Grass without Roots

Foreign Funding and the Underdevelopment of Nicaraguan Civil Society

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Abstract

How does dependence on foreign funding affect the ability of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to represent and empower the grassroots and strengthen civil society? Drawing on interviews with stakeholders in a wide range of NGOs in Nicaragua, this paper shows that instrumental dependence on funding strains the ties of NGOs to constituencies and pushes them from long-term advocacy and organizing towards short-term service and ephemeral, top-down mobilization. The result is a disproportionately influential, yet uprooted, NGO sector that leaves little room for traditional grassroots membership organizations. These results necessitate a rethinking of current funding models and the best roles for foreign-funded NGOs in building civil society.

Acknowledgements

Non-governmental Organization Abbreviations

AIDH   *Asociación Integral para los Derechos Humanos*
Comprehensive Association for Human Rights

CENIDH   *Centro Nicaragüense de Derechos Humanos*
Nicaraguan Human Rights Center

CIPRES   *Centro para la Promoción, la Integración, y el Desarrollo Rural y Social*
Center for Rural and Social Promotion, Integration, and Development

CPDH   *Centro Permanente de Derechos Humanos*
Permanent Human Rights Center

CC   *Coordinadora Civil*
Civil Coordinator

CODENI   *La Federación Coordinadora Nicaragüense de Organismos No Gubernamentales que trabaja con la Niñez y la Adolescencia*
Nicaraguan Coordinating Federation of NGOs that work with Children and Adolescents

FEDICAMP   *Federacion para el Desarrollo Integral Entre Campesinos y Campesinas*
Federation for the Full Development of Peasant Men and Women of Nicaragua

INPRHU   *Instituto para la Promoción Humana*
Institute for Human Promotion

IPADE   *Instituto para el Desarrollo y la Democracia*
Institute for Development and Democracy

IXCHEN   Centro de Mujeres IXCHEN
IXCHEN Women's Center

KEPA   Service Centre for Development Cooperation

MCN   *Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense*
Nicaraguan Communal Movement

RNDDL   *Red Nicaragüense por la Democracia y el Desarrollo Local*
Nicaraguan Network for Democracy and Local Development

TESIS   *Asociación de Trabajadores para la Educación, Salud, e Integración Social*
Association of Workers for Education, Health, and Social Integration

Introduction

Is it possible for donors in the global North to "purchase" a vibrant and active civil society that represents and empowers the poor and marginalized in the South?[1] This is the implied promise in the glossy publications produced by Northern donors, who have been increasing their funding for "civil society strengthening" in the global South.[2] Donors widely interpret civil society – in practice – to be simply the non-governmental, non-profit sector, populated by development non-governmental organizations, or NGOs (Howell & Pearce, 2001; Mercer, 2002). This is precisely the situation in Nicaragua, where we find a well-funded and prominent non-governmental sector and plenty of rhetoric around civil society (*sociedad civil*). What donors are reluctant to acknowledge, however, is just how weakly connected their purchase – an NGO-based civil society – is to the vast majority of Nicaraguans.

We frame this case study in the on-going debate over the proper role of foreign funded NGOs in civil society. To some scholars, they are "critical ingredients of civil society" (Clark, 1997, p. 43) which possess a "comparative advantage" (Smith S. C., 2007) in service delivery as well as empowerment, representation, and advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalized. However, many critical scholars in the NGO literature have taken issue with this notion, highlighting the perversities of funding NGOs as a means of building civil society (Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Henderson, 2002; Howell & Pearce, 2001; Mercer, 2002; Sundstrom, 2006; Uphoff, 1996). At the core of this view is the question of accountability and representation: who do foreign-funded NGOs most represent – the donors or the recipients? At a societal level, do they empower citizens or inadvertently displace traditional modes and cultures of organizing?

We use Nicaragua as a case study because it offers a unique setting in which to explore these questions and the validity of these critiques. Nicaragua, though characterized by unprecedented mass mobilization in the 1980s, has become unmistakably and increasingly demobilized since the early 1990s. As we will argue, in this short time interval Nicaraguan civil society has transitioned from state to donor co-optation via well-intentioned funding for NGOs. These NGOs have now come to dominate civil society relative to abnormally weakened grassroots membership organizations (Borchgrevink, 2006). (The primary distinction we will draw between grassroots membership organizations, which we will refer to often as simply the "grassroots", and NGOs is the *primary* source of funding – from members or from donors, respectively.) This paradigm shift is often referred to in Nicaragua as the "NGOization" (*ONGización*) of civil society – and as we will show, it was neither a natural nor entirely positive development.

NGOs in Nicaragua have become problematic by downplaying the difficult contradictions foreign funding imposes on their work, the core theme that we focus on in this paper. These contradictions and challenges are thus: (1) NGOs are not necessarily representative and face instrumental pressure to maintain high upward accountability at the expense of downward accountability and responsiveness. NGO relationships with grassroots organizations are thus often prescriptive, promoting donor politics and foreign values rooted in international development discourse. (2) Incentives from donors to professionalize their advocacy limit the ability of NGOs to empower citizens to demand their rights *themselves* and participate meaningfully in civil society. (3) NGO efforts to replace state services provide short-term benefits but may be coming at a long-term cost of decreased mobilization to demand even the most basic rights and responsibilities of government. (4) The growth and influence of NGOs promotes an instrumental approach to organizing in society as a whole, which decreases the viability of grassroots organizations that promote broad political engagement.

Seen together, these contradictions suggest that foreign funding for NGOs has led to the development of a "grass-without-roots" civil society, which is neither strongly representative nor empowering. Instead, NGOs may ironically reinforce current demobilization and contribute to the depoliticization of society as a whole. These results challenge scholars, donors, and practitioners alike to reassess the prevailing wisdom that civil society can be "purchased" without side effects.

Importantly, we do not argue that funding has been entirely negative, nor do we suggest that it end immediately. We recognize the sincere intentions of NGO staff, many of whom recognize (and informed us of) the critiques mentioned here. Instead, we hope to show that while financial independence is inevitably a long-term necessity for a truly representative and empowering civil society, if donors change the expectations they place on NGOs, they can mitigate many of the perverse effects we detail.

Structure

Below we briefly review the burgeoning critical literature that has developed around NGOs and civil society, which provides the theoretical and comparative framework for the analysis to follow.[3] We then provide an overview of the sample of NGOs, the methodology of the study, and the historical context of Nicaraguan civil society. We divide the remainder of the paper into two parts. In the first section, we ask how representative NGOs can be while they are highly dependent on foreign funding. We explore the perverse incentives and accountabilities that NGOs face at each level (from advocacy network to recipient) while trying to advocate for social change. In the second section, we analyze the efforts of NGOs to empower Nicaraguans**.** Here we address the fundamental paradox that prompted this study: Why have civic participation and grassroots membership organizations declined in both numbers and power while funding has increased for NGOs promising empowerment and a new civil society?[4] We posit a number of possible negative effects of foreign funding on civic participation and membership organizations. We conclude with a number of theoretical and practical implications for scholars and donors alike.

Dilemmas of Foreign Funding

We draw on the critical revisionist view of NGOs as instrumental actors who are not driven purely by normative imperatives as is often assumed (Cooley & Ron, 2002; Edwards & Hulme, 1996; Henderson, 2002; Gugerty & Prakash, 2010). Instead, "strategic concerns can and do trump normative or ideological considerations" in order to ensure organizational survival of NGOs (Gugerty & Prakash, 2010, p. 525). At the core, these "strategic concerns" relate to the process of finding and maintaining *funding* (in the Nicaraguan case, this is nearly always foreign donor support). This tension can result in competition between NGOs due to scarce funding resources and a corresponding difficulty to cooperate to serve the "greater good," as they ostensibly intend (Cooley & Ron, 2002; Pfieffer, 2003; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010). Thus, this perspective forces us to draw a critical distinction between rhetoric of what NGOs *say* and the reality of what they actually *do.* It offers us a particular insight into the motivations of NGOs, helping to explain a host of behaviors that seem to go against their staff's own beliefs, their missions, or the interests of their constituents.

This instrumental behavior manifests itself most directly in terms of conflicting accountabilities, as NGOs are often forced to be more accountable to their donors than to their constituencies or missions (Ebrahim, 2005; Kilby, 2006; Prakash & Gugerty, 2010; Townsend, Porter, & Mawdsley, 2002). Given that the interests of donors and the interests of marginalized constituents of most NGOs do not often coincide exactly (if at all), donors often place NGOs in a very awkward position. In order to secure funding, they must claim to be representatives of the "people" and devoted to strengthening "civil society" and yet they must simultaneously respond to donor preferences, even when they conflict with the organization's mission or the interests of their constituents as is often the case in Latin America

(Howell & Pearce, 2001, p. 223). In many cases, this has resulted in a "loss of linkages with grassroots constituencies" and thus a loss in "the close relationships required to represent their interests in policy-making fora" (Mercer 2002, p. 16, emphasis added). This distancing from the constituency and proximity to donors has left advocacy NGOs claiming to represent the grassroots open to criticism from their constituents (Bebbington, 1997), the state (Parks, 2008), and scholars (Jad 2007; Skocpol 2003; Tvedt 1998).

