CHAPTER 5

THE FIRST STEPS TOWARD SUSTAINABILITY

SOWING SEEDS OF HOPE

Community self-governance is a proven and effective tool, but it is not necessarily equivalent to sustainability. If communities want to avoid projects that flourish briefly but soon fizzle and vanish, they must develop self-sustaining initiatives. By 1986, we had spent some time planning alternative projects in areas threatened by mining. On one occasion, a committee from the Arts and Culture Workshop visited farmer Jaimito Rullán Mayol. We asked him if we could use a plot of his land along Valdés Road to plant trees. We told him that we wanted to create a small model of what could become an alternative to mining by planting trees to establish sustainable forests and a timber enterprise. Without missing a beat, Mr. Mayol said “It’s yours. I just donated three acres of land to you.” We were perplexed to have had our wish granted so easily.

The struggle sometimes brings surprises. We named the ecological sustainability project Planting Hope, and celebrated its inauguration on Saturday, May 17 and Sunday, May 18, 1986. On Saturday, Puerto Rican singer-songwriter María Gisela Rosado performed at one of our events. It was a great joy for the audience and for us to experience solidarity with an artist committed to the Casa and the Pueblo. As usual, we also gave our Mining and the 2020 Plan presentation. On Sunday at eleven in the morning, we celebrated the planting of the national tree, the ceiba, in front of Casa Pueblo. It was a moving ceremony. We had asked people to bring a little bit of soil from their towns, and participants proceeded to scatter the soil around the newly planted tree. People from many towns and neighborhoods delivered their gift of Earth, chanting the names of the places the soil came from as they scattered it on the ground. These were offerings and blessings for a magical tree and a community that wanted to thrive.

“From Lares, altar of the homeland.”

“From the tomb of our teacher, Pedro Albizu Campos.”
“From the remains of the foundation of Juan and Consuelo’s home in Guaynabo.”
“From Ponce, the neighborhood of Guilarte de Adjuntas.”

The lesson from this experience was that *music must accompany the process of struggle because it touches the hearts of the people in ways they never forget.* Then, we marched through town with our tree saplings in hand. It was a silent march, but our hearts were filled with determination to halt the deadly mining project. We were a liberation army, equipped not with rifles, but with trees to plant the hope of a village under siege by external forces. Oscar Collazo, stalwart fighter for Puerto Rican independence, humbly joined us in our march. Collazo was one of the Puerto Rican nationalist fighters who was arrested in 1950 for attempting to assassinate President Harry Truman at the Blair House in Washington D.C. His group was responding to Truman’s “gag law,” which criminalized any discussion about, or organizing around, Puerto Rican independence, including singing patriotic songs or displaying the Puerto Rican flag. As we approached the steep hill leading to the lands that Mr. Mayol had donated to our cause, Collazo spoke about how the struggle has multiple fronts, and all of them are important. The young organizers were eagerly awaiting us. Everything was well prepared. Newly opened trails led to holes that had already been dug throughout the steep terrain. Three hundred trees arrived to be planted, each with a tag that read:

*Planting Hope: A Pledge to Puerto Rico. This ticket is proof that you picked up this tree on Sunday, May 18, 1986, at 11:00 a.m. at Casa Pueblo. Your participation will be historic and an inspiration for the Puerto Rican people.*

Through a speakerphone, Ariel gave the instructions. Each person stood in front of the hole in which they were going to plant their tree. They listened to instructions on how to remove the
plastic bag and plant the tree. There were three hundred kids, teenagers, and adults standing in formation and in absolute silence. Ariel gave the order to start planting. In just three minutes, we planted 300 trees, completing the work. The moment stood as evidence of the power of a united village. All the signs pointed toward the possibility of a great community victory.

MADRE ISLA COFFEE

The Madre Isla Coffee project was born out of our discussions about community self-governance and the need to ensure continuity, sustainability, and permanent change. At one meeting, we talked about the possibility of developing a self-sufficient economy to sustain Casa Pueblo. After each person had shared their ideas and opinions, we still had not arrived at a clear consensus. Then, Freddie Abreu from Tanamá walked out onto the front porch and pointed toward the mountains. “There is the alternative,” he said with certainty. Still, the rest of us saw nothing more than a green expanse. He insisted, but no one understood what he was getting at and we stood silently, like students in front of the headmaster. After we pushed him for an explanation, he said: “In the green expanse that you see is a great coffee plantation. High quality beans grown in shade produce the best coffee in the world.” He continued, “From Puerto Rico, coffee used to be exported to the Vatican and other parts of Europe.” He mentioned the ideal soil, altitude, and temperature to produce the highest-quality coffee. He spoke about other topics foreign to us, explaining the different varieties of coffee, and the differences between high quality arabica beans and other varieties. Madre Isla Coffee was born out of this illuminating discussion. Its name refers to Madre Isla, the title of a volume in the collected works by Eugenio María de Hostos, in which he argues for Puerto Ricans’ right to be free, but also states that we must win that freedom with facts. And with facts, we started our work, looking to prove that a coffee crop was viable
here and that it was a good option for making our community and work self-sustaining.

