

Bonds, Bridges, and Links to Development in Osa and Golfito, Costa Rica

CARTER A. HUNT, WILLIAM H. DURHAM,
AND CLAIRE M. MENKE

Introduction

Long acclaimed for exceptional biodiversity and the efforts to conserve it, Costa Rica has recently begun to exhibit high wealth disparity, cyclical impoverishment, and deforestation rates derived from export-based economic policies (Edelman 1995; Vandermeer and Perfecto 2005; Horton 2007; Fletcher 2012). The southern cantons of Osa and Golfito are representative of this juxtaposition of political-ecological outcomes related to environmental quality and degradation. Unique ecological conditions, including the Golfo Dulce tropical fjord to the south and the Terraba-Sierpe wetlands—a Ramsar site—to the north, have influenced the region’s spectacular biodiversity. Yet these conditions have also helped shape the region’s development history.

In this chapter we draw upon field research, elaborated elsewhere (see note below), conducted as part of the Osa and Golfito Initiative (INOGO), an international collaborative effort to develop strategies for sustainable human development and environmental stewardship in this region of Costa Rica. Aiming

Content in this chapter previously appeared in extended form in *Human Organization* 74 (3) as “Social Capital in Development: Bonds, Bridges, and Links in Osa and Golfito, Costa Rica.” We are grateful to the editors for permission to reprint much of that material here.

to provide information and products that will be useful for ongoing decision-making processes, INOGO identified limited social capital—the relative lack of benefit from relations of reciprocity and trust among local-level institutions, organizations, and social networks—as a critical bottleneck for the region’s sustainable development (Putnam 1995; Bebbington et al. 2006; Titeca and Vervisch 2008; Serra 2011). Investment in social capital has historically been lacking, thus little has been done to “help build bridges between communities and social groups” (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 242). As we now show, most communities in the region do not have long and deep histories, but were instead founded as isolated settlements in the last thirty to fifty years, with major consequences for both social capital and sustainable development in the region.

Fruits, Forests, and Forced Relocations

The modern history of the region begins with the pervasive influence of the United Fruit Company (UFC) and its subsidiaries (Cuello, Brandon, and Margoluis 1998). Starting in 1938 the UFC was based in the town of Golfito, with small settlements of workers dispersed across extensive banana fields as needed for plantation labor. By 1955 nearly all of the UFC’s banana production in Costa Rica was shipped from Golfito. In 1985, amid declining production and falling world prices, the UFC abruptly withdrew from the region. Former workers remained in the scattered company towns or went looking for access to land to settle in remote corners of the region. The UFC’s dominating and lengthy presence created a culture of top-down, command-and-control management that persists in the region (Horton 2007).

In another effort to accelerate development in the region, the government granted a forty-seven-thousand-hectare concession to Osa Productos Forestales (OPF) in the 1950s. The goal was to create “a tropical sustainable forestry industry centered on rotational harvests and waste-free processing of all the harvested wood into a variety of products for maximum economic returns” (Christen 1994: 74). Like the UFC, the OPF constructed roads, bridges, and other infrastructure needed for further agricultural development in the region. Local populations who had long resided within the concession never had the opportunity to secure legal tenure, but challenged the OPF over the acquisition of their lands, sparking violent conflict (Cuello, Brandon, and Margoluis 1998). By 1978 the government’s Institute of Land and Colonization took back much

OPF land, forcibly relocated residents, and incorporated this territory into the newly created Corcovado National Park and Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve. Following these forced relocations and continued low standard of living in the affected communities, conservation-related conflict persisted in the region for twenty years (Cuello, Brandon, and Margoluis 1998).

With the creation of the national park and the forest reserve, a tradition of artisanal gold mining soon came into direct conflict with conservation strategies. Although mining along the Río Tigre is documented as far back as 1937, United Fruit's withdrawal from the region in 1980 dramatically expanded the number of local miners (Cuello Brandon, and Margoluis 1998). A spike in global gold prices further contributed to extraction pressure on the park (Horton 2007). When national and international conservationists raised the alarm in the early 1980s, the government authorized relocations—some voluntary and some forced—of eight hundred gold-mining families from Corcovado to surrounding areas, including lands inside the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve (Cuello Brandon, and Margoluis 1998). The action reduced but did not eliminate the illegal gold-mining activities that continue today (Horton 2007).

