



# After the Labor Migrants Leave: The Search for Sustainable Development in a Sending Region of the Ecuadorian Amazon

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**Summary.** — Many sustainable development projects take place in rural communities experiencing economic decline and out-migration. What kind of sustainable development projects succeed in these economically troubled settings? To answer this question, I examine two sustainable development projects initiated by women in a portion of the Ecuadorian Amazon experiencing economic decline and out-migration. The first project failed, and the second one succeeded. The differing outcomes suggest that, in the absence of larger public interventions to “turn a region around,” small scale projects that focus on the needs of the most socially cohesive groups, which are often networks of women, offer the best chance for success.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Rural places throughout the world have become sites for sustainable development projects during the past 15 years. The new development initiatives have often taken place in regions experiencing agricultural decline and out-migration. In some respects, these declining regions would seem to be particularly appropriate sites for sustainable development projects because the exodus of workers and the decline in agriculture should encourage the conversion of some agricultural lands to less intense, more sustainable uses like that of a forest. At the same time, the loss of workers and agricultural revenue could handicap sustainable development projects in these places because people refuse to invest in economically declining places and enterprises. These speculations about the effects of agricultural decline and out-migration on sustainable development could be reformulated as a question about the success rates of different types of sustainable development projects in this context. What kinds of sustainable development projects seem most likely to succeed in these places? Given the prevalence of out-migration and agricultural decline across

many rural areas in the developing world, this question should be of considerable practical importance to the development community.

I will try to answer this question in the following pages through a case study of agricultural decline, out-migration, and sustainable development efforts during 1998–2004 in a long settled portion of the Ecuadorian Amazon.<sup>1</sup> The research design takes the loose form of a within participants quasi-experimental design (Campbell & Stanley, 1963). In the late 1990s,

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a small, locally based NGO organized by landless women established a tree nursery to restock the region's forests with commercially valuable species of trees native to the region. This effort failed. Several years later, the women undertook a new effort, a home gardening program, which appeared to succeed. Many of the most important characteristics of the situation remained roughly the same during these efforts. The projects took place in the same community. The agricultural economy of the region remained stagnant. Widespread out migration continued to characterize the region. State services for the people of the region remained minimal. Both projects received support from international foundations, and the NGO's human resources did not change appreciably. The outcomes of the projects were quite different, and under these circumstances, it seems reasonable to ascribe the differences in outcomes to substantive differences in the way the projects interfaced with trends in the livelihoods of the region's residents.

For the sake of clarity in the following analysis, ambiguous terms like "sustainable development," "social capital," "project success," and "project failure" need definitions. The famous Brundtland Commission statement provides a point of departure for defining sustainable development. It is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED, 1987, p. 8). As numerous commentators have since pointed out (Frazier, 1997; Haque, 1999; Rao, 2000), people use the term "sustainable development" in a confusing variety of ways. Observers from different disciplinary backgrounds stress different dimensions of sustainable development. Observers of this discourse usually conclude by arguing that researchers and practitioners must acknowledge all dimensions of the concept if it is to be useful in development efforts (Haque, 1999, p. 200). In this regard, Edward Barbier's operational definition of "sustainable development" seems especially well conceived (Barbier, 1987). Barbier finds three dimensions in the concept, environment, economy, and equity. For him, a sustainable development project would not do damage to the biophysical environment (environment) at the same time that it promotes an increase in economic activity (economy) that benefits the poorer peoples of a community or region (equity). I employ this definition in the following study.

"Social capital" refers to the ability to amass resources or complete tasks by drawing upon the obligations of others in a personal social network (Bourdieu, 1985; Coleman, 1988; Portes, 1998). Collectivities like communities, neighborhoods, and organizations can also exhibit social capital (Flora, 1998). Because obligations to others are more common in socially cohesive groups, more cohesive groups should have more social capital. For this reason, I have used the terms "social cohesion" and "social capital" interchangeably in the text.

Definitions for the success or failure of sustainable development projects also vary. To be successful, a project would have to improve or at least not damage a place's standing along all three dimensions outlined by Barbier. Participation in a project provides a convenient proxy measure for success. If very few people participate, a project is unlikely to achieve its ends, however well conceived they are. Little participation would therefore seem to indicate project failure. A large amount of participation could indicate success, if the intended economic, environmental, and equity effects of the project occur as planned. In other words, widespread participation in a project would be a necessary but not a sufficient condition for project success. Given the absence of more precise measures, I will use participation rates as a proxy measure for project success.

## 2. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

A theoretical understanding of how labor migrants' departure alters the prospects for sustainable development draws on a wide range of literatures that address issues concerning structural adjustment, labor surpluses, and social capital in rural communities. The liberalization of economic markets under programs of structural adjustment during the past two decades has had uneven effects on rural communities. Where export oriented agriculture prevails, the renewed emphasis on export crops after structural adjustment agreements can invigorate the agricultural economy in some places (Barbier, 2000), but in many other places, the cuts in subsidies and basic services deepen rural poverty (Cupples, 2004; Perry, 2002). The negative effects of structural adjustment on the local agricultural economy would appear to be especially prevalent in the many places where smallholders produce for domestic markets. In

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