

Where the Rhetoric Meets the Road: Collaborative Teaching and Learning in a Participatory, Sustainable Mountain Development Initiative in Northern Mexico¹

Emilia González-Clements,² Ph.D.

Abstract

The Carranza-Casillas Sustainable Mountain Development Initiative, sponsored by a private agency from Oregon, aims to build capacity of villagers in a river valley in Northern Mexico by providing training and financial, technical, and research support for their endeavors. The people share a history of exploration, conquest, colonization, migration, independence, hacienda, revolution, agrarian reform, modernization, privatization, and globalization. This article describes the exchange of teaching and learning between U.S. volunteers and local partners that builds on over twenty years of continuous mutual involvement from academic research to small participatory development projects. Participation and sustainability are development approaches that have emerged in the last few decades, which have a rich and constantly expanding literature—the rhetoric. When the rhetoric meets the road—collaborative planning in the field setting—process and content are highlighted, along with insights from research and application. [sustainable development, participatory research, technical support, Mexico]

Introduction

This article describes the current mutual teaching-and-learning stage of long-term research and action in rural Northern Mexico sponsored by the Fifth Sun Development Fund (FSDF),³ an Oregon-based private agency. FSDF works with the villages of Carranza and Casillas⁴ in Nuevo León, building on more than twenty years of continuous involvement in the area, from graduate academic research to small participatory development projects. The Carranza-Casillas Sustainable Mountain Development Initiative (SMDI) involves a valley that shares a history of exploration, conquest, colonization, migration, independence, hacienda, revolution, agrarian reform, modernization, privatization and globalization. The main economic products are avocados and kid goats for the regional market and pecans for export. Most families continue to struggle for land and livelihood and face insecurities in resources, basic needs, infrastructure, and development assistance. The overarching goal of the SMDI is to build the capacity of local small producers to improve their quality of life and to provide financial, technical and research support for their endeavors.

There is a rich and constantly expanding literature on development, development approaches, development planning, training for development, and project planning –“the

rhetoric.” What happens when the rhetoric meets “the road,” i.e., collaborative planning in the field? Guided by the rhetoric, full of good intentions, and armed with scientific concepts such as sustainability, the United States team members collaborate with local actors to plan economic development strategies. Before any of the rhetoric can be put into practice; however, the *Noreteamericanos* and the *Mexicanos* engage in crucial mutual teaching and learning. This article highlights the process and content of our mutual endeavor and presents insights that will enhance the initiative. Following a description of the research setting, I briefly discuss the recent development approaches and global framework that guide FSDF efforts—the rhetoric. I then outline the challenges of counterpart selection, collaborative planning, project design, and conceptual misunderstandings—the road. Finally, I discuss the research, teaching, and learning that form a major part of our initiative and present some insights for development planning from academic research and field experience.

Anthropology and Development

The SMDI is a participatory sustainable development initiative. Development is planned change, defined by Sanford as “conscious pursuit of certain objectives with a view to increasing welfare” (Sanford 1983:4 cited in van Willigen 2002:66). Development anthropology, which

emerged in the 1970s, is described by Little as "the study of development problems (e.g., poverty, environmental degradation, and hunger) and the application of anthropological knowledge toward their solution...a field of both study and application" (2005:33). van Willigen defines participatory development as "...a process in which the individuals and groups of a community work together on problems that they see as important in order to benefit their lives in some way." He argues that a trained practitioner "...may be useful for increasing the rate of development activity, reducing internal conflict and expanding the resource base" (2002:65).

The concept of sustainability was introduced in the Brundtland Report: "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987:43). McCabe (2003) introduced a group of papers discussing the relevance of sustainability for development anthropologists in which Frutkin and Mearns define sustainability as "the ability of a people to defend and preserve its way of life" (2003:113). Stone noted that "cultural complexity, persistence and change that are the hallmarks of anthropological approaches to sustainability" (2003:98). Anthropologists may have entered the debate on sustainability recently but with our "...unique perspective and unparalleled knowledge of peoples and localities..." we can make "...a significant contribution...that gives voice to and collaborates with the people we study" (McCabe 2003:92).

SMDI uses a range of participatory approaches, including Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA) (Chambers 1997). Projects are designed with the "new synthesis" in applied anthropology: local knowledge, participation, empowerment, critical consciousness, and sustainability (van Willigen 2002:44). Most importantly, the work depends on the participation of two local community project directors, and upon a multi-strand capacity building approach, using ideas from many disciplines. (See van Willigen 2002:65-75 and Little 2005:33-59 for an overview of changes in development theory and practice. Refer to

Chambers (1997) for a detailed explanation of the development of certain participatory approaches.)

The Rhetoric: Development Approaches and Global Frameworks

FSDF follows four global research and action frameworks (1) Agenda 21, (2) the Millennium Development Goals, (3) the World Summit on Sustainable Development's "new development agenda," and (4) the Sustainable Mountain Development research agenda. Agenda 21 is the action plan resulting from the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Keating 1993). According to Hettne, UNCED, also known as "the Rio Conference", introduced the principle of sustainability and a new emphasis on "perspectives of the excluded" (1995:xi-xiii). FSDF began its work based on Agenda 21, especially Chapter 13—"Protecting Fragile Mountain Ecosystems" and Chapter 14—"Promoting Sustainable Agriculture and Rural Development." FSDF used its expertise in social and technical assistance, including training for participation, and value-added products processing for economic development planning to establish a United States-local team and to identify potential natural resources suitable for marketing.

After UNCED, interest and concern in participation and sustainable development became mainstream, resulting in myriad publications from global policy to training manuals for beneficiaries. Global frameworks for research and action evolved and became more specific. One example is the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). FSDF sharpened both its research and action agendas in keeping with these new frameworks.

The eight Millennium Development goals form a blueprint agreed to by all the world's countries and all the world's leading development institutions and have galvanized unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the world's poorest. The MDGs were identified from the content of the Millennium Declaration adopted by 189 nations and signed by 147 governments in 2000. The eight goals target major development challenges and are to be

achieved by 2015 (UNDP 2000). The FSDF Initiative focuses on MDG Number 1, "Reducing Poverty"; Number 3, Promote gender equality and empower women;" and Number 7, "Environmental Sustainability."

