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## **Attitudes to and visions of civil society/state relations in Central America: implications for sustainable development**

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## **Attitudes to and visions of civil society/state relations in Central America: implications for sustainable development**

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*This paper will present results of a research project on civil society held in three Central American states, El Salvador, Nicaragua and Honduras, in July and August, 2009, as part of the Irish Aid funded and DCU led Active Citizenship in Central America project. The paper is based on a wide range of events and interviews held in these three countries, with five distinct populations, many of them involved in the Active Citizenship Project: students of NGO Management and Municipal Leadership Diplomas funded by the project; university staff from the three partner and associate universities giving these courses; local NGO directors; local community groups; government officials. The main question framing these activities was: what is the current relation between the state and civil society in the three project countries in the context of the move to the left in Latin America? Results are examined in terms of future trends for civil society/state relations in these countries and their implications for sustainable development.*

## Introduction

This paper is based on research carried out by the authors between 13<sup>th</sup> July and 14<sup>th</sup> August 2009 to the three Central American countries, El Salvador, Honduras and Nicaragua covered by the DCU led *Active Citizenship in Central America* project.<sup>1</sup> The research visit on which the paper is based arose from a request from partners for Irish academics to engage with them and the region. As a result many of the different groups and individuals with whom we met are involved to a greater or lesser degree in the various components of the project. After consulting with partners, it was decided that the visit's main aim would be to gather information and opinions on the main themes of the project; the involvement of civil society in the formation of public policy. Since two of the countries (El Salvador and Nicaragua) now have left wing governments, with Honduras also experiencing a leftwards shift, until the recent coup, it was further thought that research should be placed in the wider context of this turn to the left in the region.<sup>2</sup> A guiding question for all activities based on these considerations was devised: What is the relationship between the state and civil society in the three project countries in the context of the move to the left in Latin America?

Since the visit had this double function of engaging with the partners while conducting research at the same time, the project was qualitative and explorative (for a full list of events, interviews and participants please see Appendix 1). Research actions were varied: round table and focus group discussions, group and one-to-one interviews, with most interventions relatively open and unstructured. Methods varied slightly in each country and this was largely shaped by the local political climate and following the advice of partner organisations.<sup>3</sup> We also had access to different populations depending on local participatory mechanisms and local project contacts. In Honduras focus group meetings were held with a Participative *Mesa* (Board) which had mixed social movement and local authority representation, while in El Salvador we met with a group of local youth leaders attached to a partner NGO, and in Nicaragua with representatives of Citizen Power Councils, which is a state promoted participative mechanism. Given the immediate post-coup conditions in Honduras, government officials were only interviewed in El Salvador and Nicaragua. Nonetheless, the unifying thread is a constant exploration of the nuances of civil society/state relations within these differing contexts.

The paper is divided into five sections. After a brief conceptual and contextual overview, we examine findings based on the different actions in each of the three countries. Each of these sections presents a synthesis of the discussions held. In the final, concluding section we outline common themes and sketch the implications for sustainable development practice.

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<sup>1</sup> This Irish Aid funded project seeks to strengthen Central American civil society by funding capacity building diplomas provided by local universities to NGOs and local municipal authorities in the poorest areas of the three countries, and research and advocacy projects on socio-economic issues proposed by local NGOs and universities. While elements of the project have existed for a number of years, the project in its present form is funded for a three year cycle beginning September 2007.

<sup>2</sup> The trip and research methodology was planned in conjunction with partners before the coup in Honduras which took place on 28 June 2009.

<sup>3</sup> Political events intervened providing differing possibilities for research. In El Salvador the new left-wing FMLN president had been in power only 60 days or so, while in Honduras a coup had taken place against the elected president of the country, who had been forcibly exiled on 28 June. In Nicaragua there was open confrontation between many NGOs and the ruling left wing party, the FSLN. All these factors have a bearing on project findings.

## State Civil Society Relations in the context of democratic disillusion

Since the end of the Cold War the concept of 'Civil Society' was adopted as a crucial tool to further democracy and development in Latin America. A notoriously contested concept, civil society can be both broad and narrow in its scope. Oxhorn (2003: 1) argues 'Rather than focusing on real people with real needs, the tendency is to focus on intangible norms of "trust," "associability" and "civic spirit." Civil society's foundation is seen as resting on the notion that rational (but largely faceless) individuals who decide to live together to further private, individual interests create civil society... Civil society becomes synonymous with "social capital," .... and from this perspective it does not matter if people join bowling clubs, church choirs or, to take a "real" example from Latin America's recent past, a human rights group resisting tyranny.' For Volk (1997: 8), 'civil society is that civic space which lies outside the direct control of the state and the market.... a complex assortment of non-state organisations concerned with a vast array of issues and operating on myriad levels from household life to trade unions, and from self-help movements and community associations to political parties'. Key here is that civil society is separate from the state and should not be under its control.

