

# Social Roles and Spatial Relations of NGOs and Civil Society: Participation and Effectiveness in Central America Post Hurricane 'Mitch'<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract:** This article considers the developing social roles and spatial network relations of civil society and more specifically NGOs in Central America post Mitch. It considers some conceptual and theoretical perspectives on NGOs, social movements and civil society, along with their developing social roles in relation to donors and beneficiaries, and their legitimacy in policy advocacy roles. It considers the role of civil organisations and their ability to push civil over government responses in contexts of market and government failure. It attempts to consider their effectiveness in both their traditional welfare roles and in influencing the social, political and economic development of the region. It considers the case of the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction - CCER - in Nicaragua. It analyses the CCER's involvement in the reconstruction and transformation process, sectors providing relief and reconstruction services, funding issues and the progress and pitfalls to date regarding reciprocal learning relationships between governments and their civil societies within development processes.

**Abstracto:** Roles Sociales y Relaciones Espaciales de ONGs y Sociedad Civil: Participación y Eficacia en América Central Después el Huracán 'Mitch'; La ponencia considera el desarrollo de los roles sociales y relaciones de redes espaciales de sociedad civil y más específicamente de los ONGs Centroamericanos después de Mitch. Discute algunas de las perspectivas conceptuales y teóricas sobre ONGs, movimientos sociales y sociedad civil, el desarrollo de su rol social en relación con organismos donantes y los/as beneficiario/as de sus actividades, y su legitimidad de incidir en políticas públicas. Considera el rol de las organizaciones de sociedad civil y su capacidad de impulsar acciones y priorizar las propuestas de sociedad civil en el contexto del fracaso de los mercados y el gobierno. Intenta analizar su eficacia tanto en su rol tradicional asistencial, como en los intentos a influenciar la forma que asume el desarrollo social, político, y económico de la región. Tomando como ejemplo el caso de la Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y La Reconstrucción - CCER - en Nicaragua, donde se analiza el rol de la CCER en el proceso de reconstrucción y transformación después del Mitch, los avances y retos logrados hasta hoy día, en torno a las relaciones reciprocas de aprendizaje entre gobiernos y sus sociedades civiles dentro del proceso de desarrollo.

**Key Words:** Central America, Hurricane Mitch, Civil Society, NGOs, Spatial Network Relations, Nicaragua, Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction - CCER, Government, Reconstruction Services, Funding.

## Introduction

" 'This earthquake is nothing new, replied Pangloss; ' the town of Lima in America experienced the same shock last year. The same causes produce the same effects. There is certainly a vein of sulphur running under the earth from Lima to Lisbon. ' 'Nothing is more likely,' said Candide; 'but oil and wine, for pity's sake!' 'Likely!' exclaimed the philosopher, 'I maintain it is proved!' " (Voltaire, describing tempest, shipwreck and earthquake . . . , 1758)

In Central America the 1980s were characterised by political negotiations in search of peace, while the 1990s had seen initiatives aimed at the consolidation of emerging democracies and governability. Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) are also playing a role in the consolidation of democracy through the development of organised civil society, along with the emergence of popular social forces and broader citizen participation in the decision making process (Fundación Arias, 1997). While the notion of civil society is nothing new, the use of the term has recently experienced a resurgence in development discourses. In Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala these

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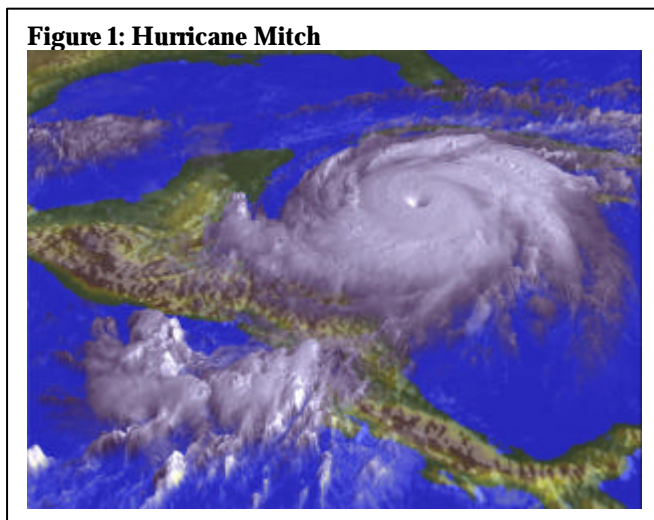
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emergent social forces, by changing the traditional alliances between the agricultural oligarchy, the military and external forces, are seen to be ways of consolidating democracy and avoiding the return to “reactionary despots” of the past (Karl, 1995).

In addition, over the last 20 years the effects of globalisation processes, neo-liberal economic stabilisation and structural adjustment policies along with the differential regional impacts of integration policies in the region have left many national economies exposed to a number of social, economic, political and physical vulnerabilities. These have been particularly pronounced in the poorest Central American countries of the region in Nicaragua, Honduras, El Salvador and Guatemala. They were recently brought into stark reality when hurricane 'Mitch' hit Central America in October 1998 (Figure 1) provoking one of the worst disasters in over 200 years (CINDI, 1999). In the region the disaster affected almost 3.5 million people, 18,000 dead and disappeared with the major impacts in Honduras and Nicaragua, losses in the region were estimated at over \$US 6 billion (CEPAL, 1999). In Nicaragua over 870,000 people were affected, over 300,000 victims, and over 3,000 dead (Linneker, Quintanilla, and Zúniga, 1998). A large part of the population lost their homes, land and means of survival. The damages principally affected the poorest sectors of the population living in vulnerable areas, exposed to flooding, landslides and in fragile housing.

Hurricane Mitch also acted as a catalyst for the organisation of civil society and the development of their own plans for the transformation of the region through processes of reconstruction. There were hopes that the destruction would create links between civil society, national and local governments, and the international community to construct strategies for sustainable human development which focus on people, and in particular, the poor and marginalised sectors of society.



The participation of civil society actors, who have been the representatives of the social groups most seriously affected by policy decisions, has historically largely been absent from decision making processes. This had created what some authors have called “a significant democratic deficit” (Serbin, 1998). Many differing endogenous national civil society initiatives and expressions have emerged in response to this. In addition, the issue is also beginning to be addressed, within the framework of the “New Policy Agenda” recently being fostered by the international community. Within this policy agenda the international donor community view NGOs

as key representatives of civil society, through which they can work to strengthen civil society (albeit to their own ends). While top down encouragement of NGO activities may be economically and politically expedient for donors in terms of, ‘alternative service providers’ and for ‘good’ governance reasons, this approach also creates a number of other political concerns. Many national NGOs have linkages with social movements and wider civil society groups and can use these networks to articulate interests. Within these developing processes, problems and contradictions can arise in donor - NGO relations, NGO- civil society relations and civil society - government relations, linked to issues such as representability, legitimacy and accountability.

The article considers the developing social roles and spatial relations of civil society and more specifically NGOs in Central America. It attempts to consider their effectiveness in both their traditional welfare roles as providers of services to alleviate poverty, and in influencing the social, political and economic development of the region, through their policy advocacy roles and through developing participation in decision-making processes. It focuses largely on the more recent developments in the Central American region post-Mitch. The first section begins by considering some conceptual and theoretical perspectives on NGOs, social movements and civil society, along with their developing social roles in relation to donors and beneficiaries, and their legitimacy in policy advocacy roles. Rather than specifically considering individual NGO service delivery activities, the second section considers the developing spatial network structures of civil society and NGOs, at national and regional level, and some recent regional level initiatives in policy decision making spaces, through their advocacy roles. The final section considers a case study of the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER) in Nicaragua. It analyses its involvement in the reconstruction and transformation process post Mitch in relation to the national government, and the international community. It contrasts the sectors providing relief and reconstruction services, funding issues and the progress and pitfalls to date in relation to the government. The article concludes with some thoughts on future developments.

