

## **“I learn to seek solutions but without work I can’t solve anything”: Youth Education and Community Development in Rural Honduras**

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### **Abstract**

This paper draws on a social capital framework to explore the complex relationship between youth education, their roles in community development, and their future opportunities as they transition from school to work against the backdrop of the social, economic, and political realities of rural Honduras. Data is from a three-year qualitative study that followed a cohort of 6<sup>th</sup> grade students as they progressed through the *Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial* (SAT), an alternative secondary education program that facilitates the development of capabilities so that youth can take charge of their intellectual and spiritual growth and contribute to the building of better communities. We focus on the youths’ own words to understand how they conceptualize the resources that exist in their communities, their access to these resources, when and how these resources are successfully mobilized for community development, as well as how youth perceive their limitations to create future opportunities, particularly with regards to work.

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2009 and again in the summer of 2011 we collected qualitative data in 4 rural Honduran villages as part of a larger impact evaluation of SAT (*Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial*), an innovative secondary education program (spanning grades 7-12) that provides educational access for youth living in marginalized rural communities. It was easy to witness the poverty that is endemic to Honduras, which is the third poorest country in Latin America, ranking 121 out of 187 countries on the United Nations Development Program’s 2011 Human Development Index (UNDP 2011). Roughly half of the population lives in rural areas where the majority live in poverty or extreme poverty (IFAD 2011)<sup>1</sup>. In the villages where we conducted research, two in the mountainous areas of the Department of Santa Bárbara and two on the north coast in the Department of Atlántida, transportation can be difficult as roads are unpaved or vehicles non-existent, running water is lacking, and electricity is recent and at times unreliable. The primary

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<sup>1</sup> Sixty-three percent of rural inhabitants live in poverty, and 50% of these are classified as living in extreme poverty <http://www.ruralpovertyportal.org/country/home/tags/honduras> (International Fund for Agricultural Development).

economic activity of all of the villages is subsistence agriculture. Prior to instituting the SAT curriculum the youth did not have access to secondary education.

During these weeklong visits, through in-depth interviews, we also heard youth describe the richness of their communities: their resources, social relations, and community development projects. Due to its emphasis on community transformation, the SAT curriculum fostered and further developed this sense of community. Most of the youth in the focal groups were hopeful for their own futures and those of their communities and most saw these futures as interconnected. Motivated to continue their studies at the university, they wanted to become nurses, doctors, teachers, and engineers. Many hoped to do so in order to further their communities' well-being. The unfortunate reality, however, was that few would be able to continue studying, due to a lack of resources and the need to work on local farms to support their families or to help with childcare.

In this paper we explore the tension between the community as agent, on one hand, which in conjunction with SAT, works to create new opportunities for young people to work for the betterment of all and, on the other, the structural realities that severely limit community development and students' work opportunities. More specifically, we address the following questions: 1) How do students understand their communities' resources and the problems that they face? 2) In what ways do students access these resources? 3) How are these resources mobilized in purposeful actions to increase the well-being of youth, their families, and communities, and what limits their mobilization? In our analysis we use the notion of social capital as a lens through which to examine the mobilization of the community as resource and the roles of the youth as they are socialized into social networks while transitioning from school to work.

### **Theoretical Context: Social Capital**

Social capital is an "elastic term" (Moore Lappe & DuBois 1997, p. 119). It has come to mean different things, it has been applied and measured in different contexts in different ways, and it is attributed with very different outcomes, both positive and negative (Portes 1998). At the same time, it continues to influence numerous disciplines of study. Recognizing that it has been widely debated, we accept Bourdieu's understanding of social capital as: "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1997, p. 51).