Following good applied practice to "fit" projects to international efforts, FSDF research will add to the growing body of knowledge about mountain systems as we plan locally appropriate responses to local felt needs. The research agenda is designed to gather data as outlined in the United Nations-based framework "Sustainable Mountain Development" (SMD) (1) status of mountain systems regarding global change, (2) pressures on mountains and consequences on different resources—human, natural and economic, and (3) responses created by different social groups and mountain societies (UNU 2002).

Ideally, agency efforts will interface with federal initiatives and global efforts. In support of national efforts FSDF will work with the 2007-2012 *La Agenda Ambiental del Estado Mexicano: La Ruta de la Sustentabilidad* (Mexico's Environmental Agenda: The Route to Sustainability). *Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* (SEMARNAT, Environment and Natural Resources Secretariat) serves as the lead agency for Mexico's actions connected to the United Nations Division for Sustainable Development. FSDF has been working with the local agent for SEMARNAT (*Secretaría del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* 2007). Key SMD research findings indicate that to achieve sustainable mountain development [planners] "...must consider biodiversity, cultural diversity, science and local knowledge...", that mountain dwellers must share in the benefits of natural resources, and that gender equity in natural resource access must be addressed (UNU 2002). FSDF is working toward those goals.

An overarching research goal is to understand the links between poverty, use of natural resources, and sustainability, as a basis for development planning. These links comprise the "new development agenda" that came out of the 2000 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa (United Nations 2002).

The Mexican Development Context

"The Revolutionary goals of modern Mexico have not been met for the majority of Mexicans, especially small rural producers, commonly known as peasants (*campesinos*)" (González-Clements 2003:1). Among the internal strategies Mexico followed were agrarian reform, import substitution, industrialization, integrated rural development for commercial production, agriculture for export, and the North American Free Trade Agreement. Along with the national strategies were external development assistance policies and programs that followed a path from modernization to human welfare to structural adjustment resulting from Mexico's inability to repay massive development loans, which in turn led to neo-liberal strategies of privatization and global markets (González-Clements 2003).

There are at least two perspectives on development in the study communities. People from a landed background feel that former peons are backward and unwilling or unable to succeed in the global context. Former peons point out that development assistance, when it does arrive in the campo, goes "*de cierta parte a cierta parte*" (from certain individuals to certain individuals), i.e., those in power capture the benefits and share them only with their own.

FSDF follows the principles refined over more than ten years of the COMPAS Programme, coordinated by the Schumacher Center for Technology and Development. The COMPAS goal was to understand traditional knowledge and values and their complementarity with modern knowledge and to share learning to develop principles for endogenous, bottom-up participatory approaches. Endogenous development is "development based on people's own resources, strategies and initiatives. The available resources and solutions developed at the grassroots include material, socio-cultural and spiritual dimensions. It is local people with their own resources, values, knowledge and organizations who drive local development" (COMPAS 2007:1). COMPAS' guiding principles for supporting endogenous development are (1) build on locally felt needs, (2) improve/ complement local knowledge and practices, (3) increase local control and decision-making, (4) identify local and regional development niches,

(5) use external resources selectively, (6) retain benefits in local area, (7) learn across cultures and religions, (8) build staff capacity for learning from/with locals, (9) link up and develop strategic partnerships, and (10) understand local forms of knowing and learning (COMPAS 2007:14-18).

The sustainable mountain development initiative is a major FSDF commitment with multiple projects in capacity building, visual cultural documentation, and economic development. This complex domain of application and development, with its changing and multi-faceted goals and approaches constitutes the rhetoric. What happens when the rhetoric meets the road in joint planning in the field?

The Setting and Social Actors

Development activity has focused on Carranza and its 350 inhabitants. I have selected two project sites, one in Carranza and one in Casillas. Casillas was added to the initiative recently, and Casillas data were gathered during

important for economic development activities. The villages are located in a valley about twenty kilometers long, separated by about fifteen kilometers of mountainous gravel road.

The project area is in the Sierra Madre Oriental, approximately three hours south of Monterrey. The area is ruggedly mountainous, with peaks reaching 2,500 to 3,000 meters. Carranza is located along the Río Casillas, which provides irrigation water. The climate is semi-arid, with summer temperatures ranging from twenty-five to thirty-five degrees Centigrade (seventy-five to ninety-five degrees Fahrenheit). The winters can be damp and cold. Villagers tell that in 1911 a *chubasco* (savage storm) was trapped in the mountains, and its violence caused the artesian wells scattered along the valley to form into the river that exists today. There have been seven years of severe drought in the last twenty years, one devastating flood when Hurricane Gilbert literally beat itself out in the canyons, and a fire that destroyed a forest just over the mountains from the valley.

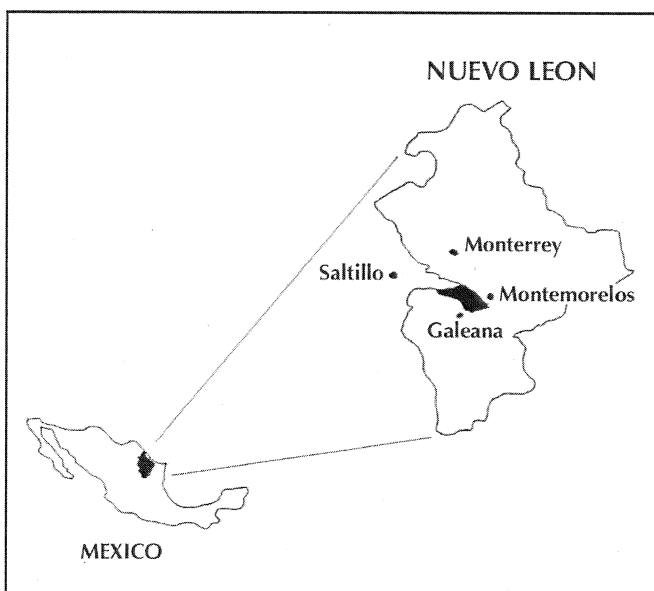


Figure 1. Nuevo León, México, and the Municipio (County) of Rayones

the 2008 summer field season. FSDF decided to include Casillas in the Initiative partly because the two communities are tied to the same socio-economic system, are in the same watershed, have essentially the same needs, and can provide the same natural resources

