

# Knowledge dialogues with Central American social movements

Synthesis research report (May 2011)

Kees Biekart & Rosalba Icaza

*International Institute of Social Studies (ISS), The Hague*

## 1. New opportunities

*“The process of analysing our struggle allowed us to be part of an exercise of self-recognition of the movement; we were making an individual and a collective assessment of our own political action”*

Juana Jiménez, leader of the Autonomous Women’s Movement MAM (Nicaragua)

It was almost seven years back when Hivos invited the ISS to participate in a new programme that was going to explore possibilities for a ‘knowledge exchange’. The idea of the programme was to take advantage of all the interesting information present in the drawers (and in the heads) of project officers in Hivos and their colleagues in partner organisations worldwide. It was assumed that a ‘treasure box’ existed somewhere out there, containing a wealth of rough but interesting data on civil society dynamics that was begging for systematic and critical analysis. ISS immediately showed an interest, agreed on the conditions, and then became in 2005 the first academic organisation participating in this new ‘knowledge programme’. It soon explored the possibilities for a dialogue between Hivos and its Southern partners on the one hand, and ISS staff and Southern researchers on the other. The knowledge programme focused initially on the practice of civil society building, and in particular on the dynamics of Central American social movements, one of Hivos’ crucial target groups. The ultimate purpose was to learn from the rich experience of Hivos’ partners in order to better understand the complex process of civil society formation.

This report synthesizes findings and conclusions of one of the pillars of the programme: a three-year study *with* (and not about) social movements in Costa Rica, Nicaragua, and Guatemala. The studies were conducted by researchers working closely with (or being an active part of) the groups and organizations involved in processes of social mobilization. This ‘engaged’ research approach assumed that research “is only useful when it somehow benefits people, society, communities or social movements” (Laako 2011: 182). It situates research into its own context by acknowledging the subjective nature of each researcher: everyone thinks and writes from a particular social location in terms of gender, class, ethnicity, and geographical location (Smith 1999, Haraway 1998, Hernandez Castillo, 2002; 2007). It was therefore a deliberate choice to use participatory action research methodologies and participatory tools from the very start. We aimed for initiating a ‘knowledge dialogue’ between several social movements, as well as between researchers and social activists. This approach offered exciting new opportunities, but also generated challenges, as we will see below.

Social movements have become a prominent feature in Central America, in particular in the post-civil war period of the new millennium. Social mobilization was virtually absent for a few decades due to tense political crises throughout the region. Civil wars in El Salvador and Guatemala, combined with the deployment of US troops in Honduras, and other security forces in Costa Rica, made social mobilisation a risky activity. A number of factors contributed to the emergence of new civic actors and renewed and non-violent social mobilisation. Of course, there was the end of three civil wars symbolised by a range of peace agreements in Nicaragua (1988), El Salvador (1992) and Guatemala (1996). And we saw a return to (fragile) democratic politics in El Salvador and Nicaragua, but with a rather unstable political process in Guatemala and Honduras, which almost returned to civil war after the 2009 coup against President Mel Zelaya. There also was an accelerated neo-liberal restructuring process present in the region, combined with a weakening of the organisational capacity of traditional social actors (peasants, trade unions, students).

Whatever the causes might have been, we have witnessed the emergence of multiple forms of new social organising, generally by smaller groups of citizens, organised in associations, NGOs, and/or in community groups. Together, these groups have formed a new type of social movement: progressive in nature, but generally de-linked from the orthodox left. New issues were launched onto the political agenda such as climate change, water privatisation, but also indigenous as well as gay and lesbian (LGBT) rights. This was happening at a moment in time in which international donors, prominently present in the region in the 1990s, were about to withdraw from Central America (Biekart, 2008). Hivos, however, continued to be a crucial supporting agency, directly as well as indirectly, of many of these social movements. It even considered itself at times to be part of these movements.<sup>1</sup> It was therefore sensible to focus more closely on social movement dynamics and the role of donors such as Hivos in this process.

The paper below will start by explaining programme objectives, central questions, and the methodology that was used. Then we will explain in part three some of the key concepts used in this dialogue process and how to locate these in current academic debates. The fourth part of the paper presents summaries and key findings of the three knowledge dialogues in Central America, followed by a discussion of main commonalities. These two parts are all summaries of the national research reports and joint reflections and discussions by the research teams over the previous years. The sixth and seventh part contains our own analysis as facilitators of the knowledge dialogue. In these parts we do write 'about' the process and the movements, but based on reports we generated together 'with' the three movements.

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<sup>1</sup> The recent Hivos policy document on Civil Society Building states: "Social movements are the expression of broad civic dynamics. They surpass by definition the level of singular organisations. (...) When relevant, Hivos will support these movements through its constituting elements. Support may vary from funding exchanges, the use of ICT, and research or campaigns. In certain cases Hivos itself will be part of these global networks" (Hivos, 2008: 8).

## 2. Participatory approaches

The central purpose of the joint Hivos-ISS 'Knowledge Programme on Civil Society Building' was "(...) to better understand and improve the contribution of civil society building efforts to bring about changes in the unequal balance of power in favour of vulnerable and marginalised groups" (ISS-Hivos, 2007: 8). The programme wanted to combine innovative research on civil society formation with active dialogues between practitioners and researchers. But the programme also aimed to contribute to improving policies that were geared towards strengthening the capacity of civil society organisations (Hivos, 2008). The participatory approaches employed were new for most actors involved; however, all agreed that this was not going to be a traditional academic exercise from which the movements would gain very little. Therefore, the start-up of this process was carefully done in consultation with all stakeholders involved.

After consulting a number of regional resource persons, Hivos and ISS reached a consensus to focus the knowledge dialogue on three movements: the movement against the free trade agreement in Costa Rica, the women's movement in Nicaragua, and the indigenous movement in Guatemala. All three were considered to be highly relevant and innovative social movements with a broad national constituency.<sup>2</sup> In April 2008, in close cooperation with Hivos' Regional Office in Costa Rica, a Central American consultative workshop was held to identify the leading issues for the research programme, as well as to discuss strategies and approaches in the various national contexts of Central America. Social movement activists as well as researchers, some of them with historical ties with Hivos and/or ISS, were invited to discuss the strategic relevance of this research for their own movements and struggles. This first encounter was crucial for three reasons: (i) priorities were jointly set for the dialogue process, (ii) essential viewpoints on the ways in which to engage in knowledge generation between practitioners and academics were debated, (iii) a network of researchers and activists was created that would play a key role throughout the following years (Valverde, 2008).

One of the key aims of the Hivos knowledge programme was to enhance "the effectiveness and sustainability of development interventions through knowledge development" (Stremmelaar, 2009). The preparatory phase included an exchange between activists from Central America and supporters of the Zapatista indigena movement for autonomy in Chiapas, which had a long tradition and a vast experience with processes and methodologies of collaborative research between academics and

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<sup>2</sup> These movements were not primarily selected because they were indirectly supported by Hivos, as this was a secondary reason. However, it was known that Hivos did support groups within the Nicaraguan women's movement (such as *SiMujer*) and also within the Guatemalan indigenous movement, such as CONIC and CALDH. Only later it turned out that Hivos indirectly also had supported groups linked to the Costa Rican anti-CAFTA movement (like *Sula Batsu* and some artists associations).

activists.<sup>3</sup> This activity allowed us to engage with the practice of *committed research* as a critical tendency within the politics of knowledge production and to reflect about the subjective and political nature of academic research (Leyva and Speed, 2008). The workshop allowed for a critical self-reflection on knowledge production, dissemination and integration on questions such as “for whom and with which purpose is knowledge produced in order to challenge mainstream academic research?”, and “how are dominant approaches to ‘knowledge cooperation’ dealing with this?”.

