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The Impact of Women's Empowerment and Craftsmanship on Achieving the United Nations  
Sustainable Development Goals: Case Study of El Centro de Formación Integral

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## Abstract

### The Impact of Women's Empowerment and Craftsmanship on Achieving the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals: Case Study of El Centro de Formación Integral

By Imani Wright

This honors thesis is a case study of a Costa Rican grassroots organization known as El Centro de Formación Integral. The organization aims to improve quality of life for women in the local community of Granadilla through a training program that teaches integral skills. The program focuses on craftsmanship, wellness, financial literacy, and women's empowerment. This thesis looks at how craftsmanship acts as a tool through which the UN's Sustainable Development Goals can be achieved. I conducted an expert interview with the organization founder in addition to participant observation in San Jose, Costa Rica to determine the specific factors that make El Centro de Formación Integral an organization with outstanding potential to impact its community. This thesis utilizes anthropological research methods, as well as development intervention practices on a grassroots level. The conclusions drawn from this study are that, if given the opportunity, women have the potential to be strong agents of change. It also concludes that craftsmanship serves as a modality to emotional healing, while also inspiring innovative solutions to improving the quality of life and wellbeing of women and their communities. Craftsmanship can be used as a tool to advance toward and eventually achieve the United Nations' 2030 Agenda. This thesis also demonstrates the significant power and value in community-led initiatives that is unique to a small-scale design. Lastly, I conclude that creative expression is essential in forming a well-rounded person and acts as a threat to conformity in a way that encourages growth and innovation.

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## Introduction

“When we invest in women—the most critical and under-resourced asset in the world—we unlock a better future not only for women themselves, but also for the next generation.”<sup>1</sup>

Melinda Gates’ remark sums up my thesis in one short sentence. By providing women with necessary, fundamental skills and knowledge, the United Nation’s Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals are achievable. For example, the eradication of poverty is possible by giving women needed tools to steer themselves and their families away from financial hardship. Teaching women to grow food in an urban environment or food desert would allow them to feed their children as well as provide them with an abundance of nutrients. My thesis uses the Sustainable Development Goals as a framework through which to look at how the Costa Rican grassroots organization, El Centro de Formación Integral, helps to improve the quality of life and well-being of the women and families in their community.

I was introduced to this organization during my semester abroad in San Jose Costa Rica where I was able to spend time with the women and their children for about three months. From my experience with El Centro, I found that their specific design has the potential to advance communities toward the UN’s goals through women’s empowerment and education. El Centro hosts workshops with a particular focus on spiritual wellness, psychological wellness, personal wellness, craftsmanship, and creating a safe space for women from vulnerable communities. The women who attend El Centro are often, but not exclusively, migrants from Nicaragua facing financial hardship, domestic abuse, and other difficult situations. In this thesis, I use spiritual wellness in a non-religious context that can be applied generally, although I do acknowledge the prevalence of Catholicism in Costa Rican culture and as it relates to El Centro’s overall structure.

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<sup>1</sup> Gates, “Unlocking the Potential of Women and Girls - Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation,” April 13, 2016.

I used participant observation as a part of my methodology in addition to preliminary research to conclude that El Centro's design is most impactful due to its focus on women and craftsmanship. In this thesis, I define craftsmanship as art that is intended to demonstrate the creativity of the artist. This component of the workshop produces an environment where the women can encourage each other, express themselves, and apply the skills learned through this organization to improve their socioeconomic status and better their quality of life. They are given a space to build the confidence needed to display their artwork in a marketplace, communicate with tourists, and sell their work, if they so choose. Across a variety of cultures, women's household crafts are often an important source of income. In most cultural contexts, women play a significant role in the household whether it be as sisters, wives, caretakers, and most commonly as mothers. There is significant power ingrained in a woman's role that is often overlooked under the constraints of patriarchal values and systems.

This thesis will look specifically at the use of craftsmanship and crafts culture as a necessary component of El Centro de Formación's design, contributing to its overall impact on the community. At El Centro de Formación, the women create a variety of different crafts such as multimedia collages and sculptures using organic materials, some of which depict a scene or in some way connect to the women and their experiences. The organization provides the women with the supplies needed for crafts making. Alongside this crafts component, the program offers other courses that expand upon the skills learned from the crafts project.

El Centro is a small-scale approach to making a large-scale impact in the greater community. My research has led me to conclude that with the creation of grassroots organizations with a similar design to El Centro de Formación Integral, specifically using experiential ways of healing to advance toward the Sustainable Development Goals, can be more



effective and impactful than top-down development interventions. Throughout the history of development practice, there have been many unsuccessful attempts to implement projects into communities with high vulnerability, often doing more harm than good. If there were more spaces created *by* the community and *for* the community, regardless of culture or context, it is more likely that there will be a decrease in vulnerability and increased well-being for the people inhabiting these spaces. Sustainable development is a growing field in today's world, and I believe women deserve to have a prominent voice in the conversations where these decisions are made. After traveling to San Jose, Costa Rica and working with this organization throughout my semester abroad, I collected observations that stood out to me throughout my time spent volunteering with El Centro de Formación Integral.

As I conducted research for this thesis, I grappled with understanding why I felt so personally connected to the parallels between El Centro de Formación and sustainable development. It was not until I began to analyze my evidence and discuss my research with peers from my childhood, that it became very clear. Craftsmanship has always been a source of expression for me. I was privileged to attend a school with a robust art program that gave students a space to be creative. Reflecting on my elementary school years in contrast with my high school experience, I notice that my connection to ceramics strengthened once I entered the ninth grade. The stark difference between the two programs is that during the years prior to high school, the school's art program was geared toward technique and skill. It was not until high school that the program shifted to expression-led artwork. We were still able to develop skills and learn technique, but the purpose of the program was embedded in the process opposed to the product. Art is what grounded, empowered, and centered me within my school community. Oftentimes, my ceramics projects reflected my life experiences, my values, and my activism.

This program allowed me to bridge the connection between art and emotions and use it to incite action throughout my community. As it relates to El Centro de Formación, when I volunteered with the organization, there were characteristics within the culture of this community that felt familiar to me. It was the sense of peace, relief, and reflection. The environment was not tense or high stress. Often in healing discourse, verbal communication is seen as the more effective method of emotional relief. El Centro de Formación is an example, though, that craftsmanship has the potential to be an inexpensive and accessible form of expression and can have an immense impact on development practice. The shift of focus from product to process allows more space for creativity and innovation in ways that technique and skill does not encompass. In my research process, I came across psychotherapist, Natalie Rogers, who validated my stances towards art as a form of healing and led me to establish correlations between craftsmanship, sustainable development, and women as mediators of this progression.

## **El Centro de Formación Background and Context – 2020**

In January 2020, I traveled to San Jose, Costa Rica through the International Center for Development Studies, a program with a concentration in sustainable development and social justice. There was a volunteer component tailored into our program. The nine students who made up the program were divided into three groups and matched with three different organizations. We were assigned organizations based on interest, so I was assigned to El Centro de Formación Integral Maria Madre de Los Pobres in Granadilla San José. Twice a week my classmate and I took public transportation to Granadilla to volunteer with the organization. For the semester, I was enrolled in a course called Community Engagement, which accompanied our work at El Centro. The first task after our first day visiting our community worksites was to write down our first reflections and observations of the community and organizations. My reflections were as follows:

When I first arrived at the center, I was on edge but still excited. Within the first few minutes, I was labeled "the girl who speaks English" or simply "muchacha." All the kids wanted to talk to us, practice the few English words they knew, show off their tricks, and their favorite toys. A lot of them wanted hugs or to shake hands. The toys the kids played with were often older or broken. The kids ranged greatly in age, anywhere from 5 months to 13 years old. At times it became difficult to gain the attention of more than 3 kids at a time. The kids make the best use possible of the small space provided to them by the church, but depending on the day, a large number of kids can easily make the space difficult to make the most of. Before we would arrive at the center, the kids would be playing and roughhousing without supervision. After a few attempts of introducing games

that would appeal to the different age levels, it became evident that we would have to take a different approach due to the lack of focus amongst the kids. Many of them preferred to play more violent or dangerous games and because we have not yet built a relationship with them, it is difficult to tell them otherwise. It became a challenge to even tell the kids that it was unsafe to put the toys in their mouths because they felt their logic made more sense.

On our last day at our community worksites, we were given the task of writing our final reflections on the work we had done throughout the semester. My final reflection read as follows:

Today, when we arrived at the center, I was hesitant because I was not sure how many kids to expect. Last week, there were about fifteen kids with extremely high energy levels. We were specifically instructed to keep a close eye on the kids to prevent them from running into the road. The entire time I was there I felt obligated to simply watch for safety purposes instead of participating and playing games with kids. I was able to have a conversation with one girl while we were tossing a ball back and forth, but at that time a two-year-old fell and began crying. This week was drastically different. There were not nearly as many kids, and we brought a few games from ICDS to teach the kids. It took a little longer than expected to teach the games to the kids, but eventually they got the hang of it. As soon as they understood how to win the game, they grew tired and found something else to do. We played UNO and Connect 4, but neither game was able to hold the attention of all the kids for longer than five minutes simply due to their age and age differences. Getting the kids to play together is an added challenge because then we would

have to create a game, they would all have the patience to play until the end! Overall, I learned a lot from my experience at the center, and I wish we were able to see these projects come to fruition.

