

CONNECTIONS

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Kettering's Multinational Research



The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through inter-related program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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A Comparative Study of Coastal Communities in Cuba and the United States

By Paloma Dallas with Penny Dendy, Terry Jack, Esther Velis, and Virginia York

This article tells the story of two organizations—one in Cuba and the other in the United States—and the community-based networks they collaborate with to learn how to make a difference on issues that affect both nations.

Nearly two decades ago, the Kettering Foundation began a series of ongoing exchanges with the Havana-based Antonio Núñez Jiménez Foundation for Nature and Humanity, a nongovernmental environmental organization founded by Antonio Núñez Jiménez, a renowned Cuban geographer, archeologist, and speleologist.

As part of these exchanges, the Núñez Foundation was interested in exploring ways citizens can play

an active role in responding to the challenges their communities face. Kettering has long studied how people come together to make progress on difficult problems and do the work of creating resilient communities. Both foundations saw potential in comparing the experiences of communities facing related problems in different contexts.

An obvious opportunity for such an exchange seemed to be their shared geography: the Gulf of Mexico. Communities along the Gulf in both countries face some of the very same challenges, namely a vulnerability to hurricanes, as well as other human-made disasters. These dangers are not going away, so the challenge was, how could they respond? How might people living in those communities begin to work together to protect their communities and strengthen their capacity to bounce back from disasters?

Both foundations reached out to communities that they thought would be interested in taking up this challenge. Because the Kettering Foundation doesn't work directly in communities, they contacted colleagues in Panama City, Florida, and Mobile, Alabama, who have long worked to encourage public deliberation on pressing issues. The Núñez Foundation initially identified the community of Cárdenas, also on the



Gulf Coast, but since the foundation would be leading the work themselves, they decided to select a community in which they were already working. So, after further consideration, they chose Playa Larga in Ciénaga de Zapata, on Cuba's southern Caribbean coast.

What follows draws from two essays authored by those who led

the work: Esther Velis, director of international relations for the Núñez Foundation; Frances "Penny" Dendy, organizational consultant and community volunteer in Mobile, Alabama; Virginia York, retired professor, consultant, and community volunteer in Panama City, Florida; and Terry Jack, professor emeritus, Gulf Coast State College.



SETTING THE STAGE

Playa Larga, Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba

The Ciénaga de Zapata has historically been a focus of the work of the Núñez Foundation. The organization's founder, Antonio Núñez Jiménez, carried out studies and research there, and the foundation subsequently maintained relationships and engaged in joint actions with local actors working on environmental issues, such as the National Park Ciénaga de Zapata and the branch of the Ministry of Science, Technology, and Environment (CITMA) of the Ciénaga de Zapata.

Ciénaga de Zapata is one of the areas of greatest biological diversity and fishing productivity in Cuba and

the Insular Caribbean, and it includes one of the country's most extensive and important areas of protected marine coasts. It is also one of the most vulnerable to the impacts of climate change, given the quality and fragility of its ecosystems. The southern coast of Cuba, where the Ciénaga de Zapata lies, is particularly sensitive due to the predominance of low-lying coasts and fragile ecosystems (wetlands, dry forests, small keys, and reefs) and because it is in the path of hurricanes. The extreme fragility of the ecosystems of the Ciénaga de Zapata and their importance in supporting multiple economic activities requires development planning and management to ensure the conservation of their resources and functionality of their ecosystems.

Ciénaga de Zapata is also a space marked by different historical conditions in two significant points in time: one before 1959, characterized by neglect and isolation, and another after the triumph of the revolution, distinguished by the improvement in the conditions of everyday life as a result of it being included in the country's new development policies. This latter development also brought with it economic diversification and the concentration of the population in regions with more of an urban character, highlighting natural, economic, and social differences. This is also the

site of the 1961 Bay of Pigs invasion (known in Cuba as the battle of Playa Girón), a definitive point in the history of the two nations.

The Gulf Coast of the United States

The coastal communities scattered along the northern shore of the Gulf of Mexico in the United States lure people with the beauty of the area, work and educational opportunities, cultural activities, and Southern hospitality. They depend on vibrant economies to provide an excellent quality of life.

