Can NGOs Make a Difference?

The Challenge of Development Alternatives

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Producing Knowledge, Generating Alternatives? Challenges to Research-oriented NGOs in Central America and Mexico

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What do non-profit organizations whose primary role is to produce knowledge contribute to development alternatives? The question is not an idle one. As the Millennium Development Goals and the poverty agenda impress themselves ever more firmly on the criteria used to allocate international cooperation and national development budgets, research-oriented NGOs, and research activities within multi-functional NGOs, have found it increasingly difficult to secure funding. In this context, being clear on the nature, role and purpose of such NGOs is urgent, otherwise research activities in progressive NGOs will wither away, leaving the non-profit knowledge-generation field open to business-supported, more conservative and well-funded think-tanks. This urgency is both institutional (to offset an organizational demise that occurs by default rather than because of any clear strategic reasoning) and political (to avoid the further colonization of public debate and discourse by a core set of broadly neoliberal principles encoded in different policy prescriptions and conceptual arguments).[1]

Clarity on the nature, role and dynamics of such organizations is also of theoretical importance. A reflection on the relationship between knowledge and development alternatives forces more careful thought on the relationships between civil society and development, among knowledge, policy and the public sphere, and on the constitution of civil society itself. Thinking in a more disaggregated manner about these relationships is itself, we argue, a contribution to reflections on the nature of development alternatives, and to our conceptualization of the relationships between non-governmental organizations and alternatives.

With these opening gambits in mind, the chapter summarizes a series of collective reflections elaborated by the authors in the course of a two-year

initiative addressing the role and evolution of NGOs engaged in knowledge generation related to environment and development in Central America and Mexico. The reflections are largely autobiographical in their inspiration, for the work underlying this chapter has revolved around analytical reconstructions of the authors' own organizations and the knowledge generation work done within them (Bebbington, 2007). Our analysis is, however, grounded in a broader theoretical reflection (see the following section) in order that it be relevant for research-oriented NGOs elsewhere.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, we outline several generative concepts that underlie our reflection on research-oriented NGOs. Second, we provide a brief summary of the organizations whose experience informs the argument here. Third, we discuss the ways in which these organizations understand the relationships between knowledge, civil society and development alternatives, and in particular their approaches to the relationships between research and policy processes. Fourth, we discuss the pressures that these organizations currently face – pressures emanating from their external and internal environments. We then close discussing the types of organizational change to which these pressures have led over recent years, and the challenges that these experiences raise for thinking about the roles of knowledge-generation organizations in producing development alternatives.

Theorizing the Informal University: Concepts for Thinking about Research-oriented NGOs

In his interpretation of the relationships among politics, economy and religion in post-World War II Latin America, David Lehmann emphasizes the importance of a certain type of non-governmental organization: those that combine grassroots work with various forms of research, publication and knowledge generation (Lehmann, 1990). He suggests that such organizations played an important part in processes of democratization, largely due to their roles in broadening particular types of public sphere and placing both academic and social movement knowledge within those public spheres. Lehmann referred to such organizations as the 'informal university', not only to draw attention to the intellectual nature of their work but also to suggest that their emergence was an effect of particular political and financial pressures on the formal university during that period. At the same time, this characterization (and Lehmann's analysis) suggested that the contribution of such centres was distinct from that of universities. Their private, not-for-profit nature allowed them to do and say things, to bridge the research and public spheres, to bridge direct engagement and

knowledge production, and so on, in ways that universities simply could not. Being non-governmental held open the possibility of generating knowledge in quite different ways – ways that were embedded in particular social actors and social processes.

Of course, such non-profit research centres also exist in countries where political and financial pressures are not so intense (Stone, 2002; Stone and Denham, 2004; Maxwell and Stone, 2004), suggesting that their emergence is due not only to the constraints on universities. However, many such centres are linked closely to political parties, interest groups or government departments, and/or exist largely as consultancies. Such linkages serve as a source of both financial support and political legitimacy, but also raise questions such as how best to theorize about these non-profit research centres. While the tendency is to refer to them as civil society organizations, this may not be the most helpful way to conceptualize (for example) a think-tank that draws the majority of its financial support from the UK's Department for International Development, that is closely linked to the UK Labour Party or that is funded primarily by US-based energy companies. While not describing the situation of the organizations writing this chapter, these hypothetical examples suggest that it is not enough to say that we are simply civil society organizations or think-tanks. Rather, we need to think much more carefully about the sources of our legitimacy – not in order to make normative judgements about our work, but in order to be clearer about our role, and the relationships and sources of legitimacy that we must nurture carefully. Too often non-profits presume they are legitimate due to their non-profit and 'civil society' status. Yet, as the literature is clear, such claims are simply not enough (Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Hulme and Edwards, 1997).