Diamond (1999) advances a model for civil society which consolidates liberal democracy structures and market oriented economic policy: 'Civil society is an intermediary entity, standing between the private sphere and the state. Thus it excludes individual and family life, inward-looking group activity (eg for recreation, entertaining or spirituality), the profit-making enterprise of individual business firms and political efforts to take control of the state' Central to his notion is a sharp distinction between state and civil society, where civil society acts as a check on the former's actions, providing it with legitimacy yet it has little active role in decision-making structures and processes. This model provides the guiding principles behind many international development interventions in the region and strengthening civil society became an important theme of donor intervention in order to strengthen democracy.

Even by the mid 1990s, however, faith in democracy and democratic institutions was declining among Latin America's citizens (UNDP, 2004). Some observers spoke of 'democratic disenchantment' in the region<sup>4</sup> (Munck, 1993), while others invented 'adjectives' to qualify the shortcomings of the democratic project (Collier and Levitsky, 1997).<sup>5</sup> Much of this sense of pessimism was rooted in the fact that the democratic transition had not addressed the region's continued high levels of inequality and poverty but instead followed strict and, often damaging, market oriented development policies. Pugh (2005) reminds us that the effects of neoliberalism are not 'benign'. Latin America stands out as the most unequal region in the world, while Central America demonstrates some of the most unequal and polarised societies.<sup>6</sup> Arguably, the swing to the left in the region, starting with the election of President Hugo Chávez in Venezuela in 1998, has been interpreted as a reaction to, and indeed rejection of, these

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<sup>4</sup> See: Munck, R(1003) 'After the Transition: Democratic Disenchantment in Latin America', *European Review of Latin American and Caribbean Studies*, No. 55 (1993)

<sup>5</sup> See: David Collier and Steven Levitsky (1007) 'Democracy with Adjectives: Conceptual Innovation in Comparative Research' *World Politics*, Vol. 49, No. 3 (Apr., 1997), pp. 430-451

<sup>6</sup> See World Bank (2003) *Inequality in Latin America & the Caribbean: Breaking with History?* Washington DC: World Bank Publications

neoliberal policies. For the first time in history, most governments in Latin America are from the left, and analysts talk now of an emerging 'Pink Tide' (Barrett, Chavez and Rodríguez-Garavito, 2008).

One of the fundamental characteristics of this New Left is its search, to a greater or lesser degree, for a different relationship between state and civil society (Ramírez-Gallegos, 2006). Many of these governments seek to integrate civil society more in decision and policy making processes, making these more participative, as can be seen for example in initiatives such as participative budgeting in Porto Alegre, Brazil, or in the 'communal councils' set up by the Venezuelan government. It could be asked indeed if these new participative mechanisms are more akin to 'alternative' perspectives on the role of civil society and its relation to the state (Howell and Pearce, 2001) than on the 'mainstream' perspective as exemplified by Diamond (1999).

This 'alternative' perspective sees civil society, as Robert Cox (1999) puts it, as "the realm in which the existing social order is grounded; [but] also...the realm in which a new social order can be founded" (p.4). Since the end of the civil conflicts in the early 1990s, Central American countries have reconfigured relations between state and civil society. In many countries, a space for civil society to act without the heavy handed repression that had characterised previous decades was opened. A crucial part of this process was the funding by international development cooperation agencies of civil society projects to further strengthen these democratisation processes. Civil society was seen to have a crucial role in furthering these processes and deepening democracy in the region with the aim of it's acting as a counterweight to the state, remaining autonomous from it, but at the same time strengthening its legitimacy. In order to understand contemporary relations between state and civil society, it is necessary to trace their development across the three countries.

In this context, civil society is often collapsed into the narrower institutional remit of NGOs. As we will see, this slippage has had implications on three key and overlapping levels in Central America. Firstly, local understandings of civil society are contested throughout the region and opposing groups claim the space to the exclusion of others. Secondly, the development of civil society must be understood within the wider context of state development and the consolidation (or lack thereof) of democratic institutions. A key finding of this research in all three countries is that the institutionality of the state is secondary to partisan and economic interests. Finally, the election of leftist governments in El Salvador and Nicaragua, and Manuel Zelaya's attempts at progressive reforms in Honduras, have – to different degrees - exposed the fractious and delicate balance between state and civil society in Central America. The recent coup in Honduras ultimately exposes the fragility of the democratic project in that country and stands as a warning to its neighbours.

## **Civil Society (NGOs) and the Turn to the Left in El Salvador**

On June 1, 2009 the first FMLN president, Mauricio Funes, was sworn in after having been elected by a narrow margin of 51.3 per cent, after a very tightly and bitterly fought campaign. According to Victor Valle (2009) this event 'completes the settlement of the armed conflict that devastated the country in the 1980s'.<sup>7</sup> Funes' election has had an immediate bearing on

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<sup>7</sup> Since the Chapultepec peace accords in 1992, agreed between the then Salvadoran government and the FMLN (Farabundo Martí National Liberation Group) guerrilla

state/civil society relations in the country. Many NGOs who have come from the left spoke of a spirit of cooperation between the new government and civil society that had been missing during the twenty years of ARENA government. As in many countries, civil society is regulated by government legislation and organisations must register as NGOs if they are to receive funds. As mentioned earlier, this has led to a certain elision between the categories civil society and NGO.

