

# Collective Entrepreneurship in a Mennonite Community in Paraguay

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**ABSTRACT.** This article examines the impact of prevailing religious beliefs on the dominant view toward work and achievement. The focus of the article is the Menno Colony of the Chaco, one of the Mennonite communities in Paraguay. It illustrates that the values of this religious minority appear to facilitate successful collective entrepreneurship. Here, religion values asceticism, frugality, and thrift, but not private property. Entrepreneurship takes a collective form, and cooperatives

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are important economic vehicles that provide jobs for indigenous workers and markets for the produce of self-employed farmers. While Mennonite cooperatives are thriving here, Indian cooperatives modelled after them have not had the same levels of success.

**RESUMEN.** Este estudio examina el impacto producido por las creencias religiosas sobre una visión predominante hacia el trabajo y los logros. El artículo se centra en la Colonia Meno del Chaco, una de las comunidades Menonitas que existen en Paraguay. También hace hincapié en que los valores de esta minoría religiosa parecen facilitar un empresariado colectivo exitoso. En este entorno, la religión valor el ascetismo, la frugalidad y la economía pero no la propiedad privada. El emprendedorismo adquiere un modelo cooperativista y las cooperativas se convierten en importantes vehículos económicos que generan trabajo a los trabajadores indígenas, y mercados para los productos de los agricultores autónomos. Mientras las cooperativas Menonitas prosperan aquí, las cooperativas indígenas que copiaron su modelo, no han alcanzado los mismos niveles de éxito.

**RESUMO.** Este estudo examina o impacto das crenças religiosas predominantes sobre a maneira de encarar o trabalho e o sucesso. O artigo enfoca a Colônia Menno do Chaco, uma das comunidades menonitas do Paraguai. Mostra que os valores dessa minoria religiosa parecem facilitar o sucesso do empreendedorismo coletivo. Aqui a religião valoriza o ascetismo, frugalidade e parcimônia, mas não a propriedade privada. O empreendedorismo assume uma forma coletiva e as cooperativas são veículos econômicos importantes, proporcionando empregos para trabalhadores nativos e mercados para a produção de fazendeiros autônomos. Enquanto as cooperativas menonitas prosperam, cooperativas indígenas que seguem seu modelo não alcançaram os mesmos níveis de sucesso.

**KEYWORDS.** Agriculture, community-based enterprise, cooperatives, development, meat exports, Mennonites, qualitative inquiry, religion, social capital, sustainability

## **INTRODUCTION**

Does enterprise develop the same way in all persons? Farmer and Richman asserted the convergent perspective: "As the general similarity of men everywhere is recognized, and as managerial and

technological necessity presses all types of culture toward a common road, nations everywhere become more similar” (1965, p. 400). In contrast, advocates of the divergent position include Hofstede (1980) and Laurent (1983). Subsequently, Huntington (1993, 1996) showed that globalization has neither standardized societies nor produced a homogeneous world culture. This article will support the divergent perspective and will demonstrate that the nature of collective entrepreneurship among the Mennonites is unlike entrepreneurship in mainstream society.

Farmer and Richman wrote, “Prevailing religious beliefs and cultural values, in conjunction with parental behavior, child-rearing practices, and the formal system of education in a particular country, usually have a direct and very significant bearing on the dominant view toward work and achievement” (1965, pp. 156–157). This article will examine the impact of prevailing religious beliefs on the dominant view toward work and achievement. The focus of the article is on the Menno Colony of the Chaco, one of the Mennonite communities in Paraguay. It will be shown that the values of this religious minority appear to facilitate successful collective entrepreneurship. The Mennonites have prospered here, and their activities have created jobs for indigenous people who come from distant places to work for the Mennonites.

### *Mennonites*

Renshaw described the Mennonites as “members of a nonconformist church that broke away from Calvin and Zwingli in the 16th century” (2002, p. 40). Mennonites adhere to the teachings of the Dutch reformer Menno Simons. Central to the Mennonite doctrine are asceticism, frugality, and thrift, as well as strict discipline.

They are ideological descendents of a religious movement that had its origins in the Anabaptist<sup>1</sup> wing of the Protestant Reformation in Western Europe during the early 16th century (Dyck, 1967; Redekop, 1989). The Anabaptist movement was founded in Switzerland in 1525, and the religion began to spread in Germany, the Netherlands, and Switzerland. As noted by Roessingh and Schoonderwoerd, “Hostile reactions from the more established churches to Anabaptist practices, such as adult baptism, non-resistance, their opinion that the church and state should be separated, and their attitude to place themselves outside the political arena, led to persecution. In response

to these persecutions, Mennonite groups migrated from Western Europe . . .”(2005, pp. 67–68).

