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HIV-Positive Women Propose Interventions to Overcome Their Nutritional Barriers: A Field Study in East London, South Africa

by Emily Christensen, sociology

This research attempted to identify barriers that prevent HIV-positive women in East London, South Africa from accessing adequate nutritional resources. Semi-structured interviews with fourteen HIV-positive women were transcribed and coded. Themes were identified through content analysis. Major nutritional barriers identified are cultural food preferences, poverty, and unemployment. Possible interventions were also identified by study participants, and include food distribution programs and community gardens.

Introduction

In 2009, an estimated 5.6 million South Africans were infected with HIV, making the country the site of the largest HIV epidemic in the world (UNAIDS Global Report, 2010). Because most HIV-related deaths occur between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five, and because of the high rates of morbidity associated with HIV, this disease continues to have a vast impact on the economy and social development of South Africa (Arndt and Lewis, 2005). It is therefore essential that this developing country find an effective way to reduce not only the spread of the epidemic but also the high rates of disability associated with its occurrence. Because nutrition has an intricate and extensive impact on immunity, attempts have been made to reduce morbidity among people living with HIV/AIDS (for the rest of the paper, these people will be referred to using the standard abbreviation PLWHA) through the use of supplemental nutrition programs with mixed success. This research attempts to identify the barriers that prevent HIV-positive women in South Africa from accessing adequate nutritional resources and concludes that they are mostly prevented from eating well by social factors such as cultural food preferences, poverty, and unemployment. Interventions such as food distribution programs and community gardens—proposals from those living among the epidemic—are also discussed and compared. While food distribution programs have been tried with little success, community gardens provide promise, but more research is needed to determine their effectiveness in the context of South Africa.

Background

Immune function is closely linked to nutrition. Independent of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, good nutrition is known to enhance immunity with the opposite being true as well—malnutrition increases susceptibility to infection (Timbo and Tollefson, 1994). Maintaining good nutrition is, therefore, essential for people who al-

ready have a compromised immune system, such as individuals with HIV. Malnutrition can quicken the progression from HIV to AIDS and conversely, infection with HIV can also heighten malnutrition (Oguntibeju, van den Heever, and Van Schalkwyk, 2007).

For someone with HIV to achieve adequate nutrition, it is essential for them to consume foods that are rich in micronutrients as well as intake a sufficient quantity of macronutrients to meet their heightened physiological needs. Specific micronutrients such as selenium, zinc, and vitamins A, D, E, and the B complex are known to play key roles in the immune system (Duggal, Chugh, and Duggal, 2012). Without them, the body cannot function properly (Chandra, 2002). Macronutrients, such as protein and carbohydrates, are also essential for proper immune function (Chandra, 2002). Without sufficient amounts of them, people with HIV often experience a critical condition known as AIDS-related wasting syndrome (Polsky, Kotler, and Steinhart, 2001). If allowed to progress beyond a certain point, this condition of losing mass can by itself result in death for the HIV patient (Fields-Gardner and Campa, 2010). Weight loss is also one of the critical factors that begin the vicious cycle of fatigue, decreased physical activity, and inability to prepare and consume food which leads to greater levels of malnutrition and morbidity (Oguntibeju, et al., 2007). Without a nutritional intervention to prevent this cycle of deterioration, individuals with HIV can quickly waste away until they are beyond the point of assistance.

Appropriate nutritional interventions are an essential factor in the care of individuals with HIV (Tang, 2003; Ahoua et al., 2011; Kotler, 1994; Oguntibeju et al., 2007). When effectively implemented, proper nutritional interventions have been shown to improve nutritional status, prolong life, decrease morbidity, and increase ability to function at home and at work (Oguntibeju et al., 2007). Part of an appropriate nutritional intervention is timeliness, as the effects of malnutrition in PLWHA have been shown to start shortly after infection occurs (Fields-Gardner and Campa, 2010). Ahoua et al. (2011) found that interventions are most effective when started as early in the malnutrition cycle as possible and in concurrence with the initiation of highly active anti-retroviral therapy (HAART). This is because proper nutrition improves the body's physiological response to HAART and helps these medications to be most effective (Polsky et al., 2001). Additionally, adequate nutrition makes it easier for individuals to maintain their HAART regimen by reducing side effects. In turn, HAART helps to support the nutritional status of PLWHA (Weiser et al., 2010; Fields-Gardner, 2010). Ideally, individuals with HIV would already be consuming an adequate, balanced diet before infection occurs so that minimal damage would ensue at the onset of disease and only slight dietary modifications would need to be made in order to accommodate the heightened nutritional requirements of PLWHA. It is especially important for South African women to maintain appropriate nutritional habits, as they continue to account for a majority of HIV occurrences within the country.

Increasingly, HIV is becoming a woman's disease. Women currently account for 62 percent of all cases of HIV in South Africa, and that percentage continues to grow (UNAIDS, 2010; Turmen, 2003). This is due in part to biological factors as well as social factors, such as high rates of sexual violence and poverty, which make women more susceptible to infection than men (Turmen, 2003; Rodrigo and Rajapaske, 2010). Because of these disparities, it is especially important to focus on the barriers that HIV-positive women face in accessing adequate nutrition. Ultimately, this research is intended to provide insights generated from the perspective of women living with, living among, and caring for those with HIV/AIDS as to what might be done to help women who are HIV positive to access the nutritional resources they need.

Methods

Potential interviewees were contacted during time spent volunteering at Sophumelela Incorporated's HIV hospice and intensive care center, Dignity House. Women who were willing and available were selected via a snowball sampling method, and although HIV-positive informants were preferred, women were not eliminated from the study if they reported a negative or unsure HIV status. Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format, with guide questions to provide focus but allowing enough flexibility to make interviewees feel comfortable and to explore subjects that were important to each individual. An interpreter was used when necessary. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted, although one had to be thrown out due to an insurmountable language barrier. The remaining fourteen interviews were transcribed from audio recordings, after which they were coded for themes and frequent responses.

Results

Of the fourteen interviewees, 100 percent were female and black. The average age was 37.3 years with a range of 22 to 55 and a median of 40. On average, interviewees completed 11.2 years of school. To determine relative socioeconomic status, each informant was asked if they owned a house, a TV, or a car. A majority (57%) reported owning a TV, 43% had some sort of dwelling be it a shack, flat, or a rented house, 7% owned a car, and 21% reported owning nothing. It is worth noting that although the women reported owning these possessions, many times they stipulated that they actually belonged to their husbands. Of the fourteen women, eight (57%) were HIV positive (see Table 1).

Themes that emerged during coding can be divided into two main categories: biological factors and social factors affecting HIV.

Biological Factors

All women, regardless of HIV status, were asked what they knew about the relationship between HIV and nutrition. A majority of women (71%) mentioned the importance of "healthy food," "good food," a "balanced diet," or "eating well."

Specific answers varied but repeatedly emphasized the importance of fruits and vegetables with nine of the fourteen women mentioning fruit or giving an example of a specific kind of fruit (apples, bananas, oranges), and thirteen of the fourteen emphasizing vegetables. A total of forty-three references to vegetables or specific kinds of vegetables (spinach, cabbage, butternut squash, “green food,” tomato, etc) were made as examples of healthy food. Regarding other foods, eight mentioned carbohydrates or gave an example of prominent grain-based foods in their diets (mealie meal [corn meal] pap, whole wheat bread, rice, cereals, or the general term “starch”), six emphasized the importance of eating low-fat foods, three said drinking water was important, three mentioned juice, and two mentioned meat.

Most women (71%) agreed that nutrition is important for PLWHA or identified a benefit of good nutrition or a consequence of bad nutrition. Identified benefits of good nutrition include boosting your immune system, becoming strong, and suffering less mental stress. Consequences of bad nutrition are exemplified by comments like the following:

Immune system is going to be weak and they are going to die.

If you don't get enough food, your immune system will drop, and your weight, all that and even the pills will not work properly.

They become sick, very sick. Always she go to clinic and say I have this, I have that, and the TB (tuberculosis) come back again because she doesn't eat much food, she doesn't have food.

If you are not eating well, you are easy to catch anything outside. You are vulnerable.

In summary, it is not safe for HIV-positive people to eat poorly because when they do, their immune system weakens, they become physically vulnerable, they lose weight, they cannot take their anti-retroviral medication (ARVs), they get sick easily, and ultimately they could die.

Ironically, even though so many women recognized the importance of good nutrition for PLWHA, more than half said women who are HIV positive do not eat well. Of the nine women who addressed this topic, four said HIV-positive women generally do not eat well, one said some HIV-positive women do not eat well, and one said they themselves do not eat well. When asked what prevents HIV-positive women from eating well, few if any mentioned biological factors but instead addressed the social influencers of HIV.

Social Factors

The themes discussed in the social factors category largely address the question, “What prevents HIV-positive women from eating well?” The most straightforward answers simply included cultural food preferences. Four of fourteen women made mention of this, and responses included comments such as:

Most of the patients doesn't like vegetables . . . it is because they are not used to it, like vegetables . . . they eat what they are given at Dignity House, but they don't like to eat it, and they like fried. They like to buy [fried] chicken . . . it is not good to eat those.

It's not easy [to change your diet] at first because you like these things. It's not easy to shop all this stuff because you're used to eat junk food, so now you getting eat healthy food, it's not easy.

Our culture, we eat lot of fatty things.

We love to eat polony and the white bread. That is not healthy for us. We need to eat brown bread . . . at the same time, if you eat brown bread, people think you don't have enough money.

In general, black South African women (whom this study represents) prefer a diet based on fatty meat dishes and refined starches with vegetables and whole grains playing a minimal role. Barriers in overcoming these cultural preferences seem to be a lack of desire (the women would rather eat unhealthy foods they like even when they understand the consequences of a poor diet), a lack of knowing how to change (women don't know what foods to eliminate or what to replace them with), a lack of understanding among the general population of the importance of healthy food (they have limited knowledge of how the body functions and what things are needed to keep it healthy), laziness (unhealthy foods are quick and convenient and change is difficult), and a stigmatization of those who eat healthy food, such as brown bread and spinach, as being poor.

Some women mentioned fear of stigmatization for being poor as a hindrance to eating well even though it appears that poverty is a widespread condition affecting most people in the demographic category represented by this research (black, female, low socioeconomic status, and limited education). In fact, poverty ranked as the most frequent response in regard to the barriers HIV-positive women face in getting adequate nutrition. Most interviewees (86 %) mentioned poverty as one of the, if not the most prominent, barriers to eating well and gave many poignant comments in regards to this topic.

If you have money, you can buy good food for yourself, and if you don't have, you just eat whatever, even though it's impacting your health.

It's harder for poor people to get healthy food. That is why some of them they end up dying, because there is no food.

Now the mother [receives a] grant for the three children. Grant is R250 [a month], so [she receives] R750 [a month]. Now [the children] are going to school. The mother, she is not going to afford to buy healthy food because she must buy food for three children [and pay for school].

Food is too expensive.

Most of them they are eating bad food because they didn't have money to buy all of these things.

It's almost only the black people who are HIV and who are dying and they are those who are even having problem of poverty.

So there's a lot of crime here because of this thing called poverty. If you ask "why did you go and rob, why did you rob this poor lady?" "I needed money." "To do what?" "To buy food."

Sometimes I notice the many defaulters . . . didn't afford . . . to continue with the medication because they didn't have nothing [to eat].

Individuals living in poverty are frequently obliged to skip meals, because they simply cannot afford to buy themselves food. In turn, not eating prevents many individuals from taking their anti-retroviral medication because HIV patients are counseled by their doctors not to take medication on an empty stomach in order to prevent severe side effects. Additionally, poverty prevents individuals from buying the right foods for maintaining a healthy immune system. This is largely due to the fact that healthy food is, or is perceived as being, more expensive than unhealthy foods, which are more culturally palatable anyway. When faced with the choice of long-term health or immediate survival on foods that are comforting and enjoyable, it is easy to see why most people make the decisions they do.

On a related note, many women (64 %) identified a lack of jobs as one of the most prevalent causes of poverty. They emphasized the importance of finding a job to support themselves, even when receiving a disability grant from the government. Reasons given for not having a job include being stigmatized by potential and current employers for being HIV-positive, laziness, preferring to take the easier route living off government grants, not enough jobs to go around, afraid to market themselves because of insufficient education, and being too sick to work. While several of the women who addressed unemployment (three of nine) cited being too sick as a reason not to work, more women (six of fourteen) emphasized without prompting the fact that being HIV-positive does not mean you are disabled.

You must look for a job . . . because if you are taking ARVs at the right time, I think HIV people are well . . . You are not disabled if you are HIV positive.

Society has made sure that people who have HIV are not disabled, they can get work for themselves.

The only thing is you are positive, you are eating treatment. I can say that, so there is no difference . . . I don't take it as I'm sick, I just take it as I'm like you.

Although many individuals who are HIV-positive choose not to work, many do want a job but have not been able to get one. What happens when people can't find jobs? Six of fourteen women mentioned government aid like food parcels and

disability grants as a resource. However, many described scenarios in which those with HIV are unable to get a grant for one reason or another. They also said that having a grant is insufficient to meet all of their needs and that food parcels run out eventually. When this is the case, those in need resort to whatever they can find to bring in any amount of money.

When you go to town you look for a job. You have to look for a white man who is having a business or whatsoever, I want to clean the kitchen or whatsoever.

Some they are collecting some chics, we call it chics, metal, rusty metal so that they go to sell it so they have some money to buy food.

Some, they are sleeping around because they need money for food. Some they are going and do piece jobs . . . but there are people that they need someone who is doing the washings. You can go and ask someone to wash the washings then after they can get something to buy at least, even if it's small.

Sometimes, the others, they sell themselves to the mans to get the money. Especially those they didn't have the job.

Unfortunately, the measures many HIV-positive people, especially women, resort to only aggravate their situation and the spread of HIV. For example, prostitution is especially common among impoverished black women and as it continues to become increasingly socially acceptable, it presents a tremendous problem in controlling the spread of HIV. The cycle of poverty and HIV that leads to actions such as these must be treated holistically if it is ever to be managed. Because both poverty and HIV affect and are affected by nutrition, an intervention targeting nutrition seems to be a logical place to start.

Interventions Proposed by Interviewees

As the ultimate purpose of this research was to determine what could be done to alleviate the interrelated problems of poverty, HIV, and malnutrition among women in South Africa, each interviewee was asked to suggest a helpful course of action based on their perspective as individuals living amidst the problem. Responses varied but focused around two main ideas: food aid and gardens.

Food Aid

Local interventions for poverty and the diseases it perpetuates seem to focus around food aid. For example, at the South African Red Cross, food parcels are regularly distributed to tuberculosis patients in neighboring townships, and soup kitchens are periodically organized in town. Interviewees were asked if they had seen any interventions implemented near their homes, and while few had, those who responded described similar activities: "In my church, I know there is a [soup kitchen] they have on Wednesday at Mdantsane, so they help the community around them."

Likewise, when asked what interventions would be most helpful, many interviewees suggested activities that would fall under this category.

Maybe buy some [food], have some ladies cook soup and give to people who have HIV, the food.

Visit the person . . . and you look is there food in her place, and if nobody to help him or her, you try to do everything for him.

It would be better if someone would buy food for them”

When we ask the patient, “What are you going to do when you don’t have food,” she said “I’m going to my neighbor and ask food.”

While food distribution is likely the easiest way to get the most people the largest amount of food, some research indicates that nutritional care and supplementation programs may not be as effective as people think (Oketch, Paterson, Maunder, and Rollins, 2011). Because obesity is an increasingly common form of malnutrition in South Africa, giving people more of cheap, bulk foods that are high in calories but of limited nutritional value, such as maize meal and oil, may only increase the occurrence of malnutrition among PLWHA. One meta-analysis of several macronutrient supplementation research studies determined there is no conclusive evidence to support macronutrient supplementation as an effective intervention for improving morbidity or mortality in PLWHA (Mahlungulu, Grobler, Visser, and Volmink, 2007). Individual studies have had significant positive results, but, when combined, there is no conclusive evidence. Food supplementation programs have also been found to be unsustainable and unable to combat the comprehensive causes and effects of HIV (Yager, Kadiyala, and Weiser, 2011). Additionally, creating a dependency program in which HIV-positive individuals play no active role in providing for themselves enhances personal feelings of hopelessness and promotes widespread perceptions that PLWHA are worthless and destined for ruin, which feed stigmatizing attitudes. In short, food distribution may seem like a simple and effective intervention, but so far this method has failed to prove itself.

Gardens

South Africans widely view having a garden as a positive and helpful activity. Among interviewees, ten of fourteen agreed that it is beneficial to have a garden and six of fourteen mentioned that having a garden is more economical than buying vegetables at the store. However, only a few women reported having a garden of their own. When asked why they did not have a garden or why others might not have a garden, a majority of interviewees (57 percent) reported a lack of space or not owning the land they lived on as a primary reason.

There is not enough space to have a garden.

She’s renting where she stays, so she can’t just make a garden for herself. She has to respect the people she’s staying with.

I don't have space.

They don't have ground to make a garden . . . they stay in a place where they don't have a soil.

Because you are living in a shack, there's no garden in our yards.

Some don't have space, others they live in informal settlement, so there's no place to.

Almost half of interviewees suggested or agreed that planting gardens would be a beneficial intervention, but in order for gardens to be a possibility, space must be found. In general, townships and informal settlements are too full of shacks for everyone to plant a garden. However, patches of empty land not owned by anyone do exist, which opens up the possibility of community gardens.

There seem to be two advantages of community gardens as compared to single-family gardens. First, a community garden would enable participants to share the workload and financial burden required for a successful garden. One of the other barriers to having a garden mentioned by interviewees was lack of time and energy.

Most people they can't do gardens for themselves because they are so sick.

If you are sick, how can you dig your soil to say that I'm making a garden because you don't have any energy, you are sick?

I had [a garden] last year, but not this year . . . because I'm busy.

Another was having access to the right resources: "The things that can make [growing a garden] hard, it's the tools that is the first things. Water, because there is a problem with water here."

Every successful family garden will necessitate the use of certain tools and seeds and require a baseline amount of labor. One study found that most South Africans fail to consider these expenses when working in their own kitchen gardens, and having to buy these things may make gardens less economical than many gardeners perceive their individual ventures to be (Karaan, and Mohammed, 1998). A slightly larger community garden will require the same tools, somewhat more seeds, and a proportionally smaller amount of labor compared to total yield. If everyone were to come together and bring what they have, each family would be required to supply fewer tools and seeds and labor than they would if they were planting a garden themselves, making the venture more economically feasible for all.

The second group of benefits made available through the use of community gardens seems to be an increase in various aspects of physical, mental/emotional, and social health. Involvement in community gardens has been significantly associated with increased consumption of fruits and vegetables and increased levels of physical activity and overall health (Litt et al., 2011; Haub, 2009). Community gardens also build communities. They promote community efficacy in which community members are willing to look out for each other and aid when problems

arise. This system of watch care was mentioned frequently by interviewees as a potential solution to many of their problems or as something they would like to see strengthened.

Most people they can't do gardens for themselves because they are so sick that they can't do a garden, so they end up just relying on the people around them to help them with whatever they may need, because they can't do it by themselves.

Just like my church, we used to say to like, Saturday, let's go to work to Sandi's house to make a garden, and then everybody must go there and work from the garden. Another weekend, we go to Sheri's house and then . . . if Sheri don't know how to paint the house, and then the church will help to paint and everybody must learn to work hard.

Some they just go to their neighbors . . . When we ask the patient, "What are you going to do when you don't have food," she said, "I'm going to my neighbor and ask food."

She can just say in front of a support group, "I'm dealing with this problem, I don't have a job, I don't get enough food . . ." the support group maybe they are doing money, they can contribute.

That is why some [people with HIV/AIDS], they end up dying, because there is no food, there's nobody care about them. At clinics, they only give them the pills, the medication and go home. After that, they don't look after them [to see that] they get the right nutrition before they eat the pills.

Perhaps community gardens would provide a common objective sufficient to strengthen ties and create an environment where everyone is more willing to look out for their neighbors in need. Likewise, community gardens provide a platform for mediating conflicts, because differences of opinion must be worked through on a daily basis (Teig et al., 2009). Teig et al. (2009) specifically mention mediating disputes when one individual steals produce belonging to another. Apparently, this is a universal problem as interviewees mentioned this as a challenge in cultivating gardens: "Because they are staying with so many people, some people end up taking their veggies and using them for their own thing." If individuals become responsible to the whole community for the use of shared resources, they will hopefully manage their stewardships more responsibly and when disputes of any nature occur, there will be a system set in place to manage their resolution.

In contrast to food distribution programs, community gardens provide an opportunity for HIV-positive individuals to play an active role in providing for themselves and their families. This element of active participation may be essential in the formation of an effective nutritional intervention, because it will promote program ownership and self-efficacy to combat feelings of helplessness that are widespread among people with HIV. As many HIV-positive interviewees said, they and their peers are not disabled. In order for HIV-positive people to realize this and be proac-

tive in improving their own health, programs must avoid treating beneficiaries as invalids. Additionally, as opposed to increasing obesity malnutrition, community gardens promote consumption of fruits and vegetables and have been shown to result in improvements of overall physical health.

Conclusions

In order to reduce the prevalence and impact of HIV among South African women, holistic interventions must be implemented that address both the biological and social factors contributing to its perpetuation. Nutrition is known to have a significant impact on both biological and social phenomena. Therefore, interventions that target improvements in nutrition among PLWHA should continue to be pursued and explored.

Although food parcel distribution has been the intervention of choice for the last several years, research has failed to prove the effectiveness of such methods among PLWHA. This method is effective at providing vast amounts of people with the greatest amount of calories, but it fails to consider other aspects of health that are essential for complete wellness. In contrast, community gardens have been shown to yield increases in physical health as well as community/social health and mental/emotional health. Because of the positive cultural perceptions of gardening that are widely held throughout South Africa, and because of the multifaceted health benefits community gardens provide, interventions based on the creation of such gardens may prove to be a more effective method for improving the overall health of PLWHA.

Unfortunately, while the beneficial effects of community gardens have been well documented in industrialized countries, limited research exists in the context of developing countries such as South Africa. Therefore, the next step to be taken is conducting research to determine the effectiveness of these programs. If previous research on community gardens holds true in the context of impoverished South African communities, we can expect to see improvements in physical, mental/emotional, and community/social health among PLWHA. By addressing the challenges of HIV from this holistic and empowerment-focused perspective, we may find decreasing rates of HIV transmission as well as morbidity and mortality among PLWHA.

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“Someone to Teach Us”: But, is Nutritional Knowledge Enough to Curb Childhood Malnutrition?