The notion of ‘knowledge dialogues’ became a guiding principle in our research programme. They were expected to have the potential to counter relationships of inequality based on geographical location, gender, and ethnicity. The purpose was to uncover ‘knowledges’ that otherwise would have been marginalized by traditional forms of research or by quick consultancy-style mapping exercises. The knowledge dialogues as methodological tools were conceived as activities of “listening (rather than recording) without pre-determined parameters, and in accordance with the participants’ knowledge practices” (Icaza and Vazquez, forthcoming).

The various research teams had relatively little experience with participatory research in the region, but everyone involved was conscious about what they did not want: an outsiders’ view on their social struggles, published in an academic form that would not be accessible or useful to the movements themselves. The selection and composition of the research teams (one co-ordinating researcher, plus at least one leader from the movement, supported by a consultative council from each movement) was a crucial step in the knowledge dialogue, as it would guarantee the movement’s ownership of the process. Another important decision was to bring the national research teams together at regular intervals, in order to exchange experiences but also to engage in cross-national discussions.<sup>4</sup> Finally, it was decided that all findings would be discussed first with the movements before they were published.<sup>5</sup>

Inspired by the Chiapas workshop, each country team followed more or less the same steps in the knowledge dialogue process. A national seminar was organized with representatives from all organizations and groups involved in the movement to define objectives and methods for the dialogue, followed by seminars in the sub regions in order to collect region-specific data through interviews, document research and focus

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<sup>3</sup> The group was hosted by the Universidad de la Tierra-CIDESI and the *Centro de Investigaciones y Estudios Superiores en Antropología Social* (CIESAS) in San Cristobal de las Casas. Thanks to the active support of Xochitl Leyva and Raymundo Sanchez, we were also invited to the Good Governance Council at Oventik, Zapatista Autonomous Territory.

<sup>4</sup> Regional meetings between the national research teams were held in Costa Rica (Heredia, April 2008), Nicaragua (Managua, February 2009), Guatemala (Santiago Atitlán, August 2009; Antigua, August 2010), and finally in The Netherlands (The Hague, September 2010).

<sup>5</sup> These feed-back and reflection sessions were held in Nicaragua (September 2009), Costa Rica (July 2010) and often involved the use of audiovisual material of the dialogue process. The Guatemala session is scheduled for June 2011.

group discussions. Draft reports were discussed by the national consultative groups, and by the international support team, and then discussed with movement representatives. The Guatemala case was slightly different, as the team decided to focus on one of the local struggles, rather than at the (highly complex) national movement dynamics. In Guatemala it also was a challenge to compose a solid research team, as identified researchers and organizations several times pulled out of the process.

The Central American knowledge dialogue focused on three questions. The first one was: *what have been the dynamics of Central American social movements?* We wanted to examine *how* the various movements unfolded from local membership groups to larger networks of multiple groups and organisations, towards broader issue movements. The important element was to understand and explain how this social clustering worked, and how advocacy or support NGOs operated in this process. But also to examine how leaders responded to members or ‘followers’, and which type of communication channels were preferred. By selecting and comparing several social movement experiences, we were hoping to get a better understanding of this dynamic process of social movement formation in different contexts.

Secondly, we asked *what has been the role of external actors, in particular of (donor) NGOs?*<sup>6</sup> The central concern in the Central American process was to assess how (and whether) social movement dynamics can be supported without distorting and undermining them. The assumption was that social movements have a particular optimum beyond which support is becoming counterproductive. A challenge was therefore to find out how to locate this optimal point, or at least how to make sure movements are supported in the phase of growth rather than in the degeneration phase. Another challenge was to examine which group, or level, or network within this movement dynamics was most effectively supported in order to positively contribute to the strengthening of a given social movement. Internal (national) and external (international) support as well as material and non-material forms of support were to be examined.

The third central research question looked at relevance: *is support to social movement activities contributing to sustainable change in unequal power balances, in particular favouring the most marginalized?* The underlying question was whether civil society building strategies aimed at strengthening social movements in the end were really benefiting the poor and the (socially and politically) excluded. We explored whether social movements were at all part of civil society, or rather part of broader processes of socio-political and socio-economic change. These issues pointed at an exploration of a

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<sup>6</sup> This support to social movements was a central focus of the 2005-2007 Andean indigenous movement research project supported by Hivos, Ibis, SNV and Oxfam America, which concluded: “The struggle over ideas is (...) an absolutely critical component of fostering more inclusive, rights-oriented development. It is also central not only to what social movements do, but to strengthening them – by elaborating well substantiated arguments around which they can coalesce and for which they can be identified as standing.” (Bebbington and Biekart, 2007: 41).

wider agenda in which support to social movements, rather than being an end in itself, would be a means to achieving broader goals of social transformation in the long run.

### **3. Concepts: social movements and civil society**

Before we discuss the findings and lessons of the Central American knowledge programme, it is important to explain key concepts as these were understood by the activists involved in the movements and undertaken by the research teams in their analyses. All the activists and leaders involved in the knowledge dialogue confirmed that they were part of 'social movements'. This is how they characterised their collective resistance to specific actions by national governments (in alliance with multinational and national private companies such as in Costa Rica and Guatemala or with national institutions and actors such as the Catholic Church and mass media in Nicaragua), rather than with concepts such as 'civil society organisation' or 'NGO'. As 'civil society building' was the central theme of the programme, this concept is also further examined.

#### **3.1 Social movements**

Several additional characteristics were mentioned in the 'self-identification' as social movements: (i) a critical stand towards neo-liberalism's negative impacts on the environment, equity, development, and social welfare in general (Guatemala and Costa Rica), racism (Guatemala) and patriarchal orders and gender discrimination (Nicaragua); (ii) a tendency to expand resistance by also generating viable proposals (*resistencia con propuestas*); (iii) the important role that identity (indigenous, women, class, sexuality, and so on) plays for the unity of the movement, despite its diversity (*unidad en la diversidad*); and (iv) a perception that collective action is not necessarily homogenous or free from tension in relation to forms and styles of leadership, degree of autonomy from the state and political parties, and local and international priorities.

In the academic literature, social movements have generally been understood as 'collective forms of action' and as a set of relationships displaying the limits of modern institutions such as nation states and their policies. From this perspective often the 'exceptional' view on Southern social movements, including those in Latin America, is emphasised that these are active in a context which is not ('yet') fully modern. This 'exceptionality' uses the European experience with modernity and democracy as the yardstick to measure Latin American social movements' contributions to structural change (see Foweraker, 1995). It represents a limited view of the contribution of 'Southern social movements' to undermine the limits of modern development and liberal democracy as it has been applied in South and Central America (Slater, 1988). More recently, a new set of literature on social movements is dealing with the issue of how they are challenging and re-constructing western social theory and notions on the political and democracy (Escobar, 2008, Florez 2010). For example, it has been pointed

out that networking dynamics of social movements challenges vertical and hierarchical structures of power and authority such as political parties and the state (Escobar, 2008). The emotions and affections that mobilize collective action are also identified as a challenge to those views, which take for granted a rational instrumentality as 'the' logic of social movement action (Florez, 2010).