Conflicting accountability also raises serious questions about the efficacy of organizations working to *empower* civil society and promote social change. In order to appease donor preferences, NGO advocacy and empowerment work often becomes compartmentalized into projects with "short-term measurable outcomes that discourage broad-based community organizing" (Bartley, 2007, p. 230). As the scholar of organizational behavior, Alnoor Ebrahim (2005), notes, donors tend to focus more on short-term "products" and much less on "more ambiguous and less tangible change in social and political processes" (p. 64). He argues that this discourages downward accountability to constituents, impedes organizational learning (based on critical self-evaluation), and limits the ability of NGOs to work towards long-term social change (2005).

Despite growing awareness of these internal contradictions of NGOs among scholars, Howell and Pearce (2001) note that for donors, "[development] NGOs are viewed a key, and indeed 'natural,' component of any civil society" (119). While donors recognize other organizations, such as business associations, clubs, churches, unions, etc., to be part of civil society, NGOs remain the "prime organization of interest," and thus donors believe that "when they are absent, they should be created" via funding (pp. 118-9).

Yet, as we will detail, the promotion of NGOs via donor funding can have adverse and (usually) unintended effects on society as a whole. Dependence on foreign funding "can easily lead to a distortion of local agendas as local NGOs competing for funding shape their planned programs and activities around the priority of donors" (Howell & Pearce, 2001, p. 120). This "distortion" can be highly *depoliticizing*, as "NGOs are often able to tempt or pressure grassroots organizations into forsaking political struggle, in favour of seeking to establish clientelistic relations by ingratiating themselves with institutions controlling access to development resources"(Arellano-López & Petras, 1994, p. 557). Similarly, NGOs are a way to meet the "immediate needs of the poor to prevent social unrest" during neoliberal transitions towards free markets and state retrenchment (Biekart, 1999, p. 95). Thus, the effect of NGOs is often the artificial elimination of conflict and politics from civil society.

However, the reduction of civil society to a neutral, "technical exercise of coordination" (Howell & Pearce, 2001, p. 117) belies the social cleavage caused by donor interventions and their ties to donor ideology and politics. For example, Smith (1990) notes that NGOs in Colombia tended to reflect donor agendas and priorities while serving a "system-maintenance" (267) function to preserve the inequalities of the status quo. More generally, NGOs are increasingly seen as a product and essential component of reinforcing and legitimizing donor-driven neoliberal reforms (Howell & Pearce, 2001; Kihika, 2009; Mercer, 2002) and transmitting Northern development ideologies (Biekart, 1999; Tvedt, 1998). NGO proliferation also tends to upset the balance of power and influence within civil society (Howell & Pearce, 2001). This frequently results in a worrisome "crowding out" and decline in grassroots organizations in diverse contexts across the globe (Arellano-López & Petras, 1994; Jad, 2007; Macdonald, 1997; Robinson & Friedman, 2005; Skocpol, 2003). As we will show, the roles and contradictions of NGOs and the effect of the "NGO explosion" in Nicaragua reflect many of these trends, particularly the drastic decline in grassroots organizations.

Nicaraguan Context

Nicaraguan civil society today would be almost unrecognizable to an observer who had seen the strength of collective action that characterized the early 1980s and survived in a lesser form through the

mid-1990s. In spite of extremely high economic inequality, cuts to social welfare services and pervasive corruption, apathy and popular demobilization pervade Nicaragua (Grigsby 2005; Mattsson 2007; W. I. Robinson 1997). A historical context is necessary to put into perspective this dramatic contrast.

Prior to the late 1970s, civil society organizations of any kind were rare and either covert or controlled by the Somoza dictatorship (Walker, 2003). However, following the popular insurrection of 1979, the Sandinista (FSLN) government consolidated revolutionary groups into mass popular organizations. These organizations drew heavily on mass voluntarism (Serra, 1991) and funding from the state, members, and NGOs, the latter typically for specific projects (Baumeister, 1995; Polakoff & La Ramée, 1997; Ruchwarger, 1987). Mass participation was encouraged and organizations were internally democratic at the lower levels – and at least nominally so at higher levels (Serra, 1991).

Yet these mass organizations became increasingly verticalized, polarizing, and subordinate to the state as the FSLN government came under increasing economic and military pressure from the United States (Macdonald, 1997; Walker, 2003). These external pressures exacerbated the pre-existing internal tensions between the hierarchical tendencies of its "vanguardism" and its emphasis on participatory democracy and empowerment (Quandt, 1995, p. 267). Participation subsequently declined in response to this structural shift as well as declining economic conditions (Polakoff & La Ramée, 1997; Serra, 1991).

However, despite this decline, the mass organizations had a lasting effect, fundamentally contributing to the early stages of participatory democracy in Nicaragua (Smith H. , 1993; Ruchwarger, 1987).They claimed an estimated combined membership of nearly a half million adults (in a country of only three million) even as late as 1989 (Serra, 1991, p. 49). As Serra (1991) notes, "many people, in spite of everything, had learned to state their opinions, criticize, be informed about the policies of the government, and organize in collective attempts to attain satisfaction of their common needs" (74). These organizations provided the first opportunities for public engagement and organization in civil society for most Nicaraguans (Ruchwarger, 1987). This left a profound legacy, which underlies the collective consciousness of the poor and marginalized portions of society as well as a generation of sympathetic intellectuals and former revolutionaries who now attempt to carry on the revolutionary project through NGOs (Pearce, 1998; Polakoff & La Ramée, 1997; Mattsson, 2007).

Following the 1990 elections, in which the neoliberal UNO administration was voted into power, social movements, unions, cooperatives, and community organizations atrophied due to the extreme effects of neoliberal economic reform on the poor, the elimination of state funding, and legislation that favored industry over laborers and small producers. This effect was by no means immediate and these grassroots groups mounted considerable resistance through the mid-1990s (Borchgrevink, 2006; Polakoff & La Ramée, 1997). Nevertheless, by 2008, only 8% of the labor force was organized into unions, down from 22% in 1989.[5] Cooperatives similarly shrunk from 3,800 in 1990 to barely 400 in 1999 (Nitlápan-Envío, 1999, p. 10). Currently, social movements, unions, cooperatives, and community organizations are fractured, weak and virtually non-existent on the national scene (Borchgrevink, 2006; Grigsby, 2005).

The rapid decline in traditional grassroots civil society organizations was accompanied by an inversely proportional explosion of NGOs. Over 300 emerged in 1990 alone (Pearce, 1998). This sudden growth was spurred by state retrenchment, foreign funding, and favorable legislation (Borchgrevink, 2006). Since 1990, the number of NGOs has continued to grow. Estimates vary from 300 to 2000, though the number of *active* NGOs is likely closer to 300 (Borchgrevink, 2006; Mattsson, 2007; Vázquez, 2008). What is more important for this study however, is the influence of these NGOs, which has grown exponentially along with their share of the foreign aid budget to Nicaragua, which now exceeds 60% (Hidalgo, 2009). Private sector associations and interest groups are strong but focused on narrow sectoral interests (Borchgrevink, 2006). In stark contrast to grassroots groups in civil society, NGOs are "strong, visible, and relatively well-funded, and consequently tend to *dominate the public sphere*" in Nicaragua (Borchgrevink, 2006, p. 8, emphasis added).

Sample Selection and Methodology

The data gathered during the field study draws primarily from interviews with NGOs, observation of NGO activities and analysis of local press and NGO publications and websites. Interviews were conducted with 60 administrators, field staff, volunteers, and recipients in a total of 16 domestic NGOs and NGO advocacy networks and one international network in 29 meetings and field visits during July and August, 2009.[6]

This sample represents the wide range of NGOs operating in Nicaragua, some of which are highly political and others that stay far away from politics. On a qualitative level, the NGOs selected provide a good picture of Nicaraguan civil society, as the NGOs in the sample work fulfill 25 of the 26 categories (only lacking church-affiliated work) listed by the *Coordinadora Civil* (CC) as the major areas of work of its hundreds of member organizations (CC, 1999, p. 14).

Conflicting Accountability and the Contradictions of Representation

As foreign donors increasingly encourage NGOs to engage in advocacy (*incidencia*) on behalf of the poor and marginalized sectors of Nicaragua (Borchgrevink, 2006) to fill the role once held by the mass organizations, unions, etc., critical questions emerge. Are these NGOs providing the distinct channels for public preference aggregation as their proponents suggest?[7] How representative are they of their constituents?

We show that a lack of downward accountability fundamentally inhibits NGOs from forming the backbone of a representative civil society. We find that foreign-funded NGOs in Nicaragua tend to provide a downward stream of "expert" opinions of their staff, donor politics, and Northern development ideologies rather than aggregating and representing the diverse interests and struggles of their constituents.

