



# Mobilizing Communities

*Asset Building as a Community  
Development Strategy*

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Edited by  
Gary Paul Green and  
Ann Goetting



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# Contents

1	Community Assets: Building the Capacity for Development	I
	▪ <i>Gary Paul Green</i>	
2	Investing in the Double Bottom Line: Growing Financial Institutions in Native Communities	14
	▪ <i>Sarah Dewees and Stewart Sarkozy-Banoczy</i>	
3	Asset-Based Community Development in Alabama's Black Belt: Seven Strategies for Building a Diverse Community Movement	48
	▪ <i>Emily Blejwas</i>	
4	The Politics of Protected Areas: Environmental Capital and Community Conflict in Guatemala	68
	▪ <i>Michael L. Dougherty and Rocío Peralta</i>	
5	Linking Cultural Capital Conceptions to Asset-Based Community Development	92
	▪ <i>Rhonda Phillips and Gordon Shockley</i>	
6	Neighborhood Approaches to Asset Mobilization: Building Chicago's West Side	112
	▪ <i>John P. Kretzmann and Deborah Puntenney</i>	
7	Natural Amenities and Asset-Based Development in Rural Communities	130
	▪ <i>Gary Paul Green</i>	

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vi ■ Contents

8	Implementing Community Development in the Mississippi Delta: The Effect of Organizations on Resident Participation	146
	▪ <i>Mark H. Harvey and Lionel J. Beaulieu</i>	
9	Lessons Learned	177
	▪ <i>Gary Paul Green</i>	
	Contributors	189
	Index	000



## 4 The Politics of Protected Areas

### *Environmental Capital and Community Conflict in Guatemala*

MICHAEL L. DOUGHERTY  
AND ROCÍO PERALTA

#### Introduction

In San Cristóbal Verapaz, Guatemala, peasant groups sought to improve sanitation infrastructure in order to mitigate the degradation of a local lake without limiting access to the environmental services that the lake provided to poor households. Local elites appropriated this process by converting it into an initiative to declare the lake and its watershed a protected area. These local elites, in cooperation with functionaries and politicians at the national level, sought to use the declaration of the area as protected to further their political aims. The findings of a group of consultants, hired by the local elites to plan the technical process of protected-area declaration, ended up supporting the peasant perspective—that a protected area was not in the interests of local development. These community conflicts eventually led to the abandonment of the initiative altogether.

Over the past fifteen years a new literature has emerged around the idea of building community assets to promote development and fortify rural communities against the adverse effects of the world market and commercial growth. Developing assets shores up community autonomy in the face of challenges from global capital (Shuman 1998). This asset-based community-development (ABCD) framework has

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become popular among community-development practitioners and academics, and in the United States, where it has been most widely applied, it has largely proven effective. This chapter looks at one kind of community asset, environmental capital, and applies this concept to rural Guatemala.

Because theoretical and empirical work on this development model is primarily focused on the United States, the documented successes of the asset-based development model often take place in the context of relatively effective local democracy characterized by strong institutions and minimal external influence. Institutional weakness and corruption characterize many political environments across the developing world. This chapter seeks to answer two research questions: Does the theoretical model of environmental capital hold up when applied to a developing country context, and what is the relationship of political institutional weakness to environmental capital-based development? The answer to these questions lies in the unique confluence of political institutional weakness and the multifunctionality of the natural landscape (Klein and Wolf 2007). The interaction of these phenomena can generate community conflict and stalemate rather than promote substantive development.

By applying the concept of asset-based development to the context of a developing world, this case study complicates the uncritical way environmental capital is commonly thought of. The community-development literature employs a narrow definition of environmental capital that limits the relevance for the model outside of the United States and Western Europe. Ultimately, this study finds that elements of the natural landscape, commonly understood as “environmental capital” in the community-development literature or “natural amenities” in the rural sociological and applied economic literature, fulfill different roles for different social groups—hence it is “multifunctional.” An environmental asset is not a thing in itself, but a way of understanding a thing. With this in mind, this chapter develops a typology of ways of conceptualizing natural resources—the capital lens, the service lens, and the symbolic lens. We find that the capital lens—that is, the viewing of natural resources as tradable commodities—may be more appropriate in affluent economies characterized by relatively strong political institutions. In the developing world, other lenses that can stymie efforts to apply the asset-based development model may emerge.

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This chapter contains six sections. The first section summarizes the asset-based development literature and briefly lays out the study's methodology. The second section provides a brief overview of the study site, its demographic composition, and its development indicators. The third, fourth, and fifth sections constitute the empirical substance of this article, the case narrative. In the third section we describe the community-based origins of the initiative to rehabilitate the lake, the formalization of the process by elite-led organizations, and the origins of social conflict in San Cristóbal. The fourth section describes the arrival of the consulting firm and the results of the technical study of the proposed protected area. Section five concludes the case narrative by describing the political fallout of the conflict in San Cristóbal. Finally, section six returns to the theoretical discussion and advances a new theoretical wrinkle in the literature on asset-based development.