The Gulf Coast provides a wide variety of valuable natural resources, including 17 percent of total US crude oil production, 5 percent of federal offshore dry natural gas production, and some of the most productive fisheries in the world. It is also the site for nearly half of the United States' petroleum refining capacity and about half of the country's natural gas processing plant capacity.

The Gulf of Mexico is a vital economic and recreational asset, and yet its fragile ecosystem faces many threats from development. With the rapid expansion of offshore drilling in the Gulf, communities have been impacted by numerous oil spills. These human-made disasters have had a devastating impact on fishing and tourism, as well as quality of life.

Communities on the Gulf Coast have also faced intense tropical storms, including Hurricanes Ivan in 2004 and Katrina in 2005. These hurricanes, along with rising sea levels, have resulted in massive destruction and physical changes along the coast. While there are differing opinions on the cause of this increase in natural disasters, no one denies that there has been a staggering increase in costs to



Communities along the Gulf in both countries face some of the very same challenges, namely a vulnerability to hurricanes, as well as other human-made disasters. . . . How might people living in those communities begin to work together to protect their communities and strengthen their capacity to bounce back from disasters?



restore and rebuild communities and the landscape.

ENCOURAGING JOINT LEARNING

From 2012 to 2014, teams in each country adopted their own approaches to engaging with the local community. Both began by talking with people to understand how they experienced the challenges they faced. In Cuba, the broad challenge was identified as climate change. In the United States, the challenge was enhancing and sustaining quality of life on the Gulf, given tensions between economic development and environmental protection. The team in Cuba moved quickly from working with people in the community to understand their concerns and experiences with climate change to identifying different actions that

might be taken and a variety of actors who might take them. The team in the United States, working in several communities in two different states, focused on developing a deliberative framework that would synthesize common themes and then encourage people to wrestle with the tensions among the various things held valuable.

Activating Citizens in Cuba

One of the key objectives of the work in Playa Larga and Ciénaga de Zapata has been to contribute to improving the resilience of the biodiversity and the capacity of local communities to adapt to climate change in ecologically sensitive coastal areas of Cuba.

The Núñez team began with a “social diagnosis” that would allow them to assess and measure how the community perceives climate change and its effects on their lives. Later they held workshops in the pilot communities with national experts, key local actors, the managers and administrators of protected areas, and members of the communities that might be affected in order to

assess the possible impacts that projected changes in biodiversity would produce in the lives of these people. The idea was to generate, in a participatory manner, a portfolio of adaptive measures that might be implemented.

Achieving success in the implementation of these activities would entail developing training programs on climate change and biodiversity that would involve at least two managers/leaders from each of the participating institutions, local community leaders, workers from the protected areas, and inhabitants of the pilot communities. This would reinforce the creation of local capacities for understanding and adapting to climate change in regions of fragile ecosystems.

In this first stage, the Núñez Foundation largely fulfilled its goal of understanding how the community perceives climate change. It also raised people's consciousness about climate change and encouraged them to suggest possible solutions. It was clear that people saw themselves as both part of the problem and protagonists in the solution. In reference to the work of the group, it was also a rich experience. It was an opportunity for Esther Velis and her colleagues from Núñez to experiment with putting Kettering ideas about naming and framing into practice in their

community work and combine these insights with other participatory techniques they have been using for some time.

How to continue with this work? Velis reports that they will focus on analyzing the proposals offered with an eye to designing strategies for the adaptation and mitigation of climate change, taking into account the proposals that came from members of the community. The information obtained from this first workshop has served as the basis for determining actions for the local authorities to follow and to identify information deficits or gaps where they might work. This experience with the community likewise allowed them to



From 2012 to 2014, teams in each country adopted their own approaches to engaging with the local community. Both began by talking with people to understand how they experienced the challenges they faced.



Virginia York, Penny Dendy, and Esther Velis

identify leaders and advocates who have continued working with them in other activities throughout the year, and who constitute a base of support for future work. Furthermore, this experience helped them improve their tools and knowledge to develop scenarios of climate change with greater accuracy at the national level and in other communities with similar characteristics. It also allowed them to assess the vulnerabilities and potential impacts, as well as have the ability to develop more effective adaptive strategies in other regions.

