

# Surviving with Dignity

## Complexities of Sustainable Human Development

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*Cet article présente une histoire de cas qui explore les initiatives et le développement d'une coopérative au Salvador, auto-gérée par des femmes pauvres. Il cible la démographie des femmes, l'histoire et les expériences de vie chez ces femmes qui actualisent leur propre vision pour un développement durable. On apprend ici les résultats économiques ainsi que les bénéfices familiaux et sociaux de la coopérative.*

*To Las Vencedoras with love and respect.*

Although the United Nation's 1992 Earth Summit Declaration and Platform of Action<sup>1</sup> was aimed at improving the lives of impoverished women while protecting the environment, it is becoming evident that "the UN is neither effective nor democratic ... and that many of the UN's official goals are designed more for public admiration than success" (Athanasiou 47). In addition, financial institutions such as the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) continue to promote large projects, which almost never have a positive impact on the lives of the poor and marginalized people in the world. Ecofeminists, environmentalists, and activists have repeatedly emphasized that small community projects are the more likely to directly benefit the poor, and in particular women.<sup>2</sup>

This article thus presents the findings of a case study of a group of Salvadoran women who in 1997 formed a fishing cooperative called "Asociación Cooperativa de Producción y Servicios Pesqueros Las Vencedoras de Oriente, El Espino de R. L.—ACOVENCE" (Cooperative for the Provision of Fishery Services and Products). The Cooperative operates in El Espino, Province of Usulután, a coastal area of El Salvador. The El Espino community is located on El Arco Island, which is situated across a coastal mangrove forest. The Coop, consisting of 15 active women members, started operations in February 1998.

As one of the researchers and supporters of this initiative, Mercedes Cañas worked with the women of the Coop and witnessed their experience of struggle and

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determination. In addition, the authors of this article have worked with women in rural areas of El Salvador on various women's projects. The authors felt that it was important to bring to the forefront the voices of grassroots women who engage in efforts to relieve their poverty, while denouncing the difficulties and complexities of achieving "development." Most importantly, the existence of the Coop challenges the construction of "development" within colonialism and creates a more progressive notion of development for the women and by the women.

The women in the "Las Vencedoras" Coop ("the ones who overcome") have survived extreme poverty, a civil war, and natural disasters, like the tropical storm Mitch and several devastating earthquakes. They have persevered despite the lack of confidence on the part of their community that they could successfully operate the Coop as well as their own lack of self-esteem and uncertainty about their capabilities. The women's approach to development is from a sustainable human development perspective, which encompasses the historical, social, economical, environmental, and political lived experiences/locations of the women. Sustainable human development in this article is understood as the process of achieving overall human well-being (i.e., meeting basic needs for water, food, shelter, clothing, health care, and education) and, therefore, living a life with dignity—a fundamental human right.

The findings of this study will demonstrate that in establishing and running this Cooperative, these women became active agents in effecting change in their communities. In particular, the value of these women in the community changed substantially. They provided a different role model mainly for girls, they are the only example of collective survival in the region, they have been able to produce material benefits for themselves and their families as well as for the fishers and their families, they have become a source of employment in their community, and foremost, they have been able to change their self-image and perceived self-worth.



*Coop members showing the fish catch. Photo: Mercedes Cañas.*

### **Las Vencedoras Coop**

Initially the women approached an NGO that was already working in the area, Fundación Aldea Infantil Pestalozzi (SKIP), for help on how to relieve their desperate situation. SKIP provided them with a loan of US\$19,434.49 (at eight per cent interest amortized over ten years) to buy the boats and fishing gear, and also to help finance technical training. In addition, another NGO, *Colectivo de Apoyo para la Población Infantil Salvadoreña* (CAPIS), provided the women with education and training on how to make "informed" business decisions.

The women built the first Coop office themselves on a parcel of land provided by one of the members. The Coop members are the owners and administrators of the Coop. Their main activity is in the fishing sector, but also includes other income-generation activities (i.e., corner grocery store, tourist cabin rental, and farming of molluscs). Due to the dangers of night time open-sea fishing, the fishing is done by professional fishers using the Coop boats and gear. The fishermen are paid the cash equivalent of 50 percent of the fish catch and the women process the fish to be sold either fresh or salted dry. The Coop members are paid a salary for processing the fish which

they decided collectively should be a fair one for their labour. Under current conditions (small catches, fisher salaries, fair wages to the women, equipment depreciation and consumables) the Coop is unable to generate a profit. To date, the Coop has been able to pay back US\$2,138.55 of capital and its interests (the interests are going back to the Coop as savings). At the end of 1998, SKIP forgave 50 per cent of the debt after a devastating tropical storm.