## Environmental Capital and the Global South

In 1993, John Kretzmann and John McKnight introduced the concept of ABCD as an alternative to the orthodoxy of the day—the needs assessment. They argued that focusing on the needs of the community rather than on its strengths, gifts, and talents had created cultures of frustration, nihilism, and dependence in marginalized areas. The alternative was to focus on residents' assets as a point of departure in planning for development. Kretzmann and McKnight defined assets as “individuals, associations, and institutions” (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993:6). They encouraged community-development practitioners to find the gifts, skills, and capacities within, and between, community residents. Their ideas revolutionized academic literature on community development. But their limited definition of asset allowed the creation of social and human capital over the introduction of financial capital, which has limited the approach's resonance among some practitioners and politicians. Another approach to ABCD that was being developed around the same time—the community capitals framework—overcomes this potential limiting factor of Kretzmann and McKnight's approach. The community capitals framework is a way of organizing and conceptualizing Kretzmann and McKnight's

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assets that assigns them quantifiable economic values as well as moral value.

Throughout the 1980s, sociologists James Coleman (1988) and Pierre Bourdieu (1986) were developing concepts of nonfinancial forms of capital such as social, human, and cultural capital. Cornelia B. Flora and Jan L. Flora (2008) drew on these concepts and consolidated them into the community capitals framework for community development. The community capitals framework includes six forms of capital: financial, human, social, built, cultural, and natural capitals. Like financial capital, each of these forms of community capital can be invested to produce returns (economic or otherwise) to the investing community without depleting the principal. Human capital, for example, refers to the educational levels, training, skills, and aptitudes of community residents. By investing in education, individuals increase their earning power, which increases the amount of financial capital in circulation within a community. Social capital refers to the financial advantages of increasing the number and density of relationships between individuals and associations both within and beyond the community. These relationships produce additional economic capital because they assist in finding jobs (Granovetter 1974; Green, Tigges, and Browne 1995). They also create informal social networks that can buttress communities in times of economic stress and fortify democratic practice (Putnam 1993). Built capital, a community's physical infrastructure and housing stock, is key in assisting potential investors in making siting decisions and influences the choices of potential migrants into the community, thus shaping the introduction of financial capital into the area. Cultural capital aids community development by encouraging visitors to move to the community in cases where unique cultural attributes are promoted for tourism (Green and Haines 2007). Another definition, more closely related to human capital, holds that certain social classes are culturally more likely to generate higher returns from labor (Bourdieu 1986). Finally, the community capitals approach includes natural capital,<sup>1</sup> which is also referred to as environmental capital. Environmental capital includes the different ways in which natural resources like land, soil, and water can be used for community development. In sum, a few key texts have drawn from the theoretical work of Bourdieu, Coleman, and others and built upon the

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concepts of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) to create the community capitals framework for community economic development (see Flora and Flora 2008 and Green and Haines 2007).

As with other forms of community capital, there is no one definitive understanding of environmental capital in the literature. The key community capitals literature acknowledges the multifunctionality of environmental capital and offers a distinction between the use values and the exchange values with which environmental capital is imbued. Karl Marx (1867), in developing his labor theory of value, distinguished between use value (value of a commodity determined by its level of utility to the human endeavor) and exchange value (value determined by the amount of another commodity it can be traded for in a market). Without using this specific terminology, Flora and Flora (2008:35) discuss the multifunctionality of natural capital. They describe seven types of values which natural capital possesses: provision, production, consumption, speculation, creation (as in the foundation for built capital), ecosystem services, and preservation. As this chapter will illustrate, this is not a comprehensive list of values. Environmental capital possesses amenity value (exchange value), direct consumptive value (use value), and symbolic value, which Flora and Flora do not discuss. M.B. Potschin and R.H. Haines-Young (2003) also develop a typology of functions of natural capital. They suggest that natural capital conforms to four types of functions—regulation functions, habitat functions, production functions, and information functions. Mary Ann Brocklesby and Eleanor Fisher (2003:195) also use the terms *use* and *exchange value* to refer to the community capitals approach. Also acknowledging the multifunctionality of environmental resources, Green and Haines (2007:169) categorize environmental capital as containing “direct use value” and “non-use value” although their definitions of these terms differ from the original Marxian definition of use value. Green and Haines’ conceptualization of environmental capital does incorporate amenity value, but again misses symbolic value. The fact that symbolic value has been overlooked in the community capitals literature is not surprising. Symbolic value is a function of political institutional weakness characteristic of developing economies, yet the community capitals literature has been largely U.S.-focused.

