

CHAPTER 5. DEVELOPMENT PLANNING FOR A TROPICAL RAIN FOREST



From April 1977 to April 1978 I undertook a consulting assignment for the Organization of American States (OAS) in the field of regional development. Unquestionably, the contractual arrangements for this assignment were the most satisfying I ever experienced — roughly, a schedule of two months on two months off. Over the course of the year, I spent six months working in Colombia and six months at home reading, writing, and, in general, simply enjoying myself.

I was contracted to assist with preparation of a development strategy for the Darien of Colombia — a frontier region located adjacent to Panama. I was asked to identify the principal development potentials and limitations of the region and make recommendations on an overall development strategy.

Parenthetically, names of regions that do not correspond to political subdivisions are often confusing. Such is the case with the Darien. It lies within the much larger Choco biogeographic region which, broadly defined, stretches along the Pacific Ocean from southeastern Panama into northwestern Ecuador. The Colombian Choco encompasses nearly 57,000 square miles (roughly the size of the state of Florida) and, while characterized by extreme altitudinal and

climatic variations, is noted for being one of the world's wettest rain forests. It is a region of particular concern to ecologists anxious to protect an area that contains some of the most diverse plant and animal life on earth.

The Darien of Colombia is known in Spanish-speaking Latin America as the *Tapon del Darien*, literally, the "Cork of the Darien." It is here that the great swamps exist which separated the former province of Panama from the country of Colombia providing the geopolitical basis for the establishment of Panama as an independent nation. It is also here that the last link in the Pan American Highway has yet to be built. It is not only that it is technically difficult and costly to construct the final section of the highway. There is the even more perplexing problem as to whether it would be worth it.

As defined for development purposes, the Darien of Colombia covers about 8,500 square miles of varied, lush tropical countryside. It is characterized by a principal valley through which a major river of Colombia, the Atrato, reaches the Caribbean at the Gulf of Uraba; by a number of intra-mountain valleys; and by a single commanding section of a mountain range, the Serrania de Abibi, which reaches over two miles in height. While the region lies within two departments (comparable to states in the U.S.), Antioquia and Choco, most development has occurred in the former, while the major portion of the great swamps lie within the latter.

Historically, the region has always been sparsely populated. At the time I was there, it still contained only about 200,000 people — most extremely poor — but the population was growing at the phenomenal rate of over 5 percent per year. In part this growth was due to the rapid expansion of the banana industry, represented by the presence of United Brands (formerly United Fruit); to the better relating of the region to the city of Medellin, a major industrial center and capital of Antioquia; and to the frequent outbreaks of internecine violence throughout Colombia, which for decades has set many of the country's poor scouting for new and safer areas in which to try to make a living.

The few towns in the Darien could have been described as early frontier — muddy, makeshift and forlorn, with little in the way of social infrastructure. The two largest, Apartado and Turbo, each had about 20,000 inhabitants; the others far fewer. One needs to be careful, however, in trying to visualize the situation of towns in vastly different economic and social circumstances. Both Apartado and Turbo gave the impression of having approximately the same dimensions and dynamism as moderately well-off rural communities in the midwest of the United States of some 4,000 to 5,000 persons. However, the level of poverty was so much greater in the two Colombian towns, with families occupying so much less space, that the presence of a major portion of their populations was barely discernable.

Just how healthy and physically safe the region actually is, is a matter of conjecture. A distinguishing feature of the Darien, as well as of many other areas that lie within the global tropical belt, is that they are prime incubators of debilitating diseases and throughout history have been inimical to human settlement. Their complex ecological composition is largely unknown simply because few people have chosen to live within such inhospitable regions. In general, those who have established themselves have been the more disadvantaged of society and have lacked the specialized skills and resources to diagnose their physical surroundings. According to historian William H. McNeill, in his study, *Plagues and Peoples*, the two most significant African diseases to establish themselves in the New World were malaria and yellow fever. 2/ For centuries both were considered endemic to the Darien, a situation that restricted development and, in the process, aided in establishing a dividing line between Colombia and Panama.

