

*La Gamba: Sustainable Communal Development in the Buffer Zone
of Piedras Blancas National Park*

Credits

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Established in 1985, the Neotrópica Foundation is a non governmental, non-profit Costa Rican organization. Its mission is to promote initiatives of participation in the sustainable management of the natural resources in order to improve human development. Since its establishment, Neotrópica had contributed with the facilitation of technical, scientific and financial means for the production and development of tools for protection and sustainable use of natural resources in the protected zones, biological brokers and basins, as well as the generation and dissemination of technical and scientific information related to the environment.

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Thanks

Reconstructing history, but most of all do it objectively and adhered to the facts is a hard and risky labor, because there will always be things and facts, unsaid or only partially said as well as facts blown out of proportion. Some people will agree and others will disagree with what is being said. But it is better trying to tell, understand, and learn from what occurred than remaining silent. This systematization has been possible thanks to the extensive contribution of unselfish groups and people protagonists of the execution of Project La Gamba.



Acronyms

ASOPROBI	Asociación pro-bienestar de la comunidad (Community Development Association)
AyA	Instituto costarricense de Acueductos y Alcantarillados (National Water Utilities Company)
CCSS	Caja Costarricense del Seguro Social (Socialized Medicine Bureau)
COOPEASEGA	Cooperativa de Pequeños Agricultores La Gamba (Small Farmer's Association of La Gamba)
ICE	Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (National Electricity and Telephone Utilities Company)
ICT	Instituto Costarricense de Turismo (Costa Rican Tourism Bureau)
IDA	Instituto del Desarrollo Agrario (Agraria Development Institute)
INA	Instituto Nacional de Aprendizaje (National Learning Institute)
JUDESUR	Junta de Desarrollo del Sur (Southern Costa Rica Development Board)
MINAE	Ministerio de Ambiente y Energía (Ministry of the Environment and Energy)
UE	Comunidad Económica Europea (European Community)

Background: Why this Systematization?

The necessity and urgency of making a meticulous and critical analysis of what happened during the implementation of project La Gamba has been the main motivation to undertake this work. The systematization of the project was arranged with two main objectives. On one hand: to promote learning between those involved, in perspective of the new challenges that arise regarding sustainable development in the buffer zones. Assuming that learning helps to strengthen and to restate, in such a way that next time we do it better. The idea is that the information offered helps the protagonists in the process itself, as well to other instances that are in similar actions.

On the other hand, there was an attempt to document the actual scope and results regarding social and environmental improvement for the community of La Gamba.

Although the impact in the community is relevant, it is also important the locals' learning and their immediate and long term contributions to new projects and activities.

A systematization exercise is supposed to make us organizations, communities, and institutions like ours more consequent and responsible, as well as more effective as agents of change. The implicit premise is that the critical interpretation of the experience lived must put in evidence the positive and negative factors that emerged during the process and how these have affected the logic and the assumptions that prevailed when setting up the objectives of the project in the first place, as well as the community's point of view and of the institutions, collaborators, facilitators and donors.

The essential is the learning provided by experience; such learning is the essence of the systematization.

Project La Gamba

The project "Strengthening of the Self-Management Capacity of La Gamba Community" (La Gamba project) financed by the Austrian Cooperation Office for Development and implemented by the Neotrópica foundation, started due to a conflict generated in 1996 between Albergue Bosque Esquinas and the community of La Gamba, property of the foundation Bosque LLuvioso of Austria and the community of La Gamba. The conflict arose from people's expectations regarding the administration and contribution of the shelter in the generation of employment. Due to this disagreement, Neotrópica foundation, promoted a conciliatory process between those involved. The result of such intervention was a document that details the necessities and problems of the community and points out their situation in terms of education and health services, infrastructure, production, self-management capacity, and organization.

After realizing that it is their situation and not the conflict the big limitation to the community's development, the inhabitants got together in the creation of La Gamba

project, which would help them confronting the limitations of their environment. The idea grew stronger after considering the strategic location of the community in the buffer zone of Piedras Blancas National Park and the Refugio de Vida Silvestre in Golfito.

