

Two Weeks in El Salvador

They call themselves Wanakos, a llama-like animal indigenous to the Andes. While not known for its intelligence, it is known for its stubborn hard work, and the El Salvadorians I am meeting are nothing if not proud of their work ethic. They are quick to point out that only 2 years after a devastating earthquake in 2001 the more than 100 villages and towns destroyed were completely rebuilt. This reconstruction, a symbol of their diligence, also shows that they are not people who wait around for things to get done. They are people who do what they have to in order to make sure the things they want happen. They are not waiting around for opportunities to come to them, but rather are extremely entrepreneurial and are determined to affect change. In my view, the prospects for their success are outstanding.

With the shadows of a particularly nasty civil war hanging over their efforts to attract foreign capital (even though there has been peace and stability for more than 10 years), and a still less than perfect rate of compliance of laws (there are still gangs and violence in certain areas) restricting the entry of some foreign companies, the El Salvadorian people (the wanakos) have taken matters into their own hands and are building their economy the old fashioned way – with local entrepreneurs.

I am here in El Salvador for a two week assignment as part of the Farmer to Farmer project funded by USAID. Administered by the Winrock Foundation in Arkansas and coordinated by Florida International University, the program matches expertise from the United States with organizations in developing countries. I am here as a volunteer, but somehow I get the feeling I am getting a lot more than I am giving.

While it may be true that I am in a position to share ideas, experiences and perceptions that they find helpful, so too is it true that their optimism, enthusiasm, dedication, and appreciation are uplifting and serve to restore some vigor and bounce in my weary bones. Doing business in the United States may bring out some less than positive tendencies in me. Being here restores my faith in the purity of the business concept and the worthiness of its pursuit.

Here in El Salvador I once again find myself impressed with the determination of the people, the ingenuity of the young, and the ambition of the professionals. The country is small and their resources are limited. Yet they are commerce oriented and proud of their reputation for savvy business sense.

The core of my activities here revolve around a fantastic program initiated 5 years ago by a coalition of NGOs called ETI – an acronym for the Spanish words that mean Launch Your Idea. A business plan competition that not only judges submitted plans, the 8 month program teaches entrepreneurs how to write a business plan, how to launch their companies, and how to sustain them. The key to the program is the small stipend of seed capital awarded to the top winners.

My first days here were spent visiting last year's winners – a horse farm with a park and restaurant, a butterfly park for the elderly and handicapped, and a biodiesel startup. In each case the entrepreneur was impressive not only in his/her vision, but also in the way they allocated their winnings and how they are actively and aggressively implementing their business plan. Each project was aware of their need for planning, multiple revenue

streams, good management, visible marketing, incentive driven sales, and the maintenance of quality.

In addition to my field trip I have been lecturing for NGOs, including Technoserve, a Washington based organization with offices in many developing countries, and CoExport, the national association of exporters, as well as at some local universities. Each lecture was constructed based on specific questions presented to me prior to the talk, because the organizers wanted to make sure that I provided them with information they were most interested (and perhaps in need) of receiving. This too impressed me, as they seem to be very focused on what they want and very intent on getting it. This dedication is a great example of the professionalism of the people and the seriousness with which they take their task. They want to improve the quality of the services they are offering entrepreneurs and they want to be sure that their emerging business leaders are armed with the skills necessary to effectively compete and succeed.

For the past 3 years I have been visiting Central America, completing 6 assignments for Farmer to Farmer and working with Tudog clients in Guatemala, Honduras and Costa Rica. Tudog now has active investments in Guatemala (biodiesel) and Costa Rica (Noni) and will most likely complete an investment in Honduras (biodiesel) in the coming months. We made these investments because we believe in the viability of each country's economy and we were impressed with the opportunities available. And while our involvement has not been devoid of challenges, we have found that the pound of flesh required is worth the pound of gold to be gained.

With our activities in neighboring countries in mind, I find myself excited by the prospect of doing business in El Salvador. The opportunities here are as appealing as elsewhere in the region, and the quality of human resources is exemplary. The pride in a strong work ethic, the thirst for know-how, the openness to new ideas, and the dedication to success all make El Salvador a perfect fit for American and regional businesses seeking to include this small but ambitious nation in their network of operations.

So while I have not yet even finished my two week stay here in El Salvador, I can enthusiastically report that this is a nation of hard workers, business oriented people, and alternative thinkers. They may be wanakos, but they are as smart as they come.