Beef, Beechwood, and Tenuous Tenure

In 1980 the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario (IDA) established a national agricultural program that supplied lands for productive use. IDA stipulated that those using the land had to pay for it over time, and they could only secure tenure after working the land productively for fifteen years (van den Hombergh 2004). IDA's program in Osa was a mechanism of resettling gold miners, but poor suitability of the region's soils for agriculture, plus IDA's small parcels, made communities dependent on expensive fertilizer inputs. Lack of access to low-interest credit needed to afford the fertilizer necessary to support viable yields was compounded by other challenges to agricultural productivity, including distance from markets, poor transportation, and lack of technical assistance. By the mid-1990s, many residents chose to sell their land rather than work the poor-quality soil (van den Hombergh 2004).

Rice was another historically important export commodity for the region, supported by subsidies from the government's National Production Council (Consejo Nacional de Producción, or CNP). When structural-adjustment policies dismantled the CNP in 1986, many medium and large producers abandoned rice production altogether (van den Hombergh 2004). Around the same

time, with international pressures and U.S. protectionist policies, livestock production also fell sharply—so much so that by 1994 Costa Rica was forced to become a net importer of both rice and beef (Edelman 1995). The failures of IDA and CNP left little in the way of agricultural development opportunities for Osa residents, but much in the way of government disillusionment (van den Hombergh 2004).

In 1992 yet another government-sponsored rural-development program was initiated in Osa and Golfito. Ston Forestal, a Costa Rican subsidiary of Stone Container Corporation, was granted a free trade agreement to begin producing wood chips for its paper products, including rights to construct an industrial port in the Golfo Dulce Forest Reserve (van den Hombergh 2004). These contracts led to twenty-four thousand hectares of beechwood (*Gmelina arborea*) being planted in the region. However, concern for social and environmental consequences led the Asociación Ecologista Costarricense to collect reports of environmental damage and mount a campaign in opposition to Ston Forestal, drawing support from the likes of the Rainforest Action Network and Greenpeace. With the election of President Figueres in 1994, Ston Forestal was denied permission to construct the marine port and Central America's largest chipping facility (van den Hombergh 2004). Without the chipping facility there was little demand for the wood already planted, and without an alternative way to earn money from plantations, residents found their subsistence jeopardized by having their land occupied by a now useless monocrop. The company ceased operations in the Osa region and was sold in 1999.

Local Impact of Global Demand for African Palm Oil

African oil palm (*Elaeis guineensis* var.) is a global commodity whose production more than doubled between 2000 and 2010 (FAO 2011b). The leading source of the world's vegetable oil, oil palm cultivation has caused extensive tropical deforestation (UCS 2011). By 2012 the National Chamber of Palm Producers (Cámara Nacional de Productores de Palma, or CANAPALMA) in Costa Rica reported being the world's ninth-leading producer of oil and number one in terms of tons per hectare per year (CANAPALMA 2012).

Despite Osa and Golfito's poor record of agriculture-based development, African oil palm has emerged today as a primary export crop in the region.

Over 64 percent of Costa Rica's oil palm production occurs in the Brunca region, which contains the cantons of Osa, Golfito, and nearby Corredores (CANAPALMA 2012). Oil palm cultivation has expanded in this southern area via contract agriculture established by Palma Tica, a member corporation of the agroindustrial conglomerate Grupo Numar. According to CANAPALMA (2012), Costa Rica's Southern Pacific, Central Pacific, and Atlantic zones reached sixty-thousand hectares under cultivation in 2011. Today palm oil is the country's second-most valuable processed-food export, behind coffee.