We adopt Bourdieu's concept of social capital because other theorizations of social capital do not fully account for the Honduran youths' realities or the tension between structural limitations, such as poverty, and the possibilities for community development and the youth's future employment. Here we break from the trend of numerous studies that understand social capital simply as a set of shared values or features—such as

reciprocity, trust, and cooperation—that are possessed by communities or individuals<sup>2</sup> (see Putnam 1994, 2000; Fukuyama 1995, 1997). In its application, researchers document evidence of these values, which can be measured to determine how much social capital a given community or individual has. This measurement implies that there is a direct causal relationship between social capital and the level of development of a community such that social capital is sufficient in and of itself to bring about community development (see Fine 2002 for an elaboration of these criticisms). In the Honduran villages however, as will be demonstrated, the youth’s descriptions of their communities included all of these values, yet development and access to educational and work opportunities continue to be limited.

From Bourdieu’s perspective, social capital does not reside in the individual or in the community but is constituted in social relationships and mobilized by individuals. This process of mobilization is dynamic and complex because social capital cannot be separated from other forms of capital, particularly economic capital (Bourdieu 1997). Therefore while there may be evidence of dense social relationships, such as those we found in the Honduran villages, the mobilization of social capital does not in and of itself generate resources where, for example, there are no jobs or no money to fix the roads. To explore the mobilization of social capital, it is also necessary to understand existing power relations that exert their influence through the larger structures of society. For this reason, Fine (2002) argues, it is important to ground social capital socially, historically, politically, and economically. In a similar vein, Morrow (1999) points out that social capital is frequently improperly contextualized in socio-economic history. For these reasons, we take pains to contextualize the social networks of the Honduran youth we interview within and in relation to the larger context of the nation and the world.

We specifically explore the *process* by which social capital is mobilized, and its limitations. Lin (1999) understands this process as involving three primary facets:

Social capital can be defined as resources embedded in a social structure which are accessed and/or mobilized in purposive actions. By this definition, the notion of social capital contains three ingredients: resources embedded in a social structure; *accessibility* to such social resources by individuals; and *use or mobilization* of such social resources by individuals in purposive actions. Thus conceived, social capital contains three elements intersecting structure and action: the structural (embeddedness), opportunity (accessibility) and action-oriented (use) aspects (p. 35, emphasis ours).

To investigate these three facets of social capital, we focus on the youths’ own words to understand how they conceptualize the resources that exist in their communities, their access to these resources, when and how these resources are successfully mobilized

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<sup>2</sup> See DeFilippis (2001) for an extended discussion of this understanding of social capital and its limitations.

for community development, as well as how the youth perceive their limitations in creating future opportunities.

Most of these youth will remain and work in the communities in which they currently live. We argue that despite learning to mobilize social capital to leverage the resources in the community to address community problems, there is no increase in opportunities for work. The process of learning to mobilize social capital reflects and forms part of larger socialization processes as youth transition to adult members of their communities and contemplate their future work and educational opportunities. As other researchers such as Raffo and Reeves (2000) have argued, youth socialization is a highly complex process that is on-going and continuously changing. For this reason we do not provide an analysis of a finished product but merely a snapshot of the process.

## **The National Context**

Given that social capital is tied to economic capital and to the larger social and economic relations of society, it is imperative that we briefly consider the realities that have severely curtailed economic development in the villages where research was conducted. We will not attempt to establish a direct, causal relationship between national and global politics and village poverty but rather provide a context that denaturalizes poverty and highlights the structural limitations that operate directly and indirectly on youth's lives.

Though physically isolated, our villages in Honduras have been mightily influenced by global forces. For much of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries the United Fruit Company and its various competitors and subsidiaries have had a tremendous impact on the political and economic landscape of Honduras. They have historically received vast concessions from the Honduran government, including land and water rights, and they have exerted their influence over the political system in order to control wages and profit (Acker 1989)<sup>3</sup>. Overall they have greatly affected economic life in Honduran villages directly and indirectly.