In this section, we attempt to detail in turn each of level of accountability in the new, foreign-funded Nicaraguan civil society. Together, it becomes clear that these unequal relationships militate against the creation of a legitimate and effective civil society able to represent and advocate for the interests of the poor and marginalized.

Upward Ties: NGOs, Volunteers, and Recipients

Foreign-funded NGOs face particular challenges to *legitimate* their advocacy and demonstrate to donors that they are in fact strengthening civil society as a whole. Nicaraguan NGOs almost universally rely on a combination of experts and volunteer networks of "promoters" (*promotores/as*) for this purpose. Yet we argue that in the absence of downward accountability, this technocratic expertise is liable to be more prescriptive than responsive, despite good intentions. Similarly, while the promoter networks are a means to show – on paper – that NGOs are creating an engaged citizenry and that they have grassroots support, the NGOs remain *unaccountable* to them and the promoters themselves are not always accountable to the communities they effectively represent.

Promoters and the Community

Of the 13 service-provision NGOs in the sample, only the MCN had a formal mechanism for direct downward accountability to constituents. The MCN is a rather unique case that will be discussed more in-depth in a later section. It holds internal elections from the community level up to its national leadership. The remaining 12 NGOs relied on less formal promoter networks. The promoters are often the pre-existing or de facto community leaders (this is not without possible tensions, as described below) and main liaisons with the NGOs. Promoters are volunteers generally recruited from the community or neighborhood where the NGO works with the community organization for projects and

workshops. They are nominally volunteers, though many NGOs may reimburse transportation and other expenditures, or even provide a small stipend (Mattsson, 2007).

The promoters are the sole representatives of their communities within the NGOs, yet they too face mixed loyalties. As Mattson (2007) observed in rural Nicaragua, promoters were "seen [by the communities] as closely associated with [NGO] project staff, and *like to see themselves* as aligned with the NGO" (99, emphasis added). In our interviews, promoters similarly expressed strong pride in their status as a promoter, even to the point of demanding official apparel. These individuals would often become a promoter for multiple organizations at the same time. At the extreme, Mattson notes that some promoters simply would not (or often could not afford to) work without a stipend (p. 133-5). Thus, while it would be incorrect to assume that most promoters are primarily driven by egoistic or instrumental motivations, these factors do play a large role. Combined with their strong loyalty to the NGOs, this "positions them in an ambiguous position in the communities" (Mattsson, 2007, p. 99) is representative in the NGO structure.

Furthermore, in many rural communities that are highly dependent on NGO aid, Mattson found that "by and large it is uncommon that individuals [in the communities] say anything critical about the community promoters." They "fear that the information will leak back to the promoter" and thus to the NGO, which they fear would prompt the organization to leave their community (p. 98). The upward dependence that the community has on the NGOs makes them correspondingly dependent on the promoter as an intermediary. Thus, while some promoters are accountable to the community via election, this may be irrelevant for representation given that communities themselves engage in self-censorship out of fear of upsetting the NGO.

In the larger, national human rights promoter networks of CENIDH and CPDH, which occupy both rural and urban areas, many promoters are not even from the given community to whom they might be accountable to through kinship, social relations, or election. For example, in a promoter training for CENIDH in León, the majority of trainees were actually professionals from other NGOs and students of social work, a key preparatory degree for NGO work. CPDH's administrator noted that promoters that were more "capable" were often promoted to oversee other promoters, thus in Managua, one of the key senior promoters for CPDH was a local professor (personal communication, July 21, 2009). While this diversity of educated and professional expertise is important, it hardly forms the connections NGOs need to legitimate their representation of their mostly uneducated, poor, and rural constituents. As we will show, this bias towards professionals has become deeply rooted in Nicaraguan civil society.

NGOs and Promoters

We have thus shown that downward accountability is not necessarily a given in promoter-community relationships. Yet even when downward accountability *is* strong – as it may be in communities where the promoters emerged from pre-existing community organizations – the relationship between the NGOs and the promoters is still weak. It is characterized by limited downward accountability and instrumental participation. This leaves little room for representative preference aggregation.

With the exception of MCN, none of the 12 NGOs with promoter networks, be they national (e.g. CENIDH, CPDH, IXCHEN) or local, (e.g. FEDICAMP, FMCP) had formal mechanisms for downward accountability to promoters. NGOs with promoters viewed them instrumentally, as a means to expand the reach of their services without paying more staff.[8] For IXCHEN, promoters "have been key in the extension of educational coverage as *transmitters* of information, in the identification of needs, and in the preparation of conditions for the arrival of the IXCHEN Unity Mobile to the communities" (IXCHEN, 2000, p. 6, emphasis added). This description was typical of the rhetoric used by staff in other NGOs. Promoters are recipients of information from the NGO experts above, which they reproduce and

"transmit." They prepare communities for projects like IXCHEN's mobile healthcare visits and, at times, identify needs. Yet, throughout our field research, NGO representatives never brought up the concept of accountability to promoters even when discussing the benefits or roles of promoters. This is the key point: with NGOs unaccountable to them, promoters are essentially passive – they may identify needs and engage in consultation, but they hold no power to decide on either the resolution of those needs nor the political positions taken by NGO staff who claim to represent them.

On balance, an informal social mechanism for accountability presumably exists through the social relations between NGO staff and promoters. NGOs must ensure the cooperation of promoters for the success of their project, but as noted above, they can gain this cooperation through the esteem they confer their promoters or through the small monetary or social status rewards they offer, but not necessarily from representativeness or downward accountability. Any such informal mechanism is likely much weaker than elected representation by members, a typical structure in other Nicaraguan civil society organizations such as unions, cooperatives, and (to an extent) the mass organizations (Serra, 1991). Worse, the ability of any such informal mechanism to transmit preferences is further limited due to the primarily instrumental role of the promoter as a tool for project implementation. As Kilby (2006) notes, "informal accountability processes are insufficient and at best link the NGO *instrumentally* (that is through its work), but not structurally, to their constituency (Fox & Brown, 1998); or in a way that leads to strong empowerment outcomes" (p. 960, emphasis added).

Indeed, promoters are called upon not for their (and their community's) opinions on the policy matters advocated by the NGO at higher levels, but rather explicitly for their assistance in organizing formal projects (both service and educational). This skews the information flow between promoters and NGO staff towards projects and away from the policy issues that the NGOs advocate for at higher levels. In fact, Grigsby (2005) notes that "NGOs very often tend to presume to represent their beneficiaries—or 'target population,' as they like to call them—*without even consulting them* about the decisions being made in their name or their particular political position on any given matter" (p.22, emphasis added). Thus, even any informal accountability from NGOs to their promoters is unlikely to significantly legitimate representation in higher-level issues. These policy issues are rarely discussed with the promoters or communities.

Given this lack of downward accountability, it is not surprising that even organizations with promoter networks are still distinctly staff-driven. The promoters may be consulted (if only on project issues), but they lack the authority to hold the staff–who are the "experts"–accountable. The staff are not dependent on the promoters or recipients for their funding or positions, they are funded by donors and elected by no one.

This lack of downward accountability and its implications are by no means lost on Nicaraguan NGOs. In a focus group of NGO staff conducted by the Institute for Communication and Development (*Instituto de Comunicación y Desarollo*) one representative noted,

> "I do *not* believe that we are democratic, in the sense that we do not ask the beneficiary 'what is your opinion,' *we simply give them what we believe* and that's why there is the failure in some cases in the impact that we can have with the beneficiary [...] I do not want to be negative, but to get better, *first I have to ask the beneficiary and then act"* (ICD, 2006, p.176, emphasis added).

Another representative added later, "The [NGO] leaders' representativeness of their constituents, with the base, is still weak. This involves an institutional change of the very organizations of civil society. It is a change of mentality, but also it is also a matter that *has to do with resources*" (ICD, 2006, p. 194-5, emphasis added).

These reflections illustrate a number of weaknesses caused by the NGOization. Almost all NGOs in Nicaragua lack democratic structures; they are unaccountable to their base. This fundamentally flips

civil society on its head. Rather than providing a mechanism by which the base (citizens) can articulate its interests to the top (civil society leaders), as suggested by proponents like Clark (1997), foreign funded NGOs "give" the beneficiary what the technical experts "believe" is needed. This sense of expertise is amplified by the stark differences between the NGO staff and recipients. In Nicaragua, NGO staff are rarely from the same class, ethnicity, or region as their constituents. Instead, they often form an "NGO elite" of educated middle-class, *mestizo*, urban professionals highly engaged in international development discourse (Mattsson, 2007) often via international conferences (CC, 2009). Thus, what the NGO staff believe is necessary (as expressed in their advocacy rhetoric) is often little more than a translated set of buzzwords from the latest World Bank report.[9]

Worse still, these buzzwords are often replaced by barbed donor political ideologies actually *intended* to be prescriptive towards society, as in the case of CENIDH and CPDH, two human rights NGOs. Their staff and rhetoric so closely follow that of their consistent, long-time donors (Europe and Canada for CENIDH and the US for CPDH) that they are polemically divided despite nearly identical missions and methods, accusing one another of politicization and bias in interviews. Ironically, the recipients these two NGOs implicitly represent are doubtfully nearly as polarized as CENDIH and CPDH would suggest. They are in fact both highly mixed (with both pro- and anti-FSLN citizens) due to the same national scope and poor and marginalized demographic that uses the free legal aid offered by both NGOs.