Small and large landowners are reaping the benefits of predictable, year-round harvests and consistent palm oil demand in Osa and Golfito, although profits are especially high for large holdings once labor needs taper off roughly four years into the production cycle (Beggs and Moore 2013). Unprecedented economic stability, coupled with a lack of competitive alternatives within or outside of agriculture, makes African oil palm cultivation extremely attractive to growers. Given strong economic incentives for growers and even modest gains for landless workers, agricultural land in Osa and Golfito is steadily being converted from food crops and pasture to palm plantations (Beggs and Moore 2013). From a political-ecology perspective, the history of successive waves of commercial production in the region—bananas, beechwood, rice, and oil palm—has had the effect of undermining food security in the region, especially for smallholders and landless laborers.¹

Tourism in Osa and Golfito: “A Forest Left Standing Is More Valuable Than One Cut Down”

Tourism in the region dates back to the 1950s, when foreign investors began purchasing coastal lands; however, it was not until the late 1980s and 1990s that development of this sector boomed, along with the broader emergence of ecotourism in the national agenda (Cuello, Brandon, and Margoluis 1998; Honey 2008). By the time president Jose Maria Figueres Olsen announced that the country would be “offering itself to the world as a ‘laboratory’ for this new [sustainable] development paradigm” (Figueres Olsen 1996: 190), Costa Rica was already a test-bed for ecotourism in practice (Ceballos-Lascurain 1996; Honey 2008). Focusing on small-scale, nature-based ecotourism avoided many exploitative practices associated with tourism's role in development elsewhere (de Kadt 1979). The ecotourism industry was noted for providing direct

economic benefits, environmental conservation, and positive social outcomes (Budowski 1976; Honey 2008).

The dominant economic motor in the region today remains small-scale nature-based tourism (Horton 2009; Hunt, et al. 2015). In northern Costa Rica, however, the trend has shifted since 2000 toward large-scale resort, second home, and residential tourism development, following the installation of a new international airport in Liberia. The striking change prompted some analysts to suggest that the country is in jeopardy of “cracking the golden egg” that has sustained it for years (Honey, Vargas, and Durham 2010). While this shift is well documented along the northern Pacific Coast (Honey, Vargas, and Durham 2010; van Noorloos 2011), it has not been as prevalent in Osa and Golfito. The nature of tourism development could, however, shift dramatically if the government carries forward plans for a large international airport in the Osa region.

Analyses of tourism’s impact on the Osa Peninsula indicate a positive relationship between ecotourism projects and forest conservation, even regeneration (Almeyda, Broadbent, and Durham 2010; Hunt et al. 2015). They also indicate positive economic impacts in the form of household income and employment that exceed other livelihood options (Almeyda Broadbent, and Durham 2010; Hunt et al. 2015). But looking at the broader social and economic impacts of tourism, one finds outcomes that are more mixed, including concerns of seasonal-job instability and inflation of local land prices. With an estimated 20 percent of the population in the region directly involved in tourism, and an additional 60 percent involved indirectly via related services (Horton 2009), it is clear that development efforts must take into account the importance of tourism in the Osa-Golfito region.

Current Development Dilemmas

As part of a development strategy for the region, the government of Costa Rica has espoused major infrastructure projects with relevance to the economic activities described in the previous sections: (1) Costa Rica’s third major international airport planned for just outside of Sierpe-Palmar Norte (Araya Monge 2011); (2) Central American’s largest hydroelectric dam upstream from the Terraba-Sierpe wetlands along the Terraba River (Grupo Independiente 2012; Fletcher and Frece, this volume); (3) road improvements, including those to the Chacarita-Rincón highway, or those linking the town of Sierpe to the

same highway; and (4) concurrent installation of electricity in formerly remote communities along said roadways.

The political ecology of these development projects includes both discursive (Escobar 1996) and structural elements (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). The discursive component emphasizes improved quality of life for the region's residents, via improved infrastructure, additional jobs, and a more diversified economy. A concern remains, however, that additional policy intervention is needed lest these efforts further consolidate the social and economic *structures*—the land tenure, materials processing, transportation facilities, and real-estate markets—responsible for perpetuating the region's underdevelopment (Fletcher 2012). Opposition to the airport and the hydroelectric project revolves around the degree to which they come at the expense of the region's natural resources.