### **Life in El Espino Community**

Traditionally the El Espino community did not engage in any form of collective work as most families were focused on ensuring their own survival. The data reported here summarizes information collected by SKIP, in a survey conducted at the time the Cooperative began its operation in order to be able to measure the subsequent impact of the Coop on the lives of the 15 women involved.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Ages and Reproductive Life*

In 1998, the average age of the members was 39 years old. They had an average of eight children, at least one of whom had died. Three of the women had 13 to 15 children. The average age of their first pregnancy was 17 years old. Forty-six per cent of the women had at least one miscarriage, and among them 50 per cent had had three. According to the women, the miscarriages were primarily due to deprivation they suffered as a result of the scarcity of food, the hardships of their labour in harvesting the mangrove (for molluscs and crabs)<sup>5</sup>, and domestic violence. Even though 85 per cent had a partner at that time, 31 per cent had no knowledge of any contraceptive methods, 54 per cent used some form of birth control, and among them 57 per cent had been sterilized between 29 and 37 years of age.

#### *Access to Education and Information*

Fifty-four per cent of the women were illiterate. On average they had completed 1.5 grades; 46 per cent had never attended school at all. The highest educational level achieved by only one of the women was the seventh grade (elementary school). Forty-six per cent had access to radio and 23 per cent to television.

#### *Dwellings*

Their homes were very rustic, with dirt floors and walls made of tin sheets, coconut leaves, wood, or mangrove roots. The roofs were made of tin sheets and coconut leaves. All the construction materials were obtained at market price (e.g. coconut leaves cost US\$8.00 per 100 leaves), except for the mangrove roots.

The average size of the dwellings was 30 square meters. The majority consisted of a single room. Only 31 per cent had two rooms. Each unit had an average of seven occupants. Twenty-three per cent had access to electricity, 69

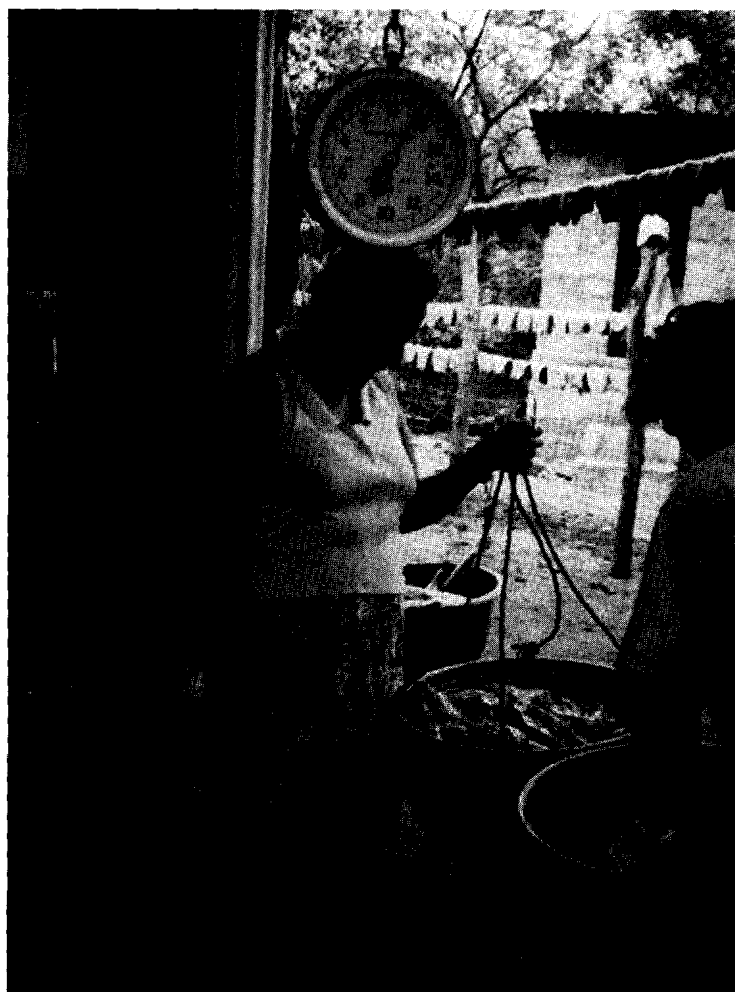
per cent had access to latrines, and 85 per cent had access to drinking water. Only two of the women had title to the land on which they lived. The rest of the women, as well as the majority of the community (320 families), did not own the land they lived on. Since the end of the civil war in 1992, these families have been living with uncertainty as they can be evicted at any time from land they have lived on for years. "The area where they live is a part of an old tourism-zoned area, whose landlords are looking for legal ways, not necessarily just ones, to have the land back for developing profitable business" (FESPAD 1).<sup>6</sup>