The first beans came from Millo Pérez’s plantation. Cindo provided the toaster and mill, Danny Torres designed the label, and I designed the rustic packaging system. Tinti and Ariel, along with several others, filled the first jars. Our commitment to stop mining led us to affirm alternative, self-sufficient economic projects as a means of breaking our dependency. And so, Madre Isla Coffee began production in 1989. The following year, Tinti organized our Artisanal Shop, a gift shop in Casa Pueblo filled with hand-crafted products, as an additional building block in the economic solidarity project. All this was an organizational and educational milestone.

FINCA MADRE ISLA

This project represented a major step forward for our alternative model of living in community. It contained a positive vision of the future, and a concrete proposal that went beyond opposition to mining. We expended considerable effort to buy a three-acre plot of land in 1991, and we named it Finca Madre Isla: Ecological, Community, and Cultural Tourism Project. Even here, the specter of mining followed us. We found out that the region used to be known as The Mine because of the manganese extraction done there in the 1930s. Some craters and stores of minerals still dotted the landscape. At first, we cultivated coffee, citrus fruit, and passionfruit. Still, it took us three years to be able to pick the first golden bean of coffee. We learned how complicated agriculture is.

The coffee brigade members of Adjuntas and other towns came to support the project and ensure its viability. To promote community eco-tourism, we also constructed four rustic cabins and an activity center. From the start of the project, we relied on the solidarity of Mrs. Asunción, one of Hostos’ daughters-in-law; and Tere de Hostos, a granddaughter of the author of Madre Isla. The Finca Madre Isla was also home to the patriot Antonio Cruz Colón.
until he built his own house elsewhere. As we built upon these great legacies, our project began to attract international attention. In 1991 and 1992, we received visitors from Germany, Holland, and the United States, as well as students from the Roberto Clemente Community Academy in Chicago and several universities. We also had visitors to the plantation from other town in Puerto Rico, including Salinas, Cataño, and Río Piedras.

All the while, we continued to carry out local advocacy work. We published and distributed Tierra Adentro Magazine in Adjuntas and kept producing events. In March 1992, The Cimarrón Theater Company mounted a production of Valero and The Wheel of History and, in October of the same year, performed The Indigenous Zarzuela of 1493, both at the José Emilio Lugo High School.

A TEMPORARY VICTORY OVER MINING

In 1986, we held several conferences in opposition to mining at the University of Puerto Rico in Arecibo and in Río Piedras; in the communities of Castañer, Jayuya, Aibonito, and Carolina; at the Institute of Technology of Ponce; and at the Catholic University of Ponce and Arecibo. We participated in press conferences and radio programs. Newspapers kept reporting about Casa Pueblo's activities, and we welcomed visitors from different parts of the country. We held an anti-mining protest with 120 children from Guayanilla and created a support committee of twenty-two people in the San Juan metropolitan area. Our identity continued to evolve. Before, we were called “the mining people” and “the 2020 Plan people.” Now, people were beginning to call us “the people from Casa Pueblo.”

Some of our efforts were led by the Democratic Student Front, a group of young workshop members led by Ariel and Arturo. The organization was active in the local school, organized visits to the mining zone, distributed newsletters, and managed the Planting Hope project. One of their goals was to call attention to the problem
of nuclear weapons, a matter that was being debated across the country. The Front had already participated in a 60-kilometer national march from Carolina to Ceiba against nuclear arms, and they also decided to organize an event in the plaza of Adjuntas on the subject. Before the event and under the direction of local graffiti artist Danny Torres, they painted a mural alluding to nuclear weapons. That night, Charles Hey Maestre from the Institute of Puerto Rican Civil Rights delivered an impactful speech, and Roy Brown, the internationally famous Puerto Rican singer-songwriter, gave a brilliant presentation.

Another memorable activity was Latin American Encounters, held in Casa Pueblo on August 16, 1986. Representatives from Argentina, Uruguay, Guatemala, Peru, Brazil, and Chile signed a document in support of our cause. Our local and national network now had an international network. Only ten days later, the headline story for the newspaper El Mundo reported the long-awaited victory. “A blow to exploitative mining on the island: celebrations as mining proposals are rejected. The Puerto Rican government will purchase 955 acres of land in the center of the island where the copper mines from the American Metal Climax Company (AMAX) were to be located: 750 acres in Utuado and Adjuntas, and the remaining 225 in Guayanilla.”

Our arguments against Plan 2020 were now officially confirmed by others. The mining companies had indeed purchased 750 acres of land around the two main deposits; they had also purchased 225 acres at the port of Guayanilla to establish a refinery and a foundry. Just as we said, they had planned to construct an aqueduct running from the dam in Maragüez in Ponce to the port.

To be clear, our joy at this victory did not signal the end of our community effort. Often, groups fizzle out once they have reached their immediate goals. As we would soon learn, however, this would have been a tragic mistake, for it was not long before the specter of mining returned. We closed a glorious 1986 with two events, and the first was the Puerto Rico Religious Conference,
meeting that year in Adjuntas. As a representative of the Arts and Culture Workshop, I was the featured speaker at the local Catholic Church. I gave testimony about the arduous anti-mining fight to an audience of more than 300 parishioners from across Puerto Rico. The second key event felt like a reward for our achievements: the rebuilding of the roof and the floors of Casa Pueblo. Arturo, Ariel, and two university students from Humacao, along with our friends Mingo Massol, Israel Plaza, and Enrique Linares, hammered and sawed with exemplary enthusiasm. A new chapter had begun for Casa Pueblo.