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Background

For 30 years, the Q'eqchi' and Mopan Maya people of Southern Belize struggled with the Belizean government to attain rights to their ancestral lands. 39 villages scattered throughout the vast tropical forests of Toledo District worked together, bringing their case all the way to the Caribbean Court of Justice, which acknowledged communal Maya ownership of the land in 2015. The interpretation of the court's ruling and ongoing legal issues will continue to play out for years to come; however, now that a major victory has been won, the Maya people have the chance to determine how to care for their land and provide for future generations.

The Maya Leaders Alliance and Toledo Alcaldes Association (a group of 78 traditional leaders) are pursuing the idea of creating a Maya economy that is birthed from within the Maya people and allows them to retain authority over their lands, their natural resources and their livelihoods. It is within this space that we, Adriana Arce, Julia Fair and Erin Ntalo, University of Minnesota Master of Development Practice students, joined with MLA and TAA in June and July of 2017 to research economic development from two angles.

We first sought to understand the local context of development work in Toledo District among Maya people, and in Belize through informational interviews with both Maya and non-Maya-led small businesses, NGOs, cooperatives, communities and institutions. We also wanted to understand different ways indigenous groups around the world have developed their own economic models with a specific focus on governance strategies, successes and challenges. We presented our findings to the MLA and TAA, applying the findings from our international economic development case studies to the local context.

Methods

Our team received an initial project proposal from the Maya Leaders Alliance in the fall of 2016. The proposal was crafted in a specific space and time, circumstances which had changed by the time we began actively planning for our project in the spring and again by the time we arrived in Belize in late May. The basic intent of the project was intact, but due to the natural evolution of on-the-ground realities, our team had to reframe the purpose of our work when we arrived and come up with appropriate activities for the two months we had allocated for research.

One of the drivers behind the reframing of our project was the ongoing and updated thought processes of the leaders of the movement. We spent time with them and with our faculty advisor trying to understand the evolution in their thinking and to capture what research would be most

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helpful to them. After all, our project was intended to be the mere starting point for a more significant body of work that would be largely undertaken by the Maya people and their leaders.

Through our initial meetings, we came to understand that there were three research questions surfacing among the leadership that needed answers before they could move forward in planning economic development initiatives with the Maya communities. The questions were centered on establishing a body of contextual knowledge that was international, regional and local. At first, the questions were conceived of as requiring academic research; however, we determined that it would be more useful for us to do both academic research and interviews with local stakeholders to fully understand the context we were working within. We reframed the task as follows.

Provide answers to three key questions through academic research and informational interviews:

- A. What are successful indigenous economic models and how are they governed?
- B. What do we mean by “development vision”?
- C. What is the local context in which we are trying to do development?

With these questions as our guide, and with the assistance of our faculty advisor who was in-country with us for one week, we crafted a revised proposal of our work, including a detailed schedule of the activities that would occupy us each day. We spent several days in a retreat-style setting talking through ideas for what we could do, structuring a final report to be delivered at the end of our research, and mapping out milestones. Dissatisfied with the idea of doing desk research after having traveled all the way to Belize, we discussed ideas for how to make more of our time on-the-ground and we landed on *aventuras*. *Aventuras*, “adventures” in Spanish, were suggested by our professor as half-day fun activities that would allow us to engage locally. Initially, they were intended to be solely fun activities with no purpose other than our own amusement, but we were eventually able to tie them into the project proposal by suggesting that we focus on interviews with local businesses, NGOs and Maya and non-Maya led initiatives that could help us understand our project better. We called this revised concept “educational outings”. In this same manner, we brought several other seemingly disparate pieces of the project together and wove them into a proposal that flowed from beginning to end.