Throughout history other health problems have also been present. Around the time of my stay, the World Health Organization mounted a special campaign in the region to stamp out a particular dread of cattlemen, hoof-and-mouth disease. Because the disease has been so prevalent in the Darien of Colombia, Panamanian officials have been particularly vigilant along their common border to prevent any illegal colonization by Colombians which, almost inevitably, would involve the presence of cattle.

Pneumonia has never achieved the killer capacity of malaria and yellow fever and consequently has never received the same publicity. As a consequence, I didn't know that it, too, is endemic to tropical rain forests until I had succumbed for a third time to the disease and, belatedly, began to investigate the matter.

At the time of my presence, the peculiar circumstances of the Darien were also exacerbating the general safety of the area. With the rapid expansion of banana plantations within the valleys, small farmers were being bought out. Although the money they received for their land undoubtedly appeared substantial to the subsistence farmers, it was, nevertheless, insufficient to reestablish them in profitable ventures. As a result, there was a marked tendency of those being dispossessed to either hire themselves out as laborers on one of the newly created plantations or, more commonly, to migrate into the hills, squat on a small piece of land, and practice slash-and-burn agriculture. There, because of the thin soil cover, the newly exposed condition of the ground, and the regular onslaught of torrential rains, the peasant farmers had to change location frequently. With each move, they left in their wake a denuded strip of mountainside whose soil was soon swept into the lowlands, usually into the many rivulets and swamps of the region.

My presence also coincided with a period of violent revolutionary action by rural guerrilla groups, one or more of which were reported to be receiving support from the Castro regime in Cuba. Because of the reduced circumstances of those coming into the hills, and their inability to create a new, permanent home, many were drawn into these groups. Raids on the smaller, more vulnerable plantations were increasing and a general sense of unease was on the rise. Plantation owners along with their chief aides, the overseers, were viewed as exploiters and became targets of armed attacks.

It was easy, prestigious and virtually without financial risk for wealthy businessmen in Medellin to develop banana plantations in the Darien. Because the international banana companies had been scared off from owning large plantations in South America, they had begun to help nationals of the country in

which they were operating to own the plantations. Typically, a banana company, particularly United Brands in the instance of the Darien, would identify prime sites and then enter into agreements with prospective owners to guarantee purchase of the entire banana crop, thus making it easy to obtain bank loans to purchase and develop the plantations. In addition, they would provide the technology, undertake agricultural research, and locate potential overseers. With such a comprehensive support system, it would be possible for a budding *finquero* to develop and operate a banana plantation with virtually no effort and little risk. And the payoff was tremendous. I was told that a plantation of approximately 25 acres, a particularly efficient size, could be expected to produce a net profit of about US\$ 50,000 annually. Under such an enticing arrangement, one can easily understand why the spread of banana plantations was proceeding so rapidly.

At the same time, the situation of the workers on the plantations was deplorable. A large percentage were young, single men who were quartered in squalid, makeshift barracks. While, collectively, their wages made the economic indices for the region compare favorably with other disadvantaged areas of the country, a popular perception within the region was that most of the money was dissipated in drinking bouts.

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Our OAS team was set up in pretty much the standard manner for a multinational field operation. There was a chief-of-mission, an agronomist from Brazil, who took personal charge of the surveying and mapping of the natural characteristics of the region — such as general topography, soil conditions, and hydrologic characteristics. There was a full time economist from Chile, whose principal responsibility was to evaluate the economic possibilities of the region; and there was myself, who worked on a regular/part time basis. Besides advising on the overall development strategy, my primary responsibilities were to diagnose the settlement pattern and its developmental role and evaluate and recommend the institutional and financial arrangements needed to carry out the development strategy. In addition to the three of us, a number of short-term consultants were

frequently present to undertake specific studies related to different social, economic and physical conditions.

The chief-of-mission was an agronomist, conservative and bureaucratic, who knew a good deal about tropical trees and shrubs but little about the dynamics of human existence in such environments. Which is not to single him out unfairly: I don't recall anyone associated with our effort who did. While involvement with the Darien unquestionably sparked in many of us career-long interest in the dynamics of such regions and the kinds of development efforts that might be of practical value, the restrictions of physical access, time, organization and money precluded us from learning a great deal about the human ecology of rain forests.