Because they were persecuted in Western Europe, many moved to the Ukraine during the 1700s. The first group of Mennonite immigrants went to the New World in 1683. Others relocated to Canada during the 1800s. Renshaw explained, “Persecuted in Russia and facing problems with the education board in Canada, they sent expeditions to the Chaco in the 1920s to look for lands that would be suitable for colonization and sufficiently isolated to allow them to practice their religion unmolested by outside interference” (2002, p. 40).

Hecht (1994) studied the Mennonites who remained in Canada. Based on their relatively low income, compared with other Canadians, he argued that Mennonites did not embrace the Protestant work ethic. *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (Weber, 1930) was based on Weber’s (1904, 1905) works, which linked asceticism, frugality, and thrift to entrepreneurial behavior. Weber (1922) maintained that Protestantism, by encouraging self-restraint and the accumulation of assets, contributed to capitalism. Hecht (1994) showed that the accumulation of assets was not of primary importance to Mennonites in Canada.

Grant and Rosenstock (2006) considered four aspects of Mennonite ethno-religious values: (1) strong work ethic, (2) self-reliance and entrepreneurship, (3) family cohesiveness, and (4) mutual aid. The Menno Colony Cooperative of Paraguay, for example, was established as a mutual aid organization. Thiessen explained, “though in religious life Mennonites have asserted the value of community over individualism, in day-to-day practices, most Mennonites are deeply implicated in capitalism’s exaltation of the individual” (1998, p. 182).

## ***Paraguay***

Paraguay, the only land-locked member of Mercosur, is 406,750-square kilometres in area, and nestled between Argentina, Bolivia, and Brazil. A western region of Paraguay is the Chaco, a semi-arid alluvial plain that is commonly referred to as Paraguay’s “Wild West” or “Green Hell.”

Paraguay has long been a topic of interest in popular literature (Adams, 1933; Gibson, 1943; Young, 1982; Dibble, 1992). In recent years, this country has also been the subject of academic research (Becker and Suarez, 2001; Pelozo, 2001).

Paraguay's constitution recognizes the unique role that Catholicism plays in the country; the national president is legally required to be Catholic. While Catholicism is the official state religion of Paraguay, other belief systems are tolerated; among these is that of the Mennonites. Although the Mennonites number only about 30,000 in Paraguay—almost half of whom live in the Chaco—their activities are highly visible in the economy. Nevertheless, with the exception of Hecht's research (1975, 1976, 1978, 1988, 1989), there is little literature on this subject.

### *Mennonites in Paraguay*

Renshaw (2002) traced the origins of the Mennonite communities in Paraguay. "In 1921 they signed an agreement with the Paraguayan government that allowed them the benefits of the Law of Colonization, freedom from military service, and the right to educate their children in their own Low German dialect" (Renshaw, 2002, p. 40).

The immigrants would be allowed self-rule and German language schools as well as exemption from military service in exchange for developing the desolate Chaco, a region of thorn thickets and marshes. Renshaw described this region: "The Chaco, the area of Paraguayan territory that lies to the west of the Paraguay River, constitutes 60% of the land surface of Paraguay, but owing to a combination of historical and environmental factors, it has always been the most marginal region of the country... most of the population is to be found in the Mennonite Colonies of the Central Chaco" (2002, p. 31).

Renshaw provided an account, "In 1928 the first settlers from Russia founded the Menno Colony... and two years later a second colony, Fernheim, was founded" (2002, p. 41). The Fernheimers had higher levels of education than did the Mennos and more exposure to urban life. In 1932, they founded the town of Filadelfia, which remains to this day the center of *Mennonitenkolonie*. In 1937, some Fernheimers left the Chaco and established the Friesland Colony on the east bank of the Paraguay River; the new colony introduced wheat to Paraguay.

Mennonites from the Soviet Union settled the Neuland Colony in 1947. That same year, the first group of Mennonite refugees left Germany for Paraguay on the *Volendam*. As stated by Renshaw, "The Mennonites were essentially subsistence farmers until the

mid-1950s, when they began to mechanize their agriculture and develop cash crops” (2002, p. 41).

Loewen suggested that subsistence farming involved “mutually-dependent gender roles” (1993, p. 93), but the move to a market orientation “created gender-stratified households” (1993, p. 93). Thus, Grant and Rosenstock (2006) explained that farming became a male-dominated sector.

Renshaw noted, “Agriculture appears never to have been of as much importance for the Chaco societies as it is for most of the societies of the tropical forest regions of Lowland South America” (2002, p. 89).

