COMMUNITY ORGANISATIONS

The political and institutional context of popular organizations in urban Argentina

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SUMMARY: The paper considers the political and institutional context within which non-government organizations provide support to low income communities in urban areas in Argentina and how this is shaped by the relationships between the state, NGOs and low income communities.

I. INTRODUCTION

IN ACTING AS intermediaries between the state and low-income communities, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) enter into a series of relationships with local politicians, political parties, the state in its different guises and grassroot organizations. These relationships change over time and differ from one national - and even local - context to another. This article presents some reflections on the political and institutional context in which NGOs provide support to poor urban communities in Argentina. These reflections are drawn from more than ten years experience by the NGO PROHA (Programa Habitat) in helping low-income communities in Buenos Aires improve their housing conditions and from research into this issue.

II. THE POPULAR SECTORS

IN THIS PAPER, the term "popular sectors" is used to denote social groups in Argentina that are defined as poor when using official definitions. Urban poverty in Argentina is often found in isolated pockets within cities but it may also be found within the better-off districts.

Conceptualizing the poorer strata of urban populations as a "sector" helps in our theoretical understanding. In general terms, this sector of the population is not organized around a common set of issues which might give it coherence as a single social actor. Nonetheless, there are a number of organizations which bring people together to improve certain aspects of their lives.

The effectiveness of organizations such as trade unions and
community social clubs may be enhanced because they seek only to improve a limited aspect of daily life. People create and join these organizations to address specific collective problems but, for this to take place, a situation must be perceived as negative by a majority of the affected population. If residents do not feel that a collective response to a problem is necessary, this problem will soon become an accepted element of daily life. For example, if a neighbourhood suffers frequent flooding, although not serious enough to destroy property, local residents may eventually become accustomed to flooding and therefore fail to develop a collective response to rid themselves of it; the problem will become a "natural" occurrence of life and people will accept it.

The kind of organizations that develop from a collective response to external events varies enormously depending on a number of factors including any previous organizational and political experience of community members and access to financial and material resources. Every organization, however short-lived, will need a set of agreed procedures and self-regulatory courses of action. If an individual agrees to belong to such an organization he or she must abide by a set of rules, such as payment of membership fees, regular participation in meetings and so on. Such patterns of behaviour are easier for individuals who are well integrated into their social environment than for those who live at the margins of it. It may therefore be expected that such organizations are more likely to emerge in groups that are more socially coherent and marked by a greater number of unmet basic needs.

However, popular or grassroots organizations may also be externally induced. They may arise from partisan political activity or social militancy, or they may be created by the state. Of course, the type and objectives of organizations arising out of each of these will differ markedly from one another. The fact that grassroots organizations might be externally induced does not make them ineffective, nor does it make them inherently weak or illegitimate. They may raise awareness among their members about a particular problem or set of problems, thus leading to a wider recognition of unsatisfied needs that might be met or of sources of inequity which previously had not been identified.

One may speak of these externally induced organizations as having a distorting effect when they exist only to widen their own impact and impose the aims of the external agency upon the grassroots grouping. This is often the case for political organizations and also in instances of political repression. In these circumstances, once the aims of the external agency have been fulfilled, the grassroots organizations will tend to dissolve.

III. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS

IN MOST SOCIETIES there are two types of dominant “model” for collective activities organized by grassroots organizations. The first and more traditional model, which we have chosen to
call the institutional model, is particularly favoured by those
groups and individuals who are more fully integrated into soci-
ety. There is a consensus on its goals and means, it is part of
an accepted practice, and it falls within a legal framework de-
finite by the state. Typically, representation of individual or group
interests lacks a spatial dimension even in those cases where
organizations have a territorial character. Examples of these are
neighbourhood organizations,\(^5\) cooperatives and local develop-
ment committees.