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Seventeen percent of populations in developing countries are undernourished. These figures do not describe the risk of malnutrition in impoverished populations within wealthy countries. The northern province of Tucumán in Argentina faces significant problems with childhood malnutrition. While there is no current data on the successfulness of approaches to curb childhood malnutrition in these communities, there are some anecdotal reports suggesting that previous strategies may be insufficient to curb the problem of malnutrition. The purpose of this paper is to explore historical changes and subsequent perceived barriers facing families in Tucumán. Using qualitative research methodology we identify and analyze data from interviews with a purposeful sample of mothers in this community. These women described their concerns and perceptions of present strategies to curb childhood malnutrition in their communities. Implications for nursing approaches will be discussed as they carry relevance to the needs of this population.

Introduction

Dogs rummaged through the open trash barrels, dragging pieces of garbage through the dusty dirt roads, and the smell of burning trash seemed to hang stagnant in the air. I looked around to see tiny shacks of thin, splintering wood; children roamed through the streets and played in the trash-laden canal despite the less-than-pleasant smell and the odd coloration of the water. The most surprising fact was that I was not in an underdeveloped, Third-World country but in Argentina, a modern country known for its abundance of agricultural production, beef production, and high literacy rates.

In the 1990s Argentina was considered one of the ten richest countries in the world; however, in 2002, Argentina underwent a severe governmental crisis that resulted in monetary inflation and high levels of unemployment (Arie, 2002). The poor economy has made it difficult for many to afford basic essentials like adequate amounts of healthful food. This political and economic instability has been considered a key component to the current problem of malnutrition among Argentine children, especially in the rural provinces.

Government and humanitarian organizations have assisted with various programs such as *comedors* (little soup kitchens), which provide children in many areas with one meal a day in the hopes of decreasing the number of malnourished children. However, for many children, this meal was the only meal of the day, and it often did not contain enough nutrients, such as vitamins, proteins, or electrolytes,

to maintain their health. While the overall level of malnutrition in Argentina has improved over time, there continue to be pockets throughout the country in which nutrition is still a fight to be won and continues to have devastating effects, such as protein energy malnutrition, growth stunting, nutrient imbalances, and infection.

In addition to the comedors, the government and community strive to alleviate the effects of malnutrition through offering free milk and grocery programs as well as community classes. Healthcare providers and other professionals teach free classes each week at the comedors and in the local health department (CAPS). These classes included teaching on nutrition, sexual health, hygiene, and other important practices.

Although many interventions have been made, Argentina continues to battle malnutrition among the pediatric population in pockets of the country. In order to improve the situation further, research must be done to identify specific barriers to improving nutrition status of children. The purpose of this paper is to explore the historical changes and subsequent barriers facing Tucumán. We provide voices to mothers living in poverty through qualitative interviews. These women describe their concerns and perceptions of strategies to curb childhood malnutrition. Nursing approaches will be discussed as they carry relevance to this population.

Significance of the Problem and Literature Review

Shortly after the economic crisis, Mercer (2003) estimated 30–60 percent of Argentines suffered from iron deficiency anemia despite the availability of iron enriched foods. The effects of malnutrition are severe. Without appropriate amounts of vitamins and minerals, there is a decrease in immunity leading to preventable deaths from infection. Another damaging effect of malnutrition is iron deficiency anemia, which causes fatigue, as well as cognitive deficits. Malnutrition worsens the healing process of the body and has been found to worsen enteric infections (Guerrant, 2008). Protein-energy malnutrition has even been linked with chromosomal aberrations and genetic damage (Padula, Salceda and Seoane, 2009). If no intervention or action is taken, malnutrition can produce life-long damaging effects on cognitive growth and well-being.

In the time since the Argentine economic crisis in 2001, the economy has slowly improved but malnutrition remains a large concern. It was estimated that up to 20 percent of the population of Argentina was malnourished in some poverty-stricken areas in 2002 (Iglesias-Rogers, 2002) but current statistics collected by the World Health Organization (WHO, 2007) show only a small percentage of children are malnourished in Argentina as a whole. However, malnutrition in Argentina is a widespread and serious problem in some pockets of the country, such as impoverished areas in the northern province of Tucumán, which is considered one of the least developed and poorest areas in the country, or indigenous communities such as those in the province of Chaco (France 24, 2007; Al Jazeera, 2007). While it is shocking that malnutrition continues to be a severe problem in multiple areas in a country known for its abundance of food, little research has been conducted to

identify the specific barriers to accessing adequate sources of nutrition in these areas. With little reliable data, this study utilized interviews to explore the particular barriers families face.

Globally, childhood malnutrition is a complex issue with many contributing factors. These factors include poverty, family living conditions, nutritional status of the mothers, socioeconomic conditions, education level, health care utilization, and childhood infection (Pongou, Salomon, and Ezzati 2006; Rahman, 2007; Assis et al, 2007). Studies by WHO (WHO, 2008a) illustrate the underlying cause of death for 30 percent of children under five is under-nutrition with some of the biggest contributing factors being inappropriate foods and access to nutritious food. The objectives of this study were to identify the specific barriers that impaired nutrition in Tucumán, Argentina, and to assess the level of understanding related to nutrition. If any of the barriers are similar to ones in other areas of the world, it may be possible to utilize recommendations or improvements made by others to combat the problem in Argentina.

Methods

This descriptive qualitative study assessed barriers to and programs for curbing malnutrition through face-to-face interviews with a purposeful sample of mothers. Prior to data collection, IRB approval was obtained, as well as verbal consent from participants. The subjects were selected through a purposeful sample; only mothers whose children utilized the comedor system in the area of Las Talitas, in the city San Miguel de Tucumán were recruited. The interview guide, based on current literature, queried them about their level of nutritional knowledge, access to food sources, normal daily food intake, and knowledge of how to obtain food. It also assessed barriers to appropriate food consumption. Interviews were conducted in Spanish, tape-recorded, transcribed, and translated. On average, the interviews were approximately one-and-a-half hours long. Using the coding approach outlined by Miles and Huberman (1994), the data was analyzed for central themes and subthemes. These themes were then synthesized to gain a better understanding of the existing barriers to nutrition in the neighborhood of Las Talitas, a neighborhood in Tucumán, Argentina.

Research Questions

Our research questions were focused on a sample of impoverished families in Las Talitas, Tucumán, Argentina, where malnutrition was prevalent. By speaking with mothers in the community, we sought to examine the families' perceptions of current barriers and interventions for nutrition. Our research questions were:

1. What are mothers' perceived barriers to adequate nutrition?
2. How do they evaluate current interventions?
3. What suggestions do they have for future interventions?

Results

Subjects

Nine mothers participated in in-depth interviews. They ranged in age from twenty-four to sixty-one years, with formal education levels from seven years of primary-level schooling to five years of university education. All but one participant stated they were employed. Numbers of children were equally distributed; four mothers had one to four children and five mothers had greater than four.

Findings from the interviews can be summarized in thematic categories: 1) perceived barriers to providing adequate nutrition, 2) perceptions regarding current interventions, and 3) suggestions for change. Each central theme had sub-themes that are presented in Table 1.

Mothers' Perceived Barriers to Adequate Nutrition

Our first research question examined the perception of the most prevalent barriers to providing adequate nutrition currently debilitating families in Tucumán. Throughout the interview process, several barriers to nutrition were quickly identified by the participants. The four most common barriers mentioned by mothers that made it difficult for them to provide adequate nutrition for their families included economic difficulty, knowledge deficits, social issues, and cultural traditions.

Economic Barriers

One of the obstacles that mothers faced were economic barriers such as difficulty finding work and limited purchasing power of an inflated monetary system. These difficulties limited families' ability to provide adequate amounts of healthy food to nourish children properly. Mothers stated that they simply did not have enough money to purchase nutritional food and still provide for the rest of the needs of family members: "It's just so expensive to buy food. Sometimes you just can't buy the materials needed to make a healthy meal every day of the week."

Some participants connected this barrier to limited work opportunities: "Everything comes back to economics. It's all because of the lack of work, because if I had another job I could manage things in another way."

In some cases work was available but not consistent, in some instances wages were not adequate, and in others this barrier was more related to unemployment and saturation of the job market. Without the opportunity to earn enough money it was difficult for many to budget for enough nutrient rich foods to feed the whole family and still provide for other needs such as housing or clothing.

Knowledge Deficits about Healthy Foods

In addition to insufficient funds for nutritious foods, many mothers lacked basic knowledge regarding nutritious foods. Two main deficiencies were discovered. First, families were misinformed as to what healthy foods actually were, and second, that families had inadequate knowledge of appropriate portion sizes needed.

Participants were asked to describe their definition of “a healthy meal.” All participants described meals that contained some healthy foods such as fruits, vegetables, yogurt, or meat but were lacking appropriate proportions of essential types of food and nutrients, such as whole grains, low sugar intake, and low saturated fats. As participants described the normal dietary habits for themselves and their families and discussed their thoughts on nutrition and health, knowledge deficits regarding what foods were essential to include in a daily diet (such as fresh fruits, vegetables, or milk) were noted in all interviews.

Another theme noted in the interviews was, when asked what they believed were healthy foods, several participants mentioned inappropriate foods. For example, participants would include *alfajores* (little cakes high in refined sugar) or fried foods like *milanesa* (battered fried beef usually served with an egg) as healthy meal choices. Although these foods are commonly eaten in the area, they are high in sugar and fat and low in essential nutrients.

After the conclusion of each interview, participants were asked if they would like more information on nutrition. All but one participant responded affirmatively. They may not have known that they lacked information regarding healthy and unhealthy foods but knew they wanted more information and were eager to learn.

Social Issues as Barriers

A third barrier identified in the interviews was the presence of social issues in the community. These social issues tended to surface in discussion of underlying problems of families in providing substantial nutrition for children. Among the social problems noted were alcoholism, family violence, safety concerns, sexual health issues, addictions, and neglect. With social difficulties such as these, nutritional health was often secondary to safety concerns or addictive behaviors. When participants were asked what other families in the community could do to improve health and nutrition, one participant observed:

The issue with the mothers is that they have addictions. That they never lack soda, they don't lack their cigarettes, their Saturday outings, the lottery tickets, they never go without that, so if you're going to get all these things, you can be buying something for your kid. You could buy a yogurt for your child . . . you could buy them fruit or chicken, things that you can eat.

The behavior described was observed by the researcher and also described by lay health workers in the area. Behaviors such as these were noted during community surveys, comedor visits, discussion with community members, and community education. With social issues such as these, it appeared to be difficult for families to address the issue of nutrition when other social issues were so debilitating.

Traditions as Barriers

A fourth barrier identified in participant responses was learned behaviors

from upbringing and existing cultural attitudes that impacted participants' nutritional knowledge learned later in life. Most participants stated that they learned their health and dietary practices from their own upbringing: "from my mother and from my grandmother." Many traditional Argentine dishes lack vegetables and lack nutrient-rich food. When these recipes and dietary habits are passed down from generation to generation as healthy meals, little improvement in malnutrition might be seen.

In addition, attitudes of complacency by families in the area and perpetuation of these attitudes were noted by participants: "There's a lot of poor people of this level of life because the parents are this way and the children grow this way, and at the same time their children and their children." Acknowledgement of this attitude was validated by both participants and other members of the community. When attitudes like this are presented, change may come slowly and painfully, especially when it is a big change such as dietary practices. As both cooking habits and attitudes of complacency are perpetuated and passed down through generations, nutritional deficits remain a struggle for families.

This is true regarding the other barriers to nutrition identified in this section: economic difficulty, knowledge deficits, and social issues. Each of these barriers can be very complex and many participants identified all four barriers in their life, but the end result is the same—a perpetuation of behaviors that sustain malnutrition in this region.

Perceived Effectiveness of Current Nutritional Interventions

Once barriers were identified, participants discussed the effectiveness of current interventions to combat malnutrition. They acknowledged three current interventions in Las Talitas that have assisted in curbing childhood malnutrition: 1) the comedor program, government provision of one meal a day to children, 2) government assistance through free milk or free groceries, and 3) community education programs.

Comedor

Comedores are designated areas that have been set up where children may go to receive one nutritious free meal a day in an effort to reduce the rates of malnourished and underweight children. Participants noted that the comedor helped provide better nutrition for their children: "When we came here I didn't have enough to give to my son. So I'm grateful to the comedor because they gave him a plate of stew."

Participants stated that although these comedors help many families, the comedors appeared to be in need of more resources to be effective in providing a healthful meal for the children. Even though knowledge deficits were noted in the participants, one participant stated

The comedor is something that's not prepared to give good nutrition . . . you can't feed two hundred kids with two kilos of meat, each one gets a few grams.

The nutrition is an embarrassment. The children eat stew everyday and not even with all the vegetables nor the necessary amount of meat. . . . I'm sure it's not sufficient . . . It is shameful to say that food is given to the children.

Another participant stated, "We have families whose kids come and take the food home and you know that the parents divide it up for the children, and other families who take the food and then they distribute it among the whole family."

Overall, the participants demonstrated a feeling of gratitude for the assistance of the comedors but acknowledged the limitations of the program providing adequate nutrition. Such feedback may require further examination in order to improve the program already in existence and help families provide nutrition to the children.

Government Milk/Grocery Programs

Some families noted that they qualify for and receive assistance from the government. These programs include the monthly receipt of free groceries and a program that dispenses free milk. Though these help many families, not all families qualify, and they were also noted to be abused by some thus contributing to the current problem of childhood malnutrition.

One participant discussed some abuses of these programs including families using the systems inappropriately, such as using the food to feed an entire family (instead of the children the food is intended for), selling food products received from the government, or keeping children underweight to qualify for free groceries. The participant related a personal conversation with another woman in the area whose children had stopped coming to the comedor, quoting the other mother, she stated, "It's not in my best interest to have my child gaining weight like that because they're going to take away the 'Bolson' [free groceries] from CAPS."

The abuse of these programs was noted by others involved in the community such as health workers. However, the degree of abuse of these programs is very unclear. The bolson or free grocery program may not be providing nutrition to impoverished families very successfully because of an inability to reach all families in need and abuses of said program.

Educational Programs

The educational programs and assistance provided by CAPS were helpful to some. Yet when asked how effective these classes were, it seemed the programs did not reach all members of the community wanting information:

Here there is nothing. Here a social worker has never visited us. Except for one time they did a parasite campaign and the minister of health came and all the doctors, but the general feeling of it is that it's all political. They came that one time and never again. They promised water, they promised a lot of other things that never happened.

As participants were asked what other parents could do to improve health, it also appeared that some members of the community lacked the necessary incentive to attend classes that were provided in the community:

There are families here where we live for whom the topic nutrition is not important. Their priorities are other things and not the nutrition of their children . . . a lot of the people don't come when we have the discussions to learn how to cook healthy meals. A lot of people have a lack of interest about that topic.

Essentially, the comedors, bolson program, and community education seemed to be making an impact in improving nutrition. Participants did identify, however, multiple limitations of these programs, some resulting from the programs themselves, such as an inability to provide sufficient healthful foods to impoverished families, and some arising in community reception, such as abuses of the programs. As limitations were identified, participants were asked what they felt would improve the situation in the future.

Perceived Interventions That Could Contribute in the Future

After identifying limitations, participants offered varying solutions to the problem of malnutrition. The most prevalent solution, stated by every participant, was that more education would benefit families, including themselves, in the community. All but one participant reported a desire to receive more information pertaining to nutrition. The suggestion to continue and renew efforts to educate mothers about healthful dietary practices was given by many participants as an important factor in the solution to the current problem of malnutrition: "We need them to educate us, that they teach us how to live better, that they guide us; we're poor and needy people, not only needy for food, but other types of necessities . . . so as people we need someone that will teach us and educate us."

Discussion

Through our interviews, economic difficulties, social conditions, knowledge deficits, and cultural traditions emerged as barriers to providing adequate nutrition for families in this area of Argentina. Current research supports many of these findings and offers various methods to improve the situation, including altering client education methods, teaching about local food choices, providing feedback to communities, and changing attitudes (Allen, 2007, Lovett, 2005, Rosser, 2005). The focus of this discussion is to note what barriers identified in this study are supported by current literature and discuss possible methods to overcome identified barriers and improve the situation.

It is not surprising that poverty was identified as a main factor to providing adequate food for families and is perceived to be a barrier to adequate childhood nutrition. Researchers show that one of the major reasons for chronic malnutrition in children is poor socioeconomic conditions (Rahman, 2007). The current economic situation plays a major role in halting the health success of this community. Re-

searchers have shown that improving the financial situation allows families to be more equipped to provide enough nutritious food for their family (Assis, 2007).

For the area of Las Talitas this may mean using the comedors as community settings, beyond food supplementation. The comedors could be opened as adult school centers where technical and job skills could be taught to allow residents to improve their employment options. One comedor director sold pies made at the comedor to raise extra money. It was her hope to find a way to get computers donated to begin computer classes. A lay health worker suggested buying sewing machines to teach the women to sew articles of clothing, which could be sold for money. Another comedor was requesting chickens (from a government program) so they could sell the eggs. The community must be creative and work together to determine the best methods for teaching job skills and raising money for the comedors themselves, but the local government institutions may also be able provide grants or other funding for these ideas to come to fruition. Such opportunities would possibly improve socioeconomic status, empower residents, and allow them to buy nutritious foods.

Improving the socioeconomic situation would also influence the environment and social conditions of the neighborhood. Socioeconomic barriers such as sanitation, housing, literacy, future-thinking, empowerment, and employment must be addressed as part of the fight against malnutrition. It is documented that socioeconomic problems such as the marginalization of women, poor sanitation, and infectious diseases, are key factors in childhood malnutrition (Lancet, 2006).

Some improvement has been made to the environment. For example, the community recently received running water and sewer lines. This decreased the amount of stale water in the streets. Unfortunately many residents could not afford the initial set up cost of thirty pesos (ten dollars) to hook the pipes up to their individual houses. Socioeconomic barriers are complex and may need to be assessed in a more comprehensive study to determine which specific social conditions apply to Argentina and especially Tucumán.

Beyond financial struggles and social conditions, cultural practices or learned behaviors were identified by participants as barriers for good nutrition. One example of a negative learned behavior is the use of a popular tea drink called *mate*. Traditionally and culturally it replaces or is included in meals and snacks for many adults. It is a very cultural part of Argentine life. Mate is frequently served with large amounts of sugar, which can cause dental caries, contribute to poor dental hygiene, and even more importantly, mate has been found to inhibit iron absorption (Bylund, 2008). It would be impossible and culturally inappropriate to suggest to the people they stop drinking mate; however, community health workers could assist the people in drinking mate with less sugar and an hour or two before meals instead of with meals so as to decrease its iron inhibiting effects.

Health education, not only about mate but other subjects as well, would be very beneficial; researchers have found the chance of stunting a child's growth was decreased by maternal health-seeking behavior (Uthman, 2008). In addition, previous studies have linked the nutrition status of children to maternal educa-

tion and maternal nutrition (Milman, Frongillo, Onis, Hwang, 2005; Pongou, Salomon, and Ezzati, 2006; Rahman, 2007). In fact, while gains in the status of women and improved health environments and food availability contributed greatly to improving malnutrition, the greatest contributing factor in Latin America and the Caribbean was women's education (Weistaubb, Araya, Hill, and Uauy, 2008). Multiple approaches to educate and change behavior are most effective, so several options will be discussed below. As first responders to health issues, community nurses should be apprised of the best methods to teach health information and reach as many as possible. The community could be instructed on meal planning, best available foods, and what can be added to supplement a shortage of safe and healthy foods.

Something unique and powerful about developed countries such as Argentina is that the media industry is available to reach a high percentage of people and can thus be an educational tool (Lovett, 2005). One example of the effectiveness of this technique would be the current immunization rates. Printed on all milk containers in Argentina are immunization schedules. Immunization rates for Argentina as measured by the World Health Organization (2008b) were quite high in 2008; rates for *haemophilus influenzae* type B vaccine was 96 percent, diphtheria toxoid, tetanus toxoid, and pertussis vaccine was 94 percent, and polio vaccine was 94 percent. Improvements in nutrition knowledge and application could very likely come as media devices are utilized, even sharing information on something as simple as a milk carton.

As pointed out by Rosser (2005), television and advertising can have such a powerful effect that vendors themselves are affected since consumer opinion drives the market. One example of this is the famous Atkins diet, which became so popular through advertising that many vendors changed their products and some even went out of business in the United States. Even in poorer areas of Argentina, such as Las Talitas, residents owned televisions and many regularly watched afternoon *novelas* (soap operas). This would be a great time to include health nutrition education. One study in 2006 illustrated that targeting health messages through soap operas may influence members of the community to adopt more healthy practices (Dutta-Bergman, 2006). Community health nurses should be involved in utilizing, promoting, and supporting media that includes health and nutrition information.

Another effective teaching technique is peer-to-peer teaching. Educating peers and initiating discussion on health and the future has been shown to improve nutritional health as well (Allen, 2007). Lay health workers in the Hispanic community have been shown to positively impact health behavior (Fernandez et al., 2009). The community of Las Talitas already has such workers in the community who are trusted. One of the comedors already offers classes to teens once a week and the classes are well attended. Although health topics such as sexually transmitted diseases and oral health have been addressed, classes on nutrition, cooking, and ways to obtain nutritious foods may be beneficial. Finding other unique outlets for educating all groups in the community is important.

Community Attitude

Another important finding of this study is the attitude presented by participants. Most participants commented on improvements that could be made by other families but said little on what they could improve themselves. This mentality must be addressed by community nurses to empower individuals to see their role in the situation and teach families how to improve themselves before major improvements can be made in the community (Friere, 1970; Payne, 2005). Poor attitudes may be a big barrier to improvement, but it may also be a learned practice that can be overcome. Several participants stated they felt some parents were disinterested or insufficiently motivated to learn about nutrition, which may deal with a deeper issue of lack of trust in unfamiliar institutions. Because of disinterest or lack of trust, parents are not aware of the consequences, both positive and negative, of their current dietary behaviors, thus they may not see a reason to change them. Families in these situations may simply be at a lower level of Maslow's hierarchy. It may be foolish to expect a family to be concerned with proper food choices when they are first concerned with food availability in general. Community health centers should offer assistance to families to improve basic safety and living needs. Once basic needs are taken care of, it is vital for families to learn why nutrition is important, and they need to learn from a source they feel is reliable.

On a positive note, participants acknowledged that the programs such as comedors and government-supplied food boxes, although abused by some, did provide supplemental nutrition for children and their families. Community health workers (such as nurses or dietitians) could review the foods provided at the comedors and included in these boxes to determine if additional foods or supplements could be added that would benefit children. Community health workers/ nurses may want to evaluate the children by running blood tests to determine which nutrients the children are lacking and use this information in determining the best supplements or foods to add to the boxes (bolsons). One way these food boxes may be improved is by utilizing ready-to-use foods (RUFs) utilized by other international food aid programs, which have been shown to prevent acute malnutrition in some areas known to have higher prevalence and also to treat less severe forms of malnutrition (Moszynski, 2008).

