

# REFLECTIONS ON WORKING IN THE FIELD: What You Can't Learn in the Classroom

by SOLANGE MUÑOZ and SHAWN M. STRANGE

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**AS GRADUATE STUDENTS DEDICATED TO** international planning and development, we look for opportunities to apply what we are learning in the classroom to the real world. It is rare, however,

to have the chance to conduct fieldwork that will be useful for—and utilized by—local communities and governments, particularly in one semester. But this is exactly what eleven graduate students did in Dr. Bjørn Sletto's course, Applied Geographic Information Systems: Participatory Approaches to Environmental Justice, in spring 2008.

The class grew out of a new, collaborative agreement between the UT School of Architecture and the Municipality of Santo Domingo Norte in the Dominican Republic. The original objective of this collaboration was to provide technical assistance to the municipal planning office, and to develop graduate-level, practical student research and learning opportunities. In this course, however, Dr. Sletto and his students took this fledgling partnership a step further. We developed a multimethod, participatory, social justice approach to investigate issues of risk and vulnerability in the informal settlement of "Los Platanitos," and, in the process, we aimed to provide project partners with conceptual and technical tools to address the challenges facing this community. We based the project on principles of service learning, which meant we had to work closely with community members while also incorporating the perspectives and experiences of Dominican NGOs and scholars. As a result, the project culminated in a much broader international collaboration than what was originally proposed.

Santo Domingo Norte was established in 2001 after the capital city was disaggregated into five municipalities in order to decentralize regional development and policymaking. It is the largest of the new municipalities and is facing the most rapid urban expansion and greatest development challenges, including a proliferation of more than thirty informal settlements. As in the case of Los Platanitos, these informal settlements tend to be located in low-lying floodplains and other

ecologically vulnerable areas, and many of these are at risk from flooding, mudslides, and water-borne diseases. This is exacerbated by social vulnerability, which stems from poverty, inequality, and institutional weakness. While policy response to natural disasters and other ecological risk is dominated by physical and infrastructure interventions, in this project, students conducted an analysis that incorporated the fundamental influence of social structures that limit access to resources and increases residents' vulnerability to natural disasters.

The goal of the project was to conduct a community needs assessment in Los Platanitos, focusing on risk and vulnerability associated with flooding, garbage accumulation, and the lack of a proper sewage system. We developed various collaborative methods, including participatory mapping, community surveys, focus groups, and workshops, to document local knowledge of environmental and social conditions, which is often overlooked in development projects that focus exclusively on infrastructure improvements. The project drew on the principles of Rapid Rural Appraisal (RRA), in part because of the limited time available to spend in the field, but also to enable residents to claim ownership of the project and the data, which in turn would allow them to plan and act on community-based initiatives. Ultimately, the intention was to initiate a partnership with community members and key organizations working in informal settlements, in particular Ciudad Alternativa and COPADEBA (Comité para la Defensa de los Derechos Barriales), to allow researchers, activists, and residents to act as equal partners to improve the quality of life in the community.

The project exposed us to the many challenges and opportunities of such participatory projects. We were confronted by limitations imposed by the academic calendar, restrictions on funding and time, and the necessity of building and maintaining relationships with Dominican partners with different political philosophies and goals. We came from various disciplinary backgrounds, including public policy, planning, geography, and anthropology, which in itself presented challenges. We were expected to take an active role in the development of the project,

which led to dynamic discussions regarding the objectives, the relationships with our various partners, the data being collected, and the collaboration between the class teams and their responsibilities. Although this often meant spending a lot of time negotiating our ideas and concerns, it led to a much more thoughtful and sophisticated awareness of the social relations and environmental aspects of our work.

Despite the time we spent developing the project before our first trip to the Dominican Republic, none of us felt fully prepared when we arrived in Santo Domingo in January to begin our fieldwork. This general sense of bewilderment only increased the first couple of days we were working in Los Platanitos. The problems faced by the community seemed overwhelming and much more severe than we had originally imagined. Garbage was everywhere. The streets were muddy and full of potholes and black water. When it rained on the second day, residents brought us to the bottom of the ravine where the flood problem is the worst. They showed us houses filled with black, murky water. Residents were standing outside in the rain or in the shade of a neighbor's house, waiting for the rain to stop and the flood water to slowly drain down the garbage-filled creek. Children jumped into the creek to pull out the garbage so the water could continue to move. This was the first time we saw people throwing their trash into Los Platanitos from higher elevations. We soon realized that the lower area of this community serves as a garbage dump for residents living in surrounding neighborhoods, a situation exacerbated by the fact that Los Platanitos is literally built on what was once the garbage dump for the city of Santo Domingo. In other

words, the inhabitants of Los Platanitos are forced to constantly live among garbage.

The participatory approaches we used were crucial for understanding such social and environmental realities, but this research strategy also presented us with unexpected challenges. In many ways it was quite easy to work with community members. They knew we would be arriving in January, and many residents had committed to working fulltime with us for the two weeks we would spend there. Women, men, and children alike were welcoming, enthusiastic about the project, and ready to participate in different capacities. "Bodyguards" accompanied us in the field for safety reasons, elder men participated in a physical survey of the bottom of the ravine, women worked with us to develop and conduct a community survey, and children participated in workshops and showed us around to help us see the community from their perspective. But even though students and community members were eager to work together, language and cultural differences sometimes made these interactions difficult. As Americanos, our more formal and reserved way of interacting contrasted drastically with the friendly, vivacious, and informal mannerisms of Dominicans. We quickly learned to give lots of hugs, touch each other's arms, hands or shoulders, look directly into each other's eyes, and share jokes and personal observations.

Despite these challenges, and although we don't know how our work ultimately will help the community, the course was a success measured by the quality of the research we conducted, and perhaps more important, in terms of the relationships that we developed with community members and the critical perspectives we developed about participatory planning in marginal neighborhoods. Throughout the

course, we were always reminded of the numerous opportunities, challenges, and potential problems with doing international development work: how our maps and data might adversely affect the people of Los Platanitos despite our good intentions; how our interventions in the neighborhood might change or reify social inequalities; how, as researchers from the United States, our epistemological perspectives might perpetuate uneven North-South power relations. By continually discussing such social, ethical, and methodological challenges, we learned to think about the consequences of our work as we developed this project, and also when we were carrying it out.

Ultimately, this project has offered us important experiences in international participatory work, which will be invaluable for our future work in academia, in development organizations, or in government agencies. The course has made us better scholars and better professionals—not only because of the technical and conceptual skills we developed, but also because we learned to see the complexity and beauty of such "underdeveloped" places. For Los Platanitos is not simply a place plagued by garbage, flooding, poverty, and injustice, but a diverse, close-knit, and humane community, where multicolored houses and winding walkways climb the hills, where children play baseball in the streets and men play dominos in family-run shops, and where palm trees stand out next to a clear, bright blue sky.

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*Solange Muñoz is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Geography and the Environment, and Shawn M. Strange is a master's candidate in the Program in Community and Regional Planning of the School of Architecture, both at the University of Texas at Austin. ☀*



Left to right: 1) First day in Los Platanitos: Walking with the residents while they tell us about the social and physical conditions of the area. 2) Three girls pose for a picture. Next to them you can see the contaminated water filled with garbage. 3) A boy stands in floodwaters outside his house, after a 15 minute rainfall floods Los Platanitos.