In his words:

The Central Chaco is the only region where agriculture is practiced on a commercial scale. . . . This population is mainly Indian and Mennonite, in about equal proportions. . . . On these pastures the Mennonites raise both beef and dairy cattle, and the milk production provides the basis for a flourishing dairy industry. . . . The cheese, butter, and milk, which is processed in Filadelfia and Loma Plata, is sold on the national market and is almost the only commercial dairy produce available in Paraguay (Renshaw, 2002, pp. 40–42).

### *A Multicultural Context*

A classic ethnographic study of indigenous life in Paraguay is that by Service and Service (1954). Redekop (1980) wrote about relationships between Mennonites and indigenous peoples of the Chaco during the 1970s.

More recently, Renshaw wrote about indigenous people in the Chaco: “All the Indian communities of the Paraguayan Chaco, with the exception of one or two bands of Ayoreo and Manjuy who managed to remain isolated in the most inaccessible areas of the northern Chaco, are in some sense integrated into the national economy” (2002, p. 63). He described these people as having “a strong egalitarian ethic, an ethic that predisposes the Indians of the Chaco to view the accumulation of material possessions—beyond a certain, limited level—as a threat to the social order” (Renshaw, 2002, p. 159).

Renshaw described relationships between indigenous people and Mennonite settlements: “Many Indian laborers in the Mennonite

Colonies try to associate themselves with a particular patron—a Mennonite who can find work for them whenever they need it, and who in turn is assured of their labor whenever he requires it” (2002, pp. 139–140). He explained, “The Indians who live in these colonies have generally accepted the religious doctrines of the Mennonite Church, but there is little evidence to suggest they have accepted the Mennonites’ economic values” (Renshaw, 2002, p. 165). He suggested that, for the Chaco people, “Commerce is an even more contradictory activity than either agriculture or stock raising, since it implies the deliberate negation of generosity, with market relations taking the place of sharing . . . on the few occasions when individuals have tried to engage in commerce . . . stores have disappeared within a few weeks, since their owners have felt obliged to give credit to their kin and neighbors until the entire stock was used up” (2002, p. 179).

Renshaw proposed another causal variable for the collapse of indigenous enterprises:

In the Mennonite Colonies credit notes have for years been the standard mode of payment in the . . . edible oil and tannin factories of Loma Plata; they were also reintroduced, despite considerable protest . . . in Filadelfia . . . The credit notes issued by the Fernheim cooperative were redeemable in a well-stocked cooperative store where the prices compared favourably with those of Asunción. One of the impacts of this method of payment . . . was the collapse of many of the small . . . stores of the indigenous people (2002, p. 139).

Renshaw explained:

In order to understand the economy of the Chaco societies one must look beyond the external constraints that determine the Indian’s economic situation and consider the system of values that underlies the economy. This system of values, with its emphasis on equality and personal autonomy, is, I believe, a defining feature of the Indians’ sense of ethnic identity. An understanding of the Chaco societies’ economic values, especially their conceptions of property . . . also helps shed light on their . . . preference for wage labor over other forms of production. . . . Wage labor is often interpreted as evidence of a

distinctly Western or capitalist mode of production. In the Chaco, however, I would argue that it indicates precisely the opposite, since it offers an alternative that allows indigenous societies to maintain their own system of values while providing access to those industrially manufactured goods that are now regarded as necessities. Unlike other forms of production for the market, wage labor offers a relatively quick return on the time and labor invested, and its products... can be integrated into the networks of exchange through which the Chaco societies define themselves without seriously challenging their insistence on equality.... This type of situation is probably common among small-scale, rural societies situated on the periphery of the global economy, societies that maintain their system of values...." (2002, p. 180).

### ***Communal Entrepreneurship***

A cooperative is an autonomous association of persons who join forces to meet their common needs by means of a jointly owned enterprise. A cooperative may thus be described as a vehicle for collective entrepreneurship in which individual skills are integrated into a group, and that group's collective ability to innovate becomes greater than the sum of its parts. Collective entrepreneurship can offer a cooperative the opportunity to tap into individual talents and to harness the energy of the community.

As discussed by Zeuli and Cropp (2004), cooperatives provide local employment and tend to have a long-term commitment to remain in the community, providing leadership and development. To be viable, a cooperative must provide benefits to its members beyond those available without it. Hogeland (2004) found that individual members do not necessarily have to support a cooperative.

