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Difficult Path to Democracy: The Political Differentiation of NGOs in Rural Mexico

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Abstract
Only recently have scholars and development practitioners started to question the role of NGOs in politics. After reviewing the current state of research in this area, we use evidence from the Huasteca region of the state of San Luis Potosí, in Central Mexico, to argue that NGOs have complex ties to their local political environment, including a direct role in politics. We propose a classification of NGOs according to their involvement with the local political scene, based on their level of political ambition and their political affiliation. Using ethnographic data and interviews with NGO members, we illustrate each type by describing a Huasteca NGO that embodies it.

*This paper is based on a presentation by the same title given at the 2003 meeting of the Southern Sociological Society in New Orleans.

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The literature on nongovernmental organizations(1) (hereafter NGOs) presents a contradictory picture of their involvement in politics. According to the literature, they are supposed to act as agents of democratization, and influence public policy, but not compete for political power. Using a study of NGOs in the Huasteca region of the state of San Luis Potosí, we show how Mexican NGOs differ from this model, illuminate the role Southern NGOs can play in democratization, and offer a typology of the forms that political involvement may take. Mexican NGOs have always been political in nature. This political involvement, while not necessarily promoting democratization, may be an innovative strategy for NGOs that are trying to implement development programs.

Considering NGOs as political actors has practical and theoretical implications. If NGOs join forces with existing parties, or directly seek political power through elections, they are in a position to directly influence policy. They can strengthen the voice of disenfranchised groups, such as the poor, women, or ethnic and racial minorities, and work to implement programs that reduce social inequality. If they are successful, they can potentially influence the course of the local or national economy. NGOs, however, are sometimes seen by local political actors as agents of Western powers, promoting concerns that have little relevance to local development. Such is the case with efforts at natural conservation, which some Third-World governments see as a lower priority than economic development (Derman 1995). If NGOs propose an agenda that clashes with perceived local priorities, if they are seen as agents of foreign powers, or as radicals who upset the existing distribution of power and resources, they may become a destabilizing force within the political arena. This new perspective, however, may imply the need to revise existing classifications of NGOs and their activities. Moreover, as we will show, not all NGOs become involved in politics, so the question remains open as to the factors that will promote or hinder such involvement.

NGOs and politics

With the 'New Policy Agenda' (Edwards and Hulme 1996) of the 1980s, NGOs became prominent agents of economic and political development, based on two assumptions. First, private agents, both businesses and nonprofit, are the most efficient and reliable service providers and vectors of economic growth. Second, nonprofit organizations, because they work with the grassroots, will foster democracy. Since democracy is supposed to foster economic growth (Huntington 1991), democratization became a development goal in the 1980s, and foreign aid is now often conditioned to the respect of political procedures and laws akin to those of Western democracies (Fowler 1993). As a result, over the past two decades, the number of NGOs and their share of the global foreign aid budget have grown exponentially (Edwards and Hulme 1996, Salomon 1994). These NGOs are either located in Western democracies, from where they send experts to implement

development projects, or in Third-World countries, where they provide work for an unemployed class of technicians. The programs all these organizations implement cover a large variety of issues in the areas of social, economic, cultural, and political development.

NGOs are considered agents of democratization because their approach to development, considered more participatory than that of state agencies, is supposed to empower participants to claim a say in public debates by giving them experience in decision-making at the project level (Clark 1995, Tendler 1982), and raising their consciousness as to the importance of challenging public policies that directly affect them (Heinrich 2001). If individuals do not speak themselves, NGOs are called to serve as advocates who will try to influence public policy (Etemadi 2004). In the political arena, NGOs are typically viewed as opponents to repressive governments who provide a relay for civil society, without the objective of seizing power (Heinrich 2001, Korten 1990, Lewis 2004, Nash 2003). For instance, in her description of indigenous people and civil society in Chiapas, Nash (2003) opposes groups and organizations favoring the status quo and the PRI government, and what she refers to as civil society organizations.(2)

State organizations, however, are still key partners in development for NGOs, so that the issue of NGOs' relations with state organizations has received great attention (see, for instance, Clark 1995, Farrington and Bebbington 1993, Méndez 1998, Miraftab 1997, Sandberg 1994, Sanyal 1994, Tendler 1982). When NGOs depend on governments financially, they can be easily co-opted, in which case they cease to represent the interests of their beneficiaries (Ndegwa 1996). In addition, when their advocacy efforts threaten authoritarian governments and established local power elites, local political authorities may try to control their activities by devising restrictive legal and fiscal regulations (Potter 1996, Thomas-Slayter 1994). For this reason, Fowler (1993) actually doubts NGOs' ability to contribute to democratization in Africa. Others also see them as too weak to resist co-optation by local elites or Western interests, and are pessimistic about their chances of achieving political change (Petras 1997, Price 1994, Sanyal 1994, Silliman 1999, Yadama 1997). However, some analysts see positive steps towards increased citizen participation (Korten 1990, Landim 1987). As a rule, NGOs' political impact is seen as greater in Latin America and Asia than in Africa (Clarke 1998).