The counterpart government agency to our team was the Regional Development Corporation for Uraba (CORPOURABA). Its name derived from the Gulf of Uraba which encompasses the large, swampy bay within the Darien which flows into the Caribbean and has been expected for a very long time to provide the site for a major seaport to serve Antioquia. The corporation was a creature of the national government and was originally assigned to the Ministry of Agriculture. During this initial period it was given few resources and accomplished little. Then, in 1974, along with the country's other regional development corporations, it was placed under the jurisdiction of the national planning agency.

Shortly before our consultation effort got underway, the President of the Republic appointed a new executive director for CORPOURABA. With that action, the agency began to come to life. It was formally directed by the national government to prepare a development plan for the Darien, to undertake development projects as needed, and to collaborate closely with other national and departmental agencies in carrying out these assignments.

The new director was a bright, young economist, very personable, with important political connections. He had recently studied in the United States, married an American, and returned to Colombia to administer a rejuvenated CORPOURABA. However, at the commencement of the joint planning project,

the professional staff of his agency consisted of only nine professionals (five economists, two agronomists, a sociologist and an architect), all young, only one of whom had received any formal education or training in development planning — an economist who had attended a nine-month Israeli course in rural development.

None of staff were from the Darien, and only a few had ever visited the region. They were urban people from Medellin, the capital of the department and the location of CORPOURABA's only office some 200 miles from the Darien. There were no good road connections between the two, only a series of poorly connected dirt and gravel paths, passable during the dry seasons by four wheel vehicles, often impassable during the rainy seasons.

Each of the consultants was assigned one or two of the corporation's professionals as aides with the intention that we would assist in their training. They, in turn, were to help us with various tasks, mostly research but, very importantly, helping to overcome the logistic difficulties associated with planning development of a region located somewhere off in the hazy, almost mystical distance. I was assigned an exceptionally conscientious and cooperative young professional. When I would leave the country after each of my two-month stints, he carried on superbly until my return. We got along well and to this day remain good friends.

The budget for CORPOURABA came from the national government with a small portion donated by the Department of Antioquia. At the time, comparable to the other of the country's regional development corporations, the board of directors of CORPOURABA consisted principally of officials of national agencies with a few prominent locals, including the governor of Antioquia and, significantly, representatives of both the banana producers and exporters of the Darien.

The approach to the planning process followed closely one that had evolved over a several year period within the OAS. It fell somewhere between elaboration of a comprehensive development plan and a simple search for and grouping of

projects. It started from the premise that development planning is an iterative process with various phases emanating from an initial overview of a region within the context of national plans and proceeding to a more detailed analysis of promising development possibilities. Actually, the area incorporated in the planning effort was so large, its physical characteristics so diverse, and information about the region so rudimentary, that it would have been impractical to contemplate sketching any type of finished scenario. The project could not have pretended, for example, to draw a blue print of the level and style of life and production to be achieved by the end of a generation or two.

The overarching goal of the development planning effort would be achieved when: 1) the indices of health, literacy, education and income per capital/per social group corresponded to national averages; and when, 2) the factors of production flowed to and from the region with the same facility they did to the other regions of the country. In short, when the level of well-being of the society desired in general was seen to apply to the Darien in particular. Viewed in such a manner, the development strategy recommended would necessarily be more qualitative than quantitative. While it would be possible that aspects of the various sets of recommended actions could be evaluated in quantitative form (with the prospect of applying analytical measures such as cost-benefit analysis), overall it would be impossible to reckon either the magnitude of the changes desired or the size of the force required to effect such changes.

I thought the reports we were responsible for producing should be viewed as working documents. They should describe clearly but briefly the current situation of the region, its principal needs and prospects, and the key, initial actions proposed. Consequently, our final product would be viewed principally as an instrument designed to stimulate debate and encourage participation. Over time, with the accumulation of experience and the gradual incorporation of additional groups in the planning effort, greater clarity and precision would evolve.

