

New Social Actors in Environment and Development in Latin America

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Introduction

This essay explores how rapid flows of capital, people and information across national borders in recent decades have engendered “new social actors” in environment and development in Latin America. Who are these actors? In what ways are they new? How, precisely, have these structural trends and processes—captured in the ubiquitous term “globalization”—contributed to the emergence and/or transformation of these actors?

In the section that follows, I outline tentative answers to these questions regarding current participants in environment and development debates raging in (and on) Latin America. In essence, my response will be that non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in developed and developing countries have become central players in the struggle to control natural resources and modes of development in Latin America in the 1990s. For decades NGOs of various sorts have been implicated in these struggles. What distinguishes contemporary development and environmental NGOs from their predecessors is that they increasingly enter in to multiplex alliances that transcend national boundaries and frequently bypass Latin American nation-states and federal government agencies.

For example, complex alliances involving NGOs have been forged in the crucible of acrimonious debate about the impact that multi-lateral development banks (MDBs)—primarily the World Bank and its regional counterpart, the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)—have had on the environment and socio-economic development in Latin America. Since the 1980s, the MDB community has established tentative working relationships with NGOs, and, more recently, has attempted to “grow” civil society by initiating small loan programs that directly target private, grassroots organizations. Analysts disagree about the motives driving these reforms, their extent, and the degree to which they are capable of mitigating the negative consequences of large-scale development projects underwritten by MDBs. Nonetheless, this dynamic has opened up new, more complex and more controversial roles for NGOs dedicated to development and environment.

Before discussing these substantive themes in more depth, however, I would like to articulate several critical observations about the multi-disciplinary literature on “new social actors” that I formulated in the course of preparing this essay. First, reviewing the literature revealed that major academic disciplines—anthropology, political science and sociology, for instance—often talk past one another as they construct conceptual frameworks to describe and explain the internationalization or globalization of development and the environment. At other times, disciplinary loyalists lock horns in attempts to demonstrate the superiority of an interpretation rooted in one disciplinary perspective over an essentially similar point of view stemming from another. These disciplinary loggerheads impede a clear understanding of the ways in which globalization has generated new social actors central to conflicts over the environment and development in Latin America and the Third World more generally. A self-

consciously interdisciplinary examination of these issues is necessary to overcome these obstacles. This essay is intended as an exercise in such interdisciplinary analysis.

A second critique is that most theory-driven scholarship on globalization overlooks the primary experiences of development practitioners and environmental activists. Even empirically-oriented social science research often fails to make use of the rich case study data published by philanthropic organizations, public interest groups, and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with direct links to grassroots actors. An important goal of this essay and the annotated bibliography that follows is to bring descriptive materials and points of view informed by active engagement in conflicts over natural resources and development in Latin America to the attention of interested scholars unfamiliar with this work.

Third, much of the research on the pitfalls and potential for sustainable development in contemporary Latin America uncritically accepts the notion that globalization and its effects on local actors are somehow new or unprecedented. Social scientists, regional studies specialists, development practitioners and environmental activists alike announce unparalleled opportunities for international cooperation to improve living standards in the region, or, conversely, insist that unprecedented challenges to local autonomy make positive social change increasingly unlikely. Although both perspectives merit exploration, as formulated in the existing literature, these positions ignore or underemphasize the historical continuities of globalization. As such, this essay advocates a more historically sensitive and methodologically rigorous approach to the study of “new” actors in the environment and development debates in the region.

Finally, as I carried out the research that forms the basis of this essay, it became evident that a disproportionate number of publications on the internationalization or globalization of the environment and development focus on the struggles of indigenous peoples or ethnic minorities. In particular, Amazonian Indian battles to secure land rights, protect natural resources and gain access international niche markets for rainforest products have captured scholars’ imaginations. This academic emphasis reflects a related trend among development agencies and NGOs to privilege indigenous organizations as aid recipients over other sectors of the poor. More recently, environmental and human rights NGOs have also established alliances with indigenous groups in efforts to protect biological and cultural diversity. One adverse effect of these events and processes has been a relative lack of research on contemporary movements to promote development and protect the environment initiated by “less colorful,” non-indigenous actors. Mexico’s “El Barzón” debtors movement provides a case in point. In a sense, this broad-based movement protesting the loss of consumer purchasing power in the wake of the 1994 peso crisis epitomizes the impact of globalization on survival strategies and conflicts over resources among Latin America’s marginal sectors. Indeed, one author describes this largely “mestizo” movement as “the clearinghouse for political objections to the neoliberal economic regime” in Mexico (Williams, 1996). Despite the import of “El Barzón,” however, the US and European academy has produced very little research on this instance of grassroots organization.

Keeping these general critiques in mind, I discuss “new social actors” engaged in Latin American development and environment debates more thoroughly in the following section. I construct a narrative of how the “fading away” of traditional nation-states has created an opportunity in which NGOs—often in uneasy alliance with MDBs, national and local governments—and local membership organizations, take on new roles to promote sustainable development.

Who and What is New?