Then the 1980's saw the rise of the U.S.'s "new imperialism" as Honduras became the main staging ground for the military's counter-insurgency campaigns in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala (Grandin 2006). During this period Honduras became known as the "aircraft carrier USS Honduras" as U.S. military aid to Honduras rose from 4 million to 77.4 million a year (Grandin 2006). The U.S. trained local militias, such as Batallion 316<sup>4</sup>, and supplied them with arms. Their tactics were particularly violent, relying upon death squads that systematically tortured and murdered people and burned entire villages. The negative consequences of this occupation continue to shape the rural

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<sup>3</sup> For more information see also Chapman 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Many believe that Batallion 316 still operates today and that it played a lead role in the military coup in 2009 and the disappearances and murders of Resistance leaders. For more information see [globalresearch.ca/articles/COH405A.html](http://globalresearch.ca/articles/COH405A.html).

landscape, as communication and transportation in rural areas became even more difficult, if not outright dangerous, and resources were diverted towards the military, not the construction of schools, roads, and water projects.

In 2009, the first year of data collection, a military coup removed then president Mel Zelaya, whose reforms were oriented towards improving the lives of the poor. In 2008 Honduras was admitted into ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas), which provided tractors and grants for rural development. It also participated in Venezuelan president Hugo Chavez’s Petrocaribe program. In a highly controversial move, Zelaya raised the minimum monthly wage from \$157 to \$289 dollars (except in the maquiladora industry), alienating business leaders who promptly began lay-offs. Finally, Zelaya resisted structural readjustments advocated by the International Monetary Fund, including his refusal to privatize Hondutel, the state telecommunications company, education, and water<sup>5</sup>.

Porfirio Lobo was elected president in 2009 and most of Zelaya’s reforms were discontinued, including money for tractors as well as scholarships for students to study agriculture and medicine, which greatly benefited poor, rural communities. According to some analysts, Lobo’s administration has turned a blind eye to drug-traffickers, and Honduras has become the favored gateway for moving cocaine from South America to the United States (Frank 2012). Gang-related violence coupled with weak law enforcement have contributed to Honduras’ lamentable status as the country with the highest homicide rate in the world. Human rights violations have also increased. The most vulnerable groups include journalists, human rights defenders, political activists, and transgender people<sup>6</sup>. Since 2010 22 journalists have been slain (Quiñones & Sandoval 2012). Whereas during Zelaya’s presidency it was common for villagers to form cooperatives in rural areas, to purchase land and to work on community projects such as building dams, any form of collective action is now considered suspect and potentially subversive. This will likely have a long-term impact on the potential for mobilization of social capital in community development.

### **The Educational Context: The SAT Program**

Designed in Colombia in the early 1980s by the non-governmental organization, *Fundación para la Enseñanza y Aplicación de las Ciencias* (FUNDAEC), the *Sistema de Aprendizaje Tutorial* or SAT program benefits youth and adults in rural areas of Honduras, Guatemala, Nicaragua, and Colombia. The overall goal of the program is to help students develop capabilities so they can take charge of their intellectual and spiritual growth and to contribute to the building of better communities and the transformation of society (FUNDAEC 2007).

<sup>5</sup> See [www.fpif.org/articles/behind\\_the\\_honduran\\_coup](http://www.fpif.org/articles/behind_the_honduran_coup) for more information on Zelaya’s reforms.

<sup>6</sup> See [www.hrw.org/americas/honduras](http://www.hrw.org/americas/honduras)

In Honduras, SAT spans lower and upper secondary education, or grades 7-12. While the program targets youth, student ages range from between 12 to 45. SAT groups normally meet five to six times a week for four hours. Along with a trained tutor, SAT students who complete the program study a set of roughly 70 interdisciplinary textbooks that divide the curriculum into five capability areas including technology (as it is relevant in rural areas), mathematics, science, language and communication, and community service. The pedagogical goal of SAT is to learn through dialogue as students exchange ideas and share experiences. The general theme that connects the curriculum is the promotion of rural development, the application of the knowledge to better the lives of youth and their communities. After finishing all of the SAT textbooks and practical activities, students receive the equivalent of a secondary school diploma.