As it actually happened, the most notable feature of our planning effort was the inordinate amount of time and resources that had to be expended on the simple identification, cataloguing and mapping of the basic, physical characteristics of

the region. Virtually everyone connected with the planning effort was proceeding into the unknown. It was, in actuality, the world of Garcia Marquez's *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, a Gothic tale which had only recently been published and which several of us read and pondered while working on the project. However, with its overpowering sense of depravity and gathering doom, it depressed as much as enlightened us about the complexity of the region and the enormous gulfs that separated its social groups.

Simply getting to and from and moving about within the Darien presented intense discomforts and hazards. Travel through the back country, frequently involved sleeping in dilapidated structures such as abandoned garages and the very modest homes of friends of friends. By air it meant tiny planes, flown and maintained by overworked and disgruntled pilots adept at landing and taking off from small, badly misshapen air strips. When it rained, water came down in thunderous torrents for days on end until both the rural and in-town roads became muddy quagmires often impassable even in a jeep given periodic pushes by thoroughly soaked and shivering passengers. Conversely, when the sun shone the heat and humidity were overpowering, rapidly draining human energy.

Once when traveling by jeep through the back country after a several day downpour my resolve to continue the survey began to unravel. Upon our passing a tiny and lonely *bodega* on the edge of a small river, it gave way completely. I volunteered the group for a beer and skinny dip; and we were, indeed, refreshed by both. Unfortunately for my personal state of well-being, a short time later I came down with a fearful case of hepatitis. Fortunately for the progress of the planning exercise, however, by the time I succumbed I was back in Massachusetts for the regular two-month interregnum with ample time to recover.

Despite such travails, a development plan for the region was prepared. 3/ It was also long, turgid, and so loaded with technical jargon that, in all candor, I do not believe that even I have ever read it completely. It was not that we did not know that it should be simpler and briefer. It resulted, principally, from the nature of our relationship with the client. Our advisory team was scheduled in for only a brief period. It was necessary to leave behind as comprehensive a report as

possible in as permanent a condition as finances permitted. Popular versions, loose leaf workbooks and other devices adaptable to a dynamic process had to be left for later development by our Colombian colleagues. In addition, the Department of Regional Development of the OAS in Washington required something solid, polished, something that would give a clear impression of capable professionalism. We put it all in, with a separate volume of folded, 4'x4' maps of the region showing its principal physical features as well as the location of the development projects that were being recommended.

Exactly which set of interest groups in Colombia had greatest priority caused us a good deal of uncertainty and resulting ambiguity. From the standpoint of the national government, matters in the region were progressing well. Apart from the sporadic violence — at the time a matter which rarely found its way onto national television and did not, therefore, have a powerful effect on national development policy — the export of bananas and the resulting increase in foreign exchange were producing bountiful rewards. By 1978 exports of bananas from the Darien already represented close to eighty percent of the national exports of this crop. In addition, personal income figures for the region, skewed significantly upwards by the money wages paid to plantation workers, did not show significant deviation from that of other disadvantaged regions of the country. Consequently, vigorous promotion of the banana industry was a major priority. An aspect of this economic interest was coupled with a strong sense of national prestige, completion of the remaining link of the Pan American Highway.

From the standpoint of the department of Antioquia, within which the bulk of the planning region was contained, the overarching objectives were the construction of a highway from Medellin to the coast and the provision of a major seaport there. The combination of these facilities would greatly assist in the promotion of major industrial and commercial activities in the department's capital city, which were the overwhelming center of concern of the dominant economic and political interests of Antioquia.

From the standpoint of the region itself, the situation was considerably less clear. Off-farm employment for the rural settlers was obviously of great

importance, as was provision of social infrastructure of all kinds. Basic to the achievement of these objectives would be improvement of transportation facilities, development of the agroforestry and fishing industries, and commercialization of the traditional crops grown by small farmers. Once our team got into the area we also saw that degradation of the natural environment was considerably more advanced than anticipated — a situation which, if left unchecked, would impact most immediately upon the people of the region.