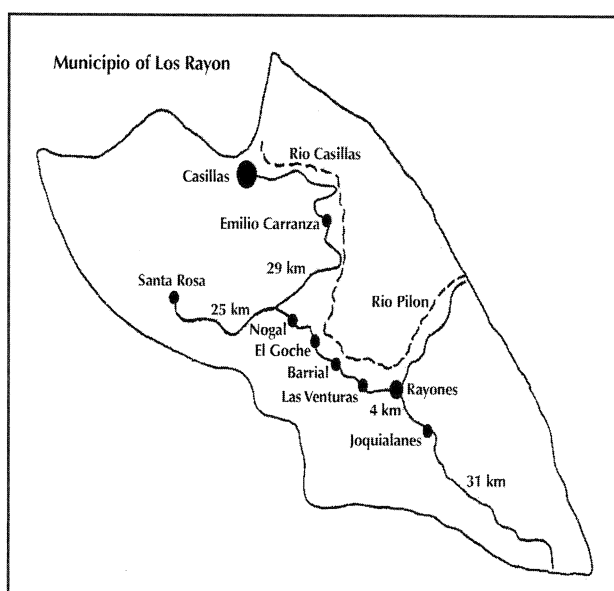


Figure 2. Municipio of Los Rayón (Rayones)

The area was first explored in 1800. Since its settlement in 1815, the valley between Carranza and Casillas was divided into eight self-sufficient haciendas. The *hacendados* (hacienda owners) were all of Spanish descent. Workers were brought in from Galeana to the south and Saltillo to the west. Many of these workers were families from

Southern Mexico that had been displaced by the establishment of haciendas and later, the war that resulted in Mexican independence from Spain in 1821. Most were *mestizo* (mix of Spanish and Indian). This economic division was also the social division. In living memory, there was only one Indian living in Carranza, a woman “who never wore shoes.” She was of the lowest social class, with mestizos in the middle and the Spanish-descendants forming the highest rung of local society. In this valley, the hacienda period lasted from 1815 until 1936.

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1917 profoundly changed the laws about land tenure, providing a mechanism for former *peones* (peons) to receive usufruct over specific lands once held by the haciendas. The local haciendas were very small compared to the huge *latifundias* (large landholdings) in other parts of Mexico and did not involve large populations of displaced indigenous peoples. According to former local hacendados, the local haciendas were not subject to the new laws because of their small size and lack of co-opted indigenous communal lands.

The municipio “was so isolated that even the revolutionaries could not find us” (personal communication, Mayor don Idelfonso de La Fuente, 1980); however, in 1936 a local man brought the revolution to the valley when he organized the peones to demand their new rights. After a bloody three years, agrarian reform resulted in the haciendas being dismantled, the lands divided into *parcelas* (allotments) that were assigned to the new *ejidatarios* (parcela holders). Individuals who were not eligible to receive parcelas seized the opportunity, gained access to parcelas and created controversy that still smolders to this day. Lands were also set aside for house sites, fields, a town center, and a school. Former peones received animals, seeds, and farming implements. All the former hacendados moved to the county seat or the nearest cities, except for one family whose last remaining male was a young boy at the time the *ejido* (farming cooperative) was formed.

Following the agrarian reform, many of the new ejidatarios sold their animals, ate the seeds, and left to find work in the nearest towns and cities. From 1939 until 1950, people eked out an

existence by harvesting and selling *lechugilla* (a type of agave) fiber to a federal program created specifically to buy the fiber. Lechugilla grows wild all over the mountains, but harvesting it is hot, hard work. Still, informants say that *tayando* (preparing lechugilla) is preferable to being peones. There are one or two campesinos still living who worked on the haciendas as very young children before the agrarian reform. All the older adults remember “*esa otra vida*” (“that other life”), meaning life during the hacienda era when landowners had total control over economics, politics, and life-and-death itself. They remember working all day for very little food and not being allowed to pick any of the abundant fruits and vegetables for themselves or their families. People still close their eyes, shudder, and say a small prayer when talking about “*esa otra vida*.”

With population growth and migration resulting from land allotments, the town centers evolved and the remaining campesinos practiced subsistence farming and planted avocado orchards to sell avocados, a mainstay of the regional diet, in Montermorelos and Monterrey, the nearest and largest cities, respectively.

In 1950 an entrepreneur from west of Monterrey came to the valley looking for land to plant pecan orchards to expand his growing business of exporting pecans to the United States. He bought up much of the land in the valley and in the several small towns in the municipio, as well as in the county seat. Soon thereafter, people all over the region began planting pecans. Local belief states that trees give warmth to the fields, but the shade cast by the growing orchards has made it impossible to grow subsistence crops. Pecans became the economic mainstay.

In 1992 Mexico privatized the ejidos as part of its neoliberal strategy. Privatization reached Carranza in 1994. Ironically, local campesinos told me “We are finally an ejido. The land belongs to us at last.” Carranza is still operating as an ejido, and the ex-hacendados who live in the county seat continue to say that the backward peasants still don’t understand anything. The main occupation is farming; particularly pecans for export and avocados and goats for the regional market. Only a few still

practice subsistence farming. The language is Spanish, and most families are Roman Catholic, although there is a protestant evangelical church in Carranza and an Adventist church in Casillas. The land is now privately owned, although the common grazing land (*el agostadero*) is cooperatively managed.

Over time, the communities have survived the aftermath of the Revolution, the creation of the ejidos, an economic transformation based on commercial production of pecans, the agricultural crisis of 1978, the economic crisis of 1982, and the move toward privatization of the Mexican economy, including the ejidos. Poverty and land pressure are increasing, government assistance does not reach the countryside as promised, and individuals are becoming increasingly critical of their government and its methods. Individuals in Carranza are aware of national and international events through word of mouth or through radio, and recently, television. There are now several satellite telephones in the valley.

Mutual Teaching-Learning Exchange

In this historical, political, economic and social context, the Fifth Sun Development Fund (FSDF) is in its sixth year of developing participatory sustainable development projects. There has been a long learning curve not only about the community, but also of the many development approaches and new foci such as sustainability. The long period of academic research and development projects has resulted in genuine mutual cooperation and interest in collaborative development planning on the part of the marginalized small producers.

FSDF is committed to providing financial, technical and research support for these communities. The agency has built a water tank, paid for locally, built sturdy shelves for two school libraries and brought school supplies and clothing for village children. Volunteers have worked for three summers to help gather data and to begin new projects. In every case, we asked for and received permission from the governing committee to work in the ejido. In implementing our first projects we invited and received active participation from community members in the identification, design, implementation, and

monitoring stages. We invited and worked with respected elders to serve as a bank to manage the cash involved in buying materials and paying workers. These small development projects resulted from individual requests. The next stage is to begin a process for collaborative planning based on locally felt needs.