The concept of environmental capital, although robust and useful in many respects, is imperfect and incomplete. Brocklesby and Fisher

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(2003:195), for example, refer to the community capitals framework in general as “simplistic, lineal, and monothematic.” They argue that reducing community assets to capitals results in “missing the human agency, practices, and social organization underpinning . . . community development.” Jan Flora (1998:502), one of the architects of the community capitals framework, echoes Brocklesby and Fisher in writing that “the conversion of environmental capital to economic capital . . . resulted in deforestation, soil loss, and agricultural chemical usage.” Jessica Crowe (2006) finds that high levels of natural capital are not significant promoters of self-development for rural communities in the American Northwest. Finally, Potschin and Haines-Young (2003) argue that unfettered exploitation of environmental capital poses ecological and human risks, and consumes these resources irreversibly.

In this chapter we use the Marxian distinction between use value and exchange value to frame our Guatemalan case study theoretically. By applying the notion of environmental capital to Guatemala, a country characterized by profound political institutional weakness, some of the limitations of the environmental capital concept come to light. In this chapter we suggest that environmental capital possesses three fundamental types of value: use value, exchange value, and symbolic value. Further, we argue that these values underpin the lenses through which environmental assets can be conceptualized in community development: the service lens, the capital lens, and the symbolic lens, respectively. Finally, we argue that these lenses cut along socioeconomic, and in this case, ethnic lines. Finally, we conclude that in the context of developing countries, the multifunctionality of environmental capital can generate community conflict, which can lead to degradation of community assets.

Although there has been robust debate around the asset-based development model for the United States and Western Europe, the framework has been sparsely applied outside of the developed world. This is ironic because the variations in political and economic environments between global north and south hold distinct sets of outcomes for asset-based development. The natural resources and comparative advantage of many parts of the developing world lend themselves to environmental capital-based strategies. Rural Guatemala, for example, offers abundant land and labor along with capital scarcity, which is an

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appropriate factor mix for a capital-unintensive, landscape-dependent development model. In capital-scarce economies that are rich in natural resources, environmental-capital-led development makes the most of comparative advantage while creating needed incentives for the protection and enhancement of natural resources. Additionally, asset-based approaches appeal to poor communities because they often require smaller capital investments than business recruitment models do. For these reasons, rural parts of some developing countries exploit asset-based development. Nevertheless, the political institutional endowments in these countries can be countervailing forces. This is the case because political institutions are generally weaker in capital-scarce economies. We use the term *political rents* to characterize the key manifestation of political institutional weakness in this case. In economics, a rent is a profit beyond what the market would establish. Rents are acquired through inappropriate market manipulation. The term *political rent* has been previously defined as “profits created politically” (McChesny 1987). Here *political rent* is used figuratively to refer to unearned or undeserved political capital extracted through antidemocratic forms of political entrepreneurialism.

This analysis is based on three sources of data: reports and documents of the protected-area declaration process, key-informant interviews, and participant observation. Grupo Sierra Madre (GSM), the Guatemala City-based environmental consulting firm that conducted the protected-area study, granted us access to all of their data. These data included focus group and interview transcripts, journal notes kept by the researchers, internal and external reports, and PowerPoint presentations designed for a range of stakeholders from community members to international funders. In addition, we traveled to San Cristóbal Verapaz in August 2006 and observed workshops conducted with community members on the topic of lake restoration. Finally, we conducted several open-ended, key-informant interviews with local elites, peasants, and external consultants during and after our stay in San Cristóbal.

The GSM data, on which this article is largely based, included open-ended interviews with community leaders and focus groups using Participatory Rural Appraisal methodology. The researchers sought community-based data that would both “complement and

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confront” their technical findings (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006:8). The focus groups were planned and organized during meetings between the consultants and community leaders in each community. The data-collection methods employed in the focus groups included a mapping exercise where participants were asked to draw accurate maps of their communities and then change the maps according to how they would like their communities to look in the future. Additionally, the research team recorded oral histories of the communities, with attention paid to environmental changes. These recordings were then transcribed and coded for analysis. The community-based research involved 309 focus-group participants and more than twenty key-informant interviews representing thirty different rural hamlets within the Chichoj watershed.

## Development and Ecology in San Cristóbal Verapaz

San Cristóbal Verapaz is located in the southwest corner of the Department of Alta Verapaz in Guatemala’s largely indigenous central highlands. The population of the municipality is 43,336, eighty-five percent of whom belong to the Maya-Poqomchi sociolinguistic group (Instituto Nacional de Estadística 2004).

Smallholder agriculture for national and international markets makes up 66 percent of the economy of San Cristóbal Verapaz. The second largest economic sector is manufacturing, at 10 percent. A national shoe company, Calzado Cobán, has its factory in San Cristóbal. The remainder of the economy consists of smallholder production for local consumption and services. Per-capita daily income is around U.S. \$3.20 in agriculture and U.S. \$5.13 in manufacturing. This is significantly below the national average (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006).