Old Colony Mennonites have traditionally been opposed to two tenets of capitalism; namely, self-interest and the centrality of private property. According to their worldview, *Gelassenheit*, people should help their neighbors and share resources. Given this communal ethic, cooperatives can receive a high level of support from Mennonites. Thiessen (1998) observed that the Mennonite work ethic emphasises collective effort and cooperation, and he linked Mennonite business success to the effective integration of religious belief and economic practice.

Peredo and Chrisman (2006) developed the concept of community-based enterprise and argued that it provides a potential strategy for sustainable local development. They maintained “that in this emerging form of entrepreneurship, typically rooted in community culture, natural and social capital are integral and inseparable from economic considerations, transforming the community into an entrepreneur. . . .” (Peredo and Chrisman, 2006, p. 309).

### ***Methodology***

Anthropologists and sociologists have benefited from the Chicago School of qualitative inquiry ever since the 1920s. In contrast, entrepreneurship research has traditionally been quantitative in nature, with logical-deductive theories fitting into a positivist paradigm. Geertz (1973, 1983) argued that positivism was yielding to a more open-ended perspective, with increasing pluralism. While the post-modern movement was shaped by a refusal to favor any particular method or theory (Richardson, 1997), the current seventh movement has been calling for the social sciences to become areas for critical discussions about class, community, globalisation, nation-states, and race (Denzin and Lincoln, 2003).

With the methodological mandate to be inductive, naturalistic, and sensitive to context, it was necessary for the authors of this article to become immersed in a Mennonite community to develop social closeness. Data could then be collected through participation and observation. Thus, ethnographic methods included participant observation as described by Burgess (1984) and Edgerton and Langess (1974).

A total of 128 interviews were conducted in Paraguay over an extended period, during which the authors lived in a Mennonite colony. To be representative of age and sex, structured interviews were administered to a stratified sample; these lasted between 35 and 45 minutes. Semi-structured interviews with opinion leaders lasted up to three hours. To minimize the impact of socially desirable responding (Arnold et al., 1985; Rahim, 1983; Zerbe and Paulus, 1987), triangulation (Patton, 1982, 1987, 1990) was used. Interviews were transcribed and the analysis of their content (Krippendorff, 1980) was very useful in identifying commonly held beliefs.

### ***Observations***

The Paraguayan Chaco, a land of stifling heat and countless poisonous snakes, is home to three Mennonite communities: (1) the

Menno Colony, which is the oldest; (2) the Fernheim Colony, founded in 1930; and (3) the Neuland Colony, established in 1947 by German Ukrainians. In the Middle Chaco, these communities are thriving on land cleared of scrub.

Interviewees often emphasized to the authors the importance of the separation of church and state. In the Chaco, the Mennonites are indeed separated from the Paraguayan state. With minimal interference from the Paraguayan government, they maintain their own infrastructure, including their own roads, phone systems, electricity plants, hospitals, banks, traffic police, and schools. The Menno Colony has over 1,500 windmills and 2,000 kilometres of water pipeline.

Interviewees also emphasized the importance of frugality and industry, which seems to have led to prosperity in a harsh environment. The economic importance of the Mennonites here far outstrips their numbers. With little concern for poisonous snakes, their farms produce corn, fine quality cotton, dairy products, peanuts, and soybeans.

The Menno Colony includes over 1,000 dairy farms. Animals are pasture-fed only, with no hormones and no artificial growth enhancers. They provide half of the country's dairy requirements. Indigenous laborers from the Ayoreo, Lengua, and Nivacle groups are often given jobs on Mennonite farms. Among themselves, the Mennonites speak their Plattdeutsch dialect of German, but many have learned Spanish, which facilitates dealings with indigenous people.

The administrative and service center for Mennonite farmers of the Fernheim Colony is Filadelfia, with a population of over 3,000 people, mostly Mennonites, but also Brazilians and indigenous people from the Ayoreo, Chulupi, and Lengua tribes. Here, one hears Spanish as well as German.

In the Menno Colony, the Sociedad Civil Chortitzer Komitee is responsible for all economic and social affairs. This committee owns all the land of the colony—amounting to more than half a million hectares used mostly for pasture—and makes areas available to families as needed. The same committee oversees the colony's 2,000 kilometers of road, the hospital, schools, insurance, and the entrepreneurial cooperative known as the Sociedad Cooperativa Colonizadora Chortitzer Komitee Ltda.