In order to meet its goal to help meet social, cultural, and environmental basic needs sustainably, through capacity building, the FSDF team is engaged in a set of capacity building activities for its U.S. team and its local Mexican counterpart.

The U.S. team varies by field season and has included anthropologists, a U.S. public middle school teacher, several archaeologists, a value-added products expert, chemical engineer, a soil conservation expert, a historian, an ecomuseum specialist, two graduate anthropology student interns (health and ecotourism), and a cultural anthropology professor and his students.

Because FSDF has multi-disciplinary teams, we are developing training modules to create a common language and understanding about our perspectives and disciplines. Because development practice continues to evolve, staff and volunteers face a growing number of new readings and topics. Global problems require global solutions, so FSDF is beginning to identify other development agencies with which to collaborate. This self-learning and volunteer training is a major component of our work.

U.S. Multidisciplinary Team Learning Tasks

Four of the U.S. teams have worked together for three or more years—an applied anthropologist, an applied chemical engineer, a middle school teacher, and a historian. The historian is an American of Mexican descent who has lived in Mexico for the last thirty-five years and serves as government liaison. We have learned to understand one another's contributions and frameworks. Now, we and the student and professional volunteers are learning about United Nations best practices for capacity building, watershed management, adult literacy, composting toilets and simple furniture carpentry for our potential future projects.

Much of the US team planning is carried out

by email and telephone calls. Volunteers generally meet once in the months preceding the fieldwork. We then meet at the border to begin our trip to the work site. Students are recruited at conferences such as the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology (HPSfAA) or the Society for Applied Anthropology (SfAA) or by referral from colleagues. **Table 1** presents a draft of our mutual teaching-learning endeavor.

This ambitious comprehensive training plan is an ideal that gives staff and volunteers a common background and local participants a set of skills for working on research projects. Once the Mexican counterparts were selected, they were included in every planning session and discussion. They were initially shy of voicing their opinions because they were embarrassed by their lack of literacy and struggled with the fact that we considered them to be experts. **Table 2** represents a process for capacity building.

I rely on my extensive past experience as a trainer and am sharpening my own skills with materials such as *Local Sustainable Development Planning* (Gerecheva 2003), *Power, Process and Participation: Tools for Change* (Slocum et al 1995), *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers* (Hope and Timmel 1999), and *Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities* (Chambers 2002).

For summer 2008, I provided the U.S. members selected materials in development anthropology, adult literacy, composting toilets, and capacity building. There is already expertise in development, group facilitation, appropriate technology, women's advocacy, economic development planning, project management, team building, field school training, and medical anthropology. As project director, it is my responsibility to oversee both the process and the content of our work.

The people of Carranza have hosted twenty years of sporadic academic field research and participated in three anthropology field schools. They have provided living space for staff and students and formed friendships that continue to this day. FSDF has a good reputation and established rapport. The field schools were careful to distribute spending among the stores and workers such as laundresses. Villagers were pleased to be asked about their activities, to be listened to,

and to realize that the learning was mutual. Over time, villagers did believe that we value their knowledge and experience and learn much from them. Staff and volunteers are free to go into almost any place and delve into almost any topic. Rapport translates into trust that facilitates our activities, especially important as we begin a formal process to promote full participation, a hallmark of participatory development.

Out of respect for local traditions of single-gender meetings and a desire to learn women's ideas for projects, several years ago I convened a focus group by bringing eight respected elder women to a home mid-way in the valley. I brought whole coffee beans (preferred to the ubiquitous instant coffee) and a large box of expensive cookies. We spent several hours talking in the Mexican fashion (personal talk first, then business) in a circle under an *enramada* (shade structure built for weddings where the couple receive the blessings of priest and family). The women talked to each other, but they answered every question I asked while FSDF volunteers video- and audio-taped the group. In the Mexican tradition, younger women and children were present, sitting respectfully out of the circle. Toward the end of the session, I asked the participants about their concerns and for their ideas about how I could help them and their communities. The eldest responded: "You've already helped us. You brought us together. You come back year after year. You have given us your friendship." It was an emotional moment for me, and it was a learning moment. I was in a project frame of mind, expecting a laundry list of potential projects. They were not. The rhetoric had hit a bump on the road. No matter how much I valued participation and felt needs, my internal agenda was already focused on development projects, from my perspective. This example, and others that follow, are like guideposts to keep me on the correct road as a participatory development practitioner.

Challenges of Collaborative Planning

Counterpart Selection. While the agency has a formal training agenda in place, much of our learning comes from conversations with our counterparts and community members. In the summer of 2006 FSDF conducted an applied

project for the Office of Governor Natividad González. The Governor was interested in exploring ecotourism as a development strategy for Nuevo León and wanted a local assessment, as well as U.S. perspectives on such a strategy.

The role of local beneficiaries is central to the principles of participatory development; the ideal is to involve local partners in every aspect of the development activities. FSDF staff had agreed to create a U.S.-Mexico development planning team of local counterparts that would be geographically representative, inclusive, participatory, and gender balanced, as well as age balanced. We knew about social differentiation in the communities, but did not really understand the kinship relationships well enough to know specifically who could/would work with whom and why/why not. Besides kinship factors, beyond social class and not counting land tenure conflicts, there was another type of differentiation. We learned that people who had not lived through the near-starvation period of *tayando ixtle* (preparing fiber) were not seen as having lived or having experience. Also, the manner of dress of the younger women was an affront to the older women. One elder claimed that the downfall of Mexican society was due to women who were "*pelonas y encueradas*" ("bald and naked," that is, had short hair and wore shorts). Our counterparts had to pass not only FSDF criteria, but especially, be respected by the community. It took over two years to find our two collaborators. The two partners were chosen because of their motivation, honesty, energy, desire to help the entire community, and because they were respected by others in the valley.

Project Sites Selection. Our idea about choosing six people, three men and three women of various ages, from each of the two villages was premature. We learned from our partners that the valley is divided into very specific *comunidades* (settlements), not just the main villages. The *comunidades* identify themselves apart from the other locations. We documented the *comunidades* before we identified the potential project sites.