Since the mid 1980s, social movements are often characterized as 'old' or 'new'. This dichotomy asserts that 'old social movements' tend to address economic and political rights and are focused on the sphere of production, as in the case of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century labour and peasants movements (Hellman, 1992). The 'new social movements' are primarily analysed in relation to culture and identity. Examples are the environmental movement and women's movement in the third feminism wave. Both movements emerged in a particular historical context marked by the crisis of the welfare state in industrialized countries, and the disenchantment with liberal democracy in several Southern countries.

This old-new heuristic perspective was particularly dominant when the analysis of social movements through class based and functionalist analyses showed its limits to understand new emerging issues (such as identity rights), or to explain the lack of interest of movements to capture the state through revolution (Florez, 2010). Analyses of new social movements often conceptualise them as non-unified collective actors constantly in the making. This allows for critical views on their internal dynamics in relation to leadership, strategy and relations with the state and authority (Melucci, 1988). However, this division between 'old' and 'new' was not without problems as scholars started to note the multiple continuities that characterized new forms of mobilization, for example, between old styles of centralized leadership and new emergent themes such as indigenous rights (Escobar, 1997 quoted in Florez, 2010).

The literature on social movements is vast and beyond the scope of this paper, nonetheless, three main theoretical orientations in the literature on social movements can be identified (Florez, 2010): (i) those that emphasize the analysis of actions and strategy (*how collective action happens*), (ii) those that seek to explain the factors behind the emergence of a particular collective identity (*when collective action happens*) and; (iii) those that articulate explanations in which strategy and identity are interlinked (*which meanings frame collective action and how*).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the way in which social movements are understood varies in these orientations: from rational actors, to bearers of identity paradigms, to cognitive processes.

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<sup>7</sup> Some of the key texts that develop these theoretical emphases include: Della Porta (1998), Diani (1998), Offe (1998), Alvarez (1988), Snow and Bendford (1992).

### **3.2 Civil society building**

Since the start of the programme, we argued that the concept of *civil society building* had to be approached from two inter-related angles. First, it was often considered to be an 'intervention strategy' by external donors, in which material or moral support was provided to strengthening civic associations and their networks abroad. This strategy became rather popular from the 1990s onwards and has been labelled as the *external intervention* approach to civil society building (cf. Hivos-ISS, 2007). The second angle puts the local dynamics of civil society building central and therefore emphasises that it is an *endogenous process*. It refers to an evolutionary process of civil society formation, in which civic associations are established or disbanded, regardless of external support, and in which horizontal and vertical networks are developed, creating a complex 'fabric' which is constantly changing. Every civil society is the product of its own unique history of relationships, struggles, conflicts and energies. As such, no single civil society resembles another, and the process of civil society building therefore varies from place to place.

However, in practice it is not easy to separate the endogenous process from the external intervention, in particular if we look at the *outcome* of civil society building. After all, this outcome is characterised by increased strength, density, and/or diversity of civil society. This strength is generally determined by a combination of endogenous and external forces, with the external influences often becoming more important due to the increased transnationalisation of associational life. Practitioners often perceive civil society building as the increase of the number of associations as well as of the (democratic or organisational) quality of these associations, including the horizontal and vertical ties with other associations, often combined with rights-based criteria (Finn Heinrich, 2007). According to this view, civil society building is by definition considered to be a positive process, evolving in a linear fashion. Implicitly donors are often working with a universal civil society model (often based on Northern experiences) which is encouraged as an ideal model that should be reproduced also in Southern (and Eastern) countries. The academic debate tends to look more critically at the role of civil society and at the implications of civil society building, for example by acknowledging that it is not always a positive, linear or progressive development (Howell and Pearce, 2001). Or that it can trigger unintended consequences for democratic life of society at large (Biekart, 2003, 2008; Hearn, 2007).



#### **4. Central American social movement dynamics**

Below we summarise the main findings of the knowledge dialogues with the three social movements: the movement against the free trade agreement in Costa Rica, the women's movement in Nicaragua and the indigenous-peasant movement in Guatemala. Separate reports, as well as English and Spanish summaries were published for each movement in the dialogue process, and in Nicaragua also a video was produced in order to provoke discussion inside the movement about the outcome. As the movement representatives were directly involved in design and implementation, in collaboration with the researchers, dissemination events often took the form of lively debates about movement strategies. This illustrated the participatory character of the dialogue and was a way to guarantee that the findings would primarily benefit the movements themselves: this is also reflected in the quotes at the start of each country overview.

##### **4.1 Costa Rica: mobilising against free trade**

"In many research projects the systematization of results is an exercise that is carried out once the process has concluded and mainly is for the benefit of the research team. (...) In this 'research and social dialogue process' we used a *blog* (digital space) that simultaneously served as a tool for documentation as well as for dissemination." (Salas, et al., 2010: 13)

The movement that emerged against the *Tratado de Libre Comercio* (TLC), the Central American Free Trade Agreement with the United States (CAFTA), certainly was the most vibrant social mobilisation activity taking place in Costa Rica for many decades. It culminated into a massive public protest in 2007, prior to a national referendum which was called for by the Arias government. According to the polls, a few weeks prior the referendum, the government was going to loose it, leading to a drastic media offensive by all those groups favouring the trade agreement. The government did win this 'battle' thanks to a narrow victory in the metropolitan area. The 'anti-CAFTA movement' had lost the referendum, but with a 48.3 % backing (and a victory in rural areas) it suddenly had created a new political momentum in the traditional Costa Rican political arena.

The movement emerged gradually but swiftly gained momentum. The United States had signed Free Trade Agreements already with other Central American countries by 2004. However, Costa Rica's Pacheco administration delayed the approval process and by the time the new Arias government was installed in 2006 several civil society groups demanded to put this decision to a popular referendum. Up to that point only small and specialised groups had dealt with the contents of the CAFTA agreement (Trejos, 2008). As soon as the referendum was announced (to take place on 7 October 2007) public interest picked up and within a few months signs of protest multiplied throughout the country, leading to a broad-based movement against the Free Trade Agreement.

What triggered this sudden increase of national mobilisation? After all, Costa Rica has kept up a tradition of relative social stability and national consensus over the past

decades, whilst neighbouring countries were involved in fierce political (and often violent) polarization processes. The study suggests that many layers of Costa Rican civil society felt that the implications of the new free trade agreement were going to undermine the country's social development model and, in particular, that it was going to weaken public institutions even further. A range of sectoral agendas, such as access to public health services, quality of public education, and environmental protection, were perceived to be threatened by the new trade agreement. The general feeling was that social values were going to be undermined and that the state was unable to guarantee the exercise of citizenship rights to its population. The 'no CAFTA' movement apparently had hit a popular nerve by those wanting to prevent social exclusion and a further neo-liberal erosion of the welfare state (Rudin and Hintjens, 2009).