Main Objective for the First Phase:

“To strengthen the self-management capacity of the community, through the performance of productive activities to promote the sustainable development”

Key Topics:

- Environmental education
- Communal infrastructure
- Community self-management
- Productive systems

Main Activities:

- Training and technical assistance for the consolidation of the communal organization (ASOPROBI)
- General education in the community to provide basic management tools
- Improvement of the school and communal lounge's infrastructure
- Training to ASOPROBI's Board of Directors to manage the community's credit fund
- Support communal eco-tourism activities
- Environmental education aimed for children and young people in the community
- Improvement of the productive systems from diversified practices and sustainable cattle farming
- Support to the cattle raising, livestock and minor species
- Construction of fermentation containers
- Support the production of medicinal plants by a group of women

Three years after the project started the community's managerial capabilities were evident. Leadership and the creation of an organized platform marked the start of a process towards communal development. Nevertheless, activism and dispersed activities, basically due to the community's heterogeneity, and reflected in the appearance of several groups of power and conflicts among families and groups, along with a strong insistence for assistance

were also detected. Due to this situation, Neotrópica Foundation and ASOPROBI decided that the project should emphasize the consolidation of the association and make an impact in specific problems, training people on abilities which can provide an income to their families, and involving groups in social and economical risk. In consequence, the project's strategy of implementation and objectives were stated again. The new objective proposed is the following: "To consolidate the self-developing process in the community of La Gamba from the organized participation of its members and the improvement of productive activities and microbusiness."

At the same time, it was decided to spread the project's coverage in order to include La Julieta and Los Angeles², two neighbor communities, for which the following objective was proposed: "To support the spreading and replication of the experiences in La Gamba, and the strengthening of technical abilities of their inhabitants in order to generate new alternatives for the improvement of the production systems and their socio-economical conditions."

The project focuses its actions on the following thematic axis:

² These communities are also part of the buffer zone and relatively close to La Gamba; their socio-economical situation is similar to that of La Gamba.

Communal microbusiness

Communal, familiar or individual business is given support in order to set commerce, service and productive activities in motion. These activities are expected to improve the familiar income in the short term, and to have a positive impact in the community's development in the medium term

Main Activities:

- Self-diagnose of offer and demand of products, service, and commerce within La Gamba.
- Creation of business plans for micro business by people or families who may be interested.
- Training in business management.
- Counseling and follow-up during the early stage of the business.

Several micro business were formed from this process, for the production of handicraft, shampoos from medicinal plants, a bakery, a little restaurant and horse-back ridings for tourists. These business produced income for 18 families. Besides, the credit committee has been strengthen and has oriented itself towards the self-handling of the community's credit fund, which works under the principles of microbusiness.

Community's Self-Management:

People's organizational, managerial and communal understanding abilities are strongly encouraged in all three communities. The results obtained in La Gamba are replicated in the other two communities

Some Important Accomplishments:

- ASPROBI gets consolidated and the community's organizations grows stronger; new support committees are formed (roads, public security, commerce, eco-tourism, aqueducts, credit, health, teenage groups, women groups, and a school committee.)
- ASPROBI strengthens its relationships and covenants with both public and private institutions such as: C.C.S.S, JUDESUR, AyA, I.C.E, I.C.T, and Golfito's Association for Development, I.N.A, Public Security Ministry, and M.I.N.A.E.
- A community's hall with excellent conditions is built.
- Construction of the teacher's house.
- A public health center is organized and built.
- A security station is created.
- Construction of an aqueduct for El Bonito.
- Elementary, Middle School, and High School students get scholarships.
- Promoters are offered training.
- Negotiations aiming for the construction of bridges begin.
- Young people's capacities are strengthen; a communal newspaper in charge of them is created.
- El Bonito and La Balsa get electrification.
- The Credit Committee manages its resources within the community with no delinquencies
- Biodigestors become an important element in Los Angeles and La Julieta, since they allow people to handle their waste adequately and reducing their household's expenses by means of biogas. This technology was widely accepted.
- Economic activities based on cattle and minor species are supported with a greater impact than that obtained in La Gamba.
- Home orchards started working, Los Angeles' case was the most successful one.

Characteristics and Tendencies of the Context in the Project's Zone

The Socio-Economical Context

La Gamba started in the 1940s when some families came to the zone with the objective of starting a new life. Those working class families, used to agricultural labor came with the intention of setting the foundations of a new life. Nevertheless, weather conditions and the lack of development, especially in terms of infrastructure, were obstacles to their dreams.

So, their dreams and lives were reduced to survival; this was the beginning of predatory practices which diminished the valuable natural resources of that region of the country. The problems that agricultural development stepped into forced some of the inhabitants to look for alternative forms of survival such as hunting and excessive harvest of timber.