Thus donors can have an enormous influence on NGOs, and while many NGO administrators claimed to resist funding with conditions that did not fit with their priorities, they can only be so selective given their instrumental pressures, as we will illustrate in the next section. The "beliefs" then touted by NGOs – whether in publications like CPDH's or in advocacy circles – are then vulnerable to being driven more by the politics and preferences of donors than by constituents they are supposed to be benefitting.

The social disconnect between the advocates – the NGO staff – and the affected citizens can further affect the efficacy of NGO advocacy. Nicaraguan scholar Andrés Baltodano (2006) notes that NGO leaders "almost never share the same 'life opportunities' and existential urgencies of those they represent." Therefore, he argues that the policies they present "with excellent intentions lacks the incentive, *sense of urgency* and even the rage and need for change that in the past provided the force behind social transformation and collective action" (p. 27, emphasis added). Thus even those NGO staff who can leap over substantial class, ethnic, and cultural divides to become incredibly in tune with the needs and beliefs of their marginalized constituents may never be able to summon the urgent force of will required to make structural changes.

Likewise, even when staff members, like those quoted above, desire to increase downward accountability - to "ask the beneficiary and then act" - they also realize that both "resources" and "mentality" are major obstacles. As long as funding is coming from above from donors who do not encourage strong downward accountability (beyond token "participatory" approaches[10]), there is little *incentive* and little ability for NGOs to become more downwardly accountable and responsive. Similarly, when civil society is "dominated by middle-class professionals of Managua" (a result of funding) as Borchgrevink (2006, 47) notes, it is unlikely that the *mentality* of NGO staff will change, given that they tend to see themselves as experts who know what is best for their constituents (Mattsson, 2007).

Advocacy Networks and NGOs: Unequal Membership

Civil society advocacy networks, such as the CC now represent the singular de facto "voice" of Nicaraguan civil society, even though their membership is dominated (in influence, if not clearly in numbers) by foreign-funded, service-focused local NGOs. These NGOs, as we discussed above, lack structures that can ensure downward accountability to their constituents. Although the CC proudly claims the membership of social movements, unions, and community organizations, these groups are

often under-represented or overshadowed by better-funded groups. Unequal membership *within* advocacy networks like the CC thus further weakens their representativeness and legitimacy.

The cultivation of this image as "the voice of the people" has come partly through a shift in the language the CC uses to describe itself. While the CC notes in its first publication in 1999 that it is composed of (specifically) NGOs as well *as* traditional member organizations (CC, 1999), ten years later NGOs are not even mentioned in their self-definition as "a national citizen platform of social movements, regional networks, thematic networks, unions, federations and individual persons (CC, 2009, p. 1).[11] This comes despite, if anything, a decrease in the influence of membership organizations. This rephrasing allows the CC to appear to be a more organic representative of civil society and defer blunt accusations - often levied by the government - of being pawns of international donors.

Donors cause major imbalances in civil society by funding NGOs based on their political orientation (like CENIDH and CPDH above) and upward accountability (Howell & Pearce, 2001). Whereas member funding makes organizations more powerful as they gain more members – and thus more public support –foreign funding *decouples* NGOs from public support. This gives most fundable groups a disproportionate voice not only in their individual advocacy efforts, but also *within* organizations like the CC. Yet it is often the least fundable groups that are the most representative and motivated to mobilize citizens. In her study of Nicaraguan women's NGOs, Ewig (1999) found that smaller groups were far more able to promote the participation of beneficiaries than the larger and more professionalized groups. Nevertheless, these better-funded groups tend to dominate advocacy networks like the CC (Borchgrevink, 2006) and even the Nicaraguan women's movement as a whole (Ewig, 1999).

The CC makes a significant effort to fulfill its rhetoric of internal democracy and "horizontal" structure, but the inequalities produced by funding and professionalization result in an observed correlation between funding and voice in the organization. Indeed, officially all the members have equal rights in terms of voting and there are no leaders per se, only rotating "contact persons" (*enlaces*) and a spokesperson (*vocería*). (The CC considers this rotating leadership key to reducing the threat of authoritarian *caudillismo*.) To create their policy proposals, the CC relies on the "experts" who staff their member organizations in various thematic areas (gender, human rights, etc.). The CC attempts to gather the input of their hundreds of member organizations in meetings and consultations around the country (CC, 1999, p. 15).

Yet even Violeta Delgado, a former national liaison of the CC, admits that the CC is still very "Managua-centric" (ICD 2006, 190). This explains Borchgrevink's (2006) observation that "better-staffed organizations based in Managua have advantages in participating in these forums" (47-8). Thus while participation in the CC's meetings is open, this participation "is not without costs" (47) for organizations with less funding. These organizations must often trek to Managua, a long and costly journey, which forces them to leave their work (Mattsson, 2007).[12] They often lack the "professional skills and full-time dedication" of the better-funded and more professionalized NGOs that is "necessary in order to take part" (Borchgrevink, 2006, p. 48). The CC's annual national assembly is illustrative of this struggle.

As part of their democratic structure, the CC calls an annual national assembly of members to "approve [the CC's] strategic plans, operation plans, annual reports, budgets, and strategies" (CC, 2009, p. 21). Yet at the CC's national assembly on August 8, 2009, the palpable sentiment was of a meeting to celebrate the success of the organization and approve policy proposals *already made* at higher levels, as noted above, by the most well funded NGOs. Approval of the policy proposal was an informal process, passing the vote with tacit unanimity, despite quiet complaints from smaller groups. Borchgrevink (2006) indicates that this is only an example of a more systemic trend, in which "large parts of [the CC's] membership" – who are not as well-funded or professionalized – "are left with the feelings that decisions are taken over their heads" (47).

Ironically, despite the clear dominance of NGOs, particularly the most well-funded NGOs, the CC has assumed its role as the *de facto* voice of civil society – no other civil society actor (including those

members of the CC) has nearly the same level of national prominence. They are considered to represent the "key opposition voice in the country" (Bradshaw & Linneker, 2003, p. 154). A former administrator noted that around 2004 came the point when they no longer sought out the media; the media began to come to them (personal communication, August 20, 2009). The media now widely quotes and interviews the CC on topical policy issues as "a national reference," holding nearly one (very well attended) press conference a week (CC, 2009, p. 29).

Efficacy

The above analysis indicates that the CC's internal democracy, which might otherwise open critical channels of representation for Nicaraguans, is only as strong as its weakest link: the NGO. Without prompting, a former administrator of the CC lamented that this accountability gap – wherein NGOs have no real imperative to consult the constituency they claim to represent – is "fundamentally undemocratic" and a key issue in need of major improvement (personal communication, August 20, 2009). This reliance on NGO representation of citizens results in a serious disconnect with citizens and a weakness in the CC. As Violeta Delgado, a former national liaison of the CC explains, "The [Civil] Coordinator is still a very interesting hybrid, but it is also very *fragile*, because we are a network of networks but *not a network of citizens.*" (ICD 2006, p. 190, emphasis added). Thus the vast majority of the organizing done by the CC and its members - which could form the backbone of a powerfully interconnected and mobilized civil society - does *not* take place between citizens in the dusty *colonias* of Managua or the muddy *pueblos* of the countryside. Rather, it mainly occurs between the new NGO elite in hotels and the air conditioned offices of the NGOs and the CC, which Delgado admits to be still "Managua-centric" despite the fact that she believes "the greatest belligerence at the hour of mobilization is from the Departments" (ICD 2006, 190). Given this lack of accountable connections to the constituency, it is perhaps no surprise that Nicaraguan sociologist Orlando Núñez[A] worries that "there is a certain sense that the [Civil] Coordinator's power to mobilize people is limited, [and that there exists] a certain sense of distrust [of the CC]" among Nicaraguans (Grigsby, 2005, p. 25).

Nevertheless, the CC *does* mobilize tens of thousands of citizens for marches, a clearly powerful show of strength which requires an immense organizational effort. Yet doubts remain as to the ability of the CC and its members to *sustain* pressure over the timescales needed to make significant political and social change while so dependent on donor funding, and thus donor preferences. The CC credits its ability to execute these massive campaigns and marches – with only eight paid staff of its own – to the resources of the member organizations. These organizations, such as IXCHEN, then utilize their connections to their recipient communities to help mobilize people for marches or events like CODENI's campaign described in the following section. Yet these organizations, typically NGOs, are running tight budgets and often changing programs quickly to keep up with new trends in donor preferences, even at the expense of the key connections to their communities: their promoters.