### **Theoretical Perspectives on Civil Society, NGOs and Social Movements**

It has been suggested that there are five main arenas within the social space of a modern consolidated democracy, which have implications for governability. These are composed of economic society, civil society, political society, the state apparatus and the judicial system (Linz and Stepan, 1996). The term 'civil society' generally refers to any organisation that mediates between the individual and the state, based on a right to associate (Fundación Arias, 1998). This rather vague definition of what civil society is, or is composed of, highlights one of the problems in that a wide range of different definitions and interpretations exist (see McIlwaine 1998a; 1998b, on these debates). While the definition in Box 1 is useful, it is important to recognise a number of issues raised by the recent resurgence in the popularity of the term civil society.

#### **Box 1**

“By ***civil society*** we refer to that arena of the polity where self-organising groups, movements and individuals, relatively autonomous from the state, attempt to articulate values, create associations and solidarities, and advance their interests. Civil society can include manifold social movements (women’s groups, neighbourhood associations, religious groupings, and intellectual organisations) and civil associations from all social strata (such as trade unions, entrepreneurial groups, journalists, or lawyers).”

(Linz and Stepan, 1996:7)

Civil society as a ‘sphere of social reproduction’ has always existed and enjoys a long history of discussion by thinkers such as Hegel, Marx and Gramsci (see McIlwaine 1998b). That in recent years organisations such as the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the World Bank have increasingly been making reference to civil society should not be confused with their invention of either the term or the concept. Indeed while the ‘strengthening of civil society’ is now placed as central by these organisations within the so called ‘New Policy Agenda’, itself a tool to push forward the continued processes of economic and political liberalisation, the extent to which this can be achieved via such organisations is questionable.

Another issue in this context is that strengthening civil society can have possible negative outcomes. That social relations between the government and civil society can at times be conflictive is described by Foley and Edwards (1996:142) as the 'paradox of civil society'. Here the positive democratic effects on governability of civil societies role as a pressure group are contrasted against a potentially damaging situation that can arise when a strong politically independent civil society puts forward excessive demands on the government which ultimately may not be consistent with democracy or governability.

More generally it is important to note that a number of different theoretical perspectives of the role, significance and meaning of civil society organisations exist. From the radical Neo-conservative perspective they are seen as private sector actors, a view which some suggest advocates the privatisation of both development and democracy. Activities are viewed as eroding the power of progressive political formations at local and national level which reinforce neo-liberal policies of state withdrawal and privatisation (Toye, 1987). The liberal pluralist perspective views the organisations of civil society as focal points for individual political participation countering the power of authoritarian states by acting as catalysts for social movements which address the more serious issues of power relations. The post-Marxists see such organisations as able to challenge state power in creative new ways through their links to the growth of social movements, allowing issues of power dynamics in households and women's participation in civil society to be addressed (MacDonald, 1997).

It is also important to note the heterogeneity of civil society. While the ability to 'challenge state power' as mentioned above may rest on coordination between key actors, conflict between social actors is also an important characteristic as organisations have different priorities and forms of working. This arises not least since civil society has many different expressions, spaces and actors. However, a number are more formalised and/or recognised which results in differential levels of power. The term Organised Civil Society (OCS) may thus be a more useful one as it puts the focus on actors such as unions, social movements, and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs).

Globalisation and democratisation processes in the region have given rise to the development of 'new' social movements. While the older social movements organised themselves around issues of a class nature, the newer social movements articulate themselves around social contradictions such as gender, lifestyles, the environment, racial inequality, and conflict. Many question the globalisation process and its expressions of 'western modernity'. These organisations tend to politicise previously non-politicised spaces and connect the local with the global by linking their activities to locally based grass-roots organisations and national and international NGOs (MacDonald, 1994). To promote their interests they often have the capacity for mass mobilisation and use this capacity as an element of pressure to defend or change existing society.

The distinction between social movements and the second important component of organised civil society, NGOs, is often not that clear to an observer given that NGOs increasingly have more 'political' objectives and activities. The upsurge of NGOs as one of the key players in development is seen to be one of the distinctive features of the last decades. The term Non-Governmental Organisation (NGO) came into being with the passing of Resolution 288 by the United Nations Economic and Social Council in 1950, defined as being organisations with no governmental affiliation with consultative status with the United Nations.

The original meaning of the term NGO, however, has been lost and instead it has become a 'catch-all' phrase used by many to describe any organisation that pertains to civil society and is not directly dependent on the government. The debate around the 'correct' usage of the term NGO has grown in recent years, along side the production of ever more detailed classification systems attempting to represent the diversity of organisations that fall under this umbrella (see Vakil, 1997 for a useful summary of the debates). Confusion around just what constitutes an NGO is largely due to its negative definition in terms of what they are not, rather than what they are. As a rule of thumb in understanding what an NGO is, the following may be useful:

- Independence: they are not dependent on political processes and are independent from the Government in the countries where they operate.
- Operation: they do not seek to maximise profits and do not distribute earnings to the individuals who exercise control within the organisation, rather their actions are based on some idea of non-profit, human solidarity or voluntarism.
- Focus: they work on development assistance, disaster relief or human rights in developing countries, either directly through working with local people or indirectly through advocacy (the work of raising people's awareness of issues).

Box 2

The World Bank draws a distinction between two basic types of NGOs, *Operational* NGOs and *Advocacy* NGOs. Operational NGOs (ONGOs) are primarily concerned with their own programs and include international organisations (INGOs) headquartered in the developed countries; national organisations (NNGOs) operating in individual developing countries, and local or community-based organisations (CBOs) which serve a specific population group in a narrow geographic area. Advocacy NGOs (ANGOs) are mainly concerned with advocating a specific point of view or concern, and seek to influence the policies and practices of governments and other organisations. They are quite effective at networking internationally and increasingly draw evidence from partner groups based in developing countries (World Bank, 1995). Thus for the World Bank, advocacy would appear to be a role for International rather than National NGOs.

That there exists a problem in classifying NGOs is clear from the plethora of terms used to describe more precisely different types of NGOs; from BINGOs (Big International Non-Governmental Organisations) and INGOs (International Non-Governmental Organisations) through to GROs (Grass Roots Organisations) and CBOs (Community Based Organisations), and from DONGOs (Donor NGO – created and owned by donors to do their job while shifting overhead costs outside) to MONGOs (My Own NGO – an NGO which is the personal property of an individual often dominated by their own ego) (see Fowler, 1997). This in part stems from the diversity of NGOs and the growth in the number and types in recent years.

In the last 20 years there has been a proliferation of non-state networks and actors that have emerged on the international scene. Many have grown from local level (bottom-up) initiatives achieving more formal status both through the increased visibility and recognition of their activities and due to the changing international climate. Many have emerged as a result of relations with intergovernmental organisations and especially with the agencies of the United Nations Organisations and its economic and social council. Others have emerged and been developed around specific issues and grievances of a global or regional nature such as peace, human rights, development and ecological balance related to international forums such as the Rio Earth Summit, the Copenhagen Social Summit and the Beijing Women's Summit (Coate, Alger, Lipechutez, 1996).

International NGOs such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace and Oxfam respond to their own internal dynamic and issues.

While in the 1980s social movements played a key role in the democratisation processes in the region, in the 1990s NGOs have risen to the fore as key social actors. The initiatives of multilateral and bilateral organisations to formalise and 'foster' organised civil society and the changing socio-political climate of the region allowing the endogenous development of NGOs have both had a role to play. The rise in importance of NGOs can be seen not least in terms of the amount of money channelled through them for development projects every year, with OECD figures (1995) suggesting that official contributions to NGOs from bilateral assistance, negligible in the 1980s, rose to US\$1.04 billion in 1994. Smillie and Helmich quoted in Scott and Hopkins (1999) estimate that globally US\$10 billion annually are channelled through the NGO sector.

