

Ometepe, Nicaragua, a Magical Digital Island

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In the heart of Nicaragua, in the middle of the lake of the same name, the largest fresh water lake in the Americas, millions of years ago a volcano eruption created an island of two volcanoes, one of them still active. The indigenous name,

the way education is being delivered in Nicaragua. Out of their own pocket and lately with additional funds from clients and the country of Denmark, more than 28,000 thousand laptops have been delivered in regions of extreme poverty in this, in

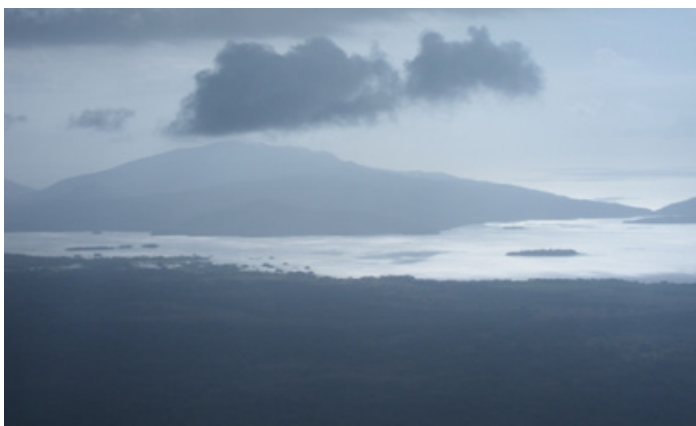


Ometepe, means place of two mountains. With a size of 245 sq. km, it also constitutes the largest Island of any lake in the Americas. Declared by UNESCO as one of the natural marvels of the globe, it certainly breeds an air of paradise, with its tropical exuberance, movie set magic. Its 50,000 inhabitants, 90% indigenous, lived until not so long ago in a medieval obscurity, sort of a Jurassic Park, where no one knew how to read or write. Yesterday, however, in a monumental leap forward, Ometepe became the first digital island of the Americas, where 100% of the children in primary school and the totality of its teachers, received one of our XO laptops, with high speed broad band connectivity and with the pedagogical apps we advocate.

itself, one of the poorest countries of Latin America. Not shy in their ambition, they are aiming at delivering 500,000 laptops before 2015, covering 100% of primary schools in their country. Witnessing what they have done so far, there is no doubt in my mind they will be able to fulfill that dream within that timeframe.

We arrived at Ometepe joining a group of entrepreneurs not only from Nicaragua but from the rest of Central America, and with members of multilateral organizations, NGOs, government officials, some 400 persons in total, interested in seeing for themselves what the Zamora Teran Foundation has been doing in Nicaragua. Founded by banker Roberto Zamora and his wife Maria Josefina Teran, in less than 30 months they have been able to transform through a clever application of philanthropy

In order to arrive to the island, one has to take a car or a bus for two and a half hours to one of several ports on the Nicaragua Lake. Then, one must take a ferry for another two hours to the port of Ometepe. At a distance, from the lake, one clearly sees the majestic silhouette of the two volcanos, guardians of this fragile but exuberant tropical ecosystem that requires tender loving care. Cobble stone roads within the island evoke times past and at the same time they give clear indication of a practical sense of adjusting to telluric movements. Cobble stones are more flexible and serve as shock absorbers so when Mother Earth "Gaia" flexes her muscles through devastating earthquakes, there are better chances that roads will remain usable than those with continuous surfaces like asphalt or concrete. In 1972, an earthquake destroyed Managua and to this day the city has not fully recovered.



Ometepe has excellent agriculture. Volcanic ashes with tropical climate all year around makes this island one of high yield agricultural products. Its two volcanos, highly visible next to each other, with their high crest and deep slopes, create a nice breezy environment that also attracts a tourist crowd.

If it were not for a paradigm change program, children of Ometepe would be condemned to follow the same fate of their ancestors, artisan peasants of small plots of land, but with their



pre-Columbian rituals and traditions well preserved due to the insular condition. The paradox of their condition is that unless a way is found under which they can jump start to modernity, catapulting themselves into the XXI Century, they may end up giving the kiss of death to their traditions and ceremonies by simple attrition. Under the pedagogical applications the XO's provide, there is a strong possibility of not only preserving their traditions, but of enhancing them by spreading and sharing them with other cultures, via the Internet. This, in itself, is a challenge worth exploring and one we already have been working on in other indigenous cultures like Mexico and Peru.

Convinced that the only solution to this diabolic vicious circle of poverty that breeds ignorance, despair and violence, the Zamora Teran family decided to embark on this rescue mission of the children of Nicaragua. They adopted the One Laptop Per Child project and philosophy as a way to bring social equality and change in the educational paradigm to their country. This is a monumental challenge that deserved our complete support and endorsement. This is why I, together with my wife Cecilia and several members of my staff at One Laptop Per Child, in addition of friends and supporters of our project from different institutions, decided to accompany the Zamora Teran family in this important ceremony in order to honor them. We wanted to recognize them for their tremendous courage and commitment. In reality it was a ceremony of giving each child of the island a symbolic "key" that will open the door to access to knowledge..