During the 1950s, the production of banana marks a new era in the economy of Costa Rica's southern zone. New working posts were created for the inhabitants and families who owned land dedicated to forestation, not fit for agricultural activities. Nevertheless, a decade later, different plagues attacked the banana plantations, and the loss of soil's fertility made banana companies leave the zone. Once again, the community is left without an economical activity to support their survival and economical development. On the other hand, the inhabitants developed a day laborer attitude.

To face this situation, the Government encourages the creation of peasant's settlements under IDA's leadership. Despite this, the same conditions that had frustrated the peasants' wishes in the 1940s remain an obstacle to achieve practices of diversified production which guarantee the community's survival and the generation of economical resources.

By the end of the 1970s, I.D.A. helped the creation of a peasant's settlement in the zone; it was mainly formed by people from Puntarenas, Guancaste, and Alajuela. During years, this settlement, just like some others dealt with grave problems, in order to consolidate a diversified production with a high added value due to the financial and environmental needs along with those of market and infrastructure.

In the 1980s, the Government and the European Economical Community support the Integrated Program of Rural Development Osa – Golfito, which develops activities in La Gamba too. This program aimed for the creation of basic infrastructure on the zone, supports productive activities (agriculture, heart of palm, and tubers) giving a press on to the cooperative organization and coordination among the government's institutions all around the region. When the program was finished, the Board for the Development of the South (JUDESUR) was born as the government's answer to the economical depression still existent on the zone.

Community's Situation at the Beginning of the Project

By 1996, La Gamba was inhabited by families whose income did not allow them to satisfy their basic needs properly. There were great limitations in terms of organization, poor levels of education and health, a strong tendency towards paternalism and non-existent technical abilities (only agricultural ones.) The people's self esteem was low, a high level of disenchantment and frequent feuds between families and different sectors.

Additionally, regarding economical activities and leadership young people were evidently neglected as well as senior citizens, some families, and women. This situation reduced their occupations to those socially and historically assigned to each group.

Agricultural and cattle production were the only economical choices, especially in the case of rice production and double purpose cattle raising.

Some farmers started developing new and less traditional activities with the support of public institutions and private companies in the zone, such as: yuca, plantains, pig breeding and minor species along with oil palm as an extensive activity. Some started working on lodging and food services and tourism related activities, such as the making and trading of handicrafts. A few of them got formal jobs in the community's influence area (Golfito Duty Free Zone, The Biological Station, and Bosque Esquinas Lodge.)

Owning land was a troublesome situation which still remains. According to previous studies 58.3% of the families in La Gamba hold deeds to their land, 20.8% own land but without any documents to support their claims, and 20.8% do not own land, so they work or live on borrowed land.

La Gamba is located in the buffer zone between Piedras Blancas National Park and Golfito's Wild Life Refuge. Just like in many other rural communities in the country, before the existence of the protected zones, the natural resources were plundered such as uncontrolled extraction of valuable trees and hunting. On the other hand, the use of forests for agricultural activities changed the landscape and has caused a natural unbalance. Consequently, this has produced floods and excessive rain.

Main Facts During the Project's Implementation

During the implementation years, La Gamba Project generated significant results for the communities where it was developed.

- The conflict: Neotrópica Foundation was hired as a mediator before the conflict that began between La Gamba and Project Bosque Esquinas Refuge. The objective of that project was to provide services in the eco-touristic line and to offer employment options and generation of resources for the inhabitants with the intention of releasing the pressure on the natural resources of the newly declared Piedras Blancas National Park and its buffer zone. For the execution of the Refuge project, an alliance was formed between the executing entity (Rain Forest Foundation) and COOPEASEGA, a communal organization, but discrepancies arose regarding the administration of the refuge. Neotrópica Foundation, in its mediator role, not only changes the community's perception of the Project Bosque Esquinas Refuge, but also worked on a deep analysis of the socio-economical situation in the community⁴. Such analysis found out that La Gamba did not have an organized supportive communal organization which could allow it to act clearly as

a collective. Then, the formulation of a project was proposed, in order the help the community to get over their limitations: La Gamba Project.