Given the importance of NGOs as key civil society actors the remainder of this section will seek to understand the existence of NGOs, what marks them as distinct from other organised social expressions, and what their role is, and can be in the development process.

#### *Non-Governmental Organisations*

Theoretically, the question of 'why do NGOs exist?' is not an easy one to answer. NGOs (as distinct from private business) do not seek to generate wealth and profit for themselves. They deliver 'services', such as health and education, technical support and material goods, which for many should be provided by the State. They campaign against policies which create and maintain injustice, and for the rights of the marginalised sectors of society such as the poor, women, street children which may be seen to be the role of political parties. Their existence then warrants further examination, not least to clarify where their 'comparative advantage' may lie. Understanding what makes NGOs distinct from other social actors, what they have to offer that private businesses, political parties and Governments do not have, may help us better understand why increasingly international donor organisations look to NGOs as key actors in development and channel funds through them. It may also help us understand the limitations to the role that NGOs can play in the development process.

In contrast to the usual moral explanation, Scott and Hopkins (1999) develop an economic model in an attempt to explain why NGOs exist, which has some useful insights. They attempt to demonstrate why NGOs are superior both to private profit firms, and to public agencies at supplying 'development' goods and services. They suggest NGOs operate in situations where there is an excess demand for the goods and services usually provided by the public sector. That is where the government of a country does not meet the basic needs of the population through lack of resources, lack of knowledge of need, or incompetence, corruption or lack of political will in the sense of government failure. However, why NGOs provide these goods and services and not private sector profit organisations is thought first, to relate to notions of altruism – the concern for the well being of others, and second, what they call better 'development technology' related to their superior preference revelation abilities of peoples needs.

The comparative advantage of NGOs, what makes them better (in terms of quality and price) than private profit organisations, comes in part from employing altruists, since altruists it is suggested may work for lower wages or work harder for the same wages. In understanding why this should be the case it is important to remember that charitable acts should not be seen as merely a one-way process (giving for no return). They are better seen as the price paid to receive a particular type of 'good' – a feeling of satisfaction, a lessening of a feeling of guilt, or even public recognition (see Andreoni

1990). For Scott and Hopkins (1999: 5) then there are advantages to altruists from working in NGOs since this work brings (i) a 'warm glow' - the personal and direct satisfaction derived from devoting effort in favour of the beneficiaries and (ii) a general altruism - the indirect increase in utility (personal satisfaction) resulting from an improvement in the beneficiaries welfare. What this means is that as long as altruists continue to work within NGOs for the personal benefits this brings them, NGOs will continue to have a comparative advantage over private sector service deliverers, that is they will continue to be better or more efficient at it.

The notion of 'development technology' is based on the idea that NGOs have a greater ability to reveal preferences, that is they are better at knowing the needs and priorities of beneficiaries and thus more efficient at increasing welfare through appropriate targeting. They are seen to be better able to understand and represent the needs of the people with whom they work given their closer working relationship with them. This in turn is based on an underlying idea of the value system from which NGOs operate (see below).

#### *What do NGOs do?*

The traditional role of NGOs has been the delivery of services to alleviate the symptoms of poverty not necessarily its causes. This is usually in the development areas of food, health, housing, education, production, credit and micro finance and fostering self-reliance. Korten (1990) identifies three key generations of development NGO strategy, which are useful for classifying the work and role of particular NGOs, these are shown in Box 3 below.

#### Box 3 Different Generations of Development NGO Strategy

1. Relief and welfare, or the direct delivery of services to meet immediate deficiency - particularly relevant to emergency or humanitarian relief in times of crisis arising from 'natural' disasters or conflict.
2. Local self-reliance, or the development of the capacities of people to better meet their own needs.
3. Sustainable development systems, or involvement in the policy formulation process of governments and multilateral organisations.
4. A fourth generation may also be noted from Korten's work, that of political advocacy and campaigning in order to support people's movements and promote a broader social vision.

While these generations may be read as process or progression, involvement in the first generation activity of relief and welfare leads onto the second and so on, they may also be seen as a system for better understanding the multiple identities and activities of NGOs as we enter 2000.

The roles of networking and research are also increasingly important in contemporary NGOs (Vakil, 1997: 2063). In the past, NGOs have been criticised for failing to capitalise on their knowledge of grass roots realities in their dialogue with government and donor agencies (Clark, 1992: 204). With advocacy becoming an important strategic role of NGOs, networking and research are ever more crucial as legitimising this role through professionalisation in relation to the public, governments and official donor agencies.

*How do NGOs Operate?: Representability, Accountability, Participation and Effectiveness*

How NGOs operate in relation to the state, private sector organisations and their users and the international community is important in understanding a number of recent debates concerning NGO legitimacy, and concerns amongst practitioners. With private firms accountable to customers via market forces and governments at times to their electorate, to what extent are private autonomous NGOs accountable to their users and beneficiaries?

Donors act via NGOs if they believe they will act in the best interests of the beneficiaries. Beneficiaries work with NGOs since they believe that the NGO will protect and promote their interests. If an NGO is not credible to either side then it will, in theory, cease to function.

As NGOs are not necessarily 'democratic' in themselves it raises the question of who represents what to whom in these relations. Attack (1999) suggests the need to consider four key issues related to NGO legitimacy: representativeness and accountability, values, participation and 'empowerment', and effectiveness.

*Accountability* raises a further problematic area for NGOs in terms of to 'whom' are they ultimately accountable and possible contradictions and conflicts that may arise for national NGOs dependent on overseas donors. Edwards and Hulme (1995) discuss the issue of 'multiple accountabilities', on the one hand, to partners or beneficiaries, staff and supporters (downwards) and on the other to various donors (upwards). The demands of donors on NGOs to prioritise certain activities or act in certain ways may weaken the very comparative advantage that cause these donors to invest in 'development' via NGOs in the first place, their accountability and representation to the ultimate beneficiaries and users of development projects, the poor.

However, within this context it is also important to note a second trend related to financing of NGOs that may have long term consequences for their comparative advantage as providers of development goods and services. The funding needs of national NGOs means inevitably they take grants from official aid agencies. With the maintenance of funding increasingly becoming a problem in the late 1990s many regional NGOs have been looking into alternative funding sources, options and activities including self-financing through the diversification of services (Puntos de Encuentro, 1998). In a sample of NGOs in the Central America region the organisations reported that among their principal sources of financing were the NGOs from the North, 43% of the sample, followed by public entities 39%, contributions from affiliates 22%, sale of services 18%, international development agencies 17%, private businesses 14%, multilateral organisations 15%, foundations 9%, individuals 10% and others 12% (FACS, 2000:8).

Financing needs thus appear to be forcing many national NGOs to introduce user charges or to sell their services and further increase their reliance on market mechanisms. Such changes may have important consequences for the very comparative advantage that have made NGOs an important social actor and limit their ability to perform their role within society. It may also be seen to raise questions around what for some is the most fundamental underlying distinctive characteristic of NGOs; the value systems from which they operate.

*Values:* another key factor that helps to explain what signifies an NGO is what may be termed their belief or value systems. Thomas (1992) suggests solidarity as the principle regulating NGOs as distinct from price, for market regulation, and authority for the State. That is NGOs deal on the basis of common interests and needs rather than coercion or a desire to extract the maximum amount of money from a relationship of exchange. While Bratton (1989) and Korten (1990) might

prefer the term 'voluntarism', at the base is the same idea, that of a shared set of values, recognition of the rights of others, and a way of operating which is distinct from the other sectors such as the state or private sector profit organisations. The Scott and Hopkins (1999) model recognises that for many the comparative advantage of NGOs lie in the staff they employ and their work practices. It is this comparative advantage that helps explain the growth in the importance of this type of organisation within contexts of government failure and market failure.

However, for some authors there exists a severe identity crisis among NGOs arising from a loss of the principles and values of 'voluntarism' in relation to the values of the market (Fowler, 1997: 33). Others see the need to exclude the term voluntary from definitions of NGOs as an acknowledgement of the increasing 'professionalisation' of the NGO sector and international recognition of their work (Vakil, 1997: 2059).