IXCHEN admits that its promoter network "requires external financial resources" and laments that when funding for the promoter network was cut for two years, some promoters were "recruited by other organizations" (IXCHEN, 2000, p. 6). Though their training may be permanent, it is uncertain how much impact they can have without funding from an NGO, despite IXCHEN's hopes that they will continue to "defend women's rights against whatever injustice" regardless of funding (6). The result is a rather ephemeral civil society – one in which promoters, organizations, mobilizations, and even entire movements may come and go with the tides of funding.

Worse, many organizations that in theory unite under the CC banner are actually in *competition* with one another for funding or are engaged in donor political feuds (like CENIDH and CPDH), leading to a level of non-cooperation that is not based on disagreements between represented sectors of Nicaraguan society. In our sample, only those organizations with vastly different project portfolios (and

thus different funding sources) ever worked together. Other organizations refused to join (FEDICAMP) or renounced their membership (MCN) over political differences and a disagreement with what they saw as the revolving door between CC leaders and political parties, particularly the Sandinista Renovation Movement (*Movimiento de Renovación Sandinista*, MRS). In a civil society polarized by funding and political parties, the CC's presumption to be the voice of *all* civil society organizations – let alone all citizens to whom they are not accountable – is an even more untenable proposition.

Together, the accountability gaps, instrumental participation of citizens, and volatility and competition for funding described here limit the representativeness and efficacy of NGO advocacy. However, these same mechanisms also help to explain the often contradictory or counter-productive behavior of NGOs towards the other key goal of their work: empowerment. The need for empowered, mobilized citizens to address the stark inequality and corruption in Nicaragua has perhaps never been greater or farther from fulfillment. Apathy and disillusionment abound, lamented by the NGO staff we interviewed, Nicaraguan commentators (Grigsby, 2005), and foreign researchers (Mattsson 2007; W. I. Robinson 1997). Public opinion polls conducted at intervals between the years of 1991-2008 confirm these qualitative assessments, affirming that there has been a *steady* and severe *decline* in citizen participation in their communities, membership organizations, and local government bodies (LAPOP).

Despite massive social problems, as one advisor to the CC noted with resignation, "a social explosion is not going to happen." He attributed this apathy and disillusionment to poor economic conditions for the vast majority of the population and the "carrot and stick" relationship of state co-option and repression of organizers and organizations as impediments to mobilization. Mattson (2007) echoes these sentiments while also pointing out a general sense of fatigue from the failures of revolutionary mobilization and war.

We do not discount any of these explanations for the current demobilization. Instead, in the remainder of the paper we seek to show the effects of a possible, if quite unintended, factor: the phenomenon of NGOization itself.

Between Institutional Survival and Empowerment

It is no secret that the funding market for NGOs in Nicaragua is fiercely competitive, volatile, and unreliable. Many NGO representatives complained of donor volatility, funding priorities, or an overall lack of funding. With the exception of AIDH (which was in the process of seeking foreign aid), all the NGOs studied were dependent on foreign funding for their very existence. Given this upward dependence, it is not surprising that the NGOs in the sample demonstrated the high levels of upward accountability, representativeness, and responsiveness that we explored in the first section. Yet the level of responsiveness to donors needed to survive not only affects the type of policies NGOs advocate for, but also the types of work they engage in and the *methods* they use to achieve their goals.

Through the same situation described by Kilby (2006), NGOs can "drift" from their original missions and methods in the pursuit of funding. We found that, although NGOs claim (and their staff genuinely desire) to empower citizens and catalyze structural social and political change, the pressures of funding have encouraged basic social service provision, professionalized advocacy, and depoliticized education. As we will show below, these do little to enhance and much to detract from the broader goal of an "empowered" and mobilized civil society.

The majority of Nicaraguan NGOs and advocacy networks in our sample - 11 of 16 - have broad goals oriented towards social change.[13] Out of these 11, 10 noted policy impact as a primary goal, six noted monitoring and public awareness as a primary goal, and (a slightly different set of) six noted citizen participation in public politics as a primary goal. Yet all of these NGOs spend the bulk of their time on often-unrelated basic social service provision, most filling voids left by neoliberal state retrenchment following 1990. Ironically, the Nicaraguan NGO administrators that we interviewed

resoundingly opposed the neoliberal anti-state paradigm, and saw the state as ultimately responsible for basic social services (e.g. health and education).

In her highly detailed ethnography, Mattson (2007) notes that the instrumental need to survive as an organization financially clashes strongly with – and indeed often overrides – the idealistic visions expressed in the rhetoric of Nicaraguan NGO activists. That this shift has occurred in spite of the ideals of the NGO staff themselves – many of whom are former revolutionaries – indicates the strength of the instrumental forces driving NGOs. In our sample, an administrator from IXCHEN was particularly clear about the issue: there is just more money available for social services (in IXCHEN's case, women's medical care) and thus it forms the vast majority of their operation. This occurred despite her conviction that their education and organization efforts in the women's movement were by far the most important aspects of their work *and* that the state should ultimately be responsible for healthcare.[14]

Even so, we observed that NGOs *do* widely perform advocacy, organization, and popular education more in line with their missions and core beliefs, even if they do often prioritize the more fundable service-provision activities. However, the pressures and incentives of foreign funding still profoundly influence the extent and form that these advocacy and empowerment activities take.

Contradictions of Professionalized Advocacy and Empowerment

The focus on and *interpretation* of "advocacy" (*incidencia*) in Nicaragua has grown in tandem with donor interest, which has risen rapidly in recent years (Borchgrevink, 2006). By 2006, 83.6% of Nicaraguan NGOs nationally listed advocacy as a main area of their work (ICD, 2006, p. 113). However, we found that the idea of "advocacy" has become practically synonymous with professionalized lobbying in NGO staff discourse and practice. As Borchgrevink (2006) notes, it is likely the "internalization" of the prevailing "models and understandings" in global development discourse and the "incentives of funding" that have driven this professionalization (58). Yet while lobbying is a potentially powerful tool for influencing policies, such professionalized advocacy does little to empower grassroots participation in civil society. Lobbying groups gain legitimacy and influence in Nicaragua largely by their level of professionalization rather than representativeness or ability to mobilize their constituents (Rocha, 2005). Yet we argue that without grassroots mobilization, even the most dedicated lobbying efforts are enfeebled and NGO claims to empower their constituencies ring hollow.

The trend towards professionalization encouraged by donors extends to NGO organizing and campaigning. As described above, although many NGOs (like CENIDH, CPDH, and IXCHEN) ostensibly "organize" networks of promoters (*redes de promotores*) that can claim hundreds of volunteers, this is a form of what Macdonald (1997) terms "instrumental participation," which is

> "…valued primarily for its contribution to the efficient implementation of a project. Beneficiaries' participation is limited to involvement in the work and the benefits of the project, they do not have real control over the design or evaluation. Control is in the hands of an outside actor, which may be the state, a political party, or the NGO itself. (25)"

Professionals – the NGO staff – remain in control, with only limited, informal downward accountability if any. Donors provide few incentives for NGO staff to actively *organize* citizens and allow them to take leadership roles, or even voting power, in their organizations.

Instead, a new culture of professionalism is encouraged that has created - and more importantly, *legitimized* - what Mattson (2007) terms an "NGO elite" in Nicaragua. Like our descriptions above, she notes that this relationship is fundamentally top-down; NGO staff express "a degree of superiority vis-à-vis 'the people' i.e. NGO actors 'know' the truth about the particular issues they work in favour of, they are experts, and their job is to *subject the population of* [sic] *better ways of thinking reality*" (p. 193, emphasis added). NGOs have thus come to legitimize and exert an "intellectual dominance" over Nicaraguan society (p. 155).

There is an unintentional parallel between these attitudes and the relationship of NGOs with promoters and communities and the vanguardism of the revolutionary ideologues of the FSLN in the 1980s. Although NGOs might oppose the phrasing, they aim for the same goal of the FSLN, to "guide, instruct, and transform the immature masses; at the same time…listen[ing] to the people and empower[ing] them." (Quandt, 1995, p. 267) This is implied in the top-down prescriptive relationships with promoters and communities. Just as Serra (1991) noted of the 1980s, the role of the grassroots today is primarily consultative, if at all involved, in the policy advocacy process of NGOs. While the revolutionary ideologues have been replaced by (or often simply become) the development experts, the actual voice of the grassroots remains muted.

Organizing is often encouraged only for the purposes of a predetermined project or campaign, such as CODENI's "Investment Campaign" to get more of the national budget devoted to children (in terms of education, health, etc.). Representatives of the different NGO members of CODENI, including two from the sample (INPRHU and IPADE) meet on a monthly basis to plan events, such as the launch of this campaign. For this event in particular, each representative promised to ask a number of children involved in their programs to come to a publicity event where they would be interviewed by reporters about their needs – for example, how poor the condition of their school is. This was a very typical example of the way NGOs draw on their recipient bases mainly for legitimacy during advocacy campaigns, whether for marches, signatures, or publicity.[15] The instrumental nature of the participation of recipients in service-focused NGOs like Asofenix, FMCP and FEDICAMP was even more explicit: though they might participate in consultations, the NGO staff still had to drive the project selection process towards what was fundable, and community organizing in this case was explicitly focused (and generally limited to) the short-term project. Constituents were not involved or organized beyond an instrumental level; the ideas, plans, and leadership of these campaigns and projects originated almost exclusively from the NGO staff.