Once the population of a settlement seeks some form of col-
lective organization and representatives are elected on a territo-
rial basis - representing, for example, a neighbourhood, a ward
or a district - there is likely to be either a conflict between the
old organizational model and a new model seeking to accommo-
date a spatial dimension or a need to somehow reconcile the
two models.\(^6\)

Usually, the institutional model will have a prominent indi-
vidual at the top exerting power autonomously on the basis of
his or her knowledge of the group as well as on their capacity to
interpret the needs of the group. Group members will system-
atically seek assistance and support from this figure. This ver-
tical vision of single leadership is so deeply entrenched in soci-
ety that it even permeates the practice of other organizational
models which seek to challenge it. Typically, it gives rise to a
more hierarchical, “vertical” kind of organization, one where the
development of the organization is more likely to be the result of
the leader’s capacity to understand reality and to act on this
understanding. The prominence of this central figure (usually a
man) is also a product of the social image that the group has of
itself, an image which is adapted from other prevailing social
values including the family, the nation and political parties. This
partly helps explain the wider prevalence of this model.

In contrast, those organizations formed by delegates that rep-
resent particular spatial units (for instance wards, neighbour-
hoods or districts) will tend to have a more “horizontal” charac-
ter, precisely because they are legally constituted by an asso-
ciation formed by peers; power in the organizations following a
spatial model has a relatively more homogenous distribution
among their members. But because they challenge established
social and political practices, they tend to be less widespread.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL MODELS AND THE
EXERCISE OF POWER

**THE MORE COMMON** institutional model promotes a patern-
nalistic vision of the state as a determining factor in meeting the
needs of a community or group and even in ensuring the supply
of some basic goods. But this model is generally implemented
in complete ignorance of the functioning of the state apparatus
which, in turn, makes it even more difficult to approach the
state. In most cases, this is a direct consequence of the con-
fused and diffuse image that the state projects. This image rein-
forces the impression that a space is needed to interact with the

\(^5\) These are known as *juntas vecinales* in Latin America; although their aims generally in-
volves the physical improvement of a neighbourhood, they operate
more like “clubs” than groupings of members elected as repre-
sentatives [Editor’s note].

\(^6\) The spatial model is a more recent development in urban Ar-
gentina - and indeed, in most Latin American cities. It is said
to become dominant in a city when a majority of the low-in-
come community organizations choose to adopt it. However, still
today the majority of community organizations in urban Argentina
conform to the institutional model.
state that can only be occupied by shrewd individuals. This space is generally filled by those who seek to mediate between the state and grassroots organizations.

There are a number of mediators who place themselves within this space: political parties, intermediary organizations and even segments of the state. These will be examined below in the light of the experience of some of Argentina’s urban grassroots organizations.

**a. Political Parties**

The form of intervention by political parties varies according to the interests they represent, their ideology, their organizational structure, the political circumstances and the historical conditions in which such intervention takes place. The more traditional and, from a social viewpoint, the more perverse form is where political parties act as intermediary agents by coopting grassroots organizations. In Argentina’s urban areas, as in most of Latin America, low-income groups are coopted through the promise of political favours or privileges or by the use of the state apparatus by political figures to provide goods or services to the group in exchange for electoral votes, help in political campaigns, or other forms of support. However, the promises are often broken. These communities are attractive to politicians because of the accumulation of unmet needs and the prevailing paternalistic image of the state as the main instrument available to meet these needs. There is often an existing organization that politicians may approach for political support.

The image of the politician providing favours in exchange for political support at election time has almost become a cliché throughout both the North and South. For it is at this time that grassroots organizations become most useful in furthering the aims of politicians. This could be said to be a “traditional” form of political intervention. But there are also other forms of intervention, especially in circumstances when a change in the prevailing social structure is proposed through political means. Such intervention consists of involving popular groups in the activities of a political party, with promises of an eventual devolution of power, thus indoctrinating the group and transforming their demands into a political programme that goes beyond mere demands for physical improvements to a settlement. In these cases, the political party does not operate as a mediator between the state and the community but rather seeks to seize power from the state.