Future Studies

With all of these barriers, it can be overwhelming to begin contemplating what can be done to start seeing changes in nutrition and overall health of these children. One arena where nurses could begin is in publishing and presenting the statistical data that is often already collected. This would define the problem of malnutrition more clearly, which would help improve the process of identifying interventions to bring changes in the community. Little statistical information is available on childhood malnutrition in many areas, so it may be difficult to assess how big the current problem is and what effect the current interventions are having. Researchers have shown that feedback to communities improves malnutrition (Rosser, 2005). Future

studies would be warranted to get a clearer picture of common barriers that must be addressed before the incidence of malnutrition can improve. Investigating the impact of the bolson program and possible abuses may be helpful as a quality improvement review of that program. One recommendation is a multi-factorial study in order to correlate the combination of factors that most directly relates to malnutrition. Interviews with key governmental agency figures and community leaders may provide further context for the problems and needs raised by these women.

Study Limitations

Though saturation was reached, one limitation to this study included its small sample size and raises the issue of whether all essential views were captured. Also, the sampling approach of targeting just one semi-urban area may or may not reflect the same issues of malnutrition in other areas of Tucumán, other provinces in Argentina, or other countries.

Conclusion

To our knowledge, there is no data available that describes parents' views of childhood malnutrition in impoverished communities such as Las Talitas, Tucumán, Argentina. This study helped identify some of the factors that influence malnutrition, including poverty, social issues, nutrition knowledge deficits, cultural traditions, and attitudes. There was consensus about the need for education. Nurses and community workers can provide the first line of defense through culturally sensitive, desired nutrition education.

The stories of these women demonstrated the importance of a broad-based approach to improve economic and social issues impacting chronic malnutrition. Many of the barriers identified in this study are not unique to this area. Thus, many of the solutions suggested in this paper may be applied to other populations globally and further research must continue in order to improve childhood malnutrition not only in the small community of Las Talitas but in other regions as well. Halting the epidemic of malnutrition among children everywhere is an overwhelming but critical task and must be done one step at a time.

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Cacao Connections: How a Billion-Dollar Industry Takes Root in the Disconnect of Poverty and Culture

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From its production to its consumption, cacao is at the core of a complex commodity chain that distributes chocolate in almost every country of the world and generates billions of dollars every year. In Ecuador alone, cacao produces four hundred million dollars a year, yet the growers responsible for those benefits remain some of the poorest people in their country and in the world. Based on my fieldwork with the Ecuadorian NGO, Conservación y Desarrollo, I look at the disconnect between the socioeconomic reality of the Ecuadorian cacao producers and the Western stakeholders of the chain, who often end-up benefiting from most of the profit. I argue that this disconnect takes root in the farmers' poverty and culture.

Introduction and Context: The World of Cacao and Chocolate

"The geography of chocolate links together distant regions of the world in interesting and important ways" (Grimes 2009: 24). When looking at the geography of chocolate, one cannot help noticing the way its commodity chain is distributed throughout the world. Almost 100 percent of the countries producing cacao are located in East Asia, South America, and Africa, while the chocolate manufacturing and distribution companies are almost entirely European or North American. The fact that cacao trees can only grow within twenty degrees of the equator and that chocolate is better processed in cooler areas "is often given as an explanation to this spatial rationale" (Grimes 2009:26).

Regardless, it seems that geography alone cannot explain the great socioeconomic disparities that exist between the actors in the chain, particularly when chocolate has become a billion dollar industry. If chocolate "links together distant regions of the world," it only does so by its global presence and common popularity, certainly not by the higher socioeconomic status it creates or communicates (Grimes 2009: 24). Cidell and Alberts (2006:1003) call this uneven situation a "double disconnect," where producers of cacao rarely eat the product made from their labor and consumers are rarely aware of the origin of the product they eat. Therefore, I propose cacao is an equally important commodity in production and in consuming countries; yet, it remains unable to socially and economically "link" these countries. I further explore the notion of the "double disconnect" by looking at the socioeconomic and sociocultural issues that lie behind it.

Chocolate: A Western Reality

I must start by pointing out the rather obvious reality that chocolate constitutes

today in Western countries in order to highlight the two opposite poles that exist within the chocolate-cacao industry. Starting as early as 1,500 B.C. in Mesoamerica, chocolate, or cacao, was treated as a crop of great value, as it was used for currency and was considered to be a sacred beverage. Today, chocolate continues to represent a highly valuable commodity with an average of three million tons produced and consumed every year (FOA 2003:73). However, this valued product is now used in socioeconomic contexts rather than in religious ones. And even if chocolate has become a common product, it nonetheless continues to have great significance in the lives of many.

In the Western world, chocolate is often associated with important values like pleasure, festivities, traditions, love, friendship, gratitude, forgiveness, and luxury. When given or consumed, chocolate promotes Western ideals by evoking particular definitions of gift giving, of establishing or reinforcing relationships, or of celebrating particular beliefs. And undeniably, chocolate conveys an individual's socioeconomic status through its brand, packaging, and quality. Overall, the Western world tends to view chocolate with a positive eye, regardless of the situation or intent. This perspective represents the full reality of chocolate to most chocolate consumers throughout the world, when in actuality it only constitutes one pole. The antipode of this naïve perspective is the producers' world. It includes little pleasure or luxury and is a rather harsh reality.

Cacao to Chocolate: The Commodity Chain

In order to fully and clearly understand the producers' reality, it seems important to look at the overall commodity chain and situate what the farmers' specific work constitutes.

Cacao beans grow in pods on trees. The beans are covered in a white, wet, and sticky substance. Cacao trees are a tropical plant; therefore, as explained earlier, cacao can only grow in locations near the equator. Also, cacao trees are quite fragile and require a lot of care year round. *This* is where the cacao commodity chain¹ truly starts, with the tree and the producers'² labor. The first link of the chain includes the growers' work in pruning and fertilizing the tree to ensure good production. Once the fruits are ripe and collected, the farmers empty the wet cacao beans out of the pod, and usually place them in wooden boxes to ferment them for a few days. Finally, the beans, still damp from the heating and "sweating" process of fermentation, are placed onto the ground to be dried.

After these initial stages of the commodity chain, the producers remove themselves from their product and consequently from the chain by selling the cacao to a collection center,³ buyers on the street or "middlemen." Acting similarly to a collection center, the middleman collects cacao from different farmers but does so on a broader scale. Collection centers tend to collect cacao from local farmers, but since the middleman usually owns a pick-up truck, he can travel to more distant and remote places and accumulate more cacao on a given day. Regardless of who buys

the cacao, it is important to collect a large enough quantity to sell to the next actor in the chain. I believe the driving reason for this strategy must be financial. Clearly, it is more time- and cost-effective to go to the exporting facility once a day, a week, or a month, instead of every single time the middleman or collection center receives a few pounds of cacao.

Once the cacao has been collected, it can be moved to different places. Most often, the beans are brought to an exporting facility that will evaluate their quality, grind them, place them into the appropriate container, and prepare the necessary paperwork for its exportation. If the beans are not sold to an exporting facility, they are sold to a processing facility that will grind the beans, and use different manufacturing processes to turn them into liquor, butter, or powder, and sometimes extract their chemical components. Those goods will be used for chocolate or byproducts, like cosmetics.

The chain then continues to exportation, where the processed beans are shipped to national and mostly international manufacturers. The majority of manufacturers are located in Western countries and use the chocolate products for the food industry (for cookies, candies, cereal, dessert, cake mixes, etc.). A smaller portion of the products go to pharmaceutical and cosmetic companies, as well as small chocolatiers and artisans. Finally, once the cacao has been turned into a packaged and consumable product, it is retailed, bought, and consumed.

It is important to mention this description of the commodity chain is greatly simplified and many more actors and activities can be involved in the chain. In fact, many actors may be involved in the chain without being fully aware of it. For instance, chocolate consumers buy and consume the product, but most often, they do not realize their actions and choices are part of and influence the cacao-chocolate commodity chain. Also, many other actors, like administrative or marketing employees, are involved in the cacao commodity chain without ever having direct contact with the product.

Cacao: An Ecuadorian Reality

In order to explore the producers' reality and to understand how they relate to the chain's other stakeholders, I traveled to Ecuador, one of the main cacao producing countries in the world. Ecuador is located between Columbia and Peru and constitutes one of the smallest countries in South America; yet, regardless of its size, Ecuador is the second-largest cacao producing country in South America (FOA 2003:73). In fact, it was seen as the leading cacao producer until the 1920s when two important diseases (witches' broom and monilia fungus) killed millions of cocoa trees, greatly affecting Ecuador's economy, since it was almost solely reliant on this single commodity (Henderson 1997:170). Today, Ecuador has become a small producer and exporter next to many African countries, like the Côte D'Ivoire, Ghana, or Cameroon, which produce most of the cacao exported to large companies in Europe and North America. Nevertheless, Ecuadorian cacao has remained an important source of revenue for many farmers.

Ecuadorian producers obtain cacao from two tree varieties: the native one called *Nacional*, produced by 80 percent of the growers, and the genetically modified one called CCN51. Both varieties have important advantages and disadvantages. CCN51 has the important benefit of being more productive than *Nacional*, but it does not have its prestige. The native variety has the advantages of being symbolic of the country and of having a unique flavor, even though it produces at least eight times less than CCN51. This native variety is known as *Arriba Fino de Aroma* by chocolatiers throughout the world and is constantly rewarded for its frutal and floral flavors, which can only be found in Ecuador. Thanks to its exceptional aroma, the majority of chocolate manufacturers in the world, from the biggest companies to the smallest artisans, buy cacao from Ecuador. As a result, regardless of its small national production, Ecuador's *Cacao Nacional* remains essential in the global commodity chain as its flavor is needed for almost any chocolate confection.

To cover the worldwide demand, Ecuador produces an average of eighty-six tons of cacao and generates approximately \$400 million each year. Considering these high numbers, one could be surprised to discover that most producers remain some of the poorest people in Ecuador, many living on \$1 a day per family. The explanation is simple; most farmers in Ecuador receive little or none of the profit that is made from the final product that is chocolate. Chocolate is a distant reality that they never see or taste because of their disadvantaged position in the commodity chain. This Marxian idea is at the core of this paper, where the farmer's product of labor, cacao, becomes independent of the producer, as he is left without the product and the surplus value generated from it. Without surplus or property, "the farmer is dominated by the more powerful Western actors of the chain who keep the surplus value produced with the [farmers'] labor," thus keeping them in a lower class or consciousness (Wilk 2007: 101).

In this sense, "the [Ecuadorian] growers of cacao are at a disadvantage because of their lack of power in relation to intermediaries and the large candy corporations. [These producers] are many and are often pitted against each other, whereas buyers of cacao are fewer in number" (Grimes 2009:26). In addition, most farmers are small landholders in remote areas of the country, without any real connection to the main export port in Guayaquil. Many of them end up selling to the first buyer on the street, the middleman, unaware of how much their cacao is actually worth on the global market. "Hence, cacao growers are 'price takers' not 'price makers'" (Grimes 2009:26). This competitive situation often places small cacao farmers in precarious situations, where the farmers do not usually possess the resources that middlemen or important buyers have, such as business or marketing skills, as well as sustainable farming techniques. From these inequalities in the forces of production, (tools, technologies, size of social groups), it is clear that a social stratification, and struggle with it, exist in the cacao-chocolate commodity chain. This struggle contributes to the disconnect between cacao farmers and chocolate consumers or manufacturers.

Conservación y Desarrollo: An Alternative?

After having done a good amount of theoretical research on Ecuadorian cacao production and the work of different NGOs in this area, I chose to work with a particular Ecuadorian NGO, Conservación y Desarrollo (CyD). Most of this NGO's developmental work focuses on cacao farmers in their country, as they are well aware of their people's challenging reality. CyD has spent many years helping "small farmers improve the production, quality, and marketing of their cocoa while making the farms better for wildlife habitat and safer for their families" (CyD). In fact, in January 1997, CyD started to work with fifteen hundred cocoa farmers. They helped these farming communities by organizing the producers into cooperatives sharing the processing and sales facilities and having access to micro-financing, as well as to a computer to be linked to the latest market information. The facilities have also been used to teach the farmers sustainable techniques to increase production while using environmentally friendly equipment, like solar dryers. With these ongoing projects, the organization believes it has "[helped the farmers] reclaim their heritage"—reclaim the importance they once had in their community and in their country as cacao producers (CyD).

I spent about three months with the workers and managers of CyD, so that I might better comprehend the challenging life of the producers and how CyD's work can offer alternatives to this life. During this fieldwork, I had the opportunity to travel to one of Ecuador's main producing areas to observe the work done by CyD, to participate in the interactions within the NGO, and, mostly, to interview several individuals directly or indirectly involved in developmental projects. My principal informant,⁴ Alfredo Dueñas, is one of the project managers at CyD and has now been working for about fifteen years in several projects specifically geared toward cacao in the Amazon. Dueñas' work has been mainly focused on helping farmers increase their income by organizing trainings and workshops on better production and commercialization methods. Also, he has helped farmers improve their living conditions by integrating social elements to his projects—elements such as hygiene, environmental responsibility, money management, family relations, etc. Juan José B., another of my informants, is also a project manager and has been working in a manner quite similar to Alfredo Dueñas but in the region of Esmeraldas. José Valdivieso is the director and one of the founders of CyD. Valdivieso oversees the projects and is mainly responsible for obtaining funds for new and ongoing projects. Viviana Valencia is the accountant of the NGO; she assists in payroll, in the distribution and managements of funds for projects, and helps guarantee the money is being spent in a legal and sound way. Finally, the last informant mentioned in this paper is the regional director of an NGO established in the U.S.; this NGO is the partner and competitor of CyD. I have chosen not to name this last informant.

It is important to mention that all the informants who have contributed to this research not only have the experience necessary to work in their field but they also have the education. All have at least a bachelor's degree, and their specialties range from accounting and business to biology.

Socioeconomic Disconnect

During my study in Ecuador, I had the opportunity to visit the region of Esmeraldas several times. Situated on the northwest coast, Esmeraldas constitutes one of the main producing regions of the country—ironically, it is also among the poorest. As I spent time in Esmeraldas and talked with producers and people directly involved with cacao, I realized that what I thought I knew about chocolate was completely tinted by my “Western ways.” I saw the gap and disconnect when I saw where and how cacao farmers live.

Clearly, the double disconnect mentioned by Cidell and Alberts does not only come from geography, where producers and consumers remain unaware of each other, because they live at opposite ends of the commodity chain. Rather, the disconnect takes root in simple demographics, where the basic factors of income, education, health, and employment opportunities are what create the gap in the first place.

When looking at Ecuador’s per capita GDP of \$7,500 as an initial comparative indicator against an average of \$37,400 per capita for the main consuming countries,⁵ the disconnect is evident (CIA—The world Factbook). In fact, these disparities become even greater when remembering that cacao farmers are among the poorest people in Ecuador and remain even further from consumers than the “average” Ecuadorian. Most farms I visited in Esmeraldas are quite different from the romanticized view I had of a cacao farm. Cacao producers live, for the most part, in precarious conditions without proper sanitary systems, potable water, electricity, medical services, or access to other important amenities. As I was often reminded by Alfredo Dueñas, “the people that have cacao in Ecuador [. . .] are poor people.”

In addition to their living conditions, most farmers do not own a lot of land on which to grow cacao. “Ninety-five percent of the cacao production is done by very, very small holders. [. . .] One hectare each farmer.”⁶ Not only does the revenue obtained from cacao remain seasonal, but it also remains low, since farmers can only earn from a limited amount of cacao. Considering this, it is important to note that most producers rely on other crops to make a living. Again, it was an unrealistic idea of mine to believe that cacao farmers would only dedicate their land and labor to cacao, giving it a high priority. This does not mean that farmers in Ecuador do not give importance to cacao; rather, it is clear that most of them simply cannot afford to.⁷ Here the simple yet important differences in lifestyle provide a basic understanding for the concept of double disconnect, where the producers and consumers are not merely separated geographically but mainly socially.

Disconnect and Lack of Knowledge: Mixing Varieties

The producers’ reliance on diversity is important to mention since it indicates that most farmers are not specialized in cacao. Farmers tend to have limited knowledge of the agricultural and business techniques that would allow them to produce cacao of higher quality and commercialize it in more profitable ways. This restricted knowledge is to be expected as the farmers will only provide the time or energy

necessary to produce and sell cacao and dedicate the rest to other crops, leaving little additional time or resources for specialization. But mostly, it is important to reiterate that most farmers' situations do not allow for an advanced education or additional training. For that reason, Ecuadorian cacao farmers tend to rely on the knowledge that was transmitted to them by their parents: traditional knowledge that is often unfit for a new and changed reality, thereby furthering the disconnect with Western reality.⁸

The shortcomings of this limited or unfit knowledge are demonstrated by the problems associated with mixing cacao varieties. As previously mentioned, Ecuador possesses two main varieties, a native one and an "artificial" one. Often unaware of the production processes necessary to obtain quality cacao, many farmers end up mixing the two varieties to increase their revenue.⁹ At the core of this issue lays an interesting yet unfortunate irony. The farmers mix varieties in order to obtain more money; nevertheless, they end up losing money because of the low quality of their cacao. This worsens their socioeconomic situation, further disconnecting them from consumers.

Mixing varieties does not only deteriorate the cacao's quality,¹⁰ but it also changes the unique flavor that Ecuador is known for, thereby discrediting the entire Ecuadorian market and its symbolic product. As previously explained, most manufacturers and distributors of chocolate need a small percentage of *Fino de Aroma* in order to guarantee the quality of their chocolate. However, if manufacturers cannot ensure this quality with Ecuadorian cacao, they will choose to buy from neighboring countries that also produce *Fino de Aroma*. Hence, by mixing cacaos in hopes of earning more, producers actually help create and reinforce the negative image of Ecuadorian cacao. Since the farmers do not have the means to connect to the manufacturers and consumers' world, they do not know what they should or should not do to ensure their cacao meets the Western definition of quality. As a result, they push consumers to stay away from their low quality cacao, taking the risk of losing business and ultimately being removed from the industry all together.

Disconnect and Lack of Knowledge: Using Middlemen

Selling cacao beans can be a bit more complicated than it seems, since farmers are removed from the location or individuals that buy cacao beans. The main exporters are in Guayaquil, situated in the south, whereas the growers are spread throughout the country. Only a very small minority of farmers have access to a vehicle that allows them to bring their cacao to a collection center or an exporter. Cacao producers must rely on intermediaries to sell their cacao, the middlemen. As previously mentioned, the farmers' basic demographics and socioeconomic situation is especially challenging; nonetheless, I would argue that the system of the middleman is another issue that worsens the farmers' situation and removes them from the consumers.

The first reason why producers are most at a disadvantage from using the middleman system is because it directly contributes to their poverty. In Ecuador,

middlemen remain few compared to the number of producers, allowing middlemen to buy cacao for a lower price than it is worth since the farmers do not have the luxury of waiting for another middleman to give them a better price. Again, the producers do not have means to bring their cacao to a bigger and more regulated facility, so they must to rely on the first middleman's offer.

The true difficulty of working with middlemen seems to lie in the fact that there are no official regulations that impose strict and established ways to sell cacao. For instance, Juan José used to work as a middleman before he became a project manager for CyD, and he admitted to me that most of the men he worked with were dishonest. He saw many of his colleagues using a scale that had been modified to show a lower weight, paying the producers for ninety pounds instead of one hundred pounds.¹¹ Juan José told me quite a few "middleman stories." He shared one in particular as we were driving to Esmeraldas, and I noticed what looked like brown beans on the side of the road; I asked about them. Juan José and Valdivieso joked that it was the farmers trying to drive the middleman's truck off the road and get rid of him. Realistic or not, I found this joke quite significant, as it clearly reflected the tense relationships that exist between farmers and middlemen. The Marxian idea of class struggle is made evident here, where the different stratified levels of the chain "are in contention and conflict with each other" (Wilk 2007: 17). Not only do middlemen serve their own interest and attempt to dominate farmers by using the system's lack of regulation to their advantage, but this joke implies that farmers understand and struggle back against this attempt to control their socioeconomic status.

In addition to this socioeconomic challenge, the middleman system seems to take away the importance of the farmer's work and presence in the process. Indeed, as cacao comes to the exporting and manufacturing facility from many different farmers, farmers do not have the opportunity to connect with this part of the commodity chain. They lose their original voice and true power to promote and defend the importance of their work as the starting point of it all, as well as their origin, flavor, and identity. As cacao becomes further removed from its starting point by being exported, manufactured, distributed, etc., farmers quickly disappear in people's minds as the founding block of the final product that chocolate is. The individual farmer fades into a body of numerous producers and becomes unable to communicate his uniqueness to the market, to the "outside" world. It seems fair to say that through the middleman system, farmers become alienated from their work and its social and economic benefits. They are unable to affirm themselves through their production, to show their individuality through their cacao, and to communicate their objectified consciousness and participation to other actors of the chain (Marx 1932).

Disconnect and Lack of Aid

The cacao industry in Ecuador generates \$400 million a year, but farmers continue to "die of hunger," as Dueñas often repeated. I have mentioned multiple rea-

sons that can explain this irony, but I believe it is important to add that the Ecuadorian government also contributes to this separation between the two ends of the cacao commodity chain.

One primary contributor to this socioeconomic disconnect, I believe, is the stratified Ecuadorian social structure. Farmers tend to have limited knowledge of the agricultural and business techniques that would allow them to produce cacao of higher quality and commercialize it in more profitable ways. From daily conversation I have had with native Ecuadorians, observation of the language and behavior used toward indigenous people, as well as my interviews, it seems that government officials have little interest in small and remote producers, as they are unable to socially relate to them and or physically reach them. On the other hand, farmers are hesitant to associate with government officials due to the violent history of slavery and abuses against indigenous people that remains a stigma. Dueñas and Valdivieso often told me that farmers do not easily trust people from a higher social status and feel uncomfortable around them because they believe themselves as “ignorant” or having too little education to speak out and defend their beliefs and practices.¹²

As cacao producers are viewed in such an inferior way, they obtain no aids from the Ecuadorian population or government, apart from that given by NGOs. As a result, the great majority of cacao farmers remain powerless, unable to better their situation, because they are too far away, too small, and too poor to make it alone. The solution that was often mentioned by my informants during my research is the creation of farmers’ associations, where producers come to a certain location to sell their cacao beans and obtain a fair price for them.¹³ Associations are extremely positive when they function properly because they might end up directly signing contracts with manufacturers or distributors, marketing the particular flavor and origin of the association’s group of farmers. This purpose that lies behind the creation of an association is essentially to “overturn the social and economic system, which gave power to certain small groups,” such as the Western actors of the chain, “and to make a new one that would serve the majority, the largest group, instead,” the cacao producers (Wilk 2007: 85). The goal is to restructure the small economic system that the commodity chain represents, in order to empower small farmers by unifying them. As a group of growers comes together, they gain social and economic strength as well as become recognized for their unique identity in the market; from this point on, the producers start existing in the mind of the consumers, becoming alive and connected¹⁴ to them.