San Cristóbal ranks as the seventh most unequal municipality of Guatemala’s 331 municipalities. Seventy-seven percent of the population lives in poverty and 30 percent in extreme poverty (Secretaría General de la Planificación 2002). Outside of the county seat there are virtually no municipal services provided. Most dwellings in the county seat are connected to municipal water and sewage, although

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the services do not function adequately (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006). The soil, forests, and aquifers from which the majority of local residents derive their livelihood have proved less resilient under the population pressures of the last few decades, and quality of life for many residents has slowly deteriorated.

The Laguna Chichoj is located on the edges of the county seat, effectively within the peri-urban area.<sup>2</sup> The Laguna forms the basin of the area's primary watershed. It collects runoff from communities in the surrounding mountains and in turn discharges into the Río Cahabón and eventually into the Caribbean Sea. The watershed, along with most of the municipality, is located in two ecoregions: encino pine forest and montane forest. This fact accounts for the watershed's importance as a central node along the migration trajectory of many endangered bird species and for its impressive diversity of local birds (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006:57). Also, the Laguna Chichoj has cultural significance for Guatemala as a whole and for the residents of San Cristóbal and the Poqomchi people, and it is a key contributor to the scenic value of the municipality (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006:35). Laguna Chichoj is considered one of Guatemala's thirteen national lakes and has a prominent place in the Guatemalan public consciousness. These unique aspects of the watershed make its conservation all the more urgent. Over the past four decades, as use of carcinogenic chemicals in daily life has outpaced public infrastructure to mitigate their effects on the environment, the Laguna Chichoj watershed has become highly contaminated and degraded. Given the growing problems of poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation, in 2003 a burgeoning peasant organization organized a campaign to save the Laguna.

## The Origins of the Peasant Initiative in San Cristóbal Verapaz

The campaign to rehabilitate Laguna Chichoj had grassroots origins, although it was quickly appropriated by municipal elites and local political entrepreneurs. The campaign emerged from an initiative by a number of community development projects (Consejos Comunitarios

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de Desarrollo [COCODEs]). These COCODEs have their origins in national legislation. Decree 11-2002, Law of Urban and Rural Community Development Councils, was published as part of a package of decentralization laws that included a new municipal code and an administrative devolution law. In San Cristóbal, these COCODEs have been officially established in all of the rural hamlets and urban neighborhoods that comprise the municipality. Each COCODE is made up of a president, vice president, secretary, treasurer, and at least three additional executive members, and is registered with the Civil Registry of the Town Hall.

With the growth of democratic space at the community level in 2003, multiple COCODEs representing urban neighborhoods and rural hamlets in the Laguna Chichoj watershed began to recognize the importance of rehabilitating the Laguna. Despite its small stature and somewhat remote location, Laguna Chichoj is a national symbol. In addition to being one of Guatemala's thirteen national lakes, it was named in article 90 of the 1989 Law of Protected Areas as one of forty-four special protection areas. In decades past, Laguna Chichoj was a major tourist attraction and revenue generator for the local economy. Before contamination became so severe, swimming the length of the Laguna Chichoj was part of a well-known, internationally attended triathlon. Additionally, the lake, despite its severe degradation, continues to provide essential environmental services to the area's poorest inhabitants. The lake provides water for irrigation and washing, and some families still fish there. For these reasons, COCODE members reasoned that rehabilitation of the Laguna would be an important first step in any community revitalization plan. Furthermore, they reasoned, basic sanitary infrastructure had to be in place before meaningful environmental rehabilitation could take place because the Laguna is at the lowest point in the watershed and thus receives all of the runoff from agricultural byproducts and waste in the surrounding communities. To that end, this nascent, grassroots community network organized to lobby the municipal government for improved sanitation and water treatment services as well as potable water provision. This policy agenda coincided with community members' material goals of improved municipal services, and so the momentum behind the campaign grew. This initiative had two principal goals: (1) to rehabilitate

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the Laguna as a matter of public health and environmental service provision, and (2) to capitalize on the considerable environmental capital of the Laguna as a core component of a comprehensive community-development plan.