Unlike the attention devoted to the issue of state-NGO relationships, the direct involvement of NGOs in politics is mostly neglected in the literature, and when addressed, it is usually frowned upon (Clarke 1998). While Fisher (1994) sees NGOs playing a positive role, Quadir (2003) question this faith in NGOs as detached from political power, and the perception of local civil society associations as the vector of democratization or opposition to authoritarian governments. He describes the Bangladeshi civil society as highly politicized, with most NGOs either created by, or affiliated to, political parties. In Africa, Ndegwa (1996) also mentions that political parties in power directly create or sponsor NGOs to support their agenda, thus hindering the empowering role of NGOs.

The picture of NGOs' relation to the political arena that emerges from these various perspectives is paradoxical. On the one hand, NGOs are supposed to promote the democratization of Third-World countries by getting ordinary citizens more involved in the public life of their country and by advocating on their behalf. These activities are eminently political in nature. On the other hand, they are supposed to stay away from direct participation in political contests, because of the risk for corruption, and focus exclusively on economic and social activities. In Mexico, however, no clear distinction exists between socio-economic activities and political ones, because of the presence of a corporatist state that has used clientelist methods for decades to maintain political control over the population. In the remaining of this study, we argue that this situation, combined with recent democratization, has laid the ground for the growth of an NGO sector that often sees political involvement as part of its mission.

The Mexican NGO community

In Mexico, politics and NGO activities have always been linked, initially to support the regime rather than foster democracy. For most of the twentieth century, Mexican civil society organizations were either created or controlled by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), which ruled the country for over seventy years. The government's strategy to remain in power and achieve its goals involved the implementation of a corporatist system, where the state directly controlled unions and other organizations (Hernandez and Fox 1995), using a combination of repression and co-optation (Adler 1994, Davis 1994). However, with the election of Vicente Fox, of the National Action Party (PAN), as president of the Mexican Republic in 2000, Mexico has entered a period of democratization, marked by an economically liberal but socially conservative political agenda. The state is progressively losing its grip on civil society, presenting NGOs with opportunities to promote the development of grassroots organizations, as well as a greater involvement in politics.

An NGO community independent from the state had begun to emerge in Mexico in the 1970s, following a decade of heightened social protest (Zermeño 1996). These often started with strong ideological ties to the

radical left or to liberation theology, as a way to pursue politics by other means than direct involvement with parties and social movements (Hernandez and Fox 1995, Tarrés 1996). They were also seen by radical social activists as an alternative to state-controlled development. A spectacular NGO boom took place after the earthquake that destroyed large parts of Mexico City in 1985. When the state failed to deliver services to the victims, they organized in neighborhood associations and protested on a large scale (Coulomb and Herrasti 1998). Seeing the results of these grassroots actions, other organizations appeared across the country. Recently applied measures of structural adjustment that promoted private action and the dismantling of state institutions only supported this trend.

Analysts of Mexican NGOs view the involvement of NGOs in politics in the same contradictory light as they have in the rest of the Third-World. Ramírez Sáiz (1998) and Dietz (1996) argue that NGOs function as intermediary institutions between the state and individual citizens. Crespo (1995) warns that NGOs' increased legitimacy as advocates of the people has drawn the interest of political parties, but that they need to remain independent in order to fulfill their mission. He fears that if they try and challenge the existing party system by becoming active political actors, they will end up having the same shortcomings as the political parties, including corruption and divisions among members who fight for power and candidacies. Likewise, Zermeño (1996) doubts that NGOs can strengthen citizenship and democracy, because of the atomization of their action and their short life span. Tarrés (1996) claims that the rise of NGOs as public policy advocates is only the consequence of the weakening of traditional political actors, but that because of their low degree of institutionalization, they are not a valid alternative.

Mexican NGOs, however, have played a crucial role in the recent democratization of the country, as observers of the electoral process. The dominant position of the PRI had been challenged since 1988, when the PRI candidate, Carlos Salinas de Gortari, allegedly won the election over Cuahuctémoc Cárdenas, from the Democratic Revolutionary party (PRD), because of electoral fraud. This signaled the beginning of large-scale NGO advocacy for fair elections. The Alianza Cívica (Civic Alliance), a coalition of NGOs, emerged in 1994 to monitor the presidential election. In 1991, some of the members had observed the gubernatorial election in San Luis Potosí, which helped the development of a true civic movement in Mexico (Aguayo Quezada 1995). Actions by civic NGOs continued throughout the 1990s, until the victory of Vicente Fox in 2000. The PRI still controlled the federal parliament and many state legislatures, but this election signaled the end of the PRI's hegemony over Mexican politics and government. In this context of a national democratization process, we will show that the role of NGOs in Mexican politics is complex. We need to understand the motives and strategies behind their political involvement, rather than looking at the NGO community as a monolithic entity.