Nevertheless, associations remain a minority since, by law, they must be legally represented to be created in the first place. This requirement seems unrealistic as farmers have very little money to pay for a lawyer or the documents necessary, no education to understand legalities, and often no means to go to the larger cities where the process takes place. Accordingly “there are 120,000 producers in Ecuador, and only 15 percent are organized.”¹⁵ As the government does not facilitate the creation of associations, farmers remain isolated, unable to create a “bridge” to the other end of the commodity chain.

Furthermore, even though the production of cacao greatly contributes to the country's economy, the Ecuadorian government has not created a law that regulates ways to produce or sell cacao. Therefore, the industry remains quite disorganized¹⁶ and monopolized by the same actors—the ones keeping the surplus capital. Most importantly, without a law, cacao remains untaxed at any level of the production or commercialization. The money generated is lost in the mass, rather than being reinvested to stimulate the industry by providing farmers with important amenities, fomenting education and training, introducing new technologies, as well as promoting research and marketing within and outside the country. The government benefits directly from the money generated by farmers, but does not contribute to their welfare by giving them the tools to better their work, their living conditions, and socially and economically connect them to the consumers.

According to Marx, "people's economic rationality is deeply embedded in society" in such a way that labor and class influence a society's social organizations and cultural values (Wilk 2007: 95). Those ideas appear well represented in the Ecuadorian system, where the historical and social views on indigenous people are reflected in the economic system, particularly the one corresponding to the cacao commodity chain. As farmers are not valued as social individuals, the economic system linked to their labor and the product of their labor appears to be viewed with the same lack of interest. Even though cacao farmers largely contribute to the Ecuadorian economy, their participation is not officially acknowledged by the system in the form of protective laws or taxation.

Socio-Cultural Disconnect

As previously described, the majority of Ecuadorian cacao farmers are almost completely detached from the rest of the industry due to their lack of education, technological means, and transportation. However, I believe the disconnect is also caused by their culture as *campesinos* and/or as indigenous people. Very early into my research, I realized cacao farmers had a very different culture from Ecuadorians living in the cities,¹⁷ and obviously, from Western consumers. Surely, the farmers' precarious living conditions will foster a different reality, thus a different culture, but it is not merely the different socioeconomic environment that removes farmers from consumers, it is their traditions and heritage.¹⁸

During my fieldwork, I was always surprised when I heard CyD workers explain that farmers did not productively and efficiently grow cacao. After all, I knew cacao had been produced in Ecuador for over three hundred years. I always assumed that with such a long history of cacao production, farmers would have mastered its growing techniques. I later understood the problem does not arise from the farmers' limited expertise but rather from the quickly changing world around them. As Valdivieso once told me, "The world changed, but they did not."

Most of the cacao farmers indigenous to Ecuador (like the Kichwa) once lived as hunter-gatherers.¹⁹ Unfortunately, most of them have not adapted to the decrease in resources due to the extreme deforestation of the Amazon and the contamina-

tion of rivers. As they have retained their hunting-gathering culture, most Kichwa growers still do not possess the agricultural knowledge to produce cacao in large enough quantities to support them. As Dueñas often explained to me, even if they have always grown cacao, indigenous people have done so in a very “passive” way. Traditionally, they never pruned, trimmed, fertilized, cleaned, or even took care of the cacao trees on their land. To them, “the tree simply produced because God was good” and they believe that pruning the tree’s branches, hurts the tree.²⁰ For that reason, I was always told that Kichwa people are “lazy.” By this, I believe my informants meant the Kichwa do not like the idea of putting a lot of additional effort into their daily tasks, as their beliefs teach them that nature must be left to take its own course.²¹

Similar to Kichwa people, Esmeraldas’ cacao farmers have been growing cacao for many generations and also continue to rely on the knowledge that was transmitted to them by their parents. For instance, traditional farmers from Esmeraldas typically let their cacao trees grow freely as well, making them less productive. Also, they tend to only grow a few specific crops, which reduces the diversification of minerals used and harms the richness and productivity of the soil. Those different crops are often planted without knowledge of their potential incompatibility or the required distance between them, weakening further the cacao trees that are already naturally fragile. Finally, due to their low income, farmers do not usually possess the right technologies or infrastructures to dry and ferment the beans, again, losing productivity and quality. With most producers in Ecuador, those kinds of “errors” in the traditional knowledge of cacao production have not changed for many generations, because they have remained isolated and without access to specialized education.

Because their cultural heritage does not promote an intensive production, thereby generating higher incomes, farmers are still in a stage of poverty, isolation, and disconnect from the more powerful sides of the industry. Most importantly, as they are unable to meet the increasing demand for chocolate and to become more competitive against the massive producing countries of Africa, small producers in Ecuador continue to be forgotten as an important element of the commodity chain. Big chocolate manufacturing and distributing companies are less likely to contract with them against Ghanaian farmers, for example, because their quantity is too small and is available only for a higher price.²² In turn, they remain removed from the profit made by the industry, from potential new technologies, and from new knowledge to market themselves and their products. As a result, the consumers continue to remain unaware of them.

Traditions: The Demands of the West

In addition to not having the appropriate knowledge to easily produce more and become better recognized, Ecuadorian cacao producers have difficulties meeting the demands set by the West. Since almost all manufacturing and distributing companies are European or North American, producers must deal with the

challenges of learning and adopting business etiquette that is foreign to them.²³ During my research, I had the opportunity to conduct interviews about farmers' associations, and to visit, several times, two of these associations. As I found out more about these organizations, I realized how extremely difficult it was not only to create and build them,²⁴ but, mainly, to keep them running as they require funds and organizational skills that farmers usually do not have.

First of all, the difficulty comes from having a hierarchical system within the association, with a director or a directive group.²⁵ The farmers always choose who they want on the directive; however, it does not necessarily make leading the group easier. Since most farmers tend to be their own supervisor, and they only have social or religious leaders, they are not often eager or used to having another producer dictate their work. Regardless, for the association to be taken seriously and seen as established, it must show a business or office-like organization. Again, for cacao farmers to physically and economically connect to more powerful actors of the chain, they must attempt to assimilate the social order of those Western actors. Unfortunately, these systems are completely unfamiliar to most farmers, with the result that only 15 percent of Ecuadorian farmers are organized into associations, leaving the remaining 85 percent completely disconnected.

Aside from this social challenge, associations must also have technologies that allow them to become marketable, and to constantly keep in contact with other actors in the chain that live in cities or other countries. Therefore, having phones, cell phones, computers, and Internet is crucial, since the most important contracting companies like Kraft or Mars do business through modern communication. Rarely will those companies actually come to the association's location.²⁶ As a result, associations do not only need to possess fairly advanced technology, they also need to have staff that is specifically trained, especially with computers, and paid to use the technology. This condition is another challenge that associations must face if they are to be considered for a direct contract with buyers.²⁷ Unfortunately, this requirement also takes the kind of money and education that micro-enterprises, like a group of cacao farmers, do not have and cannot obtain by themselves. If farmers are not culturally connected to the industry's influential actors by incorporating their expectations regarding business, they will remain cut off from the higher socioeconomic status available through the "money-making" echelons of the chain.

Finally, it is important to emphasize that even if associations receive help from NGOs to get started, they must already demonstrate a certain assimilation of Western ways. During my research I had the opportunity to deal with different NGOs; I became especially familiar with two in particular. The longer I was in the field, the more I realized that not many NGOs were actually disposed to fund a group willing to create an association. To funders, national or international, providing money to start an organization from the ground up is very risky, as many groups do not have what are considered basic necessities (i.e., potable water, electricity), and as there is no guarantee that this money will eventually lead to a final and concrete result. NGOs would then usually provide money for already existing projects. And, just as

individuals are often more likely to gravitate toward an ethnic, social, or linguistic group that is similar to theirs, I often felt NGOs would not trust their money in the hands of groups that did not demonstrate the same business values and ethics as them. This pattern clearly demonstrates Marx's idea that "modern economics [is] basically ethnocentric" (Wilk 2007: 16). NGOs are driven by and, therefore, prefer "a way of looking at the world that [is] determined by the capitalist [and Western] system," while this system and worldview is completely foreign to most cacao growers (Wilk 2007: 16).

As a matter of fact, this cultural disparity between the farmers and the Western actors of the industry became clear when I interviewed the regional director of an American NGO.²⁸ During the interview, I came to ask about this NGO's priorities when starting a new project. The director mentioned different aspects and came to explain what they take into account when selecting the social group targeted for the project. I found this answer significant:

It would be very difficult for us to work with a group of producers that we have almost no hope to see reach the market somehow. Normally we have to do an assessment and we have to make sure that there is a reasonable potential for these producers to be attractive to the market. [. . .] So [. . .] maybe there is a threshold, there is a level at which producers are in a better position for the market. If we want to work with producers that are not at that level, we would consider it as a special project, as a special effort on our part. [. . .] When we say that they are disadvantaged vis à vis the market, that does not mean that there isn't a market; what it means is that they are not equipped at this moment to reach that market. Maybe because their practices are not good enough, their quality is not good enough, their logistics, their ability to become organized as associations. So it's more on their side. [. . .] I would say we work [. . .] 60 to 70 percent with the more established [associations] and 30 to 40 percent with groups that are at a lower level, that are beginning.

This response confirms, again, that cacao farmers are more likely to receive help and become connected to consumers if they already demonstrate ways of thinking and behaving that are familiar and conformable to the Western actors of the chain. One cannot help noticing another irony of the farmers' situation, where they remain disconnected because of their socioeconomic circumstances; yet, they are expected to already have a more globalized socioeconomic connection in order to improve this same connection.

In relation to the previous quote, it also seems important to mention that NGOs, who advertise and invest money into international development, are at the market's mercy.²⁹ These NGOs look for "success stories"³⁰ that the market wants to hear and can relate to. The market must be able to relate to *this* particular group of cacao farmers living somewhere in Ecuador, if consumers are to pay an extra \$1.50 for their chocolate bar. If these farmers' way of life and of thinking is so far removed from the consumers' that they would rather buy a Hershey bar, the NGO will not

receive funding. Simply said, a development agency is an enterprise; it will only invest if it is almost guaranteed to see a viable return. It seems that most farmer groups remain in the same stage of poverty simply because their socio-cultural system does not fit with what the Western world wants them to be.

Traditions: When Coping Means Migrating

Most farmers are well aware that their lower socioeconomic status is partly due to their isolation and activity as producers, so many chose the enticing option of migrating to the city. As Dueñas explained, "There are many people that migrate every day, especially from the countryside, because they don't have sufficient income. People become desperate, and, in the end, they migrate." Clearly, to most people living in precarious conditions and in very small communities, the city represents the possibilities of "progress" and "economic power."³¹ Therefore, since making a connection with the West represents a true economic, legal, technological, and social challenge in little towns, farmers move to a place where they have higher hopes of prosperity, that is, where they can more directly reach a socioeconomic and cultural connection with the West.

Nevertheless, when visiting Ecuador or South America, one quickly comes to realize that the progress and material wealth in cities does not eliminate poverty. In fact, every day as I took the bus through Quito, I saw hundreds of people begging and selling any imaginable item to survive, whether food, books, music, trash bags, or a single piece of gum. As Viviana Valencia explained, "When you pass through the avenues of Quito, you find a lot of people begging, asking for money. And these are people that very often have their own piece of land in the countryside." So it seems that the farmers' migration does not actually improve their socioeconomic situation; rather, they remain in the same stage of poverty, and thus removal, as when living on their land. But there is more, for if farmers move to the city, it means they can no longer produce cacao. By migrating, farmers end up entirely removing themselves from the industry, completely mitigating the city's technological and legal advantages,³² and, as mentioned below, creating a potential problem for the industry.

Moreover, the living conditions remain as precarious in the city as in the countryside; farmers continue to be viewed as inferior; for if campesinos and indigenous people are viewed as lower in the Ecuadorian social structure, there is no doubt their new status as beggars or street vendors only worsens this already established sense of inferiority. As previously discussed, due to this negative perception, government officials continue to have little interest in helping farmers and indigenous people reclaim their land and find solutions to bring about productivity, sustainability, and higher incomes. Therefore, because of the socioeconomic and even cultural gap between farmers and Ecuadorian officials, the government pays no attention to former farmers, and the assets they possess in their land. In turn, as farmers are ignored and left to survive without aid, they end up migrating, completely giving up their participation in the cacao industry.

As Dueñas and Valencia pointed out, this phenomenon of the migration of farmers to the cities represents a considerable problem, since it threatens the traditions and knowledge of cacao growing,³³ as well as the cacao industry all together. Newer generations quickly understand the difficult lifestyle associated with cacao production, especially when left without governmental or nongovernmental aids. Consequently, they choose to take a chance on finding work that is less labor intensive, more profitable, and more prestigious by moving to cities. While more people are choosing this alternative, the older generation remains the majority of the population in the countryside. However, this older population is no longer physically capable of doing manual labor, and much of the productive land turns out to be neglected or abandoned. As newer and older generations live apart, “the phenomenon of teaching newer generations [how to grow cacao], where the grandpa taught the dad, and the dad taught his son, and the son to his son, is not there. [. . .] And the tradition of knowing how to run a farm [and the field] is lost.”³⁴ By looking for a connection with the West when migrating to cities, newer generations abandon their parents’ knowledge as a heritage, becoming as disconnected from cacao producers and the origins of chocolate as any consumer.³⁵

Considering Development

Having laid out the socioeconomic and cultural gap that exists between producers and the other Western actors of the commodity chain, it seems important not to remain defeatist by simply exposing the challenges of the cacao producers’ reality. Rather, I wish to consider what has been tried to change this reality, how it has been done, and what remains to be considered. My initial desire when going to Ecuador was to understand precisely *if* and *how* development projects could constitute a bridge between the producers’ and consumers’ worlds. Interestingly enough, I found the disconnect in the cacao-chocolate commodity chain was being carried into development projects.

Development Projects: Closing or Furthering the Gap?

First of all, it is important to consider that establishing a development project is, initially, highlighting a disconnect. Indeed, most often a project exists because it acknowledges a disconnect between a people’s traditional knowledge and/or behavior and modern, perhaps better adapted, ones. The project serves to create a bridge linking the traditional to the modern, in order to eliminate the disconnect. Nonetheless, highlighting the disconnect does not make breaking away from customs any easier. Dueñas often gave me the example of the Kichwa farmers to illustrate that difficulty. He explained it was very difficult for CyD to teach this people new ways of producing cacao since their production method did not only constitute their traditional knowledge; it was at the core of their belief system.³⁶ Therefore, establishing a development project and bringing about changes is a challenging “cultural process”³⁷ on its own, as it represents a way to break away from the established.

In addition to this, it seems this concept of disconnect is only being furthered by the socioeconomic and cultural gap existing between the “developers” and the ones “being developed.” As I mentioned earlier, cacao farmers do not receive governmental aids, apart from that given by NGOs; therefore, they are most likely to receive funds from NGOs and projects developed by Western countries. This is significant, since the projects and their workers will tend to rely on Western ideals and methods that are often unknown to the farmers.

A development project then appears to follow the same pattern as the cacao-chocolate commodity chain, where the farmers have difficulties connecting to the Western world because the solutions and individuals offering them are culturally inappropriate. Also, just as the disconnect in the commodity chain seems to keep cacao farmers in the same stage of poverty and anonymity, the disconnect in a development project appears to produce the same end result when a project fails.

The Expert

I found out more about the issue of using culturally unfit methods and individuals when Dueñas told me about CyD’s progress in the past fifteen years. To demonstrate this progress, he always mentioned the differences between the traditional method and the new one. With the traditional way, he explained, “Farmers are not getting it. [. . .] They have received lots of training but they don’t assimilate,” because the engineer³⁸ is the one who teaches and develops everything. “He comes with all his knowledge” and tells people how to run their farm. He probably learned all those theories at a university, but he has never planted anything in his life.

As a result, the traditional method was a complete failure when CyD used it because the engineers would not take into consideration the farmers’ needs, desires, or knowledge, and fully integrate them into the projects. For instance, the NGO would plan workshops on what they felt the farmers should know, like plant diseases or cacao, but the farmers would not actually have problems with those diseases, or they would want to plant coffee. “But the money was invested, [so they] had to comply, [even though] it was not the farmers’ needs.” So the issue truly comes from teaching the farmers about what *they* want to learn, “what they feel is theirs.”

Going along with this, Dueñas always insisted on the importance of valuing the farmers’ knowledge. As he explained, now “we take the expertise of farmers. They have been there for fifty years and their grandparents before them. They know the topography of the area, the conditions of the soil, where the animals and the water are, the places where to plant, the seasons. They have an expertise we value like gold. [. . .] the traditional expertise does not value the farmers’ experience; the expertise comes from the engineer.”

As exposed by Nolan (2002), on one hand the difficulty comes from the supposed experts, “economists, planners, nutritionists, demographers, and the like.” They too often impose their “expertise” on the local populations, having no interest in understanding the local needs according to local definitions, and little consider-

ation for the already present local knowledge. On the other hand, the challenge is only furthered by the farmers' fear to speak out even though they know the workshop is useless to them. As Alfredo explained, indigenous farmers tend to be very timid in front of white or Western "experts." They believe themselves "inferior" and "feel ignorant" for it. They "prefer to remain quiet" as they "are usually not given a chance to be heard and to expose [their] ideas."³⁹

Thus, it seems fair to say that a development project brings and, potentially leaves, farmers in the same disconnect that they know in the cacao-chocolate chain as experts and farmers have difficulties looking beyond their mutual socioeconomic and cultural differences in order to overcome those exact same difficulties found in the cacao-chocolate commodity chain.

Local Context and Participation

Today, CyD easily admits having made the mistakes of using the traditional method, and has learned the importance of the farmers' voice in development projects. However, during my fieldwork I quickly understood that if CyD has the advantage of understanding and having good relationships with its people as an Ecuadorian NGO many Western organizations are still relying on the traditional method.⁴⁰

I often heard CyD's project managers tell me they did not agree with the way certain NGOs ran their projects. First, they found it very important for any project to be directly designed along with the local people rather than "from the desk."⁴¹ That is, rather than by an individual in a different region or country with little knowledge of the farmers' reality. Gardner and Lewis confirm this lack of participation of the local people in the decision-making process is often due to the top-down manner development projects are planned. "Plans are made by distant officials who have little idea what the conditions, capabilities, or needs are in the area or community which has been earmarked for developmental interventions" (Gardner et al., 1996:63). Just as consumers and producers cannot geographically and socially connect with each other, the individuals designing the projects cannot socially relate to the farmers because they have never experienced their world. Such a project design would point out an important gap between the needs and desires of the ones "developing" and of the ones "being developed." Consequently, these projects often end up unsuccessful, because the farmers are not involved or are attached to seeing the project succeed, which only keeps them further from the consumers' reality.

Additionally, CyD's project managers always insisted on seeing that this new method be included as part of the project methodology. That is, not only would the farmers participate in the design but also learn *through* their participation. Instead of being "lectured" by the engineer, farmers "learn by doing" with what CyD called the Farmer Field Schools (FFS).⁴² In FFS, the farmers become the sole decision makers, to such extent that the developers are no longer called a "helper, teacher, or engineer," but a simple "facilitator," giving power back to the farmers.⁴³ The farmers "decide where [to] meet, which plant they want to plant," or which method they

want to learn about.⁴⁴ The fundamental idea is to foster “an inclusive, participative, democratic, and propositional process,” where nothing is forced and no one is left behind.⁴⁵ The farmers “develop their own concept” in a way they “will never forget,” since they personally developed it and did it in a practical and simple way “with words, with exercises, with examples.”⁴⁶ “Farmer Field Schools [are] very powerful as soon as [farmers] can see how important they are.”⁴⁷ They become empowered and start wanting and feeling capable of connecting to the “outside world,” if they can “feel valued, wise, and important.”⁴⁸

Moreover, the FFS are participative in their teaching methods. Farmers are taught “in a way they can love,” that is, in a way that speaks to their less individualistic culture.⁴⁹ They “do little groups” and develop workshops with friends, relatives, and acquaintances from the same local area,⁵⁰ all sharing their own experience and local knowledge while integrating new information and technology. With this method, facilitators and students learn from each other, without rejecting any type of knowledge simply because it is different, too old, or too new.

“At the end, [the farmers] will go immediately apply on the field.” The knowledge acquired becomes sustainable because the farmers have not only watched or listened but actively participated along the way. Also the knowledge is perpetuated when “farmers don’t hear it from [the engineer,] but from a neighbor who says that it is working.” The farmer will look at his neighbor and see that he has a motorcycle while he only has a bike. Then he will start to wonder why and will want to adopt his neighbor’s techniques, because he is obviously making more money.⁵¹

With FFS, the producers are given a voice to include their own values and personal cultural and social context into the project. Gardner and Lewis (1996), as well as Nolan (2002), advocate this importance for development to become more context-specific, “integrating [more] local cultures into its models and processes, and using [more] local resources to carry out its plans” (Nolan 2002:270). As farmers can relate to the knowledge, methods, and individuals involved into the project, they tend to better retain what they have learned and have a greater desire to continue applying the changes. As Juan José clearly stated, “it is human nature,” if farmers invest their own time, energy, and sometimes money into workshops, meetings, or associations, they will have a vested interest in seeing their hard work lead to concrete results.⁵² A development project is much more likely to succeed, and cacao farmers are much more likely to overcome their poverty and anonymity, if they can personally relate to what a project puts at stake.

Discussion

Considering the many challenges present in the cacao-chocolate chain for cacao farmers, I find it important to discuss what might be the eventual consequences of the disconnect, and what remains to be done and researched in order to overcome those challenges.

One important consequence of the disconnect I previously discussed is the one of immigration. One potential outcome of migration, that I believe is worth looking

at, is the threat it represents to the whole cacao-chocolate industry. When the newer generations of cacao farmers migrate to cities in search of a better socioeconomic situation, they ultimately look to become part of the social group that is wealthy enough to buy and consume chocolate. However, it is important to consider questions such as: Who will be the next generation of cacao producers, if the producers would rather become consumers and if most of the producers left are now too old to produce? If cacao production decreases while the demand remains the same, will consumers be willing to pay more for their chocolate bar? If consumers have to pay more, will they start to ask more questions about the origins of cacao? On the other side, if consumers continue to not ask questions, will they simply let chocolate become a luxury product, allowing producers to increase their income? Would any of those possible effects affect the disconnect in any way at all?