NGOs identified a willingness on the part of the state to 'listen' to 'civil society' for the first time. Mechanisms have been proposed by the new government to facilitate this, such as regular weekly meetings between civil society groups and one of the president's chief advisors, to the setting up of a Social and Economic Council with government, civil society and private sector involvement to guide state policy in these areas; the formulation of local networks or 'cabinets' to tackle development issues in a coordinated way at the municipal level.

This new willingness on the part of the government to include civil society participation in the formulation of state policy is, however, not without its challenges. Four principal risks have been identified:

1. translating micro projects that work well on a local basis into national policy proposals,
2. overcoming sectoral divisions to create a unified vision,
3. dealing with loss or 'migration' of key personnel to the state,
4. coping with increased state demands on civil society time and resources.

Given that many NGOs emerged out of the FMLN and continue to have close links with the party, they must redefine their relationship to a state led by a more open government. In previous years, some feminist organisations spoke of the contradictions of 'double militancy' between civil society activism and party allegiance. For many, the FMLN electoral success will put this double militancy to the test. On the one hand, NGOs are more than prepared to cooperate with the state; on the other hand, such cooperation is contingent on results.

A major test for the new government will be how it faces the hegemony of El Salvador's powerful economic elite. Salvadoran state interests have been traditionally subordinate to the economic interests of this group (popularly referred to as the fourteen families) who have close ties to capital interests throughout the region. This has had a detrimental effect on the consolidation of state institutions and specifically policies that challenge inequality. This situation, common in all countries in the region, was one of the principal causes of the long running war in El Salvador and has not been addressed in the post-war period, leading some observers to question the dividends of the peace process for El Salvador's poor (Pearce, 1998; Hume, 2008). The inclusion of civil society also is recognised as being fundamental to this process.

As in other contexts, there are questions as to the nature and composition of civil society, such as those raised by Oxhorn (2003). Does it matter that civil society is collapsed into NGOs, or should it also include, for example, gangs and business groups whose effects are not always progressive nor in the interests of citizens? Some respondents suggested that civil society is everyone – 'ordinary people' and not just NGOs. Others brought in the concept of citizenship to explain civil society – not just ordinary people, but people with rights and responsibilities.

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group, El Salvador has been ruled by the right wing ARENA (National Republican Alliance) party.

Another question which arises is civil society's relationship to political parties for example – is it antagonistic or cooperative? Historically, a majority of NGOs in El Salvador had strong party links (whether to the left or the right). FUSADES who have had strong links to the ARENA party have had great influence on economic policy, while others (with more leftist leanings) were ignored. This partisan division and polarisation between civil society groups and the state raises serious questions about political and social institutions and their effectiveness. It also raises concerns about the sustainability of development interventions when state institutions (at national and local levels) correspond to party rather than national interests. Working in this context of polarisation undermines many neat conceptualisations of both civil society and state.

Invariably, polarisation raises issues of voice, participation and representation. Who dominates civil society – are there stronger groups within it, with greater access to the state? These are debates that were important in the Southern cone in the 1990s, especially in Chile where NGOs had huge influence on the *Concertación* governments and supplied key skills to the government. Following concerns raised in Chile (and elsewhere), does civil society (professional NGOs) risk replacing the state? Civil society is not unified therefore, but is divided between those groups who have more power and those who have less, groups often identified with particular ideological positions. A key challenge is to ensure that weaker groups can participate fully in society and in policy making, thus making the state stronger and more responsive to their needs.

## **A political Mitch? The coup against President Manuel Zelaya in Honduras**

On 28 June, 2009 President Manuel Zelaya was ousted from power, when a group of soldiers took him from his home in the middle of the night at gunpoint and put him on a plane to Costa Rica. He has since remained in exile. A government was then installed headed by the president of the Congress, Roberto Michelletti, which has refused to agree to mediation efforts carried out by President Oscar Arias of Costa Rica, at the request of the Organisation of American States (OAS). The result is stalemate: the coup government refuses to allow Zelaya back while they prepare for elections in November. Meanwhile, the international community refuses to recognise any other government except that of Zelaya. Honduran media portrays the current situation as a clear case of Zelaya's supporters against those who support the coup.<sup>8</sup> Here we present a more complex analysis that focuses on the deep social polarisation of one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.

Honduras's economy, politics and society has many similarities with the other two countries in this study El Salvador and Nicaragua. The economy is dominated by a small number of families who have also had key roles in the state.<sup>9</sup> These families (around 22 in all) own almost all the principal means of production, as well as media outlets and have been key to the management and financing of the

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<sup>8</sup> The coup government claims to have support of almost 80 per cent of the population. It is unclear how they measure this.