- The creation of the Association for the Welfare of the Community of La Gamba (ASOPROBI): The phase of solution of the conflict was of great importance in the process of developing of the project, for since its very elaboration; the project was acknowledged and accepted by the majority of the community.
- This was an advantage in the short term, but in the long term, it delayed the development of a truly appropriation process, since the project was contaminated by the paternalism which dominated the community and its every day life. This situation delayed not only a attitude change and the construction of new capacities, but the possibility of renewing leadership and the inclusion of other sectors such as young people and women.
- An ongoing process: By the end of the first phase of the project, the process was definitely unfinished, and there was still a lot to do for communal self-management to be consolidated. The work developed until that point had allowed the creation of a communal platform based on organization and training, but the inhabitants kept regarding themselves as simple objects of the project, whose benefits were obtained by the community's historical leaders by the project's grace. Information was a treasure exclusively for the leaders, and, in general, handled secretly; there was no real participation of the community, despite the efforts made. For this reason, the second phase was focused on consolidating the self-management processes and to strengthen individual abilities in order to develop productive options.
- The credit fund: From the very beginning of the project, the possibility of a credit fund was analyzed. It gave the community a chance to have an instrument that will encourage personal development initiatives. A great ACIERTO in the creation of the fund was to have the community write the rules and policies of the fund, since it increased the appreciation and especially the sense of pertaining. Managing the fund as a business has guaranteed benefit for many members of the community as well as its sustainability and resources multiplication.
- Methodological Change: During the second phase of the project, a methodological and conceptual change happened; this encouraged the participation of more people associated to ASOPROBI. Although the traditional leaders kept playing an important role, new spaces and conditions were created and other people were naturally included. So, people from previously excluded groups were incorporated to the project. In other words, though the project was never exclusive to some community members, until that point it lacked a methodological and even conceptual clarity which would stimulate the inclusion of more members. This is how the community grows stronger as a whole, and an expansion of the people's capacities, and especially, the consolidation of new people as leaders/representatives. This was favored by the creation of committees, in which more people had the chance to participate actively. Additionally, the information to these

structures is fluid and transparent, despite this structure had been proposed from the first phase of the project, it wasn't until this moment that it really produced results as expected.

Project's Results and Mistakes

Do's:

- The promotion of a network of committees linked to ASOPROBI as a self-management strategy and community's participation tool. This gave democracy to the decision-making and opened spaces for people who had the chance to show their interest on both the organization and the community, those people suddenly became potential leaders. Besides, this projected a better organized and participative community.
- The promotion of micro-businesses as an alternative for the economical development of the community. First, it allowed some families to handle their traditional activities (agricultural) from an entrepreneurial point of view; it means, rationalizing resources and getting profit. But above all, it allowed them the chance to enter non-traditional activities which create new jobs, diversify their income, and improve their quality of life.
- The Training Received by a Community Member: A young man was technically and methodologically trained and started working on the project; this guarantees the commitment to the job and sets an example for young people, by assuming a continuity commitment and follow-up in some processes.
- The Interaction between the Projects La Gamba and Young Entrepreneurial Leadership, both with the help of Neotrópica Foundation This allowed the combination of different processes of training for two people who currently are important leaders in the community's management of La Gamba.
- From the beginning, and as an institutional policy regarding gender and inclusion; the project facilitated and promoted spaces for women and young people to join the different boards of directors and participate in the responsibilities and benefits generated by the project. The idea is to turn women and young people into pillars to the community's self-development. This element can be identified nowadays as one of the main correct answer , after evaluating the role that young people have assumed in the community.
- The strength of entrepreneurial capacities, leadership and management of the population, though it took six years to see the results. Today, La Gamba is more capacitated, since it not only has a communal structure duly organized, but the inhabitants see their reality in a different light, they think about the situations, act as a group, look for a unified criteria, and in general a person can see their joy and love for life and being part of their community.

- The project's continuance for six years allowed working with a new generation. Besides, made it possible to train young leaders committed to the community's development and the spreading of a collective conscience which puts collective needs before the individual ones.
- Support to young people's formal education. From the beginning, the project awarded students interested in continuing their formal education with scholarships. Currently, there are young students with a High School degree or technical studies; by means of non-formal education, they have increased their knowledge of the English language, as touristic guides, and producing handicraft among other things.
- Promoting natural attractions. There is no doubt this made the community visualize other options for their local development and the conservation of natural resources in the buffer zone.
- Having contributed to make the need for information a managerial tool. This element allowed the association to settle down, and especially, contributed to gain the trust of all the associates. The handling of the credit fund is the clearer example of this effort.
- The entrepreneurial approach in the administration of the community's credit fund. This made the community to be conscious about the need to invest when required in order to guarantee the fund's economical sustainability.
- The impulse given to clean and appropriate technologies such as the fermented container. Despite the results in La Gamba were poor, it meant a mechanism to dispose of waste, but an important reduction of time and costs as well as an improvement to their familiar health.
- Amplification of the project's coverage to two new communities. This corrects the exchange of experiences, repetition of processes, and learning from La Gamba examples.
- The negotiation of alliances with private and governmental entities in the zone. Allowed the process to channel and coordinate resources for the benefit of the communities.