SAT was originally conceptualized as a community development program, not as a secondary education system, but over time the educational authorities in Colombia recognized its potential to provide high-quality secondary education (Murphy-Graham 2012). Given these historical roots, the program emphasizes strengthening youth involvement in the community and on building community resources. Students complete community service projects and conduct small-scale research projects to examine community needs and resources<sup>7</sup>. Likewise, as part of their studies, students develop small-scale productive enterprises (e.g. raising chickens, starting tree nurseries) that teach them the skills required for running a small business. There is a growing body of empirical evidence that suggests that the SAT program is a promising intervention to promote the formation of social capital and education (Murphy-Graham 2007; Honeyman 2010; Murphy-Graham 2012).

## Methods

Our data are taken from a larger, mixed-methods research project examining the impact of SAT (see McEwan et al., 2012). For the larger project, we collected data in 110 rural villages in 5 Honduran Departments. For the qualitative component of the study, we purposefully selected “typical SAT villages”<sup>8</sup> from each region. At each site, we wanted to examine a range of student experiences in SAT, so we randomly selected six focal students from each class roster for a total of 24 students.

Four research teams, each consisting of one North American doctoral student and one Honduran researcher from the National Pedagogical University, spent one week in each location in 2009, and conducted follow-up visits for another week in 2011. On each occasion, the research teams conducted in-depth interviews with students that lasted approximately one hour. These interviews probed a number of topics related to education

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<sup>7</sup> See Murphy-Graham 2012 for a more detailed discussion.

<sup>8</sup> Using the quantitative baseline data we collected for our study, we identified villages with average levels of poverty, educational quality (as measured by test scores) and that were reasonable accessible geographically.

and community well-being, including the students’ prior educational experiences, their current opinions about and experiences in school, and their assessment and participation in community life. In addition, researchers conducted approximately forty hours of classroom and community observations and took extensive field notes. All interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed. Each interview team wrote a case study profiling the community where they conducted research. Drawing from the cross-cutting themes of these cases, we developed a preliminary deductive code list, and developed further inductive codes as we began to formally code our data using the software program Atlas Ti (Miles & Huberman 1994).

While the data from our larger study allowed us to examine a number of important themes related to issues of secondary schooling in Honduras, this paper looks at instances in which youth described where they lived and the problems in their communities, how they understood the resources in their communities, and how they mobilized resources in purposeful actions. We focused on the language youth used in order to explore their perspectives on the social realities they faced. In doing so we assume a perspective that sees language not as a transparent conduit to convey information but as socio-cultural practice in which participants co-construct meanings by engaging in social interactions. Ultimately, these interactions create the social realities where students live (Schieffelin 1990; Duranti 1997; Ochs 1988; Sapir 1949). The language that youth use to describe their communities and the issues they face reveal their understandings of its resources and the potential mobilization of social capital for development. At the same time, their language reveals the roles and futures they envision for themselves as youth participants being socialized into adult roles and the economic as well as social capital available to them.

## **Findings**

### **Youths’ Perceptions of Their Communities as Resource**

Youth’s descriptions demonstrate that they do see the community itself as a potential resource to be mobilized to address local problems. This was reflected in and further developed through their experiences studying in the SAT program. Overall, descriptions of their communities and its problems can be broadly divided into two categories, those that speak to the social relationships and the shared values in their communities and those that refer to the physical conditions of the communities, understood as its natural resources and man-made infrastructure.

Youth descriptions of community social relationships overwhelmingly emphasized unity, cooperation, and collaboration. More specifically, youth described their communities as: “united<sup>9</sup>”, “safe”, “humble”, “friendly”, “calm”, “happy and not

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<sup>9</sup> The authors are responsible for all translations from Spanish to English.

boring” and “the people are polite, they help each other”, and overall there is “peace and harmony”. In her 2009 interview Kristina<sup>10</sup> noted that her community is mostly “united” and in 2011 she elaborated, saying: “well I like the communication that there is, right, between people; I mean they always mutually help each other with their family problems”. As demonstrated later, other youth echoed this sentiment that social relationships in the community were based on communication and mutual support. In terms of physical conditions youth mentioned the landscape such as rivers and trees, the available fruit, the variety of plants and animals, and the soccer field. They also referenced other markers that represent community prosperity. For example, Rebecca, from the town of El Edén, specifically explained: “it makes one happy to say ‘yes, El Edén is prospering’... because it has a primary and secondary school and a health clinic”. Overall youth saw a great deal of potential in their communities in terms of relational and physical resources.