Collaborative Planning Training. Based on our earlier work, we already knew that collaborative planning would have to be introduced and taught as a set of skills. For example, for many of the women it is not proper to go to meetings and

to speak out. Thanks to our cultural understanding, we knew about the value of respect and that in these rural areas, there is a distinct difference in interpersonal behavior based on age. For example, it is still common for younger people to cross their closed palm across their chest when addressing their elders and to semi-kneel and kiss the hand of a much older person. Younger people will stand when an elder stands, and remain standing until the elder is seated. Elders speak first.

We were unsure how to facilitate a meeting with these practices. While we wished to respect cultural differences, how were we to deal with our own values of equality and gender equity? Our first step is to learn to work with our two community counterparts. In the first 2008 session, my husband suggested that we work with couples. My husband and I work together professionally, are locally identified as a couple, and felt that this was an appropriate way to include women in our planning activities. All three husbands are supportive of their wives' public endeavors. (Although I am called "*la Gringa*," I am held locally accountable to Latino customs and behaviors.)

Project Design. Project design proved to be more sensitive than we expected. We wanted to start with felt needs identified during academic research, the most important being electric pump irrigation and fertilizer and pesticides for orchards followed by local jobs for the adult men and for the young adult men.

When global prices for pecans plummet, or when there is no crop due to drought or pest plagues, these rural producers cannot revert back to subsistence cropping unless they chop down the orchards with which they replaced their row crop fields. The men realized that they needed to find other ways to generate income without cutting down the trees. While it is the man's responsibility to provide for his family, women also add to family income and subsistence although there are very few opportunities for either men or women. FSDF debated designing projects that were small and successful (a good model for a beginning initiative) but did not create income, projects that immediately provided income but were short-term, or projects that aided women first. We discussed alternatives

to electric pumps, shied away from facilitating the use of toxic herbicides and fertilizers, and opted for projects that taught skills and provided cash income, such as carpentry for furniture making. Meanwhile, our senior technical advisor continues to gather the data required for long-term development strategies based on sustainable use of local natural resources.

Gender in Development

In informal interviews and from the elder women's focus group I learned about women's and men's differing felt needs: cultural documentation. During their focus group conversation, the elders mentioned the importance of finding a way to keep traditions alive. Doña Lola was upset that her daughter wanted to dig up a lechugilla plant that grows in an awkward place near the house and wanted her daughter to know that the plant was a symbol of survival. The other women identified things that had been forgotten by children who migrated to the towns and cities. This resulted in the *Abuelas Agenda* (Grandmothers' Agenda) to document traditions, as specified by the elder women.

The larger issue of how to involve women in development planning is a major task that we are working on with both local collaborators. Our plan was for FSDF to identify projects that benefit women and teach skills that help women earn money without breaking social and cultural norms. As it turned out, women in Las Gallinas and the three other nearby communities did attend our first community meeting. The 14-year-old daughter of our collaborators, who crochets and likes to sew, asked if we could provide training in how to make clothing patterns. Her girlfriends seconded her request. The result is that eighteen women signed up for a sewing workshop. Working on establishing links with state agencies, our government liaison has requested and received two sewing machines.

Scientific Concepts and Local Cultural Models

I discovered early on that conceptual differences had to be clarified and understood by volunteers and locals. During one of three summer field schools I led, students helped create transects of the different ecosystems

along the valley. At a community farewell celebration designed to thank the villagers for hosting the field school, I posted a large drawing of one transept that showed a cross section from the eastern ridge to the western ridge of the watershed and invited comments. After a respectful period of inspecting the diagram, the farmers began to teach me about the river. For me, "river" meant the banks and the water. For them, "river" meant the banks, the water, and the uplands where corn and other crops used to be grown. I also learned that bamboo, which we saw as a nuisance, is carefully cultivated to help change the course of the river and open up more upland or change boundaries. Further research informed us that the federal government has a specific definition for river. A "river" means from the middle of the watercourse to twenty-five meters on either side.

Another concept that has emic and etic definitions is the environment. To FSDF staff and students, the environment means the land, soil, water, flora and fauna, trees, plants and air. No one in the valley knew the words *el medio ambiente* (the environment). Two informants responded to this word with "prickly pears and trees" and "working with a hoe." To the term natural resources (*recursos naturales*) campesinos answered "pecan trees," "avocado trees," "peach trees," "*producción*" (essentially, "the harvest"), and "working the land." *La naturaleza* (nature), to women, meant "all the wild fruits," "the harvests," "water," "the plantings," "mountains," the river," and "medicinal plants." To men, nature meant "avocados," "trees," "hills," "mountains," "the river," "squirrels," and "pecan trees." There were some gender differences, with men naming row crops and orchard trees and women naming wild plants. The most common definition, spoken with a sweep of the arms, was "The things God gives us." The next most common was "our hearts, our hands, and our strength," meaning not only physical strength, but perseverance in adversity. In August 2008 I heard a term, *el panino* (translation currently unavailable) that from the context may mean growing conditions. Further research will help us clarify other conceptual differences for "sustainability," "mountains," "watershed," "participation," and "capacity building."

A Local Opportunity

Our summer 2008 field season marked an important change in our methods. While we doubt anyone can argue with our list of assessed needs, when we began the actual participatory planning in May, the resulting list was completely different. The Las Gallinas men's group had been thinking about their local resources and the need for income-generation and wanted help with a *bloquera*-making (cinder block making) business using the rocks from their fields as a source of sand and a bottled-water enterprise using water from a nearby artesian well. Based on our follow-up research in the U.S., FSDf supported the *bloquera* project, but informed the group that the bottled water project was much too expensive (machinery costs \$20,000 - \$200,000 U.S.) and required specialized twenty-four hour, seven days-a-week expertise and laboratory.

Literacy Training

After the first formal meeting of the core U.S.-Mexico team, I learned that one of our carefully chosen collaborators had a second grade level of education; the other had more or less one year. Expecting that neither person had much experience with formal meetings, I had brought agendas that I read out loud carefully, with frequent explanation and discussion. Our meeting started with dinner at the restaurant next door. I wondered why one of the collaborators had brought two young adult male relatives to the meeting with him. As we continued the meeting at our headquarters, the collaborator gave the agenda to one of the young men to read for him.