Methodology

The data for this study were collected over six months of field work in San Luis Potosí, Mexico, in 2001, for a study of the factors influencing the characteristics and geographical distribution of development NGOs across the rural areas of the state. While only a quarter of the Mexican population lives in rural areas, in San Luis Potosí, the proportion reaches 41%, increasing the potential for NGO activity in rural areas. In addition, the state is divided in four areas with markedly different characteristics: the arid Altiplano (high plateau); the area around the capital city San Luis Potosí (Zona Centro); the fertile hills of the Zona Media; and the subtropical Huasteca. These translated into significant regional variations in the characteristics of the NGO population. Rural NGOs were defined as conducting at least part of their activities in the communities inhabited by no more than 2,500 people, based on the definition of the Mexican National Institute for Statistical and Geographical Information (INEGI). The pattern of human settlement in the state was such that communities fell clearly above or below the line, so that the arbitrary nature of the divide did not cause a difficulty. All the NGOs encountered could easily be classified as rural or urban.

Development NGOs were those that engaged in activities of socio-economic development, ranging from the implementation of income-generating projects to training, capacity-building, and advocacy. As a rule, rural NGOs in San Luis Potosí combined several of these activities. These organizations also had to fall under the category of intermediary organizations, in contrast to primary grassroots groups. While primary grassroots groups are 'the smallest aggregation of individuals or households that regularly engage in some joint development activity,' intermediary organizations 'seek to assist and support them.' (Carroll 1992, p.11). Rural development NGOs are only a subset of the whole population of Potosino NGOs, and were mostly absent from available NGO directories, so that part of the field work consisted in identifying them. A research population of 89 rural development NGOs, representing most of the rural NGOs active in San Luis Potosí, was generated.

The data collection strategy combined face-to-face interviews, participant observation, and gathering of written documents. Due to the lack of a reliable NGO directory at the onset of fieldwork, snowball sampling was the only possible strategy to identify respondents and organizations. In addition to 82 interviews with staff or members of 51 NGOs, information came from interviews with 26 key informants, including people in the government and business sectors, and individuals who were mentioned as knowledgeable about the NGO sector in San Luis Potosí. The interview questions included structured and unstructured sections that address the respondents' biographical data, the characteristics of the organization, the location of its activities, and its contacts with other organizations. In addition to interviews, ethnographic data was gathered from accompanying NGOs in their work activities, from field trips in communities where development projects were implemented, and from attending the regular meetings of rural development programs. The examination of organizational records such as annual reports, proposals, or brochures, when available, complemented the interviews and ethnographic data.

The majority of rural NGOs in the sample and the population were active in the Huasteca region. Thirty-one of the 58 rural NGOs identified in the Huasteca were part of the sample of 51 NGOs, so that they constituted 60.8% of the total sample. The Huasteca region covers parts of five of the present day Mexican states, including the southeastern quarter of San Luis Potosí. In contrast to the semi-arid climate and high altitude that make up three-quarters of the state of San Luis Potosí and most of Northern Mexico, the Huasteca seems to have been transplanted from Southern Mexico to the Eastern corner of the state. Rather than mines, bare hills, cacti, and herds of goats and donkeys, it exhibits the luxurious *selva*, cattle ranching, plantations of coffee, orange, or sugarcane, and the traditional *milpas* (small corn fields cultivated for family consumption). Rather than a population of *mestizos* and *criollos*, it possesses a large indigenous population. San Luis Potosí is classified among the Mexican states with a high proportion of indigenous population (SEDESOL 1997). The Huasteca contains 96% of the state indigenous population, divided mostly in two ethnic groups, the Teenek and the Nahua. The indigenous population comprises 11.2% of the total population of the state, but 34.6% of the population of the Huasteca.(3)

The Teenek originally populated the Potosino area. Their agrarian society was organized in a system of numerous small estates, each administered by a *cacique*, or authoritarian landlord, whose title was hereditary. In the fifteenth century, the expansion of the Aztec empire brought a group of Nahua, who ruled over the Teenek on behalf of the Aztec emperor. When the Spanish took control of the area, they granted land titles to conquistadores, who started the tradition of cattle ranching in the area. The local residents became serfs, but managed to preserve their traditional political organization. Throughout the centuries, as the mining resources of San Luis Potosí declined, wealthy mine owners became eager to expand their agricultural estates and invaded the *ejido* land that the Spanish law granted indigenous populations. This spoliation, as well as the mistreatment endured at the hands of the Spanish overseers, started a struggle for land ownership that has not yet ended in the Huasteca. For most of the twentieth century, while the rest of San Luis Potosí was undergoing an extensive program of land distribution that reduced inequality, the Huasteca remained under control of a few families who intermarried to maintain their local power, and even gained political power at the state level in the 1940s and 1950s (Monroy Castillo and Calvillo Unna 1997). The *cacique* system that endures in this part of the state perpetuates a highly unequal economic stratification system based on latifundism. The ruling elite of *criollo* or *mestizo* landowners faces a mass of landless, indigenous peasants. In addition to controlling most of the land, *latifundistas* also control the trade of the main commodities, maintaining peasants in a state of economic dependence.