Resistance against the free trade agreement was particularly strong in more remote areas and with popular sectors in which the state's presence had been smaller. Thus citizens had to organise themselves to guarantee their own livelihoods. This also explains why the strength of the movement was especially elevated in the regions outside the so-called 'Greater Metropolitan Area'.<sup>8</sup> For example in Guanacaste, the Pacific region with a high presence of US tourists and residents, citizens were concerned about the deterioration of natural resources due to unlimited real estate development and holiday resorts. In the Northern and Southern border regions the concern especially was about access to land and protection of the environment, next to a general feeling of being neglected by the central state.<sup>9</sup> The unique composition of the anti-CAFTA movement also confirmed this sense of neglect: next to labour and peasant unions, the environmental movement was actively involved, as well as the women's movement, the academic sector (including all public universities), the cultural sector, indigenous groups as well as think tanks and human rights organisations and sectors of the Catholic Church. In the last stages even political parties and a whole range of regional and national co-ordinating platforms joined the movement as well (Merino et al., 2009: 36-43, Salas et al., 2010: 16-19).

One of the most particular features of the movement was the emergence of over a 120 so-called 'Patriotic Committees' (*Comités Patrióticos*) as a direct product of campaigning against the signing of CAFTA.<sup>10</sup> These committees were set up at the community level and therefore clearly 'territorial'. They assembled community members from a broad array of backgrounds: from various political parties, multiple professions, as well as different religion, gender and age backgrounds. The Patriotic Committees were unique as they were horizontally organised community-based citizen's initiatives generating a

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<sup>8</sup> The Greater Metropolitan Area (GMA) is located in the central valley of Costa Rica; it is a chain of urban centres in which over half of the country's population lives.

<sup>9</sup> It was in these remote regions that political parties such as *Partido Acción Ciudadana* (a political movement formed in 2000, but growing alongside the protest movement) realized important political victories in the 2010 municipal elections (see Campbell, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> The research report refers to a number between 120 and 150, as the exact number could not be confirmed. After all, the committees were not formally registered (Merino et al., 2009).

new form of local participation in national politics. The prominent role of the Patriotic Committees in the anti-CAFTA movement likely can be explained by two factors. On the one hand, CAFTA was going to have a severe local socio-economic impact, such as on land ownership and environmental degradation, generating specific resistance from local communities. The other factor was that the committees actively mobilised voters to participate in the referendum (distributing fliers, organising forum debates and concerts, etc.). This function was particularly strong in those areas (such as in the North, the South, and the Atlantic Coast) where political parties were relatively weak. It turned out that the Patriotic Committees maintained their role and function after the referendum especially in these remote areas, which suggested the emergence of a new and more permanent network of citizens action groups (Salas et al., 2010: 22-3).

Overall, the study concludes that the Costa Rican anti-CAFTA movement represented a good example of a non-traditional and non-institutionalised social movement, characterised by a decentralised leadership structure with a strong local rooting in autonomous community-based groups (Patriotic Committees). The knowledge dialogue process – initiated by the Hivos-ISS programme almost a year later – turned out to be a major tool to analyse this experience and to draw lessons for the future (Salas et al, 2010:32-5). One lesson was that the strength of the movement had been determined by a loose alliance of a few dozen national associations, including parties and NGOs, which had shown an impressive mobilising power in mid-2007, also due to a creative use of new (social) media. But this was also a weakness: after the government won the referendum in October 2007 with a narrow 51.7 % majority, the *momentum* of the mobilisation as a national social movement was lost. Though the structures created during the campaign continued to be viable for subsequent local struggles, such as against the open pit mining in San Carlos and in the water struggle in Sardinal (Merino et al., 2009: 58).

Another lesson was the fundamental role of information and social media. Citizens groups were not reactive or weak, as might have been expected, but turned out to be pro-active, well-informed and dynamic thanks to the use of alternative communication to trigger debate. The movement was diverse, pragmatic, and sometimes radical by challenging the state's leading role in selling its national sovereignty to transnational companies. By doing so, the movement almost managed to penalise the political arrogance of the Arias administration. Others felt that the referendum had been a trap that was too easily accepted. It was manipulated by the government through a huge and expensive media offensive, and according to others, also by using electoral fraud. But it was also recognised that the movement lacked electoral experience: hence the renewed expectations created by the successful election of various anti-CAFTA movement leaders as part of the new Citizens Action Party in the 2010 municipal elections.

## **4.2 Nicaragua: women's movement and the struggle for autonomy**

"The research implied a big methodological challenge as it broke with the traditional academic parameters. In this case, the most important challenge was to open up a joint space for dialogue and reflection in which the women's movement's most representative groups, from national as well as regional level, would be willing to participate" (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2009: 9).

The second social movement central to this knowledge dialogue is the Nicaraguan women's movement. The dynamics of this movement are closely related to the political struggle against the Somoza dictatorship. Women and their organisations performed a key role during the Sandinista rebellion of the late 1970s and the subsequent period of the Sandinista-led revolution (1979-1990). The main focal point of women's organization in the 1980s was the national network AMNLAE, organically linked to the revolutionary forces. After the historical February 1990 electoral defeat of Sandinista presidential candidate Daniel Ortega, women's groups became more critical of the Sandinista party FSLN. This increased autonomy went parallel to a process in the 1990s in which a range of feminist NGOs were established with external funding. This was soon leading to a process of 'NGO-isation' of the women's movement: NGO interests (reproducing the organisation, accountability to donors, etc.) were replacing the interests of the movement and actually taking over its dynamic. This was partly caused by increased international aid funding, and partly by governmental efforts to control the movement. By the end of the 1990s, many of these NGOs, together with a range of national and local groups, were organised in joint networks to rally for the protection of sexual and reproductive rights. Particularly in the period 2006-2007, the movement rallied against the penalization of therapeutic abortion (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2009: 43-4; Wilson, 2009).

The Nicaraguan study used a participatory approach in which a range of representative feminist women's groups decided to jointly analyse the past ten years of struggle for the defence of women's rights, but also to examine recent strategic choices by the movement. At the inaugural seminar it was decided to focus on five important and representative groups in the movement: the Women's' Network against Violence, the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM), the Feminist Movement, the Women's' Network of Matagalpa, and the Women's Network of the North. This choice represented the various viewpoints, tendencies, as well local-national differences within the movement.<sup>11</sup> But it also meant that a variety of organisational forms (networks,

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<sup>11</sup> The choice for this selection was made jointly by the research team and did not relate to Hivos or ISS preferences. The method of data collection consisted of regional focus group discussions, in addition to over eighty targeted semi-structured interviews, and analysis of documentation. A 'consultative group' of 12 women representing the various organizations served as a national focus group with which historical patterns, strategies, organization models and challenges of the movement were discussed in a range of sessions (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2009).

NGOs, local groups as well as national membership organisations) would be included in the dialogue.