We presented our revised project proposal to our client and it was well received. The next step was to get ideas for the educational outings; after all, none of us was familiar with the context of Punta Gorda town where we lived, nor of Toledo District. At the following week’s MLA staff meeting, we appealed to the staff for ideas of people and institutions to visit to establish a contextual understanding of economic development in Toledo District. We passed out slips of paper on which staff wrote their ideas. After a few minutes, we collected the papers, which we later sorted and prioritized. Ideas ranged from individual thatch roof makers to women’s craft groups to conservation NGOs. We set about contacting each to arrange an interview. Organizations based in Punta Gorda received an email, though many did not respond and we

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had to visit their offices instead. Maya businesses and associations received a letter introducing us and the purpose of our work, and explaining what we hoped to gain from interviewing. MLA staff reviewed the letters to ensure we were communicating clearly and that our research was properly situated in the larger context of their current work. Lacking a village postal service, we sent the letters with *alcaldes*, village chiefs. We called to confirm the letters had been received and the suggested time of the interview worked.

Our next task was to generate interview questions. The interviews were intended to be informal, conversation-style interviews, but we prepared questions so we would not forget important points and so that we had a guide in case the conversation was strained. Our first interview was stilted at the beginning and we learned a few important lessons; we revised subsequent interview questions accordingly. Instead of launching straight into our prepared questions, we learned we needed to:

- Begin with an introduction of ourselves and our work
- Provide any relevant context to the interview
- Start by asking the name and position of the person we were talking to

In addition to revising our questions for a smoother interview, we reviewed each set of questions the day before an interview to update them according to what we had learned since the initial draft. Toward the end of our thirteen interviews, the revisions were significant and the interviews more effective at gathering important information. This served to demonstrate the positive effect of spending time in a place and developing a broad contextual understanding. We also made sure to end each interview by asking the interviewee for recommendations of others we should meet. We were aware that the MLA staff had a specific circle of acquaintances that was limited to their experience and that others would be able to recommend from their own circles, expanding our pool of ideas.

Throughout the two months we worked with the Maya Leaders Alliance and Toledo Alcaldes Association, we found that it was necessary to constantly revise and renegotiate our project, both in light of what we learned along the way, and in light of the ongoing work of MLA. At the beginning, we felt lost. The initial proposal seemed moot and our client too busy to give us new orders. Instead of waiting for our client to propose a revised project, we took it upon ourselves to make revisions with our limited contextual understanding. We brought our revised proposal to the client for input and feedback, rather than asking them to co-create a new proposal. By doing so, it sped the process of establishing our day-to-day activities and demonstrated to the client that we were capable of planning and moving forward independently.

The revised proposal was not perfect, though, and we often struggled to make confident decisions with less information than would have been ideal. Many times during our research, the MLA staff was faced with heavy demands in their work and they were not available to give timely feedback. We learned to make firm decisions and revise as we went. Naturally, our continually-growing understanding of context changed over time and reshaped the project.

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Our other struggle was wondering if our work was significant and if it would be useful in the future. We resisted the idea of doing work for work's sake and wanted to ensure that our time was well spent. While there was not one solution, there were a few strategies we employed to make our work useful. First, we listened carefully to the way the staff presented our work to others. We locked onto their key words and made sure to understand them and adopt them into the way we spoke about our work. Second, we made a point to check in with our immediate supervisor at least once weekly. This allowed us to ask questions and double check our understanding of specific parts of the project. The third tactic we employed was to speak confidently about our work despite residual doubts. The more we interviewed Maya businesses and associations—which came toward the end of our time because of the difficulty of scheduling—the more word was spread about our work and what would come out of it in the future. Of course, we were not in control of the future of the economic development work, but the more people that knew about it, the more there would be accountability and expectation for it to continue.

Findings

The following economic models are alternatives to mainstream, Western, capitalist economics. These alternatives may be useful to the Maya people as they contemplate how to structure their own economy. Theoretical definitions and governance structures are given, followed by case studies that elaborate on the practical successes, failures and challenges of each model. Applications to the Maya context are included after each case study.

