

I N T R O D U C T I O N

“Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has.”

—MARGARET MEAD.

This book describes and compares the survival strategies of three very different Latin American cultural, linguistic, and ethnic groups as they deal with the forces of globalization and modernization. It is based on extensive field work and interviews; the main body of the manuscript presents the words of the people themselves. The three groups are the *caboclo* [mixed African, Indian, and European] Portuguese-speaking rubber tappers of the far western Brazilian Amazon; the Spanish and Guaraní-speaking Guaraní Indians of the southernmost toe of the Bolivian Chaco; and the Spanish-speaking mestizo country women of agricultural and savings cooperatives in northern and western Nicaragua. However diverse the cultures, each is located in a poor rural area with virtually no infrastructure; endemic diseases such as malaria, Chagas, and rabies; and a single export commodity in the process of being replaced by logging, ranching, or large-scale farming for export.

Of course, poverty existed long before globalization, but currently it seems that most local and national efforts to fight poverty are undercut by that process. Since poverty and its new global guardian are immediate dangers to the survival of these peoples, their cultures, and their livelihoods, they, unlike some intellectual observers, do not have the luxury of regarding globalization as simply a trend whose consequences can be described but probably not fundamentally altered. The people who tell their stories here must react in order to survive. They have no choice but to take action. They must at least alter the consequences, if not the trend itself. This book is mainly about their concrete strategies and actions, their motivating faith and vision. To set the stage for understanding their heroism (no other word suffices), extreme hardships, and accomplishments, we have to describe briefly the forces of globalization to which they are reacting. That is the purpose of this introduction.

Much recent research confirms that globalization and development are having an enormous impact even in the most remote corners of Latin America, and that