Don'ts:

- During the first phase of the project the Neotrópica Foundation got attached to a conciliatory attitude, from the stage of attention to the conflict. This facilitated the inclusion of the project within the community, but it also put Neotrópica in the first place instead of La Gamba Project per se, even less ASOPROBI. It took a great effort to change that attitude.

- During the first phase, the project supported itself on the community's traditional leaders only. This help having the project legitimized, but increased the community's dependency in those historical leaders, concentrated the power and decision-making processes, and consequently restricted the participation and the possibility to find new leaders.
- The participation in the project for ASOPROBI associates only. Although it managed to increase the number of associates, the main motivation to join the organization was based on the possibility to access the services offered, not from the people's conviction of the importance of getting organized. Even so, some people never got involved with ASOPROBI, which caused them to be permanently excluded from the project.
- The methodological handling and timing could have been better, especially during the first phase of the project. The technical team was worn out in the solution of internal conflicts; many of these conflicts were personal of little transcendence for the community. On the other hand, it was not easy to put together a work team which reflected the historical, economical, and social characteristics of the community. This disorientated the working strategy and the team members found themselves overwhelmed over the conflictive situation of the community, unable to set their activities within the global strategy which intended to contribute to the community's self-management. Activism and some paternalist practices caused the situation to worsen.
- The fact of not having the counsel of a professional in social sciences to focus in the social organization and the visualization and solution of social or communal conflicts. With the incorporation of this counselor, the coordinator and the production specialists wouldn't have weathered and spent their time in situations which, in the mid term, would turn out to be more expensive to the project; and therefore to the cooperation.
- The designation of beneficiaries was based more on leadership abilities or involvement in the activities rather than in people's real needs. This caused exclusion and differentiation of classes in addition to an idea of failure among those who were not part of the project.
- The touristic development promoted in some areas was not affordable for the Gambians. Many people got disappointed when their intentions of starting collective or individual touristic businesses.
- The developing ideas, whose content does not come from the benefited population, produce little or none commitment within the community. In the case of La Gamba, some proposals were brought in by technicians; the population assumed them because of the possibility of a grant or benefits, but they never embraced them as their own. In addition the technical management style from a paternalist perspective, we will understand the incorrect answer of these activities. Such as the case of home orchard and the handling of minor species.

- Although the project is oriented to the creation of self-management capacities, the environmental issue should have had more prominence in all the processes developed. The topic was taken in a situational way and did not count with a policy or strategy of transversal handling.

Lessons Learned

- **Social participation and organization is the base to achieving communal development:** Experience has taught us that in working groups or communal work there are no recipes. Each community must establish an organized structure of their own which will be based on their own people's conditions and way of thinking. Despite this, the organization is the very foundation of any community that expects to manage their own development. The organization must allow equal participation for all the inhabitants and have inclusion policies and consensus.
- **Communal self-esteem is the base to communal development:** Mental limits have always been a great limitation, both individually and collectively for permanent development. This is why when working in a communal level, topics such as self-esteem, leadership, projection, dreams and others must be discussed. By doing this, mental barriers can be broken and people can see their future without limitations or under-estimation. When a community is confident about itself, it will be prepared to keep going independently. This is a slow process whose main basis is individual and collective training.
- **Conscious participation is the base to legitimate communal processes:** Only information, action, reflection, and collective construction allow people to define their opinions to participate and express themselves about a community's destiny. This is why any project that aims to create capacities of communal self-management, must offer structures that allow this exercise. Even more, to define inclusion strategies to incorporate all groups within the community's reality. Only then, processes and local governability will be legitimated.
- **The realities of rural communities are very heterogeneous.** Because of this, the particular situation of a community must be analyzed before the intervention: Knowledge and experience from those who live within the community, are the most important tool for a communal diagnosis. Those people are the most important actors, very relevant in the case of an eventual approach. Therefore, inhabitants must visualize themselves not only as protagonists, but as the main creators of the processes that will bring change. Only then, the community will get a positive impact. A project or supportive institution's main challenge is to create the conditions for this to happen and creating the capacities of management in the community. At the same time, the community's challenge is to assume that responsibility and guide their own development.