Studying abroad in Costa Rica the Spring of 2020 was an experience that came at the most perfect time in my academic career at Emory. I went into my semester abroad with the intention of escaping unresolved conflicts, responsibilities, and doubts. I did not expect the journey to completely reroute the trajectory of my life plan in the way it did. At Oxford College, my academic background was based in anthropology and sociology. Throughout my time abroad I utilized many of the concepts learned over the past year and a half in my interactions with my classmates, host family, professors, and anyone new I encountered, including the women and children at El Centro de Formación Integral. The real transition only occurred once I began taking courses in Costa Rica at Universidad de Latina. All my classes related to sustainable development in some way and were specific to either Costa Rica or Latin America. The course with the community worksite component was called Community Engagement and Sustainable Development. This is where I was initially introduced to El Centro de Formación Integral. We began with preliminary research that included researching the geographical location and demographic within San Jose, learning about their mission, and establishing exactly how the organization relates to sustainable development. It was not until we had a solid background on the organization that we actually went to the worksite to meet with the organizers and introduce ourselves. My classmate and I were both assigned to this organization, so we used public transportation to travel to Granadilla, a suburb within the San Jose province. The bus ride was about a 10-

minute bus ride outside of San Pedro, where we took classes during the day. On the bus we were able to grasp a visual sense of what the community was like. The homes were in close proximity and mainly made up of cement and zinc. The only noticeable difference between the infrastructure in Granadilla and San Pedro is the space between houses and sizes of them. The roads were made of tar, but there were many potholes throughout that made the ride to the church a tad rough. As we arrived at the Catholic Church, it was obvious that this location was a central point in the community based on the size and bold nature of the gates at the entrance.

When I first visited the worksite, I felt the need to mentally acknowledge my positionality as a Black woman in a predominantly white country. I found it interesting that I was cognizant of this difference at my community worksite versus within my homestay. After thinking about this more critically though, I think I noticed it more because in San Pedro the city was significantly more diverse and populated with tourists; in this context, it felt safe to assume that in a more local area (with less tourism) it is not common for the community to interact with women who look like I do.

I was extremely nervous going into my first meeting with the women and their children. The language barrier was another challenge that I anticipated. I have been studying Spanish since I was 8 years old, but still I was not fully confident in my ability to understand or communicate. The organizers of El Centro de Formación told us ahead of time that none of the women could speak English outside of the vocabulary they had learned in their classes. The only thought that put me slightly at ease was that my classmate was a native Spanish

speaker from Mexico, so I was relieved that I would have a bit of help when communicating with the members of the organization. Throughout my time volunteering with El Centro de Formación, I was able to watch as the women's crafts progressed over the few months I was there. In our last couple of weeks working with the center, we visited with all the members of my semester abroad program to give the women an opportunity to showcase their artwork and talk to us about them. The energy in the room was interesting because many of the women from my program were not fluent in Spanish and none of the women at the center were fluent in English. We all still managed to connect with one another through the artwork and the appreciation for the effort, time, and emotion put into each project. The program is structured in a way where the center provides the women an assortment of supplies and general instruction for a crafts project. From there, the women are free to decide how they produce their craft and how they decide to use or display the craft. After spending these months working with the kids alongside this program, I began to understand how the craftsmanship component of El Centro de Formación is essential to the mission of this organization and can in many ways be applicable in broader contexts relating to development and women's rights.

I included my participant observation collected in 2020 to encapsulate experiences that still exemplify aspects of Costa Rican culture that I could not collect in 2022, due to the corona virus pandemic. As Costa Rica is sociologically categorized as a collectivist society, the pandemic is the principal reason for the shift in my ability and comfortability interacting with and living amongst the people of Granadilla as I was in 2020, out of concern for the health and safety of everyone involved.

## Literature Review

This study aims to discover the significance, intention, and impact of the aspects that make up the design of El Centro de Formación. To gain a better understanding of the recurring themes that have been present while analyzing El Centro's design and mission, which is heavily rooted in women's empowerment through craftsmanship, literature and theory will be useful in providing the necessary information to effectively apply to the organization's design. This literature review will not only be a critical analysis of the existing literature in development studies, women's studies, and cultural studies, but also it will be a thorough critique of the systems that make up each of these disciplines. It is important that throughout this thesis, the reader acknowledges the use of the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals as a conceptual framework and point of reference, not a direct interpretation from the United Nations. The definitions mentioned in this literature review will range from a variety of authors and theorists that have also made significant contributions to the aforementioned disciplines. Although the sustainable development goals aim to develop nations through the social, economic, and environmental pillar, the way in which each goal is expounded upon seems to only pertain to one pillar. It is imperative to review each goal and understand how the three pillars are intertwined from within, not only generally across the seventeen goals. It has been the case historically that development initiatives are created to solve one specific issue by aiding a problem opposed to eliminating the issue entirely and having little consideration for the resulting consequences that the communities are left to fix on their own.

Another point of criticism that is present in this chapter is that many of the authors write or have written from a position of *teaching* instead of *learning*. There is a level of privilege engrained in the ability to publish information within academia and control a narrative of what



should be considered the “correct” way of developing a community while imposing beliefs from an ill-informed perspective. My thesis intends to learn from the multiple layers that are built into this organization's grassroots foundation and analyze the aspects of El Centro that are essential to its progression towards their mission as well as how the design could be applicable and beneficial in other cultural contexts. The literature will act as a sounding board to clearly recognize the paths development and cultural studies have taken historically and conceptualize a solution that could be more successful in the future.

It is important in the context of this thesis to have a clear definition for sustainable development because it is often used interchangeably with sustainability, which do not necessarily reference the same agenda. In *Enterprising Communities, Grassroots Sustainability*, Anna Davies explores the distinctions between a grassroots organization, an enterprise, and how they play into both sustainability and sustainable development in different ways. In the first chapter "Introduction: Sustainability, Innovation, Enterprise and the Grassroots," Davies provides background on the terms "sustainability" and "sustainable development."<sup>2</sup> To define sustainable development, she cites the Brundtland Report's definition that explains it "is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."<sup>3</sup>

The Brundtland Report is the report that was presented at the Brundtland Commission for the World Commission on Environment and Development, for which Gro Harlem Brundtland was the chair.<sup>4</sup> The Report inspired groundbreaking movement and development because it explicitly addressed a well-rounded, in-depth description of the dire issues the world is currently

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<sup>2</sup> Davies, *Enterprising Communities Grassroots Sustainability Innovations*.

<sup>3</sup> Davies, "Introduction: Sustainability, Innovation, Enterprise and the Grassroots."

<sup>4</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."

facing, while also emphasizing the need to develop for future generations. This was the first time the three pillars of sustainability were acknowledged as interdependent entities that needed to be developed at the same pace and time. In an article that uses the Brundtland Report as a conceptual framework, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability," Amartya Sen writes, "Since people are the ultimate 'agents' of change, much must depend on their inspiration and commitment, and we do require a broad enough notion of sustainability that be sufficiently enlivening."<sup>5</sup> The Report was the first statement on development that held industrial countries accountable for any progress that would be made or had been made, and this was the motive for defining sustainable development and sustainability in vague terms for the entire world, including the nations commonly referred to as the Global South.<sup>6</sup> It gave humans the space and time to plan and execute initiatives according to the time and circumstance instead of writing specifically to the context of 1987, when the Report was published.<sup>7</sup>

Davies goes on to break down the flaws within this outdated definition due to the vagueness of the language used. She specifically emphasizes the lack of clarity given to distinguish between what should be considered a "need" in any particular community.<sup>8</sup> The definition of needs can be viewed from standpoints. Sen argues that there must be a shift in humanity where people have the agency to address and cater to their own needs instead of the imposition of savior complexes onto communities.<sup>9</sup> It is valid to delve deeper into what "needs" are just as it is important to understand what El Centro's mission refers to when it uses the term

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<sup>5</sup> Sen.

<sup>6</sup> The use of the adjective "industrial" to discuss the Western nations, which are considered to have the greatest influence on power structures and dynamics, is necessary in order to remain consistent with the terminology used in the official Brundtland Report.

<sup>7</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."

<sup>8</sup> Davies, "Introduction: Sustainability, Innovation, Enterprise and the Grassroots."

<sup>9</sup> Sen.