Similar to Costa Rica, the emphasis was on explaining the factors behind the emergence of women social movement. The analysis deliberately focused on the period 1998-2008: this was the decade starting with the 'gentlemen's agreement' between the two central political players in Nicaragua, former and actual presidents Daniel Ortega and Arnaldo Alemán. This agreement ('el pacto') symbolised the start of an authoritarian cycle in Nicaraguan politics, also characterised by increased aggression and violence towards women and their associations.<sup>12</sup> This situation was aggravated by the devastating impact of hurricane Mitch in 1998 and the large scale of corruption by the Alemán government following the influx of international relief aid. In addition, the decade witnessed the growth of the women's movement as an important political actor, and the increasing tension with the Sandinista party (FSLN) which returned to power in 2006 with the electoral victory of Daniel Ortega (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2010: 17).<sup>13</sup>

The increased autonomy of the women's movement vis-à-vis the Sandinista party received an additional boost in 1998 when Ortega's stepdaughter Zoilamérica Narváez publicly denounced that she had been sexually abused by him. It made women's groups still loyal to Ortega decide to distance themselves further from the Sandinista FSLN. The news also triggered a significant increase in other public denouncements of violence against women, putting the issue central onto the political agenda.<sup>14</sup> The government's response was to try to co-opt the moderate groups, in order to divide the movement, but without much success. The leadership of the Catholic Church refused to discuss proposals about abortion legislation, and lobbied the government to reject the suggestions by the women's movement. Gradually, all room for dialogue between the women's movement and the government disappeared. This in turn generated heated internal debates within the movement and provoked deep conflict between women leaders. Eventually, in the eve of the 2006 electoral campaign, new movements emerged: The Feminist Movement and the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM). They participated together with other citizens groups in a range of massive popular mobilisations against the authoritarian character of *el pacto*, demanding democracy and the full exercise of citizenship.

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<sup>12</sup> The agreement was negotiated after the 1997 landslide presidential triumph of Aleman's Liberal Party, leading to the second defeat of the FSLN presidential candidacy of Ortega. But Aleman soon required Ortega's support in order to achieve his political goals and the party leaders therefore negotiated a political deal in 1998 to agree on mutual support; this agreement is known as 'el pacto'. This agreement turned out to be relatively stable but clearly reduced internal party democracy and political space for new contenders in the emerging multi-party system.

<sup>13</sup> Thanks to the 'pacto' Sandinista leader Daniel Ortega managed to win the 2006 presidential elections, after being defeated at three consecutive electoral contests (in 1990, 1996, and 2001).

<sup>14</sup> A well-known case was Rosita, a nine-year old girl who became pregnant after having been violated. She had an abortion to save her life, despite fierce protests from the government and fundamentalist churches who opposed abortion in any circumstance (see Kruk, 2010).

One of the specific targets of the women's movement in that period was to prevent the abolition of the right to (therapeutic) abortion by parliament. The MAM even went so far to forge an (unsuccessful) alliance with the opposition party MRS (Sandinista Renovation Movement) in the wake of the elections in order to weaken the Sandinista party FSLN. However, the Sandinistas did win the 2006 elections, making an end to a series of three neo-liberal governments and putting Daniel Ortega back in the presidential office in 2007. Supported by the Church, the new government started to persecute nine women leaders who had practiced illegal abortion (in the Rosita case), several NGOs promoting sexual and productive rights were harassed, and the office of one of the organisations was even occupied and raided by security forces.<sup>15</sup>

The analysis also examines the women's movement four-pronged strategy. This consists of (i) the promotion of political participation, (ii) the struggle against domestic violence, (iii) the strengthening of the movement, and (iv) a cultural and ideological shift to tackle the underlying forces responsible for the subordination of women. One of the central targets was to change the legal framework dealing with women's rights. Even though the legislation was not changed as the movement had hoped, the women groups forming the movement were largely positive about the result of these strategies. After all, abortion had put central onto the political agenda, and due to sustained campaigning all social actors had been obliged to speak out on the issue. Moreover, one of the main results had been the strengthening of the women's movement as a key social and political actor (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2009: 85-103).

The role of leadership and internal democracy was signalled as one of the most sensitive issues within the movement. The dialogue process provided space for this issue to be discussed in more detail, which was seen as one of the most important gains of the process. Internal democratization had started over a decade ago and was meant to tackle vertical and authoritarian leadership cultures. This was necessary, since it was acknowledged that vertical leadership often had generated 'democratic centralism' (a characteristic of the authoritarian left) and thus had reduced the space for internal debate. This in turn had provoked fragmentation and distancing amongst groups within the movement, leading to intolerant positions: "Often we considered 'unity' to be the same as 'homogeneity', so if we would not think the same way we would see that as a threat, and as a result we were avoiding each other."<sup>16</sup> This discussion on the diversity within the movement illustrated an emergent culture of internal reflection and debate, but it was also identified as a challenge to expand this culture further in the years to come (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2009: 133).

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<sup>15</sup> The offices of MAM and CINCO, as well as the Managua office of Oxfam-GB were occupied, searched, and sealed by the security forces in October 2008, confiscating truck loads of archives and computers. This delayed the initial process of this study, as both principle researchers were working with MAM and CINCO.

<sup>16</sup> According to Azahalea Solís, one of the movement leaders and participant of the Consultative Group of the study (Cuadra and Jimenez, 2009: 122).

### 4.3 Guatemala: claiming land and territory

*“One of the commitments with the communities of San Juan Sacatepequez was to return the outcomes of the research process to them as a way to evaluate their struggle. Therefore, the socialization of the Maya knowledges, practices, norms and values on the relationship between community, land, and territory was crucial” (Acevedo, 2011:14).*

Over the last two decades, Guatemala has been the stage of a dynamic political mobilization by indigenous groups. After the violent civil war of the 1980s, the indigenous majority managed to overcome its local fragmentation and revalued its ‘indigenous’ identity and the historical struggle for rights from pre-colonial times. Interestingly, the Maya indigenous identity was so far articulated mainly by religious, colonial, and pre-Hispanic forms of organization. In 2006, twelve Maya *kaqchikeles* communities in San Juan Sacatapéquez, the municipality with the largest indigenous population in Guatemala, formed a social organisation with a territorial and anti-neoliberal character. The organisation wanted to prevent mining exploitation by national and transnational companies, and the construction in their municipality of a cement factory of the San Jose MINCESA company.<sup>17</sup>

The San Juan Sacatapéquez communities are largely living from the cultivation of flowers. They opposed the establishment of the factory due to the pollution and exploitation of rivers and soil generated by cement production, but also because they feared the future displacement of their communities. Their claim was for interrelated rights: the right to land and territory, to autonomy from neo-liberal development projects, but also the right to indigenous and Maya identity. Their struggle was supported by CONIC, one of the large national Maya and peasant organisations, and by the Continental Networks of Indigenous Peoples.<sup>18</sup> Hence, the communities turned to anti-colonial positions and discourses by linking their own local struggle to neo-liberal reforms. By doing so, the communities constituted themselves as a collective indigenous actor with forms of political organization and with a discourse that incorporated elements of the Maya *kaqchikele* ‘cosmovision’ in which land and territory are considered to be sacred. In particular, the territory is conceived as *K’AT* (interlinked life) in which multiple complex relations between human beings, nature, the cosmos, and the inner self of human beings are interconnected (Acevedo, 2011).

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<sup>17</sup>The MINCESA company is owned by the Novella family, which monopolizes cement production, distribution, and sales in Guatemala. The transnational company HOLCIM-APASCO, one of the three largest cement producers in the world, owns 20 % of MINCESA group. The factory responds to an increased demand of cement for the construction of popular housing which is financed by remittances from Guatemalan migrants in the United States and Mexico (Acevedo, 2011).

<sup>18</sup> These alliances have included Coordinadora Nacional Indígena Campesina (CONIC), Centro de Acción Legal en Derechos Humanos (CALDH), Coordinación y Convergencia Nacional Waqib’ Kej, Comité de Unidad Campesina (CUC) and the Continental Summit of Indigenous People.

