

Career stories: The map is not the territory

During the last decade of the twentieth century, I worked as a project manager for NGOs in Ecuador and Peru on a number of projects, all of which had strong environmental, as well as developmental components. One of these was the 'Manu Project', whose objectives were succinctly described in its more formal title: 'Conservation and sustainable development of the Manu Biosphere Reserve, Peru'. To achieve these objectives the project worked mainly with communities located close to the Manu National Park, the core zone of the reserve for biodiversity conservation.

One cluster of communities (I'll call them A, B, C and D) was located in wild and beautiful country high in the Andes mountains. On the map, these looked close, separated by no more than a few kilometres from each other. What the maps didn't show clearly was the steep-sided river valley separating villages A and B from C and D – or the fact that there were no roads between the villages. As a result, visiting the four villages involved a strenuous three-day round walk.

The walk started out from village A, accessible by a winding road through a high (and, once, snow-covered) mountain pass. The walk from A to B along the south side of the valley was a couple of hours' deceptively simple stroll across open moorland. From there the path turned and headed abruptly down into the valley, it seemed almost vertically, winding through a mosaic of landscapes that became ever more luxuriant as the climate turned tropical, to the fast-flowing, silt-laden River Mapacho almost 2000 metres below. To cross the river on the outward journey we had the luxury of stone bridge (the way back from village D to A involved a scary if exhilarating flight across the river on a cable pulley). Resting at the bridge we could contemplate the pain in our knees and the 2000 metre ascent that had to be completed before nightfall.

Arriving, several hours later, tired but exhilarated, at village C, our first port of call was the village shop, which stocked pasta, rice, sugar and biscuits (more nourishing food had to be carried in with us) but also, most importantly, three different brands of excellent Peruvian beer. Our hosts, however, were usually in no mind to let us enjoy a well deserved rest. Our visit was a not-to-be-missed opportunity to make up the numbers for a game of football, and this had to be played at once, before it got dark at 6 pm and the village shut down for the night. That obligatory game of football, played on tired legs in the half light on a bumpy pitch at 3000 metres above sea level, wasn't on the map either!

Death of a project

Thinking about my project in Peru, there were some aspects that fitted quite well to the idea of projects as 'cycles'. The project had two phases, each of five years, and design of the second phase incorporated a number of lessons learned by reviewing the experiences of Phase 1. For example the first phase envisaged supporting subsistence agricultural production by communities living near to the National Park. It became clear in Phase 1 that developing *commercial* agriculture was a key concern among local communities and this was incorporated in Phase 2.

In fact, as a description of the iterative learning process that occurred, the project cycle seems an oversimplification. The process of reflecting and refining also occurred at shorter time scales, on an annual cycle, but also from month to month and even week to week. Project staff and other participants were constantly learning and revising activities, and the project was constantly evolving.

My job was mainly office based and on my relatively infrequent trips to the field, it was always a pleasure to learn about the latest innovations!

Looking back, however, I can see that we were unprepared for the end of the project. Although it became clear quite early on in Phase 2 that we were unlikely to get funding for a further phase, in effect we were in denial. By the time, we had accepted the fact it was too late to design a proper strategy for the 'closure' of the project. At the end, it felt like we were 'walking out' of the situation without properly saying goodbye to the participants, leaving many activities 'hanging in the air'.

The closure of the project also involved saying goodbye to long-standing colleagues, who had become my friends. Although I kept my job at head office, several members of the project staff were not so lucky. Finally, we hadn't really thought about what to do with all the infrastructure and hardware that we had accumulated over the lifetime of the project. On my visits after the end of the project, pick-up trucks that had been in constant use were lying idle in the courtyard of the project office. The office itself, for ten years a hub of frenzied activity, was now eerily calm.

At times like this, when something comes to an end after investing a great deal of time and emotional energy, remembering the maxim that 'change is the only constant in life' helps me to begin again.

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