Yet another form of intervention used by political parties is to camouflage their partisan political action under the guise of a grassroots organization, with the aim of widening their political base. This strategy is popular among small minority parties who perceive themselves as inspired by a god-given mission to effect social change and thus deny all autonomy to grassroots groups.
b. Intermediary Organizations

Most intermediary organizations are NGOs who seek to provide support for the development of low-income communities - a relatively recent phenomenon in the Argentinean context.\(^7\) NGOs are young and limited in number in Argentina. They cover a large spectrum according to their origins - religious groups, the political left, political parties - and their perceptions of society and social change, ranging from charity organizations who do not seek to challenge the *status quo* to those who strive for new forms of political and social organization.

The role of intermediaries is generally fulfilled by NGOs on the basis of personal relations with state officials who have the power to use the state apparatus in favour of grassroots organizations. In the case of Argentina, this is possible because the state generally acts in an arbitrary and inconsistent manner, through channels of action which are usually hidden from public scrutiny. Of course, this form of action also creates a form of dependency between the NGOs and the grassroots organizations, not dissimilar to the clientelistic relations between politicians and voters.

On the basis of the experience of PROHA and other similar organizations in urban Argentina, there is no systematic transfer of knowledge from the NGOs to the grassroots organizations to enable the latter to deal autonomously with the state.

c. The State

The notion of “the state” is too vast and unspecific for our purpose here, which is to identify characteristics, forms of action and even interests within it when dealing with low-income communities and NGOs. But it is important to give some consideration to this notion to determine its salient features.

In Argentina, there is no stable body of government officials - such as the civil service in the British tradition - which one may characterize as representing “the state”. In consequence, the state apparatus is all too often confused with the political party voted into power by the electorate. The political party in power is not able to give a sense of coherence and a common direction to state actions. An overriding feature of large political parties in Argentina is their heterogeneity. Each one represents a variety of social sectors, economic interests and ideological positions. After the election, power is distributed among the different political sectors within the successful party. In contrast, in those situations where one sector has some degree of hegemony within the party, it sets a direction and an ideological content for the party and consequently the state. In those cases where power is equally distributed between two or more sectors within the party, this eventually leads to internal conflict and a gradual paralysis of some state interventions.

When the state is operating from a partisan perspective it tends to relate to civil society in much the same way as political parties. With the dual aim of, on the one hand, protecting their sphere of action and, on the other, furthering their political ca-

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7. The recent development of support NGOs in Argentina may be traced largely to a deterioration in living conditions among a growing number of households in urban Argentina and a parallel weakening and gradual withdrawal of the state as provider of social services. Other factors that have provoked the creation of NGOs in Argentina (with comparable factors operating to create or strengthen NGOs in many other Latin American countries) include: the acknowledgement of poverty as a structural fact; the political/ideological changes between professionals and intellectuals since the innovative experiences during the 1970s; the increased space given to NGOs after the temporary disappearance of this as a result of the repression between 1976 and 1983; the lack of defence of civil society in general, during this repression; and the fact that the return to democracy permits or enables a new source for relations with the more vulnerable or poor sectors of society.
reers, government officials seek to accumulate power in the same way as political leaders. From this position they establish an “institutional relation” with grassroots groups. In these circumstances, once government officials have enough resources at their disposal to intervene, they would tend to favour a top-down policy of assisting poor communities, with little or no prior consultation about community needs or priorities. In the absence of these resources, a common course of action is to promote projects where the community is asked to participate (for example, by donating their time). However, this is more a way of substituting for services which would normally be bought in the open market than a genuine exercise in power-sharing.

Even within community participation schemes, there is a tendency to restrict their scope so that they benefit only limited sections of the community, as in the case of self-help housing projects, settlement upgrading schemes or institutional support to small-scale enterprise. Once these seemingly harmless undertakings start to be manipulated politically by party members, either within the community or within the state apparatus, small power groupings appear and the relationship between the community and the state changes.

The involvement of political parties in state actions conditions the relationship between the state and society, a relationship which is further complicated by the heterogeneity of political parties and the fragmented nature of the state apparatus. Coherent state action on a problem of such vast proportions as poverty (or community participation), which requires comprehensive rather than sectoral actions, is thus impossible. Concerted action by separate elements within the state to support comprehensive grassroots development is further hindered by politicians’ attempts to accumulate personal power.