*Participation.* The ultimate benefit of development for many is the 'empowerment' of those disadvantaged groups in a society. While for some, empowerment is the key concept within the development discourse for others it remains a vague and elusive term, which allows for misuse and abuse (see Attack, 1999; Edwards and Hulme, 1992). One central aspect of the process of empowerment is participation. In recent years, many bilateral and multilateral agencies are embracing the idea of participatory development which many NGOs have taken as central for a number of years (World Bank, 1995, UN 1999). This increasingly places people at the centre of the planning process and has been high on the agenda of the international development community NGOs working on poverty and environmental concerns. However, real participation as opposed to consultation, co-opting, or coercion is difficult to achieve and is a learning process in itself.

#### *Effectiveness of NGOs*

One of the greatest concerns for many commentators is that while NGOs may be quite effective and do a lot of good at a local or micro level, on the international or macro level their impact on policy making is negligible. They have largely failed to influence ideological political regimes or to bring about more fundamental changes in attitudes (Edwards and Hulme, 1992). Indeed, it is the bilateral and multilateral donors such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund (IMF) who tend to determine the dominant ideological policy regimes within which NGOs have to work. In the past, years of lobbying has not changed the structure of the world economy nor the ideology of its ruling institutions on the alternative views of development advocated by NGOs. Multilateral intergovernmental organisations and NGOs still hold quite different views on the importance of economic growth in poverty reduction strategies. Indeed, official donors often criticise NGOs for doing little work on developing workable alternative policy proposals to the official ones they oppose. Despite programs to alleviate the symptoms of poverty, many NGOs still do not have an adequate poverty reduction strategy. However, through their links with grass roots organisations and wider civil society this may be changing (see case study) through a combination of pressure from below and above and through links with international NGOs.

Measuring the impact of an organisation is an inherently difficult task if their aim is to 'empower'. Similarly, given the form of operation Edwards and Hulme (1995: 11) point out that the effectiveness of their interventions are difficult to measure since they are rarely able to control all, or most, of the factors which influence the out-come of their work. Perhaps for these two reasons, emphasis on evaluation of effectiveness by donors has been somewhat lacking. The increase in the number of NGOs and funds flowing through them, and the growing importance of the market economy, however, is resulting in a change. The suggestion by some is that the effectiveness of

NGOs as agents of development has been exaggerated, not least since even those that are seen to be effective are so only at a local level and have not been able to recreate this success or 'scale-up' (see Edwards and Hulme, 1992).

What influences NGOs to move from working at the local development level towards greater involvement in networks and policy advocacy depends not only on the political context in which the NGO operates and the internal characteristics of the NGO but also on the influence of other NGOs and NGO networking (Fisher, 1998). In relation to this there are also practical and theoretical limitations to group networks and sizes and their abilities to perform (Olson, 1982). In addition a major requirement for effective lobbying is also a degree of openness on the part of the organisation being lobbied and a carefully thought out strategy to target efforts.

The heterogeneity of NGOs, the diversity within, amongst and between the important social actors needs to be recognised also as a potentially limiting factor. Relations between them may be described as those of 'cooperation and conflict'. The ability to work together in order to strengthen the collective voice depends on the extent to which co-operation can be achieved in the face of conflicting priorities. That is, while NGOs along with other expressions of civil society may organise and cooperate in order to campaign towards a common goal, conflict over how best to achieve this goal and indeed what the central goal should be will always be present. Interventions by international organisations in this arena to 'strengthen' civil society via NGOs as key actors may then result in only superficial cooperation. It may also serve to upset existent tenuous linkages.

Despite these problems, in Central American and the Caribbean, regional NGOs and regional NGO networks are growing in importance with the integration and reconstruction process post-Mitch. The following sections will examine more closely this more 'political' advocacy role of NGOs, and the links between NGOs, civil society and governments, highlighting some of the problems this may bring as well as some of the achievements.

### **Spatial Network Relations and Participation of NGOs and Civil Society Post Mitch**

NGOs are playing an active role in the development of civil society at the national and sub-regional level through their horizontal and vertical networking abilities. These link relations between grass roots organisations and the international community and their abilities to collectively organise in particular contexts. The impacts of international policies and decisions are known only too well at the local and grass roots levels at which many national development NGOs work. Many national NGOs are an integral and constituent part of an organised national civil society and are trying to build stronger national, regional and global alliances in an attempt to influence international global political agendas and decision making. One of the main effective strategic roles NGOs can play in political and economic development is through their ability to energise and activate social networks to push for social transformation through the formation of spatial coordinations at national, regional and international level.

#### *The Network Structures of Civil Society and NGO organisations at National and Regional Level*

The organisational structures of national and regional Civil Society and NGO coordinations vary depending on the countries concerned, their historical cultural, political and economic development with regard to internal and external power relations (Hengstenberg et al, 1999).

National co-ordinating organisations in the countries of the region tend to be organised into sectoral networks around specific themes and activities such as health, education, democracy, decentralisation, gender, and small businesses. The national networks are not themselves NGOs in the strict organisational sense, rather co-ordinating bodies of a variety of types of organisations, some of which include NGOs, but also include social movements, sectoral networks, territorial networks, producers associations, unions, and federations. These national sectoral networks are often combined in different ways into national inter-sectoral co-ordinating bodies.

In Central America, coordinations at the regional level have also tended to be organised around these sectoral interests, for example *Desarrollo Sostenible de los Asentamientos Humanos en Centroamérica* (CERCA) (Sustainable Development of Human Settlements in Central America) has 27 member organisations or the *Consejo Indígena Centroamericano* (CICA) (Central American Indigenous Council) with representatives from 6 national level groupings. Other initiatives with a broader focus do, however, exist such as the *Iniciativa Civil para la Integración Centroamericana* (ICIC) (Civil Initiative for Central American Integration) which is composed of 12 organisations concerned with the integration process in the region (Goitia and Aguilar, 1998). In the Caribbean regional context, the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC) groups more than 21 organisations of a regional, sub-regional and national nature. Together with labour unions and the business sector the CPDC was incorporated as the third 'social partner' by CARICOM heads of government in their regional Consultative Council. This may be taken as a sign of the greater ability of such coordinations to more easily gain an effective voice for civil society in decision-making processes than single local initiatives.

Networking of organised civil society in a number of countries is strong at a national level and is beginning to improve at a sub-regional level, especially around trade and integration in the Caribbean and as a response to Hurricane Mitch in Central America. However, initiatives to link the countries of the wider 'Middle' America region remain weak. Once again sectoral networking appears to be most established as the national sectoral networks also combine into regional sectoral networks, for example the *Comité Regional de Promoción de Salud Comunitaria* (CRPSC, 1999) (Regional Committee for the Promotion of Community Health) which covers Mexico, Central America and the Caribbean. Other initiatives at the Middle America level include attempts at organising civil society to influence the more recent regional state level grouping of ACS (Association of Caribbean States – including governments of the greater Caribbean region). As part of this initiative, 1997 saw the first 'Forum of Civil Society in the Greater Caribbean' which included representatives from Central America, the Caribbean and Venezuela. However, the fact that only 41 participants attended suggests either existence of funding constraints or a lack of interest in initiatives at this 'super' regional level or lack of association with this concept of 'region' (for a list of participants see CRIES-INVESP 1998).

#### *Recent Regional Level Initiatives and Participation Post-Mitch*

In the post-Mitch context, a number of national and regional coordinations bringing together diverse sectors of civil society have emerged, with the aim of achieving greater participation in the reconstruction process. In November 1998, immediately after Hurricane Mitch, regional civil society activated and formulated a declaration to lobby for a process of reconstruction based on sustainable human development with the maximum participation of civil society.