I had assumed because there had been schools in the area during their early years, that the collaborators had at least a 6th grade education and, therefore, could read and write, but even though there have been schools in the area since 1938, neither had the free time to attend school as a child. Fortunately, both of them were very receptive to the idea of improving their reading. Hence, the adult literacy program began with focused training for the collaborators, and I added that topic to our master teacher's responsibilities. While we will

continue collaborative planning and project support, our next step is to design and implement an adult literacy program for a small group of local villagers who wish to be involved in the project planning as few adults have schooling beyond the third grade. A challenge is that people live in scattered settlements, women do not generally go to meetings, and everyone has a full workday. DIF will send a group facilitator for literacy training, but community members must first form a group. There are also issues of meals and lodging for the teacher that need to be managed.

With the increasing number of volunteers and students interested in working on the SMDI, and because of our commitment to long-term development assistance, FSDf is now seeking a location to build a headquarters in the valley to continue our work. We will also be hiring applied anthropologists with the necessary training to work full time at our headquarters. We particularly need applied anthropologists with training in environmental anthropology and agricultural anthropology and consultants with expertise in watershed management. While I have no formal training in those domains, I rely on Kedia and van Willigen (2005) to learn enough to know what to look for in applicants.

Social Relations

One issue that continues to be problematic is the social relations in the valley. Historically, there were landowners and peons. After the agrarian reform, people identified themselves by land tenure types. Even though former peons were now landowners, the original hacendados have kept control over the financial and political systems. They still resent the loss of their haciendas and do not work cooperatively with the poor. Some guides to participatory development strategies describe methodologies for "bringing together the aspirations and capacities of governments, civil society, and the private sector to create a vision for the future, and to work tactically and progressively towards it..." (Gercheva 2003:7). Unfortunately, we do not see that happening any time soon in the campo. The campo itself is divided into factions.

The Rhetoric and The Road

Finan and van Willigen identify anthropology's contribution to problem-solving as "social knowledge: an encompassing understanding about a local community, its regular and discernible behavior patterns, its cultural logic, and the nature of its integration into wider systems" (1991:1). Using anthropological and other methods, I have amassed a wealth of social knowledge of the valley system, including local definitions of "the environment" and "development." I must know these local definitions for project development, but equally important, I need to review the literature on "cultural logic, cultural models, and folk models" to talk intelligently with other anthropologists and be able to teach my multidisciplinary team colleagues or, in Finan and van Willigen's words, "accurately translate their categories of knowledge into categories we understand and use in other contexts, such as development" (ibid.:1). Meanwhile, I am now focusing on both general ethnographic data and specific project-related research in the two project sites.

The rhetoric and the road are constantly changing. The rhetoric now includes a growing literature on capacity building in which I am immersed. Goals involve projects in the domains of development, environment, economics, health, agriculture, and education, all requiring more familiarization with literature and methods. FSDF will be hiring applied anthropologists with expertise, but for now, I must know enough to select applicants and keep the project planning sufficiently designed. All this self-education will help to improve the chances of success in settings where my activities engage in the realities of other people's lives.

The road also keeps changing. The realities of the potential beneficiaries are deteriorating. As the drought continues, people adapt by not keeping small animals or kitchen gardens. Their main commercial crop harvests are no longer dependable. Men search for other economic activities. Re-concentration of land is occurring in one of our project sites. Fully one-half of the agrarian reform fields have been purchased by a member of one of the wealthier families; this transfer of ownership has economic, political

and religious impacts. The new owner has fired workers for not following his political will, and the patron saint's annual parade through the village must skip half of the fields.

For the first time, in May of 2008, FSDF was warned about interfering in the business of the ejido. While searching for a site for the August student group, a local teacher suggested asking the school parent group for the use of the porch of the local school. The porch is large, high, dry and roofed. It has electricity and a cement floor, with flush toilets and water faucets. While I was inspecting the site, I noticed two large dome-like structures nearby. Lupe, my counterpart, had accompanied me, as appropriate, and explained that the smaller one was the community water source and was located on her brother's former property. The new owner inconsistently provided water from the smaller tank and had fenced off the larger water tank that the community had built after the loss of the smaller one.

As any anthropologist with field experience knows, human groups are complex. This particular setting has a history of social class conflict, land ownership violence, political polarity and rural elite dominance. The wealthy new owner wonders why I (from a landowner background) am working with poor people. His wife is the sister of the leader of the local parent group (whom I've known for over 20 years) who is also a leader of a different political party. The teacher (whom I've worked with for over five years) has been re-assigned to a school in a different part of the county, and my counterpart is with the group that built the larger tank. My interpretation is that the ejido leader, who succeeded and is related to the wealthy new owner, thought I was checking out the tanks, involving myself in the controversy on the part of the poorer people. My counterpart's interpretation is that "They do not want you to open our eyes. They are trying to recreate the old (hacienda) system."

The rhetoric, as I went into this multi-year set of projects, gave me a good foundation for what questions to ask and what methods to use to gather data. As I understood the road better and began working on projects, I have identified gaps in my knowledge and abilities; hence, the

multiple reading lists I've developed. Fortunately, my relationship with the marginalized villagers continues to grow. The team stayed with Lupe in Los Nogales for its August fieldwork. We rented a room and moved in our portable tables, chairs, crate-bookcases and cots. We were able to observe daily activities (including scrambling to collect water when it was available), eat with the family, sit in the shade and talk, gather firewood (heavy work with lots of walking) and formally and informally complete the next steps planning for our projects. We have been invited to use Lolo's spare room in Las Gallinas, which we will do in the future.

The current mutual teaching-and-learning stage of long-term research and action in rural Northern Mexico is in full swing. Literature review while in the U.S., is as important as the literacy training for counterparts that we began this summer. Since all three core U.S. team members speak Spanish, our work documenting local knowledge and beliefs continues. The teacher-volunteer and engineer-volunteer understand the anthropological perspective and are now using basic methods of data gathering. Counterparts have learned and are creating kinship charts and correcting our census. They are paid for their professional time and for providing food and shelter. We are evolving into a true team, with common goals. We even shared a nuanced joke. The wife of the mayor had been making visits to the communities. There was a presentation scheduled for Los Nogales. Lupe and almost every other woman attended, not knowing what to expect. Later, Lupe told us that her topic was about traditional customs and activities that were being forgotten, such as serving *nopalitos* (wild-gathered cactus paddles), once a mainstay of the diet. We agreed, it was sad, but who had the time to go gather, clean, take off the thorns, cut up and cook nopalitos? Did she serve nopalitos? Did she grow, gather and grind corn for tortillas? We laughed. We both knew that she and her husband had worked as migrant laborers in the United States for years. She wore pants; she drove a truck. We understood the irony. Lupe concluded that it had not been a total waste of time; her mother had gotten a gift of ten *pesos*.