### *Material Production*

Among the women who decided to become members of the Cooperative, only one woman had a full-time job as an employee of an organization. Among the rest, 77 per cent had jobs processing and/or marketing fish, in itinerant sales, and harvesting the mangrove. According to one of the women in the Coop, "We have done everything: *curilear*, *punchar*,<sup>4</sup> fish filleting, rice harvesting, corn processing, land clearing, everything in agriculture..." (Petronila). They struggled daily to provide for their families, but the availability of work, and the wages they received for that work, was inconsistent. For most of the year, the women had no income, and on the days that they did, it varied from US\$2.29 to \$3.42 per day. It was difficult for the women to provide an estimate of the number of days on which they actually received some income, however, typically it was about 96 days with income per year, resulting on an average income per year of US\$0.75 per day for their families. Among the Coop members, only two had land on which they could grow their own food, and only one (who received at least one yearly remittance from relatives in the U.S.) owned a fishing boat and two cows. The rest did not have any means of production.

Nevertheless, these women were not economically dependent on their partners. Eighty-five per cent of the women had partners who were fisherman (31 per cent working for boat owners), mangrove harvesters (15 per cent), or agricultural workers (15 per cent). One woman's partner was a mason (eight per cent), and one other woman's partner was unemployed. During shrimp season (which last seven months), 47.5 per cent of the fishermen had an income, if the catch was good, of US\$114.28 per month (Torres and Díaz Melara). The men that harvested the mangrove forest had the same income as the women. The majority of those who worked in agriculture were subsistence farmers. However, the income the women's partners brought to the household was minimal as most were not permanent partners and, as such, they did not feel they were obliged to provide for children who were not theirs or whose paternity they doubted.<sup>5</sup> In most cases, therefore, the women were the sole providers for their families.

The demographics of the women active in the Coop



*Weighing the fish catch at the Coop. Photo: Mercedes Cañas.*

women demonstrate how complex it is to obtain "hard" economic data to explain the dire poverty most endured. Assuming that there were partners present who indeed contributed 100 per cent of their income to the family's income, then the daily average per family would be US\$1.96 to \$2.96 to cover their food, shelter, health, education and clothing expenses. This suggests that family's survival depends on the entire family's labour. Children, both male and female, often start working at seven years of age, although most often their labour is unwaged since mainly they contribute to the family's work (e.g. harvesting the mangrove). In 46 per cent of the Coop members' families, daughters and sons younger than 18 (in average about nine years old) work mainly in agriculture, the fishery or mangrove harvesting and contribute to the family income.<sup>6</sup> In the families where women perform the mangrove harvesting, their children did the same, and the woman started harvesting the mangrove during her childhood.

### **And Then the Cooperative Was Born...**

These 15 women in El Espino decided to establish the Cooperative to "get a job," "to progress, to see if we can

prosper," "for economic needs," "to have an income," "because we have faith that we can do better," and "to provide for my children."<sup>7</sup> In doing so, the women faced a number of challenges.

Many had to overcome their own individual pessimism which made them question whether it was indeed possible to improve their economic situation and furthermore, to do so collectively. Most suffered from low self-esteem and lack of confidence, a result of the "machista" socialization and education that reinforced their belief that anything important can only be accomplished by man and that women are ignorant and incapable of effecting change. Further, the envy and lack of trust among women themselves, also a result of a socialization process which encouraged them to see other women as competitors, gossips, disloyal, weak and untrustworthy, needed to be addressed and dealt with.

Another significant challenge was general lack of trust common in a war-stricken society such as El Espino, which was an active conflict zone. Among the women, there are some whose relatives were either murdered by the guerrillas, killed by the army, and/or actively participated in the guerrilla movement or collaborated with the army. The creation of the Cooperative required the women to question and overcome the social polarization created by the civil war in order to learn to trust each other.

