

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

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When Democracy Doesn't Work

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Dear Peter,

The health clinic in San Juan Bosco isn't much to look at. Unpainted wooden benches fill the unlit waiting room. The nurse's office is barely large enough to fit both her desk and the medical examination table, and a small cupboard stands in a corner half-filled with sundry medicines. For this impoverished farming community in southwest Honduras, however, their recently inaugurated clinic represents one of the greatest social advances their village has made.

Living on a diet of little more than corn tortillas, beans, and salt, most of the villagers are malnourished and highly susceptible to sickness. Dysentery, diarrhea, and other intestinal infections are the most common illnesses. And among the children - an average of eight per family - polio and malaria are not unusual. Before they had their own clinic, the nearest doctor's office was a two-hour walk away.

Getting the government to give San Juan Bosco its clinic, however, was an ordeal which few villagers will ever forget. For some, it even called into question the very value of democracy. These doubters associate their difficulties with the new, elected government that Honduras has had since January 1982, after more than a decade of military rule.

"You know, after seeing how the Liberal Party, the party in power, tried to use our clinic to forward their political ends, I'd say I preferred the military governments we had before. At least they didn't play so many childish games with the people," declared Teresa Torres, president of the village's health committee.

Teresa is one of the dominant women in the community, and even long before had a leading role in trying to improve its health. She used to be San Juan Bosco's guardia de salud, or paramedic. With government-sponsored training in basic health care, she dispersed medicines for common ailments, and sent the more difficult cases to the nearest doctor. Teresa concentrated most of her energies on teaching preventative medicine: that the pigs, cows, and chickens should not be allowed to wander in the homes, that people should wash their hands before eating, should boil their drinking water,

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and, should build latrines. She also had the government train the local midwives. (Before that course, the midwives' general practice was to leave the afterbirth inside the womb, and to forbid the mother from moving from her bed for eight days following the delivery.)

It was Teresa who organized the village's health committee, and who, as its president, went to the regional capital of Choluteca over a year ago, to demand the establishment of a clinic in San Juan Bosco. The government's health officials in Choluteca explained that they could only send a nurse once the community had provided both a work-space for the clinic, complete with furniture and a waiting room, and living quarters for the nurse.

In San Juan Bosco, where few people have more than three changes of clothing, and where the average annual income is less than one-thousand dollars, coming up with the money for a clinic required a major effort. Without the money for a new building, the villagers partitioned off one corner of their grain warehouse. To buy furniture, they raised money at charity dances held in the village's cramped mango jam cannery. It took four months; and there still had to be an official inauguration ceremony before the government would send a nurse to work in the clinic.

On inauguration day, a band was hired and an elaborate and expensive meal was prepared in honor of the official delegation. But no one from the government showed up.

The next day, Teresa and the other members of the health committee went to Choluteca. For hours they sat in the health ministry's waiting room. When finally ushered in, they were given short shrift.

"Are you all members of the Liberal Party?" they were asked abruptly by the regional director.

They replied to the negative.

"And what about your president, is she a Liberal?" he continued, looking with disapproval at Teresa.

"I voted for neither the Liberal nor the National Party. I'm not interested in politics," replied Teresa, with indignation.

The committee was told to return to San Juan Bosco, to have the village elect a new, all-Liberal party health committee. The government officials said that only then would the inauguration be held.

The villagers were furious, and unwilling to do as told. Teresa went to the capital city of Tegucigalpa to speak directly with the Minister of Health himself. For three days she sat in the Minister's waiting room. On the evening of the third day, she was ushered into his office. He assured her that there was nothing to worry about, that the old health committee was good enough, and that they just had to be patient.

But, back home in San Juan Bosco, another month and a half passed without further news. In desperation, Teresa turned to "non-democratic" methods.

Don Chema, an autocratic old storekeeper in a nearby town, had always been the man to turn to for results when the army was in power, because he had military connections. He hadn't lost his touch. With one phone call to his friend, the regional army commander, the eighteen month ordeal came to an end. San Juan Bosco's health clinic began operating two weeks later.

"I kept trying to explain to the government workers," recalled Teresa, "Health care should not be for the Liberals, nor the Nationals, nor for the followers of any particular party. Health care should be a right guaranteed to all Hondurans."