The Osa and Golfito region has seen numerous unsuccessful attempts to develop the region economically while improving the quality of life for local residents. Major international firms promoting exports (e.g., United Fruit, Ston Forestal, Osa Forest Products) provided little to communities in the way of social capital, other than what emerged via protests of these companies' activities. State-led efforts to improve local-resident livelihood capabilities (e.g., IDA and CNP programs) likewise resulted in little opportunity for social-capital enhancement. Internationally imposed structural-adjustment policies that promoted nontraditional agricultural exports failed to reduce the region's relative poverty or promote its reliable social networks. Yet there are indications in recent years that small-scale ecotourism ventures are providing more stable employment and greater earnings than other available employment opportunities (Hunt et al. 2015), while African oil palm cultivation is emerging as a principal economic activity. Infrastructure remains poor in many areas, and development projects have done little to generate interactions beyond the local level. In the remainder of this chapter, we explore the implications of these historical and current livelihood activities for social-capital formation in the region.

Study Methods

The research is based on geographically extensive ethnographic fieldwork in the region related to the history of development efforts, perceptions of current educational offerings, current health issues and access, principle livelihood viability, landscape preferences, and the social-institutional analysis we focus on here. From key informants we identified communities in Osa and Golfito that

had been neglected by prior research. We sought sizeable samples in those areas, aiming for between 1:200 and 1:100 individuals, to ensure that the data would provide a fair overall representation of the region (see table 11.1). The resulting analysis includes development challenges and barriers to social capital in both well-studied hubs and in areas collectively perceived as understudied within the region. The combined efforts resulted in 310 completed interviews. Further methodological details are detailed elsewhere (Hunt, Durham, and Menke 2015).

Interviewees identified and described the three principle assets or strengths in their community and then free listed all forms of collective action in the

TABLE 11.1 Semistructured interviews by community



Canton	District	2011 population	Sampling Ratio ^a	Community				
Golfito (n=187)	Pavón (n=55)	6,159	8.9	Pavones (n=18)				
				Punta Banco (n=24)				
				Zaucudo (n=13)				
	Golfito (n=77)	11,284	6.8	Golfito (n=77)				
	Guaycara (n=47)	12,918	3.6	Rio Claro (n=23)				
				La Gamba (n=9)				
				KM 20 (n=8)				
				Villa Briseno KM 37 (n=7)				
				Jiménez ^b (n=8)	8,789	0.9	Puerto Jiménez (n=3)	
				La Palma (n=5)				
				Osa (n=123)	Sierpe (n=61)	4,205	14.5	Rincón (n=6)
								Rancho Quemado (n=2)
Sábalo (n=12)								
				Alto Laguna (n=6)				
				Bahía Drake (n=21)				
				Sierpe (n=14)				
	Palmar ^b (n=7)	9,815	0.7	Chacarita (n=7)				
	Piedras Blancas (n=55)	4,138	13.3	Piedras Blancas (n=55)				

^aPer thousand persons.

^bDeliberately undersampled as explained in Hunt, Durham, and Menke 2015.

TABLE 11.2 Most-cited community strengths and challenges

Strength	Mentioned as primary strength (%)	Mentioned as one of top three strengths (%)
<i>Nature and natural resource</i>	23.9	56.1
<i>Community identity</i>	17.4	45.6
<i>Employment/commerce</i>	11.5	34.1
<i>Tourism</i>	12.8	28.9
<i>Community organizations</i>	9.2	19.3

Challenge	Mentioned as primary challenge (%)	Mentioned as one of top three challenges (%)
<i>Infrastructure</i>	17.9	53.3
<i>Unemployment</i>	17.4	41.8
<i>Lack of broader identity</i>	18.2	38.7
<i>Drugs/Alcoholism</i>	7.8	26.6
<i>Failure of government</i>	9.1	24.0

community (see table 11.2). This led to a relational database characterizing both formal organization and informal collective action according to criteria relevant to our social capital analysis: (1) their focus of activity (e.g., development, sports, religion, etc.), (2) the geographic scope of their activity (local, regional, national, international), (3) the number of organizational members, (4) the organization's leadership, and (5) the source of the organization's funding (local activities, regional, national, and international sources). This characterization of resident perspectives and organizations working in the study region shed much light on the nature of social capital in the region.