Ironically, NGOs (most under the umbrella of the CC) also claim to empower recipients to become active participants in civil society and public politics through their popular education. The educational materials used in workshops conducted by organizations like CENIDH, CPDH, and IPADE focus on raising awareness about the human rights enshrined in Nicaraguan and international law, voting and electoral procedures, and the laws pertaining to civil society and organizing. The Law on Citizen Participation (*Ley 475: Ley de Participación Ciudadania*) is a particular focus, along with information on how to work with the Municipal Development Commitees (*CDM, Comités de Desarrollo Municipal*). The CDM are a critical means for citizens to participate and make demands of local government, for projects such as rural road improvements, for example. Unfortunately, CPDH field staff workers complained that funding for such educational work was volatile, and none was available during the time of our fieldwork (personal communication, July 22, 2009).

When funded, such education *can* be a critical first step towards creating an empowered citizenry that is engaged in public policy. However, when seen in the context of the growing professionalization of advocacy and organizing, the contradiction is hard to ignore. The CC maintains prominently that its primary goal is "building *citizenry* to influence public politics" (CC, 2009, front cover, emphasis added), a goal shared (in some rhetorical formulation) by five other NGOs and advocacy networks in the sample. Yet while NGOs *are* informing citizens of their rights to organize and advocate as part of civil society, we have shown that citizens ironically have few avenues to exercise their newfound rights in the prevailing NGO system, which is dominated by professionals. Thus, the CC's motto is quite misleading. Foreign funding has been effective in building a professionalized NGO elite, but not an engaged citizenry, to influence public politics. Citizens–specifically those who lack professional degrees and fluency in development discourse–are thus largely excluded from non-instrumental participation in civil society. Worse still, as NGOs replace huge swaths of the state's prior

responsibilities for social services, the very *incentive* to mobilize and participate – even to demand the most basic rights like water – is diminishing.

Services for the Status Quo

The allure of funding draws NGOs away from active organizing and advocacy and towards the provision of social services that they themselves consider the state's responsibility. We noted above the concerns NGO staff have with replacing state services cut by neoliberal reform. These detract from their *organization's* ability to focus on the kind of organizing and popular education (such as the civics described above) that might help change the political and economic status quo, which they often describe as intolerable. Yet we argue that the effect of NGOs replacing basic state services (in whatever fragmented manner that they can) is not simply a distraction for the NGOs, but for society as a *whole*, which is then drawn away from mobilization and towards passivity.

NGO staff overwhelmingly emphasized their desire to empower "citizens to demand their rights from the government." NGOs defined these rights broadly to include not only legal and political rights, but also basic social services such as the availability of potable water, healthcare, and agricultural assistance. Yet by providing services parallel to the state, they make it much easier for Nicaraguans to *exit* the failed state service system rather than *voice* their discontent and make demands of the state.[16] NGOs in the sample almost never had significant collaboration or joint projects with the government in regards to service provision, preferring vertical structures paralleling (typically underfunded, but more large-scale) government services, which they considered inferior. The few exceptions were limited training and capacity- building of government officials or employees (Centro Humboldt, INPRHU, IXCHEN, and TESIS) or simply serving as a government subcontractor (AsoFenix).[17] Others, like an administrator for FMCP, referred to the government as simply a "waste of time" while emphasizing rhetorically that citizens needed to be empowered to make demands on the state (personal communication, July 8, 2009). NGO staff frequently underplayed the apparent contradiction of replacing state services *while* simultaneously attempting to "empower" and encourage citizens to demand better state services.

IXCHEN provides a typical example of this phenomenon. Providing low-cost medical services to women due to the poor quality women's health services provided by the state, IXCHEN has become a very popular and prominent institution in Nicaragua, with health centers across the country. Yet despite being convinced that the state was responsible for healthcare, one of IXCHEN's administrators admitted that, in her opinion, IXCHEN's medical services – while filling a critical short-term need - simply "would not resolve" state deficiencies as desired in the long-term (personal communication, August 21, 2009). It is similarly unlikely that IXCHEN's organizing work with promoters is going to result in citizen pressure for improved state services for women, since promoters focus on specific health issue education and arranging the logistics for IXCHEN's mobile medical unit.

The key question then becomes this: how do these social services affect the *incentives* to mobilize and participate in civil society? Nicaraguan journalist William Grigsby (2005) posits that NGO services like these actually act as "retaining walls against grassroots discontent towards the government and the system, as people tend to wait for outside charity rather than fight for their rights" (p. 22). This converges with the conclusions of researcher Brian Smith (1990), who noted that NGOs in Colombia likewise tended to "harness the energies of regime opponents from the middle class" and "placate working-class sectors" (p. 276) which might otherwise pose a challenge to systemic inequalities. In this sense, NGOs tend to actually limit the social discontent that accompanies neoliberal reform. Such discontent occurred in Nicaragua during the early 1990s, only to subside as their economic impact – and the subsequent trend of NGOization – solidified.

This should not be taken as weakness or irrationality on the part of citizens, but rather as a product of the abundance of NGOs and the neoliberal state retrenchment mandated by international

financial institutions and donors. In the short-term, it is often much simpler and easier to ask an NGO to fill a need than to mobilize for a long-term, systemic change that is uncertain and difficult to accomplish – and indeed, this simple calculus is what we observe in Nicaragua.

No Room for the Grassroots and No Room for Politics?

Why, despite the massive efforts and rhetorical commitments of NGOs to "empower" the grassroots, have Nicaraguan grassroots organizations dwindled since 1990? Where is the grassroots "community," which the CC's members adamantly resolve to "work from and for" but "without *substituting*" (CC 2009, p. 19, emphasis added)? We argue that foreign funding has led NGOs to largely displace and (incompletely) replace grassroots organizations. The culture of organizing in Nicaragua has shifted towards professionalization and short-termism, which favors the NGO model. Whether the initial shift was a cause or an effect of NGOization is unclear, but regardless there is room for concern that NGOs may be unintentionally reinforcing the trend, and thus encouraging demobilization. In the process, the ability of Nicaraguan civil society to mobilize Nicaraguans and create the "social force" Baltodano (2006) notes is necessary for major social and political change in Nicaragua has greatly diminished.

The phenomenon of NGOs crowding out and replacing grassroots membership organizations is not unique to Nicaragua. Indeed, it is widely observed in contexts as disparate as Palestine, Ghana, Uganda, Bolivia, Central America (in general), and even the United States (Arellano-López & Petras, 1994; Jad, 2007; Macdonald, 1997; Robinson & Friedman, 2005; Skocpol, 2003). In the Nicaraguan context, as discussed above, NGOs have become the predominant form of civil society organization as grassroots organizations have dwindled (Borchgrevink, 2006). They are the face of civil society in international forums, national and local lobbying efforts, and the media. NGOs have even come to represent – or indeed consider themselves as – social movements.

This replacement of grassroots organizations by NGOs coincides with an increasing legitimacy and normalcy of the NGO development model among Nicaraguans. Mattson (2007) notes that the "discourse of development in many ways is a continuance of earlier modernisation/revolutionising projects" and "NGOs (and their development talk and practice) is therefore convincing and continuously made legitimate in the eyes and ears of the masses" (147). We argue that the position and prominence of NGOs has made the NGO model - based on "development talk and practice" - not only legitimate, but also *influential* and sought after.

With NGOization, foreign funding has become a natural, necessary, and even expected part of organizing in civil society, arguably taking a much larger role than it did in the 1980s and early 1990s. Community organizers and promoters affiliated with NGOs (CC, CPDH, and MCN) continually spoke of foreign funding or, typically, the *lack* of it that hinders their ability to complete projects and workshops for their communities. Other NGO staff from IXCHEN and CENIDH, as well as promoters, and community leaders said that funding was necessary even for the organization and education efforts conducted by volunteer promoters, due to the amenities it offered. As the leader of a women's group in Carazo seeking funding to create a health clinic noted, people simply "won't come if you don't have food and a good space" for the meeting or workshop. She continued that it was just "necessary" to become an NGO, especially in light of government incapacity regarding women's health (personal communication, August 20, 2009).[18]

These service activities all require funding; hence, it is no wonder that organizers and organizations like AIDH actively seek foreign funding, despite having started with member contributions. The goals are typically the same: provide more services and more projects, professionalize, and expand. These snippets only confirm Mattson's broader observation that working for an NGO, finding foreign funding, and implementing a "project" (likely based on short-term, quantitatively evaluated service

delivery) has become the "commonsensical" extension of the modernization and revolutionary project (2007, p. 147)

In many ways, this new culture of organizing reflects a rejection of politics in favor of providing services and projects. In some organizations, this shift was actually explicit. As a departmental coordinator for the MCN related to Polakoff and La Ramée (1997) in 1995, "We [the MCN] talk about *concrete problems* that people have [in the communities], and *not about politics.* Before, it was reversed" (p. 187, emphasis added). The coordinator further notes that poor Nicaraguans were tired of "sacrifice after sacrifice" mandated by the 1980s FSLN government. Thus, a shift towards services was necessary in order to "gain acceptance" among the people, especially those devastated by increasing poverty (p. 187). This fatigue makes it understandable that NGOs like the MCN have drifted towards services and away from politics.