Since the late 18th century, political philosophers and social scientists have grappled with conceptualizing “civil society,” or the realm of social relations that lies outside and ostensibly counterposes the nation-state. In an era when talk of globalization abounds both in popular and academic discourse, it is not surprising that students of civil society now posit the emergence of a “global civil society.” Disciplines ranging from anthropology to international relations currently invoke this term and devote considerable analytical energy to discerning its contents. What entities or actors populate this realm of globalized social relations lying outside or counterposing the nation-state? What processes contribute to the creation or transformation of these actors?

Though the literature is disparate and marked by disciplinary disagreements, common ground exists. For one, the literature consistently identifies grassroots movements with international allies, professionalized NGOs in the North and South, decentralized issue networks and transnational social movements as key components of global civil society. Moreover, many analysts agree that advanced capitalism is the driving force behind both these novel organizational forms and the bankruptcy—financial and ideological—of the nation-state. Historically informed scholarship documents how communications technology and capitalism combine to integrate—then work to disintegrate the nation-state as the primary locus of collective identity and legitimate authority in the 19th century. Benedict Anderson lucidly articulates one variant of this argument.¹ Anderson attributes the success of the nation-state project, defined as “the fullest alignment of habitus, culture, attachment, and exclusive political participation” (1994: 324) to print capitalism. The spread of print capitalism in the form of widely distributed local newspapers and increased rates of literacy enabled geographically dispersed individuals to imagine themselves as members of a political community, and to condition their actions as “citizens” accordingly (1991). Over time, however, technological innovation led not only to the rise but also to the weakening of the nation-state as a dominant form of cognitive and political affiliation. The displacement of railroad systems calibrated to correspond with national borders by the “vast proliferation of macadamized road surfaces” and motor vehicles facilitated transnational communication and, presumably, new identity forms that today chip away at nationalism’s ostensible monopoly (Anderson, 1994). What do these historical processes have to do with new actors in environment and development in contemporary Latin America?

The broad implication here is that other sites of “culture, attachment and exclusive political participation” have gained currency, revitalizing “old” forms of organization and making possible new ones. Human and indigenous rights movements provide an excellent case in point. The insistence on respect for the inalienable rights of individuals and ethnic groups over the right of the sovereign nation-state challenges the image of individuals—citizens—belonging exclusively to nation-states. The nature of the human rights movement’s claims, for instance, has given rise to the complementary notion of a global community that comprises all members of the human race regardless of nationality. If the human rights movement has opened up a space for imagining new forms of affiliation, it has also capitalized on technological advances that allow for highly decentralized, loosely-knit and flexible organizational forms that

¹ Benedict Anderson, “Exodus,” *Critical Inquiry* 20 (Winter 1994); *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism* (London, UK & New York, NY: Verso, 1991).

cut across national borders to unite a broad range of actors concerned with human rights abuses. In Latin America, these transnational issue or advocacy networks are spearheaded by NGOs that relay victims' grievances to both institutionalized audiences such as the United Nations and to audiences linked informally via electronically networked bulletins and chat groups (Keck and Sikkink, 1997; Smith, 1995; Sikkink, 1993). Empirical research has shown that the effectiveness of internationally mobilized political pressure on Latin American governments to respect human rights depends on the work of these NGO-dominated networks (Sikkink, 1993).

The human rights movement, then, draws upon a sense of membership broader than the nation-state, and has successfully experimented with a new organizational form—the advocacy network—to mobilize locally, nationally and internationally. Almost paradoxically, however, in addition to expanding the base of cognitive and political affiliation beyond the nation-state, variants of this movement have simultaneously vindicated *sub*-national identities. This is particularly clear in the case of the struggle to defend the rights of cultural minorities and indigenous peoples. This simultaneous appreciation for and strengthening of local and global bases of identity constitutes one of the distinguishing features of advocacy networks as new actors.

Human rights movements are particularly rich venues for discussing the emergence of new social actors because the theoretically rich literature on advocacy networks and transnational social movements has devoted particular attention to them. Advocacy or issue networks dominated by NGOs, however, characterize contemporary struggles over socio-economic development and the environment as well. As in the case of human rights, a critical mass of private citizens in both the developed and developing worlds has come to recognize that the problems of unjust and environmentally unsustainable development cannot remain the exclusive domain of the state. Indeed, there is a growing consensus among the political left and right that the state (elected officials and the corps of technicians in their service) has neither the institutional capacity nor the resources to resolve these dilemmas.

In Latin America, these issues emerged as the topics of vociferous public debate in the aftermath of the 1982 debt crisis. As access to foreign capital evaporated and International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan packages materialized but with structural adjustment strings attached, governing elites faced the imperative of downsizing, privatizing and decentralizing traditional state functions. In much of the region, paring down the state has resulted in the drastic reduction of public sector support for small-scale, sustainable development in both rural and urban areas. Moreover, as policymakers struggle to maintain fiscal solvency under the dictates of neoliberal reform, they increasingly have cut not only outlays for alternative development initiatives but also expenditures for basic public services such as health, education, transportation and waste management (Reilly, 1995).