International treaties, such as ILO's 169 Convention, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and the National Agreement on Indigenous Peoples' Identity and Rights, grant Guatemalan indigenous people the right to be consulted by state authorities when political and administrative measures might affect them and their territories. The study shows that the state did not respect this right and actively promoted the necessary institutional and political reforms facilitating the arrival of national and multinational companies to indigenous people's territories in order to exploit their resources.<sup>19</sup> A few years ago, the Guatemalan state signed a free trade agreement with the United States (CAFTA) and continued with privatization, liberalization and deregulation of capital and goods markets, including those of minerals and raw materials.

In this context, the communities of San Juan Sacatepéquez resisted the establishment of the cement factory in various ways and through diverse means. This included legal actions, marches to the capital, and regional mobilisations in alliance with organizations of the national Maya and peasant movement such as CONIC, CUC, *Waqib'Kej* and supported by the 'Maya Lawyers' and CALDH. There were also violent confrontations with Guatemala security forces in the villages. President Alvaro Colóm even established a 'state of siege' during 15 days in June 2008, followed by the detention of various indigenous leaders. The Guatemalan government responded in different ways to control the resistance of the communities. New official bodies were established, such as the Municipal Development Council responsible for designing development interventions for the communities. This Council tried to weaken the movement by co-opting members of the communities, albeit without success. Meanwhile, the Novella family (owner of the factory) used its powerful links to initiate a media campaign against the community mobilizations, portraying these as acts of violence.

The objective of the dialogue process in San Juan Sacatepéquez was to contribute to the construction of a political discourse that would integrate Maya cosmovision, knowledges, and practices. Hence it applied the *Pachúm Na'oj* methodology, which is basically a reformulation of participatory methodology tools. These tools included workshops, focus groups, and participatory observation, that – according to the Maya cultural codes – refer to knowledge creation as an interlinked endeavour implemented through *tz'ijonik* (dialogue), *pixab'* (advice) and the exercise of *eqalen* (responsibilities). The reformulation of the methodology facilitated the communities' active involvement in a process of self-critical reflection on their struggle.

The concluding analysis of the study indicates that the resistance of the twelve Maya *kaqchikeles* communities in San Juan Sacatepéquez highlighted two relevant processes

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<sup>19</sup> In 1996, for example, the government of President Alvaro Arzú approved reforms to the National Mining Law that reduced state royalties from 6 % to 1 % and set the political and institutional basis for the promotion of private investment in the mining sector. This reform was paralleled by the peace process negotiations that ended two decades of civil war (Solano 2005:105, quoted in Acevedo, 2011).



in the country. On the one hand, the communities transformed themselves into a collective indigenous agency, while establishing alliances with the National Indigenous and Peasant Organization CONIC. On the other hand, their resistance made CONIC focus more on 'local concerns', after it had been prioritising for over twenty years national expansion and internationalization efforts. This return to local concerns occurs in a qualitatively different context, characterised by the interdependence of local, national and global processes. As a result, the mobilization of the twelve Maya *kaqchikeles* communities in San Juan can be viewed as a localized process of resistance against the increasing global demand for natural resources facilitated by national political and economic elites. This happened in a severely hostile context in which the Guatemalan state failed to fulfil its duties and obligations, while mass media and economic elites were able to initiate a negative campaign against the communities. Despite this, the communities in San Juan Sacatepéquez became a national and continental symbol for the fight against neo-liberalism and for the recognition of indigenous people's rights, Mother Earth and *el buen vivir*.

The mobilization of the twelve Maya *kaqchikeles* communities, in which Maya indigenous identity was a key tool to for unity and resistance, coincided with a similar trend at the national level. Here, the national Maya organizations have forced the Guatemalan state to negotiate about their demands. In addition, it has strengthened public awareness about environmental, social equity, food security and health challenges generated by mining activities thanks to the mobilization of academic sectors, small entrepreneurs and other social actors. It shows that the movement managed to counter the negative media coverage, and rallied for support against the blockade of the cement company in the municipality of San Juan. The study indicates that the reinterpretation of some aspects of Maya *cosmovisión* to the form and substance of social resistance has turned the mobilization into a political and spiritual fight. The leaders of the movement after all are also political and religious leaders in their community; despite their religious differences (various Christian denominations) they share a common understanding of the land as something sacred.

The dialogue especially focused on the role of women in the resistance process. The study mentions that women's participation was increased after intense consultations within the communities on the need to expand the social constituency of the movement. But women also play an important role as direct representatives of Mother Earth. The analysis indicates that despite gender discrimination and racism experienced in their communities, women have been able to strengthen their role as community leaders. Before the resistance started against the mining company, women participation was generally limited to public responsibilities mediated by religious structures or traditional authorities.

The dialogue process had several impacts, on the movement as well as on wider society. First, it contributed to systematize their collective history and memory. Second, since the study took place during the resistance period, it became a learning process that

allowed for a careful analysis of achievements and setbacks. Third, the study identified San Juan Sacatepéquez as a crucial space of resistance, with an impact at the national level with the identification of new knowledges and the generation of new skills. Fourth, the dialogue process helped to build up a plural and de-colonized narrative on Maya people, which are often depicted as disposed, unable to organize, think and build up their own political project. Finally, the process enhanced the understanding of indigenous social movements, their interpretations about land as a living entity (Mother Earth) and their forms and horizons of resistance.

## **5. Common themes amongst the movements**

All three movements analysed in this programme are obviously very different. If only looking at the context, we can see also vast differences between the three countries in terms of socio-political conditions, levels of inequality and political exclusion, and spaces to exercise citizenship rights. Also internally, we recognised different patterns in terms of composition of members, movement strategies, as well as organisational cultures. However, we also found a number of striking common threads. The following reflections are largely based on substantial discussions over the past two years between the three country teams at the range of national and regional meetings. These reflections are also interconnecting the questions set by the three theoretical perspectives discussed in the introduction: how collective action happens, when it takes place, and which meanings frame collective action and how.

The first element that all movements identified as a common theme is that all are in a way ‘anti-systemic’. Their struggle is largely determined by the implications of the neo-liberal model, which had developed so energetically over the past two decades throughout post-civil war Central America. In our regional discussions there was a general feeling of a ‘resurgence’ of social movement activity throughout the region, which essentially tackled the neo-liberal offensive. In the Costa Rican case it was the proposed Free Trade agreement with the United States that triggered a massive protest against the neo-liberal legal framework. In Guatemala it was the transnational mining company that was enabled by this free trade arrangement to enter and distort local indigenous communities. And in even Nicaragua, the women’s movement felt it had been opposing neo-liberal regimes that wanted to depoliticise and fragment the population. Therefore, the general perception was that all three movements were essentially ‘anti-systemic’ and their mobilising capacity was coming from an urge to contribute to social transformation.<sup>20</sup>

A second common element was the issue of ‘territoriality’: all movements appeared to have stronger dynamics at the local (and sub national) level, rather than at the national

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<sup>20</sup> This was the main conclusion of the regional seminar of the ‘Social Movements and Citizenship’ seminar in Antigua (Guatemala) in August 2010, in which all research teams participated.