Recent Fieldwork

The summer 2008 team began specific research to build on the academic findings collected to date. We began a poverty assessment, sanitation survey, and a study of energy use patterns in support of our assessed needs. Because of teaching schedules, the 2008 work plan was divided into two sessions: the first session involved fourteen undergraduate students from Metropolitan State College of Denver, their professor, and his assistant. In 2006, FSDF completed a study on American Perspectives on Ecotourism Development for the Office of the Governor of Nuevo León. In early 2008, FSDF was asked by the Governor's office to write descriptions of local tourist spots for potential publication on U.S. tourist websites. American Perspectives on Ecotourism Development II involved visiting each locale on a locally produced tourist map as well as writing a general description of the county seat of Rayones and of several locations along the valley. The project included visual documentation with still photography. Goals for the first session were to (1) establish rapport with Las Gallinas/Las Trancas, (2) re-connect with Los Nogales, (3) identify felt needs at each project site, (4) begin ethnographic profiles of selected sites, (5) conduct exploratory research regarding assessed needs (FSDF-identified projects), (6) meet with local collaborators, and (7) plan next steps with collaborators. The ethnographic research agenda included collecting basic data about the two project sites of Las Gallinas/Las Trancas, and Los Nogales. Technical tasks focused on compiling a handbook on composting toilets and gathering information on natural resources, including the river's depth and current.

Projects planned for summer 2008 included building composting toilets, building furniture for field volunteers (as a mechanism for organizing a men's group), adult literacy projects, and enrichment classes for primary students at selected sites. As often happens, the realities of the field changed our plans. Our selected individual for the demonstration of the composting toilet (who had had no toilet at our last visit) had built a very good, sturdy, cement toilet. Although he volunteered to let us "cut into the system wherever you need to put in the

compost part,” we decided to find another location in the future. There was not enough time or resources to build furniture. The literacy project had to be re-scheduled for the second session in August, and the school enrichment classes cancelled due to a major change in the teacher-volunteer’s schedule.

In spite of the changes, FSDF did meet its fieldwork goals. Students and staff spent time in Las Gallinas creating GPS and manual maps, beginning a census, and in general, building rapport. Staff held a participatory planning community meeting that resulted in three felt needs project ideas and led to including two nearby communities in the development initiative, Sillares and Chilares, bringing the men’s group to thirty-five members.

Exploratory research on the assessed needs (composting toilet, micro-central for electricity) showed that due to local customs and priorities and to federal policies respectively, neither project is viable at this time.

Fieldworkers and community members of all ages participated in our traditional community event, a *lotería* (Mexican bingo) where winners picked from an assortment of gifts donated by students and staff. Our Las Gallinas counterparts provided a dinner for all participants where every community member received one or more prizes.

Next Steps

FSDF staff and volunteers will return to offer a requested workshop on pattern making to women and girls in Las Gallinas. Several women from Los Nogales will also attend, working out places to stay for the two-day event. We will work on advancing the bloquera project in the four northern communities and the papalote project in Los Nogales. Our focus is still the literacy training of collaborators. We will be selecting a site for a field office, probably in one of the four northern villages where there are more people and they are much better organized. We are also in negotiation with a non-governmental agency in Nuevo León whose goals are to find marginalized small rural producers for economic development programs.

In 2009 we will be adding two projects to the elder women’s request for cultural documentation.

I plan to show the original focus group video in honor of the participant who passed away two years ago and to film two additional videos: Los Nogales Community Celebration for San Isidro (the patron saint of rain) and the History of the Ejido Emilio Carranza with key informant Doña Jesusa of Los Nogales whose father distributed the first agrarian reform land parcels. She is eighty-four years old and an ejidataria. This story would make a wonderful addition to a future Casa de la Cultura.

The video is an offering to San Isidro. When we took the students on a familiarization trip in May 2008, they rode in the back of our two pickups. At Lupe’s home, she showed them a poster of San Isidro and explained that he was the saint to whom they prayed for rain. I took the students to the church, dedicated to San Isidro. There is a painting of the patron saint there that is a bit unusual. San Isidro was considered a very good man who stopped and helped poor people and is often depicted as guiding a plow, with an angel somewhere in the picture. The priest, who infrequently comes from Saltillo, paid for the painting and told me that he had left out the angel because the local people didn’t understand. I warned the students to be respectful of local beliefs.

The valley is experiencing a drought; however, on our trip back, we had hard rain, hail and a rockslide, caused by the rain, which pelted the students. They were wet, cold, dirty and absolutely thrilled to have had their first field experience.

Success Factors

The use of basic applied anthropology methods, techniques, and values facilitated the gathering of information, especially listening with respect and joining in daily activities. Growing academic experience resulted in improved research design and more useful research questions; however, where the rhetoric meets the road, intangibles proved to be just as important. First, the innate courtesy of the villagers to share their lives, second, my being from a “*familia fuerte*” (powerful family) with local connections, and third, repeated visits with a long-term commitment to provide assistance all facilitated this work. It also helps that I am

an elder with grand children and therefore a “wise, experienced person.” Factors contributing to success include gaining the trust of the local population, knowing how to work in multi-disciplinary teams, respecting local beliefs and cultural models, and discipline and dedication

to field work tasks even in trying conditions.

Most locals that we work with say that all they ever get are promises, never any help. FSDF is committed to continue providing assistance and to learning better ways of providing that assistance. ○

Table 1. Mutual Teaching-Learning Phases

Phase One: Volunteer Training	Phase Two A: Partner Training	Phase Two B: U.S. Team Training	Phase Three: Joint Planning
Literature Review	Literacy Program	Local Knowledge	Selected Projects
Assigned Readings	Project Skills	Cultural Models	Project Design
Topical Teaching	Research Skills	Project Ideas	Selected Locations
Orientation to Site	Participation Skills	Location Ideas	Emerging issues
Academic Insights	Leadership Training	Counterpart Selection	Monitoring/Evaluation

Table 2. Training for Development Planning

1. Education	Literacy, mountain ecosystems, watersheds
2. Training	Participation, research, planning, project management
3. Practice	Teaching, facilitating
4. Collaboration	All SMDI activities, community celebrations

Notes

1. The author presented an overview of the global frameworks and sustainable mountain initiative at the spring conference of the High Plains Society for Applied Anthropology in Denver, Colorado, on April 29, 2007. The presentation was titled “Where the Rhetoric Meets the Road: Collaborative Teaching and Learning in a Participatory, Sustainable Mountain Development Initiative in Northern México.”