This reversal of populist import-substitution-industrialization development models in favor of a leaner, (some might say) meaner, neoliberal state has brought into sharp relief questions of justice, responsibility and accountability regarding development and the environment. Will trickle down effects from market-oriented growth suffice to bring about just and environmentally sound development? If not, how should scarce public funds for economic development and the environment be allocated? Who, precisely, bears the responsibility for safeguarding the environment, the rights of cultural minorities, and living wages for all able-bodied citizens? If states are implicated as stewards of the natural and human resources located

within national boundaries, how will state officials be held accountable for their decisions where citizens lack adequate means to express their voice and vote in the political sphere? Should or can issue-specific NGOs play a role in the policymaking process at the national and international levels more representative? Or does the comparative advantage of environmental and development NGOs consist of using their in-depth knowledge of grassroots situations and on-the-ground needs to help shape and implement public policy?

Private and public sector actors in the Americas have been grappling with these questions for over a decade. What is new to the 1990s, however, is the clarity with which advocacy networks have articulated critiques of prevailing policies, proposed alternatives sensitive to the views of grassroots constituents, and pressed these claims in a variety of policymaking forums. This is not to say that what some have called the “NGO movement”² constitutes a homogenous political force uniting civil society actors of all stripes from the North and South in opposition to the neoliberal agenda. Indeed, as the example below illustrates, this movement is marked by internal divisions and differences, by competition among NGOs for scarce resources, and by jockeying for the right to speak on behalf of the victims of environmental exploitation and misguided development.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, an advocacy network led by Washington-based NGOs crystallized around the perceived negative environmental impact of World Bank projects in the Third World. The “Fifty Years is Enough” campaign³ mobilized contacts in local communities to gather evidence of how “mega-projects” underwritten by the Bank precipitated environmental disasters. These development debacles often involve the destruction of forest to build roads or dams coupled with the forced resettlement of local populations. In Latin America, for instance, this campaign brought to light the devastating consequences of the Polonoroeste highway construction project that facilitated peasant colonization in Brazil’s tropical rainforest.

The Northern NGOs that confronted the World Bank with the Polonoroeste abuses allied with local indigenous peoples to protest the Brazilian state’s inability to protect the integrity of their land. In the name of these aggrieved rainforest communities, the NGOs prominent in this advocacy network pressured the Bank to halt funds for this project, and more generally, to include NGOs in the design, implementation and evaluation of Bank projects. A number of Southern NGOs, however, proved to be at odds with this agenda which threatened to cut off a valuable source of international development aid. Moreover, these NGOs accused their counterparts of manipulating their indigenous allies to advance a First World environmental cause alien to the best interests of a largely Third World Brazil.

These issues of representation and NGO accountability have become even more complex as MDBs and bilateral aid agencies in industrialized nations experiment with NGO partnerships and channel greater portions of their budgets through these private sector actors. In part, this trend responds to the popular belief—only partially substantiated by empirical evidence—that their small size, professional expertise and close contact with beneficiary populations make

² This usage can be found in the Associated Press article printed on the eve of the publication of Lester Salamon’s new book on NGOs [not included in the annotated bibliography attached]. “[T]he NGO movement,” the article states, “if viewed as a nation, would rank eighth in economic power.” See the *Chicago Tribune*, November 8, 1998.

³ Launched on the fifty-year anniversary of the signing of the Bretton Woods accords that brought into existence, among other international financial institutions, the World Bank.

NGOs good substitutes for government. As Latin American states increasingly turn to NGOs to compensate for their deficiencies in job creation and service provision, many NGOs eagerly turn to public patrons proffering funds and the prospect of partnerships. Can NGOs whose purse strings are held by bilateral or multilateral governmental entities remain responsive to the needs of local actors and communities?

Framed in broader terms, the question of NGO accountability can be put as follows: Are NGOs that form partnerships with government entities at risk of being reduced to public sector contractors or uncritical collaborators in the currently fashionable neoliberal economic and political project? Or do NGOs remain agents of progressive social change and advocates for greater responsiveness to the needs of grassroots actors?

In the context of globalization, this discussion of the who and what is new among social actors in environment and development has generated many provocative paths of inquiry and few—if any—definitive responses. However, some incomplete answers and possible trends have emerged. I have suggested that the “who” in this scenario consist of NGOs embedded in networks that link grassroots actors to centers of decision-making at the national and international levels. How NGOs have become such salient actors in these networks and, more generally, in the realms of environment and development correlates with ever more sophisticated means of transferring capital and communicating across nation borders. For better or for worse, as the crisis of the capitalist state unfolds, NGOs take on ever greater roles promoting just and sustainable development in the context of downsized public sectors in nation-states.

The “what is new” in social actors in environment and development is integrally related to the observations above. The fact that states in Latin America—or elsewhere, for that matter—are neither willing nor able to actively generate equitable and sustainable development creates new and varied niches for civil society actors. In relationships—both conflictive and cooperative—with a myriad of public and private sector actors, NGOs have carved out roles as activists, advocates, planners and practitioners in the issue areas of development and environment.