"integral." Both terms are often viewed as subjective based on the circumstance and histories of the communities. Throughout this thesis, though, I will utilize the framework of the "hierarchy of needs" curated by Abraham Maslow and use it as the foundation of my argument that wellbeing is based on more concrete aspects of life, thus gearing it more towards "needs." Quality of life is connected to "wants." Abraham Maslow built this pyramid with the base consisting of physical needs required for survival such as food, shelter, and water.<sup>10</sup> The pyramid moves up towards a humans need for safety and security, then the need for love and a sense of belonging. Lastly, the structure has esteem and self-actualization as the last two sections.<sup>11</sup> As one need builds on another, the pyramid becomes slightly less tangible or concrete. Furthermore, according to Maslow, one cannot reach the upper levels of the hierarchy unless the level below is satisfied. In other words, without the most basic needs, self-actualization is not achievable.<sup>12</sup> This theory of need is significant because when the Brundtland Report considers *needs* on an international scale, it is necessary to clearly understand what exactly the report refers to. This thesis will apply Maslow's hierarchy of needs to the Brundtland Report in a way that aims to achieve the base level of the hierarchy to allow equal opportunity to advance and pursue the upper levels of the pyramid.

Maslow's theory of need is consistent with Chilean economist Max-Neef's theory that humans require nine fundamental needs and within those groups are "satisfiers," or less tangible conditions that satisfy each need opposed to "economic goods."<sup>13</sup> The application of these needs, however, is different. The nine fundamental needs are listed as "subsistence, protection, affection, understanding, participation, creation, leisure, identity, and freedom." Satisfiers were

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<sup>10</sup> Davies, "Introduction: Sustainability, Innovation, Enterprise and the Grassroots."

<sup>11</sup> Davies.

<sup>12</sup> Walter, "Human Behaviour and Adequacy of Satisfiers in the Light of Sustainable Development."

<sup>13</sup> Walter.

described as "forms of organization, political structures, social practices, values and norms, types of behaviour etc."<sup>14</sup> Max-Neef's theory describes the fundamental needs as finite categories that can be classified and are consistent in time as well as geographical location. This description is posed in contrast with satisfiers, which can change because it is dependent on circumstance, location, and time.<sup>15</sup>

In the same way that rhetoric and denotation made a significant difference when analyzing the meaning of sustainable development, it is equally as important to provide clarity when analyzing each individual goal and the explanations the United Nations has for them. According to the United Nations, the first goal, Zero Poverty, is one that aims to liberate the entire world of extreme economic poverty. Although poverty is a challenge people and families face at different scales, it should be recognized that solving the problem is not as simple as giving people enough money to survive. The issue of poverty is deeply rooted in inequality and "capability deprivation," contrary to the commonly recognized economic poverty.<sup>16</sup> Capability deprivation looks at the moral-intellectual poverty many people face, where they are denied equal opportunity to provide for themselves or their families.<sup>17</sup> It is important for both types of poverty to be addressed because these two types of poverty are not mutually exclusive and mitigated with the proper resources to prevent future generations from repeating the cycle. As women, and mainly mothers in El Centro's case, they exist within a vulnerable demographic that is afforded few opportunities to grow, lead, and thrive autonomously. Defining poverty as Amartya Sen does, brings visibility to the women who attend El Centro's workshops.<sup>18</sup> The

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<sup>14</sup> Walter.

<sup>15</sup> Max-Neef, "Development and Human Needs."

<sup>16</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."

<sup>17</sup> Walter, "Human Behaviour and Adequacy of Satisfiers in the Light of Sustainable Development."

<sup>18</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."

women who join El Centro's workshops are commonly those who have been marginalized with their community and do not receive the same amount of opportunity that others have. For reasons such as a lack of formal education, citizenship, or stability, the women attend El Centro in hopes of creating opportunities for themselves where officially recognized systems have continuously excluded them. The market economy cannot truly be a source of stability for vulnerable populations due to the systems and institutions that control it. Opportunity as it relates to access and mobility, however, holds immense value and is interminable. Though the women who attend El Centro de Formación often come from low-income backgrounds, financial aid and food assistance could only provide temporary relief. The sustainable solution, which El Centro aims to reach, is for the women to develop the strength, confidence, and skills to sustain a quality life for themselves and their children independent of the organization.

In the concluding chapter of this book, Davies discusses the mobility of grassroots sustainability and how these efforts are translatable across communities while remaining true to the inherent locality of *grassroots* organizations. She addresses the possibility for grassroots enterprises to be successful and increase their impact by applying them in other contexts, as long as they operate independently while using a similar model. In her debate on whether or not transitioning an organization into an enterprise would diminish the main aspects of a grassroots initiative, Davies explains that "grassroots sustainability enterprises often remain small and locally focused because they are starved of institutional support and resources in ways which technological innovations do not experience."<sup>19</sup> For El Centro de Formación, the mission is to fill a gap that the government has no intention of filling for these women. The women would not otherwise attend these programs if this level of community support were being fostered

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<sup>19</sup> Davies, "Conclusion: Sustaining Grassroots Sustainability Enterprise: Challenges and Opportunities."

elsewhere. Scenarios where institutions and government systems leave members of the population without access and resources is a common occurrence in communities all over the world. It is not unique to Granadilla, San Jose.

Another significant point that Davies addresses, though, is that when mobilizing a grassroots sustainability enterprise, it is critical to account for and recognize the differences in context through the reapplication process. Davies asserts, “Translating practices from one context to another is then not simply a case of replicating models. Expanding activities in order to ensure economic vitality of grassroots sustainability enterprises can clash with community and environmental values that originally motivated the initiation of the grassroots enterprise.”<sup>20</sup> To negate this potential clash with community values, it is critical that the community from which the enterprise was to originate would be involved in the conversation of expanding the organization. Similarly for the environmental values in any community, every decision should be intentional and well planned from several angles regarding who or what is negatively affected, how will they be impacted, and how can these consequences be eliminated from the plan. El Centro is an organization that holds the potential to be impactful in many other contexts on different scales while maintaining its core mission. It is essential to acknowledge, however, that the expansion would have to be a progressive effort in order to monitor and maintain the strength of the program’s core goals and values. Interventions that are initiated on a small scale and rapidly upscaled typically have less of an impact because the concern is geared more towards changing *the world* opposed to bettering the lives of people in need. The framework of this chapter builds upon theories by Manfred Max Neef in that regardless of the new context, expanding an organization like El Centro requires a constant reevaluation of what the people

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<sup>20</sup> Davies.

need and how these needs can be satisfied. These needs should also not be assumed nor imposed. For these programs to work, it takes observation and interaction; there requires a dialogue with the beneficiaries of these programs to be able to measure the impact and positive movement toward the organization's mission.

In "The Role of Women in Construction of Sustainable and Social Entrepreneurship," the chapter suggests that women play an essential role in sustainable development through their entrepreneurial involvement in the modern economy.<sup>21</sup> Though the chapter uses Brazil as an example of a developing country where social entrepreneurship has become especially common, El Centro similarly teaches women entrepreneurial skills and money management, so the women are able to participate in the modern economy more easily if they choose to do so. The authors explain the history of the term "entrepreneur" as well as the history of women's traditional roles in society that previously prohibited them from holding positions in economic affairs.<sup>22</sup> As it relates to my argument, this chapter acts as support for why women have for so long been unable to explore economic opportunities, which is a reality that is not specific to one culture.

A similar point is made in "Women Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Business Development: Key Findings from a SWOT-AHP Analysis." In this article, women are said to be the only part of society that remains "unexploited."<sup>23</sup> Stefan et al. uses this term not to refer to the women but their potential as and capacity to be productive members of society. This is the case because women have been constantly underestimated, overlooked, and doubted when in pursuit of any role outside of embodying "the domestic, caretaker" trope. The article also acknowledges that women who have started their own businesses experience challenges because

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<sup>21</sup> Pereira de Araújo et al., "The Role of Women in Construction of Sustainable and Social Entrepreneurship."

<sup>22</sup> Pereira de Araújo et al.

<sup>23</sup> Stefan et al., "Women Entrepreneurship and Sustainable Business Development."

of the gender biases prevalent in the innovative economy. In more recent years, women are motivated to start their own business in hopes of being independent, having financial stability, and building self-assurance in the business sector. Stefan et al. explains that women find challenges assembling the proper network, raising the initial funding, or applying knowledge of financial literacy to jumpstart a business.<sup>24</sup> Below, I will argue that these challenges are minimized by El Centro de Formación's organization design. The workshops teach financial planning and literacy because these resources are not readily available to women unless they decide to pursue entrepreneurship through a formal education route or if there is a man within the household who may have this knowledge. In connection with the self-assurance necessary to participate in the business sector, El Centro contributes to this with its encouraging environment that is fostered and sustained through craftsmanship.

In an article titled "Knowledge and Perceptions in Costa Rica Regarding Environment, Population, and Biodiversity Issues," Karen D. Holl recognizes Costa Rica's leading efforts in sustainable development and the impact it has made on the environment in relation to the demographics of their citizens.<sup>25</sup> The authors conducted a study in which they interviewed people from different socioeconomic statuses to gauge their knowledge of the environmental issues that will increasingly impact them if overpopulation persists.<sup>26</sup> The results showed that the majority of the subjects did not consider the environment to be an important issue. The authors also found that it was mainly interviewees with fewer years of formal education who were less knowledgeable about environmental issues and more concerned with social problems.<sup>27</sup> This

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<sup>24</sup> Stefan et al.