These descriptions and the underlying values of shared resources and unity were reflected in and reinforced through the SAT curriculum. In his interview Aaron retells a story he had read in class about a dog that was walking in a stream with a bone in his mouth. When he sees what he thinks is another dog that is also carrying a bone he drops his own. Because the other dog is merely a reflection of himself, he loses the bone. When asked if he uses what he learns in school in his own community Aaron recontextualizes the story, the bone becomes a guava fruit that he is carrying and the other dog a friend. When he tries to take his friend’s guava he loses his own. He notes the significance of this story in his own life in his vow “not to be envious”.

Community problems were understood as either potential threats to the shared values of the community or limitations related to the allocation, use, access to, and maintenance of the shared resources. In terms of the former, youth mentioned either drugs, smoking, or alcohol use three times; community violence twice; and the following once: throwing trash in the streets, youth vagrancy, lack of acceptance of God, lazy people and those that live off of others. The vast majority of problems mentioned in both years of data collection were physical, namely water and roads. Youth stated that there was not enough water or none at all and that there were problems with the water tank such as blocked pipes. Youth complained that the roads were not paved and were in poor condition due to stones. Other problems included illness, particularly dengue fever; lack of housing and its poor quality; poverty; lack of food and malnutrition; lack of a community center; and the condition of the school. These are physical and infrastructural problems that are endemic throughout Honduras. They are significant in terms of mobilizing community resources to look for local solutions, as national solutions have not materialized.

Whereas there were no substantive differences between youth responses in 2009 and 2011 with respect to either social relationships within the communities or the problems facing communities, it is noteworthy that youth in general elaborated their responses more in 2011. This suggests that with increased maturity they became more aware of

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<sup>10</sup> All names are pseudonyms.



the complexity of these issues and that they were better able to articulate them and their consequences vis-à-vis the community. They also had had the opportunity to develop them through classroom discussions and SAT projects that involved talking to the villagers about these problems.

The following exchange with Enrique took place in 2011. The interview occurred on his back porch. In the course of the interview, two small children crossed the road in front of his house. The interviewer asked him what the problems were in his community:

*Enrique:* The mal... what is it called? Malnutritioning!!

*Interviewer:* Malnutrition

*Enrique:* Malnutrition!, this is what most effects our community

*Interviewer:* uh huh

*Enrique:* That there is not much food well... those little kids that crossed there well I will tell you that they inspire pity, I mean to know that they don’t have well... services... food... they suffer and it makes me feel pity. In this case the village suffers, there is not good nourishment, I mean if this were eliminated then... there would be more strength and good things like houses, good roads and everything... the suffering needs to be eliminated, that is the biggest problem

Malnutrition was the most significant problem in his community both at an abstract and personal level because the children’s suffering was not only about an individual’s lack of food, but, at a broader level it was connected to other structural problems such as the housing and road situation, all of which referenced a lack of resources for large segments of society. In this way, an individual problem became a collective issue that had consequences for the entire community, by making it “suffer.” Of note in this explanation is the position of authority that Enrique assumed as a spokesperson for his community, particularly considering his youth status. “I tell you that they inspire pity” is an evaluative statement, which instructs the interviewer, as a community outsider, what he should feel, namely, pity. We would suggest that this also speaks to a process of socialization as Enrique is becoming an adult member of his community; He has internalized its shared values and is authorized to speak on its behalf.

When asked if he did anything to help solve this problem Enrique replied, “what we can do is work hard”. Again he switched from an individual perspective, an ‘I’, to the use of ‘we’, indexing his entire community as responsible for realizing solutions. Thus, resources are not individual but belong to the community, and, although the youth as individuals can access them, ultimately their mobilization is a collective endeavor.