Renewed attention to the Laguna and the diffusion among the population of the rhetoric of conservation and development eventually got the attention of members of the elite, educated stratum of San Cristobal's county seat. In the last few years two formal nonprofit organizations were established in the county seat: Asociación Verapaz (ASOVERAPAZ) and Grupo Asociado Salvemos al Lago (GASAL). ASOVERAPAZ formed in 2004 to undertake environmental education workshops for rural women whose lack of access to municipal water sources forced them to use the Laguna to wash clothing. GASAL's principal undertaking has been the removal of invasive species of aquatic plants that have proliferated in the nitrate-laden waters of the Laguna. These two organizations embraced the notion of saving the lake, but articulated policy goals that were at odds with the ambitions of the community-development councils. For example, educating poor women about the environmental impacts of washing clothes in the Laguna does not address the core problem of lack of access to municipal services. Community members and outside observers questioned the local elites' commitment to their professed stewardship goals (Grupo Sierra Madre 2007). When ASOVERAPAZ and GASAL joined forces with the Town Hall to form the Environmental Roundtable for the Rescue of Laguna Chichoj in 2005, the rhetoric shifted from *rehabilitation* to *protection*. Consequently, the policy goals also shifted from improved municipal-service provision to declaring the lake a protected area under the National System of Protected Areas (República de Guatemala 1989). The COCODEs objected to this revised set of goals, arguing that because the hydrogeology of the watershed is such that the Laguna will always receive the runoff from surrounding communities, simply "roping off" the Laguna would not protect it from further degradation but would prevent communities from accessing the lake's environmental services. Although community members viewed the Laguna as a provider of ecosystem services, the local elites saw it as an opportunity to consolidate political power. An additional incentive for the Town Hall to appropriate the peasant-led initiative was the circumvention of responsibility for the expensive

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infrastructure projects that the peasant groups were calling for. The costs of protected-area declaration, in contrast, would not come from the municipal budget but would be absorbed by the National Council of Protected Areas (CONAP). Therefore, the rhetorical transition from rehabilitation to protection—with the establishment of the Environmental Roundtable—had symbolic as well as substantive meaning.

Local participants at the Environmental Roundtable included ASOVERAPAZ, GASAL, the mayor and other municipal functionaries, and representatives from COCODEs of three urban neighborhoods in the San Cristóbal county seat. Whereas COCODEs and their constituents had originally spearheaded the campaign, in this new incarnation their participation was marginalized. Other institutions with official representation in the Roundtable included the National Peace Fund (FONAPAZ), the Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARN), and the Secretariat of Executive Coordination of the Presidency (SCEP). The creation of the Roundtable marked the beginning of coordination among the various institutions of civil society and local government. The Roundtable's initial activities included the creation of the Municipal Environmental Agenda, the coordination of efforts to extract invasive species of aquatic plants from the Laguna, and visits to Congress to discuss the possibility of declaring the Laguna a protected area.

The leadership of ASOVERAPAZ was creative and savvy. ASOVERAPAZ knew that the Laguna Chichoj had been listed in the 1989 Law of Protected Areas and intended to capitalize on that fact. They approached CONAP, which had recently entered into an agreement with the Netherlands Directorate General of Development Cooperation (DGIS) and the Tropical Agronomical Center for Research and Teaching (CATIE) of Costa Rica. DGIS, CATIE, and CONAP were collaborating on a project to conserve biodiversity and strengthen the bureaucratic and administrative processes for establishing protected areas in Guatemala. This trinational collaboration is hereafter referred to as the National Protected Area Management Project. ASOVERAPAZ's petition to CONAP dovetailed with the goals of the National Protected Area Management Project, and CONAP issued a call for proposals from consulting firms to conduct the technical study and operative plan for the declaration of Laguna Chichoj as a protected area. In May 2006, the Guatemala City-based environmental

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consulting firm GSM won the public call, and in June 2006 GSM began its research.

## The Technical Study and Peasant Participation

The methodology for the technical study included a review of public documents on the municipality of San Cristóbal as well as species inventories, water-quality tests, analysis of soil types and usage, measurement of forest cover, and assessment of hydrology and geomorphology. Along with the technical data, the consultants conducted community focus groups and key-informant interviews to assess community support for the protected area. Community support—more than technical issues, they argued—would determine the viability of the project.

This research found that the priorities for rural communities were, first, water provision through the protection of natural springs and, second, waste-water management, reforestation, and appropriate farming techniques. Additionally, many community members pointed out natural attractions and scenic routes in their communities that they wished to develop into small-scale, amenity-based tourism attractions. All of the community concerns related back to quality of life and economic productivity rather than strict conservation and protection (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006:59).

The water quality studies showed that the Laguna could not maintain stable biotic communities and that the chemical and bacteriological composition of the water made it unfit for marine life and human consumption (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006). The technical study affirmed the COCODEs' arguments that population pressure within the boundaries of the watershed had increased at a greater rate than the capacity to provide an adequate infrastructure for health and sanitation, and until adequate systems of waste-water treatment and potable water provision were put into place, the recovery of the Laguna would not be feasible under Guatemala's Law of Protected Areas. After completing the technical study and before beginning the master plan, the consultants changed course. Rather than recommend the site be declared a protected area, they recommended it be declared a critical-

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management site. They drafted a plan for the critical-management site that would focus initially on expanding and improving municipal services, including potable water provision, waste management, and sewers (Grupo Sierra Madre 2006). This shifted the emphasis of the endeavor away from protection and back to rehabilitation.