- **The key to a successful project lies in the formation of a true working team.** The communal reality is the foundation to the formation of working teams. The team must respond to a global reality, but it must also have the capacity to include particular realities: organization, production, credit, commercialization, etc. For each component, it is necessary to define its scope and actions permitted. In the same way, the teams must be clear in terms of the project's main goal. This is the only way for a successful management. Team members, on the other hand, must be chosen based on previously evaluated profiles, with the purpose of guaranteeing the work in a communal level.
- **Communal work must start from a face-to-face communication between technicians and the community:** The professional team of a project must position itself within the community as another community member. Someone who is there to facilitate the processes from their knowledge and experience, not to solve problems or tell what to do before any given conflict situations, even less to the work of the beneficiaries. The community, on one hand, must understand the temporality of the project. On the other hand, they must not develop a dependence on it.
- **The handling of a communal credit fund must be done from an entrepreneurial point of view:** If the rules to the handling of the credit fund are defined from the beginning, the community will understand the difference between what is communal and what is financial. So, the organized community will find a way to take the financial resources to those who need them, without losing the entrepreneurial view and financial handling. This is the only way to guarantee sustainability and multiplication of the credit fund, which can be achieved when both the individual and collective consciences are prepared for it.

Main Conclusions

- In the productive aspects of the farms, the processes of technical assistance could have been more belligerent, a management model that emphasized the possibilities of the beneficiaries and not a paternalist perspective should have been used. This approach diminished the merit a job well done deserved, and therefore, the sustainability of the management, at least, it contributed to not getting the most desirable effect.
- From the perspective of farm working, there are technical criteria that show the economical and ecological valuation achieved from the investment of the project. Nevertheless, this element by itself does not mean an improvement of the families' quality of life, since that valuation is not recovered until the property is sold. In that sense, since most of the properties are forest-oriented, the diversification efforts have produced little impact in terms of quality of life. This can be proved after noticing that out of the nine farms benefited; only four still keep some of the induced.
- From the beginning of the project, discrimination was detected, but it was until the final phase of it that clear policies of social inclusion were defined. Consequently, the project did not have enough time to benefit families with great economical limitations, as well as

personality and socialization issues. The project was not able to find a formula to integrate all those families to a social life in equality. Although the duration was adequate, the first phase spent excessive time to solve conflicts of little relevance or transcendence to the objectives of the process.

- The community, especially those benefited lacked commitment to the processes developed. The shadow of paternalist projects and the vision of former banana workers weighed a lot, especially during the early years. It was necessary to work very hard in the formation of a culture that aimed to change paradigms and make people believe in their own managerial capacities.
- There are some contributions whose validity is less quantitative, which makes its measurement difficult, but they are evident in process that call for communal protagonist. These contributions are related to self-esteem, vision towards the future, managerial abilities, conflicts resolution, the ability to respect other people's opinions, and decision making.
- In order to understand the real contribution of the project, visiting La Gamba today is not enough; it is necessary to have known the inhabitants 4 or 7 years ago, or at least to have talked or lived with them. Currently, the Gambians know about specific topics and organization, try to act collectively, have various skills, and keep a "face to face" attitude with other people and institutions. But especially, they their own values and cultural manifestations proper to a local society. Therefore, it is possible to say that the project cooperated in the generation of a local culture based on organization, and identity of their own, a differentiation from other southern communities of Costa Rica. The change can be confirmed just by asking different communal organizations from the south of Costa Rica. Despite La Gamba is a community of only one hundred families, its image in a regional scope is very positive.
- The community achieved the capacity to solve local governability problems, make agreements, look for consensus, and especially, to tolerate each other. This does not mean the community has no problems, but it has the will of all those who really want to make their contribution from a constructive perspective and the necessary spaces to find new alternatives.
- The handling of the Communal Credit Fund is another indicator that helps us visualize communal growth in La Gamba. By means of its credit committee, the community is permanently benefited with soft credits of easy paperwork, their own cattle, pigs, equipment, and other possessions work as collaterals. Each credit request is analyzed by members of the community; this not only facilitates the access to the fund but increases the esteem of the community for this resource.