In order to address these different perceptions of priority, the plan proposed an extended list of projects and programs. Unfortunately, collectively, they constituted little more than an extended wish list. Apart from special appropriations from the national government, CORPOURABA lacked any source of financing. The Department of Antioquia was in a roughly similar situation. The greater part of its annual budgets derived from national transfers. Other than the banana and timber industries, both headquartered outside of the region, neither the local public agencies nor the private interest groups within the Darien could provide investment funds of any significance. Just as disadvantageous to success, neither could the OAS, which lacked the means for following up its planning effort. In effect, everything depended upon myriad national agencies focusing special attention upon the Darien, funding projects and programs at, or at least close to, the levels recommended, and harmonizing their activities in great detail over a number of years — in sum, an impossibility.

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In all candor, we were, at best, only dimly aware of the slim prospects for realizing the plan. As it developed, the director of CORPOURABA proved to be resourceful, tough, and, in the context of Colombian polity, extraordinarily long-lasting. Over the next several years, reports kept filtering out that he was continuing to flesh out the staff of his agency with bright, dedicated young professionals, that by 1984 his agency had come up with a more finely tuned plan,

and that various constructive actions were underway aimed particularly at improvement of local government.

In early 1986 the OAS contacted me about the prospect of my returning to Colombia to determine the results of its planning effort for the Darien and prepare a report for inclusion in a forthcoming publication commemorating the twentieth anniversary of the organization's Department of Regional Development. At the time, however, I was occupied with a planning program in Central Asia, and the case study was never undertaken. It was just as well: A few months later the director of CORPOURABA was out, and political mayhem was rapidly destroying the agency.

Regardless of the varying perceptions respecting the priorities for the development of the Darien, making the region easily accessible to the outside world was obviously critical to any broad scale effort to deal with its problems. Lamentably, a center piece of the development plan — connecting the Darien to Medellin by a good all-weather highway — has never been realized. In 1992 a special task force of the national government, convened for the express purpose of addressing the explosive increase of violence within the Darien, continued to advocate the proposal. 4/ However, in 1997 there still remained a serious question as to when such access would be provided.

A number of obstacles have prevented completion of the highway. It would be enormously expensive; and, just as it was for the rest of Latin American, the decade of the 1980's was an economic disaster for Colombia. In addition, drug trafficking in Colombia on an unprecedented scale increasingly undermined the ability of the government to address development issues.

Circumstances particular to the Darien have also hindered the highway construction program. One is the continuing uncertainty as to whether it is desirable to complete the Pan American Highway by bridging the great swamps of the Darien. I personally opposed the idea and sought to separate the need to provide access to the Darien from the concept of a resplendent Pan American Highway. I thought it probable that a couple of modest-sized ferry boats would

better serve to connect Colombia and Panama. I also thought it unlikely that, under the most favorable conditions, the huge effort of bridging the swamps could be justified economically. Apart from these uncertainties, I was in no doubt that maintenance of connecting bridges would require a level of professional expertise impossible to provide. Further, construction of a highway connecting Colombia and Panama would provide access for the insect life of the Darien to trek into the forest preserves of Panama just as easily as it would for cars and trucks. The Panamanians have obviously felt the same, and there has been little enthusiasm shown by its successive governments for completing the highway.

A less publicized but perhaps an even more formidable obstacle to the provision of highway access into and through the Darien has been the largely behind the scenes opposition of the armed forces of Colombia, which have continued to believe that it is easier to deal with the rising tide of violence in the region by limiting access of the dissidents to outside support. The practical result of these various constraints has been that, two decades after the first, broad-scale planning effort, the Darien remains largely isolated and virtually impossible for centralized public agencies to assist.

Another key proposal included in the plan was the conversion of one of the principal settlements within the Darien into a regional service center where a range of private and public services and facilities would be concentrated. It would be both a principal link to the outside world as well as to key market centers within the Darien. Activities that greatly affected the character and rhythm of development of the region were being planned and directed from offices in distant cities. In the instance of the banana industry, it was by necessity tightly organized, and its capital equipment, sources of financing, basic supplies and technical assistance came not just from outside the region but even from outside of the country. Equally disadvantageous to the development of the Darien, many of the plantation owners were living in Medellin and managing their agricultural enterprises through local overseers. One of the few manufacturers within the Darien and by far the largest, Carton de Colombia, which provided paper cartons for the banana industry, was part of an international group whose headquarters in Colombia were in Cali, a city located several hundred miles from the Darien.