Profile of the Huasteca NGOs

To compare Huasteca NGOs to those in other regions of the state, we used the questions in the interviews and various items from written documents that generated quantitative data. We analyzed means with a t-test, and frequencies with a chi-square or Fisher's exact test (when over 50% of the frequencies were below a value of 5). NGOs working in the Huasteca region differed from those operating in other parts of the state, and reflected the regional specificity of their work environment (see Table 1). First, they were, on average, much younger than other Potosino NGOs, with less than 8 years (7.79 years) in operation, compared to an average of 17.83 years for other Potosino NGOs. While the circumstances for their creation did not differ significantly, they were more likely to promote the defense of human rights (36.4%) than NGOs working in other parts of San Luis Potosí (5.6%). The presence of a relatively large, historically oppressed indigenous population called for such an orientation. In addition, they relied on a larger number of members and volunteers. Huasteca NGOs averaged over 4,000 members and 63 volunteers, or four times the average number of members (504) and more than twice the average number of volunteers (26) reported by NGOs in the rest of the state.

Table 1: Comparison between NGOs in the Huasteca and in Other Regions

Variable	Huasteca	Other Regions	N
Average number of years of activity*	7.79	17.83	51
Circumstances of the creation			
Created by a government agency (*a*)	21.2%	38.9%	51
Created by another NGO (*a*)	24.2%	16.7%	51
Nationally based	33.3%	61.1%	51
Goals (b)			
Economic development	69.7%	72.2%	51
Social development	60.6%	50.0%	51
Sustainability	15.2%	5.6%	51
Environmental conservation	24.2%	22.2%	51
Local institution building	33.3%	44.4%	51
Land distribution	15.2%	5.6%	51
Cultural preservation	18.2%	11.1%	51
Promotion and defense of human rights*	36.4%	5.6%	51
Human resources			
Intermediary NGOs	45.5%	44.4%	51
Have paid staff	45.5%	50.0%	51
Average number of paid staff	4.10	7.23	49
Average number of members (*c*)*	4352.05	508.83	35
Average number of volunteers (*c*)	63.08	26.08	41
Financial resources			
Receive funds from the government	56.3%	50.0%	50
Receive funds from businesses *(a)**	6.3%	27.8%	50
Receive funds from international donors (*a*)	21.9%	22.2%	50
Receive donations	31.3%	56.6%	50
Charge for their services (*a*)	15.2%	33.2%	51
Receive punctual contributions from members	65.6%	55.6%	50
Charge regular membership dues (*a*)	13.3%	23.5%	47
Material resources			
Have an office	59.4%	82.4%	49
Have a vehicle**	9.1%	43.8%	51
Have a phone (*a*)	86.7%	88.2%	47
Have a computer	51.9%	66.7%	45
Have access to the Internet*	25.9%	61.1%	45
Professional network			
Average number of contacts with other organizations*	13.2	22.6	48

*: p<.05, **: p<.01.
(*a*) Fisher's exact test is reported.
(*b*) Respondents could give several answers.
(*c*) Excluding the CNC, which is an outlier, with 172848 members, and 2240 regular volunteers.

In terms of financial resources, only 6.3% received funds from private businesses, while 27.8% of NGOs in other regions did. Other indicators did not generate statistically significant differences, but less Huasteca NGOs in the sample received funds from donations (31.1%), service fees (15.2%), or membership dues (13.3%), than NGOs in other regions. When it came to material resources, again, a lower percentage of Huasteca NGOs than other NGOs reported access to an office (59.4%), a vehicle (9.1%), a computer

(51.9%), the Internet (35.9%), and, to a lesser extent, a telephone (86.7%). Finally, Huasteca NGOs had smaller professional networks than other NGOs, being in contact, on average, with 13.2 organizations. Fewer contacts were found with almost all sectors (government agencies, grassroots organizations, schools and universities, businesses, and multilateral organizations), and these contacts tended to be only superficial (Campion 2002). Despite their strength in the ability of human resources, overall, Huasteca NGOs exhibit a lower level of institutionalization than those in other regions of San Luis Potosí.

The most significant difference, however, lay in the relationship to state organizations and the local political scene. In the other regions of San Luis Potosí, NGOs largely ignored electoral politics and partisan activities. Few (with the notable exception of the PRI-created National Central Peasant Union, or CNC) openly claimed ties with or opposition to the government. They just perceived it as a part of the environment that they had to negotiate with in order to carry out their work. In the Huasteca, however, local politics played an important role in the self-definition and activities of NGOs, who in turn sometimes became a significant player in the political sphere.

The political involvement of Huasteca NGOs

When informants were asked to describe the NGO community of the Huasteca, their answers followed these lines: 'The Huasteca [NGOs] are more politicized. The ones in the high plateau are more active, they have proposals,' or 'In the Huasteca, I am telling you that there are two [NGOs], but the political ones, there are about 20.' Respondents clearly favored the apolitical NGOs of the high plateau that focused on income-generating projects, rather than the politically active but supposedly inefficient NGOs of the Huasteca. When asked to evaluate other NGOs, respondents' comments that an NGO was affiliated with a given political party, or simply that it was 'political,' was meant as a negative assessment. Often, the alleged ties were only imaginary, but their mention was intended to discredit a rival NGO.

