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EXPERIENCES FROM THE NUFU PROGRAMME “MAYA COMPETENCE BUILDING”

Ms. Cristel Ruiz Bode presented the collaboration programme between the University of San Carlos in Guatemala and the University of Tromsø, Norway. Addressing the process of these kinds of collaboration, she saw the initial stages as the *romantic fase* of the project, where the partners make “love promises” by calling upon the moon and the stars, the ideals of harmony, the wish to make a difference to the people, and to produce knowledge and build competence. Some of the promises might be hard to keep. This love promises resulted in the programme “Maya Competence Building”. Basing the programme on the peace agreement, they took as a point of departure the rights of the indigenous peoples as understood in the Peace agreement and internationally (ILO 169, UN etc).

A Need for Flexibility

A main objective of the programme is to establish academic opportunities on a master level for Maya students. However, this objective proved very hard to implement. In Guatemala most Maya students never reach master level at the university. Very few complete their studies at bachelor level, and among the ones continuing their university studies, the most common degree is called “licenciatura”. Consequently, The MCB programme decided that some of the original criteria for entering the programme had to be changed. Ruiz reported that after opening up the programme to meet some of the “realities of Guatemala” it had become a success. Realising that development efforts take time, Ruiz focused on some of the results from the first 4 years of Maya Competence Building. Since 1998, 30 young students have received financial support to do fieldwork and finish their thesis. These 30 have passed their exams at the “licenciatura” level. Two students are on the master level and one on the doctorate level. Three of the students mentioned participated in Tromsø at the Forum. They belong to different ethnic groups. According to Ruiz, the programme has succeeded in building bridges, between ethnic groups and between people from different parts of the country. The project has showed them the importance of working together. In addition to the thesis, the students and researchers involved have produced a total of six books, journals, and films published in different medias. The programme has further been important as a catalyst for the participants’ interests, ambitions and talents, and many of them take part in the political and social life of Guatemala.

Making Room for Maya Students within the University Systems

Many Mayas in Guatemala still face poverty, hunger and discrimination, and Ruiz was very certain that programmes like the Maya Competence Building might change the future for many of the Maya children. The most important was that the programme “make room” for Maya students within the university system. The programme has received support from Norway/NUFU funds for another 5 years, and now they no longer have to convince students to apply. 416 students have applied for 2002. This is a lot more than they will be able to support, but shows that the program has been a success. Ruiz ended by declaring that the romance between the two universities had turned into real love.

Institutional Frameworks for Collaboration

Mr. Georges Midré from the University of Tromsø elaborated on the experiences from the Maya Competence Building programme, and especially focused on the institutional frameworks for the programme. Admitting that they had entered into the cooperation without much knowledge of San Carlos, he now realised that the two universities collaborating could hardly be more different;

- The University of Tromsø, the smallest and newest university in Norway, with 6500 students and a staff of less than 2000,
- The University of San Carlos; one of the oldest and most prestigious universities in Latin America, with more than 120 000 students and a staff of 6000.

Another major difference was the social and political position each of the universities held in their respective society. The University of San Carlos has a more crucial role in the Guatemalan society than any of the Norwegian Universities in Norway. As an example the University Board at San Carlos elects the members to the national boards of the social security institutions, to the Bank of Guatemala and to the higher courts, among others. Consequently, the seats at the university board are prestigious and attractive. Similar to political campaigns, the process before the elections is long and expensive, with strong emphasis on advertisements, meetings, gifts and parties, trying to reach potential supporters.

Beside the rector, the deans are important political actors in the Guatemalan system. Depending on financial support from the outside, not only political parties, but also business firms and individuals on the outside become important allies. According to people in Guatemala, positions within the university system may in some occasions also be given in exchange for contributions prior to university elections. According to Midré, the success of any inter-university cooperation with Guatemala depends on a realistic assessment of these power relations, and knowledge of the subtleties of decision-making. He further thought that one of the factors explaining the relative success of the Maya Competence Building is the political experience of the director, Cristel Ruiz Bode. Another effect of the political system at the San Carlos University is that all the top and medium level leaders are changed together with the rector and deans. Consequently, also some of the Guatemalan partners in the Maya Competence Building may be changed after the next election!

The Internal Challenges of the Programme

Midré went on to mention some of “internal” challenges of the programme. Because of the lack of Maya students at the master level, they had, as Ms Ruiz mentioned, decided to change the MCB requirements a little, and to also include students without Maya background - and at the “Licenciatura” level. Although it is the most “usual” academic degree in Guatemala, it is not recognised as graduate level in Norway, and within the NUFU system. The Maya Competence Building still chose to bend the rules in order to be able to include more students. Midré added that he considered this a success.

Another problem was the specific Maya focus of the programme. Not tolerating discrimination of any kind, public institutions like the San Carlos University initially did not accept ethnic specific grants. Admitting that this might be a sound general principle, Midré thought that the very obvious differences between different ethnic groups in Guatemala, legitimised the positive discrimination of Mayan students. But even though the leaders and bureaucrats tacitly have accepted how the programme works, the main goal of the MCB programme and the regulations of the San Carlos University still are in conflict. They have not found an institutionalised solution to the problem.

Emphasising the general problem of shifting priorities among financing authorities in Norway, and the fact that the MCB was the only NUFU programme to receive continued support in Central America, Midré ended his intervention by focusing on the need for a *long-term perspective* on these kinds of programmes. It takes time to develop infrastructure and experience, and time for the students to get through the university system.

More Information about the Programme:

<http://www.uit.no/semut/aktiviteter/NUFU/PRO05-98-main.htm>

Link to the University of San Carlos: <http://www.usac.edu.gt/2.html>