In terms of working collaboratively, the women also had to overcome their fear and distrust of any kind of social organizing, also a consequence of the recent civil war, during which any type of organizing was seen as suspicious. Many of the women had witnessed different groups, such as teachers, farmers, and slum dwellers, organize before and during war, as well as the subsequent massacre of the members of those organized groups.

For some of the women it was difficult to break free from patriarchal stereotypes that dictate a woman's place is in the home. A number of women had partners and family members who insisted they remain at home, making it hard for them to get together with the other women. Some of the women had partners who threatened throwing them out of their own homes if they refused to leave the Cooperative.

Lastly, the women had to deal with the challenges posed to them by their own community, which mocked their efforts as futile and ridiculed their attempts to make their own decision and achieve tangible results.

Nevertheless, the fact that these women were able to overcome these obstacles and deal with challenges is, in and of itself, a major accomplishment that improved the

quality of their lives and helped them take a big first step in their human development.

### Women as Agents of Change

Although in the first two years the Cooperative was moderately successful, there was a decline in the production levels in 2000 and 2001. This can be explained by the decrease in fish stocks. Shrimp, the most valuable product on the market, has become scarcer with time, mainly as a consequence of overfishing and the destruction of their ecosystem by industrial fishery practices (i.e., trawling<sup>9</sup>). In addition, the weather phenomenon known as "El Niño" also had a significant impact on shrimp stocks in the area during that time.

Another factor that contributed to the decline in income was the high price of consumables like gas and oil. Further, the Coop was not able to generate enough revenue to replace and repair their equipment.

The wages paid to the Coop members were lower than those paid to the fishers. The wages of the Coop members depends on the number of days worked which in turn depend on the

quantity of fish that needs processing. Nevertheless, earnings from the fishery are shared equally, 50 per cent to the fishers and 50 per cent to the boat owners. However, the boat owners (in this case the Coop) are responsible for covering the cost of the boat, supplies, and net repairs from their share of earnings.

Taking into consideration the information above, we can make some inferences on the impact of the Coop on the members' economic situation. Members received approximately US\$1,061 in the four years of the Coop's life.<sup>10</sup> This translates to US\$0.72 per family per day. Although this is a small amount of money, it made a difference to the members, especially as it would have been difficult for them to earn extra income on their own. The precarious types of work these women perform are neither permanent nor secure, yet the Coop was able to provide them with a certain amount of income security. In addition, the Coop generated income for approximately 12 fishers and their families in the amount of US\$1.56 per family per day.

Knowing that the situation for Coop members is still very difficult economically, in November 2002, we asked them what they felt were the major obstacles to the Coop's success. They explained that the decrease in fish stocks was a significant factor. However, it spurred them to implement alternative income-generating projects, such as the establishment of a corner grocery corner store, eateries,

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**"The workshops have helped me tremendously, have opened my mind, and now I think differently. Before I feared my husband's jealousy, now I decide. Before I did not know how to drive, now I know how."**

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and more recently the farming of *curiles* (molluscs) and the rental of beach cabins, making them less dependent on the fishery.

The Coop's productivity was also hampered by interpersonal problems among the members, which consumed significant amounts of time in meetings that should have been used to make decisions related to the Coop's production activities.

The resistance of some members to change or to explore new initiatives was another obstacle they identified. For example, marketing the Coop has not improved as none of the members wanted to take on the task of finding new markets for their products since this would require travel outside the area. This was compounded by the unwillingness of the fishers to catch other commercially valuable species, despite the fact that the shrimp stocks are decreasing annually.

Despite the obstacles they faced, the Coop did have a positive impact on the women's lives. Some of the coop members talked about benefits to their work and incomes:

*The best thing out of the Coop organizing has been the opportunity to have an income, thus allowing our children to work less.* (Jesus)

*It has helped us, it has given us work, sometimes we did not have anything to eat but here we always have work to do, even if we quarrel among each other we'll come to work.* (Rosita)

*Thank God we have our own business, and when there is work to do we take advantage, maybe we can not read but we certainly can process fish.* (Elvira)

They also spoke of personal transformation:

*It has helped us a lot, at the beginning we had fear, but now we feel more confident. I feel freer now. Now I found my voice to reply whenever I disagree with something; before I would have kept silence.* (Jesus)