<sup>9</sup> For example Carlos Flores Facussé was president between 1998 and 2002 and is an important supporter of the coup government. Eighty percent of the newspapers circulating in the country belong to one family, the Canahuati, while another, the Ferrari own one of the largest television groups, Telecentro, with five signals, and 17 radio stations.

coup.<sup>10</sup> In order to understand political life in Honduras, it is imperative to capture the power of this group. In many ways, they encapsulate the most extreme patronage politics and the figure of the local 'cacique' underscores the political system. Honduras has been labelled a 'captive' democracy, where these powerful economic groups can veto state policy, including who becomes president, with many having their own members of congress. Politics is dominated by the two main traditional parties, the Liberals and the Nationals with strong ties to these powerful families. The state therefore becomes a 'plunder' state, where access for public goods is fought for by these powerful families through the institutions of the state. The result is a weak and fractured state, unable (or unwilling) to respond to the demands of the majority of the country's inhabitants, who remain mired in poverty. Hence there is increasing estrangement from the parties, which is in danger of becoming a rejection of democracy – only about 50 per cent of the population voted in the last presidential elections in 2004.

Manuel Rosales Zelaya was elected president in those elections with only 23 per cent of the vote. Coming from a rich rural family, he was the epitome of an oligarchic president. In the first two years of his mandate he did little to cause concern among Honduras's economic and political elite, however, two shifts with historic policy began to cause concern within elite circles: his ties to leftist governments in the region and his dialogue with NGOs and social movements. In his final years he became increasingly close to President Hugo Chávez of Venezuela, bringing Honduras into Venezuela's Petrocaribe initiative the Venezuelan led Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, ALBA.

Zelaya's social policy was in general in disarray: he had no development plan in place for most of his presidency; he lost important international cooperation funds, and many civil society actors distrusted the President's erratic policy making procedures and unpredictability. Nonetheless, he began to provide greater space for civil society groups, holding popular assemblies in the presidential palace, for example.

The increasing rift between those elites and the president crystallized when Zelaya proposed a referendum, to be held on the same day as the elections in November 2009, on Honduras instituting a Constituent Assembly to redraft the country's constitution. The Honduran constitution was drafted as part of a civilian-military pact in 1982, and was seen to be outmoded by much of civil society. Many NGOs and social movements therefore embraced the idea as a possibility to have a greater say in the running of the country. The elites, however, who benefit most from the present situation, rejected it, with Congress and the Supreme Court declaring it illegal. Zelaya modified the proposal, to have a consultation on whether there should be a referendum and it was then that the army acted in overthrowing Zelaya and removing him from the country.

The impact of the coup on civil society has transformed the deep levels of social polarisation within the country into a more pronounced political polarisation based on class structure. Whilst on the face of it this polarisation revolves around the figure of the president – into supposedly pro- and anti-Zelaya factions, in reality it is the embodiment of much deeper social fractures within Honduran society. Two main groups have emerged: those who do not support the coup and those who do. Those who are against the coup are made up of two main tendencies: those who were originally supporters of the president, some of whom now demand the constituent assembly and those who support the return of the constitutional

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<sup>10</sup> La Tercera, 'Las 22 Familias más poderosas de Honduras hicieron sentir su peso tras el golpe', in *La Tercera*, Sunday 12 July, 2009, p.13.



order, but who are not necessarily supporters of Zelaya. The social base of these groups consists of indigenous, peasants, intellectuals, women's organisations, some sections of the church such as the Jesuits and the Dominicans, labour unions, especially the powerful teacher's union, lesbian and gay groups etc. These groups conform to Cox's view of 'alternative' civil society.

On the other hand those supporting the coup are the business groups, the media, the church hierarchy, including the country's Cardinal Rodriguez, the political parties, the Human Rights Ombudsman, the Armed Forces, the police and all the main institutions of the state. The social base on which this support rests are the church faithful, especially the more conservative elements. Allegations have been made that business groups have forced their workers to march in support of the coup government. Mass media campaigns and marches, heavily protected by the army and police have framed these groups under a careful rhetoric of national unity and claiming to be the true voice of civil society. The groups have called themselves the 'whites', in an effort to symbolise peace and purity. This stands in stark contrast with media portrayals of the anti-coup groups who have been dubbed as 'mobs' and 'undesirable'. Social divisions around class were hence made visible by the coup, although these fissures are further crossed by ideological views of democracy, the pro-coup groups equating democracy with the existing institutional configuration, while the anti-coup groups, including middle class intellectuals, seeking a more inclusive form of democracy, with a more progressive, lay conception of the state. Polarisation has been made more acute by the delegitimisation of traditional mediators in Honduran society, such as the Church and even the Human Rights Ombudsman, which have aligned themselves clearly with the coup. As many respondents commented 'all the masks had fallen' and people's true positions had been revealed.

Such polarisation, however, has an additional international dimension as many identified this coup as a 'laboratory' strategy to defeat the advance of the ALBA initiative in Latin America with its close alliance with social movements in the region. While all Latin American countries condemned the coup and the OAS was at the forefront of action against it, the US has sent mixed signals and has been slow to act decisively against it, and conservative elements within the US establishment, as well as sections of the Miami Cuban and the Venezuelan right were said to be advising the coup plotters. Part of this strategy is to recast this battle in Cold War terms, with ALBA and Chávez depicted as the communist threat, and many respondents noted how old faces from the 1980s, who were involved with the war against the Sandinistas in Nicaragua and the FMLN in El Salvador had resurfaced.