Youth did invoke the community as a resource that could be mobilized to enact solutions to these problems, both in terms of social relationships and physical conditions. Rebeca was specifically concerned about people doing bad things, such as smoking, drinking, and robbing as this disrupted the social networks in her community and its

shared values of prosperity and unity. As a solution to the problem, she identified the community as a resource capable of collective action, stating “it is necessary to call on the community and tell them we are going to do this and this so they come to an agreement”. Edgar, who was worried about the roads, also suggested the need to organize a community group because without dialogue about the community’s problems “there will be no help to fix it”.

According to Edgar, the recognition that there is “no help” for his community suggests that there is no possibility of receiving assistance from either the national, departmental, or local governments. Nor did he consider the financial resources needed to repair the road. Of utmost concern in fact was the community agreement to undertake the project. In the end, the community cannot mobilize its social capital beyond its own networks, nor can it access economic capital beyond what is available. Road repairs for example will only be completed through the community members’ own shared labor and resources.

### **Youths’ Access to Community Resources and Their Roles in Purposive Actions**

The youth consider the community itself as a resource that can be called upon to solve problems in order to maintain the cooperative social networks and to improve the physical environment. The process of learning to access these resources is part of their socialization as members of the community even if their participation appears to be passive. Community mobilization is evidenced through sharing knowledge and accessing community resources to achieve collective projects. To demonstrate this process three specific cases are explored.

#### **Edgar: “Without dialogue the communities’ problems won’t be fixed”**

In 2011 Edgar was 17 years old. He was interviewed one evening on his porch. In his front yard, by the main road, there was a very large tree that provided ample shade, and, below it there were plastic chairs and an old log on which community members would frequently sit. The researchers had noticed the tree because of these gatherings. However, their significance was not realized until this interview:

*Interviewer:* Are there other things that you like?

*Edgar:* Well the... the older people get together and dialogue like that there under that tree that we have, there they get together and talk, the family members

*Interviewer:* And, what things do they talk about?

*Edgar:* Well about the jobs that they do in agriculture

*Interviewer:* And do you learn something when you listen to them talk... about those experiences?

*Edgar:* Yes...

*Interviewer:* ...about their experiences?

*Edgar:* ...Yes

*Interviewer:* What types of things?

*Edgar:* Well there I learn how to... How they say that the plants are sown, what fertilizer they use is what I learn.

This village, like the others, relied on agriculture both as a form of sustenance and as a source of income. In fact, Edgar spent several hours a day after school working in the fields to contribute to his families’ welfare. Therefore, one of the important resources in this community was this agricultural knowledge; their livelihoods depended on it. Edgar and the other youth who frequently gathered under the tree were able to access this knowledge by listening to the older family members. Edgar did not mention actively participating in the conversations. However, when he was asked what he had learned, he mentioned the use of fertilizer. By listening, he had gained important knowledge from the community, learned how to access it, and considered its future use.

### **Belicia: “We are going to do it”**

Belicia, who was 16 years old in 2011, was very concerned about the water problem in her community. In 2009 she mentioned that it was the biggest problem. Because of the water tank, some days they had water and some they did not. In the intervening years, her community mobilized its resources to fix the problem, as she explained in 2011: “they fixed the reservoir that they had said that we are going to do it, we are going to do it, and in the end they achieved it”.

Just as in Edgar’s description, Belicia’s role in fixing the problem appeared to be passive. In fact she refers to a ‘they’, ostensibly referring to the adult members of the community. However, she learned an important lesson, that the community itself is a resource that can be mobilized because “they had said” that they were going to fix it and they did. Her changing positioning as indexed through the subject pronouns and verb tenses she uses is of particular interest. She begins from a position of outside observer describing a past action that others, namely ‘they’, participated in. Then she switched to the present progressive tense and the subject pronoun ‘we’ as she states “we are going to do it”. This marks a change in perspective as she has become an active member of a collective identity, her community. She now sees herself participating in community mobilization on an ongoing basis. Therefore, although she did not directly participate in this particular community project, through it she can envision herself doing so in the future. This is particularly notable since there was also a feeling of pride that her community had overcome the problem it set out to address. From this experience she learned that community resources can be mobilized to make physical improvements, and though young, she too can participate.