From the interviews, four types of NGOs emerged, that varied in their party affiliation and political ambition (see Table 2). ***Party affiliation*** refers to the presence or absence of a direct link between the NGO and an existing political party, either because the party created the NGO, because the NGO promoted a party's agenda, or because the leadership of the NGO included individual party members. ***Political ambition*** existed when either individual members or the organization as an entity were trying to gain political control at the local or national level. ***Official NGOs***, like the CNC, had official and open ties to a political party, but did not try to gain office, because that was the role of the party. ***Opportunistic NGOs*** also had ties to a party, but they had been set up by a politically ambitious individual or group of individuals as a tool to launch or maintain their political career. ***Protest NGOs*** exhibited no open ties to a party and no plan to enter elections, but advocated for social change and policy reform on their participants' behalf. Some of the NGOs involved in the fight for land distribution fell in this category. Finally, ***civil society NGOs*** were born as social movements or project-oriented NGOs, but came to organize some of their activities as a political party, planning to win political power at least at the local level in order to implement their social agenda. Contrary to opportunistic NGOs, they emerged at the grassroots and did not represent an interest group.

Table 2: Typology of NGO Political Involvement, with Examples from the Huasteca in San Luis Potosí

		Party Affiliation	
		Yes	No
Political Ambition	Yes	Opportunistic NGO (DEMITAN, Comité de Desarrollo Regional Xilitla)	Civil Society Organization (Frente Ciudadano Salvador Nava, UNORCA)
	No	Official NGO (CNC, Consejo de Lucha Indígena de la Huasteca Potosina)	Protest Organization (PIECP, Movimiento Huasteco Democrático)

In each category some NGOs successfully implemented projects or lobbied for their members, while others were nothing more than ghost NGOs. The premise of this typology is that political involvement is not laudable or condemnable in and of itself, but that it is an integral part of NGO activities in a highly politicized environment. Of course, not all NGOs, even in the Huasteca, were politically active. But it was difficult, even for the neutral ones, not to be dragged into a local political feud. Not declaring a preference or an allegiance in a political conflict was often construed as a sign of opposition to all actors involved.

The negative perception of political involvement may actually come from a deficient democratic culture in Mexico, with its attendant inability to distinguish between the state and the party. NGOs created by the government, particularly peasant unions, are viewed as agents of the PRI. The history of the CNC tends to

reinforce their point, since this union was merely an instrument for the party to control peasants, granting them favors in exchange for their vote. Usually, respondents would say of the CNC that 'it is more political than social.' Today, however, even the CNC is trying to change its approach, adapting to the democratization of the country. The presence of a PAN government in Mexico City is only encouraging them in this direction, because it is trying to weaken what it sees as an agent of the PRI. Unable to rely on federal support, local branches of the CNC have become another social movement organization among others, competing for members and influence.

Though ***official NGOs*** are not created to gain political power, but rather to ensure political support for the candidates of their party, opportunistic individuals may use them for political motives. One CNC official describes the former president of the organization, who was from the Huasteca, as 'looking for political space' for himself, and acting out of 'personal interest' rather than a belief in the mission of the organization. Many members of the CNC that were interviewed believed in the social mission of the organization and did not view it as an instrument of the PRI. In the Huasteca, the CNC even created another NGO, the MOCACO, for the sole purpose of addressing the issue of land redistribution. Rather than being an instrument of the PRI government, this NGO organized protests and invaded *latifundistas'* property, as other organizations did in the 1980s.

The PRI is no longer the only party to create its own NGOs, even though it still dominates the category of official NGOs. In the Huasteca, the PRD supported the creation of the Indigenous Struggle Council of the Potosino Huasteca. This NGO acted as an intermediary between ordinary citizens and government agencies at the municipal level. It channeled individual or collective demands for housing infrastructure, health services in isolated communities, government subsidies for food items for children and women, or equipment for income-generating projects. With the backing of the PRD, this newly formed organization was starting to achieve recognition at the regional level. Not only did PRD state deputies help the NGO financially, but its party affiliation gave it a clear identity and appeal. The PRD is a leftist party that has traditionally defended small-holders and indigenous communities. The Huasteca is understandably the only part of San Luis Potosí where it carries some weight.

Official NGOs always run the risk of being diverted from their original purpose, as happened with the state representation of the CNC, but a change of leadership can correct the situation. ***Opportunistic NGOs***, however, are primarily set up to promote individuals, and are likely to dwindle after the electoral campaign is over. DEMITAN was a good example of this scenario. DEMITAN, or Development of the Indigenous Woman of Tancanhuitz, was formally created in 1995 by a group of four politically active professionals (supporters of the PRI), residents or native to the village of Tancanhuitz. As one of the few organizations in San Luis Potosí primarily dedicated to the promotion of women's rights, its activities had evolved over the years from consciousness-raising to income-generating projects.