The first hurdle faced was the fact that at the first meeting of the Consultative Group<sup>2</sup> on Central America in Washington D.C. in 1998 between international donors and Central American governments, the governments did not permit the official participation of civil society. The presence of representatives of organised civil society of Honduras and Nicaragua, the ICIC and the president of the Central American Integration System in Washington D.C. undertook a successful campaign of lobbying to be allowed to participate in such meetings in the future (see Box 4 for a chronology of meetings and events).

Since Washington, national level coordinations of civil society have continued to meet at a regional level in order to develop proposals to be included in national and regional reconstruction plans. They are developing internal structures and lobbying mechanisms to permit an active participation of NGOs and social organisations in the process of reconstruction and transformation of the region. These national level co-ordinating organisations; the *Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y Reconstrucción* (CCER, 1999a) in Nicaragua; *Espacio INTERFOROS* in Honduras (Interforos, 1999a); *La Instancia de Seguimiento al Grupo Consultivo* (1999) in Guatemala; *El Foro de la Sociedad Civil por la Reconstrucción y el Desarrollo* in El Salvador (1999); *Centroamerica Solidaria* in Costa Rica (1999), together with the regional level organisations (ICIC) *Iniciativa Civil para la Integración Centroamericano* (1999) and the *Coordinadora Centroamericana del Campo*, have met to elaborate policy proposals for the reconstruction and transformation of the region (for summaries of these respective proposals see ALFORJA, 1999).

Month/Year	Event
October 1998	Hurricane Mitch hits Central America
December 1998	Emergency Consultative Group meeting for Central America in Washington D.C.
February 1999	Phase I of the Social Audit undertaken in Nicaragua by the CCER
April 1999	First National Meeting of Civil Society in Nicaragua hosted by the CCER
April 1999	First Regional Meeting of Civil Society held in Honduras hosted by INTERFOROS in Tegucigalpa
May 1999	Consultative Group Meeting in Stockholm, Sweden
September 1999	Phase II of the Social Audit undertaken in Nicaragua by CCER
November 1999	Anniversary Meeting of Civil Society in Nicaragua hosted by the CCER
November 1999	Second Regional Meeting of Civil Society held in Nicaragua hosted by the CCER in Managua
February 2000	Government of Nicaragua cancels Consultative Group meeting for Nicaragua planned to be held in Managua
February 2000	National Civil Society Forum in Nicaragua hosted by CCER, evaluates completion of Stockholm agreements
May 2000	Consultative Group Meeting held in Washington D.C. evaluates completion of Stockholm agreements
March 2001	Consultative Group Meeting held in Madrid

The end of February 1999 saw a first meeting of national coordinations and regional networks to plan strategies and reach a common position for the forthcoming Consultative Group meeting in Stockholm between the government and the international donor community countries. This was followed in April 1999 by the first Regional Meeting of Civil Society for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Central America in Tegucigalpa, Honduras hosted by INTERFOROS (Interforos, 1999c). This reaffirmed the need to have a common regional plan in respect to

<sup>2</sup> The Consultative Group meetings are coordinating forums between countries that receive aid and the international donor community. They permit cooperating countries to influence policies of countries receiving international support and implementing Structural Adjustment Programs. The international cooperating countries that participate in the Consultative Group meetings are members of the Organisation for Cooperation and Economic Development (OCED) and are coordinated by international organisations like the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank (IDB). In previous meetings countries like Germany, Austria, Canada, Denmark, Spain, USA, Finland, France, Holland, Italy, Japan, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland have participated along with some United Nations and European Union organisations.

reconstruction and to work towards active participation in the Consultative Group meeting in Stockholm. Over and above this, each national level co-ordination was working to develop its own national level plan (see case study of CCER in Nicaragua who produced one of the more elaborate and detailed civil society proposals for national level reconstruction).

Campaigning by the above organisations permitted the representatives of national and regional coordinations and networks to be included in the national official government delegations in Stockholm (in many cases for the first time). Some organisations are of the view that this demonstrates a civil society disposed to face the challenges that the reconstruction and transformation of the region requires (ICIC, 1999).

A meeting of civil society took place before the official meeting in Stockholm. This allowed the interchange of views between international NGOs from Europe, Canada and the United States and those of the region. This resulted in a joint declaration of the NGOs of the North and the South to be presented to the main meeting. This declaration reiterated, to the donor countries, the views of organised civil society (both North and South) that certain conditions were absolutely necessary for a reconstruction process, which would truly transform the countries and the region. Such conditionalities could then be presented by the official international governments to the national governments as an integral part of the reconstruction process which had to be complied with and which would be monitored and evaluated.

The official declaration of the Consultative Group meeting in Stockholm in May 1999 between the regional governments and the international co-operating governments of the official donors adopted presidential agreements to “continue consolidating peace and democracy in their countries, looking each time for higher levels of economic growth with equity” (Consultative Group, 1999; 2). The declaration contained seven principal areas of work which were to be undertaken by the national governments. The Declaration of Stockholm recognises that reconstruction must take place through a co-ordinated effort based on the priorities of each country. The priorities are; reducing environmental and social vulnerability; consolidating democracy and good governance with decentralisation of power and citizen participation being seen as central; promoting and respecting human rights with the rights of children, ethnic and other minority groups and the promotion of gender equality being specifically highlighted. This will take place within a context of transparency and accountability of all actors and accompanied by a reduction in the debt burden. In addition, these initiatives were designed to be undertaken with the participation and consultation of organised civil society.

Funds agreed were to come from the international official donors and the international NGO solidarity donors. However, more progress has been made with regard to the funds agreed with the international NGO solidarity organisations than via more official channels. This has been not least due to problems around lack of advancement in the areas of transparency and good governance by the governments of the region related to the issue of corruption.

The regional civil society organisations met once again in Costa Rica in June 1999 and once again in November 1999. One year after Mitch, representatives of national and regional Civil Society networks that participated in Stockholm met in Managua, Nicaragua at the Second Regional Meeting of Central American Civil Society hosted by the CCER. The intention was to establish a space to evaluate Stockholm and establish follow up agreements. This time other key themes were also

discussed, such as regional integration, globalisation and democratic construction in the region along with the implications for popular social movements (Segundo Encuentro Regional, 2000).

#### *National Level Initiatives and Participation in Central America*

At the national level after the Stockholm meeting, civil society forces developed follow-up initiatives in their own countries. Guatemala and Costa Rica have developed national level co-ordinating actions along with advocacy activities towards the governments and international co-operation. In El Salvador, the mechanisms of consultation between civil society and the government was facilitated by UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and have concerned formal mechanisms to follow up agreements that would permit the active participation of civil society and the creation of a National Council for reconstruction.

In Honduras, *Espacio INTERFOROS* has realised constant discussion with the government and co-operation on the need for a process of reconstruction that will permit transformation. One year after Mitch their analysis is that the reconstruction process is going slowly and that transformation has not yet begun. In addition, during 10 months the Central Government has not opened real spaces for civil participation in the definition and management of new policies, programs and development projects (Interforos, 1999b). The theme of external debt is one of the fundamental axis of their work and advances have been made in the HIPC (Highly Indebted Poor Countries) initiative in which they have achieved flexibility in the conditions for the country that permits them to obtain benefits from the alleviation of the external debt. The advances in Nicaragua offer an interesting case study of the development of organised civil society, and the limitations to its actions. These will be considered in the following section.

### **Case Study of the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction - CCER - in Nicaragua**

In Nicaragua the last 20 years have seen the development and strengthening of different expressions of organised civil society, with the rise of organisations working especially within the themes of health, education, the environment, human rights, governability and gender amongst others. Hurricane Mitch brought with it a new stage in the development of these distinct organisations as they came together with the objective of co-ordinating a collective effort to respond to the immediate necessities of the populations in the affected zones (CCER, 1999a). Out of this the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (CCER) was formed as a coordination of 21 networks<sup>3</sup> which represents the involvement of more than 350 national NGOs, social movements, sectoral networks, producer associations, unions, collectives and federations.