Yet these post-1990 views of the small, grassroots organizations and the MCN cannot be seen as purely a result of the fatigue from the 1980s that the MCN refers to. Indeed, already by the time of MCN's statements in 1995, NGOization was a widespread phenomenon that was already in the process of changing the public's perception of what to expect from groups organizing for the public. No longer was it only possible to make demands on the government – but Nicaraguans could now make demands on NGOs, and even form their own NGOs to make demands directly on donors. The new influx of foreign funding made a new form of organization, the NGO, possible on a large scale. However, it is arguable that this came at the cost of overshadowing the previous form of mass and grassroots associations.

The thrust towards NGOization has thus been driven not only by the fatigue from the 1980s, but also by the new expectations of a society increasingly accustomed the NGO model. In the words of one NGO representative, "The communities do not feel like civil society. They look at civil society like a *project* that can resolve and finance their problems*"* (ICD, 2006, p. 171, emphasis added). This comment illustrates the immense change in the perception of civil society by the public ("the communities"). Civil society is a disconnected entity populated by professionals of which they "do not feel" a part, and which no longer requires sacrifices and collective participation to be successful. It is instead a "project," a means to "resolve and finance" instrumental, short-term problems, not a means to achieve long-term structural change. As Grigsby (2005) notes, NGOs have "perverted the natural channels through which people defend their rights and struggle for their demands" and have actually "helped reinforce a culture in which people expect handouts [from NGOs] rather than fight for their rights" (p. 22). Thus, the NGOization of the grassroots – while perhaps initially triggered by fatigue from war and state co-opted mobilization – may in fact be a process that *reinforces* itself through the cultural shift it has induced.

The abundance of NGOs and the increasing normalcy of their mode of work only accentuate the challenges faced by grassroots (membership) organizations attempting to operate outside of the NGO-donor system. Without foreign funding, grassroots organizations cannot attract broad participation based on purely instrumental benefits like NGOs that are now expected. In this sense, they are in direct competition to recruit organizers and members with NGOs that can promise immediate benefits (status and/or material for promoters and material for communities). In contrast, membership organizations require immediate sacrifices with uncertain future rewards – even if they bring a "larger, more utopian scope to [their] vision of social change" when compared with NGOs in Nicaragua (Montenegro, 2002, p. 18). Their influence in critical umbrella organizations, like the CC, international forums, and even the media is also marginal due to a lack of funds and professionalization, as described above.

NGOization has thus led to a sort of "professionalization arms race." Grassroots organizations must find foreign donors and professionalize to compete – or be left with few members and even less influence. Given the choices, it is not surprising that most grassroots organizations choose to adopt many elements of the NGO model. Nicaraguan women's movement activist Sofia Montenegro (2002) notes that this trend among grassroots social organizations and movements is widespread. These organizations have "become more like NGOs, spending more energy fundraising and bureaucratizing to

implement projects, and less acting as the participatory representatives of their respective sectors" (p. 17).

This NGOization of the grassroots mainly benefits the burgeoning sector of NGO elite and, in the short-term, the scattered communities that receive services, but all at the cost of the *depoliticization* of civil society.[19] As one advisor to the CC noted, becoming a (professional) NGO provides a great way to "capture [material] resources" but he worries that dependence on foreign funding encourages organizations to "substitute the state" and promotes "technicians with [projects like] wells instead of politics" (personal communication, August 31, 2009). Thus, while professionalization and institutionalization in the form of an NGO may bring some technical expertise and efficiencies, there is a risk that the NGOs are artificially sanitizing the political role of civil society.

Echoing the views of the IXCHEN administrator described above, the advisor saw politics as the key for enacting badly needed systemic change. The emphasis on these projects is at the heart of the depoliticizing effect of NGOs – and there is no lack of concern among NGO workers themselves. As a women's rights NGO worker notes,

> we [the NGO] have not been able to get to the point where the NGOs serve as a medium that strengthens the social subject, i.e. the political subject that the social movements are. I think it is something that you see in some organizations…in the end all the organization does is to execute projects…What we do then is to resolve a specific necessity, and we are not creating the political mobilization that could take us further, to a vision that is a lot more strategic…The project has become an institutionalized part of the NGOs – and the project is directed [at] satisfying basic necessities. (Mattsson, 2007, p. 157)

This emphasis on "the project" and basic services over political mobilization within NGOs only amplifies the growing *expectation* among Nicaraguans that organizing and civil society bring quick and *instrumental* results. Despite the official rhetoric, NGO workers are cognizant of the limitations imposed by the NGO model. They cannot "strengthen the social subject" – that is, empower the grassroots social movements. The emphasis on the "project" supersedes "political mobilization" that might have a much more "strategic," long-term effect.

As noted in the quotation above, the project work of NGOs is at best "satisfying basic necessities," but at worst, it may be *demobilizing*, as Polakoff and La Ramée (1997) speculate with the case of the MCN. They note that the decentralization and service re-orientation of the MCN "ironically…may have contributed to low levels of participation by *detaching local concerns from the wider social context*" (190, emphasis added). Indeed, "community problems" like the poor quality schools and ineffective public health departments that the MCN supplants do not occur in isolation from the national context in which civil society operates. NGOs like the MCN have gone from one extreme to another, from an over-emphasis on national politics and ideology to massive decentralization and service-orientation. The evidence would suggest that a more moderate balance is now in order to promote mobilization and participation without alienation and over-abstraction.

Despite very visible – but ephemeral - manifestations and media reports, NGO leaders recognize that their day-to-day operations have become dominated by the depoliticized "project." Given the newfound dominance of NGOs over civil society via the exclusion of the more political grassroots, this has a depoliticizing effect on society as a whole. While their initial rejection of politics came in response to the desperation caused by neoliberal reform and the disillusionment with the 1980s revolution, NGOs may have inadvertently *reinforced* a trend of demobilization and depoliticization by making the service project – and not politics and collective action - the centerpiece of civil society in the post-1990 Nicaraguan conscience.

Policy: Towards Representation and Empowerment

Old Funding Systems and New Accountabilities

After twenty years of increasing dependence on funding, NGOs in Nicaragua that attempt to advocate for social change like the CC and the MCN are actively trying to rid themselves of their dependence on foreign funding, which their administrators see as volatile and damaging to their ability to form a powerful and sustained movement. A former administrator of the CC described that the ideal CC of the future should be an association of member-funded community organizations composed of volunteers, independent of foreign funding to enhance its downward accountability to citizens. While this represents a return to the organizing culture that preceded NGOization, organizers today stress *full* independence – from donors *and* parties; they are aware of the similar danger of the FSLN party funding that co-opted 1980s and early 1990s civil society organizations.

Already, the MCN has turned its focus to mass community fundraising, such as the selling of *bonos comunitarios* – scrip that contributes to a pool of money to send people from the community to marches even if the buyer themselves cannot go. They claim that this measure has radically driven down costs for activities like marches and reduced donor dependence at least slightly – though a Managua administrator admitted that they have a long way to go (personal communication, August 26, 2009).

Other NGOs like IPADE and IXCHEN are able to earn income from services; IPADE rents a convention center while IXCHEN is over 50% self-funding through medical service fees (IXCHEN 2000, 11). However, we must be wary as while such systems may help make NGOs less dependent on donors, they do little to promote downward accountability and may actually create perverse incentives. For example, IXCHEN has an instrumental incentive (conflicting with their normative ideals) to continue vertical service delivery perpetually, leaving the state services – whose reach has a much greater potential - enfeebled. Such organizations might follow the MCN's lead in formalizing downward accountability through internal elections, but the palliative effect of service delivery discussed above is still a serious concern.

Given the extremely challenging economic conditions faced by organizers, it is not clear that member funding can cover all the costs of organizing yet – hence there will likely continue to be a role for donors in the near future. In the short-term, there is evidence downward accountability can be improved through longer-term, more flexible funding arrangements (Kilby, 2006) and reporting processes aimed at more qualitative data and critical self-evaluation (Ebrahim, 2003). In the long-term, donors must actively encourage autonomy among NGOs and find ways to avoid what Biekart (1999) calls the "paradox of private foreign aid" (298) in his study of private European donors in Central America.[20] He notes that "efforts to make organisations in civil society self-supporting and financially independent are often contrary to private aid agency interests" (298-9) since the donors benefit from taking credit for the work of successful grantees.