Community Assets, Liabilities, and Social Organization

Community Strengths and Weaknesses

Our interviewees most frequently cited *nature and natural resources* as one of the strengths of their community (mentioned as one of three primary strengths by 56.1 percent of those surveyed). The survey makes clear that this population does not need to be persuaded of the virtues of biodiversity and its conservation.

Of even more relevance to the discussion of social capital is the next most frequently cited asset: *community identity or membership*, cited by 45.6 percent of the interviewees. Qualitative responses spoke of a “sense of community,” “community unity,” and “community solidarity,” and gave many examples of benefits from schools and clinics, water-service providers, microfinance and development committees, and many other local organizations. This second-most-cited asset was all about what Gittell and Vidal (1998) call bonding social capital. Responses to this question implied a distinction between these strong notions of belonging to a local, beneficial community, and a much less salient sense of belonging to, and benefiting from, the larger region (see below).

Employment and *tourism* came in as the next main assets, cited by 34.1 percent and 28.9 percent of our interviewees respectively. And *community organizations*, the various civic groups of each community, were mentioned as the fifth-most commonly perceived asset, as mentioned by 19.3 percent of the sample. This data revealed that interviewees had more difficulty identifying assets in their communities than they did challenges and constraints. Reflecting the development challenges faced by this region, 43.3 percent could not identify at least three strengths of their communities, and 10 percent were unable to identify even one. In comparison, less than a quarter (24.7 percent) were unable to identify three challenges in their community.

Turning to community challenges, *infrastructure*—mentioned by 53.3 percent—was the number one concern of our interviewees. This finding suggests the government’s focus on infrastructural improvements is not without merit. However, the qualitative information reveals that the geographical scale of need—local rather than regional—may be perceived differently by local stakeholders than by the government. Communities are much more concerned about local, small-scale infrastructural improvements—notably, roads and bridges—for access in the rainy season. They gave no indications of need for an international airport or major hydroelectric project. That national-level policy based on infrastructural plans for the Diquís hydroelectric project (see Fletcher and Frece, this volume) and an international airport overlaps little with local-resident concerns provides further indications of the paucity of linking social capital from relationships between local residents and powerful actors at the national level (or beyond).

Employment shows up second on the list of challenges and is thus perceived simultaneously as a strength and a challenge in communities. Although tourism is the region’s principle employer (Horton 2009; Hunt et al. 2015), it has not yet reached all communities in the Osa. Thus tourism is not providing, or not yet

providing, sufficient employment opportunities for the residents in those communities, especially many of the lesser-studied communities included here. Furthermore, even those with the opportunity to work in the tourism sector do not always have interest in doing so (Hunt et al. 2015). Yet the data indicate that residents across the region perceive even less opportunity in other economic sectors. The perception of employment as a weakness of local communities is likely further influenced by the tumultuous history of earlier agricultural-export programs.

The most striking challenge after infrastructure needs and unemployment in the region is the absence of a regional Osa-Golfito *intercommunity identity*. Ethnographic data indicate very little interaction between communities across the region, very little sense of benefit from what there is, and thus little opportunity for a broader sense of belonging to develop. Intercommunity activity is restricted to interactions with direct neighbors during recreational activities (e.g., soccer) or else for meeting needs for health care, education, and commerce (e.g., visits to a larger town for banking services or medical care). Informants attest that there are generally few collaborative activities and fewer collaborative organizations between communities, and thus little opportunity for a broader, overarching identity to form. This finding stands in striking contrast to the usage of international conservationists (Cuello, Brandon, and Margoluis 1998; Nuñez, Borge, and Herrera 2007) and tourists (Hunt et al. 2015) who typically speak of “the Osa”; we found there is little sense of belonging to or being part of “Osa” among local residents. Although we found social benefits to be a commonly perceived strength within communities, community organizations remain isolated from one another and are not collectively bridging to confront the development challenges facing their region.