Indeed, the special case of research-oriented NGOs is helpful for thinking about civil society – and, in turn, reflecting on these analytical approaches to civil society helps illuminate potential roles of research-oriented organizations. Here we outline two distinct approaches, one viewing civil society in associative terms, the second seeing it as 'the arena ... in which ideological hegemony is contested' (Lewis, 2002: 572). The associationalist approach views civil society as the arena of association between the household and the state, a 'third sector' which can supply services that neither state nor market can (e.g. Salamon and Anheier, 1997). In this reading, knowledge-generating NGOs might be viewed as sources of research, consulting, advice and publication, but understood in their terms of their function rather than in terms of the political project of which they are a part. This latter emphasis instead characterizes a second approach, which has roots in both Gramsci (1971) and Habermas (1984). Here, civil society is understood as the arena in which ideas and discourses become hegemonic, serving to stabilize and

naturalize capitalist systems of production and exchange. Notwithstanding their hegemonic status, these ideas can be challenged and upset. Indeed, for post-Marxism and post-structuralism, this was the lens through which Latin American social movements had to be understood (Alvarez et al., 1998). It was not simply that the role of a social movement was to build counter-hegemonic ideas (around development, democracy or human rights); rather this was the very definition of a social movement. Movements were vectors of these counter-hegemonic tendencies. Given that knowledge is central to both hegemony and counter-hegemony, in this interpretation, research-oriented NGOs would have to be understood in terms of their positioning with either hegemonic (mainstream) or counter-hegemonic (alternative) tendencies.

A second, related, axis around which we have ordered our thinking derives from recent work by Evelina Dagnino and colleagues (2006). Rather than use a language of state, market and civil society to help locate the niche and roles of particular (non-governmental) actors in fostering inclusion and democracy, they suggest that it is more helpful to consider their relationship to larger political projects that cut across the spheres of state and civil society. They identify three such meta-projects in contemporary Latin America: a neoliberal (or neoliberal-deepening) project, a direct democracy (or democracy-deepening) project, and an authoritarian project. The advantage of such a framework is that it avoids the issue of whether or not an organization is an NGO or a social movement (etc.), and asks instead that an organization's essence be identified in terms of what it stands for and contributes to. This approach may also be helpful given that the ways in which other actors relate to an organization probably depend more on its relationship to distinct projects rather than on its relative purity as a civil society, market or state actor. Furthermore, for the particular case of knowledge generation, actors might deliberately interact with others whose political projects are quite distinct in order that the knowledge produced is as legitimate and evidence-based as possible.

A drawback of Dagnino et al.'s characterization, however, is that it may be too blunt to accommodate the different hybrids that exist in the region. Some of these hybrids might simply be – in Dagnino's et al.'s language – instances of 'perverse convergence' in which a neoliberal project appears to open scope for participation but in practice does so in a way that further undermines the concepts of universal rights and social justice. Others, however, may not be perverse, and may involve serious attempts to explore ways in which markets can be used (and governed) so as to allocate resources to foster greater social inclusion. Indeed, a second drawback of the framework is the tendency to associate the participatory democratic project with political practices, and the neoliberal project with

market-based practices. Yet there are evidently projects – both globally and in the region – that are based on economic models that afford an important role for markets while also fostering inclusion either directly (through addressing who has access to these markets) or indirectly (through addressing the quality of growth that market development delivers). Such hybrids have different origins, often depending on the institutional context in which they have been elaborated. Some have grown out of the institutional and informational turn in economics, some from efforts to refashion socialist and social-democratic political projects so that they allow markets to play a bigger role in resource allocation and the creation of opportunities; some are based in real-world exigencies encountered by left-of-centre political projects when they assume positions of political power and need to manage resource scarcity and fiscal constraints. Whether referred to as the post-Washington Consensus (Fine, 2001, 1999), the Third Way (Giddens, 1998), or some other epithet, such efforts at hybridizing aspects of both neoliberalism's commitment to the role of markets and social democracies' commitment to the importance of governing markets so that they are less exclusive, are present in projects in contexts as diverse as Lula's Brazil, the Concertación's Chile, New Labour's Britain or even the World Bank's *World Development Report* of 2006 on Equity. Hybrids such as these offer a fourth political project to add to Dagnino et al.'s trinity. This schema can help not only to locate our organizations but also to shed light on their role and niche in the region.

A final axis for thinking about the work, nature and niche of organizations such as ours comes from understandings of the linkages between research/policy and research/social change. Diane Stone (2002) suggests three main types of explanation used to explore obstacles to research–policy linkages: supply-side explanations (which suggest that the main problem is to do with problems in the quality, usefulness and communication of research); demand-side explanations (suggesting that the main problems are to do with lack of political will or the lack of technical ability among policymakers to use research-based knowledge); and embeddedness explanations (suggesting that the main problems are related to weak links between research centres and the social actors that drive policy change). These three explanations might well be related to two broad approaches to research–policy linkages: approaches that can be characterized as the 'short route' from research to policy and the 'long route' (Bebbington and Barrientos, 2005). Supply- and demand-side explanations of the obstacles to research–policy linkages imply that once the related problems are resolved, then research should become relevant to and influential in policy formation. Therefore supply- and demand-side explanations hold open the possibility and desirability of following a *short route* from researchers to policymakers – a route in which

researchers, their ideas and their publications have a direct influence on policy. Conversely, embeddedness explanations suggest that for research to influence policy, it is important that research centres embed themselves in particular social actors who will then take the knowledge that the centres produce (knowledge made more relevant through this process of becoming embedded) and use it both in their own practices and in their efforts to influence policy: a *longer route* from research to policy.