<sup>25</sup> Holl, Daily, and Ehrlich, "Knowledge and Perceptions in Costa Rica Regarding Environment, Population, and Biodiversity Issues."

<sup>26</sup> Holl, Daily, and Ehrlich.

<sup>27</sup> Holl, Daily, and Ehrlich.



article will assist in formulating my methodology and conducting my interview with El Centro de Formación's founder, Emmanuel. The authors' positioning on the subject is that environmental education is important to sustainable development and should be implemented at every level of education regardless of socioeconomic status, age, or gender.<sup>28</sup> In this research, there are perspectives missing, and I plan to use this research as a framework for formulating my own conclusions on the importance of an environmental education in achieving sustainable development as opposed to social and economic competence. Additionally, the crafts at El Centro de Formación are made using recycled and organic materials, so the crafts component could initiate conversations about the environment and sustainable art practices.

In Kate Goldade's essay "Transnational Reproduction: Reproductive Health, Limitations, and Contradictions for Working Nicaraguan Migrant Women in Costa Rica," she provides historical context to the reasons for Nicaraguan migration to Costa Rica. Goldade also discusses the discrimination and indifference felt towards migrants despite the perception that Costa Rica provides universal services for all.<sup>29</sup> She details the different ways Nicaraguan mothers maneuvered around Costa Rican laws against undocumented immigration, leaving them with limited resources and access to the labor force.<sup>30</sup> Goldade's essay supports claims in my thesis that pertain to Granadilla's ethnic demographic. It also supports the need for organizations like El Centro de Formación because it details the challenges migrant mothers face in Costa Rica, due to strict policies. Although it does not explicitly explain it, Goldade's essay also alludes to the importance of increasing a woman's human capital, so she is not forced to work such low paying jobs. Additionally, the role of self-esteem and well-being, main components of El Centro's

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<sup>28</sup> Holl, Daily, and Ehrlich.

<sup>29</sup> Goldade, "Transnational Reproduction: Reproductive Health, Limitations, and Contradictions for Working Nicaraguan Migrant Women in Costa Rica."

<sup>30</sup> Goldade.

mission and goal, is addressed in this chapter as well.<sup>31</sup> El Centro's enrichment program serves a community that is overlooked and inadequately supported.

In Rocio Loría's chapter on the vulnerability of Nicaraguan and Panamanian women as they migrate to Costa Rica, Loría discusses the violence that such women often endure in their journeys to Costa Rica, as well as the challenges they face in an effort to establish an identity in a different country.<sup>32</sup> The chapter details extreme poverty and exploitation as the frequent outcome for recent migrants. The influx in migrants from Nicaragua began in the 1980s due to economic hardships, so many women moved to Costa Rica in hopes of a better quality of life for themselves and their children.<sup>33</sup> In this thesis, I am analyzing the demographic in one particular area in Costa Rica, the Granadilla district of San Jose. The community has a high migrant population from Nicaragua, and it is mainly due to the economic pressures discussed throughout Loría's chapter. Although El Centro de Formación Integral does not explicitly market itself toward migrant women, women from Nicaragua often receive support from the center in response to the violence experienced during their migration or as a result of the relocation to Costa Rica. In many cases, they are unable or ineligible to seek support elsewhere, so the church is the most welcoming environment available.

Generally, I have found that academic literature makes few connections between the social and economic pillars that sustainable development encompasses and a women's role in society. This aspect is often unappreciated in research and goes unrecognized in academic literature, and I hope to make the connection more explicit in my thesis. I want to convey to the reader a few things: that women play a more significant role in sustainable development than is

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<sup>31</sup> Goldade.

<sup>32</sup> Loría, "Vulnerability to Violence in Immigration: Nicaraguan and Panamanian Women in Migratory Transit to Costa Rica."

<sup>33</sup> Loría.

generally publicized, and that the social and economic aspects of the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goals are more commonly discussed through the assessment of the environmental pillar. More specifically, I would like to emphasize the importance of the women's role in improving overall quality of life for everyone and how craftsmanship acts as a satisfier to this objective.

In Arjo Klamer's "Craftsculture: an international comparison," Klamer provides a comparison of the value different countries place on the culture of craftsmanship and how it plays into the wider economy. He describes craft culture to have an entirely separate economy known as the "creative economy."<sup>34</sup> To take it a step further, Klamer conducted a study that was designed to assess the economic significance of craft cultures in six countries specifically: Japan, China, India, Italy, Germany, and England. Klamer argues that "craftsmanship furthermore satisfies the need for meaningful work. Mastery provides a sense of self-worth. This article supports my argument in how it acknowledges the correlation between craftsmanship and self-worth, a connection that does not receive much recognition due to the more popular notion that craftsmanship requires very little intellect."<sup>35</sup> Klamer highlights the significance of capability and demonstrating proficiency at any particular skill or activity. The freedom of creation operates in conjunction with Sen's definition of poverty, but applied to craftsmanship, the point of satisfaction is determined by the artist along with what is to be considered the point of fulfillment.<sup>36</sup> It also supports the earlier discussed self-assurance as it relates to women's participation in the business sector and how mastery in one skill and embolden exploration in another.

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<sup>34</sup> Klamer, "Crafting Culture: The Importance of Craftsmanship for the World of the Arts and the Economy at Large."

<sup>35</sup> Klamer.

<sup>36</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."

For my thesis, I will be defining "craftsmanship" based on the framework Klamer outlines in this article as he filters through the many definitions of craftsmanship he found through his research in the Netherlands. To define such a broad topic, the researchers begin by breaking down craftsmanship into four categories: "skilled work, unskilled work, utilitarian crafts, and creative crafts."<sup>37</sup> Skilled work is work that requires some degree of training; unskilled work does not require training. Utilitarian crafts are those that serve a concrete purpose or use; creative crafts are intended to showcase the creativity of the artist. As I plan to relate this to El Centro, I am specifically using the creative craft category when referring to craftsmanship within the organization. Klamer concluded from his findings that there is, in fact, not one definition of craftsmanship or crafts culture because the market accepts and legitimizes craftsmanship to various degrees in different cultures.<sup>38</sup> To better understand how crafts culture is relevant in Costa Rican culture specifically, I looked at Frederick Wherry's book, *Global Markets and Local Crafts: Thailand and Costa Rica Compared*.<sup>39</sup> This book overlaps with Klamer's article in how it provides a solid description of what is defined as craftsmanship in Costa Rica, in addition to the economic value of producing these creative crafts to sell in a marketplace or as a street vendor. Wherry also emphasizes the authenticity and expression that craftsmanship demonstrates as well as a significant relic of the culture from which it comes. In her review of Wherry's book, Piya Pangsapa writes:

For example, artisans routinely stage demonstrations for tourists to let them see, feel, and experience the production process and witness how the artisan gets caught up in the rhythm of work, how making pottery "comes naturally"-- acts that generate the emotional

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<sup>37</sup> Klamer, "Crafting Culture: The Importance of Craftsmanship for the World of the Arts and the Economy at Large."

<sup>38</sup> Klamer.

<sup>39</sup> Pangsapa, "Review of Global Markets and Local Crafts."

energy that makes the object worth its price but also affirm the artisan's unique set of skills that cannot be replicated by mass production. Some artisans' children are even put on display for the tourists and are involved in the sales pitch.<sup>40</sup>

Wherry also explores the ways in which local artisans convert resources into assets that benefit them politically and economically.<sup>41</sup> This example is an accurate description of how street vendors and local artisans successfully market their artwork to tourists and even locals who have an interest in craft culture. The use of children in the marketing strategy for crafts culture is interesting because it can easily be misconstrued as exploitation or profiting from their children. On the contrary, it is a technique that piques the interest of a wider audience and buyer's market and is mutually beneficial to the child as well as the parent. People are then intrigued by the pride, knowledge, and appreciation that the children hold for craftsmanship. The act of children showcasing the crafts is how they demonstrate this pride to the public; people without an aptitude for art are more likely to buy from a child than they are an adult. The showcasing is comparable to having children sell cookies or merchandise for an organization. In this case, it is to help their parent sell their artwork and increase their family's financial stability. Although Wherry's economy-driven views on the profitability of crafts culture contrasts with theorist, Manfred Max Neef, who may not view economic growth or security as a human need, it is important to acknowledge that for some people economic prosperity acts a satisfier to their fundamental human needs.<sup>42</sup> At El Centro de Formación, the women work on these crafts throughout the duration of the program. Once their crafts projects are complete, they are able to sell their artwork in the marketplace if they so choose, but they could also display it at church or

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<sup>40</sup> Pangsapa.

<sup>41</sup> Pangsapa.

<sup>42</sup> Max-Neef, "Development and Human Needs."

in their homes. The point is, though, regardless of what the women decide to do with their projects, they were given tools, support, and opportunity that they were unattainable elsewhere. Craftsmanship acts as a satisfier for these women as they see fit from the different ways crafts culture contributes to wellbeing and a quality life.