This process of learning continued, as the project had also been a topic of conversation in her SAT class. She summarizes these conversations thus: “Well, sometimes we start on the community about the water as they have put they have put meters and sometimes it is good and sometimes it isn’t because now they are charging, they use less water and they charge more than what they paid”. From this lesson Belicia demonstrates active learning and critical thinking while articulating her evaluation of this project—the fact that the price of water had increased and that community members were spending more money even though they were using less water. This ability to critically reflect on community development is significant in terms of her future contributions to community mobilizations.

### **Gilberto: “I am helping my community”**

Gilberto was also concerned about infrastructure in his community. His comments focused on the poor condition of the roads. In addition, he was the only student to mention his own participation in a collaborative project. The following is his description of the project and its perceived benefits:

- Interviewer 1:* And do you participate in activities dedicated to the community?  
Gilberto?
- Gilberto:* No I haven’t, only when they were fixing the road.
- Interviewer 1:* You helped?
- Gilberto:* Yes
- Interviewer 2:* How did you help?
- Gilberto:* Perhaps making ditches there with, with my mother that, we all worked, all of us from the village.
- Interviewer 2:* And what do you think are the benefits from participating in this activity?  
Why is it good?
- Gilberto:* Because I am helping my community.
- Interviewer 1:* But, why is helping good? Why is helping the community good?
- Gilberto:* I don’t know.
- ...
- Interviewer 2:* Do you like to help?
- Gilberto:* Yes.
- Interviewer 2:* And why do you like to help?
- Gilberto:* Because it is good to help others when, because if I don’t when I have a problem they won’t help me.

The importance of helping his community was the anticipation of future problems that will require accessing community resources to mobilize action of direct benefit to

him. Therefore, part of the socialization process is not only learning knowledge (Edgar) and critical evaluation skills (Belicia), but also learning reciprocity, because participating in community projects brings future benefits to the youth through expectations of reciprocity in future mobilizations.

The youths' descriptions suggest that the communities themselves provided significant actual and potential resources in order to realize development projects. Again in all cases there is no mention of the larger departmental or national networks of which the community is a part that could be mobilized, the communities must realize change on their own. The youth do not envision their role as that of individually mobilizing community resources. However, through the socialization process they were actively learning how to access these resources in their communities for the future.

### **The Future and the Limitations of Social Capital**

At the end of the 2011 school year, most of these youth would be graduating from SAT and their future options included: 1) continuing their studies, which in most cases would require living in or traveling to another town; 2) working on their family farms or assisting in the care of the house and siblings as they potentially began their own families; or 3) moving to another town to find a job. All of the youth in the focal group positively assessed their experiences in the SAT program and its usefulness to their lives, and all hoped to continue their studies. Overall they had significant hopes in terms of their own future studies and work opportunities and the possibility of realizing change in their communities.

Alejandro was 14 years old in 2011 and he wanted to be a mechanic. He was asked to reflect on how what he had learned in SAT that would help him:

*Alejandro:* To be somebody to be an important person I mean um that in the future one can have a good job and if one doesn't know all this he isn't going to do well

*Interviewer:* What is an important person for you?

*Alejandro:* To be someone like that to be someone in the community, to have a position that works for the good of the community.

*Interviewer:* mm and for example, do you know someone that is working for the good of the community?

*Alejandro:* yes

*Interviewer:* yes, who?

*Alejandro:* there is a woman whose name is Lourdes that professor Saul knows.

*Interviewer:* yes... yes

*Alejandro:* Him and other people that live in Góngora but I don't know them

*Interviewer:* and what do they do for example for the community?