The ups and downs of DEMITAN over the years somewhat reflected the political fortune of its founders. One of them, a member of a prominent Tancanhuitz family that had combined economic and political power for generations, explained that she created DEMITAN herself after a first unsuccessful run in the municipal elections. The NGO allowed her to keep in touch with all the communities of the electoral district, without having to follow the party line. This way, she built a popular base before the next election: 'All the time I was preparing for the election, I was going around as if I was campaigning all the time. When I ran for the second time, I had a lot of support from the people.' This NGO founder claimed the positive impact of the NGO in her name, to secure her political victory.

As all the original founders got involved in local politics, however, they lost interest in DEMITAN. The NGO remained temporarily in the hands of a corrupt manager, who caused it to lose its international funding before he was fired. The several founders who worked in the municipal government secured funding for the technicians' salary, an office, and the maintenance of a vehicle, but invested little time in the organization, even though they were still sitting on its board of directors. The NGO's sphere of influence shrank to a few communities, leading one of the technicians to remark bitterly: 'When there are elections, they remember the NGO. Right now, since there are no elections, the NGO is switched off.' Even one of the founders admitted: 'We created an NGO when we did not have a job, and if we have a job, we leave it aside. I am sure that the day we lose the municipal government, we are all going to go as volunteers with DEMITAN.' The real focus on the NGO was to promote political candidates, even though its activities had a positive but irregular impact on women in isolated rural communities. The opportunistic orientation also lowered its legitimacy in the eyes of opponents of the PRI.

Protest NGOs followed the ideal model of advocacy promoted by development scholars, also summed up by a respondent: 'Politics are part of the human life, the two cannot be divided. But what it can be is non-

partisan. This, yes. Me wanting to influence federal policy, this is politics. Now I must not be with a party.(4)' They remained completely outside of electoral politics. Some, born in the time of demands for land distribution, held radical views of their relations to the government. Convinced that legal action and negotiation would not lead to positive results, they turned to illegal acts such as land invasion or road blockades, and to spectacular actions, including mass marches to the state Parliament, month-long sit-ins, and hunger strikes. The Huasteco Democratic Movement, a semi-underground organization, was a regional specialist in these kinds of events. Despite the official end of the national program of land distribution in 1992, this organization continued to invade privately-owned land. These actions granted it a lot of attention in the local and state press, but representatives of other NGOs doubted the effectiveness of the strategy. Some claimed that the government tolerated them to keep protest under control, because they provided an identifiable adversary.

Other NGOs, usually the local branches of national peasant unions, favored peaceful dialogue with the government. In the Huasteca, these included CIOAC, CODUC, and UNORCA, among others. Several of them had privileged ties to a political party at the national level, but tried to preserve their independence at the local level by separating the political and social branches of their organization. The UNORCA went as far as creating two NGOs, one in charge of development projects, and another, the Democratic Action Network, responsible for political action. At the local level, however, the separation was more theoretical than factual: In the Huasteca, the same person was in charge of both branches. In some NGOs, all political negotiation took place at the national level, with the local offices focusing on socio-economic projects. Their protests were usually part of national actions orchestrated by their headquarters.

Like protest organizations, ***Civil society NGOs*** represented grassroots interests. However, they considered that gaining political power was the surest way to enforce policy reform, and thus competed in elections at the local level. NGO members reconciled this apparent contradiction by supporting the idea of NGOs entering elections independently, with no official party affiliation. This way, the NGO was political, but still non-partisan. The Frente Ciudadano Salvador Nava (Salvador Nava Citizen Front, named after Dr. Salvador Nava, a nationally known Potosino democrat active in the 1960s) was the best regional example of a civil society organization. Though its name clearly stated a political goal, it started its activities by lobbying the local and state governments on behalf of citizen groups to improve housing or start income-generating projects, but then evolved into both a political party and an NGO. Its candidates were elected to the Municipal government in two Huasteca districts. Even though the Front had no official plan and probably little hope of gaining power all over the state, in the Huasteca it became a legitimate political force. In this case, contrary to what happened with official or opportunistic NGOs, the NGO was not created to promote the ideology of a pre-existing party or to satisfy the political ambition of a few individuals. It simply decided, pragmatically, that being in power in a municipal district would guarantee that the projects the members asked for would be carried out without opposition from the local government. The socio-economic activities were not abandoned when some leaders ascended to political power.

Of course, even if the Citizen Front represented real grassroots interests, it hardly represented all special interests, and was accused of favoritism by outsiders. Although these allegations were not verified in the course of this research, civil society organizations are not necessarily immune to the culture of clientelism that still prevails in Mexico. Above all in the Huasteca, political leaders from new organizations are surrounded by a majority of PRI leaders, many of them local *caciques*. Even if they manage to allocate municipal funds as they wish, other funds still depend on state- and federal-level decisions, where local caciques can exercise pressure. The situation of PRD leaders described by Glenhill (1992) applies to the Frente Ciudadano as well: In order to counteract the political moves of the PRI, representatives of other political ideologies adopt its tactics and favor their supporters, instead of acting according to democratic principles.