All these questions seem to highlight the fact that the cacao-chocolate system is changing, leading us to further ask if, as expected by Marx, the working class (in this case farmers) is showing the kind of increasing class consciousness that will lead to more conflicts “as the inequalities of capitalism increase” (Wilk 2007:101)? And will those potential changes or revolutions “return the ownership” of the surplus to the farmers “who [do] do the actual work?” (Wilk 2007:101).

On a broader scale, is this disconnect only present in Ecuador, or is it similar in cacao producing countries worldwide? Is this disconnect applicable to other products and commodity chains? Finally, does this disconnect not simply come back to basic worldwide inequalities? Or is it less complex and are there solutions that remain to be explored? These questions could certainly be the subject of further studies and might not only bring to light the important weight that cacao and chocolate have in many societies, but they might present solutions to some of challenges exposed in this paper.

In fact, I believe the discipline of anthropology might represent an asset in finding new answers and solutions. As I have explained throughout this paper, cacao farmers seem disconnected from the benefits generated from their labor, because they belong to a reality that is too different from the one of developers or other actors in the chain. Therefore, whether in the commodity chain or in development, farmers are left behind, because most of the world seems “[dependent] on Western modernity,” while they have little knowledge of what this Western modernity involves (Escobar 2005:341). In this sense, anthropology can constitute a mediator between those two realities, by offering ways of connection that do not force Western values upon farmers but rather find culturally acceptable and successful solutions.

Throughout my fieldwork I realized that if a project is to be successful, project managers and facilitators need to possess the same skills taught to anthropologists for their fieldwork. The project managers always use gatekeepers to gain entrance and trust from the community; a concept often used by anthropologists. Also, Dueñas always insisted on the importance of visiting a community as often as possible and creating a strong relationship with farmers if the project is to be successful, just as anthropologists build rapport, observe, and participate in the

life of a social group in order to better understand and connect to them. Finally, it is clear that anthropologists as well as project facilitators must eliminate any prejudicial beliefs if they are to create a connection with any community. Therefore, it is clear that anthropology can initially help compensating for the cocoa-chocolate industry and development projects by creating a socio-cultural link, initially, and possibly a socioeconomic one.

Conclusion

As demonstrated throughout this paper, if the “geography of chocolate” indicates a gap between the initial and final stages of the cacao-chocolate commodity chain, the socioeconomic and cultural disparities between the initial and final actors of the chain only seem to confirm this gap. The farmers’ poverty comes as the initial and evident explanation for their removal, as they possess or receive no means to learn new methods of production and commercialization. But it is not merely their poverty that triggers this disconnect, it is their cultural beliefs and behaviors that foster it. Interestingly enough, even though developments projects are there to help removing those socioeconomic and cultural issues, they in fact seem to highlight them, leaving farmers in the same initial disconnect. Consequently, by not behaving and thinking in ways that better fit the Western world, producers remain passive and removed from the benefits of their product. Surely, the concept of disconnect gives a clear explanation for how a billion-dollar-industry can be raised from poverty and anonymity.

NOTES

1. Since I will use the phrase “commodity chain,” it appears important to quickly review what it means. The commodity chain, also called “value chain” or “chain of value,” constitutes the entire process from the time cacao is grown to the time it is used in form of byproducts, or consumed in form of chocolate. The cacao-chocolate commodity chain includes the sequence of the different actions and individuals involved in cacao or chocolate.
2. In this paper, I will use interchangeably the terms “producer,” “farmer,” and “grower” to refer to the Ecuadorian individuals who provide buyers with cacao by collecting it, fermenting it, and drying it.
3. The collection center is a central location where farmers from the same area go to drop off and sell their beans.
4. All individuals named in this paper have purposely chosen and asked that their name and role in the NGO appear without being altered or concealed.
5. The top five consuming countries are Netherlands first, followed by Germany, the UK, France, and the U.S. (FOA)
6. Alfredo Dueñas, 19 July 2010.
7. As explained in *Cacao: an Ecuadorian reality*, the majority of farmers produce *cacao nacional*, which has a fairly low production. Therefore, unless farmers can afford to produce the CCN51 variety, they must supplement their revenue with other crops as cacao alone would not be sufficient.
8. I will later come back to this idea in the section dedicated to *Culture*.
9. The primary criterion that is considered when buying cacao is weight; the more weight, the more money the farmer will receive. CCN51 tends to have bigger beans and to weigh more. Most farmers produce *nacional* along with CCN51, however, many of them mix the two varieties in order to sell the whole as CCN51, and obtain more money. The farmers lie about their cacao in order to increase their revenue.

10. Mixing nacional with CCN51 has negative consequences on the quality of the cacao because these two varieties ferment differently. When they are mixed, neither nacional nor CCN51 end up properly fermented; the cacao beans are bitter and the producer obtains less money than he would with properly fermented cacao.
11. Juan José, 26 July 2010.
12. Alfredo Dueñas, 2 August 2010.
13. Associations usually have or go to a collection center. The collection has several major advantages; it buys cacao beans from the farmers and properly ferments them, avoiding a loss of money due to mixing. Also, it reduces the chain by directly going to the exporting facility, which cuts costs and allows farmers to receive a more money. Finally, associations have a more controlled buying system; they give a better price for cacao, fairly judging its quality and honestly weighing it.
14. The Kichwa group of cacao producers Kallari is a very good example of the importance of connecting farmers to their consumers. This group started as one of the poorest in Ecuador, isolated in Upper Napo River valley of the Amazon. Through a well-organized and structured association, this group slowly started to obtain funds and export its own chocolate. Today, it can be bought by anyone at WholeFoods© stores.
15. Alfredo Dueñas, 19 July 2010.
16. For instance, many farmers will dry cacao on the side of the road, contaminating the beans with chemicals from the asphalt and from the exhaust of cars driving by. Also, the cacao beans are often under- or over-fermented and different varieties are mixed, as already explained.
17. Here, I mention Ecuadorian people living in the cities because they constitute the potential chocolate consumers in this country.
18. Most of the farmers that I visited or heard about were from Esmeraldas or from the Kichwa indigenous group. In other words, the data I obtained was mainly focused on those two groups, and I could not necessarily speak for any other group of cacao producers.
19. Hunter-gatherers usually obtain food from their surrounding environment, through the hunting and fishing of animals, and gathering of seeds, fruits, vegetables, roots, etc.
20. Alfredo Dueñas, 19 July 2010.
21. *Ibid.*
22. Ecuadorian cacao has a higher price than African producing countries because Ecuador produces less and at a higher quality.
23. It is important to add that a single farmer must be part of an association if companies are to directly buy his cacao. A farmer alone has no other opportunity than selling to middlemen.
24. Because it costs a lot of money to build facilities for the association, the funds must often be donated. Finding the funds constitutes one of the major challenges.
25. The directive group makes sure that farmers are receiving a fair price, that all members and transactions are properly recorded, that visits to the farms, meetings, and trainings are being held, etc.
26. I heard of one example where Kraft came to the farmers' association to negotiate the contract. The rest of the time, companies like Kraft will have employees working as intermediaries.
27. Important buyers do not only represent very big companies like Kraft, Hershey's, or Mars. Smaller chocolatiers, exporters, or even companies processing cacao beans to make byproducts, all constitute business opportunities that associations of farmers look for.
28. I have chosen not to name this NGO. For this paper, it is only important to mention that it is a powerful and worldwide NGO, which has an ongoing work history with the USAID.
29. The market simply represents us. That is, people all over world wanting and buying goods.
30. José Valdivieso is the one who used this phrase as he talked about what NGOs that give CyD funding usually wanted to get out of their money.
31. Viviana Valencia said those words during our interview on 9 July 2010.
32. I will later take time to discuss the important threat to the industry that the migration of farmers represents.
33. Because this paper does deal with environmental issues, I will not go into great details about the threat to the environment that migration represents. However, it is important to add that because older and newer generations of farmers have progressively lost the know-how necessary to grow crops, they have resorted to the cutting of wood / trees; an easier and more

profitable way to earn money. This practice is partly responsible for the intense deforestation of the Amazon.

34. Alfredo Dueñas, 19 July 2010.
35. This idea that migration turns producers into consumers will further be discussed in Last thoughts.
36. See section on Traditions: Production.
37. Alfredo Dueñas often used this phrase.
38. Ingeniero was the term the farmers and CyD staff used to refer to an NGO representative who would work with and teach new specialized skills to the farmers.
39. Alfredo Dueñas, 20 August 2010.
40. I base this statement on my observation of three other American NGOs, my interview with the regional director of one of them, and my participation in meetings with them.
41. Alfredo Dueñas always used this important phrase.
42. Alfredo Dueñas, 2 July 2010.
43. *Ibid.*
44. *Ibid.*
45. Alfredo Dueñas, 19 July 2010.
46. Alfredo Dueñas, 2 July 2010.
47. *Ibid.*
48. *Ibid.*
49. *Ibid.*
50. *Ibid.*
51. *Ibid.*
52. Juan José, July 26, 2010.

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Luxury, Limitations, and Longing: Societal Changes Reflected in German Food Culture

by Rebekah Wilson Monahan, sociocultural anthropology

In the wake of World War II, East Germany experienced extreme social and political reconfigurations. With the establishment of communism, the reorganized society struggled but eventually managed to create a national German Democratic Republic identity. Many social changes occurred that are connected with production, specifically in relation to food. The communist government policies limited trade with the West thereby assigning luxury status to certain food products. Shortages and limited availability of food items helped to perpetuate a secondary economy in which East Germans traded what they had (goods and services) for things they needed. Reliance on connections inadvertently strengthened feelings of community. With the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and reunification in 1990, the East German society was once again restructured. This disruption had the effect of inadvertently perpetuating Ostalgie—the longing for traditional East German brands and products. This study used German food culture as an indicator of the social changes that have occurred in Eastern Germany since the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification in order to understand how women were affected.

Introduction

At first after the *Wende*, I felt it was too much. Of course, we were excited that you could buy everything. There was an enormous variety of things suddenly available. It used to be you went there and bought the butter, because the butter was the butter. And now you had a variety. You had sweet butter, salted butter, Irish butter, butter from the North of Germany, butter from cows from Tyrolean meadows milked only in the late afternoon or whatever. And for me, then came after a certain time a stop, because you looked at all the things on the shelf and you felt “oh” (deep exhale). I have to make a choice to take this or that. And that was sometimes . . . I didn’t like this. (Brigitte¹ interview 2010)

Like many of her contemporaries, Brigitte described the changes in food that occurred following the *Wende*² as being at once exciting and overwhelming. While the expanded variety and availability was welcomed, as many others described, accompanying this were also many difficulties. The subsidies on basic food stuffs such as bread and milk disappeared, increasing costs significantly. Disappointment eventually came to characterize the feelings toward the new assortment of Western products as they did not live up to the expectations created by commercial advertisements. While the opportunity to purchase a larger selection and variety of goods

previously unavailable was now theirs, the products and brands familiar to them were gone. Food culture in the former East had forever changed.

The East Germans experienced many social changes that disrupted their daily lives and cultural changes were not limited to food. With the fall of the Berlin Wall came promises of freedoms—political freedom, freedom to travel without restriction, expanded purchasing power, and opportunities for education and career advancement. Socialism would be replaced with the glittering capitalism that had for so long been broadcast from the West into GDR homes. As the East Germans soon discovered, reunification solved some social problems but exacerbated others. The various social changes that accompanied reunification and the formation of a united German state are reflected in the transformation of German food culture.

This ethnographic project used food as an indicator of social change in order to understand the impact of German reunification on the lives of women in eastern Germany. While the primary purpose for food is nutrition, it also has a cultural dimension by which people choose what they eat not only by flavor or nutritional value but through a variety of factors including culture, religion, age, ethnicity, geographic location, and economic or social status (Fieldhouse 1995). People do not eat certain foods based solely on nutritional need; taste is learned by individuals in a society based on cultural norms. What people eat, how they eat, and when are all important factors in understanding the basic categories of a culture's worldview (Mead 1943). Thus, food is a cultural construct that can signify conceptions of self, solidarity, and alliance within the social community (Meigs 1997). For this reason, food makes a very interesting indicator of social change and identity.

This paper will first explore the history surrounding the formation of two distinct German states after World War II and their reunification forty-five years later. With this contextualization, I will then show how the changes in food culture reflect the broader social changes that occurred in Germany. This includes an analysis of the GDR government's involvement in creation of luxury status and notions of health for certain food items; the way that shortages and limitations of food items promoted informal exchange networks; and how *ostalgie*—nostalgia for traditional East German brands, icons, and food products—is a manifestation of the culture shock that accompanied globalization.

Methodology

The ethnographic data represented in this paper was collected during a three-month study conducted in the summer of 2010. Main methods of research included ethnographic interviews and participant observation. Participant observation as informants went about daily tasks was done every day during the three-month period. The researcher conducted fifteen semi-structured interviews lasting between one and two hours each. Informants were chosen from the social network of a main informant using a convenience sample or snowball method. All informants were German nationals currently residing in Markkleeberg or Leipzig between the ages of thirty and seventy-five. Age range was important as memories of life prior to

1990 were the main subject of the interviews. As such, all informants also had to have lived in East Germany since before 1990. While the focus was primarily on women, some interviews were conducted with couples, which allowed men to give their input as well. Community feedback was an integral part of the study and discussions with groups of informants occurred weekly. These discussions helped to solidify themes discovered during individual interviews.

Data was coded and analyzed throughout the study and during the four months following. Because this study was focused on a particular group, generalizations cannot be made that broaden the experiences of the study's informants to those of each and every person living in East Germany before or after reunification. This was acknowledged by informants and the researcher throughout the duration of the field study.

Background

In order to understand the social changes that occurred in the years following reunification in 1990, it is important to acknowledge the major changes in Germany in the decades leading up to this point. In the years following World War II, Germany found itself dealing with heavy losses. Not only had millions of German countrymen been killed, and cities and cultural landmarks destroyed, but the country itself had been divided into the allied occupational zones. Each zone was under governmental control of the occupying power—France, UK, U.S., or Soviet Union. While the allies initially planned to govern Germany through the united Allied Control Council, growing tensions between the Soviet Union and the West marking the beginning of the Cold War led to the breakdown of the council, and the plan was never implemented (Fulbrook 2008). On 3–4 May 1949, France, UK, and the U.S. merged their occupational zone in Western Germany to form the Bundesrepublik Deutschland or Federal Republic of Germany (FRG). Five months later, the Soviet Union established the Deutsche Demokratische Republik or German Democratic Republic (GDR). The Western allies lessened their control of West Germany over the next six years when in May 1955, the FRG was declared a fully sovereign state. East Germany continued to remain occupied by and under the political and military control of the USSR. Political power was solely executed by leading members of the communist-controlled SED (Socialist Unity Party of Germany).

In 1961, the Berlin Wall was erected, splitting the city in two and completely enclosing the city of West Berlin and separating it from the rest of East Germany. As the capital city, Berlin had been divided into sectors like the rest of Germany following WWII even though it was located in the East. Before the wall was built, many citizens of the GDR escaped into the western portion of the city where they could take trains out of Berlin to the FRG. By 1961, an estimated 3.5 million people left the GDR for the West (Fulbrook 2008:165). Officially known as the “Anti-Fascist Protection Wall,” the blockade essentially ended all immigration from East to West, split families, and cut off people who lived in the East but worked in West Berlin. Although united by languages and centuries of history, during the next decades, the

GDR and FRG became increasingly different. *Ossis* (colloquial terminology meaning East Germans) and *Wessis* (West Germans) emerged as two distinct cultural groups. Both symbolically and geographically, the two German states represented the contrast between East and West that heightened in importance as the Cold War raged on.

The stark contrast between East and West began to wane in 1989 when the Eastern Bloc³ began to liberalize its authoritarian system. Marking the turning point (*die Wende*), countries within the bloc underwent many political changes. As a result, Hungary and Czechoslovakia opened their borders and many East Germans seized the opportunity to escape to the West. In a mass exodus of nine thousand per day, East Germans left the GDR by way of these eastern countries, bypassing the Berlin Wall, and making their way to the West (Fulbrook 2008:278). Clearly, the Berlin Wall was now superfluous, and officials struggled with what to do to stop the flow of citizens out of the GDR. The solution came when the government decided to allow East Germans to legally visit West Germany and West Berlin directly. The hope was that removing the prohibition would encourage the people to return, as it was no longer a strictly regulated opportunity to go to the West. In September of the following year, the occupying powers renounced all remaining rights granted them under the Instrument of Surrender, and Germany regained full sovereignty. On 3 October 1990, the states of the GDR joined the FRG and reunification (*Deutsche Wiedervereinigung*) was complete, ushering in a wave of social changes that profoundly affected the former GDR.

Studies of the changes that have occurred in the twenty years since the *Deutsche Wiedervereinigung* have focused mainly on internal migration from East to West and West to East, social inequalities in East Germany, and societal issues associated with the elderly population (Bertram 1997). While some of these studies focused on women (mostly under the category of social inequalities), none were focused primarily on changes in food practices as an indicator of social change. Although traditional foods have long been imbedded in the cultural history of Germany, these food practices are so pervasive they are often considered insignificant in cultural studies. Because of shortages and lack of access to Western cuisine, East Germans were limited in their consumption practices in ways not experienced by their Western counterparts. As an indicator of social change, the ways in which East German women use food as a unifier in society, the contemporary role of traditional foods, and the way in which women consciously understand and speak about their food in relation to the relatively recent social and political changes reveals the impact reunification has had on the lives of women in Eastern Germany.

According to Mintz and Du Bois (2002), foodways and social change are intimately connected. They attribute effects of broad societal changes on eating patterns to “changes in intergroup relations within societies; mass production of foods; biotechnology; movements of peoples; increasing globalization of foods themselves; and war” (2002:104). East Germans have been confronted with each of these

catalysts in the past century, and since 1989 all but war. Unfortunately, while each of these categories has been researched by anthropologists and food historians, studies have been minimal (Mintz and Du Bois 2002). Especially in Germany, a country with a long heritage of traditional, regionally specific foods, understanding the concept of food as a construction of culture is integral to understanding the social transformation since it is one aspect of everyday life that underwent immense changes.

Margaret Mead was one the first anthropologists to write about the centrality of foodways to human culture and to social science. Her motive in writing about food was to encourage other social scientists to investigate food and nutrition. She was concerned with both the cultural and nutritional aspects of food, with particular interest in native peoples dealing with famine and starvation (Mead 1970). However, the dialogue also included an argument for food as a cultural construct. According to Mead, food has a commemorative or traditionalizing function. It can act as a societal unifier, as well as provide background for a gendered experience, and food practices are also a representation of cultural consciousness (Mead 1970). This shows that food is significant to understanding a culture because it acts as an indicator of identity and unification within the social community. Understanding how food is a marker for national identity helps us to recognize the significance behind the differing food cultures in the GDR and FRG, and how they clashed after the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Anna Meigs expounded on the work of Margaret Mead in her article "Food as a Cultural Construction." She explains that prominent anthropologists who study food, such as Mead and Mary Douglas, have "consistently argued for greater attention to the social (as opposed to the nutritive and physiological) aspects of food and eating" (Meigs 1997:95). According to Meigs, food sharing is so prevalent that it has been taken for granted in many studies of foodways. The exception is anthropology, where food sharing has been studied as the social cement holding groups together. As Meigs found in her studies, "Food exchanges develop and express bonds of solidarity and alliance, . . . exchanges of food parallel to exchanges of sociality, and . . . commensality corresponds to social communality" (1997:96). Thus, food sharing helps to create and strengthen bonds between people in society. While food exchanges indicate other types of exchanges, they also represent a form of reciprocity within the social community that benefits both parties. As Meigs explains, the exchange of food works to "bind members of a society together in relations of mutual participation and unity" (1997:96). Such was the case in the GDR, where neighbors and friends used informal networks of exchange to get food stuffs that were limited or in high demand.

Meigs argues that food systems, like myth or ritual systems, are codes wherein patterns by which cultures "see" are embedded. In other words, food systems are schemas, providing an opportunity for anthropologists to study the lenses through which a specific people view the world. Through the analysis of food and eating systems, one can gain information about how a culture understands some basic categories of its world.

Roland Barthes' analysis builds on this idea stating that food is also a system of "communication, a body of images, a protocol of usages, situations, and behavior" (1997: 21). Barthes explains that although food is, anthropologically speaking, "the first need," it often goes unseen by the culture consuming it (1997:22). In most cultures, what is eaten—not to mention how, when, and why—is overlooked and ignored, and, even worse, in many studies it is assumed to be insignificant. However, culture and society cannot exist without food, because man cannot live without it. Barthes states that food is one of the most significant aspects of culture.

When he buys an item of food, consumes it, or serves it, modern man does not manipulate a simple object in a purely transitive fashion; this item of food sums up and transmits situation; it constitutes an information; it signifies. (Barthes 1997:21)

Substances, techniques of preparation, and habits, all become part of a system of differences in signification; and as soon as this happens, there is communication by way of food. All food serves as a sign among the members of a given society. As Barthes so eloquently puts it, "One could say that an entire 'world' (social environment) is present in and signified by food" (1997:23). Thus, Barthes argues that information about food must be gathered wherever it can be found: Through "direct observation in the economy, in techniques, usages, and advertising; and by indirect observation in the mental life of a given society" (1997:21). In order to explain what certain foods signify, we must understand how these foods are understood within their cultural context.

Barthes recognizes three themes as integral to understanding food in Europe: First, food serves a commemorative function; "food permits a person to partake each day of the national past." In the case of the former GDR, the differences between their food culture and the food culture of the FRG had the effect of "othering" the Wessis (West Germans) in the minds of the Ossis (East Germans), as they experienced the very different food culture through television and packages from West German relatives. Second, food represents an anthropological situation (foods attached with power or inferiority, or foods as masculine or feminine). Because Eastern Germany was under communist rule before 1990, there were limitations in the availability of certain commodities and substances. With these limitations came a stratification that assigned varying amounts of power and prestige. Limitations affected women's foodways, as did the availability of certain items that were made available once again after reunification. The impact of globalization and industrialization on traditional food culture in the former East Germany is significant. Third, are the issues surrounding food and health. The issue of health is important, because there exists a whole set of ambiguous values clustered around the concept of healthy food, which differ in space and time (for example, coffee used to be thought of as a stimulant, but today it is more often associated with a break or relaxation). The concept of health in German food culture is important because of how modern women explain the differences in health in the GDR compared to Germany today.