*It has helped me to better myself. I have learned to make decisions. The workshops have helped me tremendously, have opened my mind, and now I think differently. Now I have even changed my appearance, I got a haircut and use make-up if I feel like it. Before I feared my husband's jealousy, now I decide. Before I did not know how to drive, now I know how.* (Mercedes)

*Before the Coop my husband used to kick me out of the house when he was drunk, now I know what to do. I have threatened him with legal action.* (Elba)

Collective support was also identified as an important benefit:

*I feel the support of my Coop friends and if I need something I know I can count on them.* (Elvira)

*I have hope to look for work, and if there is none I can still come and have the support of the other members. Even when I am old I will keep coming to the Coop, and I want my daughters to stay in the Coop when I die.* (Elba)

*Despite all the disappointments I had and still have in my life, I won't quit the Coop; it is better to work together than not having anybody. I feel supported and that I belong to the group that also feeds me.* (Carmen)

There are times when there is no work at the Coop, hence women still need multiple sources of income, and thus still harvest the mangrove and sell foodstuffs to tourist. Nevertheless, the enabled them to generate another source of income for themselves and for other community members. They have proven that poor women are able to help themselves and others to survive. They have significantly changed the way their community valued them, the way they are looked upon by younger generations, and more significantly the way they see themselves.

## Conclusion

Is this story an example of human development? We believe the answer is yes, since we reject the consumption-based model of human development.<sup>11</sup> As active agents in the process of organizing the Coop, the women were able to self-determine their own vision of development. This "development" project thus came from the women and is for for the women; they are the agents, owners and consumers of their own economic and "human" development.

Although the Coop has not been entirely successful economically, from the women's point of view, the Coop venture has been a very positive experience. The extra revenues they were able to generate at the Coop has at least kept the women and their families from enduring increasing impoverishment at a time when globalization has resulted in increasing women's poverty around the world. Furthermore, through their participation in the Coop, the women learned how to manage their resources and how to make informed decisions. In the process, the women significantly increased their self-esteem and confidence in their own capabilities. This component of development is as important as access to health, food and other resources in order to have a life with dignity.

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<sup>1</sup>For more detail see the *United Nations Sustainable Development Agenda 21*.

<sup>2</sup>For more information see Shiva. See also Mies and Shiva.

<sup>3</sup>SKIP conducted a comparison survey in 2002.

<sup>4</sup>The harvesting of the mangrove area (referred to as *curileada* and *punchada*) takes place at low tide, and consists of the handpicking of molluscs (*curil*), and a variety of crab (*punche*). In order to do this, women walk sometimes waist deep in the intertidal mud and search for their catch among the mangrove roots. One of the women, who reported having had three miscarriages, claimed they were a consequence of the falls and bruising she experienced while searching among the roots. She had been harvesting the mangrove since she was seven years old.

<sup>5</sup>The negation of paternity is a common phenomenon in El Salvador, and even though there are no hard data to back up this statement, these authors believe one of the reasons the men do this is to protect their personal income.

<sup>6</sup>In El Espino, the SKIP Foundation and the Communal Association (ACAPA) have, however, implemented a program to educate the girls and boys who harvest the mangrove. There are a total of 18 girls and 21 boys (between the ages of 7 and 19) currently attending school.

<sup>7</sup>These comments were taken from the survey conducted by SKIP when the Coop began its operations on February 1998.

<sup>8</sup>This information was obtained from an external audit conducted on the Coop. The expenditures did not include equipment depreciation.

<sup>9</sup>See Vandana Shiva's report on the detrimental effect of trawling by industrial fishing on shrimp stocks compared to the impact of artisanal fishing (39-42).

<sup>10</sup>This calculation is based on information provided by 13 active members of the Cooperative.

<sup>11</sup>See the concept of human development as defined in UNDP: "Sustainable development is that which meets all the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

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## KAREN SHENFELD

### The Jade Sea

In a dream  
we came through brush and acacia  
to an infinite land-locked coast.  
The sea was no mirror: resolute,  
ignoring clear or clouded skies,  
it shone, basked, in its  
own mineralled light, was  
in a dream dreamlike,  
its surface inscrutable.

Below: an airless garden  
spined stars, the swell of fish.  
I baptized myself in  
the sea's oriental green  
swam open-eyed, was  
smooth, perfect,  
like the carved figure of a vase.

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