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### **Solidarity in the Economy: A Socio-economic Analysis of the Lives of Rural Indigenous Families in Ecuador**

There have been numerous changes throughout Latin America in terms of social, political and economic ideals in the past decade, and Ecuador is no exception. The idea of “Solidarity in the Economy” that is being practiced in Ecuador demonstrates the need and desire of people to improve their standard of living, something which is more evident due to Ecuador’s cultural and biological diversity. Besides understanding this socio-economic movement, I have been able to appreciate the unique cultural identity of a country rich in resources, peoples, and customs.

The principles behind “Economía Solidaria” are based on social and ethical components such as solidarity, equality, and a fair distribution of resources to all of the members within the population. Unlike modern market oriented economic thought which bases its models on assumptions of competition, “Economía Solidaria” stresses sharing, and better explained in Spanish as *compartencia* instead of *competencia*. This is a simple definition of an important socio-economic movement that is growing throughout various communities in Ecuador and Latin America. As Dr. Milton Caceres, president of the EECA explained to me, the origin of the word economics comes from the Greek stem “οἶκος,” meaning house. The movement also takes root in past indigenous cultures like that of the Incas, who placed a strong emphasis on maintaining their household as well as the *Pachamama*, literally translated from Quechua to English as “Mother Earth.”

This economic theory presents an ethical dilemma that would necessitate the people in each community to be educated in issues of solidarity in order for this system to work. During my studies in the EECA, in the fields, and through various interviews, I found education on this issue to be the main

problem behind the backwardness of this movement. The leaders of this movement in Cuenca and the surrounding area struggled to gain supporters due to people's own self interests and many times were very critical of the economic models that are used in the United States. In my interview with Emma Illescas, president of REDESOL and an active leader of MESSE, I found that anti-American (U.S.) sentiment exists among the leaders of this movement because of ideological notions in the United States that teach more is better when it comes to economics. I tried to maintain an unbiased approach throughout my research and thus objectively tried to understand their point of view. Emma emphasized her point by comparing two simple agricultural markets: a grocery store in the U.S., and an open market in Cuenca. She showed me that the idea behind "Economía Solidaria" is not only to improve living conditions for all, but to develop cohesion within larger communities. In a grocery store, the consumer buys their products without knowing the conditions under which they were produced and could make their purchases without speaking to anyone throughout the entire process. When I went to an open market with Emma, every producer, who came to these markets to sell their own products in order to eliminate the "middle man," explained how and where their product was produced. Furthermore, I met each person individually and made social contacts throughout the day, regardless of whether or not I purchased anything.

The idea of "Economía Solidaria" has taken root throughout much of the southern highlands of Ecuador and can efficiently include all aspects of a nation's economy. As I was trying to travel throughout Ecuador I met an association that promoted "community tourism," and whose role centered on the "Economía Solidaria" system. This network of tourism operates in 5 different provinces throughout Ecuador and allowed native people of the various regions the opportunity to gain a living by serving as a complete tour guide to tourists. I used this resource as a means to travel and learn the different cultures throughout the Ecuadorian highlands. There were people from all over the world who came to visit Ecuador and its diverse cultures and biodiversity, and the "Pakariñan Red," as its known,

allowed for a direct relationship with these people and their customs.

This movement also entails ecological and political implications that demonstrate its appeal to rural communities in the Ecuadorian highlands. In my experience, producers of agricultural products stressed that their products were totally organic and chemical free; which is both healthier for the consumer and the land. Through my visit to the city of Cañar, I was able to see the problems and implications of this aspect of the movement firsthand. I was received in Cañar by Nicolas Pichisaca, a recent graduate of the EECA, who was promoting “Economía Solidaria” in the rural areas surrounding Cañar. The experience of having to live as an agricultural producer in itself was memorable due to the differences in lifestyles as well as culture. A strong Andean culture was present in their dress, customs and language, being as most spoke Quechua in daily conversation. The events that took place in Cañar revolved around the agricultural production of various grains that are native to the Andean Highlands including: *chochos*, *quinua*, *amaranto*, and *ataco*. Mr. Pichisaca promoted the event with the aim to promote the production of these rich grains in the area in order for the community in the greater community to become more self-sustainable. According to Nicolas, only 2% of the population in the rural Cañar region was producing these grains. Other agricultural organizations were also promoting the production of grains in order for increased exportation by educating the people in the region about technology and advanced farming techniques. One might think that production for exportation would go against the general theory of “Economía Solidaria”, however, as Emma Illescas explained to me, “Economía Solidaria” looks to improve the economy of the local community first, but in order for the system to work at a higher level, each local economy will eventually better the economy as a whole. Ecuador recently established a new constitution that has as one of its goals, the need to improve the social inequality gaps that exist throughout the country. The constitution has several reforms that support “Economía Solidaria” movements, and aim to narrow the social inequality gap that currently exists throughout the country. Hopefully these reforms will allow this economic system to work once

they are put into practice. The main obstacle faced by supporters of this movement in Ecuador is a lack of active citizen participation and awareness in order for this theory to work. This socio-economic movement is steadily growing but only time will tell if it can prove both effective and viable within the region.