The two routes have different institutional implications for research centres. The short route suggests a more rapid, less costly and a more elitist and technocratic approach to research–policy linkages, while also implying that research-centre legitimacy would be derived primarily from the professional quality of their staff and their work, as well as from personal linkages with policymakers and policy framers. The long route suggests a slower, more expensive process and perhaps one that requires more grassroots-oriented political commitments. In following the longer route, research centres would seek legitimacy primarily from the quality and depth of their relationships with social-change actors, and from the ways in which this embeddedness affected the research process. How a knowledge generating organization places itself with respect to the short- and long-route options will influence the types of internal capacity and external relationships it feels are most important to strengthen, the ways in which it structures itself institutionally and geographically, how it claims legitimacy for the work that it does, and quite possibly the larger political project within which it locates itself. With these conceptual axes in mind, then – namely, sources of legitimacy, positioning vis-à-vis larger political and development projects, and approaches to research–policy linkages – we discuss the organizations whose experiences drive the reflections presented in this chapter.

The Case Study Organizations

While the organizations whose experiences underlie this reflection are all non-governmental, they are non-governmental in different ways and to different degrees. Likewise the balance between research, knowledge generation and development intervention varies among them. Also, the extent to which environment and development is central to their work varies. In some cases (e.g. PRISMA and GEA) it runs through all their work; in others (e.g. Nitlapán and FLACSO) it is a programme within a wider suite of research themes, and so in these cases our collective reflection involved the parts of the organization involved in rural and environmentally related work. How might we, then, map our organizations?

At one extreme is the Group for Environmental Studies (Grupo de

Estudios Ambientales, GEA AC, Mexico), an organization that, while it takes knowledge generation seriously, has done so from the basis of a strong engagement in social-change and development activities. At the other extreme are organizations whose work is very largely research-oriented. This position is most apparent in Nitlapán (Nicaragua) and PRISMA (Programa Salvadoreño de Investigación sobre Desarrollo y Medio Ambiente). PRISMA is a free-standing NGO; Nitlapán functions in a similar way to PRISMA, but in formal terms is an administratively independent institute within the Universidad CentroAmericana (UCA) in Managua, a university owned by the Company of Jesús and with a presence through much of Central America.

Located between these two extremes we have two other types of organization. One is much more akin to or linked to a university organization. The Latin American Faculty for Social Sciences (FLACSO–Guatemala) is an autonomous graduate school that combines research, teaching, extension and outreach. While created under the auspices of UNESCO and governed, ultimately, by its fifteen member states, it functions to a considerable degree as an NGO. It combines research, outreach and efforts to influence policy and public debate, has considerable autonomy in devising strategy, and depends in large measure on international agencies for its activities. However, it is neither as autonomous nor as purely research-oriented as is Nitlapán. The Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán is a public university one of whose roles is to contribute to development of the Yucatán. PROTROPICO, however, is a programme created within the university with the express purpose of linking research and community development processes and allowing more participatory and also policy-oriented forms of knowledge generation related to natural resource management and development. With time, however, PROTROPICO has become increasingly autonomous of the university. It too depends on external funding for its work and is not governed by formal university rules and practices.

The other intermediary grouping is of NGOs that emerged as networks or inter-organizational forums that had the explicit objective of fostering public debate with a view to influencing policy. The Network for Sustainable Development (RDS, Red de Desarrollo Sostenible) also emerged under the auspices of a UN initiative (UNDP in this case) to broaden information availability on environment and development. While it continues to emphasize information exchange and policy influence, with time it has assumed the dynamics of a free-standing NGO combining development and information exchange. The Forum for Sustainable Development (Foro Chiapas) similarly emerged to foster exchange and debate among organizations, academics and political actors in Chiapas, Mexico, but with time it has become an NGO combining development projects and research activity.

   Among them, then, these case-study organizations represent different ways of trying to be a private, non-profit organization that generates knowledge with a view to influencing action, public debate and policy. These different models, while complicating simple comparisons, allow us to reflect more systematically on the prospects for knowledge generation for alternative development from the position of non-governmental organizations.

Theorizing the Relationships between Knowledge, Civil Society and Development

Each of our institutions would think of itself as a civil society organization, though in somewhat distinct ways. These visions have also taken us towards differing views on the relationships between our work, knowledge production and development. In this section we outline these views. As will be apparent, they have different implications˙for the ways in which our institutions need to seek legitimacy. Whatever the case, it is clear that it is not enough for us to seek legitimacy simply by claiming to be civil society groups, and in practice it is probably the case that our legitimacy derives more from the quality and effects of the knowledge we produce than from our social location. We return to this later.