The coup, at the time of writing almost two months old, is taking its toll on Honduran society, despite official denials. Human rights abuses have been rife since June 28, as a recent Amnesty International report attests, with murders, torture, numerous arrests, arbitrarily imposed curfews, denial of access to food, denial of freedom of association and movement all being reported. Media blackouts are common with the majority of the media supporting the coup with little regard for the truth, ignoring anti-coup demonstrations and vilifying anti-coup groups. The few anti-coup media outlets were harassed or closed and some foreign reporters arrested.<sup>11</sup> Little of this has been reported overseas.

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<sup>11</sup> Amnesty International, 2009. *Honduras: Human Rights crisis threatens as repression increases*. Available from: <http://www.amnesty.org/en/library/info/AMR37/004/2009/en>. Downloaded: 27 Aug. 09

The gravity of the crisis has exacerbated fissures in civil society itself. NGOs were already divided around the figure of President Zelaya, and now over the coup against him. Some NGOs have refused to declare themselves against the coup due to the internal divisions within them made apparent by it. A further division has been made visible between wider social movements and NGOs. NGOs, while recognised as important spaces for discussion, are seen by activists as being ineffectual due to their refusal or inability to take political positions and actions. There is a lack of appreciation within them of the need to synchronize social with political struggles, they claim. NGOs are seen by some as substitutes for civil society, as unrepresentative, and fixated on changing laws in a country which has never had a political system ruled by laws, laws set by a state riddled with corruption and dominated by powerful interests resisting change.

For the moment the future looks uncertain. Michelletti and the coup government are refusing to accept the will of the international community in restoring Zelaya to power and are continuing to prepare for elections, even though the new government may not be recognised internationally. The US continues to respond tepidly to this intransigence. Social movements working against the coup continue to struggle in the streets, but are worn down with exhaustion, repression and lack of resources and have no clear agreed strategy. Notwithstanding this differences, there is unprecedented cooperation between different elements of civil society, as most are agreed on the need to restore constitutional order, with the return of Zelaya as key. There is agreement too that this is an historical moment in the country, which requires a rethink on the very basis of the Honduran nation, which could mean the continued insistence on a Constituent Assembly to redraft the constitution. The coup has been, therefore, as one respondent put it, a political Mitch, referring to the hurricane which devastated the country in 1998, “except this time the only bridge that has been blown down is that of democracy”. How Honduras will rebuild that bridge, if at all, remains to be seen, but it could well be that a civil society in its broadest sense will be central to that.

## **Nicaragua: Civil Society or ‘Sociedad sí vil’?**

Daniel Ortega’s return to power in January 2007, for the first time since the FSLN’s (Sandinista) defeat in elections in 1990, ended 16 years of conservative rule in Nicaragua. Since 1990 most of the principles and social advances of the Sandinista revolution (1979-1990) have been dismantled. Since Ortega’s re-election as president Nicaragua has been characterised by a deepening polarisation between the government and the social forces supporting it on the one hand, and on the other, many prominent NGOs, much of them historically linked to Sandinismo, the media, particularly the print media, and opposition parties. This polarisation is cemented around the figure of Daniel Ortega. On one hand, the opposition views him as authoritarian and personalistic, while his government sees it as an ideological dispute over the role of the state and the nature and power of civil society itself.

Since the fall of Sandinismo in the 1990 elections successive Liberal led Nicaraguan governments have introduced wide ranging neoliberal reforms, much of this with Sandinista support. This neoliberalisation of Nicaragua was accompanied by a huge explosion of the NGO sector. Much of this increase in NGOs in the country emerged as a result of the Sandinista defeat, and most NGOs had links to the wider Sandinista movement, although not always specifically to the *Frente*, as the FSLN is commonly called.

The fall of Sandinismo in 1990 also saw the return to a more traditional form of politics in the country. After the election defeat to the coalition led by Violeta Chamorro, wife of an assassinated anti-Somoza hero, Joaquín Chamorro, many Sandinistas participated in what was popularly known as the 'piñata', whereby many state owned assets and properties were appropriated by Sandinista officials and public representatives. This reasserted a pattern whereby as one respondent puts it, the state is seen as 'plunder' and public office a means to reap its benefits, with few ever being punished for this corruption. Political organisation is based on the leader, or the 'cacique' whose word is final, a pattern seen at all levels of Nicaraguan society, including NGOs. In both these ways Nicaragua has much in common with the political cultures of El Salvador and Honduras.