Klamer anticipated in 2012 that, as we move into the future, quality, creativity, and authenticity will become increasingly popular attributes that buyers seek in their crafts across cultures.<sup>43</sup> As was the case in the Netherlands, it seems that there are not significant resources allocated towards craft culture, decreasing the spaces creatives have to showcase their craftsmanship. Similarly, Wherry defines "the aura of authenticity" as a phenomenon that brings cultural status and significance to a community while also increasing the economic value of crafts that are produced there.<sup>44</sup> Whether artisans are successful in their local communities is dependent on "the nations' respective social and cultural histories and their orientations toward national identity, but also owing to economic development policies and export growth strategies," the review on *Global Markets and Local Crafts: Thailand and Costa Rica Compared* explained.<sup>45</sup> To Wherry's point, if Costa Rica were to embrace traditional crafts culture more, they could potentially add yet another aspect of their culture to making the nation an "important center of cultural production," in addition to their rich biodiversity and environmental conservation efforts.<sup>46</sup>

To connect the previously discussed themes, this mention of whether crafts culture is a profitable market is heavily dependent on the strategies used to sell the crafts to tourists and local

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<sup>43</sup> Klamer, "Crafting Culture: The Importance of Craftsmanship for the World of the Arts and the Economy at Large."

<sup>44</sup> Pangsapa, "Review of Global Markets and Local Crafts."

<sup>45</sup> Pangsapa.

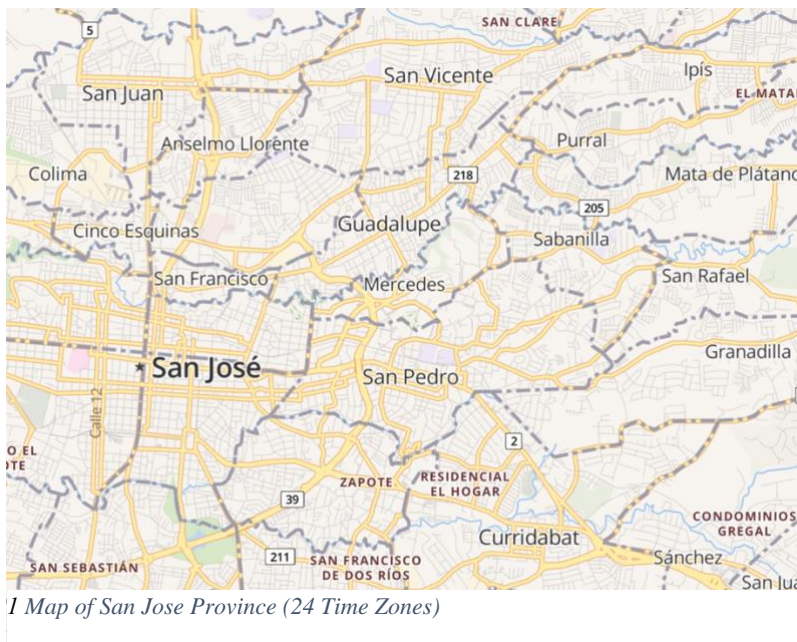
<sup>46</sup> Pangsapa.

buyers. With the financial literacy workshops that El Centro de Formación hosts, women can learn the basic skills needed to effectively market their products and profit from their crafts by marketing themselves. Selling oneself along with a product is a skill that takes a level of confidence and conviction because the artisan must believe in themselves and the value of their craft. The workshops that El Centro hosts are geared towards strengthening these skills and healing from past and present traumas that may otherwise deter a woman from pursuing a career in entrepreneurship. The benefits of an organization like El Centro are that when the organizers and leaders are teaching these skills to the women, it is not structured similar to a Boys & Girls Club, where women can select a class or two that interests them and only attend as they please. The women who attend El Centro go through the program from start to finish with the same women to help foster a familiar community of strong women within their town. This allows them to watch as they and their peers progress and learn collectively. It is also common for the women to leave the program and return to help support the women who actively take classes with El Centro.

In the following chapters, I plan to bridge the connections between the literature I previously discussed while adding the voices of El Centro's founder as well as a few more authors to highlight the intersections between craftsmanship, women empowerment, and sustainable development. Much of the analysis will be based on complex theories with multiple explanations and avenues of discourse surrounding them, so to bring clarity I will expound upon these theories as they present themselves throughout.

## Methods

The following chapter of this thesis will consist of my participant observation and an interview with the founder of El Centro de Formación. I have decided to conduct expert interviews to solely focus on the structure of the organization and analyze the facts and figures associated with the organization to better understand the aspects that make it an impactful grassroots organization. The interview will supplement my preliminary research by filling in gaps that the literature may not have included or provide further reasoning that prompts me to draw different conclusions than I had initially anticipated. After returning to Costa Rica December 2021 to conduct in-person participant observation and an interview, I have a more current idea of what aspects of the organization has worked in the past and what they have changed since my visit during the spring of 2020. It will make for an interesting comparison there as well to see how they have changed and why, especially in the current context of the pandemic. I was curious to understand how El Centro has had to adapt since the start of coronavirus and whether the changes have proven to be a hinderance or catalyst to the organization's community impact.





On December 31, 2021, I traveled independently to San Jose, Costa Rica to conduct an interview with the founder of El Centro de Formación, Emmanuel. I included a map above for visual clarity on where I stayed is located in relation to Granadilla, where I visited. I traveled to Costa Rica only after having obtained the appropriate vaccinations and booster shots to build immunity against the coronavirus in order to protect myself, Emmanuel, and anyone I happened to come into contact with as I conducted my research. I stayed in San Pedro, a suburb of San Jose that I was rather familiar with from my past semester abroad experience in 2020. I conducted participant observation of the neighborhood that I stayed in and continued to record observations on my way to the Church of Granadilla, where the interview was conducted in Emmanuel's office. Upon arrival, I reintroduced my project to Emmanuel and gained verbal informed consent to ask questions about the organization for my thesis. I audio recorded an hour-long interview with consent from Emmanuel completely in Spanish, but for the sake of this honors thesis I had the transcript translated to English by a native Spanish speaker to retain the authenticity of the responses. The questions asked during the interview pertained to the facts, figures, and perceived success of the organization by the founder. I refrained from asking for specific anecdotes or scenarios of the individual women in the program to be respectful of the vulnerabilities experienced by marginalized groups in this region. I was also cognizant of the fact that Emmanuel builds close and personal relationships with the women who participate in this program, so I remained mindful of this throughout the interview as well.

The thirteen questions I asked read as follows:

1. What is the mission or purpose of El Centro in the community?
2. Why was there a need for El Centro in the community?
3. What does “integral” mean in the name of the organization?
4. How does the program operate day to day?
5. What do the kids do at the center while the women are in class?
6. How is El Centro funded? What funding does the organization require?
7. How do you market El Centro?
8. Who teaches the workshops?
9. Why did you choose those workshops?
10. What impact have you noticed on the women?
11. How important is the crafts component at El Centro?
12. What makes El Centro a “successful” organization, in your opinion?
13. How has the vision of the center changed over the years since it originally began?

After the interview, I walked around the center and the outside of the church to take a few pictures, which I received permission to capture. Similar to my ride to the organization, I took observations after the interview until my arrival at my AirBnB. I spent time consolidating my participant observations and coding the collected data using women, socioeconomic markers, and the presence of craftsmanship as overarching categories that I divide into specific codes. After conducting and consolidating my participant observation, I categorized the recurring themes I noticed and placed each theme into a category that is prevalent throughout my thesis. The three categories that pertain to my thesis are women, identifiers of socioeconomic status, and the presence of crafts culture in everyday life. The participant observation that follows goes on to

explain and describe the recurring themes I noticed within the context of the three primary categories. I am supplementing this analysis with the interpretations drawn from my interview with a literature review that gives a few perspectives of the discourses surrounding craftsmanship, development, and art therapy within academia, more specifically psychology, some of which support my argument while others I challenge in my analysis of the evidence.

### Participant Observation 2022

Participant Observation Codes	Women	Socioeconomic markers	Presence of Craftsmanship
	Motherhood	Cars	Suburbs (San Pedro)
	Societal role	Infrastructure	Downtown (Street vendors)
		Homes	Granadilla (El Centro)
		Roads	
		Buses	

As I walk down the street there are many homes, schools, and businesses along the way. Some are bars, or "sodas." Sodas are small restaurants where locals can get traditional Costa Rican meals, such as *un casado* or *gallo pinto*, for an economically reasonable price as well as a hamburger, fries, etc. Sodas are typically embedded in residential communities. Often times business owners sit in front of their stores and speak with members of their community. This level of intimacy between locals and business owners was an example of the collectivist society I was experiencing. Even amidst a pandemic, there was still a level of community that I no longer experience in the United States. It was important for me to spend time collecting observations of the local norms in order to draw informed conclusions on features or conditions that may be culturally specific to this region in Costa Rica and draw on moments I noticed that support responses in the later mentioned interview with the founder of El Centro de Formación, Emmanuel.