*Alejandro:* they get help for people that need it

His experiences in SAT are beneficial at two levels, first that he could be an important person, understood as somebody who helps his community, and secondly that he could use the information he learned to help obtain a good job and do well at that job. Even though the precise action of getting help for people is unspecified, he saw himself in the future position of having resources and being able to mobilize them and in doing so to contribute to the good of his community.

Many others also identified a direct connection between their own futures and those of their communities—through their studies, students would be able to contribute additional resources and achieve their goals. In her 2011 interview, Berta, who was 14 years old, wanted to go to Santa Bárbara to obtain a degree in rural well-being. In the following exchange she elaborates:

- Interviewer:* What plans do you have for the future?  
*Berta:* Help the other people in the community, help the poor and all that  
*Interviewer:* And personally what do you think will happen to you? Will you continue studying or work?  
*Berta:* Yes, yes, I would continue studying, well studying and working the two things together  
*Interviewer:* and what would you like to study?  
...  
*Berta:* a degree in rural well-being  
...  
*Interviewer:* What do you want to work in?  
*Berta:* to go to create an organization... to go into to do something that... benefits the community

Despite this optimism, the reality is that most of these youth will not continue their studies due to the financial demands of living in another town or finding daily transportation while continuing to help their families. They would also not find jobs apart from working on their family farms, unless they moved to San Pedro Sula to work in the maquilas or immigrated to the United States as undocumented workers. The structural limitations and poverty in these rural areas prevented them from achieving their dreams. As their futures and those of their communities are intimately linked, there were severe limitations to their own contributions to community development. Enrique hoped to attend the university and to become an agronomist, also to further help his community and his future family. Yet, while he recognized that he had learned “to seek solutions” through his educational experiences in SAT and community socialization he also admitted that there were no jobs in his community, and, that “without work I can’t solve anything”.

## Conclusions

Overall the words of these youth suggest that they see the social networks of their communities as resources that can be mobilized both at an individual level, to acquire important knowledge in anticipation of future reciprocal assistance, and to realize community development projects such as those related to water and roads, even if they did not position themselves as yet being able to individually mobilize these resources. However, Enrique’s haunting words, “without work I can’t solve anything”, reveal the underlying limitations of social capital if it is divorced from economic capital and socio-historical context. As Portes and Landolt (2000) elaborate:

Social capital can be a powerful force for promoting group projects but... it consists of the ability to marshal resources through social networks, *not the resources themselves*. When the latter are poor and scarce, the goal achievement capacity of a collectivity is restricted, no matter how strong its internal bonds....Social capital is not a substitute for the provision of credit, material infrastructure, and education. What social capital can do is to increase the ‘yield’ of such resources by reinforcing them with the voluntary efforts of participants and their monitoring capacity to prevent malfeasance (p. 546-547, emphasis ours).

Therefore, while Enrique and his group of classmates and neighbors in the village may have social capital, there is a disconnect between social capital and access to economic capital, which will potentially stymie the impact of SAT on fostering community development.

Our findings thus reinforce the theoretical orientation of Bourdieu and the criticisms of Fine (2002) regarding the application of the concept of social capital and the need to ground it socially, historically, politically, and economically. The social networks of these youth need to be understood as existing within and in relation to larger networks that compose the nation and the world. Furthermore, these networks cannot be divorced from their particular realities that have systematically favored the economic interests of multinational corporations and an elite oligarchy of business owners that controls ownership of rural land and urban business and that controls state policies that favor their continued economic prosperity at the expense of the poor (Grandin 2006).

This is not to belittle the great importance of transformative education for youth and of the critical perspectives that they have developed through their participation in SAT and the community development projects that have taken place in these villages. Indeed, the youths’ words demonstrate that their communities are active agents that have participated in important changes that benefit all through improving access to water and functioning roads. However, our findings point to the limits of social capital and underscore that in and of itself, it will not alleviate poverty, nor will it necessarily provide Enrique and his

classmates with access to a job or a more prosperous future.

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