   In practice the concept of civil society that is most prevalent in the ways in which we understand ourselves has been the associationalist one. We have viewed ourselves as civil society organizations because we are neither government nor profit-oriented organizations. The irony here, of course, is that – at least in terms of intellectual lineage – this places us in a tradition that has tended to be more conservative than we would want to think of ourselves as being. Indeed, for most of us, our earlier years were characterized by a more Gramscian sense of our place in civil society than have been our later years. The origins of our institutions were diverse: some inhered in a determination to be alternative, and to demonstrate that it was possible to build different ways of producing knowledge with campesinos (GEA); others inhered in the effort to produce knowledge that, though not organically linked to the FMLN, certainly sought to challenge right-wing views of what El Salvador was and should be (PRISMA); others (Foro Chiapas) came from a commitment to challenge authoritarian approaches to governing Chiapas, and to build on the spaces opened up by Zapatismo in Chiapas while (as in PRISMA's case) having no organic link to this movement; and others derived from a commitment to contribute to the liberating elements of Sandinismo (Nitlapán). Common to most of our origins was a commitment to build – or to facilitate the building of – knowledge that would challenge public debate and contribute to some or other form of democracy-deepening project.

This commitment was made all the more complex by the historical moment in which many of us emerged. With the exception of FLACSO and GEA, we are all creatures and creations of the 1990s, a period of paradigmatic crisis in development and politics which was every bit as real in Mexico and Central America as it was in Northern academic and political worlds. As a result, our efforts to build alternatives were themselves challenged by a relative lack of guiding concepts – we had to build these ourselves. This is apparent in some of our work. For instance, Nitlapán's efforts to understand the dynamics of the peasant economy reflect the lack of a clear *ex ante* view on the merits of peasant production and organization (Maldidier and Marchetti, 1996); PRISMA's early (and some of its continuing) work in El Salvador reflected a conscious effort to connect discussion in El Salvador with international debates on environment and development, as a first step towards rethinking foundational concepts for an alternative Salvadoran development; by the 1980s GEA was similarly trying to elaborate with others a conceptual (and practical) base from which sustainable forest management under *campesino* control could be imagined. The more general point is that in order to challenge public debate we first had to do preliminary work in rethinking concepts for imagining development and politics.

Perhaps we and our financial supporters underestimated the challenge implied by an agenda such as this, and so with time we became part drawn, part pushed, towards more applied forms of knowledge production. Whatever the case, and while some of our knowledge production work is still oriented towards destabilizing core ideas in public debates and opening up alternative ways of thinking about development, there is also a sense in which our approach to the links between knowledge and development has become less ambitious. Albeit for some of us more than others, this change has led us to an approach that focuses more on generating knowledge for problem solving: knowledge to resolve problems in marketing chains, to generate agroecologically sound production options, to inform land-use plans and so on. In the following section we explore some of the factors that have pushed us in this direction.

Whatever the case, we believe that this role is a legitimate one, and certainly there is very great demand for us to play this role – a demand that comes from communities, peasant organizations, other NGOs, local governments. However, this change in the balance of our orientation – which is one that happened by default more than because of any conscious strategic decision – has slowly moved us towards that niche which is defined as civil society because it provides a service (in this case a knowledge service) that other organizations of the state or the market are not providing. We doubt how far this knowledge feeds into wider public and political discussions in ways that may lead people to reframe the problem of development and

democracy in our societies. Moreover, the change in orientation itself takes some of the alternative edge off the very concept of civil society in our societies. That is, to the extent that we define ourselves as civil society, and what we do is increasingly to provide services, our very form of existing and operating contributes to the idea that civil society is a domain of service provision, not of contestation over hegemony. By default (again) we have steadily assumed roles that seem to project an associationalist, gap-filling understanding of civil society, not a Gramscian one.

Whether in producing knowledge that might contribute to public debate, or knowledge that solves problems of development and livelihood, what is evident is that much of our legitimacy as organizations comes from the *quality* of the knowledge we produce. While there are different metrics of quality depending on the type of knowledge, and the social relationship within which it is being produced, we cannot get away from this issue of quality. There is a clear resonance here with earlier debates on NGOs and development at the 1994 Manchester NGO conference (see Edwards's chapter in this book; Edwards and Hulme, 1995; Hulme and Edwards, 1997). One of the important messages of that conference was that the legitimacy of NGOs derived as much from their performance – the quality of what they did and delivered – as it did from the mechanisms of accountability linking them to other social actors and ensuring transparency of their actions (Edwards and Hulme, 1995).