## **Women**

To collect more observations, I walked to a popular café called Aroma y Sabor, which is located next to the ULatina, where I studied during my semester abroad. As I ate lunch, I observed the area particularly the buses and bus stop culture. I noted a lot of people walking to get around, but the bus is also very popular. People, who appear to be working class, tend to wait at the bus stop in silence and everyone just tends to their own business. I noticed mothers with their kids waiting for the bus. It seemed as though it was common for mothers to commute with their children via the bus. Both of the kids wore backpacks and lightweight jackets it was midday, so I could only assume the kids had just finished school. Women, mothers in particular, have a seemingly involved role through which they have significant influence due to the amount of time spent with their children.

## **Socioeconomic Markers**

Throughout my time spent in San Jose, there were multiple occasions where I felt the wealth disparity was particularly prevalent as I collected qualitative data. From conversations I have had with locals, it seems that owning vehicles in Costa Rica is not as common for the average household because the import tax imposed by the government makes them significantly more expensive than their retail value. The maintenance and gas for vehicles are also expensive, so it is more common for families to purchase used cars to reduce costs. Owning a car in Costa Rica can be a symbol of class status, however it is common and convenient for residents to rely on public transportation. In the town where I stayed, the houses typically were multifamily units, in which case it was more common for one or two family members to have access to a vehicle while the others depended on public transportation.

The bus system is typically populated with commuters whether they be students or working-class people. On the bus, everyone keeps to themselves and gazes out the window. Due to the pandemic everyone wears masks on the bus. I believe this is also the reason that people are rather spread out on the bus; they are socially distanced as much as the space would allow. In comparison to my first experience in San Jose, the bus culture has changed considerably. Having collected these observations prior to my interview with Emmanuel, I realized there was a shift in cultural dynamics that occurred in response to the pandemic.

On January 5th, I rode in an Uber to the Church of Granadilla to meet with Emmanuel at 12pm. As I rode in the Uber, I made note of the visible changes in landscape from San Pedro to Granadilla. There were a few shopping centers with US-owned stores like Columbia, Starbucks, etc. Many of the restaurants looked expensive and were located in newly developed centers with modern seating plans and minimalist architecture. We took a few turns onto an uphill road that led to a town where the residential areas looked very economically segregated. On one side of the street, there were newly developed gated condominiums, which seems to be quite common in this general area. On the opposite side of the street there were a line of smaller, local businesses. This side was significantly more populated with a lot more foot traffic. Behind this were more residential homes, but it was clear there was a difference in socioeconomic status of the families that would live on either side of the street. The houses on the other side were pretty close packed. The homes are made of nickel and look like they have experienced a bit of wear and tear on the outside.

The observations I collected while sitting in the café compared to the observations taken in the Uber provided a substantial contrast and made the wealth disparity within the province of San Jose clearer. A particularly interesting example that does not necessarily demonstrate wealth disparity but a particularly different level of prominence in the community is the Catholic Church. Catholicism is the official religion in Costa Rica, so it is no surprise that the church was the largest structure in Granadilla aside from the newly constructed condominiums.

### **Presence of Craftsmanship**

The prevalence of craftsmanship varies significantly based on location and region in Costa Rica. Crafts are commonly made and sold to tourists as souvenirs, not necessarily as keepsakes for locals. Economic disparities were visible in the presence of street vendors as well. The street vendors located in downtown San Jose often operated without proper licensing, so the vendors would strategically place their merchandise on blankets on concrete to increase mobility in the presence of a law enforcement officer. Selling merchandise in San Jose without the ownership of a storefront is not a protected profession, so many women, migrant women especially, would be risking a lot as a street vendor considering they have significantly less protections under the law. In San Jose, it is more common for street vendors to display their artwork and crafts downtown opposed to in more residential areas. It is less common for tourists to stay in the suburbs of San Jose, so it makes sense that vendors would sell in areas where tourists would be more inclined to purchase souvenirs from local vendors. Crafts culture can display itself in many ways, but established storefronts that sold crafts were scarce within the suburbs of San Jose.

## Interview Interpretation and Coding Analysis

The purpose of grassroots organizations is to change the lives of individuals within a community in hopes of it having a cascade effect on the greater world around them. Similarly, in Abraham Maslow's theory of self-actualization, he argues that individual development is how humans reach the point of self-actualization, or "personal perfection." The field of development acts as a parallel to this theory because in order to truly develop and make a difference in the world, it requires change from within, on an individual scale. The enforcement of development policy and treaties is not the long-term solution to populations in every context living a quality life. As Amartya Sen has laid out, sustainable development can be addressed using two different approaches.<sup>47</sup> Practitioners develop using a need-based model of ensuring that everyone has their fundamental human needs, while a more effective approach would be freedom based where practitioners aim to give every human opportunity. To revisit Max Neef's nine fundamental needs, five of the specified needs are satisfied through active participation in crafts making: participation, creation, leisure, identity, and freedom. The remaining four needs can be satisfied with proper use of the process or product. Sen highlights the value of autonomy in this freedom-based practice. Top-down development interventions have for decades had an inverse effect, causing increased disparity in communities due to existing systems that limit their mobility.

After conducting an interview with Emmanuel, the founder of El Centro de Formación Integral, I obtained a deeper understanding of why and how the organization developed into what it is today. Although my overall argument aims to demonstrate the importance of craftsmanship and how it is necessary for in accomplishing the founding goals of the organization and boosting its impact on the community, I felt it necessary to ask questions that may not directly pertain to

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<sup>47</sup> Sen, "The Ends and Means of Sustainability."



craftsmanship to provide a framework for how this organization fits into its community. El Centro began as a project meant to feed people in the community who may have been having trouble feeding themselves or their families. El Centro would deliver lunches to homes or people could go to the Church of Granadilla and have lunch at the center. Eventually, Emmanuel realized that providing lunches did not serve as a long-term solution to the hardship these people were facing. It only generated a dependence on the resources and services offered by the center. Emmanuel wanted to see these people rise from the cycle of poverty.

“The center was born looking at the situation of the people and wanting to respond to that situation... We also discovered one thing, that there are places here where people are trained – they teach them to do things – make crafts, vessels, plant plants – but people acquired new knowledge, but they did not leave the cycle of poverty. They were still poor, and we discovered there was an issue. So, the center, in addition to giving the training so that they learn to do something, has the formation of reconciling themselves and that is the part of psychology. Because poverty is also a question of the mind, of how they are understood as people.”

*“El centro nació viendo la situación de la gente y queriendo responderle a esa situación...Pues también descubrimos una cosa, que aquí hay lugares donde hay formación a las personas - les enseñan a hacer cosas, manualidades... vasijas, sembrar plantas... pero las personas adquirirían nuevos conocimientos, pero no dejaban los ciclos de pobreza. Seguían siendo pobres. Ahí descubrimos que había una falla. Entonces el centro, además de dar la formación para que aprendan a hacer algo, tienen la formación de reconciliarse consigo mismos y esa es la parte de psicología. Porque la pobreza también es una cuestión de la cabeza, de cómo se entienden como personas.”*

This mindset is what inspired Emmanuel to change the mission of the organization to be “an aid for improving the quality of life of people living in poverty, so they can go forward...no need to rely on institutions and agencies.” As Emmanuel expressed, many grassroots initiatives stem from the need to provide for communities that are not being taken care of by the government or public institutions. There are examples of community-led mobilization in many collectivist societies such as tandas in Mexico. Where the government would not provide credit for communities living in poverty, the community relied on *confianza*, trust, to allow everyone the same opportunity to develop their own communities. Marginalization is a challenge faced especially by migrants who may lack citizenship or social services, and this is an issue that El Centro acknowledges as well.

“The center welcomes people,” Emmanuel explains. El Centro does not discriminate or withhold services for anyone, regardless of ethnicity, citizenship, etc. Migrants from Nicaragua are common at the center because of the high population in Granadilla.

As a result of the pandemic, El Centro decided to expand their services further to help alleviate the stress the community has experienced with the abrupt spike in unemployment rates. The center now offers employment assistance and has opened their lunch service to anyone in the community, not only the women who are participants in the program. These changes did impact the structure of the organization because they shortened the daily duration of the program and lessen the number of days the program runs each week to accommodate these additional services. Even with the modifications, El Centro’s focus still follows the framework of the 2030 Agenda. It aims to help release families from the cycle of poverty, promote economic growth of women, feed the community, and promote good health and well-being for women and their families. Though this alignment of the UN’s agenda and the El Centro’s mission was not

intentional, the organization is an example of the achievability of these goals through a grassroots approach. The local nature of the organization strengthens the support fostered amongst the community and keeps it in operation.