2. Emilia González-Clements is founder and director of the Fifth Sun Development Fund (FSDF) a private development agency located in Oregon. She holds a Ph.D. in applied social anthropology with an emphasis on alternative development practice from the University of Kentucky (2003). Her area of interest is international development, primarily in Latin America. Her professional background includes social work, women’s advocacy, social justice

advocacy, university-level teaching in applied anthropology, advocacy agency management, and entrepreneurship. Born in Texas, she is a member of the González family of El Carmen, Nuevo León, México. She can be reached by mail at 2725 S.E. Washington Street, Milwaukie, OR 97222, by e-mail at egc@fsdf.org, and by telephone at 503-860-4808.

3. The Fifth Sun Development Fund is a private development agency headquartered at 2725 S.E. Washington Street, Milwaukie, OR and at Calle Profesor Miguel Valdez Gallardo No. 100, Colonia Centro, Rayones, Nuevo León, México. Emilia González-Clements founded the agency as a vehicle for development activities in her former research sites. The FSDF *vision* is of a world based on equitable, collaborative, sustainable development, with respect to the social and natural environments. Its *mission* is to build capacity in individuals and groups to

improve their quality of life. *Strategies* include projects in basic needs, planning and financial assistance to meet self-determined goals, technical assistance to enhance economic development, and documentation of cultural traditions for future generations. Program areas include: (1) Capacity-building Grants – Individuals and Groups, (2) Ethnographic/ Visual documentation – Traditions and Customs, and (3) Sustainable Mountain Development Projects – Villages and Tribes.

FSDF works with project counterparts, practitioners, academics, interns and volunteers in the natural and social sciences and engineering. Advisors include Dr. John van Willigen, professor of anthropology at the University of Kentucky (project design), Mr. Clyde Tyndall, a member of the Omaha nation (tribes/native populations), Susan Ugai, Attorney-at-law, Lincoln, Nebraska (nonprofit governance and legal issues), and Dr. Art Campa, professor of anthropology at Metropolitan State College of Denver (Latin American settings).

4. The villagers have given their permission for FSDF to use the names of their communities and their own names in professional presentations and publications.

References Cited

- Chambers, Robert
2002 *Participatory Workshops: A Sourcebook of 21 Sets of Ideas and Activities*. London: Earthscan.
- 1997 *Whose Reality Counts? Putting the First Last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.
- COMPAS
2007 *Learning Endogenous Development: Building on Bio-Cultural Diversity*. Bourton on Dunsmore, Rugby, Warwickshire, United Kingdom: Practical Action Publishing.
- Finan, Timothy, and John van Willigen
1991 "The Pursuit of Local Knowledge: Methodology and the Practice of Anthropology." In *Soundings: Rapid and Reliable Research Methods for Practicing Anthropologists, Bulletin 10 of the National Association for the Practice of Anthropology (NAPA Bulletin 10)*. Edited by John van Willigen and Timothy L. Finan. Pages 1-10. Washington, District of Columbia: American Anthropological Association.
- Frackin, Elliot, and Robin Mearns
2003 "Sustainability and Pastoral Livelihoods: Lessons from East African Maasai and Mongolia." *Human Organization* 62(2): 112-122.
- Gerecheva, Dafina
2003 *Local Sustainable Development Planning: Manual for a Local Sustainable Development Strategy Formulation*. New York: United Nations Development Program.
- González-Clements, Emilia
2003 "Puras Promesas: Local Perceptions of Development in a Northern Mexican Mestizo ex-Ejido." Doctoral dissertation. Department of Anthropology, University of Kentucky.
- Hettne, Bjorn
1995 *Development Theory and the Three Worlds: Towards an International Political Economy of Development*. New York: John Wiley and Sons.
- Hope, Anne, and Sally Timmel
1999 *Training for Transformation: A Handbook for Community Workers*. Book 4. London: ITDG Publishing.
- Keating, Michael
1993 *Agenda for Change: A Plain language Version of Agenda 21 and other Rio Agreements*. Geneva: Center on Our Common Future.
- Kedia, Satish, and John van Willigen, editors
2005 *Applied Anthropology: Domains of Application*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- Levy, Daniel, and Gabriel Szekely
1987 *Mexico: Paradoxes of Stability and Change*. 2d ed. Boulder: Westview Press.
- Little, Peter D.
2005 "Anthropology and Development." In *Applied Anthropology: Domains of Application*. Edited by Satish Kedia and John van Willigen. Pages 33-59. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger.
- McCabe, J. Terrance
2003 "Toward an Anthropological Understanding of Sustainability: A Preface." *Human Organization* 62(2): 91-92.
- Secretaria del Medio Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (SEMARNAT)
2007 *La Agenda Ambiental del Estado Mexicano: La Ruta de la Sustentabilidad* (Mexico's Environmental Agenda: The Route to Sustainability). México, Distrito Federal: SEMARNAT.
- Sanford, S.
1983 *Management of Pastoral Development in the Third World*. London: Wiley.

- Skidmore, Thomas E., and Peter H. Smith
1997 *Modern Latin America*. 4th Edition. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Slocum, Rachel, Lori Wichhart, Dianne Rocheleau, and Barbara Thomas Slayter, editors
1995 *Power, Process and Participation: Tools for Change*. London: Intermediate Technologies Publications Ltd.
- Stone, M. Priscilla
2003 "Is Sustainability for Development Anthropologists?" *Human Organization* 62(2): 93-99.
- United Nations (UN)
2002 "Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development" (Revised). Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Division for Sustainable Development. New York: United Nations.
- United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)
2000 "About the MDGs: Basics." Electronic document, accessed online May 12, 2002, at <http://www.undp.org/mdg/basics.shtml>.
- United Nations University (UNU)
2002 "UNU Project on Sustainable Mountain Development." Electronic document, accessed online August 10, 2003, at <http://www.unu.edu/env/mountains/index.htm>.
- van Willigen, John
2002 *Applied Anthropology: An Introduction*. Third Edition. Westport, Connecticut: Bergin & Garvey.
- Wolf, Eric
1966 *Peasants*. Foundations of Modern Anthropology Series. Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc.
- World Commission on Environment and Development
1987 *Our Common Future*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.