level. How to explain this? It is striking to discover that there is a tendency for people to join forces especially at the community level, as we have seen with the local 'patriotic committees' in Costa Rica, the local women's groups in Matagalpa, Estelí, and Jinotega, and with the indigenous communities in San Juan Sacatepéquez against the mining company. These are in fact all groups resisting global dynamics (responding to global demands) with largely local organisational structures. Partly this focus away from the national level can be explained by the ICT revolution, which has reduced physical distances and has made local organising and networking with other local groups a lot easier.<sup>21</sup>

A third common point was the problematic relationship with the orthodox left-wing parties. This tension certainly is not new, but still a striking feature in the three movements. In Nicaragua, the women's movement openly distanced itself from the Sandinista party FSLN, of which many had been active members since the rebellion against Somoza in the 1970s. The majority of the women's groups gradually decided to break with the party in the 1990s as it tried to instrumentalise the women's movement (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2010). In Costa Rica, with a strong bipartisan system, the anti-CAFTA campaign was careful in being co-opted by any of the dominant parties. It did generate the rapid growth of a new citizen's-oriented party, the Citizen's Action Party (established in 2000), which became the biggest opposition party after the 2010 general elections. In Guatemala, the indigenous movement is still in the process of creating a stronger autonomy vis-à-vis the traditional revolutionary parties of the URNG, which have been weakened severely in the post-war years. This was inevitably leading to a more critical approach towards a belief in a common utopia, *una utopía única*, as the Nicaraguan women's groups called it (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2010: 68-9). A more realistic discourse was entering movement discussions. Much of this was centred on the concept of *buen vivir* ('living well'), which originates from indigenous conceptualizations of finding an equilibrium between human beings and nature.<sup>22</sup> It had been used by the Zapatistas in Mexico, by indigenous movements in Bolivia and Peru, but also by Maya organizations in Guatemala as a critique to modernization and the growth principle of capitalist expansion (Walsh, 2007).

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<sup>21</sup> Civic agency generally tends to originate from local levels, since 'civic energy' derives basically from individual citizens that organise in order to undertake civic action affecting their community interests. The term is coming from Hirschmann's 'social energy' and applied to the community, hence the term 'civic' (Fowler and Biekart, 2011).

<sup>22</sup> "*Buen vivir*, in its most general sense, organizes and constructs a life-system based on the communion of beings (human and otherwise) and nature, on the intimate ties and harmonious co-existence among beings and nature, between the tangible and intangible, the organic and inorganic, the divine and the human; among knowledges, the earth, ancestors, and the cosmos. It points toward a correlation, complementarity and reciprocity with the rest in harmony, respect, dignity and continuous relation. In this sense, the individual as such has little significance. He or she is not separate from, but an integral part of nature." (Interview with Catherine Walsh available at: <http://www.sidint.net/interview-with-catherine-walsh-human-development-and-buen-vivir/>). See also Walsh (2007).

A fourth feature that came up in the regional discussions was the changing role of national and local leaders within the various movements. A shift had taken place in which leaders apparently maintained a more open and self-critical position towards their constituency. This was likely an effect of the more loose relationships between movements and political parties, but possibly it was also influenced by a new generation of leadership that confronts the older generations more critically. In Nicaragua this was very clear with the open questioning of the rather vocal role of several national leaders, identified as “one of the most sensitive issues in the non-public domain of the movement, which has generated some of the fiercest contradictions since the 1990s” (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2009: 121). In Guatemala, where the indigenous movement is still quite divided, this debate was also starting, even though it was still very much a debate behind closed doors.<sup>23</sup>

We also identified a fifth common characteristic: the heterogeneity within the movements is becoming more visible. There seems to be a constant tension between a general desire for unity in the movement, and consensual politics, versus the need for respecting diversity, internal debate, and guarantees that various viewpoints can co-exist. This is also a break with past left-wing orthodoxy, in which democratic centralism demanded a common voice without much discussion. The current setting of heterogeneity offers a fertile ground for internal knowledge dialogues: if you want to generate non-traditional and ‘other’ types of knowledges (in Spanish: *otros saberes*), then of course you need to have themes to disagree on. Outsiders would characterise this diversity as ‘fragmentation’, but the movements emphasised that nowadays this should be seen rather as a token of strength. In fact, all three movements demonstrated an original view on knowledge production, in which open debate is central. Increased critique to traditional (‘Western’) forms of knowledge generation has apparently helped to perceive activists also as knowledge producers and thinkers, rather than delegating knowledge production tasks entirely to academics (Sousa Santos and Meneses, 2007).

## **6. Findings and viewpoints**

In the previous pages a synthesis was provided of the main findings of the three studies. We also gave an overview of common issues and trends that were identified by the research teams in the joint regional meetings. It is emphasised again that these findings have been generated in close cooperation and consultation with the movements themselves, rather by external analysts or commentators. This knowledge dialogue was an integrated part of the participatory research process in order to avoid the ‘extraction’ of findings from the movements. However, we felt that as research ‘facilitators’ we would also have to provide our views on this participatory exercise. Even though we hesitate to reflect ‘about’ the movements, adding our views can be complementary in the process of analysing the results of the knowledge dialogue. We are conscious of the

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<sup>23</sup> According to one of the key Guatemalan human rights leaders, Antigua August 2010.

fact that our analysis is informed by our own social location in the position of knowledge production as academics based in a Europe-based development research institute. Inevitably, this defines and limits our interpretations, but nonetheless they hopefully contribute to an ongoing research process. The following sections will first review the three central research questions, outlined at the start of the paper. In the final section of this paper we will then offer some lessons that we believe can be relevant for academics, practitioners, as well as social activists.

### ***6.1 Dynamics of civil society formation***

Based on the previous assessment of common features, we can now look more specifically at the dynamics of civil society formation. The study examined the particular dynamics of *how* social movements were formed and have evolved in the three cases. All three movements can be labelled as emerging from the 'non-traditional' sectors of society. The reason they became so prominent was partly because the traditional social movements (peasants, industrial workers, public sector employees) had been severely weakened by neo-liberal adjustment policies in the 1990s. Another reason was that these movements were less radically searching for social transformation compared to many movements of the 1970s in Central America. Out of the massive popular movements of the 1970s, and due to the lack of political articulation of their reform demands, eventually armed revolutionary groups emerged (Biekart, 1999: 145-54). After two decades of civil war and brutal repression throughout the region, the lesson for the 'new' social movements was clear: resistance and struggle by violent means no longer was an issue. The three movements had broken with these principles as well as with the idea of a leading role for a revolutionary party, let alone – as we have seen above – a prominent role for an all-embracing ideology.

The findings further suggest that the movements are not only post-war oriented and promoting non-traditional ideologies, but that they are rooted in a rather different national and regional context, which is characterised by increased inequality and growing polarisation. The current level of political repression and exclusion cannot be compared to the extreme situation of the past, which possibly explains why the diversity amongst movements, but also within movements, is thriving. The more limited role of political parties within the movements has two different impacts. On the one hand, it makes it more difficult for these movements to articulate their demands for political reform at the level of political society. It makes the movements more contentious and therefore more often triggering confrontations with the authorities.