Even if donors can take steps to avoid these major pitfalls, the achievement of these goals of self-sufficiency and autonomy are a long way off. Nevertheless, the seeds of voluntarism and collective action planted in the Nicaraguan consciousness by the Sandinistas give many in Nicaragua hope that it may be possible.

Different Roles and Less Expectations

Our analysis of the Nicaraguan case only adds to the growing criticism in the literature of foreign funding for building civil society and the (for all practical purposes) conflation of NGOs with civil society. Due to their dependence on foreign funding, NGOs in Nicaragua face perverse incentives to prioritize upward over downward accountability and to shift towards professionalized advocacy and service-

delivery over active organizing. This means they neither clearly represent nor empower the whole of civil society as they intend.

The irony is that NGO workers are largely aware of this massive disparity between the rhetoric and the reality of their work.[21] Nevertheless, they must promote the illusion in order to find funding. To donors, NGOs *are* civil society, but to an NGO worker, "civil society is the organizations that [the communities] have" (ICD, 2006, pp. 171-2), a much broader, grassroots-focused view. Especially for the generation of NGO workers in Nicaragua who experienced the mobilization of the 1980s and 1990s, an empowered, representative civil society cannot be judged by the number of press conferences and coordination meetings NGOs can hold, but by the full – not just instrumental – participation of the grassroots.

This indicates that we are long overdue for the paradigm shift suggested by Pearce (1993) nearly two decades ago: donors and scholars should no longer view NGOs as the "agents" (key actors) driving social change in civil society but rather as the "facilitators" of the grassroots. While many NGOs and donors (like the CC) may rhetorically claim to have always seen their work this way, in practice NGOs are still the agents and de facto "voice" of civil society. Efforts to empower and involve most Nicaraguans are limited and primarily instrumental.

The *agents* in civil society must be strongly accountable to their constituents in order to claim to represent them – and this is unlikely to occur in organizations like NGOs that are highly dependent on foreign funding, even those with democratic structures (Biekart, 1999) like the MCN. Membership organizations also face difficulties, and poorly organized membership organizations can be even more vulnerable to *caudillismo* (elitist leadership) than NGOs (Carroll, 1992). While there are major inherent benefits to member funding, it alone does not make organizations downwardly accountable. Thus, we need to critically examine future organizations serving as agents not only for their funding, but also for their organizational structure.

Where NGOs might play a crucial role is instead as *facilitators* who can inform and assist the grassroots but – and this is the crucial point – *not* claim to represent them. As even an outspoken Nicaraguan critic of NGOization, like William Grigsby, notes,

> It is undeniable that without the NGOs' "professional" work it would have been difficult for certain sectors of society to learn about the true implications of issues such as the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). (2005, p. 23)

Like the impact of CAFTA, there are many technical issues where NGO experts may be able to contribute their knowledge and professional capacity to grassroots organizations and the media. For example, human rights organizations like CPDH and CENIDH can remain as critical watchdogs for abuses and provide legal counsel to social movements, IPADE can contribute its specialized knowledge in elections monitoring, and Centro Humboldt can continue to investigate the environmental impacts of proposed policies, etc. On a local level, they can continue to run – and focus more on - those workshops that give citizens the tools to organize, access, and make demands of government. In other words, NGOs should see themselves as *supporting* – but not necessarily *part* or even *representatives* of – the grassroots and social movements.

This represents a shift in *power* from the NGO elite and donors back to citizens. As Batliwala (2007) notes, politics – and thus power – is at the core of any authentic *empowerment*, a fact that is too often lost in the term's translation from buzzword to reality. For this to happen, donors must avoid Biekart's paradox noted above, and encourage NGOs to truly work to either shift their role from agents to facilitators or greatly reduce their dependence on foreign funding. In the process, NGO activists can make room for – or become – the new, autonomous civil society to which they currently aspire. The naturalization of the NGO model in the popular consciousness will make this transition difficult and slow. Nevertheless, NGOs should insist on a new generation of voluntary, collective action that goes far

beyond services for the status quo. Only then can they reawaken the sleeping giant of popular mobilization that shook Nicaragua only two decades prior – only this time, without the co-option of the state *or* donors.

In many ways, the apparent failure of NGOs to represent and empower the grassroots is actually a reflection of the impossible expectations placed on them by donors. Only by lowering these expectations and realizing that NGOs are not a "magic bullet" for building civil society can donors limit the further damage from the negative externalities they have produced. Two decades of inflated expectations placed on NGOs by donors has so far only served to magnify the extent of – and disappointment over - the current demobilization of the grassroots in Nicaragua.

Conclusions, Limitations, and Further Study

We recognize that this study is inherently exploratory in nature, and raises more questions than answers. These questions open up major areas for further research. A key limitation is our focus on data collected from those Nicaraguans affiliated with NGOs and the literature produced by the local intellectual elite. We do not have a representative sample of Nicaraguan *people* or those many (weak) grassroots organizations too small to be found readily in two short months of fieldwork. We were not able to ask a sample of the vast majority of Nicaraguans - those who are too apathetic and disillusioned, economically desperate, or something else altogether – *why* they are not organized and "associating" in civil society. Nor were we able to conclude definitively that NGOs are *not* representative or responsive at an issue level since we lack the in-depth and topical public opinion data to trace the longitudinal behavior of NGOs in response to public opinion shifts. However, while preliminary, the low levels of downward accountability and stark cultural divisions between NGO staff and recipients makes high levels of representativeness and responsiveness very unlikely. Further research in these areas and careful re-evaluation of the best role of NGOs in civil society should be priorities going forward.

As Pearce (1993) noted presciently almost two decades ago, "constructing civil society cannot be essentially about building up intermediary development organisations to represent the 'poor': it must be about empowering the poor and enabling them to fight for their own rights as citizens" (225). Nicaragua's experiment with NGOization has shown that "intermediary development organisations" like NGOs, despite modest successes, are vulnerable to respond to donor pressures by promoting a misleading façade of civil society. NGOs have formed a "grass-without-roots" civil society, which despite its glossy appearance in publications, is woefully inadequate to summon the "social force" (Baltodano, 2006) needed to solve Nicaragua's increasingly dire need for structural change.

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[1] This is a theme inspired by Sarah Henderson's critical analysis of civil society in Russia (2002).

[2] During the period with data (2004-2008), official development assistance (ODA) targeted at "Civil Society Strengthening" increased rapidly as a proportion of total ODA both globally and even more dramatically in Nicaragua. (OECD).

[3] For a more exhaustive review, see Mercer (2002).

[4] See note 2.

[5] Union membership count from Polakoff and La Ramée (1997) & Vázquez (2008); percentage calculated from total labor force data from World Bank (n.d.)

[6] Interviews ranged from semi-structured to unstructured, formal to relatively informal and from opportune discussions to daylong exchanges. Open-ended questions were intended to allow NGO stakeholders to emphasize points that were most important to their work to thus give a better idea of their ideology and priorities. Handwritten notes were used in place of audio recording to put interviewees at ease, but this reduced the length of direct quotations possible to transcribe.

[7] See for example, S.C. Smith (2007).

[8] This was emphasized by an administrator for CENIDH (personal communication, July 9, 2009).

[9] Among the most pervasive Northern ideas are: "participation" (*participación*), "governability" (*gobernabilidad*), "decentralization" (*decentralización*), among others.

[10] See Batliwala (2007) for a critical discussion of "participation" in development projects.

[11] These "individual persons" are individual *members* and typically development experts, numbering likely much less than a hundred.

[12] For organizations on the Pacific coast, this trip can be up to a five hour drive. For organizations on the Atlantic coast, the journey is an expensive but short one-hour flight or up to 12-hour drive – a source of frequent complaints.

[13] The remaining five focus more explicitly on service-provision.

[14] It is also worth noting that NGOs face an internal conflict of interest: effective state services would diminish the demand and funding for the services they provide – and thus threaten the survival of their organizations and jobs.

[15] Indeed, Mattson (2007, 130) describes a nearly identical process for a similar campaign for women's rights.

[16] This concept and terminology draws on the seminal work of Hirschman (1970).

[17] See Wood (1997) for a discussion of the problems with the latter "franchise state" arrangement.

[18] While the definition of "food and a good space" is a small restaurant or office for most promoters, NGOs often hold upper level workshops and coordination events in the luxury hotels and restaurants in Managua.

[19] For a more in-depth discussion of the formation and classification of the new NGO elite in Nicaragua, see Mattson (2007).

[20] While Biekart refers to "private" donors, his study focuses on the funding provided by large *European* NGOs, which he notes taxpayers often indirectly fund via official aid allocations. His conclusions are also arguably applicable to private aid agencies in other countries and even (to a lesser extent) official agencies, both of which face a similar incentive to demonstrate results.

[21] Mattson (2007) details these personal and hidden conflicts in much more detail through her ethnographic work.