NGOs, Institutions, and Development in Guatemala

In the spring of 2009 I began discussing the possibilities of an independent study research project with Professor Brad Barham. My idea was to research how non-governmental organizations (NGOs) can affect development. I have been very fortunate to have two experiences previously volunteering with NGOs in Panama and Guatemala. These experiences and the classes on development that I had taken here at UW-Madison left me excited about the potential of NGOs and with a lot of questions about the ways in which they operate and the effects they have.

I began researching the role of NGOs on development and thinking about NGO operations in Guatemala specifically. Using the framework of a few academic writings about the role of institutions and development I began to form my research questions: What is the role of NGOs in development? How do NGO and governmental interactions and collaborations affect the institutional atmosphere of the society? Can NGOs fulfill institutional roles, and in doing so can NGOs positively affect development? And, what special contextual considerations affect NGO and government development initiatives in Guatemala?

The LACIS Undergraduate Internship Grant allowed me to fund a trip to the Western highlands area of Guatemala over winter break 2010. Before my trip I made some connections with NGO directors in this area. I made plans to interview and observe them and the work that they do. While I was in Guatemala I interviewed 6 different
individuals, all of whom were directors or employees of 3 different NGOs operating in this area of Guatemala. The experience was challenging and rewarding.

Guatemala is a beautiful country, and on the ride through the mountains as I entered the city I was nervous and excited. I was looking forward to using my Spanish language skills in a semi-professional setting. I was excited about what I would learn. However, I was also nervous about independently conducting this project; I had never done interviewing or first hand research before.

I was blown away by the directors I met and their dedication to the work that they do. These organizations ran health clinics, connected volunteers with NGOs, provided educational workshops for women and young girls about technology use, supported economic endeavors of various communities, and so much more. Each director and employee had their own personal reasons for doing this work and their own philosophy on what this work meant. The conversations I was privileged to take part of were infinitely interesting.

This was a valuable opportunity for me to initiate a project on my own. While I was in Guatemala I became more confident in my language skills and I learned a lot about NGOs and the ways they work in this area of Guatemala. Through continued research over the spring semester I have been able to draw some conclusions of my research based off of my experiences in Guatemala with these NGOs. First of all, I saw that these NGOs did have positive affects on the people they serve, but that perhaps their most important roles are as advocates, educators, and supporters of local initiatives. I saw that these NGOs do serve some of the functions of institutions – they provide people with
opportunities and incentives to invest, they support social infrastructure, and they can promote sustainable projects for local communities.

The LACIS grant allowed me to see first hand how NGOs operate. Instead of simply reading about these functions in a book, I was able to witness them and to attach personal examples to my conclusions. It was a wonderful experience. Thank you!