During its 16 years out of power, Ortega and the FSLN built various pacts with elements of Liberalism in order to regain space in the state. The first of these was with Arnaldo Alemán, president from 1996, convicted of corruption in 2003, whereby Alemán ruled without opposition in return for granting the FSLN positions in the state. Another pact was with Cardinal Miguel Obando y Bravo before the elections in 2006, which led to the Sandinistas supporting the end of therapeutic abortion in return for Church support for Ortega's election. Yet another was with the old enemy, the Contras, the counterinsurgency groups supported by the United States in the bitter war against the Sandinistas in the 1980s, when he appointed a former Contra leader, Jaime Morales, as his vice-presidential partner. These various pacts have created a confusion between left and right in Nicaragua; while the '*Frente*' has built these pacts with reactionary rightist elements, the MRS (Sandinista Renovation Movement), a dissident Sandinista group led by Edmundo Jarquín has allied itself to the right-wing ALN (Nicaraguan Liberal Alliance) a spin-off or Alemán's PLC (Constitutional Liberal Party), led by Eduardo Montealegre, a very successful, and somewhat questioned, banker. To add to this confusion, some NGOs which historically emerged from Sandinismo have also given support to Montealegre in their attempts to challenge the Ortega led government.

As stated above, since the fall of the Sandinista revolution, the NGO sector expanded enormously in Nicaragua, supported by international cooperation funds, allowing it to become equated with the concept of civil society and it is over the terrain of this concept that much of current social and political polarisation has developed. On a discourse level the FSLN government claims that its objective is to change the neoliberal nature of Nicaragua, from one in which the market is given a pre-eminent role, to one where the state recuperates its role and forms a strong alliance with society. Key to this task is the strengthening of popular participation. Civil society in this conception is about people exercising citizenship, and one of the chief vehicles for this new model is the Citizen's Power Councils (CPCs), of which more later.

NGOs have a reduced role in this emerging model. The Sandinista government, recognizes the skills, knowledge and capacity within NGOs, and hence in Nicaragua as in El Salvador, many NGO personnel are now working with the government. NGOs, however, do not have primacy as representatives of the citizenry, a role persistently questioned by the government, with the President himself accusing them of enrichment and the First Lady, Rosario Murillo, calling NGO's '*sociedad sí vil*' - 'vile society' - and a play on the Spanish for civil society - *sociedad civil*. Links between NGOs and United States funders associated with political meddling in Latin American politics - not least in Nicaragua - such as the National Endowment for Democracy and USAid - are often pointed to as threats to

the Nicaraguan state. Government officials also claim that in the final analysis NGOs can only represent themselves, they cannot claim any wider mandates, because of their unelected status, unlike government.

This situation reached its nadir in 2008 when a number of national and international NGOs, including Oxfam were accused of money laundering. Feminist organisations in particular were placed in the front line, with the first lady calling them the 'Trojan horse of imperialism'. While feminist organisations were singled out, according to their view, due to their opposition to the criminalisation of therapeutic abortion and to their support for Ortega's stepdaughter, Zoila America Narvaez, who accused him of sexual abuse, NGOs in general are under fire because they are seen as competitors with the *Frente*, and hence the state, both for consciences and for resources. While many NGOs are vehemently opposed to the government, others are torn between this view and wishing to avoid conflict with the government, while others still are more cooperative with it. Many NGOs, supported by the media, accuse the government of being totalitarian not unlike the Samozas. The above mentioned CPCs are especially singled out by critics as a means to achieve that objective.

CPCs are neighbourhood based committees with the objective of improving local access to services. They are elected by local communities in open assembly, with usually around 12 members, each of which takes responsibility for a particular social area – such as women, the environment, health, education etc. Their chief function is to identify alongside the community local needs, formulate projects to satisfy those needs, coordinating with local municipalities, which help them to secure funding and/or materials. Communities then further participate by providing the labour to build these projects.

CPCs also administer the flagship government projects, Zero Hunger – whereby local women receive loans in kind to allow them to farm on a small scale – and Zero Profit, where local people can get access to microloans to start small enterprises. CPCs along with the local community identify the people who would most benefit from these government schemes, acting in effect as the liaison mechanism between the neighbourhood and the state. Analysts identify mixed results for CPCs, claiming that it often depends on the level of cooperation in a particular municipality and how well that functioned prior to the arrival of CPCs. While the government claims that CPCs are the vehicles for a new model of citizenship, critics within NGOs and the media identify them as a vehicle for the extension and perpetuation of FSLN power, being essentially sectarian and exclusive in character, which the government denies. Another concern is that they inhibit existing organisational models. Most importantly, some NGOs see CPCs as indoctrination mechanisms, reducing citizen autonomy of thought and action with CPCs increasingly occupying social spaces and acting as gatekeepers for access to social goods.

The different interpretations of CPCs are emblematic of the polarised views on the Sandinista government led by Daniel Ortega. The government views their policies as instruments to achieve the end of neoliberalism, while critics within the NGOs in particular see the government as a continuation of neoliberalism due to the business interests of Ortega, continued cooperation with the IMF etc. While the government sees its policies as the beginnings of a new pact between society and the state, its most ferocious critics see it as a totalitarian project aimed at perpetuating Ortega and the FSLN in power. While the government claims that polarisation is media driven and mostly Managua based, many within the NGOs and the media fear that it is so acute it could engulf the country

in a new civil war. How these diametrically opposed visions can be reconciled is difficult to imagine in the current context.