Other than the few public services and facilities which pertained to municipal governments, the public offices and services provided the Darien were small, branch activities that served only selected portions of the region.

A severe constraint to attracting economic interests and public offices into the Darien was the lack of an urban center that had sufficient quality of social infrastructure and cultural activities to appeal to the many professionals required for development of the region. An area such as the Darien, which has not been in the mainstream of development, where extreme poverty is the norm, and whose ecological makeup is both complex and largely unknown, cannot make anything approximating desirable headway without the presence of an appreciable concentration of professional managers, scientists and technicians.

To undertake the accelerated advancement of such a region requires competent and sustained research into its biological and climatic functioning, into the soil conditions and their special requirements when employed for agriculture, and into the intricacies of insect life and its interplay with different forms of soil cultivation. A campaign, for example, to stamp out hoof-and-mouth disease, and similar types of interventions in the ecology of the region, require prolonged on-site investigations. These can only be managed successfully by those who are part of the region, those who patiently and professionally explore the evolving relationship between the settlers and their physical environment. Practically, this requires at least one human settlement that is capable of attracting and retaining a scientific community by catering to both its professional and social needs.

The same situation pertains to those who manage the private enterprises to be promoted, to the teachers who will be expected to guide the technical schools, to the agronomists, economists, sociologists and engineers needed to aid the accelerated development process. These are professional people who, in the main, have choice of residence and who look to situations that afford appealing physical surroundings, good schools, recreational opportunities, compatible professional colleagues, and access to ideas through libraries, bookstores and the like. All of this requires an urban setting of appreciable size and quality.

One of the basic needs of the Darien — as it is of most lagging regions — is to take advantage of the various ecological zones that are present in order to promote a diversity of agricultural production and economic opportunities. Phrased negatively, it is necessary to minimize development of capital intensive, large farm agriculture that emphasizes single-crop production, drives out the small farmer, and is prone to spreading across a vast countryside, oblivious of subtle gradations in the natural environment. In the Darien this means special efforts to foster a progressive rural economy through cultivation of cacao, rice, coco, palm, corn, malanga, and pulp wood as well as other products — many not even identified as yet — suitable to a tropical forest, coastal region.

Providing aid to farmers with modest-sized holdings who are involved with a variety of agricultural activities is extraordinarily difficult and requires a multiplicity of efforts. Although the banana planter can simply contract with multinational agro-businesses to supply capital equipment, seedlings, fertilizers, pesticides, transportation, research and technical assistance, and obtain large scale credit from outside commercial banks, such a streamlined operation is not possible when a series of small scale, agricultural opportunities need to be promoted. These require establishment of linkages with numerous private and public institutions. For example, even those common economic services such as farm credit have to be set up with active regional and subregional offices in order to be in close proximity to the potential clients. Without an intimate system of such linkages, the many small farmers who require assistance are ignored, and institutionalized credit is channeled to the plantation owner able to manage his situation without special aid from government.

A basic requirement for the accelerated development of the Darien is the coordination within the region of the many public services that have direct dealings with the Darien and require for their effective operation close proximity to one another. Without an urban center of appreciable scale that serves to concentrate such services, the many public and private agencies whose actions influence the development of the region will continue to maintain tiny, ineffective dependencies in a number of scattered settlements. Basing the regional headquarters of such services within a single, centrally located settlement and

expanding operations to support a professional level of service establishes a base through which headquarter staffs located in Medellin and Bogota can become acquainted with the realities of the region and can offer appropriate levels of service. To the extent that such agencies concentrate their principal offices in a single locality, they create the ambiance peculiar to a regional capital, a center of regional communication and command, a crossroads of transportation systems, a site of investigation into the environmental realities of the area, and a locus of professional attraction.