Cooperatives and Economic Development Corporations

Cooperatives are businesses that are owned and run by and for their members. They are an independent association of people who work together voluntarily to meet shared economic, social, and cultural needs and goals through a communally owned and democratically-controlled enterprise (International Cooperative Alliance).

All cooperatives work under the following principles:

1. Voluntary and Open Membership
2. Democratic Member Control
3. Member Economic Participation
4. Autonomy and Independence
5. Education, Training, and Information
6. Co-operation among Co-operatives
7. Concern for Community

There are a variety of types of cooperatives, but there are five main types of cooperatives and they are: consumer, producer, worker, purchasing, and hybrid. Also included under the umbrella of cooperatives are: credit unions, housing, and social cooperatives.

The strength of cooperatives are that they exist and operates for the benefit of its members and as members are also owners with financial interests in the enterprise, they typically provide full

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support to the cooperative. Members also have a voice in the control of the enterprise and therefore supply the types of services desired by its members.

However, cooperatives share the same weaknesses as other democratic organizations in that the manager is responsible to the group of members which limits flexibility. It also means that unlike commercial business operators that are primarily concerned with profit, cooperatives are concerned with retaining membership.

Economic Development Corporations

An economic development corporation (EDC) is typically a non-profit corporation that is designed to foster economic development. Most frequently, EDCs are established to help existing and/or new enterprises through grants, loans, provision of information and expertise, and more. One common type of EDC is an incubator. They are generally established to assist new businesses typically within economies that are depressed or deteriorating or to assist existing businesses in those same economies. Incubators provide low-interest loans, equipment, clerical and technical services, etc. to support businesses within communities experiencing economic deterioration.

EDCs focus on the economic and social benefits provided the communities where they operate. They provide a critical source of employment for community members. They also provide assistance beyond employment support including drawing investment interest into the community, supporting small business owners within the community, and by mentoring and providing financial assistance to businesses (Canadian Council for Aboriginal Business).

While EDCs provide employment opportunities, this also presents a challenge with regard to training and maintaining employees. Employee-related matters are one of the biggest challenges facing EDCs and as a result, more investments are placed into hiring new employees and developing and training new employees. With larger organizations, the challenge to find qualified employees (especially in smaller communities) grows.

Social Enterprise & Ecotourism

Business ventures that pursue multiple goals, usually people, profit and planet (a “triple bottom line”). A social enterprise can also include cultural or spiritual goals. Enterprises are typically privately owned by one person, a family, or several partners and have a Chief Executive Officer responsible for all final decisions.

While not an economic model, ecotourism is a business activity that is already happening among the Maya people of Southern Belize and is likely to grow in importance. Ecotourism is an activity that generates economic and social benefits for local communities, as well as an alternative to other less sustainable practices of land use in natural ecosystems. Community-based tourism is a type of tourism in which the community manages and receives most of the benefits from tourism.

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Samoa case study: 'ie toga and coconut oil soap

Cahn (2008) studied two businesses being practiced by rural Samoans, the weaving of fine mats, called 'ie toga, and the production of soap from coconut oil. In addition to documenting the challenges of the businesses, Cahn concluded that, for an enterprise to be successful among indigenous Samoans, it must be consistent with fa'aSamoa, the Samoan way of life.

In rural Samoa, there are several challenges that make modern Western-style business models fail. Traditional society is structured into family groups that have intense rivalries over social status. In addition, there are social constraints that discourage innovation and flaunting oneself. As a result of these aspects of fa'aSamoa, copycatting is a major problem in business. There is too much competition because markets are flooded with too many of the same products.

Another aspect of fa'aSamoa that contradicts Western business principles is the way Samoans view saving. Samoans save food items and their finest 'ie toga under their beds and they count on reciprocal charity from family and friends in times of need. In the West, on the other hand, business owners are encouraged to save money in a bank account to reinvest in the business or for lean times. Fa'aSamoa prioritizes gift-giving, helping family and redistributing extra money over saving and reinvesting cash, which means businesses are slow to grow and owners do not have a lot of cash on hand for times of scarcity.