Luxury

The GDR government policies and actions heavily influenced the creation and maintenance of luxury status for certain items and the status of health foods for others. While the communist state was relatively stable for four decades, there were not a lot of advances made in any arena of the economy. Production was concentrated in heavy industrial goods rather than consumer goods, and this “led to difficulties in the supply and quality of basic necessities such as food and clothing” (Fulbrook 2008:163). Within industrial production, the focus was clearly on the quantity and not the quality of goods. While there was no real hunger in East Germany after the formulation of the GDR, there was very little choice, and this was a major factor in the creation of certain items as *luxus*. The basic foodstuffs were very cheap because the prices were subsidized and fixed and, therefore, not reflecting a true supply and demand. So no one starved (according to Fulbrook disparity in income, homelessness, and malnutrition were significantly lower in East Germany than in West Germany) or went hungry because they were poor; “the problem for many was not so much lack of money, as lack of goods to spend it on” (Fulbrook 2008:192). This issue was exacerbated by the fact that East Germans had access to Western television and were well aware of higher quality items available in the FRG and those items were not available in the GDR.

Eventually, the government allowed for the creation of shops called *delikatladen* that carried higher quality items and eventually *intershops*, where GDR citizens could purchase *Westprodukte* at incredibly high prices (Wagner Interview 2010). At intershops, East Germans could turn their West marks⁴ into *forumschein*, certificates they could then redeem for Western goods. The government’s goal was two-fold: to remove any Western currency from the population, and to increase the state’s holdings of foreign currency, which is necessary for trade with other countries (Mahler interview 2010). Like their government, individuals knew that with Western currency, any problem could be solved. The strength of the West mark was much greater than the Ost mark, even within the GDR. Items could be purchased much quicker when paid for with West marks, thus East Germans wanted to have Western currency at home to fall back on in case of emergency. However, the majority of East Germans did not have West marks and could not purchase items from the intershops. One woman explained that as a school teacher, she never had any West marks and could have gotten in a lot of trouble had it been revealed that she shopped in the intershops:

Officially, nobody went there. And actually we shouldn’t go there as teachers. And, they [anyone who did shop there] did not speak about it or show the things they bought. No, I wouldn’t say. Because they mustn’t, you know, the party members should be the ideal, and the idealistic thinking people do not go to intershops. And they do not have the West money. (Ute interview 2010)

Of course the irony here was that the party members—the “idealistic thinking people”—were the ones who had special access to goods that nonparty members did not. But as this woman described, because they did not have foreign currency, “we made up our mind and said, well life is like that, we can’t do anything, we can’t go” (Ute interview 2010).

The lack of money to purchase items didn’t stop others from looking. One woman reflected on how her grandmother loved yogurt—an item that was never regularly available during the GDR. She described the shape of the little plastic container, and how her grandmother would take her and her younger brother into the shop where she proceeded to buy one tiny cup of kiwi flavored yogurt at an exorbitant price. At home, the whole family would sit around the table with a teaspoon and take turns tasting the yogurt. While yogurt flavors like strawberry were occasionally available, kiwi was special, as all tropical fruit flavors were quite rare (Hanna, Brigitte interviews 2010).

Actual *südf Früchte*, or tropical fruits, were also a rarity in the GDR. Green oranges from Cuba were available around Christmastime only. This limitation was mainly because the GDR did not import from any countries that were not part of the Soviet Bloc or under communist control. According to Brigitte,

You couldn’t get any fruit from the south, tropical fruits you know bananas, oranges, apricots. Kiwis, I never saw a kiwi I didn’t know what that is. And now all these things now which I even don’t know now. There wasn’t anything. You had to queue up once a year, that was shortly before Christmas, and if you were lucky after two or three hours of waiting that you got a pound or a kilo [of oranges], that was all. (interview 2010)

Other fruits like bananas and grapes would appear occasionally, and with them long lines as citizens queued to purchase the rare products. Especially in regard to fruits and vegetables:

It spread like rumors when there was something available in the supermarkets. So that a neighbor would ring and say there are bananas in the supermarket and I would just drop everything and rush to the supermarket. And I was even more lucky because I had three kids and that was something the state supported. I got a special sort of *Ausweis*, and I could say, I’m sorry I’m a mother with three children can I please go to the front? (Brigitte interview 2010)

The *Ausweis*, or identification papers, were available to various groups including mothers, pregnant women, and diabetics (Christin interview 2010). Bananas were viewed as a healthy food for children and quantities were limited depending on family size and number of children. Diabetics were given priority when grapefruits were available: “With their *Ausweis*, they could get it while the others couldn’t. Only when there was more than enough, or the diabetics didn’t take them, could you get them” (Vogel interview 2010). Thus, grapefruit was at once assigned luxury and health status—the fruit was believed to naturally lower blood sugar, and purchasing power was limited to those with diabetes.

Klara, who was a child during the GDR, explained that her mother, a school teacher, told her that if she ever saw a line forming at a store, she was to get in it immediately and then find out what product the people were interested in. She remembered a time when she was about eight years old and saw a line forming outside of a store. The people in front of her were ordering *Wein*, which made little sense to her because it was obviously not wine in bottles but some type of produce. She repeated to the store clerk exactly what the woman in front of her said, and ordered “1 kg wein.” She carried the bag home, and finding her mother said, “Mom! Look what I have!” “What is it?” Klara was eight years old and had never before seen grapes. To be clear, regions of East Germany, especially in the south, produced grapes and wine, but any items of regional specialty were commonly not sold within the GDR but were exported to the West in order for the government to increase their supply of Western currency. Asparagus, a delicacy traditionally in season from May through June, is grown abundantly in northern areas of East Germany. However, the white vegetable could not be purchased in the GDR, except by those living in the north willing to pay quite a bit of money for seconds—the majority was exported to West Germany (Christin interview 2010).

Other luxury items were tinned fruits, tinned fish, and processed foods like ketchup (Maria interview 2010). When they were available, East Germans would get as many as they could, because it was never known when the product would be available again. For a few years after the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification, Maria continued to stockpile ketchup bottles and her daughter had to convince her that it was no longer necessary (Klara interview 2010).

Propaganda was employed by the GDR government in relation to food especially during times of shortage or surplus. Several informants described the “take one more” campaign used to encourage the purchase of eggs.

We had advertisements to manage shortages. For example, eggs. If there was an overproduction ‘*Nimm mal ein mehr.*’ Or if there was a shortage the advertisement would be for the [opposite]. (Hanna interview 2010)

Exemplified by the egg propaganda, this promotion began shortly after a new study concluded by the government, during a shortage, that eggs were not healthy and their ingestion should be limited. The quick reversal brought about some confusion regarding health and food. However, looking back the majority of informants concluded that food was much healthier in the GDR than today. Their reasoning hangs on the belief that food in the GDR was free of chemical preservatives and additives; there were no processed foods, and foods were eaten regionally and in season—thus healthier for individuals and the environment (Christin, Sabine, Brigitte interviews 2010). Many informants linked increases in allergies, skin disease, and asthma to various processed products and preservatives absent before the fall of the Berlin wall.

I think in the GDR we were not often ill. There were not so many illnesses. Like heart problems, there weren’t as many, and there weren’t as many *Hautkrankheit-*

en.⁵ Allergies. There weren't as many. Diabetes, actually. Diabetes is really bad. Today that is a big problem for children. (Wagner interview 2010)

Another couple explained that "today there are many illnesses and allergies from many kinds of foods. Before, that wasn't so widespread" (Vogel interview 2010). While one could argue that information about food allergies and illnesses linked to food intake may not have been widely available during the GDR, it is still important to note that the majority of those I interviewed linked increasingly unhealthy food with the influx of Western products that occurred after the fall of the Berlin Wall. Undoubtedly, tactics were used by the government to propagate the idea that Western products could increase these types of illnesses (Mahler interview 2010).

The national GDR cookbook, shown to me by Regina, was an interesting resource in discovering what things were available at that time. While the cookbook included recipes for things like seafood or mussels, which according to Regina were never available, "*Vergiss es! Gab's nicht. So was gab's nicht,*"⁶ many recipes reflected the unavailability or limitations of food products (interview 2010). For example in the meat section, reading down the list of dishes, Regina concluded "schwein, schwein, schwein, schwein, schwein. Alles schwein," meaning that while there were a few recipes for other types of meats, the majority of recipes were for pig. A similar example came from the cookbook's fish section. Instead of specifying which type of fish the recipe called for, the ingredient listed was simply "1 kg fisch." As she read through her old cookbook, Regina alternated between laughing when she read the very unspecific ingredient "fisch," exclaiming "*Gab's nicht*"⁷ as she read off the names of fish such as eel, salmon, or *kabeljau*,⁸ and laughing again once discovering a dozen various ways to cook green herring (which comes from the nearby Ostsee).

With the limitations on trade, seasonality was of great importance to the availability of produce in East Germany. Cabbages and apples were available year round as they could be stored for long periods of time without spoiling. Plums, pears, cherries, and other local fruits were available only during season. Tomatoes, cucumbers, and other vegetables were also available only in-season.

You just had to wait for the right time of the year to get things. So there were no cucumbers when there were no cucumbers. There were no strawberries when there were no strawberries. And we always gasped and said "What? You can have strawberries all year long?" when we had contact with people from the western part of Germany. (Brigitte 2010)

Canned fruits and vegetables were not easy to come by and often expensive. Thus, many families canned fruits and vegetables to preserve them for winter use. The resourcefulness of individuals in the GDR is reflected in their ability to make and preserve foods when availability was limited. For example, yogurt, as described earlier, was often unavailable. Berta described the process of making the dairy product from scratch at home with her mother. Although very involved and time consuming, knowing how to do it themselves allowed their family to eat the luxury product even when it was not available in stores (Berta interview 2010).

Others described helping their parents or grandparents preserve fruit juices, paying particular attention to the amount of time and labor involved in doing so. Time saving appliances and devices were unobtainable. Christin explained, "We couldn't freeze things, because we didn't have a deep freezer. You had to can everything, and that's how you had things in winter. So we had winter plums and cherries, and what else did we have? Applesauce, we canned applesauce." Her husband Werner added, "It was sort of special on Sunday mornings to go to the basement and bring up a jar. Today we have cherries or today there are plums" (Wagner interview 2010). As with Christin's family, freezing was not common, because few families owned freezers big enough for storing—ice boxes within refrigerators were more common.

While the limitations on availability of certain items and the absence altogether of others were not enough to prompt a mass exodus of East Germans, it was a constant reminder of the disparity in standard of living between themselves and their Western counterparts. As Fulbrook explains, East Germans were not "for the most part prepared to rise in a clearly hopeless revolt just because the choice in their fruit and vegetable shops was between cabbages and more cabbages, while the West Germans ate peaches, oranges, and grapes" (2008:194). As the FRG expanded relations with other democratic nations, many of these items were taken for granted in the West. In the GDR, however, the government policies limiting imports continued to create luxury status for food items that were not readily available.

Limitations

Government policies on trade, which created shortages and limitations on the availability of food items, inadvertently helped to strengthen feelings of community and connectedness. While these ideals were encouraged by the ruling SED party, they were more a response to the conditions created by the government than a reflection of agreement with or adherence to communist principles. As many informants explained, it was difficult for them, especially in the first decades of the GDR, to genuinely support a government that had been chosen for them by the occupying power of the Soviet Union (Mahler, Dächer interviews 2010). So while the SED espoused ideals of reliance on community, networking and reliance on others was perpetuated by the difficulty of finding certain products rather than identification with socialist principles.

Shortages in housing supplies, automobile parts, and other necessities helped to perpetuate a secondary economy in which East Germans traded what they had, goods and services, for things they needed. Sharing and trading was especially common at Christmas time, when special baking goods were needed to create traditional treats like *stollen*.⁹ Hanna explained:

Stollen belongs to Christmas. Not that people really like it. It just belongs. We have a custom that if you eat seven different types of stollen you will have luck in the New Year. My mother pays attention to that. It is social. It means that you need to be a guest six times and invite people once. . . . It was traditional to make our own stollen in the village. We would all take our own to the baker. We say

that it only works in a huge batch. I can remember taking the ingredients on my bike. Then you waited and compared how much butter you brought with the others. We always had flour, sugar, and butter. But it was a special type of *schmalzbutter*, you could order it. But *zitronat* [candied lemon peel] was often in shortage. You could order that too in the *konsum* but that really depended on connections. I can remember everyone had their own family recipe and amounts. But it was also a status symbol. It was the ratio of butter to margarine. Butter was much more expensive and everyone looked to see how much you had. You gave it up and came back a day later. It was very social. And now you buy it at the store. Few make it anymore. You need a big oven like at the baker. (Hanna interview 2010)

From this exchange, it becomes clear this one type of Christmas bread was at the same time a tradition, a social experience, and a marker of status. Because candied lemon peel and other ingredients were in shortage, getting enough to make a large batch of stollen took effort and connections. Nuts, cocoa, candied fruits, and sweets were difficult to come by, especially in the quantities necessary during the holidays. Marzipan for example was rationed; "You were only allowed a certain number, because otherwise not everyone that wanted it would get a piece" (Hanna interview 2010). Another informant described to me how his mother would save up almonds and hazelnuts for the entire year in preparation for making her special Christmas desserts (Monahan field notes 2010). Others, like Hanna, mentioned that connections with others were the key to accessing limited food items.

Friendships were created and maintained because of the shortages, and especially important were good relationships with bakers, butchers, and grocery store clerks. "It was very important to have a butcher or a baker in this circle, because when you wanted to have a party you needed something," said one woman. Store workers could put things aside to be sold "*unter dem ladentisch*"¹⁰ to customers with whom they were friends. Brigitte told me that because her husband had connections, he could get some special things at Christmas:

He knew the butcher and so he got a nice goose which was sometimes hard to get. And he got oranges. That was really something. Quite a number of people didn't have oranges for Christmas. . . . All these things fruit and other things that had to be imported were just simply not there. (Brigitte interview 2010)

Others described that while certain foods and dishes, like oranges or roast goose, were understood to be tradition for holiday meals, the reality was that many families did not eat these, because they were not available or were too expensive. As was the case with some informants, this was one reason why families came together at the holidays to share meals; in an extended family or network of friends someone was bound to know a butcher.

As Ute described, one had to have these connections in order to throw a party. Planning had to begin weeks or even months ahead of time since many items like

beer or bottled water could only be purchased in limited quantities. She once forgot an important anniversary and had to spend the entire morning rushing from store to store with a little wagon to buy a few bottles at one store and few bottles at the next. Fortunately, when it came to catering the food for the occasion, she was good friends with a butcher who provided enough sausage and ground meat for the event on short notice. After finishing the humorous story she said:

I just tell you this because it was so difficult to get the things you needed for something. Today, you would go to the butcher and say bring me this, or you phone and say bring me this and that. And you put it on the table and that's that. So now it is very difficult to have an idea how to arrange [a party], and what to do. Today it's all about something new, something surprising, or I don't know what. Under a certain [theme] or so. But at that time, the most important thing was to get *something*. And so [pulling together the party the morning of] was a big success at that time. (Ute interview 2010)

Without the connections she had, she would not have been able to acquire enough food for the party.

Cultivating these relationships took time, and often involved providing services for others. One woman explained how, as a music teacher, she had no access to goods—there was no product she could bring to the table to trade. However, her talent with singing and playing the guitar garnered many invitations to garden parties where she strengthened relationships with, for example, a local butcher. Another woman, Sabine, told me she got certain things because, as a hairdresser, she had customers who worked in both the produce store and butcher's shop. It also helped that the produce store was next door, which gave her an advantage:

I could always run over when I saw that the delivery truck was there. And since the cashier was my customer, I always gave her my order ahead of time. I always wanted to have cauliflower or lettuce or a cucumber. When it wasn't harvest time, these were hard to get. But I have to say that many who worked in other occupations didn't have that option. . . . The normal citizens, who didn't have these relationships had to go shopping. And when something was there, only then could they buy it. (Sabine interview 2010)

Those without relationships and connections to those working in the food industry and those who were employed in occupations where they couldn't leave at a moment's notice were restricted in their access to scarce food stuffs.

Gaining access to rare food items was especially problematic for many full-time workers with responsibilities that prevented them from leaving work at a moment's notice when something became available at a store. Such was the case for school teachers. Of those teachers or retired teachers interviewed in this study, many explained that they circumvented this problem by taking turns watching each other's classes so that one teacher could buy whatever it was for the others. Some described buying extra bananas and other rarities simply because they knew a neighbor,

friend, or family member was at work and would otherwise miss out on the item. These women knew the reciprocity would be returned in time.

As mentioned above, one informant described how, as a music teacher, she always felt she had very little to give. Within her circle of friends, one couple owned a garden, another was a butcher, and others had different kinds of connections that allowed them to have barbecue parties often during the summer. She and her husband would get invitations to these garden parties, but always with an “oh by the way, would you please bring your guitar.” So while she had no physical, tangible goods to share with the group, entertainment was a service she could provide. The interrelationships created by friendships based in reciprocated needs formed the underlying basis of the *notgemeinschaft*, described below:

It means a community, being together, gathering together when there is a need. When you are in need. You needed something and therefore you, you stick together. To overcome these difficulties you had. We said always the GDR is a *notgemeinschaft*. (Ute interview 2010)

Literally meaning “emergency community,” these friendships and associations existed because there was a need. In order to deal with the situations, to find the ingredients needed to bake a cake, the tools necessary to repair a car, or someone to provide entertainment at a party, East Germans formed relationships that allowed them to get what they needed from peers—things not available from (or because of) the government. “And so we all lived on connections . . . you need somebody who has [what you need], and you must have something that he needs. And so the whole society worked” (Ute 2010 interview).

After reunification, these connections were no longer necessary. The shortages no longer existed, and the ban on trade with capitalist countries no longer applied. Both Sabine and Ute described this as bittersweet. For Ute, this was an opportunity to recognize which friendships were real—those based on mutual interests as opposed to those cultivated solely for the network exchanges. Sabine, on the other hand, still maintains many of the relationships formed during the GDR—although exchange of goods is no longer a major part. While she is still friends with many of her comrades from GDR times, she recognizes times have changed, “I think it’s sad that it isn’t that way anymore; that the young people, they don’t have it” (Sabine interview 2010). For her, the loss of community and cultivated relationships is unfortunate. While it is good that people no longer need to rely on each other, it is regrettable that people cannot rely on each other like they used to. Her comments reflect the disappointment in the social changes brought on by globalization. In GDR times, government policies unintentionally encouraged reliance on others within the social community but with reunification and the ensuing political changes, this was no longer necessary and people became cut off from each other.

Longing

Twenty years after the fall of the Berlin Wall, a GDR identity still exists in the

former East, manifesting itself in response to the social changes that accompanied globalization in the form of *ostalgia*—nostalgia for traditional East German brands, icons, and food products. National identity was a problematic question for both the GDR and FRG, because, before their creation, Germany itself had experienced multiple reshaping since the turn of the century. Following WWII, the two occupied states of the defeated nation were in the midst of another. The split identity was inevitable as the two governments created differing conditions for cultural life. Obviously, the political constraints in the East were a marked difference, as were the economic conditions. As the two Germanys worked to establish themselves as distinct nations, both faced problems. In the GDR, these problems included being only half of a state, severed from a defeated nation. The new communist political regime was not a choice of the people but imposed by the occupying power, and they had to deal with the horrors of the recent Nazi past (Fulbrook 2008:252). As mentioned above, because the people did not choose socialism, it was difficult for a population who, for the most part, lacked the “appropriate political values and attitude” to be genuinely interested and supportive of it (Fulbrook 2008:252). Over time, these issues lessened and the once-new cultural conditions became the taken-for-granted. Eventually, the younger generations began to think of themselves as GDR citizens—not German citizens—and their identification with a GDR culture naturally followed.

By the 1970s, it appeared that the two nations would permanently be separated, and there was no reason for the people to assume otherwise (Sabine, Maria interviews 2010). While communist party participation still remained largely an example of public conformity, with individual’s authentic expressions of ideals and political beliefs allocated to the private domain, the limitations in the supply of material goods was accepted as the way things were (Monahan field notes 2010). While tuning in to West German television stations allowed the GDR citizens to visually experience the limitations within their country, they were also aware that they did not experience the food riots and starvation experienced by their neighbors in the immediate east (Vogel interview 2010). Excluding the years immediately following WWII, East Germany did not face mass starvations. As many informants said, *wir haben nie gehungert*; “we never went hungry” (Vogel, Mahler interviews 2010). After the initial food rations at the end of the 1940s, whatever the limitations in selection, East Germans did not face starvation or overall food shortages. While they did not have the same choices as their Western counterparts, there was always food on the shelves. This required adaptation for the first generations as they learned to plan daily meals based on what was available in the stores, but eventually this became the typical way to decide on what to make for dinner.

When the border between the divided Germanys was opened, the East Germans experienced “the glittering materialism of Western consumer society” that they had seen on television and heard about from West German relatives (Fulbrook 2008:279, Brigitte interview 2010). There was a stark contrast between the *Zonis*¹¹ and the West: clothing styles were different, cars, hair styles—and many of the Ossis

who were welcomed into the West with *begrüßungsgeld*¹² soon began to feel embarrassed by the paternalistic response to their newfound freedom. As the conversation in the political sphere turned to the need for, and inevitability of, reunification, many changes began taking shape in East Germany. Overnight, East German stores were restocked—replacing the familiar East German brands with a wider range of colorful West German goods. But with the new products came new prices, and the subsidies that had long kept basic foodstuffs very inexpensive were removed.

Going to the grocery store was a new experience and many Osis, especially the older generations, experienced a sort of culture shock when they went to buy food. Previously, the question posited to the store clerk was “do you have . . .,” but this was now replaced with customers having to choose between different brands, with different ingredients, and different promises. Going to the store was now a difficult task, as consumers learned to navigate the new environment. With so many choices, it was difficult to know what to buy and how to go about making that decision. Brigitte described it as:

And what should you buy? Maybe then you decided you would consider the price. And funnily enough it was not the cheapest you chose. Maybe it was sort of that you wanted to say, I can afford it. I’m gonna buy this now. And uh, *ja*. That was a step where I felt, oh it’s just too much.” (interview 2010)

Customers faced culture shock and disorientation in their neighborhood grocery stores. Price, regionality, seasonality, ingredients, and *bioprodukte* (the German equivalent of organic products) were now added to the equation. Now that products could be shipped from Holland, tomatoes, cucumbers, and other produce could be offered year-round. Although the immediate availability of produce during the winter months was initially viewed as progress, today many informants spoke of this with reservations. Many explained that the imports from Holland are tasteless, and it is not worth it to buy most produce out of season. Others spoke of an inherent discomfort toward out of season fruits and vegetables rather than an issue with quality:

I would have inhibitions eating strawberries out of season, because I somehow feel it doesn’t belong now. It’s not right now. And I wouldn’t probably buy asparagus but I would have no problem buying cucumbers all the time. *Ja*. I can’t explain this. (Brigitte interview 2010)

This type of sentiment was much more common among older informants while those of younger age did not feel any inhibition toward purchasing produce out of season, reflecting the changing food practices in the former GDR.