If we look at our own knowledge-generation work, we can see efforts to build each of these sources of legitimacy. Some of us emphasize quality more than accountability, and others accountability over quality, and, while the precise meanings of these terms may vary among us, we each broadly understand accountability in terms of our relationship to social organizations, and quality in terms of the depth, nuance and internal coherence of the knowledge we produce. In the following section we reflect on the challenges we face in protecting each of these sources of legitimacy. Here we would merely comment that they are not completely substitutable one for the other (indeed, the extent to which they are at all substitutable is not great). That is, there is a relatively high baseline of quality below which we cannot fall – when oriented towards problem-solving, the knowledge we produce must indeed solve problems, whether these are *campesino* production problems or local authorities' planning problems. When oriented towards public and policy debate, this knowledge must be minimally innovative; it cannot simply recycle what is already known and that which has already been said. Achieving these levels of quality is vital, but is a great challenge for organizations with no core funding (see below). Likewise, if we turn into pure think-tanks, doing commissioned and consulting work, we lose the legitimacy that comes from being a civil society actor (with either

meaning of the term). In many ways we become a pseudo-market, pseudo government, or pseudo-political party actor. That is, the knowledge we produce becomes entirely demand driven, and thus – almost by definition – loses any hope of being counter-hegemonic.

Challenges to Research-oriented NGOs

As we reflect on the challenges that our organizations face, some are similar to the generic challenges facing NGOs seeking development alternatives, others are peculiar to the case of knowledge-generating and research-oriented NGOs. We comment on each in turn, paying special attention to our specific challenges as knowledge-generating NGOs concerned with incidence.

The generic challenges

While it sounds mercantile to begin with such a statement, there is absolutely no doubt that the main challenge of our organizations is a financial and resource mobilization one. By and large the issue is not that we cannot mobilize resources in order to continue being organizations. The consulting and short-term studies option offers this means of providing jobs to our staff and development services to clients (who in this financing model tend to become those who pay for the services more than the social organizations receiving them). In this sense, fulfilling the associationalist role of a civil society actor is not so very hard. The problem is to mobilize resources that allow us to play a civil society role in the Gramscian sense that permeates the argument of this book – the role of challenging orthodoxies and building alternatives.

In most of the agencies that historically supported the cultivation of alternatives in Central America and Mexico, a view of development as being synonymous with poverty reduction (and, note, a notion of poverty reduction that is more traditional than that even of World Bank documents such as the *World Development Reports* of 2000/2001 and 2006) has become increasingly hegemonic. The reasons for this are as much external (the pressure from the governments that transfer co-financing resources to them) as they are internal (the rise of a certain pragmatic institutional agenda inside these agencies). Whatever their source, they have translated into reduced funding for knowledge-generation activities in Central America and Mexico. Agencies offer several reasons for this reduction. First, if development finance is to be concentrated on poverty, then with the exceptions of Honduras and Nicaragua, Central America and Mexico are no longer priorities for most agencies, in spite of official figures establishing the existence of 50

to 72 million poor in Mexico. Second, the poverty impacts of knowledge generation are hard to discern, and it is far more appropriate therefore to fund projects that *do* things rather than people that *think and analyse* things. Implicitly, the message is that these agencies are no longer interested in alternatives, because poverty reduction is so self-evidently the right emphasis for aid that there is no alternative required. Furthermore, the assumption seems to be that the practice of poverty reduction is already understood, and can be dealt with independently of redistribution – an issue to be left to national political processes, not international cooperation.

All our organizations have experienced the effects of this. Some have been able to handle it better than others. Because of their university status or links, FLACSO and PROTROPICO have been most able to absorb this pressure – public funding and course fees for teaching offers them some financial base, and also it seems that increasingly universities have more legitimacy with certain funders than do research NGOs. After these two, PRISMA and GEA have been the next most resilient. Though two completely different organizations – the one a think-tank, the other a *campesinista* group of thinking activists – the sources of their resilience are similar. Each shares a strong institutional culture regarding how they must and will operate. PRISMA insists that its work is programmatically funded or not funded at all; GEA's members' collective commitment to their political project generates massive (Chayanovian) subsidies to the organization. These commitments have helped each organization find its way through, and retain some knowledge-generating work. The remainder of our organizations – Nitlapán, Foro, RDS – have seen their work slowly but surely slip into a projectized, semi-consulting mode with serious (and negative) consequences for their ability to produce analytical or strategic knowledge oriented towards alternatives.

A second challenge – which is related to this financial pressure – has been to manage ourselves as organizations in such a way that there is coherence between what we argue to be our ideological and theoretical commitment, our ways of organizing ourselves internally, and the nature of our external relationships. Parts of this observation are distributed through different parts of this chapter – in the following paragraphs we simply bring together the parts and explain the core of the challenge.

In organizational terms, the challenge here is to find congruence between our political model, our institutional model and our financial model. In an ideal world, we would move from the first to the third of these, our financial model being functional to our political commitments (of being Gramscian civil society actors). In the real world, and in particular over the last five years, struggles with our financial model have determined everything else – our institutional model has been a retrofit to our financial reality, and to

a considerable degree our political model has fallen away from this calculus, like a mission statement hovering above and largely unconnected to our everyday practices.