Months of preparation on teacher training and work-shops with parents, school officials and some key students is the best guarantee that once the laptops are distributed, they will be put to good use and provide maximum benefits.

A few critical concepts adopted, make this possible; First, the concept of saturation--every child in the community, including

mentally impaired children, visually impaired and physically disabled, receive a laptop. Under this concept true synergies are obtained, thus the total is greater than the sum of the parts. Second, empowering the children so they become the agents of change; new dimensions from the exploration of the brain are emerging as a consequence of massive distribution of laptops to children of young age, that of the "teaching brain". Until now, most of the research in neuroscience was oriented towards the "learning brain". Having an entire island with children in



possession of a laptop opens the possibilities of unlimited explorations into the human brain and how to maximize its potential. Third, the way the modules of learning are organized provide the best opportunity for children to "learn-how-to-learn". Fourth, by being connected to high speed, broad band internet, the children of Ometepe have exactly the same opportunity of access to knowledge, in quantity as well as in quality, as the most privileged child of New York, Tokyo or Berlin. Finally, in a free and open software environment, where kids have access to the source code, a myriad of opportunities become available for children to learn to program, to become inventors and innovators and to develop their inherent creativity--one of the fundamental aspects of this new profile of a citizen of the future. If we accept the fact that wealth in the XXI Century will be created by Intellectual Property, not by commodities, meaning the type of wealth created by the inventors of companies like Google, Facebook, Apple to name a few, then we understand the need to become competitive in a world in which ideas and



patents become the yardstick by which future wealth creation will be measured. And the beauty of it is that a young adult in the Amazon jungle or in Ometepe, and by this we mean a young programmer of 12 years of age as is the case of a child we know in Paraguay, can produce wealth in the same manner as a kid in Palo Alto. Then we understand that we are not talking about science fiction but about unleashed potentials dormant until now for lack of opportunities.

The ceremony in itself was loaded with emotions. Children gathered very early in the morning in a baseball field for the laptops to be distributed one-by-one to the 5,000 children. Bar code matched the identity of each child and each parent or guardian signed for the receipt of the child-laptop. Each child was given a label with his name and the name of the school and the corresponding grade within the school. Keeping in mind there are 32 schools in the island, keeping the children attentive, organized and disciplined was not a small task. The foundation did have all these contingencies well under control and constant distribution of water, candies and snacks kept the children happy and patient. In any case, just the distribution of the laptops took a good 3 hours and the sun, up and awake, in full swing, was becoming a problem. A group photograph was taken, where all the children raised their laptops over their heads, all of them surrounding Roberto and Maria Josefina, their all too generous benefactors. The photo in itself speaks more than a thousand words.

The formal part of the ceremony then began, with all of us crossing our fingers so speakers will not be carried away in their well understood enthusiasm and desire to honor the project. The obvious political speech followed, after the religious proclamation and benediction, followed by the needed description of what the whole project was all about. Gallantly, Maria Josefina, radiating enthusiasm, passion, motivation and commitment described the project. Not in vain this couple has invested their own money for the fifth time in order to provide the 28,000 laptops and well on their way to complete 50,000 before the end of this coming summer. When people invest their own funds, the type of funds that "hurt", and for the fifth consecutive time, it is because the first four times the results have been positive. A better definition of success is difficult to find.

The children were sitting in the baseball field playing with their computers, mesmerized by their ability to read the screen in full sunlight, oblivious to what was being said at the podium, so

happy to have this, their most important possession, one that empowers them to unimaginable heights. Time passed by and then a beautiful pair of presentations were made by the children themselves. In one the Nicaraguan flag was "presented" and honored, with uniforms and attitude full of dignified and sacrosanct pride. In another presentation, local girls depicted



a ceremony of sharing and giving, drawn from a local miracle by the patron saint of the island. The ceremony culminated in a climax of applause and screams of joy. The faces and eyes of the children, not to mention the huge attendance of parents and guardians, something that the island has not witnessed in a long, long time, were to me the best testimony of the transformational nature of this project. Indeed, this has been the most impacting ceremony of all the ones we have attended. Certainly Ometepe and the Zamora Teran family just created a milestone in the history of the island and of Nicaragua and, even more, of the region as a whole. This is an example worth emulating by others. I just wish there were thousands of people like the Zamora Terans in Latin America. The social inequalities and under-developing nature of our economies would have disappeared long time ago.



Ometepe becomes, then, the first Digital island of the Americas. It was pure magic. Good for you, Ometepe!