While it took time for the East German stores to create window displays and eye-catching advertisements that matched those found in the West, the Western products themselves were a new experience. Bright packaging promising the product was the tastiest and healthiest seemed too good to be true. As people tried new things, they soon began to realize that the advertisements really were *too good to be true*; the promises of health and happiness if one ate a certain product were false

advertisements and this led to feelings of mistrust and disappointment. The products East Germans had salivated over on television were not all the glitzy advertisements had made them out to be, and eventually the desire grew to return to the familiar. But this was not an option as the traditional East German brands were no longer in production, and the influx of chemical substitutes, preservatives, and processed products had forever changed the way foodstuffs were manufactured. Ostalgia emerged as East Germans began to long for the way things were—without the threat of the *Stasi*,¹³ the previous way of life started to seem uncomplicatedly superior.

Somewhat ironically, a new sense of “GDR identity” started to emerge, now that the worst aspects of the old system—the wall, the dictatorship of the SED, the *Stasi*—had disappeared. Many East Germans, suffering from the loss of old securities, began to hanker after aspects of the old GDR society, feeling that there was a sense of social solidarity, or “togetherness,” which they had now lost in the new, competitive, “elbow society” of capitalism. (Fulbrook 300)

The changes that accompanied reunification were easily dismissed in the West. The economy and welfare system in the West was strained by the influx of immigrants pouring in from the East, and this “posed, serious problems, attacking the very heart of West German material prosperity—which constituted almost the very essence of any real West German identity” (Fulbrook 2009:324). Unfortunately, as the two states merged into one, the disparity between the Wessis and Ossis was exacerbated, and many citizens of the former GDR began to feel denigrated to lower social classes. For example, Brigitte described to me a postcard that was popular in the West during the *Wende*:

This was probably what they felt was a typical GDR woman. There was this constant joke about, not joke, but question we had, “Why do women from the Western part look different from us?” They look always relaxed, *gepflegt*, well-clad, good clothing. And we look always grey, and worn, and worn out, and this is because we go out for work and have the kids and the household. I *never* felt like that. I enjoyed going out for work. I was with all three kids. I was at least one year at home. I loved the time, but I loved going back to work as well. Anyway, this funny postcard showed probably the typical image of the GDR woman, how Western people felt. She was in her thirties, plain, quite a perm that was a bit frizzy. Dyes it blonde—this super peroxide blonde. Grinning, having silver earrings, a jeans jacket, and holding a large long cucumber. And the title underneath . . . the caption was “*Zonen Gabi mit ihre erste Banana.*”¹⁴ So that implied that we didn’t know what a banana looked like. So that was true, bananas were rare, that was true. And that was something you saved for the little ones. If you got hold of some bananas then you would save them for the babies in the family. But on the other hand, it showed that we had an obsession with cucumbers. And that is true. And maybe this is a bit of a left over. (Brigitte interview 2010)

While today Brigitte laughs at this imagery, during the first years following reunification, this type of stereotyping only aggravated the differences between East and West Germans.

While many East Germans looked forward to having access to Western goods and traveled in droves across the open border, West Germans seized the opportunity to take their used belongings, especially cars, in the opposite direction to make a profit. In the GDR, it sometimes took up to fifteen years on a waiting list to buy a car because production supply could not keep up with demand. So when a Western BMW could be purchased to immediately replace the old, smoggy GDR Trabant, many were willing to pay retail price for a used car (Mahler interview 2010). However, many West Germans overestimated the need and willingness of Ossis to pay for old goods, and tried to sell clothing, cars, and small appliances that were beyond used. Multiple informants described that they were offended by the things Wessis sent or tried to sell to them.

We had our pride and sometimes they were very tactless. Some people sometimes sent their old things which were too old, even for us. I mean, I sometimes got some pullovers which people had worn already, and I was happy with them. But when they were too worn out, no I wouldn't take that. (Ute interview 2010)

In conjunction with the exacerbated differences between the two regions, East Germans faced social changes that West Germany did not. The cost of living increase, as subsidies on food and housing were lifted, and high unemployment were two of the most prominent changes. One couple explained that during the GDR they could purchase two loaves of bread for 42 Pfennigs¹⁵ (approximately \$.08 for two or \$.04 each), while today, for one (400 g) loaf of bread, they now pay three euros (or approximately \$4.25). The price during the GDR was very inexpensive—“*Waren Preiswert. Muss' mal sagen*” (Dächer interview 2010). By the time reunification was official, disappointment was high. With the threat of the Stasi, limitations on products, and restricted travel no longer a reality, East Germans began to feel that perhaps life had been better before 1989.

Twenty years after reunification, nostalgia still exists. However, commercialization of GDR brands and products was not immediate and actually did not begin until years after the disappearance of such goods from store shelves. With the restocking of grocery stores with Western products, citizens of the former GDR experienced culture shock as described above. The familiar brands could not be purchased, as the East German companies were put out of business by competing Western companies when the region made the change from socialism to free market capitalism.

With the borders open, Eastern Germany began to see an influx of foreigners into their cities. Immigrants from Turkey now populate many German cities, and in 2010 it was rumored that Berlin was the largest Turkish city second only to Istanbul. Albeit untrue, Turks in reality do make up the largest ethnic minority in Germany, and the popularity of Döner Kebab (similar to the Greek gyros) reflects this. Snack shacks or *schnell imbiss* stands and shops are abundant in Leipzig, and according

to one restaurant owner are the “direct competition to McDonalds” (Monahan field notes 2010).

In conjunction with immigration, Fulbrook described the alarming rise in racism and general violent crimes during the 1990s in the former GDR (2008:295). Although racism was not a specific issue that came up in my research, fear and suspicion toward foreigners was. Ute explained,

We do not go very often to town now. We are afraid that something happens. There is nobody in the any longer and you have to go around the block to get a taxi. And all the way there, there are only some figures, where I think Oh God who is that? And I mean, what could we do if they want to rob us? We couldn't do anything. . . . I couldn't know how to box somebody. I wouldn't know how to do it and what to do. I hope I will never get into this situation. . . . And it's crime, it's simply crime. They come from everywhere. This was maybe the only thing good about the GDR, these borders didn't let us out, but they also didn't let people in. And now you can go wherever you like, and mostly not the best come. Because, at least the television says that Leipzig is one of the towns with the highest crime rate. (Ute interview 2010)

Thus, reflecting on the GDR it is possible to see some “rose-tinting,” the ideology that it wasn't all bad. This was in fact a common theme that came out in the interviews—that life in the GDR wasn't all bad. Many recognized life in general is much better now and as one informant said, “*Es ist schöner geworden. Ich würde nie wieder die DDR haben wollen*”¹⁶ (Sabine Interview 2010). Yet, each person could easily point out that, along with the many good things, there are also many bad things. Life was quieter in the GDR, but life was limited. Only the “big wigs in the party” could travel. In relation to food, it is better now, because there is so much more selection and everything is now available, but that isn't necessarily good. As another informant said, “In the GDR time, we were happy when we sometimes had everything. *Und jetzt ist mann doch ein Bisschen übersättigt.*”¹⁷ From a more extreme vantage point, the oversaturation of goods available for purchase today in the former GDR has led to a consumerist society obsessed with material goods and immediate gratification (Monahan field notes 2010). It is understandable that the constant availability is not viewed as completely wonderful.

Opening the borders allowed for cuisine from all over the world to penetrate the Eastern half of Germany. Many viewed the influx from countries like France, Spain, and Italy as adding to the healthy variety of foods available. More important in the discussions was the “corrupting” influence of American fast food on German food traditions:

These influences from other countries give people the opportunity to eat healthier, but then it gives them the opportunity to eat fast food, too. What I have noticed is that young people don't know how to cook traditionally. It is all about convenience. (Hanna interview 2010)

Others, like Christin, saw this as a loss of culture; the younger generations do not know how to cook without using sauce packets and processed products. While others did not see the inability to cook traditional foods as detrimental in and of itself, they did comment that young people eat too much fast food.

You can see that too—they are fat and unhealthy. But it is bad when they have children. Children need to learn how to deal with food. Many parents don't have time to show them. But it is also a question of society. Many parents do take the time to teach their children properly about food. Fast food and pizza has become a part of society, which is actually more expensive than if you make it yourself. But I don't think it is too bad if you don't know how to make *rouladen*, if you don't want to. (Christin interview 2010)

The real issue, as many explained, is that, "like with anything else, when you have more choices, more possibilities, you also have a higher personal responsibility to live up to" (Werner interview 2010). There exists the opportunity to eat more nutritiously than during the GDR, but that also involves taking responsibility for one's choices. When the choices weren't there,

the kids weren't so fat and there were fewer allergies. We didn't have such a variety, but the products weren't so sterile or treated with chemicals. We ate fewer sweets and we were healthier. We do eat more differently but also poorer. (Hanna interview 2010)

Other informants reflected that while they themselves do not believe their personal habits have changed, the *wende* has changed German food habits so that things are much fattier.

Because of the mixed feelings about changes in food culture and other social processes, it is clear that East Germans still see themselves as distinct from West Germans. While individuals do have some nostalgia for the way things were in GDR times, they also recognize the benefits of living in a capitalist society. So, while they remember that people did not starve, they were limited in choice—there was always food, but not always what they wanted.

Discussion

Through food, we can see how deeply social changes affected the culture of the former GDR. Purchasing food in Leipzig is a completely different experience today than prior to the fall of the Berlin Wall. It cannot be taken for granted that choice and selection were natural accompaniments to reunification with Western Germany, because this was a significant change to the GDR way of life. The limitations were a driving force behind the creation and maintenance of luxury status for particular food items. The typical Western high status items like truffles or lobster may have been expensive in the GDR had they been available. But what developed into luxury items were products largely overlooked in the West—products like tinned fish, fresh fruits—especially those of tropical origin, vegetables, and bottled products like ketchup. A simple dish that consisted of toast spread with ketchup

and cheese melted over a slice of peach became a favorite dish to order at restaurants, because the simple ingredients were rare. More than one informant admitted with incredulity the price they were willing to pay for a slice of peach. Today, the situation is quite different. Processed products and time-saving devices are common; women are no longer required to preserve fruits and vegetables by canning, and stockpiles are no longer necessary, because produce and other products are available year-round.

While limitations on availability and purchasing power existed, they ultimately acted to solidify ties between individuals in society. Connections were a necessary part of life integral to getting needed ingredients and other products. Those who formed bonds with store workers, butchers, and bakers were greatly advantaged in their ability to access limited food products. Oranges and bananas as well as other tropical fruits were among the most prized. Green oranges from Cuba, one of the only communist countries in which the fruits were grown, were only available in the winter. As soon as something became available, phones would ring, doors were knocked, and people were drawn to the stores. Lines formed, and the products were sold in limited quantities to ensure that everyone could get their share. In a society limited in available food stuffs, sharing of food and information about food were important parts of cementing groups together. However, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, some of these relationships were revealed for what they really were—associations built on symbiotic needs rather than true friendships based in common interests.

As is typical in the maintenance of food culture, the “othering” of foreign foods was an important factor. Before reunification, this was limited to recognition that Western food products sent in packages to the East or purchased in Delikatladen looked and tasted very different from those available in the GDR. Food imports were limited to those countries also under communist rule. Cuisines of nearby countries such as Italy and France were not available and did not influence cooking practices in East German kitchens like Russian and Hungarian food did. Dishes such as *soljanka*, a tomato-based soup associated with the Soviet Union, can still be ordered in restaurants in Leipzig. However, the unified country’s broken ties with Russia and current position in the West are also reflected in the stigma attached to garlic—as the pungent herb has come to represent Russian cooking. Overwhelming dislike for foods “tainted” with garlic were prevalent among informants, and two women on separate occasions informed me that garlic is a “Russian smell” to be avoided whenever possible.

Over the years, the differences between East and West grew, and a GDR identity developed, which included adaptations on traditional foods. Because many traditional German specialties could not be replicated due to unavailability of specific ingredients, the GDR came to have its own food culture and produced cookbooks that reflected this. The GDR manufactured a range of specialties including *rotkäppchen sekt* (a sparkling wine) and *schlager süsstafel* (a chocolate flavored candy bar). However, many of the GDR brands disappeared from shelves with the influx of

Western goods during the wende and have only in recent years regained prominence (usually produced with the same GDR packaging and labels but by Western-owned companies) as the demand for these goods in the former GDR began to rise in response to *ostalgie*.

While so many of the women I interviewed were afraid they would not remember anything about food that would be useful, they unintentionally revealed one of the most significant aspects of food in culture; it is so pervasive within human existence that it goes unseen. While these women could easily describe multiple instances of food shortages, trying to adapt to the changes in food after reunification, and experiences when they had to barter, trade, or stand in long lines, they did not see food as significant in and of itself. On further reflection, however, many came to realize the changes in their food culture after reunification were extreme and important.

Conclusion

The formation of a stable, established nation of the GDR took many years but as the social changes began to be accepted, a national identity was formed. The government was intertwined with creating this national identity that is reflected in East German food culture. As the communist regime regulated all business and trade, it easily became the main force behind creating and maintaining luxury status for certain food products. The constraints placed on the food industries by limited availability of food products did not inspire rebellions in the GDR as it did in other nations in the Soviet bloc because actual starvation did not occur. Instead, these shortages and limitations in availability of certain food products helped to strengthen feelings of community and connectedness among East Germans as they used informal networks to get what they needed. The need for and reliance upon informal networks disappeared with the fall of the Berlin Wall as trade opportunities opened and Western goods poured in. Traditional GDR brands were replaced with Western products, and the Osis had to deal with culture shock and failed expectations. With the threatening aspects of the communist regime such as the Stasi out of mind, many people longed for things to return to the way they were. The open borders were blamed for increased crime, unemployment, and the loss of community. Dislike of foreigners and foreign food was a major response to the changes that accompanied globalization. While East Germans as a whole freely admit things are much better today in a unified Germany, where there is choice in brand, regionality, and product selection, there exists still a fondness for a simpler time where “the butter was the butter.”

NOTES

1. Names have been changed to maintain confidentiality.
2. The “turning point” marked by a series of events in Germany between 1989 and 1990 involved in the process of changing from socialism to capitalism.
3. Communist states of Eastern Europe including the Soviet Union, GDR, Poland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Romania, and Bulgaria.

4. Informants referred to FRG currency as West marks, while the GDR currency was referred to as Ost marks, DDR marks or simply marks. For ease, FRG currency will always be referred to as West marks in this paper, and GDR currency will be referred to as Ost marks.
5. Skin diseases
6. "Forget it! There wasn't any. There wasn't any of that."
7. "There wasn't any."
8. Codfish
9. A yeast-bread cake made with candied fruits, nuts, and spices often covered in powdered sugar.
10. "under the table"
11. Pejorative and dismissive term used by West Germans to refer to East Germans, commenting on the GDR involvement with the Zone or Soviet Bloc.
12. "Welcome money" of one hundred West marks paid to visiting East Germans.
13. Common name for the *Ministerium für Staatssicherheit*—the official state security service of East Germany.
14. Gabi from the zone (meaning the Soviet Zone) with her first banana.
15. With currency unification in 1990, the official exchange rate between the former East and West was 1:1 for the first four thousand Ost Marks, and then 2:1 for larger amounts. While this was the official exchange rate, the reality experienced by many in the East was a conversion closer to 10:1. As described to me by the Vogels and Maria, .42 Ost mark was approximately .04 (unified) DM. In 1990, the exchange rate for DM to dollars would make this about \$.07 (Marcuse 2005).
16. "It got better. I would never again want to have the GDR."
17. "And now people are actually a little oversaturated."

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Searching for Practical Evaluation Tactics: A Case Study of CHOICE Humanitarian's Evaluation Methods and Practices

by Jeffrey Swindle, sociology

Evaluation assists international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) in fighting poverty and developing communities. Why, then, do many NGOs fail to monitor and evaluate their projects? Moreover, among NGOs that do evaluate their efforts, the results of said evaluations usually have little detectable influence on future NGO projects and policy. Sadly, evaluation is often a static, singular event instead of the catalyst to a greater learning process. In hopes of making evaluation more useful to directly influence and inform NGO efforts and the decision-making process, I analyze my personal experiences as an evaluator in both Guatemala and Mexico for a small, grassroots, international NGO, CHOICE Humanitarian. I argue that, above all other considerations, evaluation for small NGOs needs to be practical. Evaluation is practical when all associated groups participate; when all parties are involved, then they are likely to work together to apply the evaluation results and learn together. Development efforts improve when the evaluation responsibilities and measurements are shared between all parties involved. Despite this, the type and level of participation between stakeholders should vary in order to accommodate needs and to maximize efficiency.

Purpose of Study

This study aims to answer the question: What are the barriers to implementation and utilization of evaluation results for CHOICE Humanitarian? In addition to identifying these barriers, I outline potential solutions, which point toward a need for evaluation to be practical. Though this study is particular to CHOICE Humanitarian (CHOICE), for whom I worked as an evaluator in both Guatemala and Mexico, its implications may apply to other small international NGOs and appropriately to larger development organizations. After all, the barriers to quality evaluation common for CHOICE are not exclusive but principle-based.

This paper examines Mulwa's theory of participatory evaluation (2008) in the context of CHOICE's actual evaluation practices. Through a close investigation of CHOICE's evaluation rhetoric, practices, and application of results, I outline the need for development evaluations to be informed by all parties and stakeholders involved. Consequently, I join Mulwa (2008) in advocating for the involvement of local people in evaluation, but I diverge in arguing that he does not emphasize enough the importance of equally involving outsiders (primarily NGO headquarters staff and project donors) in evaluation. The nature of the relationship between donors and local people creates a need to share evaluation responsibilities. After analyzing my experience with CHOICE, it is clear that in order for evaluations to

be practical—in order for the results to be applied and for evaluation to contribute to a greater learning process—there must exist a shared responsibility between all parties involved. If certain parties are left out of the evaluation process, then they are not likely to learn from the experience and apply the results, leading to a stagnant development approach rather than a steady improvement of efficiency and accuracy.

In this paper, I highlight the history of the development evaluation debate, the key aspects of participatory evaluation theory, and a broader explanation of the need for evaluation to be practical. Then I describe the pertinent history and goals of CHOICE; the research methods utilized in analyzing the key issues surrounding evaluation for CHOICE; and discuss the key findings from personal experiences as an evaluator for CHOICE and as a participant observer of the organization. To close, I summarize my findings and the need for evaluation to be practical.

The Evaluation Debate

Evaluations enable development agencies to improve their efforts and increase impact. As researchers for the World Bank have observed: “The intent [of evaluation] is to give partners enough feedback to allow them to learn, and if necessary, to modify their initial plans” (Liebenthal et al. 2004:37). The initiatives and projects of large development agencies, like the World Bank, are evaluated on a consistent basis; as a result, some are canceled and others are modified. Evaluation helps the World Bank to learn from their mistakes and practice better development. For NGOs, evaluation is equally, if not more, beneficial to their improvement as an organization. One NGO, the American Indian Higher Education Consortium, explained: “Evaluation, when properly understood, developed and applied, can provide powerful knowledge throughout Indian country . . . [leading to] stronger, healthier, and more prosperous tribal communities and increased participation in the U.S. workforce” (2008:2). When NGOs apply the information gleaned from an evaluation, meaning they adjust their efforts to overcome the weaknesses identified in evaluations, they increase their potential to make a significant impact and meet their goals (Mulwa 2008).

However, although evaluation is commonly accepted, scholarly opinions regarding the method and mode of evaluation vary (Conlin and Stirat, 2008). Scholars from public policy, anthropology, economics, and sociology all contribute to the development evaluation debate. Proponents of locally based development initiatives generally push for participatory evaluation, while advocates of international agencies and large-scale development assert that standardized quantitative measurements, such as randomized trials, are most accurate; though, notably, contemporary scholars such as Esther Duflo promote the use of trials even in small rural areas with low scalability (Duflo and Kremer 2003). Irrespective of theoretical framework, however, there is scholarly accord that evaluation improves the effectiveness of NGOs (Clements et. al 2008; Conlin and Stirat 2008; Duflo and Kremer 2003).

Nevertheless, many NGOs face difficulties in conducting evaluations as well as utilizing the lessons learned from the evaluation reports to change their practices. Meaningful evaluation requires a significant educational investment that some NGOs cannot make due to financial difficulties, lack of staff, or pressure from donors. Moreover, those NGOs that can perform accurate and meaningful evaluations still struggle to incorporate the lessons learned from the evaluations into their actual practices. Evaluation presents the organization with problems; correcting those problems requires the NGO to undergo what Mulwa calls the “painful process of change,” requiring theoretical, methodological, and practical challenges (2008:14). In addition, evaluations uncover weaknesses with the practices of NGOs and such information could be potentially harmful for an organization’s ability to attract and maintain donors. Despite these challenges, evaluation is only a worthwhile activity when the knowledge obtained is applied.

Effective evaluations are not discreet, static events, rather they are part of a larger process. The process of organizational progression for an NGO involves a continuous conversation between theory, practice, and evaluation (Rossi 2008). This process is not merely deductive or inductive but is a cycle: each step leads to the next. Without evaluation, or failing to apply evaluation results and lessons learned, the process of progression is halted.

A good visual representation of organizational progression is a mechanical spring. Each ring in the spring features a theory, an action, and an evaluation, which in turn lead to a higher understanding, a new theory, a new action, and another evaluation; it is a process of continual progression. Accordingly, evaluation is productive when it foments new or modified theories, which in turn lead to new or modified practices.

Unfortunately, the process of organizational progression is often only rhetorical. NGOs commonly implement the same development projects over and over again, regardless of the evaluation data obtained in each successive iteration—if evaluations are conducted at all (Ferguson 1990). Even if NGOs religiously evaluate their projects, these measurements are only valuable when they influence the actions of NGOs. Why, then, do some NGOs invest the resources to conduct evaluations of their projects, but fail to apply the lessons learned? What are the social conditions that stop NGOs from applying the knowledge acquired by evaluations? On the other hand, why are some NGOs innovative, consistently updating their projects based on the data and conclusions of their evaluations?

These are difficult questions with complex answers. Liebenenthal et al. at the World Bank states: “The more perspectives on a situation that are considered, the better informed will be any conclusions drawn about that situation. . . . I strongly recommend that stakeholders be encouraged to participate in the evaluation process” (2004:195–96). Additionally, Mulwa asserts that involving representatives from all stakeholding groups throughout the development process solves the common disconnect between evaluation results and their application into future projects.