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<sup>3</sup> The CCER is composed of the following national networks; *Asociación de Mujeres "Luisa Amanda Espinoza"* – AMNLAE; *Comité Costeño de Apoyo a la gestión de Emergencia y Rehabilitación en la Costa Caribe Nicaragüense*; *Consejo de la Juventud de Nicaragua* – CJN; *Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONGs*; *Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONGs que trabajan con la Niñez y la Adolescencia* – CODENI; *Federación de Coordinadora Nicaragüense de Organismos por la Rehabilitación e Integración* – FECONORI; *Federación Organizaciones No Gubernamentales de Nicaragua* – FONG; *Foro de Educación y Desarrollo Humano* – FEDH; *Grupo de Coordinación para la Prevención del Consumo de Drogas*; *Grupo FUNDEMOS*; *Grupo Propositivo de Cabildeo e Incidencia* – GPC; *MIPYMEs*; *Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense* – MCN; *Movimiento Pedagógico Nicaragüense*; *Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia*; *Red de Mujeres por la Salud "María Cavalleri"*; *Red Nicaragüense de Comercio Comunitario*; *Red Nicaragüense por la Democracia y el Desarrollo Local*; *Red de Vivienda*; *Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos* – UNAG; *Unión Nicaragüense de Campesinos Agropecuarios* – UNCA.

The CCER was not created or imposed from above by agencies of the international community, as was the case in other Central American countries post Mitch, but rather emerged from below out of already existing national and local networks. For organised civil society, with the CCER now acting as its main expression, responding to the immediate needs of those affected (providing food, water, clothing, housing and medical help) was not seen to be sufficient. Mitch was seen as providing an opportunity to transform Nicaragua through the reconstruction process. The collective experience and knowledge of the CCER participant organisations, together with a lack of confidence in the ability or willingness of the Government to undertake a real process of reconstruction, resulted in the recognition that civil society itself had to propose a plan for reconstruction, and not merely comment on the plans of others. Thus while the immediate response of organised civil society to Mitch may be seen to be to adopt a 'welfare' role, it used its national coordinating networks to develop policy proposals and quickly progressed to a 'political advocacy' role in relation to the government and international donor community.

#### *Government – Civil Society Relations in Nicaragua: Co-operation and Conflict*

By the time of the emergency meeting of the Consultative Group for the Reconstruction of Central America in Washington in December 1998, the CCER had outlined its own proposal for the reconstruction of the country, based on a recognition of the need for organised civil society to move beyond campaigning 'against' and rather to campaign 'for' (CCER, 1998). That is the CCER quickly developed its role from one of coordinating the delivery of services to alleviate the situation (Figure 2), to one of discussing the real causes of that situation.

**Figure 2: One week after Mitch in a refugee camp in Tuskru Tara, Rio Coco, Nicaragua, November 1998**



*photo by Liz Light*

The proposal, written by representatives from the different organisations that form the CCER, stressed the need, not only to rebuild the damaged infrastructure of the country and reply to the basic needs of those affected, but to improve the conditions of the most vulnerable with a shared vision of sustainable human development. This proposal represented the first achievements of the CCER in a number of ways. First, that a shared proposal was produced at all in such a short space of time must be seen as an achievement given the diversity of participant organisations in the CCER. Second, as the only expression of Civil

Society to arrive at Washington D.C. with a formulated proposal document the CCER won recognition from international governments and donor agencies as a legitimate actor in the reconstruction process in Nicaragua. This legitimacy was then recognised by the national government post-Washington with the formation of the National Council for Economic and Social Planning (CONPES). This allowed for the official participation of representatives from civil society in the working groups created by the government to write the national reconstruction plan. It is important to note, however, that while officially formed in February of 1999, it was not formally installed until August of that year, and did not begin to function until November, nearly one year later.

Indeed, the official Government plan for reconstruction was not discussed with civil society via this officially created space, nor more generally, not least since it was written in English and then translated into Spanish just before the second international meeting to discuss the reconstruction of the region. The Government's focus on reinstating the damaged infrastructure of the country, particularly a road building programme, was attacked by the CCER as unable alone to bring about the social transformation desired (CCER, 1999d).

Post-Washington, the CCER had recognised the need to validate its own proposal, thus far produced by a small group of representatives from different participant organisations, and to improve it. The CCER used two methods to produce a more inclusionary document. First, themed commissions were formed to re-work and develop the proposal in the key areas. These consisted of seven commissions formed on Health, Education, Production and Small Business, Environment and Development, Decentralisation and Local Power, Housing and Infrastructure and the Macro-Economic and Debt Commission.

These were complemented by the Gender Commission, and commissions focused on young people and children. In addition, due to the differing ethnic identities of the autonomous Atlantic coast regions, there was a semi-autonomous commission of the Caribbean Coast. These transversal commissions worked with the themed commissions to ensure that issues such as power relations between men and women, and ethnicity were taken into account in the proposals. Once a draft document had been written a consultation process began (CCER, 1999b). The document was discussed via the networks at 18 open meetings covering the different regions of the country, plus 4 themed meetings at the national level representing 376 organisations. This process culminated in the First National Meeting of Civil Society with the participation of over 1500 delegates from civil society organisations.

At the Consultative Group meeting in Stockholm in May 1999 the CCER presented a proposal for the reconstruction and transformation of Nicaragua that was based on, if still not a truly participatory, at least a truly consultative process. It sought not only to challenge the government document but to counteract this focus. It highlighted the need to address the underlying causes of vulnerability, such as unequal power relations and resource distribution, in order to mitigate the impact of events such as Mitch in the future. The role of civil society in the Stockholm meeting had also changed from Washington. The CCER and its sister organisations in the other countries of the region were given, for the first time at such meetings, official recognition and participatory status.

Stockholm saw common agreements between expressions of civil society from the North and the South that successfully entered the official declarations of the meeting, accepted by the governments of the region. The meeting in Stockholm is also important since it looked set to mark a new era of dialogue between civil society and national governments. Some achievements were made, most notably acceptance by all sides of a proposal for indicators to evaluate the reconstruction process produced by a team of consultants. However, the agreements for more discussion and participation in Nicaragua did not last.

An analysis of the activities of the CCER after Stockholm may help to explain the rapid deterioration of the relations between the Government and the CCER. First, while for the CCER the advocacy role was from its origins central, this did not negate other roles. The CCER had recognised the need to campaign from a basis of evidence, and thus a 'research' role had been adopted almost from its

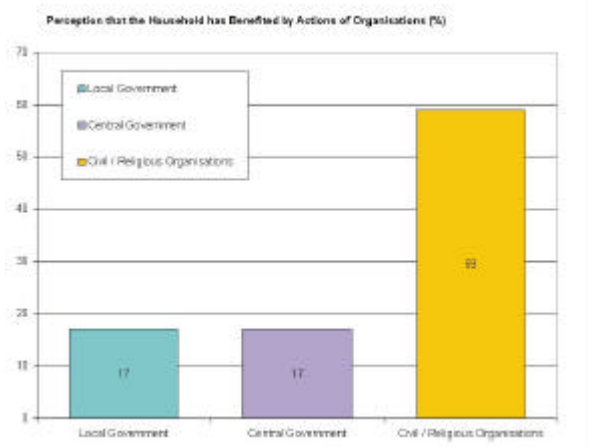
initiation. While a number of research projects exist within the CCER, central to date may be seen to be the Social Audit project. This allows civil society to generate its own information on the situation in the country and monitor and evaluate its own and the government's efforts in reconstruction activities. To date two phases of this auditing process have been completed, each consisting of interviews with over 6,000 men and women (including both young and older people), covering the municipalities worst affected by Mitch. While the first audit addressed the emergency phase (CCER, 1999c), and the second the reconstruction phase (CCER, 1999e), both had a shared focus.