The technical processes of rehabilitation and environmental management are not accounted for in the legislation concerning protected areas. Therefore, the responsibility of a critical-management site falls to MARN and not CONAP. Article Fourteen of the statute regarding the Law of Protected Areas (República de Guatemala 1989) states that CONAP has the jurisdiction to oversee recovery plans for areas that have already been established as protected, but there is no legal attribution for the technical processes of recovery for areas that have not already been declared protected. If Laguna Chichoj were to become a critical-management site rather than a protected area, CONAP would lose its authority over the site and the associated political rents. In such a scenario, management would fall to a new commission made up of local technicians approved by MARN and representatives from a variety of national institutions including MARN, the National Forest Institute (INAB), and CONAP (Grupo Sierra Madre 2007). The legal basis for the critical management plan and the establishment of a local management authority draws from the new Municipal Code and Decentralization Law (Decrees 12 and 14-2002) as well as from the new Health Code.

The consultants presented their findings and recommendations to the Roundtable. This created cracks in the veneer of consensus that Roundtable leaders had constructed. The COCODEs, which had been primarily concerned with improving municipal sewer and water service, saw the critical management plan as reflecting their material interests to a greater extent than the protected-area proposal. The Roundtable leadership, for whom protected-area status was a symbolic victory with significant political rent potential, ardently questioned the study's findings and categorically rejected its recommendations.

The GSM consulting team was made up of highly educated residents of Guatemala City of *mestizo* descent. The technicians ostensibly shared fewer cultural attributes with the peasants who constituted COCODE membership than local elites did. Therefore, it is ironic but

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telling that the external consultants and COCODE representatives found common ground in dissention from the policy agenda of the local elites. The consultants' community-based research confirmed that the COCODE's identified goals did, in fact, correspond with the material interests of the majority of peasants. Furthermore, the technical study of ecosystem integrity legitimized the arguments that COCODE members had made three years prior, furthering the case for the value of local knowledge and underscoring the importance of beneficiary participation in the development process.

### The Political Consequences of the Technical Study

The character of the relationship among the consultants, the COCODEs, and the Environmental Roundtable began to change in September 2006 when the top three functionaries of CONAP left their posts for undisclosed reasons. The first to depart was the executive secretary. Her departure was followed by the director of the National Protected Area Management Project, and shortly thereafter by the deputy secretary (CONAP's second-highest ranking official). No official reasons were given for these high-level departures, although anonymous research informants speculate that the three were replaced by more politically amenable appointees.

Around the same time, evidence emerged of collusion between the political elites of San Cristóbal Verapaz and government functionaries at the national level. The former minister of the environment, who replaced the outgoing executive secretary of CONAP, reportedly demonstrated a feeling of personal entitlement to the Laguna Chichoj project, suggesting that there was political competition between CONAP and MARN for administrative authority of prominent amenity sites (Grupo Sierra Madre 2007). This kind of competition for political rents, between similar government ministries, is not unheard of. For example, in the United States there has long been competition between the Park Service and the Forest Service over how best to manage certain federal lands. Further pointing to collusion, the mayor of San Cristóbal had recently parted ways with his political party and realigned himself with the Gran Alianza Nacional (GANAN), the party

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that held the presidency for the 2003–2007 term. The goal of this political maneuver was to enhance his potential for reelection by allying with the incumbent party. To cement the alliance between GANA and the mayor of San Cristóbal, Eduardo Gonzales, then the secretary of SCEP, came to San Cristóbal to stump for the mayor. Gonzales, at the time, was GANA's candidate for president in the 2007 elections.

Had they stayed on, the departed functionaries would have supported the technical study and its conclusion that making Laguna Chichoj a protected area was not feasible. In August 2006, before the technical study was rejected, GSM consultants presented their preliminary findings in the CONAP headquarters in Guatemala City. At the time of that meeting, CONAP's executive secretary had just left, but the deputy secretary and unit director had not yet departed. In that meeting, the then-deputy secretary and unit director of CONAP stated that they knew all along that Laguna Chichoj could not qualify as a protected area, but that they needed the study to confirm it. They described in detail the problems CONAP had faced in the similar case of Lake Atitlán, where a protected area was declared in a densely populated region. This shortsighted decision had imposed impossibly costly bureaucratic procedures on poor community members residing inside the protected area for a variety of banal aspects of daily life. For example, making slight modifications to a private dwelling within the protected area required an environmental-impact study authorized by CONAP, a significant bureaucratic imposition on peasant families (Grupo Sierra Madre 2007).

At this meeting, GSM and CONAP agreed to abandon the protected-area process and shift their attention to a rehabilitation plan for the Chichoj watershed that would not be bureaucratically burdensome for community members and would be more likely to achieve the development goals articulated by peasant groups in the area. The director of the National Protected Area Management Project changed the Terms of Reference of the contract with GSM to reflect this shift in focus and sent the documentation off to the national office of CATIE for approval. Shortly thereafter, however, both the deputy director and the project director left their posts. With the change of authorities, the process began to break down quickly.