Collective Action and Social Organization

Our exhaustive list of organizations operating in the communities tallied an impressive 187 unique organizations operating in the study area. We assessed the average number of members in each of these organizations (see table 11.3) and found that, on average, organizations have 13.1 members (though total group size ranges from 3 to 160 individuals). Next, we categorized organizations by the focus of their activities and compared average membership to the thematic focus of each organization. When organizations addressed multiple community concerns simultaneously, they were counted in both categories. Our analysis indicates that overlapping concerns for human well-being (*bienestar*)

TABLE 11.3 Characteristics of organizations in study region

Organization theme	Quantity	Total organizations (%)	Average number of members	Principle funding source
<i>Development</i>	30	16.1	21.8	Government
<i>Education</i>	18	9.6	5.4	Local activities
<i>Water quality</i>	21	11.2	6.9	Personal funds
<i>Trade-specific</i>	29	15.5	17.1	Donations
<i>Infrastructure</i>	19	10.2	9.4	Government
<i>Health</i>	8	4.3	7.1	Local activities
<i>Sports</i>	13	7.0	7.9	Local activities
<i>Religion</i>	19	10.2	22.7	Donations
<i>Finance</i>	11	5.9	19.4	Dues
<i>Tourism</i>	15	8.0	14.3	Dues
<i>Well-being</i>	49	26.2	12.3	Local activities
TOTAL	187	100	13.1	Local activities

and development (*desarrollo*) were the most frequently cited foci of the organizations identified, reported 26.2 percent and 16.0 percent of the time, respectively. Groups assembled around development concerns also had a high average number of members—21.8 members per group—second only to church organizations, which had an average membership of 22.7 individuals.

Organizations addressing potable *water* needs—11.2 percent of the total organizations identified—are also mainstays in the communities. Committees working in support of local *schools* are well represented (9.6 percent of the organizations), as are *church-related groups* (10.2 percent) and *athletic organizations* (7.0 percent). Finally, though fewer in number, *local-finance and microcredit enterprises* account for 5.9 percent of all organizations identified, signaling their status as valuable community assets where they occur.

We also categorized organizations according to the geographic extent of their activities, revealing that the activities of 137 (73.3 percent) of 187 organizations in our sample are restricted primarily to one of the local communities. There are 50 organizations (27 percent) that operate across more than one named community, and only 22 organizations (11.8 percent) in the region have contact with national- or international-level actors. These data are consistent

with the lack of bridging capital documented above among the communities. High levels of internal collective action and benefits within communities (i.e., bonding capital) have not produced broader interactions and benefits at higher levels, resulting in very little bridging or linking forms of social capital that enable integration of local-development concerns with national and international policies and processes affecting the region.

Sources of funding for local organizations were also categorized by their geographical origin. A total of 324 funding sources were described for organizations, and each was coded as local, regional, national, international, or combined local-national sources. As a proxy indicator of linking social capital in the region, this measure provides insight into how local level organizations connect, at least for funding purposes, with more powerful actors at the regional, national, and international levels. We found that 57.1 percent of all funding sources were reported as being local, 2.5 percent were regional, 22.5 percent national, 1.2 percent international, and 4.9 percent were described as mixed national-local sources. Thus, by all indications, the majority of collective action occurring in Osa-Golfito communities is funded locally; as a consequence, the lack of regional, national, and international funding leaves many capital-intensive community needs out of reach. The capacity to interact with and benefit from key actors at the regional level and beyond—a key characteristic of linking social capital (Szreter and Woolcock 2004; Titeca and Vervisch 2008) to human-centered development in other regions of Latin America (Bebbington 1999)—is lacking.

