Cafetalera Aquiares Reflection Paper

On December 25th, 2013 I landed in San José, Costa Rica. In the taxi ride over to Diego Robelo’s home in Escazú, I was nervous about what the coming month would bring. However all of my worries subsided, as by the time I returned to New York on January 23rd, I had completed my first scientific study, developed friendships with people from an amazing community, and visited one of the most beautiful waterfalls I’ve ever seen. I returned to Cornell ready for the new semester and eager to continue to develop my relationship with Cafetalera Aquiares.

Prior to arriving to Costa Rica, I developed a community census encompassing 57 questions and a few different specialized surveys for the community. Under the guidance of one of my professors from the Development Sociology department, I learned how to correctly facilitate small-group meetings called “focus groups.” I worked with Diego Robelo to develop material pertinent to the interests of Cafetalera Aquiares. Diego and his father were interested in conducting surveys to learn about the social wellbeing of the community in order to make improvements, if necessary, to better the quality of life within the community. Similarly, they were interested in learning about the sustainability of employing community members in various positions on the farm, as well as learning the community’s opinions of the farm.

Cafetalera Aquiares is located in the Cartago region of Costa Rica and is about a one and a half hour drive from San Jose. It is the largest privately owned coffee farm in Costa Rica as well as is the largest coffee farm on one plot of land within the country. They are one of the largest coffee producers in Costa Rica. They have many clients within Costa Rica and abroad. They have their own coffee processing plant, so they are able to prepare the beans on site and then ship them to buyers. Occasionally, Cafetalera Aquiares roasts some of its own coffee, but only for special clients. It is similar to a small batch of beer or wine, but in this case it is a “micro-roast” of coffee. Cafetalera Aquiares does not have their own label of coffee right at present time, but are hoping to develop their own brand instead of selling their coffee to large companies to blend with other varieties. They grow different Arabica varieties and have a couple of hybrids in the works.

I spent a total of about 4 weeks conducting a social capital and community wellbeing study for Cafetalera Aquiares. The first week on the farm, I made last minute changes to the surveys, planned focus-group meetings, consulted with Diego and Don Alfonso about their desired outcomes of the surveys, made focus-group specific interview questions, and began the individual house interviews. I distributed the census surveys to the community during the second week of my visit and continued home interviews. The surveys were distributed with help of some of the office staff. The office staff was very helpful throughout the entire duration of the study; they were always willing to take time to work with me. The third week I collected the community census and continued home interviews. The fourth week of the study I finished the household surveys and began to analyze the data.

The data analysis occupied a lot of time and careful attention because of the amount of data returned. Out of the 400 household surveys given to the community, about 50% of them were returned. Over the course of the month, I had conducted over 100 home interviews that were each about 30 minutes long and hosted focus group
meetings with over thirteen different groups of interest, including single mothers, field workers, and local community leaders. The surveys showed that the majority of the community in Aquiares lives modestly, most not owning a car and working for a low wage. The majority of those who work on the coffee farm earn low wages in comparison to those who work in the nearby town of Turrialba.

However, while most live modestly, there are few people who live in true poverty. In the community of Aquiares, the majority of residents own their homes, due to the government-subsidized sale of the homes to the community by the farm in the 1990s. Previous to the sale, the residents of Aquiares had to rent their homes and move from house to house, as all of the homes were owned by the coffee farm and it was very common for families to move rotate homes as directed by the farm. I was able to learn about these issues from the household interviews and group meetings with the community members. Due to the fact families now own their own homes, they have more pride in their abodes. The majority of the houses are very well kept and decorated very beautifully because of pride of homeownership within the community.

The census and household interviews revealed a lot about the health of the community, an area that I am very passionate about. While the majority of the community stated that they were in “good health” on the surveys, during the household interviews, they revealed that the majority of adults in their individual families suffered from Type II diabetes or hypertension. The high rates of diabetes and hypertension within the community are so prevalent that the community views their development as natural and the destiny of all those in older age. The number one killers in the community are heart disease and cancer, non-communicable diseases, which are becoming more prevalent throughout Costa Rica. There is a pharmacy about three miles from the center of the town, but a lot of people only take their prescriptions a few times a week to be more cost effective. After talking with one woman about her prescriptions, her medications totaled more than 8 a day with each pill costing about $0.50, which gets to be pretty expensive for someone living on a pension. Since the majority of the residents do not own cars, they walk or take the bus to the nearest hospital in times of necessity.

After collecting the surveys and hosting the interviews, the community had a number of desires for improvement within Aquiares. Among the improvements the community would like for their town include: improved roads (the ones in the town are full of potholes), improved wages from working in the coffee fields, improved access to and prices of healthy foods within the local supermarket, more activities for the youth, a community center, technical skill classes such as baking, carpentry, and mechanics, and more job opportunities for women within the farm. While the community had many recommendations about how to improve their community, they are wholly content with the lives they have in Aquiares. Nearly every person I talked to would say that while they had a few complaints, they loved their community and felt very privileged to live there. They love the tranquil lifestyle, beautiful scenery, and tight-knit community of people they live with. Similarly, the community has a feeling that everyone in the community is very connected as “todos somos una sola familia,” we are all one family.

My experience in Aquiares was one that was very impactful for me, as conducting a study all on my own has built up my confidence in what I can accomplish. I was able to get to know the family of Diego Robelo, who were very hospitable to me. The community welcomed me with open arms and the family I stayed with treated me like
one of their children. I was able to develop wonderful friendships and have been invited back by the community whenever I want to visit. On a professional level, I was able to developed and distribute a census survey to 400 houses with a response rate of 50% and was able to interview over 100 people in their homes, as well as meet with 13 focus groups. I wrote a report in English and Spanish and gave recommendations to the Aquiares coffee farm on how to meet the needs and desires of the community. Cafetalera Aquiares has expressed interest to implement these recommendations, and I am still in contact with them about how to do so. While I was only in Aquiares for one month, I had a wonderful experience and hope to go back again one day.