If community participation fails to be incorporated into normal state actions - in other words, if it is not institutionalized - its survival will be subject to the political priorities of those responsible for the different areas of state intervention such as public works, health services and education. Thus, the full potential of participation is not realized and, instead, it takes the form of a political favour to the community from the government official, with its future closely linked to the job stability of the official in question.

V. THE STATE AND NGOs

IN THIS CONTEXT, where partisan politics is virtually the only rationale for state actions, NGOs working in tandem with grassroots groups would appear to seek to seize power from state officials. As a consequence, the state officials will respond in different ways. One form of response that has been observed among local government officials in Argentina is to use their power to displace NGOs from their particular social space by, for example, threatening to withdraw funding for a particular project unless the community severs all links with the offending NGO. Another favoured method is to organize campaigns to
discredit an NGO claiming it pursues partisan political objectives. In one instance where PROHA was involved, local government officials offered the community a large subsidy for setting up small-scale enterprises on the condition that the project involved enlisted the help of persons associated with the ruling party rather than the NGO; the offer was too good to refuse.

Another pattern of behaviour seen among officials is to let NGOs continue with their work. Once there is the possibility of success, officials associate themselves with the work and try to appropriate the achievements, at least in the promotional documentation. One example is the help that PROHA provided to the occupants of a semi-derelict building in central Buenos Aires in 1990 in asking for support from the local government to upgrade it. Once a resolution was passed by the Council, the local planning office acted as the NGO’s counterpart. At the end of the project, however, local government officials not only failed to acknowledge PROHA’s contribution but presented the project as a local government initiative.

Implicit in this behaviour is the notion that NGOs simply contribute to the actions of the state rather than perceiving them as independent bodies carrying out useful work. This is probably a result of the lack of public awareness of the distinct strengths and qualities of development NGOs working with poor urban communities which may, in turn, be a reflection of the fact that they are a relatively recent phenomenon in Argentina and have yet to acquire a presence in the public mind. This is further hindered by the lack of a common body which can lobby in their favour at a national or city level and can put pressure on government to accept their role as a new social actor to be taken into account when formulating and implementing social policy.

In the Argentinean context, a step towards preventing the hijacking of state institutions by political parties or individuals seeking their own political advancement would be to create a professional body of state officials - something akin to a civil service - who would not seek to use the state apparatus to guarantee some stability in their own jobs but, instead, would use it as a means of genuinely promoting the advancement of disadvantaged groups.

VI. CONCLUSION

THIS PAPER HAS presented some general reflections drawn from observations over the past decade in Argentina of interactions between poor urban communities, NGOs and the state. As such, these reflections seek to provide neither answers nor a guide to action but, instead, some ideas which may be shared or disputed by others in the NGO community who may have experienced comparable situations. Reflections of this nature are, of course, only a small step towards making NGO activities more effective and realistic.

In considering what needs to be done, there are three priorities. First, it is necessary to enhance our knowledge of the “popular sector” in urban Argentina. This should allow us to better
understand their needs and the mechanisms that poor communities have created to cope with the growing poverty already evident in many cities - a poverty exacerbated by a reduction in state expenditure on social services and by economic reforms which have resulted in widespread firm closures.

A second step would be to bring pressure to bear on the state to widen the channels for genuine popular participation and ensure the joint management of processes affecting low-income communities, rather than merely encouraging token participation by members from poor communities in producing their built environment. For this to become possible, current political practices must be modified and political parties must be given more wide-ranging civic responsibilities such as enhancing the political education of voters, training their own party members to bring about a more mature kind of political activity, and improving outdated political practices.

Finally, NGOs must be accepted as a social collective actor with a role in discussions on, and the drafting of, social policies, along with the other social agencies which participate in the process such as the state, the private sector and representatives from trade unions. The recognition and involvement of NGOs in such processes, both at the national and local levels, has recently begun in other Latin American countries such as Brazil and Colombia. Only by allowing social actors to reformulate their current practices will a path be opened to enable disadvantaged urban communities to participate in managing the spaces that by right belong to them.

FURTHER READING