Additionally, fa'aSamoa includes obligations to family, church and community, like weddings, burials, community work and meetings. These priorities are central to the life of the community and are taken very seriously. They supersede business priorities like customer service or standard operating hours, which are fundamental principles of the Western business model. Ultimately, Cahn determined that finding ways to incorporate cultural traditions is key to success for rural Samoan businesses.

It should be of no surprise that the example Cahn gives of a successful Samoan social enterprise is the weaving of traditional fine mats. 'ie toga are large mats handmade from products collected in the forest. They are unique and highly-prized locally for their beauty and their use in ceremony. Foreigners like them, too, for their decorative qualities. There are many benefits to the 'ie toga business and reasons for its success in rural Samoa:

- Revival of a nearly-lost art
- Unique and highly prized item locally for its use in ceremony
- Low startup costs because products are abundant in the forest and it requires no equipment/machinery
- Allows women to practice cultural tradition; women have a place in earning income for the family
- Enhances a traditional skill, which is seen as a value by the community
- Easy to stop and start work in order to attend to family/community obligations
- Activity is not counter to culture or shameful for people doing it; approved-of by elders

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and in line with social/gender norms

Coconut production has been key in subsistence living within Samoa, but recently, there has been a decline with commercial coconut production due to a combination of factors including global price drops for coconut products. An NGO, METI saw an opportunity to utilize the coconuts for to make a value-added product, soap. Four community co-operatives were established by METI to produce pure coconut oil to be used in the soap. The members of the co-operatives in the villages sell coconuts from their family farms to METI and this provides an important income-generating function for families. People paid according to the weight of the oil produced and the amount that METI pays villagers for their oil is higher than they are able to receive from other markets. Presently, the co-operative funds the tools to produce the oil, but villagers are expected to purchase them in the future.

However, many of the cooperatives faced challenges and found it difficult to balance family, social, and cultural obligations with the business activities. There has also been challenges with recruiting and retaining cooperative members. While there are traditional land systems that provide access to subsistence farming for all village members, and that there are plentiful coconuts, control over the land and crop harvest is held by those in authority including matai, males, and elders. As a result of the existing power structures, some community members are unable to guarantee regular supply of coconuts to the cooperative and therefore, are unable to join the cooperative. The lack of cultural connection with the soap production combined with the uneven labor distribution in coconut harvesting (as a result of power structure), has led to decreases in motivation to harvest coconuts. This has led to a decrease in overall oil production so this endeavor is not sustainable.

There are clear tensions between the structure of this cooperative and Samoan culture. Having all members be equal does not suit traditional Samoan power structures which are based on hierarchy where priority is given to males, elders, and chiefs.

Application to the Maya context

- Maya women make many handicrafts, some of which are also prized locally for their traditional value, such as cuxtals and jippi jappa baskets. Currently, women compete with each other by making the same crafts, rather than cooperating and specializing.
- Members of Marigold Women's Cooperative mentioned that there have been issues with retaining and inviting members to join.
- Marigold Women's Cooperative referenced that family obligations make it impossible to travel to sell crafts outside of Indian Creek.
- Rio Blanco, Toledo Cacao Growers Association, Marigold Women's Cooperative, and Laguna Homestay all are offering services or making products that are tied to Maya culture.

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Final Thoughts

From our experiences, we have learned the process of writing a proposal for a client and in doing so, leading successfully from an inferior position. Our work with Maya Leaders Alliance provided us with skills in working for an incredibly busy organization and with this, how to make critical project decisions with less input than we desired. In building our understanding of local context, we built up our skills in interview conducting and how to go about developing contextual understanding quickly.

Within the context-building research, finding multiple appropriate and relevant case studies was the most difficult part. In the future, to develop a more clear and complete contextual understanding and compilation of case studies, research needs to begin earlier than we were able to. We found that the case studies were the most helpful component of the economic model and context research. Presenting the research as the history of the model and the definition were not as meaningful or relevant.

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