This problem has been more severe for some of our organizations than others, though is real in all of them. The package of financing that we are able to compose determines the time horizons of our research, the types of contract we can offer to our staff, our salary and pensions conditions, and our ability to manage human resources strategically. For instance, the more our financial model is dominated by short-term funding streams the less we can engage in strategic research – for otherwise the risk is that we will start, but never finish it. Likewise, a model dominated by shorter-term funding requires contractual conditions that make it harder to hold staff. Young staff are typically on three- to six-month contracts with relatively low pay, and other opportunities attract all but the academically purist, most stubborn and ideologically most committed. Nor can we compensate for this with staff development except in those few (valuable) cases in which we are able to develop links to international universities that allow us to send these young staff for postgraduate training. Meanwhile for the other end of our staff profile, most of our organizations make no contribution to pensions or health care. This makes us ever less attractive to those of our staff who are older – but who, for the same reason of maturity, have more knowledge of managing knowledge production, and more contacts in the political and public spheres in which we aim to intervene. These very abilities make it easier for them to find better paid positions elsewhere or close their careers doing high-end consulting work.

It is not only that our financial model makes it harder to retain and develop research staff. It is also that it leads us towards the very same sort of neoliberal human resource management model we claim to work against. This weakens both our external legitimacy – as it subjects us to criticisms of practising what we preach against – and our internal coherence – as it generates serious internal tensions among staff of different ages, on different types of contract. Those of us who have been better able to manage these tensions have done so either because of a strong institutional culture, or because of strong models of leadership. Shared institutional cultures can lead us to solutions in which the collectivity bears the costs of the financial model, and so enjoys very similar work conditions; and in other circum-stances they drive an ethic of overwork that helps compensate for resource constraints (but in doing so increases staff burnout). Such cultures are not, however, immaculately and spontaneously conceived: their existence is a result of diligent, deliberate and strategic cultivation since our early years. They cannot therefore be quickly invoked from nothing in order to save an otherwise dire financial and institutional situation.

Strong leadership can help deal with these pressures through two main avenues. First, among us there are cases where the strength of a leader or leaders has given us greater negotiating power with our financing agencies, helping gain longer-term, programmatic funding streams. These leaders inspire external subsidies to the institution. Second, we can identify cases where a strong leader so embodied an institutional culture that, though perhaps not existing in all of us, forced us by example to make the same commitments to the institution as did these leaders. Such leaders inspire internal subsidies to the institution. The problem with the subsidy of leadership is that, embodied as it is in one person, it can be easily lost when that person leaves or dies. There are among us several cases of this. Particularly severe is the case (which is perhaps the norm) in which the leader inspired *both* external and internal subsidies. On leaving, they take some of our external legitimacy (and contacts) with them, and leave a heart-sized hole in the cultural fabric of the institution.

The specific challenges

Perhaps the most important challenge we face specifically as research- and knowledge-generating organizations relates to the quality of our product. While product quality is a problem for all NGOs, the market for development ideas is a far tighter one than is that for development projects. Also, we would venture, the very nature of hegemony means that the possibility of breaking into, upsetting and changing the course of public and policy debate is far more circumscribed than the possibility of innovating in a location-specific development project. In this context, the quality of the knowledge and proposals we produce is of the greatest importance: and the more counter-hegemonic the goal, the longer the time required to build both the evidence base and the relations necessary to disseminate and legitimize this evidence. Yet producing such high-quality, evidence-based, strategic knowledge requires high-quality people and resources that allow sustained research *programmes* rather than short-term research consultancies of a few months or so, or small pieces of research hidden away in what are otherwise action-oriented projects. The increasing pressure on our financial base makes each of these ever more difficult. Staff retention is a particularly serious problem. High-quality thinkers are in relatively short supply, and – particularly as they get older and need to think of retirement – many of them have moved into better-paid public-sector, international or consultancy positions. Perhaps the most significant case of this is Nitlapán, but it is not the only case. That these people make this decision is entirely understandable. However, the effect is to weaken the human capital of our organizations, and thus the quality of the strategic knowledge we produce. By the same token, it is very difficult to produce destabilizing forms of

knowledge if those who do research have constantly to complement their income with consulting, and have research funding that reaches only several months ahead.

Another challenge that is somewhat more specific to NGOs such as ours also has to do with how we affect policy and public debate. For each of us, this is an explicit part of our mission and objectives, though we pursue the goal in different ways. The short and long routes to incidence are present in each of our organizations, though combined in different ways. These combinations also suggest the need to nuance this distinction and to add to it a notion of scale, as we discuss below.

There are two main long routes to incidence in our work. One is the link with students – which is central to PROTROPICO's and FLACSO's way of working. PROTROPICO aims to train students who will then become professionals working in the Yucatan. The hope is that these persons will bring to their professional work more participatory and systems-based understandings of the links between development and the environment. FLACSO aims to do much the same at a wider geographical scale – indeed FLACSO's students return to positions not only in Guatemala but through-out Mesoamerica, Ecuador, Bolivia, Peru and Chile. In each case, the notion is that policy can be changed not only through engaging in policy framing and formation, but also through influencing the technocracies that manage policy. The goal is to change the human capital that makes those technocracies function and thus influence policy through its implementa-tion. The challenge in this case is that there is a long delay before such incidence becomes apparent, and in neither FLACSO nor PROTROPICO do we have a documented sense of how far the training of students has actually influenced either bureaucratic practice or policy implementation in the region.