The new authorities at CONAP sided with the mayor and community elites from ASOVERAPAZ and rejected the technical study and

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critical management plan on the grounds that they were technically deficient. CONAP submitted a twelve-page condemnation of the study to GSM and demanded that the study be redone, effectively, without additional timeline or budgetary allowances, which was obviously impossible. This had the effect of disrupting the community-based process of creating an organizational structure to implement the critical management plan.

The legal parameters of protected-area recovery in Guatemala are vague, which heightened the political tensions of this case. Because 2007 was an election year and technocrats at all levels are political appointees in Guatemala, CONAP may have refused to accept the conclusions of the technical study because doing so would have meant relinquishing oversight authority of Laguna Chichoj to MARN and losing the political momentum behind declaring the Laguna a protected area.

The technical team was made up of expert geologists, biologists, environmental scientists, and planners, so it was easy to interpret CONAP's rejection of the technical study as a political maneuver masquerading as a technical critique. GSM submitted the critique of their study to colleagues at two Guatemalan universities, who independently confirmed that the scientific basis for CONAP's rejection was spurious. Furthermore, because the proposed critical-management plan was drawn from the extensive community data collected in interviews and focus groups, and was supported by the COCODEs participating in the Roundtable, rejecting the plan was tantamount to rejecting the desires of the majority of citizens of San Cristóbal Verapaz.

## Assets, Multifunctionality, and Political Rents

In Guatemala, civil society tends to view local government with a lack of trust. Because of the enduring legacy of government corruption, relationships between civil society and local government are often hostile and occasionally violent. In 2002, for example, citizens rioted in Tecpán, Chimaltenango when the mayor tried to implement collection processes for the nationally mandated, but locally administered, property tax. The police station and the mayor's home and car were burned,

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the town hall was vandalized, and an assassination attempt was made against the mayor (Palmer 2007). Another similar case took place in Aguacatán, Huehuetenango in 2003 when the ethnically divisive mayor, Pablo Escobar Méndez, was reelected with only 19 percent of the popular vote. A coalition of opposition parties and civilian supporters violently occupied the town hall, setting off two years of physical confrontations resulting in three deaths and assassination attempts against the mayor and his wife (Méndez 2007). This destructive tension is primarily a product of civil society's mistrust of local governments. Matthew Bond (2003:21), for example, writes that communities "see [tax collection] as yet another form of corruption."

In San Cristóbal Verapaz, this same destructive tension between local elected officials and peasant civil society is at work. The Environmental Roundtable in San Cristóbal was ostensibly created as a way to bring diverse community perspectives on the fate of Laguna Chichoj together. Yet community elites used the Roundtable and the protected-area declaration process for political purposes that were incompatible with the desires of the peasant majority. Furthermore, the mayor of San Cristóbal presided over the Roundtable, and the Town Hall was responsible for convening meetings and setting out the agenda. This created the impression that the Roundtable was a municipal project and that the mayor had final say. Lastly, only three COCODEs, all of which represented urban neighborhoods, were invited to participate in the Environmental Roundtable—and even then, their participation was marginal in comparison with the local organizations, municipal leaders, and outside technicians.

The intense politicization of the protected-area process in the San Cristóbal case illustrates one problem with environmental capital-based development initiatives in weak institutional environments. High-profile environmental initiatives, including the establishment of protected areas, attract the attention of international funders and become very visible types of political victories that play well in the media. For these reasons, one can extract substantial political rents from such projects. In stronger institutional environments where civil society is better equipped to hold government accountable and institutionalized checks help prevent collusion, tension between community members and local government is often productive and creative rather than detrimental to the development process (see Peterman 2000 for a

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discussion of creative tension in the context of community organizing in Chicago). For this reason the community capitals framework may not always translate perfectly across institutional environments or national borders, and political institutional endowments may outweigh economic factor endowments in cases where they are in conflict. This may be in part because the multifunctionality of natural resources causes different populations to conceive of these resources in distinct ways.

In addition to the Marxian categories of use and exchange value, certain environmental assets, in certain contexts, may also possess symbolic value, as the case of Laguna Chichoj demonstrates. Symbolic value is determined by the significance of an object or phenomenon within the collective consciousness of a given social group. This significance is separate from the material utility that is derived from use-valuable commodities and the monetary utility of exchange-valuable commodities. Symbolic value can be operationalized when an individual or group invokes representatively valuable objects or phenomena, resulting in the attribution of credit. That credit can then serve the credited in materially important ways, such as forgiveness or support. A natural resource has use value as an organ of an ecosystem, use value as a provider of environmental services to the human population, exchange value as a commodified amenity, and symbolic value that can be leveraged for material gain. Each of these ways of conceptualizing an organ of the landscape is a different lens that cuts along the contours of different social groups. Peasant groups that are less integrated into the global economy than other social groups may depend on environmental services that the landscape provides as a dimension of their livelihood strategies. The COCODES in San Cristobal Verapaz viewed the Laguna through the service lens. To these groups, the lake possessed use value. In contrast, the local and national elites who constituted the Environmental Roundtable for the Rescue of Laguna Chichoj viewed the lake through the symbolic lens. In their eyes, the lake was a political tool that could be symbolically manipulated to extract political rents. The third lens, the capital lens, conceptualized the lake as a commodity to be traded, and thus endowed the object with exchange value. Both the service and symbolic lenses are characteristic of, although by no means endemic to, some developing countries