Information has been gathered not only on practical issues, such as the damages suffered, needs and priorities of those affected, amount of aid received, from whom aid has been received, but also around the distribution of aid, issues of fairness, transparency and accountability and levels of participation in planning and decision making processes. What the Social Audit shows is that most active in reconstruction were NGOs, both national and international, and that their projects were seen to be most beneficial to the people affected (59%) in relation to the local and national government sectors (17%) (graph 1). When asked to identify the most important thing the government was doing in the reconstruction process 60% of those interviewed replied 'nothing' (CCER, 1999e). These results are shown in Map 1, in areas such as Waspán, 98% of respondents replied in this negative way. While the results suggest that all sectors, including the NGOs could improve, they are particularly damning in terms of the population's views on the role of the government. Nationally, of households that maintain themselves from agriculture, 76% had sowed, and 36% had received support with this. In terms of housing, 73% reported destroyed or damaged housing, with 40% having received support to reconstruct or repair, many without help. Maps 2 and 3 show support received for agriculture and housing by region, according to the type of organisation identified and highlight the somewhat slender government role in places.

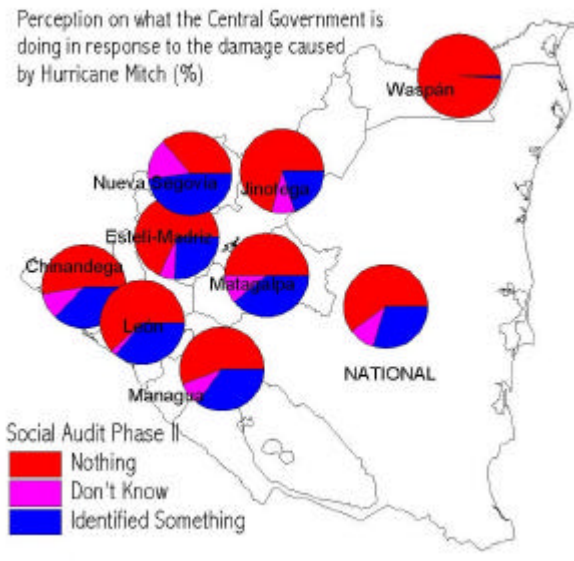
Over the emergency and reconstruction stages the composition of the activities being funded vary between the government and NGO sectors. In the early stages of the emergency produced by the passing of Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua, more aid was channelled through civil society organisations (US\$ 16 million), than through the government sector, (US\$ 12 million, up to the 26-11-98) (Linneker, Quintanilla, and Zúniga, 1998). Future planned external reconstruction funds (composed of donations and loans) being channelled through the government sector over the 5 year period 1999 to 2003 should total some US\$ 1.2 billion. There is a planned fall from US\$ 614.1 million in 1999, US\$ 398.9 in 2000, US\$ 123.7 in 2001, US\$ 58.0 in 2002 to US\$ 38.8 million in 2003 (Gobierno de Nicaragua, 1999).

While information on future funding commitments through the NGO sector are less certain, estimates do exist for 1999 (Gobierno de Nicaragua, 2000a). Estimates of external reconstruction funds channelled into Nicaragua in 1999 through the government and NGO sectors are shown in Table 1 below along with general activity proportions. The NGO share varies between 20% to 33% depending on the NGO estimate used. The official government figures (US\$ 154.4 million) on NGOs from the Secretary for External Cooperation mainly include those national and international NGOs with offices in Managua. A more realistic estimate from the CCER is in the region of US\$300 million if the other bilateral and multilateral organisations channelling funds directly through the national NGO-civil society sector are included (personal communication with Ana Quirós Viquez). In total, approximately US\$ 914.1 million of external funding was channelled through both the national government and NGO sectors in 1999.

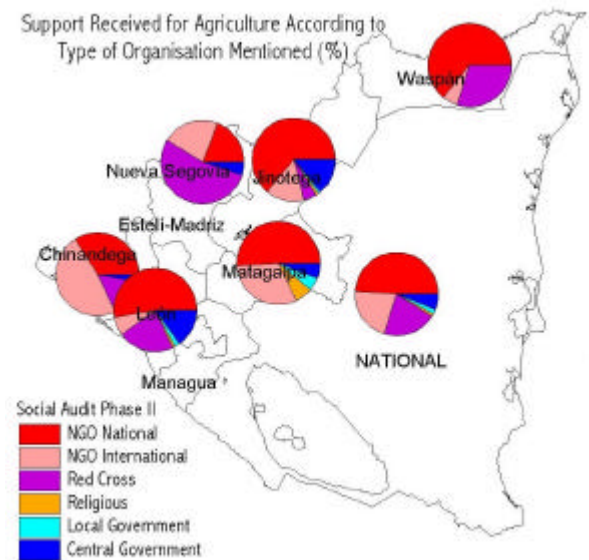
Graph 1



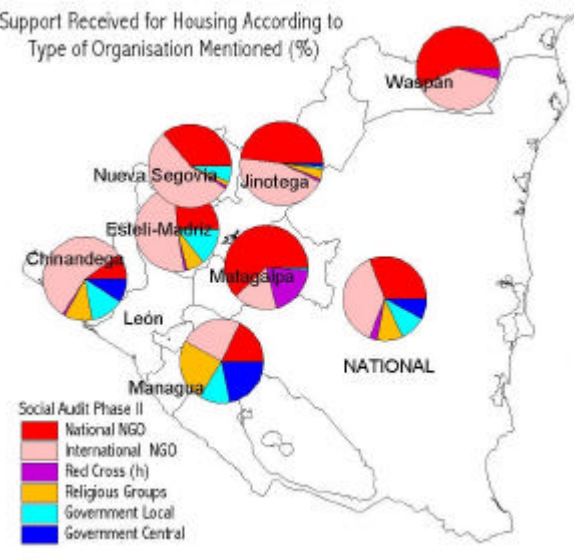
Map 1



Map 2



Map 3



**Table 1: Reconstruction Funds Channelled into Nicaragua in 1999**

Activity	Government	NGOs	*Other NGO funds	Total NGOs	Total
Production and Finance	34%	28%	Na	na	na
Infrastructure	36%	13%	Na	na	na
Governability	6%	6%	Na	na	na
Social Sector	24%	53%	Na	na	na
Total US\$ (millions)	US\$ 614,1	US\$ 154,4	US\$ 145,6	US\$ 300	US\$ 914,1
%	67.2%			32.8%	100%

Source: Authors Estimate from Official and Unofficial Sources (Gobierno de Nicaragua, 1999, 2000a, and CCER communication).

\* Direct Bilateral and Multilateral Organisation funds channelled through NGO sector,

n.a. - not available.

In the reconstruction stage a larger proportion of NGO spending is being undertaken in the social sector (such as health, housing and education) while that of the government tends to be concentrated on physical infrastructure and production and finance. These funds should be seen in relation to an estimated GDP of US\$ 2,190 million in 1999 (FIDEG, 2000) and represent 41% of this total. These estimates ignore the changing distribution between individual donor countries, since some countries channel the majority of their external funding through the NGO sector due to their concerns about transparency and corruption problems in relation to the government sector. Nor do they take account of recent withholding of funding by some donor countries to government agencies for similar reasons. Institutionalised corruption is a major concern in Nicaragua with 85% of the general public perceiving government ministers, political leaders and members of the National Assembly to be corrupt (IEN quoted in CCER, 2000a; 40).

The channelling of funds through NGOs and the questioning of the government role in reconstruction through the presentation of the Social Audit results at the Anniversary National Meeting of Civil Society, hosted by the CCER in November 1999, may not have helped CCER relations with the Government. Further problems arose as organised civil society, including, and at times 'led' by the CCER, protested at what they saw as threats to democracy and good governance. The key issues were the pact between the ruling Government (*Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (PLC); Liberal Constitutional Party) party and the opposition party (the *Frente Sandinista Liberación Nacional* (FSLN); Sandinista National Liberation Front), constitutional reforms (made easier by this pact) and the arrest and imprisonment of the head of the independent audit commission and more recently the expansion of government control over this body. Actions by civil society took the form of street demonstrations and lobbying outside government offices, through to public announcements and press conferences. A campaign to petition for a referendum on the reforms to the constitution was also launched.