In the participatory evaluation process, the project donor(s), the project team (staff and management), and the beneficiary representatives are called upon to participate jointly . . . ensuring true local ownership and commitment not only to the exercise and its outcome but more importantly, to the future program evolution. (Mulwa 2008:13–14,18)

Based on my personal experiences as an evaluator for CHOICE in Guatemala and Mexico, I argue that the participatory approach to development evaluation, as explicated in the passage just mentioned, is ideal but at times unrealistic. Unfortunately, certain barriers—geographic, linguistic, cultural, and financial—complicate the involvement of all stakeholders “to participate *jointly*.” Donors are rarely in the same geographic location as project beneficiaries, stifling communication between the two groups. Furthermore, even when they are, language barriers and cultural differences make basic communication extremely difficult, limiting agreement on project planning, implementation, and evaluation. The root of these difficulties is the difference in values in each stakeholding group. In fact, empirical evidence shows that perceptions regarding evaluation “vary considerably among hierarchical levels” (Mebrahtu 2002). If local people were to evaluate a project, they would base their evaluation on their own values, which, in many instances, the donors or NGO staff would not understand. The same would be true if donors did the evaluation themselves. If, for example, the project was to provide transportation from the village to the hospital in the nearest city, the donors might consider how many people rode in the ambulance the past month. The local people, however, might point out that those people were actually the driver and his ten children going for a joyride. Clearly, then, involving all participants in the evaluation process is crucial in order to formulate a full picture.

Involving all the participants in the evaluation process is distinct from ensuring they all “participate jointly.” Through a deeper reading of Mulwa’s work, one notices the consistent emphasis on empowering the local people, also known as the project beneficiaries. He continually stresses the importance of removing power from the top, such as donors and headquarters staff, and empowering local people with decision power. Given the hierarchical nature of most NGOs—or of most organizations, for that matter—Mulwa’s call for the empowerment of the local people is needed. In fact, even local NGOs founded by the villagers for their own improvement are still subject to the restraints of hierarchy; the founders and leaders of the organization nearly always wield more influence (Mebrahtu 2002). Despite the inherent challenge toward equal participation, however, evaluations can still respect the equality of others. By involving all parties to the extent that it is feasible, given organizational hierarchy, geographic space, cultural understandings, and so on, the equality of all people involved is respected. Equality, then, can be respected even when participation and power is not equally shared in the development evaluation.

In sum, Mulwa is right to place power in the hands of local people—local ownership increases the potential for evaluation results to be applied, but there are additional indicators to take into account. In particular, the variables that influenced

CHOICE's tendency to apply the lessons learned from evaluations were: 1) shared goals, and 2) the practicality of evaluation results. Thus, the effectiveness of evaluation, at least for CHOICE and potentially for many other NGOs, resides on these variables. Practical evaluations stress participatory practices when possible but have the overarching goal of improved development not adherence to the participatory framework.

CHOICE Humanitarian's Background

CHOICE began in 1982. Over time, the organization expanded, working in fifteen nations, and currently operates in five countries, including Mexico and Guatemala.

Stated Goals

Our goal is to connect motivated villagers to resources and tools to change their lives. By building skills, capacities and leadership of the villagers—the entire community brings itself out of the cycle of poverty. (CHOICE official web site)

Essentially, CHOICE hopes to teach villagers skills with which they can better their lives. Arming villagers with skills, as opposed to filling their cabinets with donations, demonstrates CHOICE's commitment to practice sustainable village development.

Implied Goals

CHOICE identifies five dimensions of development: 1) leadership and self-development, 2) access to education, 3) access to living environment, 4) access to healthcare, and 5) access to markets. Accordingly, CHOICE supports villagers in projects that align with at least one of these dimensions. Though projects are not stated in CHOICE's mission statement, they are the means by which they attempt to accomplish their mission.

Another implied goal is to avoid creating long-term dependency. To promote self-sufficiency, CHOICE aims to work in a village for a period of three to five years. Furthermore, CHOICE only works in villages that specifically petition the organization for help, and ideally, villagers decide on what their community's needs are and how to address those needs. After the villagers decide on a certain project, they submit a project proposal to CHOICE, which then may agree to fund a portion of the project. As villages progress, CHOICE's role diminishes. CHOICE argues that these practices help villagers to become leaders, learn skills, and find local solutions to their community's challenges.

CHOICE Evaluation Methodology

CHOICE's founders and later leaders experimented with various evaluation models over the course of the past thirty years. They eventually settled on their current methodology, which focuses on the five dimensions of development mentioned above. To measure progress in the five dimensions, CHOICE Methodology

includes a qualitative ranking system. Within each dimension are seven to twelve subcategories, which are all ranked on a scale of 1 to 5. A ranking of 1 indicates the lowest level of development and a ranking of 5 represents fully developed, modern society. A ranking guideline sheet helps evaluators determine what characteristics merit which numerical rankings. Once a community reaches rankings of 3, they are determined to be on their way to self-development, and CHOICE withdraws from the community. All rankings are averaged, yet it is important to note that the dimension of leadership development is weighted 400 percent. Ideally, all of this information is gathered in each village and then posted on CHOICE's online database on a semi-annual basis.

Through consistent collection of evaluation data, village development is measured, helping CHOICE leaders identify strengths, weaknesses, and needs in different villages. If the community steadily progresses to receive rankings at 3 or higher, CHOICE knows that it can phase out its assistance, letting it continue its development independently.

The CHOICE evaluation methodology, as described above, appears well designed and functional. However, evaluations have been conducted inconsistently, if at all, and there is a lack of harmony within the organization about evaluation, dependency, and CHOICE's mission in general. Subsequently, there is room for improvement both in conducting evaluations and in applying the results.

Methods

In this CHOICE case study, I examine the contributing factors in their evaluation methodology and application of evaluation results. I draw my conclusions from participant observation methods as an independent evaluator for CHOICE in both Guatemala and Mexico. My particular role as an independent evaluator in Guatemala and Mexico granted me access to all aspects of CHOICE's hierarchy, including personal conversations with project beneficiaries, the CEO, and the middlemen between them. As an evaluator, I had private meetings and conversations with all CHOICE employees, and I participated in many CHOICE leadership meetings including the Annual CHOICE World Conference for all staff.

In addition, I draw upon my experience living with local staff in Guatemala and Mexico, traveling with headquarters staff throughout Guatemala, numerous international phone calls, and a myriad of e-mail exchanges. Throughout all of these endeavors, I recorded field notes that provide the basis from which I formulated my experiences into cohesive conclusions.

In addition to participant observation of CHOICE and its systems, values, and organization, I also rely heavily on my own evaluation research in Guatemala and Mexico. Though the data I collected as an evaluator were explicitly designed for evaluation reports, they relate to my conclusions in this paper, if only indirectly.

In Guatemala, my primary method of data collection was focus groups. Accompanied by two CHOICE employees, local villagers themselves, I visited eight villages and held focus groups with village leadership. In each meeting, I asked

the villagers pertinent questions about the state of their villages in order to accurately rank the villages' level of development according to CHOICE's evaluation methodology.

In Mexico, I worked with two other evaluators. Together, we began our research with semi-structured interviews administered to one representative of each home in the two communities being studied, Tamuala and Huaricho (Mulwa 2008). We reached at least one person from most homes. The purpose of the preliminary interviews was to observe the social impact of the goat cheese project in the community, to learn about leadership, and search for viral effects, as well to build good rapport with the villagers.

The next stage in research was the development of predictors: leadership, business practices, and villager mentality. For this stage we dissected the most heavily weighted of the CHOICE toolkit indicators: leadership. A number of indicators from the Inter-American Foundation's Grassroots Development Framework (GDF) were also applied because of the specific nature of evaluating a project as opposed to a community. "The GDF is a tool to measure the impact and the results of a project. Since the pilot testing and application of the GDF in various countries in the region, several development assistance institutions have, in consultation with the Inter-American Foundation, adapted the GDF to their own activities" (Inter-American Foundation).

From each indicator we developed several open-ended questions—a total of sixty-six questions we needed answered. We did not ask every person the same questions, as we would have in a survey, but rather focused our questions on the relevant questions given the participation of that person in the project. The open-ended questions afforded us with deep and descriptive information and a good understanding of the group's knowledge and beliefs (Mulwa 2008). After this initial collection of data, we interviewed key informants in both groups, asking them additional open-ended questions and reiterating some of the questions from our original interviews. Finally, we analyzed our notes from both sets of interviews in order to ascertain the social impact of the goat cheese factories in both villages.

Findings

As previously stated, the key for CHOICE, in terms of connecting evaluation results with future development plans, involves two main indicators: 1) shared goals, and 2) the practicality of evaluation results. Though these indicators do not comprise all the influences on the practicality of evaluation processes or measurements, they are the core principles that underlie delineations from evaluation efficiency for small NGOs.

Shared Goals

"Shared goals" refers to the level of commonality between headquarters' goals and local staff, respectively. For evaluations to be applied, headquarters and local staff must share development aims (Mebrahtu 2002). In Guatemala, there was a lack

of shared goals due to hiring new local staff. However, the new staff was humble and moldable, leading to moderate success in implementing evaluation results. In Mexico, local staff and headquarters' staff operated under different development goals. Consequently, evaluations generally served the interests of either local staff or headquarters' staff, but not both.

In Guatemala, the country director passed away in a horrific plane crash in August 2008. His passing slowed CHOICE's work immensely, and the new country director had not learned CHOICE's evaluation methodology before I arrived in August 2009. Also, given his lack of experience in development, the new country director did not have strong opinions respecting evaluation theory or methodology. His prior work experience was in law as an attorney, yet his unique ability to speak the local dialect of the people where CHOICE worked, Q'eqchi', qualified him for the job. Fortunately, he was teachable and energetic; in fact, he asked headquarters' staff to allow me to come and teach the local staff, including himself, CHOICE's evaluation methodology. He wanted more training, and his desire to learn was reflected in the rest of the local staff in Guatemala as well. Consequently, the Guatemala staff did not display resistance toward the evaluation methodology set up by headquarters but in fact embraced it. In other words, they knew no better and were new; subsequently, they were teachable.

However, the new country director's inexperience was problematic with respect to the goals and vision of the organization. He was only beginning to comprehend that CHOICE was focused on building on self-developing communities, and he had yet to correlate this focus with related policy. For example, should an NGO give all the people in the village a laptop? According to CHOICE methodology, such a project may or may not be beneficial depending on the situation of the particular village, but the dependency this would create would certainly be a serious consideration for CHOICE. Conversely, for him it wasn't a question of potentially creating dependency; rather, if the resources were available, then they should be gifted! This opinion reflected his inexperience in development and lack of acquaintance with the CHOICE model of self-developing communities. Evaluation of CHOICE's programs, then, could only be useful to the extent that headquarters and local staff had the same goal of creating self-developing communities and not dependent ones.

The CHOICE evaluation methodology, then, which I taught to local staff and which they regularly used to evaluate the progress of villages every six months, is only useful to the extent that local staff understands the goals upon which the evaluation data is based. Therefore, to apply this finding to other NGOs, it is apparent that evaluation results must be meaningful to those who are engaged in the creation of the evaluation methodology.

Contrarily, in Mexico, the CHOICE country director was extremely experienced; he had advanced degrees in development, had worked in the field for over twenty years, and worked with CHOICE specifically for over a decade. He had strong opinions about what development should be and CHOICE's goals. He strongly sup-

ported the CHOICE motto: "Building people, not projects." Development, according to the Mexico country director, was primarily focused on the individual and not necessarily on community development. The projects in Mexico reflected his goals, as opposed to headquarters' goals for community-based development.

In consequence of the differences in goals between CHOICE Mexico staff and headquarters, there was a disagreement about evaluation methodology, and neither party respected the evaluations that the other had completed in the past. CHOICE Mexico evaluated some projects in their own manner, designing their own methodology in hopes of measuring individuals' self-development, while headquarters wanted to focus on communities, leading to a different evaluation design. Neither understood the evaluation design of the other. They had different goals, and subsequently, different opinions pertaining to what should be evaluated to determine whether projects were successful or not. The lack of shared goals stripped any current evaluation practices of both meaning and purpose.

Hoping to solve the discord between headquarters and local staff regarding evaluation, CHOICE headquarters sent two other evaluators and me to Mexico with specific instructions to work with the country director on the selection of a project to be evaluated and the evaluation methodology. After meeting with him and the rest of the Mexico staff, we found they had previously been evaluating the progress of the communities with whom they worked but had stopped monitoring them within the past year. The country director and other staff members became extremely discouraged with evaluation due to a variety of factors and experiences. With respect to the CHOICE evaluation methodology, he reported that headquarters handed him a new booklet, which was in fact the evaluation methods, and told him to use it to evaluate his communities. However, he claimed to have never been trained on how to use the booklet or taught about how evaluation can help CHOICE Mexico progress. When the country director asked his three rural development facilitators (villagers who serve as his liaisons in the communities) to use the booklet, two of them promptly quit. They felt they could train the people on how to complete projects, but felt uncomfortable calling and leading focus group meetings to collect data for the evaluations. If this negative situation was not enough, the Mexico country director had a negative experience with the independent financial auditor who was hired by the larger philanthropic organization who granted CHOICE funding for the goat cheese project. The auditor spent a single day with the country director, wrote a report, and then charged an excessive amount. Furthermore, an additional internal evaluator of the umbrella NGO called him once every six months and asked him a series of questions from which she drew her conclusions and "evaluated" CHOICE's efforts.

Most recently, the computer servers at CHOICE headquarters in Utah crashed and a variety of information the country director had uploaded to the CHOICE online database was lost. (Though headquarters staff reports they have restored the lost information, the country director insists that much of the information he uploaded is still lost.) All of these experiences left CHOICE Mexico reason to avoid

evaluation. Discouraged by pressure from headquarters staff to perform evaluation and by their numerous challenges, CHOICE Mexico staff abandoned the endeavor of evaluation altogether.

Nevertheless, CHOICE Mexico was still open to working with us on an evaluation. Encouraged by CHOICE headquarters to experiment with new methods of evaluation, the country director asked us to evaluate the social implications of a goat cheese project designed to create local jobs and subsequently decrease the necessity of forced migration to the U.S. for employment opportunities. He wanted us to anthropologically examine social implications. "Does the project develop individuals?" he consistently stressed. After conducting in-depth interviews, we concluded that the project would probably fail to create a sustainable goat cheese business but unexpected social benefits resulted. Specifically, gender-based discrimination among participating families decreased while education expectations for their children increased. We recommended that the villagers be retrained in effective business practices using more appropriate teaching methods. In addition, we practiced ways of appropriately retraining the villagers with him in order to facilitate the application of said results. Not only did the country director appreciate the evaluation results, he instigated the retraining plans as recommended by the evaluation. Thus, it is apparent that when local staff participates in evaluation design then they are more likely to respect and apply the results. However, it is crucial to note that though local staff was involved in the evaluation design and results, they did not share equally with other stakeholder groups in the evaluation effort.

Despite the success of our evaluation regarding future development efforts and modifying project designs, headquarters staff had less use for our evaluation results. Since other countries where CHOICE worked, such as Guatemala, collected evaluation data in a more systematic and homogenous manner, headquarters staff wanted Mexico to do likewise. It was most useful for headquarters to compare and contrast the development of communities across countries in order to demonstrate to donors the progress and effectiveness of their efforts. Communities in Mexico, however, could not be compared due to the lack of consistent evaluation collection or comparable data. Shared goals between local and headquarters staff, then, is imperative to maintain a sustainable balance between the demands of donors and the local people's perception of their needs.

The Need for Evaluation Results to be Practical

The end goal of evaluation is the improvement of NGOs' efforts to help target beneficiaries. As a default, NGOs should adopt more participatory-leaning evaluation styles, listening to and taking into account the stated needs of project beneficiaries themselves. At other times, however, opportunities will present themselves that will not cater to the participatory style. Regardless, evaluation results are most useful for small NGOs when they contain explicit and practical applications. I turn

to my experiences as an evaluator for CHOICE to highlight the effects of both explicit and abstract evaluation results.

Since I trained the Guatemalan staff in development evaluation, they have consistently evaluated the progress of the villages in which they work according to the CHOICE methodology. The results, as seen on CHOICE's internal online database, show slow but consistent improvements for the villages. Though it is unclear to what degree evaluation of projects contributes to the overall development of the villages, it is apparent that the evaluations are taking place. Why does local staff consistently carry out evaluations while local staff in other countries where CHOICE works does not? The difference is that they understand how to conduct the evaluations.

While in Guatemala, I held focus group meetings in eight villages with a member of the local CHOICE staff. In the first meeting, I asked all of the questions. However, the local CHOICE employee fielded more and more responsibility after each meeting. By the end of the meetings, he had demonstrated that he was fully capable of carrying out the entire evaluation process himself. Therefore, training local staff in a functional and hands-on, culturally appropriate manner resolved the lack of evaluation in Guatemala.

Previously, some of the local staff had received lectures on the importance of evaluation and had even been trained one on one by CHOICE headquarters on the logistical aspects of carrying out the evaluation. None of these methods were effective, however; they were Western methods of learning. It was not until they saw and participated in the process themselves that they digested the information and became cognizant of what evaluation entailed.

Having seen firsthand the successes of on-the-ground evaluations implemented with local staff, I recommended that CHOICE do the same in its other countries of operation. Unfortunately, they did not, and I neglected to force the issue. In fact, I presented on evaluation at the CHOICE World Conference in the presence of all of CHOICE's country directors. I explained the success in Guatemala and simply asked them to do the same. This was a crucial error—I had forgotten the lesson of Guatemala; in order to get local staff to carry out evaluations, they need an evaluator to walk them through the process.

Verifying that local staff understands the "how" of evaluation, however, ignores a larger issue; it assumes that headquarters staff should design the evaluation methodology—the "why" and the "what." Participatory evaluation, as advocated by Mulwa, involves all stakeholders, including, donors, staff, and beneficiaries. Though rhetorically beautiful and notably democratic, fully participatory evaluation (where all stakeholders "participate jointly") is slower and is often impractical. For many of CHOICE's projects a modified participatory approach was more useful, especially with those projects that were intended to meet physical needs.

Recently, for example, donors approached CHOICE and asked to donate several old American ambulances to the Guatemalan villages where CHOICE operates. CHOICE headquarters staff consulted with local staff respecting where the ambu-

lances should be stationed and who should be given the responsibility of driving and maintaining them; it was assumed the villagers would accept the donation of the ambulances. However, the villagers themselves were not contacted; local staff feared village leaders would each vie for the ambulances to be stationed at their own village, creating rivalries. Regardless of CHOICE's efforts and assessment of local politics, donors adamantly demanded the ambulances be stationed in the village of Xalibe, where they visited the previous year and were touched by the hospitality of the people. Though Xalibe may not have been the ideal location, CHOICE staff and the villagers still accepted the donation—any ambulance was better than no ambulance.

How should such a project be evaluated? Should the villagers head the evaluation? Should donors travel to Guatemala along with headquarters staff and meet with village leaders to evaluate the project? The manner in which this particular project was initiated was not participatory in nature—the villagers did not propose this project. However, letting those who designed the project, the donors, design the evaluation could also be problematic. If, for example, the donors decided to evaluate the project by counting the number of passengers transported in the ambulance per month, they would miss the full story. For example, if twelve people were transported last month, but in fact it was the villager designated to be the ambulance driver with his eleven closest friends traveling to the city for a soccer game, then the quantitative measurement would not reveal the truth. Communication between all stakeholders, then, should inform final evaluation measurements (Chambers 2008).

As is often the case with international NGOs, donations and financial support come at unexpected moments and occasionally with unexpected strings attached (such as the donors' demand that the ambulances be stationed at Xalibe). If CHOICE had dogmatically adhered to the participatory development approach, they would have rejected the donation of the ambulances unless the villagers themselves, in direct consultation with all other stakeholding groups, proposed such a project. Thankfully, CHOICE was flexible and accepted the ambulances, involving the local people in the project when appropriate. Though the donation of the ambulances did not directly help the villagers to be self-reliant (in fact, it probably increased dependency), it did help villagers get access to healthcare. With better health, the villagers can be more capable of meeting abstract goals, such as self-sufficiency. Similarly, other international NGOs must accept donations and support as they arrive, especially smaller NGOs that are highly dependent on outsider finances.

Evaluation of projects that arise in a non-participatory manner, such as the ambulance in Xalibe, will inherently not be purely participatory in application, nor can they be evaluated in a participatory manner. Despite this inherent distinction at the start of such projects, projects can shift from a top-down model toward a shared, participatory model over time. In a practical way, shares of project ownership can slowly shift from completely belonging to outsiders to shared ownership between all project stakeholders, including the local beneficiaries. Thus, even projects that arise in a non-participatory way can appropriately assume more participation over

time. This approach to development evaluation is practical; it looks to improve participation across all stakeholders but allows for the natural course of ownership shift to occur gradually and appropriately, not through shock treatments of change, which can lead to disorganization and project failure.

Practicality in Evaluation

When evaluation results are disseminated to all parties and understood by all parties (meaning that the results of the evaluations might require a translation indicative to the various ways of knowing between the stakeholders), then said results are applied. The application of evaluation results is essential for the improvement of development practices (Liebenthal et al. 2004). For CHOICE, evaluation is a means to an end (increased development effectiveness) when evaluation approaches are founded on the same grounds as the project that they intend to evaluate. Some of CHOICE's projects were initiated, planned, and executed primarily by the local people with some facilitation and resource management on CHOICE's part. Evaluations for such projects can be designed and implemented by the local people themselves, but must include the input of other stakeholders (i.e., donors and headquarters staff) in order for the evaluation results to contribute to the development learning process. Other projects, on the other hand, were initiated, planned, and executed by CHOICE headquarters and donors. These projects generally aim to satisfy basic physical needs of the local people. Evaluations of such projects must inform the project designers but should be informed by the local people via surveys, focus groups, etc. The involvement of all parties involved is vital for full disclosure of information and for shared responsibility, and subsequently, shared project ownership (Mulwa 2008).

NGOs should be flexible in their evaluation methods. As outlined throughout this paper, practicality in evaluation recognizes that the paramount purpose of evaluation is to improve development. Often the most functional, workable, and plausible evaluation method does not include fully equal participation of stakeholders, rather it reflects the interests of those who proposed and implemented the development project. As seen in Mexico, if local staff is not committed to the evaluation framework designed by headquarters, then evaluations will not change development initiatives. As seen in Guatemala, a willing staff is not enough; they must then use the evaluation results to plan future projects.

Ultimately, sustainable long-term change can only occur in communities when local people are empowered to the degree that they appreciate full responsibility for their development. However, NGOs often find themselves in positions to make self-actualization more feasible by proposing and implementing projects for the villagers. Such top-down projects generally meet the basic physical needs of local people. In these cases, evaluations may be designed by and, primarily, for donors and NGO staff. However, these evaluations must include the project beneficiaries—the local people—in order for the results to be applied. The question of practicality, then,

includes the rational judgment of what degree all stakeholders can reasonably be involved so that ownership for the project is shared.

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