The second long route is that which occurs through other social actors, primarily social movements and social organizations. In the past, several of us attempted to build links with national movements. Nitlapán, for instance, engaged with the National Farmers and Livestock Producers Union (UNAG), with a view to the movement carrying forward ideas in their own engagement with the Nicaraguan government. In practice, however, this has been difficult, and over time, to the extent that we support other social actors with knowledge generation activities, we do so at a sub-national level only. Foro has worked with coffee organizations in Chiapas, and now works mostly with social organizations and communities that have been displaced by environmental conflicts; GEA works with peasant organizations in Guerrerro; PRISMA collaborates with forestry cooperatives and local governments, and so on. These relationships with more thematically and geographically focused organizations have proven easier to manage than ones

with more diffuse social movements. At best, however, they lead only to local and regional, or commodity-specific, influence. They rarely influence broader public debate. Indeed, the more general point here is that it has proven very difficult to sustain a social basis from which to do more basic and strategic research aimed at influencing policy and national debate. The organizations we work with have more immediate and pragmatic concerns, and our work becomes drawn towards applied activities aimed at addressing these concerns. Sometimes, along the way, more strategic issues arise and we can take these to policy debates – but by and large these are by-products of more applied work, and not the prime concerns of the organizations we interact with.

We have all tried the short route – direct to policymakers and policy working groups – to a greater or lesser extent. The advantages of this route – given our financial constraints – are that it is less resource-intensive, and does not require that we have regular or permanent presence outside the capital city. That said, it is a route that still consumes resources. Building the relationships necessary to get to the policy table takes time, and requires repeated participation in a range of events. Perhaps the most serious draw-back of this route, however – at least in the ways in which we have practised it to date – is that it tends to hinge on personal relationships built up with a small number of technocrats or political appointees inside government. These contacts are then the vehicle for allowing us to bring our knowledge to policy discussions. Yet the rate of staff turnover in our governments falls far short of the Weberian ideal (and itself reflects another limitation of this route – namely that, failing significant political change, such individuals themselves have limited room to manoeuvre within government). Thus it is that on repeated occasions we have built these relationships only to see the persons removed from their government positions for bureaucratic or political reasons. Once that happens our access has been closed and we have to start again.

Our collective experience also suggests another route to policy influence with which several of us have experimented. This has involved efforts to create what Andolina has termed new 'counter-public' (Andolina, 2003: 733) spheres in which novel debates on development and democracy might occur. Andolina was referring to debates made possible by new local assemblies created by indigenous movements. In a similar way several of us have been directly involved in attempts to create networks of organizations – mostly NGOs, but also some social organizations and occasionally public sector organizations – whose purpose is not simply to exchange information but also to create visible arenas that might allow new debates on development and environment to occur. Indeed one of us – Foro Chiapas – was created specifically for this precise purpose. For its part, RDS soon moved into this

role, and has served as an arena allowing public debates on issues that the Honduran press has refused to cover (because of its ideological commitments and forms of political control). GEA has repeatedly tried to do something similar in Mexico, leading the creation of networks and platforms intended to make community forestry and themes such as bio-safety and GMOs more visible within Mexican public policy debate; and in Guatemala FLACSO uses its privileged institutional position to support (albeit more specific) debates on issues of public importance.

The greatest challenge to this strategy has been the difficulty of sustaining such counter-public spaces over time. At an institutional level it has proven impossible to mobilize resources that would support us (Foro and RDS) to play the role of creating and nurturing these spaces. And at a practical level, pressure of work has repeatedly impinged on these spaces, and with time levels of participation fall. The tendency, repeatedly, has been for these spaces to wither away, or for organizations created in order to embody such spaces to turn into one more development NGO.

Conclusions

If 'development alternatives' are to be more than simple rallying cries, they require substance and content. This content must come from somewhere. While the everyday practice and experiential knowledge of social-movement actors might be one source of such knowledge, it cannot possibly be the only source. To become a counter-discourse with teeth, this everyday knowledge needs to be synthesized, systematized and given coherence. It also has to be linked with analytical knowledge of the contexts within which everyday practices occur – contexts which, while they impinge on people's life, are in many cases analytically inaccessible to them. Alternatives only stand a chance if they can both adapt to and change contexts, and for each of these requirements organized knowledge of those contexts is essential.

If this knowledge has to be produced, there are two implications. Somebody has to produce it, and somebody has to cover the costs associated with its production. Apart from maverick reformists here and there (Fox, 1996), government will not produce such knowledge *even if* bureaucratic pressures allowed for some space to do so. Likewise with aid agencies, non-profit and public sector alike – the bureaucratic pressures on their generally highly competent and trained staff mean that their practical capacity to think strategically about themselves, let alone about broader social processes, remains weak. So, realistically the only two bodies that might produce this knowledge are universities and non-profit organizations with research and analytical capacity.