Activating Citizens in the United States

The US team of Penny Dendy, Terry Jack, and Virginia York began by organizing 10 different community

conversations in 6 communities in Florida and Alabama to identify local concerns and potential actions that might be taken to address them. In recruiting participants, attempts were made to ensure that a broad spectrum of ideas, concerns, and points of view were included. The concerns that people raised and the actions suggested would be used to create a framework to help communities deliberate further about how they might work with one another in addressing the challenges their communities are facing.

Conversations in Panama City, Florida, and Callaway, Florida, included everyone from commercial and recreational fishermen and representatives of the boating industry

to seashell collectors and a writer. New residents and families who had owned beach houses for generations came together to talk. In Port Saint Joe, Florida, where people had experienced financial reversals when both the large paper mill and the chemical plant closed, people nonetheless expressed pride in their hometown, appreciation for sunsets on the water that are not blocked by tall buildings, and a desire to support small businesses rather than have large corporations (such as Walmart) enter the city limits. The assembly included educators, an insurance agent, marina workers, and two high school students.

Since 2004, Mobile has been hit by two major hurricanes, the Deep Water oil spill, and the economic recession that staggered the whole nation. It has also seen major expansion in the shipbuilding industry and was selected by Airbus as the location for its North American assembly plant. The conversations in Mobile centered on providing well-paying jobs for local workers and ensuring that the educational and training programs and the social service networks are in place to maximize the potential for economic growth. People also raised concerns about changes in lifestyle that this growth will generate.

Participants in the conversations in nearby Bayou La Batre, Alabama,

included a number of immigrants from Southeast Asia, many of whom work in the seafood industry. This industry has been one of the hardest hit by recent natural and human-made disasters, and as a result many of these participants are now unemployed or underemployed. Their concerns were much more fundamental: ensuring work to provide food, clothing, shelter, and safety for their families. The younger participants, also primarily of Southeast Asian descent, worried that the “American Dream” of financial security and an abundance of recreational activities was harder to achieve.

Baldwin County, on the eastern side of Mobile Bay, is more affluent, and its economy depends on tourism, retirees, and agriculture. Participants talked about the struggle to balance economic prosperity with preservation of the natural resources that differentiate the area from other parts of the United States. They talked about the need to develop and implement regional plans that respect the character of individual communities



JIM WEST/ALAMY STOCK PHOTO

while exploring opportunities to grow the economy. This group also talked in personal terms about what they can and should do to sustain the quality of life while expanding opportunity.

These initial community conversations helped reveal shared concerns and values, as well as tensions. The team took what they heard in the conversations to create a framework for people all along the Gulf Coast to use in making decisions together about their future. The framework adopted three different approaches:

Approach One:

Focus on Preservation of the Environment

Approach Two:

Focus on Economic Development

Approach Three:

Focus on Preservation of Local Culture

How to continue with this work? Some initial deliberative forums were held using this framework, and many of the participants were really struck by the experience. As one said, “People in a community are capable of deciding what direction their community should take.” Others expressed a sense of urgency: “If we do not come to grips with this problem and protect our coastal communities, people will leave this area for other opportunities.” The team said that regardless of profession or point

of view, participants in the forums all expressed their deep love of the community and commitment to its health and prosperity. Because of this commitment, they were willing to wrestle with the uncertainty they were facing.

SHARING PROGRESS

In January 2014, representatives of each of the teams shared what they were learning at a conference in Havana, Cuba. The focus of the conference was on “active citizenship” and its role in strengthening democracy. Both teams had the opportunity to learn from each other’s experiences. For Kettering, it was an opportunity to learn more about how people in communities can start on the path of making collective decisions about their shared future. Núñez and Kettering continue to collaborate. A conference in 2016 began another exploration of shared problems. For the communities chronicled here, the work continues. ■

Paloma Dallas is a program officer and writer/editor at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at pdallas@kettering.org.

For a longer account of this work, see: Esther Velis, “Climate Change and Our Community: Playa Larga, Ciénaga de Zapata, Cuba,” and Virginia York, Terry Jack, and Penny Dendy, “Quality of Life on the Gulf Coast: How Can It Be Enhanced and Sustained?,” in Ileana Marin and Esther Velis, eds., Initiatives in Active Citizenship: Reports from the Third International Exchange on Active Citizenship for Democratic Strengthening in Latin America, the Caribbean, and the United States (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2015).