The Sociedad Cooperativa Colonizadora Chortitzer Komitee Ltda is responsible for agricultural and industrial development. Whereas cooperatives in mainstream society pay dividends to members, this

was created as a mutual aid organization, as mentioned above. Therefore, unlike other cooperatives, the Chortitzer Komitee decided not to pay dividends to individual members but instead to contribute to the well being of the community as a whole. Profits have been used to support the hospital, and credit is given to those in need. One interviewee suggested that in her opinion an entity that has return-on-investment as its goal may oversee environmental or social concerns; in contrast, she explained, a sustainable balance is reached when an economic entity such as a cooperative is dedicated to the social well being of its members. Her husband explained that this was very much compatible with Mennonite cultural values.

The cooperative provides products for consumers and, perhaps more importantly, it provides an outlet and distribution network for Mennonite farmers' produce. One farmer told the authors that there was a noticeable sense of security when it was known that a market was guaranteed for one's goods: "Instead of looking for markets, we can focus our energy on the work itself."

Given that Mennonite farmers breed Holstein and Pardo Suizo cattle, milk is in abundance. The Menno Colony accounts for about 300,000 liters of milk per day. Under the banner of its Trebol brand, the cooperative produces a huge range of dairy products, from milk and chocolate milk to yogurt, butter, and an assortment of cheeses.

Mennonite farmers also raise Brahma cattle for their meat, and crossbreeding with Angus and Hereford cattle helps attain the desired levels of marbling. One farmer explained, "The Angus is a British breed, with fat between muscular fibrils but not around the muscles." There are about 300,000 cattle in the Menno Colony, of which roughly a third of the stock is sold each year.

The Sociedad Cooperativa Colonizadora Chortitzer Komitee Ltda built one of the biggest meat packing plants in Paraguay: FrigoChorti. The slaughterhouse is in the middle of the Menno livestock rearing area, thereby avoiding long trips elsewhere, which would place stress on the animals. Six hundred animals are slaughtered per day.

The cooperative's Chorti brand is used for a wide variety of ham, minced meat paddies, and sausages. Much of the beef is exported to Europe. The cooperative also exports high-quality semen through its Tamyca Centro Genetico. Several interviewees outside the Menno Colony confirmed that the Chortitzer Komitee cooperative is the leading supplier of dairy and meat products in Paraguay.

The international trade of guajak (*Guaiacum officinale*) is controlled and requires Convention on International Trade in Enda-

gered Species (CITES) certification. Verawood (*Bulnesia sarmientoi*) is a substitute that can be freely traded, and the Chortitzer Komitee Cooperative exports this to France, where it is used as a base in the production of perfumes.

A recent attempt to establish tourism involves promoting the Central Chaco as a destination for bird-watchers. In addition, foreigners have been willing to pay \$1,000 US to hunt doves. In Filadelfia, Cooperativa Fernheim Ltda., the Fernheim cooperative owns the 24-room Hotel Florida, which operates in German, English, and Spanish.

Mennonite entrepreneurship in Paraguay is not restricted to the Chaco. Mennonite Economic Development Associates (MEDA)<sup>2</sup> is comprised of about 60 Mennonite entrepreneurs who established a factory in eastern Paraguay to produce starch from manioc, a plant with large tubers. The factory buys the manioc from several hundred local farmers. MEDA Paraguay pioneered the commercial development of *stevia*, a Paraguayan plant that is used as a sweetener in diet drinks as far away as Japan. Meanwhile, the Chaco chapter of MEDA produces charcoal, which is exported to Europe.

One elder interviewee told the authors that the cooperative model was essential to the economic success of the Mennonite communities in Paraguay. In the desolate Chaco, he explained, it would have been hard to survive, let alone succeed, without the values encouraged by their religion; i.e., honesty, mutual help, and solidarity. A cooperative was compatible with these values and facilitated the road to prosperity. However, as Mennonites prosper in Paraguay, the less wealthy indigenous people are blamed for rising crime.

Sitting at his dining room table in Loma Plata, one Mennonite interviewee complained to the authors that, "welfare programs keep people in poverty, but it would be wiser to teach them how to get out of poverty." For this reason, he praised his religion's emphasis on being self-reliant and having a strong work ethic. He also mentioned that his people were happy to have control of their own schools, and he expressed displeasure with a Canadian law that disallowed Mennonites control over theirs.

### ***Toward Future Research***

The three Mennonite cooperatives in the Chaco appear to be highly successful institutions, acting as growth poles for the region. Theoretically, they could serve as role models. Future research might investigate why Chaco Indian cooperatives have had comparatively

little success despite the fact that 50% of the Indians in the region belong to Mennonite churches.

## NOTES

1. For an overview of Anabaptist religions see Kraybill and Bowman (2001).
2. According to Redekop et al. (1995), Mennonite Economic Development Associates is the only Mennonite-related organization that talks about business and church without discomfort.

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