In our internal discussions, I expounded on the need to stimulate creation of a bona fide, regional service center with what I felt was impeccable logic as well as with supporting gravity models and other numerical calculations. However, while the concept was included in our plan, it was soon discarded by CORPOURABA for an even more compelling logic: You do not gain broad support by announcing you intend to locate major services and facilities in community A when communities B and C are clamoring for them, and even happen to be of a different political persuasion, which, as a matter of fact, happened to be the case. Consequently, the concept of centrality was modified in CORPOURABA's 1984 development plan to promotion of an "urban axis" extending for some 60 miles and including the three largest towns within the region — two of which, Apartado and Turbo, were accorded the status of regional capitals. Their mayors were appointed as vice governors with authority to coordinate actions with the mayors of each of the towns under their jurisdiction. Small universities and hospitals were built in both towns and a modern hotel was constructed in Turbo.

At some point, of course, logic usually overtakes the situation and a single, strategically placed urban center becomes the dominate magnet that both captures and promotes activities that serve the entire region. The hope, of course, is that planning can telescope the process and result in greater savings and fewer failures.

As could be expected, our plan made a series of recommendations for improving the productivity and employment generation of the banana industry. However, the plantations continue pretty much as before. There has, however,

been a good deal of concentration of land as smaller, and not so small, plantations have been consolidated.

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Although there were significant deficiencies in our planning effort, on pondering the record, I believe our work was constructive. The mission left behind a well organized description of the physical conditions and resources of the region and a basis for building on the information, a strengthened CORPOURABA, and a definition of major problems that confronted the region and proposals for confronting them. Our greatest shortcoming was our inability to address constructively two interrelated situations of overarching concern, the continuing degradation of one of the world's most biologically rich environments and the appalling plight of the region's most disadvantaged people — the small farmers, or *colonos*, who keep streaming into the region. However, in our defense, the agro-forestry recommendations for improving economic and environmental conditions in the lowland, tropical forest areas were typical for the period and were based principally on experience in highly developed countries, such as revising credit mechanisms, extending technical assistance, and providing improved warehousing, access roads, arboretums, and other pieces of physical infrastructure.

Our proposals for the forested mountains were even sketchier, in reality limited to defining the basic character and condition of the different ecological zones and indicating the general type of action that should be directed to each, for example, areas where environmental degradation was most advanced and strong intervention was required, and lands most appropriate for extensive timber production.

Our shortcomings had several roots. There was, of course, the great difficulty in getting into and about the region, which meant that visits were short and designed to gather only the most relevant information. There was the certainty that we would only be in Colombia for a brief period, that the financial resources for our work were both fixed and limited, and that we had, therefore, to rely on

what we already knew. In the main, this consisted in overly simplified development models each of us carried in his head.

The practical result of the situation was that we never were able to perceive the *colonos* as a client of special significance, indeed, as indispensable to the development process. Our analyses of the population of the Darien never went any deeper than those I had undertaken earlier in Puerto Rico. It is discomfoting to realize, but I don't recall knowing about, much less investigating, the presence of indigenous peoples in the Darien. I had worked extensively in Panama, had visited Kuna communities on the off shore islands of that country on a number of occasions, and should have realized that at least their culture, if no others, would be present in the Darien. However, in none of the many project documents I have reviewed is there a single reference to such groups.

CORPOURABA, as the agency with ultimate responsibility and with a different time horizon from our consulting group, viewed priorities from a different perspective. Most importantly, it did not perceive the fruits of our labors as constituting a plan, rather as a set of baseline studies accompanied by a number of ideas for addressing general conditions in the Darien. The agency recognized that it had to have considerably greater insight into the situation of the *colonos* and that it was necessary to begin, in however modest a manner, to involve them in the improvement of their own situation. As a consequence, in conjunction with several other public agencies, it initiated a series of pilot efforts to work directly with small groups of *colonos*. Although the professional staff of CORPOURABA learned from the process and came to understand the *colonos* better, the practical results of its efforts were limited. In 1991 an evaluation by the University of Antioquia of CORPOURABA's 1984 plan for the Darien could state that over the intervening years gross underfunding and the impossibility of government agencies to work in collaboration had effectively doomed any possibilities of success of CORPOURABA's development efforts with the *colonos*. 5/

CORPOURABA had more success with addressing the urban side of the development equation. In the support of small-scale agriculture, the agency recognized the importance of helping to equip strategically located settlements to

serve as marketing and distribution centers. It worked with a number of small towns in the reorganization of their administrative structures, in improving their tax structures and increasing revenues, in providing basic social infrastructure, and in encouraging national and departmental agencies in decentralizing and concentrating their services and facilities in such centers. As a result, in 1986 when the government of Colombia began a process of decentralizing most public functions to departmental and local governments and improving their fiscal capability, much of the necessary groundwork in the Darien had already been laid.