The Future of the Community

In 1998, the project started with a community composed by families whose income did not allow them to satisfy their basic needs, with great organizational limitations, deficient levels of education and health, paternalism taken from previous projects, lack of technical skills instead of agricultural skills, a low level of self-esteem, highly disappointed, and big internal problems between families and different sectors... Today, they have proof that the community has a highly organized structure, very participative, with different groups ready to negotiate, with productive activities that diversify some family's income, with important advances in communal infrastructure, with training levels that allow the inhabitants to negotiate and put communal rights ahead, with a health center which offers basic services at least, with important projects for communal development on the way, recognized by other communities and especially with a community which is considered a role model in the region.

The level of development reached by the country is not only restricted but also polarized, this means that entire regions of the country where production or economical investment are not stimulated. This produces a decrease of the interest in social investments.

Costa Rica's southern region is one of the zones with the lowest level of development. In the specific case of Golfito, the economy depends mainly on the Free Trade Zone and the arrival of tourists with tourists which visit the zone once a year. This situation makes their economy highly vulnerable.

For the last few years there have been discussions about the construction of a mega-project involving the entire zone, which would make the economy more dynamic by attracting tourists and investors. Such mega-project would turn into strength for local organizations that know how to use its competitive advantage; in order for that to occur visionary leaders and communal projects with a great vision of the future are required.

Despite its limitations, La Gamba is strategically located, and before a project of such magnitude, it would become a must see place for all visitors. In addition, it would be the closest-by community to this project-to-be. A series of possibilities which could be worked-on immediately can be visualized.

The management processes developed by the project have allowed the community to jump qualitatively and quantitatively, but these advances do not guarantee their sustainability over time. The community requires visionary leadership, self-management principles, and especially grouped efforts. Only then people will take advantage of a difficult environment for a community that is only taking their first steps in terms of local government.

In order to enter into economical, local and regional development processes, the project was focused in self-management, communal processes for the development of small business, leadership renewal, equality, constructive and participative processes in the decision-making. The evolution of the community that is now finishing the project can be approached from two points of view:

- The sustainability of the organization structures, and with it the representation they have before their community. From that perspective, the project made the community consolidate a group of major leaders and proved itself there are ways to do things by means of consensus and planification

- A group of communal leaders was formed and trained; they are in charge of the community's destiny via democratic election. Over the last year, the community has been through processes that indicate their self-government capacity, which allows predicting a possible success in that sense.

The Credit Committee has been in charge of the handling of a communal credit fund of more than 12 million colones. That money has been handled in the best interest of the community with a high level of efficiency and efficacy, which let us think not only in the community's handling capacity, but in that it is possible to handle the fund with an entrepreneurial point of view. It is important to remark the need of a business perspective of the fund for the benefit of the community, within the financial parameters of returning of the money. Only this will guarantee the successful handling of the fund.

The process allowed the developing of a highly participative election, by which ASOPROBI's new Board of Directors and its committees were elected; as a result of the election, a group of young leaders were elected. This is an indication of renewal but it could also be a risk to trust what has been accomplished so far in the hands of people with little experience and training in the day-to-day reality of the project.

The community must find a way to take into consideration all points of view before making a decision, especially now that the most experienced leaders are not part of the main committees. The current environment requires from every member of the different boards: negotiation abilities, conflict resolution, gender equality, etc. Nevertheless, current members lack experience handling such situations. Traditional leaders are called to support without any personal interests, working as counselors on this new stage which is seen as necessary in order to achieve a true self-development.

Quite possibly, ASOPROBI will get offers from institutions or projects that would be interested in being part of the future of the community, for the conditions to continue its development have been strengthened and new doors are opened in front of the community. This will put their negotiation abilities and their capacity of being active subjects instead of passive objects to the test.

The impact achieved from the entrepreneurial development perspective, the advance on productive economical activities (individually,) the appraisal of the farms, and the progress in terms of tourism will be sustained in time only if the profits generated by the activity are cherished by the person or family who get the benefits. In such cases sustainability depends more on the person or family rather than on the community.

Parallel projects are taking place in other communities which, due to the logics of development of the zone, will start to show themselves. In that sense, the community's role is that of being alert to new possibilities and making the most out of their circumstances.

As for the development of tourism, there are things to do yet, but the focus must be for the home tourist, and if possible, enter into agricultural-ecological tourism, since Costa Rican traditions can be traded. This does not require significative investment; this has already been proved by the community itself. Continuity depends on the families who collect the benefits and the strategic alliances which have allow it so far.