Deterioration in relations continued as the CCER criticised the Government's strategy document for poverty reduction (a necessary component of being accepted onto the heavily indebted countries list). This called into question the evidence presented on the situation in the country and the capacity for the policies presented to surmount the enormity of the problems faced. The Government had also produced an evaluation document (Gobierno de Nicaragua, 2000b), highlighting its achievements since Stockholm to be presented at the meeting planned for February 2000 with the consultative group as part of the follow up process. The cancellation by the government of this meeting due to a prior engagement of the President to attend a meeting in Mexico, caused a further rift. This was made worse by the decision of the CCER to hold in its place a meeting of Civil Society to evaluate the reconstruction of the country since Stockholm.

This meeting attended, despite the short notice, by over 300 people, representing 200 expressions of civil society, can be read in two ways. First, as marking a key stage in the development of the CCER as a legitimate participatory space and representative voice of civil society. Important here is that while representatives of the themed commissions within the CCER had been working on a document in response to, and based on the Government's official presentation of the situation in the country, this was not presented at the meeting. Instead, the meeting consisted of work groups, consisting of several for each of the themes of the Declaration of Stockholm, with the task to evaluate progress to date, outstanding issues and recommendations for the future. The different groups for each theme then joined together to produce a final summary of achievements, outstanding issues and recommendations, based on consensus. These summary documents formed the basis for the CCER submissions presented at the re-scheduled meeting with the consultative group in Washington in May 2000 (CCER, 2000a).

A progression or development is apparent in terms of the production of civil society proposals: from a document produced by 'experts' in Washington in 1998, to a document based on the work of themed commissions validated through a wide consultation process in Stockholm, to a document produced using participatory methods to assess the situation in the country, complemented by a more direct critique of the government document produced by the themed commissions in the run-up to the re-scheduled follow up to Stockholm meeting in Washington 2000. Thus the CCER could be said to be actively working to improve its legitimacy and credibility both with donor governments and agencies and the people it seeks to represent.

The February 2000 meeting was also important as marking a clear change in the relations between organised civil society as represented by the CCER and the Government to one of open confrontation. This confrontation initially took the form of public attacks, via the national media, not on the legitimacy of the CCER in itself but rather on its official spokesperson Ana Quirós Viquez. While the government campaign began in this way, threatening to revoke the status of Ana Quirós Viquez as a nationalised Nicaraguan, it quickly took a more political focus.

This situation may be considered within the 'paradox of civil society', where a strong politically independent civil society might put forward excessive demands on a weak government which are not consistent with democracy and governability. The government first challenged the right of the CCER to involve itself in 'political' issues. Here reference has been to both the CCER's criticism of government documents and strategies (especially the poverty reduction strategy) and its involvement in the campaign for a referendum on the constitutional reforms. The CCER see the former as fundamental to its very existence in its advocacy role, and legitimised by international and national recognition since Washington 1998. Comments by some members of the Government (and some

representatives of the FSLN) suggest that their view is very different, suggesting the only true representatives of civil society in the 'political' realm of policy formulation to be political parties. Civil society organising itself outside of, and over, political affiliation does not in this scenario have a legitimate voice. On the second issue, the referendum campaign, the fact that some key ex-political figures and some looking for a future in politics were involved clouds the issue. However, while the Government focus on the campaign as 'political' in the 'party political' sense (an arena for a new political grouping) the CCER state that their mission includes campaigning on issues of transparency, accountability and good governance (agreed in the Declaration of Stockholm) arguing the lack of consultation on the reforms thus to be a legitimate focus for their work (CCER, 2000b).

The basis of the confrontation then could be read to be a difference in opinion around the role of civil society organisations. However, an alternative reading may suggest the confrontation to be a response to the perceived lack of 'success' of the government in terms of meeting the agreements of Stockholm (as evidenced by the Social Audit results), and the 'success' of the CCER in its role in highlighting this. Moreover, the CCER may be seen to have been 'successful' in presenting alternatives due to its proactive role, for example going, beyond merely criticising government strategy and presenting alternative plans.

Furthermore, the government moved beyond questioning the legitimacy of the CCER to questioning the legitimacy of the NGO sector in general. Recently, the government has presented plans to audit all NGOs and to carry out an audit on service delivery to be used as a comparison to the Social Audit. That these proposals have been met with some concern by the NGOs operating in the country is perhaps not surprising given the relations between the government and civil society, and the present governments repressive stance with regard to the Nochari group in Nandaime and the Womens Health Collective of Mulakuku (CCER, 2001).

## **Conclusions and Future Developments**

While national NGOs have demonstrated a high degree of success in their traditional role of local level emergency and poverty alleviation, in relation to weak governments, there is still room for improvement. The wealth of local knowledge they have is often under used in terms of improving responsiveness to needs and effective service provision. However, their real effectiveness in newer and increasingly important roles, most specifically advocacy or lobbying at national and international level, is far from clear cut. An analysis of organised civil society in post-Mitch Central America has helped to highlight some of the achievements and shortcomings in this area.

What is apparent is the extent to which Mitch acted as a catalyst for the energising of previously existing networks of both national and local organisations. Coordinations of civil society organisations rapidly came together around a common desire to actively participate in the reconstruction and transformation of their countries and the region. These diverse organisations were united by the perceived need for an alternative (non-government) mechanism to articulate the views of their participants to the national governments and international community. NGOs and civil society of the region may be judged to have been highly effective in opening up spaces and creating mechanisms of discussion that allow its voice to be heard, perhaps more so on the international, than the national level. The issue of their real ability to represent and articulate the views of the grass roots is less clear, since it depends largely on their own internal mechanisms of consultation. The case study of the CCER might suggest that this issue has been taken on board as a

serious concern by these coordinations, important for improving legitimacy both in the eyes of the people they seek to represent and international agencies.

One contradiction to emerge in this process is between civil society's ability to get policy demands heard via lobbying at an international level, and agreements formalised via international pressure, and the lack of ability to ensure that national government carry them out. While it is debatable whether lack of action by national governments stems from lack of ability, due to finance for example, or lack of willingness, it does highlight that civil society coordinations, at the end of the day, are reliant on governments. That organised civil society cannot replace all the functions of the government, stems first from more practical considerations and the lack of evidence of NGOs to successfully 'scale-up' their approaches to service delivery. Second, it highlights issues of the internal contradictions that exist in terms of the real representability, accountability and legitimacy of these non-governmental groupings.

That at times the coming together of value and fact can be a very explosive social mixture has often been the experience in social relations in the countries of the region. However, reciprocal learning relationships between government and civil society is hopefully a valid and achievable goal, but one which is dependent on the will of both sides to be open to debate and discussion and to address their own internal strengths and limitations.

The perception of weak and weakened national governments and the existence of a democratic deficit acts as a catalyst to new expressions of civil society that challenge the legitimacy of such bodies. Moreover, these new expressions increasingly do not limit themselves to engagement at a local (national) level but consider it increasingly necessary to work at an international and global level to address causes rather than just effects.

For some authors recent changes in social network relations at national, regional and international level represent progress in the development of a global civil society (Lipschutz, 1992; Serbin, 1998). The disruption of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) conference in Seattle in 1999 may stand as an example for the future. The Seattle demonstration of 'global' organised civil society owed its success to a combination of local and global actions, through the ability to easily bring together people from many different countries both physically (in the city) and 'virtually' (on the WTO web site) via modern communication technologies. While global alliances can be quickly built around certain issues, aided by the ease of generating and disseminating information, it also highlights the technical vulnerabilities of those international organisations and networks who also depend on them. However, the real question of civil society effectiveness in changing global power relations, policy regimes and dominant ideologies remains to be seen.

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