prior to seven more countries in Central America, **(2)** Southern Mexico is a focus of strong social movements and the cradle of EZLN and the Subcomandante Marcos, and **(3)** Southern Mexico and some countries in Central America have the worst social and economic indicators in the continent, even though it holds 10% of world's biodiversity. Thus, the first phase of the PPP may be highly controversial due to socioeconomic conditions and active social and political mobilization.

This research includes key information from the place where the PPP is coordinated and the place where is being executed. This research has identified significant consistencies and inconsistencies, cost and benefits regarding the PPP; likewise, similar topics and consensus opinions regarding the probability of certain types of issues and crisis around the PPP. Social capital, local structures, and general assumptions about public opposition and anti globalization movements and what will be the best way to overcome them are also part of this work.

Participation and information is a resource in any strategic plan. Recent work by sociologist K. KUMAR has emphasized the importance of participation and consultation and information to understand recent controversies concerning the development of economic projects and the accompanying expressions of public distrust. It is considered that public opposition in terms of distrust has deep roots in the lack of information, participation, and consultation with the society, which highlights a lack of planning. Prior to suffering their first major crisis, few organizations invest the time and financial resources necessary to take a hard look at their own vulnerabilities except as legally required. Furthermore, policy makers from international organizations such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank have taken on board the conclusions, from studies of public understanding, that information and public participation and consultation are key elements to develop any kind of project. Participation and information flows play a key role in the relations between government, commerce, regulatory agencies, and activist groups. Consequently, poor dissemination information and lack of participation play a dramatic role in the rapid spread of public concerns and citizen mobilization across national and international boundaries.

Keywords: Consultation, international development projects, participation, perceptions audit (PA), plan Puebla-Panama