This diversity of political activity was not observed in the other regions of San Luis Potosí. Because it brought competition rather than cooperation in the local NGO community, it was sometimes a negative factor in the socio-economic development of the Huasteca: When NGOs supporting opposing candidates or parties publicly spoke negatively about each other, local residents ended up having a negative opinion of all of them, and were little inclined to believe their promises or participate in their projects. State organizations, who provided the most substantial source of funding for Potosino NGOs, were also less likely to invest funding, either because they feared that they would help the opposition come into power, or because they viewed these NGOs as unreliable development partners. So why did political involvement spread in this particular region, with no tangible benefit for the development of the local communities? A look at the political context of the Huasteca will provide an explanation.

The political history of Huasteca

In the Huasteca, most social unrest historically centered on land distribution, which had not been widespread because of political repression. Since the 19th century, the local *caciques* were consistently successful in labeling local movements organized to claim land as political unrest and in making extensive use of the police and the army to quell them. This struggle for land was particularly violent in the 1970s and 1980s, as one NGO leader remembers:

> We had to invade the land for them to give it to us. We started because we saw that it was very deplorable, sad that there was land… to distribute to the *compañeros* ... We had to take to the streets, block government agencies, the Water Commission, the Secretary of Agrarian Reform. We had to invade the land for them [the government] to give us the land... This was not easy. We had many problems with the system, including threats, beatings, imprisonments. We had to go and pay bail in jail because of this situation. I did not think that helping people with limited economic means was forbidden, and for this they put me in jail, they beat us up.

In the midst of the land struggle came the Pánuco river federal project, a Mexican white elephant intent on creating the largest irrigation basin in Latin America. A basin of 720,000 hectares, covering the Eastern part of the Huasteca, as well as areas of the neighboring states of Veracruz and Tamaulipas, was to be converted from cattle ranching to horticulture and cereal production on irrigated arable land. Close to a million hectares of rainforest were razed, disturbing the rain patterns in the area. Subsequent work was to involve the control of the course of the river, the installation of vast irrigation infrastructure, the redistribution of the land to peasants, and the creation of new human settlements (Aguilar Robledo and Muñoz Rodríguez 1992). The Potosino segment was named the Pujal-Coy project after the two effluents of the river Pánuco that defined it.

The implementation of the Pujal-Coy project began in 1973, and was therefore intertwined with the development of social movements in the Huasteca. A strong peasant movement for land redistribution, centering on the organization Campamento Tierra y Libertad (Camp Land and Freedom), coveted the area because it had higher agricultural potential than the steep slopes of the Sierra Madre at the South of the Huasteca. The land, however, was in the hands of cattle ranchers who strongly opposed the Pujal-Coy project, even though they would be compensated for expropriation. They used their political power to repress the movements and assassinate the leader of Campamento Tierra y Libertad (Cervantes Rosales 1992).

Many suspect, however, that the federal government was eager to see the completion of Pujal-Coy to weaken peasant movements on a national scale. Even though some of the land was given to local residents, the project was so vast that it justified bringing groups from other states. The new communities and the *ejidos* that were created as part of the project included natives of the Huasteca, landless peasants from the arid areas of San Luis Potosí and from the states of Veracruz and Guanajuato, as well as representatives of a multitude of indigenous groups from Southern Mexico. Government agencies actively broke down the old social structure to create heterogeneous settlements (Muñoz Rodríguez 1992).

This strategy, however, not only weakened the social movements but the productive structure as a whole. The *ejido* structure itself implied the existence of trust among its members, since peasants managed the land together. Even if they did not always organize labor collectively, they enforced common rules for irrigation management. People without roots in the area, who did not share a common cultural background, did not readily work together. Moreover, many of the outsiders were not familiar with the modern agricultural technology required for irrigation. The system of extension and credit that the government had promised quickly showed dysfunctions caused by lack of planning and lack of funds. The peasants were left with a working irrigation infrastructure, but no tools to work the land, no schools or hospitals, and in some cases, no electricity or running water (Díaz Cisneros and Valtierra Pacheco 1992). All these factors contributed to the failure of the project. Some peasants simply sold their land back to the *latifundistas*, packed their bags, and left. Others now rent their lots. For the most part, the area has reverted to cattle ranching.

Pujal-Coy, however, put the Huasteca on the map for many national peasant organizations. An opening of the political space in Mexico in the 1980s allowed several national peasant movements to emerge. They quickly sent representatives to the Pujal-Coy area or contacted existing local groups to try and incorporate them in their national structure. In the Huasteca such organizations include the CODUC, the CIOAC, the UNORCA, and the CCC, among others. By the time the Huasteca structures started functioning, however, the fight for land distribution was coming to an end. The organizations, rather than abandoning the area,

adapted their strategy to focus on other pressing issues. The Huasteca is still an attractive area for them because problems of economic inequality were not solved by the Pujal-Coy project. Now social movement organizations demand the completion of the social infrastructure in the Pujal-Coy area (schools, clinics, etc.), and micro-credit for income-generating projects. They also try to organize the commercialization of local agricultural products such as sugar cane or coffee, to bypass traditional intermediaries and guarantee the peasants a fair price.