However, in the final analysis, CORPOURABA was never able to overcome the many handicaps under which it labored. Over the years the armed forces received substantially more support from the national government. As the conditions of the laborers on the banana plantations failed to improve, union activities during the 1980s became increasingly militant involving kidnappings and ruthless slaughter. Between the gradual escalation of labor-management warfare, the continued attacks of the rural guerrillas, and the historical militancy of Colombian politics, a development agency such as CORPOURABA, formed, financed, and directed from the outside of the region was doomed.

In November of 1986, after almost ten years in office, the director of CORPOURABA resigned. At the insistence of the in-coming governor of Antioquia, who was of a different political persuasion, the national government replaced the director with a party hack who immediately began to dismantle the agency. Within six months all of the incumbent members of the staff had either resigned or been fired. During the next four years, five or six different *politicos* held the directorship: No one seems to remember exactly how many nor even who they were. It was an agency in free fall. When I visited it in 1993, it was barely alive. Its only hope for survival was the possibility that, along with Colombia's other regional development corporations, the national government would convert it into an agency concerned exclusively with the protection of the natural environment.

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The history of CORPOURABA and the planning assistance it received from the OAS encapsule, albeit in an exaggerated manner, the basic trends regional development efforts took during the 1970s and '80s. However, given the scarce financial and trained human resources available to the government of Colombia, the inaccessibility and largely unknown and daunting character of the Darien, and the rabid militancy of the political divisions within the country, it is as hard to conjure up a scenario that would have been more successful as it was in the case of Panama.

Environmental conditions in the Darien are in desperate shape. The 1991 study by the University of Antioquia reported environmental degradation of alarming proportions — a finding substantiated two years later for the entire Choco region by the World Wildlife Fund. 6/ U.S. newspapers continue to report that the rain forests of the region are in decline. In concert with this seemingly inexorable trend has been the escalation of violence, by laborers on the banana plantations, by guerrilla groups, drug cartels, and political factions.

The only possibility for salvaging the Darien, as well as many similar regions, lies in widespread alarm over the rapid deterioration of the tropical rain forests. Experience throughout the developing world is demonstrating clearly that such alarm has to be translated into decentralized and efficient local institutions. It has also to involve multiple partners — local citizens groups, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organizations, and donor agencies at every level including the international. To do that effectively, requires creation of a process much more fine grained than we were able to initiate.

Colombia made a start at turning matters around in 1986 when it substantially reformed municipal government, provided for the direct election of mayors and strengthened the fiscal capability of municipalities. A new national constitution adopted in 1991 further opened the door to participatory democracy. However, under the very best of circumstances, efforts to assist the peoples and ecology of the Darien will be long, grueling — and absolutely necessary.

NOTES

1. To confuse matters even more, the reader will recall that the eastern most province of Panama is also called the Darien, and, formerly, the name was applied to the entire isthmus of Panama.

2. William H. McNeill, *Plagues and Peoples*, (Garden City: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1976). p. 211.

3. *Proyecto Darien: Estudio Para la Orientacion del Desarrollo Integral de la Region del Darien Colombiano*, (Medellin: Republic of Colombia/Organization of American States, July, 1978).

4. *Plan Uraba*, (Bogota: National Department of Planning/ Government of Antioquia/Municipalities of Uraba, December, 1992).

5. *Proyecto: Actualizacion Plan de Desarrollo de Uraba: Informe Final*, (Medellin: Instituto de Estudios Regionales/Universidad de Antioquia, August, 1991). pp. 166-167.

6. "Colombia's Biologically Rich Choco Forest Faces Increasing Threats," *FOCUS 15* (World Wildlife Fund, March/April 1993). p.1