## **Conclusions: The end of ‘Civil Society’?**

Each of the countries has similar economic, social and political structures, with a high concentration of capital in the hands of a few powerful families in each country, who wield uncommon influence in the political structures. This power is underpinned by internal support coming from the Church and the media, as well as external support from more conservative elements within the United States political and economic establishment. In Nicaragua and El Salvador, however, a left-wing alternative party exists which emerged from the guerrilla movements of each country and which recently achieved power after many years of conservative, neoliberal governments. While Honduras does not have a similar left wing party, a Liberal oligarchic president nonetheless began to implement some policies normally associated with the left. Each country therefore has at least nominally experienced a shift to the left bringing them into line with the current zeitgeist in the wider region.

In each case this shift to the left has presented challenges to civil society. Processes of co-optation have presented themselves in each case, as many NGOs are historically linked to the present parties in power, or offers of inclusion were sufficiently attractive to present co-operation as an option. This presents problems and opportunities to civil society organisation – problems in terms of maintaining autonomy and a critical distance, opportunities in terms of having unprecedented access to influence decision-making processes. Furthermore, in each case questions have been raised as to the nature of civil society itself, with the equation of civil society equals NGO being questioned, and the search for a wider, more inclusive conception more aligned with ideas of citizenship. This has been brought to its most radical form in Nicaragua where the government has embarked on an all out effort to curtail the power of NGOs in favour of its own CPC initiative. In Honduras too the government of President Zelaya reached out to trade unions, peasant and indigenous groups, to seek endorsement of its projected Constituent Assembly process, which was seen as a possibility for widening citizen involvement in decision-making processes. The findings therefore raise questions on the usefulness of civil society as an analytical concept in the current context in Central America.

Such questions around the usefulness of the civil society concept are further highlighted with the evident fractures found in society, whereby some groups, including NGOs are privileged over others depending on the political context of the time. In El Salvador ARENA favoured business oriented NGOs, while now the new FSLN government favours social NGOs historically linked to the FMLN. In Nicaragua meanwhile most NGOs are sidelined by government, including those historically linked to the FSLN, in favour of new conceptions of civil participation. In Honduras, attempts at greater inclusion of previously excluded groups, such as peasants and indigenous, by President Zelaya were halted by a coup favouring business and conservative religious groups. ‘Civil society’ is divided along class, religious, ethnic and economic grounds. It is also divided along ideological lines, as seen in Honduras as groups lined up in favour or against the coup.

Yet ideology also presents a slippery terrain for analysis. While nominally in El Salvador and Nicaragua there are left wing parties in power, and while in Honduras Zelaya shifted to the left in the later two years of his still unfinished presidential term, many would not refer to these

governments as being leftist. President Funes in El Salvador came from outside the FMLN party structure, being a well known media figure, who also developed close links with some important business families, such as supermarket magnates, the Salumé. Zelaya in Honduras is from a rich, oligarchic family, who many claimed did little to undermine capital's position in the country. Meanwhile in Nicaragua, with FSLN officials' ownership of important businesses and properties, its record supporting the introduction of neoliberal policies in the last 16 years, and Ortega's close association with the most reactionary elements of the Catholic Church, the *Frente's* left wing credentials could be open to question. Hence there is ideological slippage in what are nominally referred to as 'pink tide' governments, raising questions about the extent to which these governments are left at all.

The equation in Latin America between leader and party also raises questions of the nature of the state in Central America. As we have seen the state is extremely weak in the region and easily dominated by the powerful economic families found in each country, which have also extended their reach throughout the region. But while powerful families can dominate the economy, strong leaders can dominate parties. With its presidential tradition, Latin American leaders dominate parties, which when in government can attempt to dominate the state, creating an equation of leader=party=government=state. This phenomenon, alongside that of the influence of important families, raises questions on the autonomy and nature of the state in the region. The extent to which the actual concept of civil society and who it includes is dependent on the government of the day rather than the institutions of state is an important issue to be considered when looking at civil society/state relations in the region.

Such swings in policy can further contribute to the other key theme identified in this study, polarisation. While in each country social polarisation is a permanent feature due to the high levels of poverty found in each of them, such polarisation does not always manifest itself politically. This can occur, however, when a government begins to implement policies in favour of previously excluded groups which can be perceived by power groups as threatening the status quo. Political and social polarisation can emerge in such a scenario, threatening the stability of the state. This was most acute in Honduras, where Zelaya's efforts at reform led to a coup, and in Nicaragua where there is open confrontation between the government and NGOs, opposition parties and media. It was also apparent in the ferocity of the presidential campaign in El Salvador, which while abated for the moment, could re-emerge depending on how the present government advances in the social and economic terrain. Questions which emerge therefore are: to what extent is polarisation informed by existing social cleavages, and how can structural change be achieved without aggravating existing polarisation into a crisis of the state?