In Central America and Mexico universities continue to be very weak. They lack budget to cover research, and more seriously still, perhaps, they lack the embeddedness in everyday social (movement) practices that might inform the production of knowledge for alternatives. Of course, there are exceptions here and there: FLACSO and PROTROPICO, in their different ways, demonstrate university efforts to become more embedded. However, the panorama is such that universities will not play this embedded knowledge-producing role, at least not alone or in the form in which they currently exist. Indeed, FLACSO and PROTROPICO each suggest that in order to become more embedded, universities need to incorporate elements of the non-governmental model into their own way of being and operating.

Non-profit research centres have different sets of strengths and weaknesses. Their greatest strength, arguably, is that their private status allows them greater flexibility in engaging with social actors in this knowledge-producing endeavour, as well as in mobilizing resources to support it. Their greatest weakness is that they have few or no core resources of their own. During the years of civil war (from Nicaragua through to Chiapas), as well as the first years after civil war began to wind down (essentially the 1980s and up to the latter 1990s), a suite of agencies, above all in Europe though also in North America, saw the importance of such non-profit production of strategic knowledge for alternative development. When development was about transformation, when it was more about redistribution than about targeted poverty reduction, agencies seemed to see an important role for these centres of knowledge production. However, since the late 1990s this has changed and international cooperation has appeared less interested in cooperating either with anything that is not a development project offering material, measurable impacts on poverty or with any actions that are deemed as occurring outside formal democratic processes. This shift in cooperation has been generally prejudicial to Latin America, and particularly so to organizations such as ours. It has meant that we have had to spend more time mobilizing resources, and engaging in activities less than consistent with the visions upon which we were founded.

The pressure to chase resources also has the effect of pulling our organizations away from social movements, with the possible exception again of GEA, whose geographical structure and strong institutional culture militate against such a trend. This is not to say that our organizations all had strong links with such movements in the first place, but with time whatever relationship there was has weakened. Several factors are at play here. First, and importantly, the weakening of movements themselves makes such links progressively more difficult and resource-consuming, precisely at a time when resources are less available. Second, and related, social organizations are far less able and willing to commit time and people to work with us

in generating strategic, hegemony-challenging knowledge (as opposed to applied, problem-solving knowledge). While their leaders generally see the need for such knowledge, internal dynamics militate against any significant commitment of resources to such an endeavour. Third, the time that institute staff members have to spend chasing resources, completing consultancies and cultivating the relationships that might ensure future resource flows means – in a finite world – less time for building movement relationships. As a result, while a number of our organizations prefer the long route from knowledge to policy incidence, it is not clear that we can demonstrate that we have followed this route, or – in cases where there are elements of this – whether the route has in fact led to any such incidence. In practice we have gone the short route.

These same pressures – drawing us away from movements and other social bases, and forcing us to spend more time chasing money – have also challenged the extent to which we are accountable to society. While we all sustain relationships – some more organic than others – with social organizations, the extent to which we are able to make ourselves accountable to them has declined over time. Increasingly – again echoing Hulme and Edwards (1997) – our accountability has shifted towards those agencies that fund our increasingly short term projects and away from the social actors with whose counter-hegemonic concerns we hope to identify. *Ipso facto*, the extent to which societal accountability is a source of legitimacy for our work has also weakened.

All this has implications for how we are located vis-à-vis Dagnino et al.'s (2006) three political projects, and the fourth hybrid that we have added to them. If asked, we – as individuals and as institutions – would all identify with the direct democracy/democracy-deepening project. Yet our practices seem to contribute at least as much to a neoliberal project. We have become, to different degrees, actors operating in a funding market and – out of necessity – accepting its rules of operation. We have – to different degrees – introduced some of these market principles within the functioning of our own organizations. And, to the extent that our links with movements have become weaker, we contribute progressively less to strengthening, either directly or with the knowledge that we produce, the actors that would carry forward a democracy-deepening project in our countries. The situation is not completely depressing – we have links with progressive mayors, forest cooperatives, peasant organizations, migrant organizations and youth networks – but the challenge not to fall into what Dagnino et al. (2006) might deem the trap of perverse convergence is ever present. Indeed, it can become a source of stress within our organizations.

Looking at the trends in our countries – increasing levels of organized everyday violence and delinquency, deepening exclusion (especially of youth

and indigenous campesinos), continuing inequality, environmental destruc-
tion that, especially in Central America really does threaten the bases of
our countries' sustainability – it is difficult to believe that there is not a
continuing need to imagine, and build analytical, careful, alternative models
of development, environment and social change in our region. It would be
perverse to say that poverty is not a serious problem in our region, but it
is not necessarily the most serious development problem, and it is certainly
not the only problem. Now, more than ever, sustainable development is
far more than poverty reduction; but we are frighteningly far from having
alternative models that might inch us towards that sustainability. Knowledge
for those models has to be elaborated by someone. The questions for the
wider community of international cooperation (in particular our traditional
supporters) are therefore: if not us, then who? If not from you, then from
where? These questions need to be answered with searching honesty, not
with easy, policy-honed sound bites.

Note

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