With all these factors at play, this thesis questions how El Centro applies craftsmanship as a tool to bring to fruition the psychological, spiritual, and personal growth the organization expects to see in every participant who attends this program. The two different ways in which this growth manifests itself are through changes in the wellbeing and quality of life of the women at the center. Drawing upon Maslow's theory of needs, wellbeing is measured by the fulfillment of needs, while quality of life is measured by the fulfillment of wants. El Centro can use recorded metrics regarding families who previously depended on the center to feed their families and no longer require such services as an indicator of a better wellbeing. Similarly, metrics regarding women who participate in the educational program offered at El Centro and graduate to obtain further certification from an academic or occupational institution can be said to have received a quality education. This education is an indicator that the women have the opportunity to sustain a quality life for themselves and their families. From my observations and interview with Emmanuel, it seems that El Centro's general services are in place to cater to the well-being of the overall community. Although both parts of El Centro operate closely with each other, the program that is offered to women is the aspect of the center that aims to improve quality of life. The approach the program uses, though, necessitates empowerment as a means for obtaining this improved quality life.

As Emmanuel looked for ways to increase the impact of El Centro, he explained:

“When they come ask for help, we say: Well, we can help them by giving them food, but that does not help them get ahead because once they run out of food, they are again in need of more food and it is a cycle...so we’re not making an impact.”

*“Cuando ellas vienen a pedir ayuda, nosotros decimos: bueno podemos ayudarles dándoles comida. Pero eso no les ayuda a salir adelante, porque una vez que se les acaba la comida vuelven a tener necesidad de más comida y es un ciclo...Entonces no estamos logrando un impacto.”*

In order to make El Centro a more sustainable project that women could use and not as a service to rely on, Emmanuel delved deeper into the factors that contribute to this cycle of poverty. As he describes his attitudes toward the matter, he expresses:

“Poverty is also a question of the mind, of how they see themselves as people...I’m not worth anything, I deserve to be poor, I don’t deserve to move ahead, etc. That’s an issue that needs to be addressed psychologically. It can also be something like a guilt that people experience, and that may be more spiritual than psychological. We also have this spiritual component, so that the women can get rid of this guilt that they drag with them and does not allow them to get ahead... It not only gives them tools to learn how to do things...and people may also have all these tools, but they may not manage their money. The center then gives them money management assistance, so they can manage the assets they have. The idea is that from that integral formation, they can move forward.”

*“Porque la pobreza también es una cuestión de la cabeza, de cómo se entienden como personas... "yo no valgo nada...", "yo merezco estar pobre...", "yo no merezco salir adelante..." etc. esa es una cuestión que hay que atacar psicológicamente. También puede ser algo como una culpa que las personas experimentan, y eso puede ser más que*

*psicológico es espiritual. También tenemos este acompañamiento espiritual, para que la persona pueda deshacerse de estas culpas que las arrastran consigo que no las dejan salir adelante...No solo les da herramientas para aprender a hacer cosas... y también puede que las personas tengan todas estas herramientas, pero no sepan administrar su dinero. Entonces el centro les da asistencia de administración para que puedan administrar los bienes que tienen. La idea es que, a partir de esa formación integral, puedan salir adelante.”*

Emmanuel’s discussion of these three barriers, psychological, spiritual, and personal, that keep women from escaping the cycle of poverty is important because it is what brings the issue of poverty from an issue of policy and institutions down to a local level within the control of the people experiencing. It is a transference of agency and power without assigning blame to poor people. To connect Emmanuel’s response to Sen’s discussion of poverty as capability deprivation, when poverty is viewed as “the absence of the freedom of the people to be able to satisfy their necessary ends” the way to break this cycle would be to restore autonomy and authority to those who do not have it, the women of Granadilla in El Centro’s case.<sup>48</sup> If empowerment is the method through which El Centro plans to bring women out of poverty, it is necessary to apply a single definition to the loosely used term.

Empowerment, according to development practitioner Jo Rowlands, has many different definitions based on how theories of power, varying across disciplines, are applied to the term. I gathered three descriptions of empowerment that can be attributed to how El Centro uses it.<sup>49</sup> Empowerment can be a transfer of “power to,” a resistance against existing powers, and an inclusion of the marginalized in formal decision-making processes. Rowlands says

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<sup>48</sup> Sen.

<sup>49</sup> Rowlands, “Empowerment Examined.”

empowerment “is about individuals being able to maximise the opportunities available to them without or despite constraints of structure and State...Empowerment is thus more than simply opening up access to decision-making; it must also include the processes that lead people to perceive themselves as able and entitled to occupy that decision-making space, and so overlaps with the other categories of ‘power to’ and ‘power from within’.”

This definition of empowerment encompasses a few points that Emmanuel also touches upon including that of self-perception. Overlapping this definition with the concept of capability deprivation supports the idea that poverty is a mental challenge, just as it can refer to economic hardship. Women who do not feel worthy of more cannot achieve more. These deeply rooted barriers, psychological and spiritual, have to be broken down before taking on the personal challenges with escaping poverty. This process works similarly to Maslow’s hierarchy of needs in that the basic needs associated with wellbeing have to be fulfilled before any of the other levels can be satisfied. Rowland’s definition of empowerment encompasses aspects of Sen’s view on opportunity and freedom-led development as a better way opposed to the United Nation's need-driven approach.<sup>50</sup>

Historically, development interventions have been implemented using the economic definition of poverty. These interventions always fail once reality settles in and culture and existing social systems deter from the intended direction of the project, even when the goal is to empower women and give them agency. An example of this type of initiative is the Grameen Bank. The Grameen Bank in Bangladesh began as a microcredit loan program that issues loans to women so they are able to invest in businesses and play a role in the market economy in ways they would not typically be able to. Aside from the high interest rates and push to replicate

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<sup>50</sup> Sen, “The Ends and Means of Sustainability.”

Western economic systems on a local level, the Grameen Bank was unsuccessful because it viewed poverty as an economic matter, instead of redirecting attention to cultural aspects of rural Bangladesh.<sup>51</sup> The women did not ever truly gain agency; the loans were mainly given to women but used by men anyway. The Bank did not create a space for women to participate in the male dominated economy, even though the loans were in their names. The women assumed the brunt of the risk but had very little autonomy, freedom, or power over their economic situation because there was no individual or local intervention accompanying this development intervention. The Grameen Bank is an example that operates on a smaller scale, but organizations such as the World Bank, IMF, and the United Nations employ this economic definition of poverty in all of their initiatives as well.<sup>52</sup> There is little concern for the level of growth opportunity made available to women in these periphery nations.

To draw again on Rowland's definition of empowerment, El Centro's design uses an effective method of empowering women because it operates independently of the State and defies the structural norms of its culture.<sup>53</sup> Women, as is the case in most countries, are a marginalized group with expectedly less social power in Costa Rica. The Church of Granadilla hosts El Centro de Formación, so it operates out of a Catholic Church. The official religion practiced in Costa Rica is Catholicism and it is engrained in many aspects of their culture, however, Catholicism is a patriarchal denomination that does not offer many positions of authority for women. It can be viewed as ironic that an organization geared towards women empowerment would operate out of this place of worship, but this evasion from normality advances the organization towards its goal to bettering the quality of life for these women. El

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<sup>51</sup> Khandker, *Grameen Bank Lending*.

<sup>52</sup> Khandker.

<sup>53</sup> Rowlands, "Empowerment Examined."

Centro is marketed through oral communication and social media marketing, so a strong community helps to promote the organization and keep it in operation.

To engage further with the significance of a strong community, drawing back on Goldade and Loría's discussion of migrant women's status in Latin America, the experience of a migrant woman can be violent and traumatic. There are significant challenges to overcome while trying to seek new and better opportunities for herself and her family against patriarchal systems, without citizenship and financial security, and with few protections from the law. These challenges fall under the poverties outlined by Max-Neef:

In fact, any fundamental human need that is not adequately satisfied, reveals a human poverty. Some examples are: poverty of subsistence (due to insufficient income, food, shelter, etc.), of protection (due to bad health systems, violence, arms race, etc.), of affection (due to authoritarianism, oppression, exploitative relations with the natural environment, etc.), of understanding (due to poor quality of education), of participation (due to marginalization of and discrimination against women, children and minorities), of identity (due to imposition of alien values upon local and regional cultures, forced migration, political exile, etc.).<sup>54</sup>

This passage is noteworthy because within each of the examples that Max Neef lists is a poverty that women, migrant women in particular, experience disproportionately more than other demographics. The poverties that the women at El Centro are trying to come out of is a culmination of many, which is why the solution is not as simple as an economically driven intervention. The intervention is at an individual level, provoking change from within the women in the program. Money cannot solve all of these problems, but opportunity and autonomy can.

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<sup>54</sup> Max-Neef, "Development and Human Needs."



The crafts component of this organization acts as a direct channel to grasping hold of the freedoms these women are constantly denied.