Discussion

Social networks are “one of the primary resources [the poor] have for managing risk and vulnerability” (Woolcock and Narayan 2000: 242). Our data indicate that the benefits of collective activity—the bonding social capital (Gittell and Vidal 1998)—is strong within the many communities of the region. We found many local organizations with relatively high average memberships and diverse kinds of benefits for their members, including such things as water access, microfinancing, sports, religious activity, health support, and educational opportunities. They are held in high regard locally and are ranked among the key strengths of local communities.

In contrast, the evidence of bridging social capital—activity that provides benefits from organizational networks and relations across communities in the

region (Gittell and Vidal 1998; Titeca and Vervisch 2008)— is much weaker. We found surprisingly few organizations whose intercommunity activities provide routine benefits to members. There is a notable disconnect with any form of regional integration, and “regional organization for the common good” was cited as a key community challenge. Whereas health and education are the traditional foci of development efforts, in this region neither theme was listed among the challenges most cited. Residents may feel that collective action across broader scales is a prerequisite to greater representation of local concerns.

Furthermore, our data also indicate markedly less interaction, and therefore less benefit, between local residents and national or international actors than we expected, and certainly less than anticipated from the history of international conservation efforts reviewed earlier (Nuñez, Borge, and Herrera 2007; Menke 2012). We found little evidence of linking social capital among even the most active and widespread organizations working in these communities. With the benefits from these key bridges and linkages absent, barriers to improved livelihoods that have historically plagued the region are bound to persist (Woolcock and Narayan 2000; Titeca and Vervisch 2008).

If theoretical perspectives on social capital are applied to policy prescriptions here, then our evidence suggests that investments should target rural residents' capacity to retain or improve access to a specific type of asset—the accumulation of the bonding and bridging forms of social capital necessary for improved access to regional-, national-, and international-level institutions and actors (Bebbington 1999). This recommendation echoes Agrawal and Gibson (1999: 639), who point out how different actors have differential access to resources and power, and “for community actors to possess some leverage in their dealings with state officials, it would be imperative that they organize themselves into larger collectives or federations that can span the gap between local and the national.”

With tourism as the region's primary economic motor, opportunities to develop social capital within that sector are tantamount. Financial support and business training among local tourism businesses and organizations—for example, AGITUR (the Tourist Guide Association of Piedras Blancas)— is likely to contribute additional bridging and linking social capital. As Jones (2005) notes, high levels of social capital can lead to strong initial outcomes from newly introduced ecotourism revenues; however, if transparency is not also maintained and corruption assiduously avoided, social capital can quickly erode. When ecotourism projects provide mechanisms to equitably distribute benefits, social capital is more likely to increase.

Given the lack of social networks linking local residents to national-level actors, the most “fundamental” relation for the development of social capital is local residents’ relation with the state (Szreter 2002). State spending in the region is one path to developing these ties, though the nature of the changes to social capital will determine if the implications are favorable or unfavorable for them. Our findings suggest that locally identified development priorities are currently underrepresented in the government’s plans for mega-infrastructure like the Diquís hydroelectric project or an international airport.

Conclusion

Local residents in Osa and Golfito are caught in a vortex of national and global political-ecological processes that they have little institutional or political capacity to address. The actors and forces that have the most influence on these processes are almost entirely exogenous to the region, continuing the decidedly top-down development pattern of the region’s history. A recommendation for enhancing both bridging and linking forms of social capital, in a way that reflects this subjective experience of poverty, would be (1) for local-actor-level interventions to catalyze regional, intercommunity networking while, at the same time, (2) providing avenues for local actors to connect to and benefit from more powerful national and international actors.

Without sound development policy in place to support bridging and linking social capital, the history and current sociopolitical context of Osa and Golfito suggest that external actors and forces are likely to further erode the quality of life for local residents. Finding ways to connect to external actors—and to develop social capital across the region and up to the state—will be critical to maintaining and improving human well-being in this region, and will provide still more examples of the Costa Rican “ecolab” at work.²

Notes

1. For discussion of a recent effort to improve the food security of small commercial oil palm producers, see <http://inogo.stanford.edu/palm?language=en>.
2. For a description of efforts to expand bridging and linking social capital via ecotourism, see <http://www.caminosdeosa.com/>.