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where partially subsistence-level livelihoods and political rent-seeking are widespread phenomena. The capital lens, on the other hand, is more common in the global north, perhaps because the historically larger leisure class understands the landscape in part as a recreational apparatus.

Multifunctionality means that natural resources, in particular amenities with high visibility, signify different things to different groups in a community. David Marcouiller and Greg Clendenning (2005) characterize amenities by high-income elasticity of demand, but that is the case only when a resource is conceptualized through the capital lens as deriving its value through exchange. When the same resource is conceptualized by rural peasants through the service lens, demand is considerably less income-elastic. In this case, and others like it where political rent-seeking in natural resource management intervenes in genuine community-led efforts to develop around environmental capital, the power structure is not acting in the interests of the population. This is more likely to happen in weak political institutional environments where civil society possesses less leverage over its elected officials.

Jeffrey Klein and Steven Wolf (2007) apply the concept of multifunctionality beyond agriculture to landscapes in general. They find that in the Northern Forest of New York State there are distinct orientations regarding forest management. Further, they find that “political economic factors shape the relative value individuals place on . . . forests” (Klein and Wolf 2007:414). This work parallels, to some extent, the typology of lenses advanced here. However, this typology is far from exhaustive and additional literature must develop it further.

This case and its lessons affirm earlier research that natural resource issues, by virtue of their contentious multifunctionality and unique visibility, lend themselves to political entrepreneurialism that can undermine genuine community initiatives (Walker and Hurley 2004). Environmental capital-based development has the potential to serve as an important component of comprehensive community-development planning, but the institutional conditions must be right to maximize the potential of this strategy. Where the right mix of factor endowments, strong political institutions and strong civil society are in place, leveraging environmental capital can constitute an effective

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form of asset building, which can shore up community economic autonomy, contribute to quality of life, and enhance ecosystems. Nevertheless, the San Cristóbal case suggests that although many rural areas in the developing world possess favorable economic conditions for effective environmental capital-based development, the relative strength of political institutions and civil society must be also considered as a determining factor in the outcomes of such initiatives.

## List of Acronyms

- ASOVERAPAZ: Asociación Verapaz (Verapaz Association), the local nonprofit organization that spearheaded the process of declaring the Laguna protected
- CATIE: Centro Agronómico Tropical para la Investigación y Enseñanza (Tropical Agronomical Center for Research and Teaching), the Costa Rican organization that disbursed and oversaw the financing of the program of protected-area declaration that sponsored the Laguna Chichoj initiative
- COCODE: Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo (Community Development Council), a legally mandated grassroots development organization that operates on the submunicipal level of the urban neighborhood or rural hamlet
- CONAP: Consejo Nacional de Áreas Protegidas (National Council of Protected Areas), the state agency that manages Guatemala's system of protected areas
- DGIS: Netherlands Directorate General of Development Cooperation, the government development agency of the Netherlands responsible for underwriting the program of protected-area declaration that sponsored the Laguna Chichoj initiative
- FONAPAZ: Fondo Nacional para la Paz (National Peace Fund)
- GAN: Gran Alianza Nacional (Great National Alliance), the political party that held the presidency for the 2003–2007 term
- GASAL: Grupo Asociado Salvemos al Lago (Associated Group “Let’s Save the Lake”), a local nonprofit organization primarily concerned with removing invasive plant species

from the Laguna and also part of the Roundtable initiative to declare the Laguna protected

GSM: Grupo Sierra Madre, the environmental consulting firm hired to conduct the technical plan for the protected-area declaration of the Laguna Chichoj watershed

INAB: Instituto Nacional de Bosques (National Forest Institute)

MARN: Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales (Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources)

OECD: Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development

SCEP: Secretaria de Coordinación Ejecutiva de la Presidencia (Secretariat of Executive Coordination of the Presidency)

## Notes

1. In this chapter we refer to environmental and natural capital interchangeably. We use the term *environmental capital* throughout, but where we refer to another text that uses the term *natural capital*, use also use the term *natural capital*.

2. Laguna Chichoj is the proper name of the small lake that is the focal point of the proposed protected area discussed here. The Spanish word *laguna* refers to a small, freshwater body of water, whereas the false English cognate *lagoon* refers to a saline bay or ocean inlet. Here we call this pond *Laguna*, referring to its proper name.

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