Indigenous People and Development in Latin America: A Literature Survey and Recommendations

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Executive Summary

This report represents an effort to synthesize some of the lessons that can be learned from a review of the literature on development directed toward indigenous peoples in Latin America. The goals are (1) to identify those characteristics underlying, enabling, or enhancing the success of such “positive” development projects; (2) to determine those conditions that are significant obstacles to development success; and (3) to extrapolate from this evidence to generate hypotheses and recommendations concerning the best practices for development efforts directed toward aiding indigenous development in the region.

In-depth information on 42 specific cases of indigenous development in Latin America served as the basic source of data for analysis and the generation of theory and proposals. The cases represent information from a large number of countries, involve a wide variety of development interventions, and include projects carried out among relatively isolated lowland indigenous groups as well as in “peasantized” indigenous communities. Of the 42 cases, 28 are considered as basically successful, 8 are viewed as not successful or only nominally successful, and 6 are unclear in relation to outcomes.

FINDINGS

The Legal Framework

The lack of a legal framework supporting and enforcing indigenous rights at numerous levels presents a basic and often insurmountable obstacle to indigenous self-development. The analysis indicates that:

- Variables associated with broader political-economic issues, primarily with problems related to human rights and the legal framework necessary for development, were significant to the failure of 75 percent of the cases identified as unsuccessful.
- Problems concerning security over land and natural resources were significant to the failure of 63 percent of the unsuccessful cases. It is interesting to note, however, that although usually seen as a basic prerequisite for successful indigenous development, issues concerning land and natural resource security contributed significantly to success in only 32 percent of the successful cases. Land and natural resource security is a prerequisite, but by itself does not appear to significantly promote successful development.

Participation, Empowerment, and Self-Determination

While involvement of indigenous peoples at all stages of the development process helps to ensure that local priorities are addressed, what is most important to achieving maximum participation is that development plans are internalized by the participating group. The most common thread that bound together successful cases of development, and was consistently discussed as important, was the presence or creation of indigenous organizations both at the local level and multi-community level as a means by which indigenous peoples can be represented in the development process and manage development initiatives.
The analysis indicates that:

- Problems associated with overall community involvement in the development process, principally related to lack of such involvement, were primary factors involved in the failure of 63 percent of the unsuccessful cases.
- The involvement of local and macrolevel indigenous organizations in the development process was significant to the success of development in 71 percent of the successful cases. (Well-established indigenous organizations were seen to serve many roles—from political empowerment to project management.)
- Knowledge and skills necessary for the development project or program were significant to the success of 61 percent of the successful cases. (Seventy-seven percent of these cases involved using or building on indigenous knowledge.)
- Issues concerning marketing and economies of scale were discussed as significant to the success of 55 percent of the successful cases that involved marketing, and significant to the failure of 57 percent of the poor cases that involved marketing.

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While many cases made no mention of cultural revaluation or ethnic strengthening, in 43 percent of the successful cases it was discussed as central to development success.

**Financial, Technical and State Support**

In most successful and unsuccessful cases of development, outside financial and technical assistance was received—suggesting that while this is an important factor, assistance in itself is no guarantee of success. The analysis indicates that:

- Issues concerning the provision of financial and technical assistance were significant to the success of 64 percent of the successful cases. (Examination of these cases, and the fact that financial assistance was provided in 71 percent of successful and 88 percent of unsuccessful cases and technical assistance in 89 percent of the successful and 88 percent of the unsuccessful cases, suggests that this significance depended more on how and for what such assistance was provided than simply on its availability.)

**CONCLUSIONS**

Indigenous peoples are different as a group because they share a history of colonial repression and are viewed as different by external power structures. Negative external categorizations of indigenous people continue, as do the abuses they suffer as a result of such views. Yet, there are many more distinctions than similarities among indigenous groups, and it is clear from the review of specific cases, and of the broader literature, that no general recipe exists from which successful cases of indigenous development have been produced. Each case is unique, with its own permutations and quirks, from the sociocultural aspects of the groups involved to the constantly changing national and global environments which establish important and sometimes crucial conditions that shape adaptations/developments.
Based upon this report, preliminary recommendations for successful indigenous self-development may be formulated and summarized as follows.

1. The basic human rights, including full rights as citizens; the right to vote, participate, and be represented in the political system; and the insurance of physical security, of indigenous peoples must be recognized and protected.

2. Food security, as an essential component of group health, must be maintained or enhanced by safeguarding activities appropriate to the indigenous culture, whether involving hunting, gathering, farming, fishing, animal husbandry, craft production, wage labor, or any combination thereof. Priority should be accorded to improving health conditions, including attention to potable water, appropriate sanitation measures, and disease prevention.

3. Secure (demarcated and definitively titled) property rights to land, water, and other natural resources must be obtained and guaranteed.

4. Development efforts oriented towards indigenous peoples must address local concerns and be compatible with autochthonous social, economic, and political systems. To ensure this, indigenous peoples should be involved in planning, implementing, and managing development initiatives.

5. Group solidarity, self-esteem, and cultural pride facilitate development programs and should be maintained or revitalized. Locally based bilingual education and literacy training are an important component in achieving this and are essential to helping provide the human capital for long-term autonomous development.

6. The formation of legally constituted management and coordinating organizations, to direct projects and to ensure representation and participation in the national systems, should be encouraged and should be based, when appropriate, on existing indigenous organizing principles.

7. In order to economically empower indigenous development efforts, there should be: freedom from exploitative labor and market arrangements; appropriate economies of scale and/or market niches; reinvestment of profits into the community and productive enterprises; and diversification of production, particularly towards value-added products.

8. Appropriate types of financial assistance, particularly nonpartisan aid provided with the potential for long-term commitment, should be provided to indigenous groups involved in development projects. For initial organizational and development efforts that often have little economic return, much of this assistance should come in the form of grants rather than loans.

9. Technical assistance and training programs or courses that are appropriate for the development activities being undertaken should be available to indigenous participants. Such assistance should be provided by organizations or individuals sensitive to cultural issues, knowledgeable about the targeted indigenous group, and who can commit long periods of time working with indigenous groups. The goal should be to establish the greatest degree of indigenous autonomy possible given the development activities.

10. Some level of support (even if benign neglect) for indigenous self-development by the state is critical to any chance for successful development by indigenous peoples.