All these issues have bearing on sustainable development policies. With the change in governments, we see new configurations emerging between the two main recipients of international cooperation funds – NGOs and the state. How these configurations consolidate themselves could dictate how these funds can be distributed in the future. In Nicaragua, for example, we have seen attacks by the government on NGOs, both national and international, and a demonstrated desire to receive a larger share of development funds. In El Salvador we are beginning to see closer cooperation between state and NGOs, and more state action on social issues. What implications will this have for funding? Should government receive greater share of development funds to support these efforts? In Honduras, we have seen a coup which has led to the suspension of

development aid to that country from the European Union. This could result, as one respondent told us, in increased child labour as policy for children is almost entirely dependent on external funding. How does the international development community respond to these changes to ensure that development funding achieves sustainability?

Particularly pertinent for the *Active Citizenship in Central America* project is the study's indications of difficulties and contradictions in the very concept of civil society. As many Latin American societies begin to move away from strictly liberal conceptions of civil society, with its sharp distinctions between civil society and the state, so development projects in that area need to reflect this shift. More space needs to be devoted to exploring the meaning of the term and indeed to question its very usefulness. This is to an extent being addressed by the project through the introduction of content in the curriculum on the meaning and role of civil society in modern democracies and of NGOs within that. More work needs to be done, however, on ensuring that the working definition of civil society be widened to include social movements, trade unions and other groups which do not normally receive funding due to their not being constituted as NGOs or their marginalised situation within Central American societies.

Another useful way to explore these themes further would be to carry out a more detailed case study. Many of those interviewed suggested that Honduras would be an ideal case study because of the recent events there which have thrown into stark relief many of the major issues indentified in this study.

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## Appendix 1: List of Research Activities

DATE	NAME OR POPULATION	NATURE OF EVENT	LOCATION
<b>EL SALVADOR, SAN SALVADOR</b>			
17 JULY	REGIONAL COMMITTEE ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP PROJECT	ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION	TERRAZA HOTEL
20 JULY	ACADEMICS	ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION	CENTRAL AMERICAN UNIVERSITY (UCA), SAN SALVADOR
21 JULY	DEYSI CHEYNI, DIRECTOR, WOMEN'S INSTITUTE (IMU), NGO	INTERVIEW	OFFICES (IMU)
	DR. MIGUEL ORRELLANA, SALVADORAN ASSOCIATION FOR HEALTH PROMOTION (ASPS).	INTERVIEW	OFFICES ASPS
22 JULY	YOUNG LEADERS	FOCUS GROUP	CECADE NGO
24 JULY	DIPLOMA STUDENTS	FOCUS GROUP	UCA
<b>HONDURAS (TEGUCIGALPA, SANTA ROSA DE COPAN, SAN PEDRO SULA – TEGUS, SRC, SPS)</b>			
27 JULY	MABEL HERNÁNDEZ, FONDO ACI-ERP	INTERVIEW	TROCAIRE OFFICES, TEGUS
	HÉCTOR RENÁN SOTO, CIVIL SOCIETY GROUP (GSC)	INTERVIEW	GSC OFFICES, TEGUS
	ACADEMICS AND GENERAL PUBLIC	PANEL DISCUSSION	NATIONAL AUTONOMOUS UNIVERSITY OF HONDURAS (UNAH), TEGUS
28 JULY	RAF FLORES, DEPUTY COORDINATOR, FOSDEH, NGO	INTERVIEW	TROCAIRE OFFICES, TEGUS
	GILBERTO RIOS, DIRECTOR, FIAN (FOOD FIRST INFORMATION AND ACTION NETWORK) HONDURAS.	INTERVIEW	TROCAIRE OFFICES, TEGUS
30 JULY	NGOS AND MUNICIPALITIES.	ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION	EROC, , REGIONAL SPACE OF WEST HONDURAS.SANTA ROSA DE COPAN
31 JULY	SOCIAL FORUM OF SULA VALLEY, SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND NGOS	ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION	MENONITE CENTRE, SAN PEDRO SULA
1 AUG	CODEMUH, WOMEN'S ORGANISATION	PANEL DISCUSSION	CODEMUH OFFICES
<b>NICARAGUA – MANAGUA, MASAYA</b>			
4 AUG	ACADEMICS	ROUND TABLE	CENTRAL AMERICAN UNIVERSITY, MANAGUA
	MARIA LOPEZ VIGIL, EDITOR ENVIO MAGAZINE, ACADEMIC	INTERVIEW	UCA
	SOFIA MONTENEGRO, CINCO, MEDIA NGO	INTERVIEW	CINCO OFFICES
5 AUG	CITIZENS POWER COUNCIL	PUBLIC MEETING	PEOPLE'S HOUSE, FSLN OFFICES, MASAYA
6 AUG	SIXTO ULLOA, OMBUDSMAN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND STAFF, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL	INTERVIEW	OFFICES OF THE OMBUDSMAN FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
	WOMEN'S ORGANISATION, GRUPO VENANCIA	INTERVIEW	LUNCH
7 AUG	RODOLFO DELGADO, PRESIDENTIAL ADVISER ON CITIZEN PARTICIPATION, GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL	INTERVIEW	OFFICE OF MR. DELGADO