When the United Nations created the 2030 Agenda with the seventeen sustainable development goals, they listed the first goal as “No Poverty,”<sup>55</sup> This goal is aimed at eradicating poverty “in all its forms,” though the description immediately turns to ensuring that families are not living below the extreme poverty line economically, setting a low measure for a quality of life already. Eradicating poverty, using the mental-emotional framework Sen describes, entails much more than making certain that there are no families surviving on \$1.25 per day.<sup>56</sup> In fact, each of the seventeen goals have one of the forms of poverty ingrained in them, and they should be addressed as such. As it relates to finding a solution, Sen’s freedom-based approach would be most effective because it gives people agency over their own lives. Her approach still effectively satisfies the fundamental human needs, it just redirects the motive. The Sustainable Development Goals act as a roadmap for improving the wellbeing of the entire planet; the quality of life portion of the goals has a more subjective measure on a personal level. The agency built into the freedom-based approach is what also links the quality of life, individualized aspect of this mission.

The craftsmanship component is the most effective way to incorporate these approaches because it is an interactive activity that targets and changes different aspects of a person. El Centro focuses on growth: psychological, spiritual, and personal. Psychological growth is important because many of these women have experienced the violence and traumas that are associated with poverty and living under challenging circumstances, thereby requiring mental healing and an escape from the weight of holding onto these experiences. Craftsmanship as an

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<sup>55</sup> “THE 17 GOALS Sustainable Development.”

<sup>56</sup> “THE 17 GOALS Sustainable Development.”

activity rooted in progression targets self-esteem and builds confidence because it demonstrates an ability to progress and improve. El Centro has a spiritual sector because, as Emmanuel discussed, poverty can act as a mental cage of sorts in which women blame themselves and feel guilty about their circumstance. This spiritual component minimizes this guilt and gives the women the space to forgive themselves and find peace. Craftsmanship on a spiritual front can be a meditative activity that requires focus but also forces the artist to reckon with mistakes and work past them. Lastly, the personal aspect of El Centro is visible in facilitating the space for women to express themselves freely and showcase their work with pride. The crafts can be a reflection of themselves, their lives, and their growth in any way the women choose to apply it. The main point is that the women move toward this healing and wellbeing as they see fit and at their own pace throughout the duration of the program. Even with all of these essential pieces that make El Centro what it is, every theory and concept is built on the strength of the community. It takes a strong sense of community to have an organization run as El Centro does.

## Conclusion

Craftsmanship is the tool used to empower and improve the self-esteem of women in Granadilla, yet the organization is founded on the values of a strong community. During the first day of classes, my classmates and I participated in an activity in which we curated a definition of “community.” My peer and I established that a community is “an inclusive environment that promotes trust within an individual for themselves as well as the people surrounding them. It is done by teaching through action and validation both the individual and one another. This environment encourages a more in-depth exploration of one's well-being.” El Centro is an inclusive environment which prides itself on fostering an environment where people can better themselves, their lives, as well as introduce action plans and instill hope. This community level organization utilizes techniques commonly seen in practices of art therapy and experiential healing, which can have broader impacts on society in how trauma and mental health are treated.

Underlying themes of community are present in psychological research on expressive arts as a method of healing. Natalie Rogers was a psychotherapist who intertwined expressive arts with person-centered therapy techniques. In Rogers’ *The Creative Connection: Expressive Arts as Healing*, Rogers mentions the connections between craftsmanship and empowerment, self-esteem, and wellbeing. In her explanation of the human ability to connect with creativity, she says:

“We tap into the unconscious and become aware of new aspects of self, thus gaining insight and empowerment. Then, by connecting to at least one other person in an empathic and supportive environment, we learn ways to relate to the community. As we learn how to be authentic and empowered in a small community, we are then inspired to move to the larger circle. We become co-creative and collaborative, being able to access

our higher purpose and powers. This connects us to the world—other cultures and nature—with compassion.”<sup>57</sup>

In this passage, Rogers outlines an important process that El Centro also exemplifies. She reveals the transition from a community-based initiative to its wider applications. There is a direct correlation between empowerment within a community and a deeper connection and compassion for the world, changing how we interact and influence the surrounding environment, people and nature encompassed. Rogers goes on to intertwine creativity in this discourse as a phenomenon that is not dependent on one aspect of a person; humans generate creativity from the “*whole being*,” as Rogers explains. This point was especially interesting because it aligns with Emmanuel’s mention of El Centro’s intentions of “touching all points that make up a person.” Creativity acts as a positive complement to these intentions. Throughout this book, Rogers refers to “person-centered expressive visual arts” which she defines as “the process of experiencing a feeling, either conscious or unconscious, and expressing it through art without concern for the product.” The crafts made at El Centro are the person-centered expressive visual arts that Rogers cites throughout this book, as the focus is also on the connection between the people and their art opposed to the quality or technique of its production. The process is significant because it holds the value, meaning, and healing of the experience. The nonverbal self-expression is built into the process of craftsmanship. Once the craft is complete, there is a reflection process that follows, which is where the women can learn and understand themselves deeply. The act of craft making is one that requires a level of sincerity and openness for it to have a positive impact on energy and confidence. Craft making is a meditative activity due to the artists’ willingness to allow space for change and new creation. Natalie Rogers, then, explicitly

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<sup>57</sup> Rogers, *The Creative Connection*.

mentions the interconnectedness of women and person-centered expressive visual arts, as “women are discovering their self-worth, personal strength, and power.”<sup>58</sup>

Craftsmanship offers women a platform on which to inspire solutions through creative expression. Partaking in artistic activities, whether it be craftsmanship specifically or various other forms of creative expression, expands the minds of women and encourages innovation which can have potential implications for women of all backgrounds, as well as the world around them. This is not to imply that women are *responsible* for saving the world from its current course of devastation, by any means. It is to say, however, that women have the power and potential to incite immense change but have been historically repressed from doing so. Therefore, opportunity, a recurring theme throughout this thesis, holds significant power because without it, women cannot be agents of change the world actively needs.

It is plausible that everyone may not have the artistic expertise or dexterity. However, if an art program is geared toward the process opposed to the result, there is greater benefit with this approach. Creativity heightens the mind’s ability to explore new options. Those who challenge art programs may argue that everyone does not possess an interest in art, but this does not necessarily limit one’s ability to engage with this autonomous, liberated part of the brain. It is competition that induces a resistance to such programs because it shifts focus onto aptitude over emotion and personal development. A noteworthy point that Natalie Rogers underscores is that “creativity is threatening to those who demand conformity.” She addresses this discourse to contribute to the conversation of art programs in educational institutions. Creativity being eliminated from these institutions promotes adaptation and conformity to fit a standard or a

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<sup>58</sup> Rogers.

norm. Art can be an outlet to remind people that there is more to their existence than playing into the market economy.

Creative expression is a supplementary tool that is necessary to be regarded as a competent member and participating member of society and culture. Institutions have refrained from allocating funds toward art and creative programs out of fear of wasting resources while not providing immediate relief. Conversely, creative expression functions as a long-term solution to maintaining personal balance and exhibiting well roundedness, as it relates to sustainable development. The emphasis for development interventions by organizations such as the United Nations typically concentrates on integrating underserved communities into the market economy. Art can offer everyone this option without necessarily imposing any particular direction. It poses an alternative to the previous development interventions and offers a different approach to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.

All in all, the interconnectivity between craftsmanship, development practices, and women are made visible through El Centro de Formación Integral's design. It targets every aspect of a person's being that is necessary to activate personal, spiritual, and psychological growth. Women have a unique positionality in society that makes them an asset to the success of development interventions. El Centro is founded upon themes similar to community-based art therapy programs. The organization makes this healing process accessible to vulnerable populations and underserved communities that may not be able to afford otherwise, due to the commodification of fundamental human needs. The exploration of creativity has the potential to lead to various advancements. Although El Centro was not intentionally created to be an art program and it is not the sole or primary component of the organization, it is the unique element that distinguishes it from other initiatives while also having a positive impact on the community.

There is a strong need in society for community-led initiatives such as art therapy programs, but there are few resources allocated towards this form of experiential healing over more traditional solutions. Development practitioners should use creativity and originality to improve the effectiveness of development interventions and lessen the attention given to forcing or coercing every individual to participate in the market economy.

El Centro de Formación is an initiative built upon a strong framework that has the potential to inspire positive change in marginalized communities across various cultural contexts. Drawing upon the earlier described participant observation from 2020, my peer and I hoped to implement a project at the center that would be sustainable and realistic. Our goal was also to bring purpose and structure to the children's presence at the center. If I were to continue my work on this project, I would merge and expand upon this crafts component of the organization's design to include the children in the crafts workshop. The union of children and their mothers would introduce the positive psychological effect of person-centered expressive art therapy at an earlier age, while also demonstrating the accessibility of this form of healing and relief. Additionally, it would introduce creativity in a manner that is limited by academic institutions or educational parameters. The coalition of creative expression and development practice, as seen in the case of El Centro de Formación Integral, can help to advance underserved communities and populations toward achieving the United Nation's 2030 Agenda. Women and their children, specifically, can freely express their creativity in a space where conformity cannot not exist due to the promotion of variety, diversity, and innovation, which is essential in creating a balanced person and quality lifestyle.

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