Recently, these organizations have found another area to diversify their activities. With the rebellion in Chiapas, the issue of indigenous rights has gained national attention. The government itself has been active through its National Indigenous Institute (INI). It has sponsored NGOs focusing exclusively on legal assistance for indigenous groups who face regular discrimination by the Mexican justice system. In the Huasteca, one such NGO exists for the Teenek, and one for the Nahua. Local groups have also emerged, such as the Consejo de Lucha Indígena de la Huasteca Potosina (Indigenous Struggle Council of the Potosino Huasteca) or the Parlamento Indio Estatal Peasant y Popular (State Indian [sic], Peasant and Popular Parliament). The local branches of national NGOs are minimally involved. They usually only added a paragraph on indigenous rights in their mission statement so that their members would not leave them for another organization. Overall, however, the necessity to switch their activities from land reform to economic development and indigenous rights has not diminished the size of the NGO community in the Huasteca.

Conclusion

The history of the Huasteca favored the development of political activities among the local NGO community to an extent that did not exist in other rural parts of San Luis Potosí. The unique combination of natural resources and social inequality made the Huasteca a niche for rural NGOs, both endogenous and exogenous. Local leaders emerged, who organized protests to improve the peasants' and indigenous populations' social and economic situation. National organizations came to gain support from these disgruntled groups. The official and opportunistic NGOs reflected the continued dominance of the PRI and of local *caciques* who combined economic and political power. Protest organizations continued a tradition of social movements, either by limiting themselves to violent and inefficient opposition to the government, or by seeking influence over public policy through negotiations. Civil society organizations took advantage of the democratization of the country to bring their social agenda into the local political arena. In all cases, political NGOs were able to develop in the Huasteca because of the existence of social demands that they aimed to satisfy.

A greater number of NGOs, however, does not guarantee the achievement of local development goals or the promotion of democratic values. The Huasteca remains the region of San Luis Potosí with the most inequality in socio-economic stratification. The national process of democratization has been more important than local NGO activity in opening political space and the indigenous communities have experienced no collective gain since NGOs started showing interest in indigenous rights. Contrary to what Fowler (1993) witnessed in Africa, the limitation to NGOs promoting democracy in the Huasteca did not come mainly from state co-optation or repression, but from amateurism, opportunism and competition within the NGO community. The fact remains, however, that NGOs' political involvement in Mexico is a reality that should be taken into account and analyzed as such, rather than shunned.

By excluding direct political participation from their analyses, development scholars turn them into passive entities that only react to the political context in which they operate without playing any significant part in its development. On the contrary, NGOs as political actors become active participants in the development of political life. Assuming that political activity is sometimes an integral part of NGO activity, rather than an external influence, will require a redefinition of the range of NGO activities and goals, as well as a revision of existing NGO classifications. In addition, as shown by the history of NGOs in the Huasteca, the relationships between various individual and organizational actors over time play an important role in the development of the political life of NGOs. Future research on the social networks of local leaders, in conjunction with the history of their organizational affiliation, would add to the understanding of how NGOs develop their political activities and of the kind of impact on politics and development to be expected from them.

A line of thought on NGOs and politics is also developing that would integrate the political involvement of Southern NGOs with local politics into a more global context. After all, NGOs in Western democracies also often have ties to political parties, are created by governments, or to support interest groups. Businesses regularly create such entities to represent their interests to elected officials through the lobbying process (Demirovic 2003). The evidence from the Huasteca supports this view of NGOs as political actors with diverse agendas and suggests that the phenomenon is not limited to established Western democracies or international institutions. Because the diversity of NGO orientations to politics stems from the diversity of

their social, historical, economic, and cultural environment, we can expect Southern NGOs to exhibit political strategies and outcomes different from those of other NGOs. First, the fact that some Huasteca NGOs have taken advantage of the democratization process to become elected bodies suggests that a country's political regime and its development may influence the development of NGO political activities. Second, the presence of marked social and economic inequality and a history of social unrest, even faced with severe repression, provided a fertile ground for the development of NGO political activity. These preliminary findings open the door to comparative studies involving other regions of the world and other types of political regimes.

Endnotes

1 The term NGO still does not have a single definition (see Martens 2002, Vakil 1997), so that different authors will include different types of organizations under that term or use other terms to refer to a specific sub-group. Broadly speaking, in the development literature, NGOs are intermediary or grassroots organizations that work to improve the social, economic, cultural, and political lives of a target population. Return

2 Authors who focus on democratization refer more often to civil society organizations or associations. These share many characteristics with development NGOs but are typically understood as organizations that relay the political voice of private citizens to the state. Here, these civil society organizations will be considered to be NGOs primarily concerned with political advocacy. Return

3 The INEGI measures the indigenous population as residents 5 years or older who are able to speak an indigenous language. For Mexico as a whole, the proportion of indigenous people in the 2000 census was 6.8%. Return

4 While the English language distinguishes between policy and politics, Spanish only uses one word, *política*. This is why respondents felt the need to clarify what they meant and distinguish between being political and being partisan. The first implies a concern with the public good, while the second implies an ideological bias and a corruptive appetite for power. Return

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