On the other hand, a greater autonomy from the orthodox left wing parties has meant a boost to debates on strategic and organisational issues. The move away from the 'one-single-party, -leader, and -ideology' model has meant that traditional 'organic intellectuals' are playing a more self-critical role in the public domain. They have moved away from the party-discipline, as in Nicaragua with the FSLN, and are identifying closer

with extra parliamentary groups and movements. In Costa Rica, academics also played an important role in the provision of arguments for the anti-CAFTA campaign. In this sense, Guatemala is somewhat different: there is still a pattern of *doble militancia* (being committed to the party and the movement at the same time), plus that it is not yet safe in Guatemala to express any self-criticism without serious repercussions.<sup>24</sup>

One of the elements often leading to confusion in the dialogues was to understand the difference between ‘movement’ and ‘organization’ (see also Sogge and Dütting, 2009). It is important to acknowledge again that social movements themselves are processes of social transformation, since they are constructed around explicit ideas and identities. However, movements have no elected or appointed leaders, they cannot be ‘founded’ (nor ‘funded’), nor can they be formally disbanded. The constituent parts of the movement (communities, committees, associations) can indeed claim successes, can receive funding, and can write press statements. But movements themselves are expressions of something that is ‘moving’, and as soon as this stagnates, they often stop being movements. This is especially valid for the Costa Rican case, where the idea of the movement after the referendum became a source of inspiration and an indication that change through social mobilisation actually also was possible in a ‘pacified’ country like Costa Rica. The Costa Rican case suggests that the movement ‘as an idea’ continued, but that the mobilising potential rapidly diluted after the referendum was lost: from a movement it ‘re-transformed’ into a network of committees and citizens groups.

The three movements thus have in common that they are expressions of a ‘new’ social movement, ideologically less dogmatic, and organisationally more scattered. Even if they perceive themselves as ‘anti-systemic’ and movements for ‘social transformation’, we see them also (especially in the case of Costa Rica) as a collection of citizens-based groups, aimed at rather specific and medium-term goals. Even though their demands and contextual constraints are rather different, in the regional workshops they appeared to have many affinities in the way in which they dealt with internal tension and/or external pressure. The driving force behind the formation of these ‘movements’, constructed out of a multitude of smaller groups, is in all cases an explicit demand to respect human rights and deal with oppression (Guatemala, Nicaragua), and/or to demand specific legislative (Nicaragua) or constitutional (Costa Rica) reform. To what extent they were successful in their struggle and mobilisation efforts, will be dealt with below. But we will first examine the role of external actors.

## **6.2 Role of external actors**

A distinction will have to be made between the role of international and national external actors, even though the two are often closely related. We will start with the international actors. In fact, all three movements received directly – or via their

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<sup>24</sup> Based on discussions at the regional seminar in Antigua, Guatemala, August 2010.

members, including local NGOs – some form of international financial support, often combined with technical assistance. For the Costa Rican citizens groups this international support was rather marginal, as donors had left Costa Rica already a decade earlier (Biekart, 2007). Moreover, the organisations that were still getting limited grants from international donors often were part of regional or continental networks.<sup>25</sup>

In the case of Nicaragua this international support was much larger and certainly more influential: as a result of increased support in the 1990s, many new feminist NGOs had been established with international donor support. This support was very important in order to guarantee a certain level of autonomy of women's groups from the FSLN, but also their survival at moments of extreme aggression by the Sandinista regime. In addition, several women's collectives and smaller associations converted into more legal NGO structures, as this was a key requirement of external donors to receive large funding. The result was the start of a so-called process of NGO-isation of the women's movement, which is still a typical feature of the Nicaraguan movement up to the current moment (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2009: 108-10). However, this NGO-isation was of a quite different nature compared to, for example, Africa. The Nicaraguan feminist NGOs (such as *Puntos de Encuentro* or *Si-Mujer*) indeed had a broad constituency throughout the country, and in that sense were strongly rooted in Nicaraguan society. But also the regional groups, such as *Colectivo de Mujeres de Matagalpa*, which technically speaking could be labelled as NGOs, basically operated as local membership organisations. These organisations received between the early 1990s and the mid-2000s substantial international aid resources, especially from European and Canadian NGOs, including the Dutch NGOs Hivos and Oxfam-Novib.

For Guatemala a distinction has to be made between the national and the local level. The Maya organisations operating at the national level, such as CONIC and CUC, have been closely working with international donor agencies since the early 1990s. They received substantial funding, and were also intimately linked to international advocacy networks, which was essential for the politically vulnerable organisations in Guatemala. They also used this funding to support their constituencies at the local level, often politically inspired and competing with other national networks. Direct international donor support to the local level outside these networks was rather unusual (see the case of the San Juan Sacatepéquez communities) and often limited to support by the various churches.

The role of 'external' national actors is a different story. In Guatemala, the indigenous peasant organization CONIC clearly has been one of the key pillars of (and a source of

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<sup>25</sup> Examples are the NGO network on popular education ALFORJA, or the communication cooperative *Sula Batsú*, both participating in this study. At the start of the study in 2008, Hivos even denied that it was at all indirectly financing the anti-CAFTA movement, which probably illustrates the limited magnitude of this support.

inspiration for) the new indigenous movement. The same goes for the human rights organisation CALDH, which has done courageous work to contribute to legal and social justice after the genocide of the early 1980s. Both organisations were central to our study, and participated actively in the ‘land and territory’ discussion focusing on the highland communities. But with the communities of San Juan Sacatepéquez an ambivalent relationship existed: CONIC and CALDH were allies in the struggle to get national recognition, but at times they were also perceived as being external actors.<sup>26</sup>

Other external actors that had been important in the construction of these movements were national media, political parties, churches, but also state institutions and international bodies such as UNDP. In Costa Rica the role of internet and social media was very important for social mobilising.<sup>27</sup> But equally important were local radio stations, playing a vital role in informing communities and patriotic committees in rural areas, where the (government-owned) national media had lost their credibility. In Nicaragua, the radio stations of the opposition actively covered the campaign of the women’s movement. Their success was illustrated by the fact that the government temporarily closed them down in October 2008.

In fact, the issue of ‘external support’ to movements has both a financial and a more political angle. The financial dimension is obvious: movements always require financial resources to make organisations run, to cover for transport expenses, to facilitate research or legal action. One of the Guatemalan participants in the study commented: “Whether we find it problematic or not, as social movements we cannot deny that we need the resources of the agencies of international cooperation; this implies that we will always have to negotiate with these donors”.<sup>28</sup> But it was felt also that international funding was rapidly decreasing and that it was important to try to maintain international advocacy support through a range of thematic networks. The financial support increasingly would have to come from self-generating methods, largely from local sources and solidarity support directly from those involved in change processes.<sup>29</sup> The fact that the question about the role of external actors was least discussed in the Central American knowledge dialogues probably tells the whole story.

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<sup>26</sup> This was visible in the heated discussion about the acceptance of the final study report by the communities, in which CONIC and CALDH were criticized of jumping too quickly to conclusions (elaborate on this later, as soon as we have more news...).

<sup>27</sup> In particular news sites such as *Ticonoticias*, but also *El Pais* and CNN, who apparently provided more credible information than the main national newspapers and television stations.

<sup>28</sup> According to an activist from the human rights organization CALDH at the Antigua regional seminar (Guatemala, August 2010).

<sup>29</sup> This had been the experience in Honduras during the protests against the Zelaya coup in 2009, during which the street marches were organized with locally collected resources as well as food packages. International agencies were unable to play a major role here.



### **6.3 Movements and structural social change**

The third central question of the study was related to the relevance of the movement dynamics for change: have these movements been successful in bringing about structural social-political changes? This question is rather broad, and in the course of the study we decided to focus on a more direct question: were substantial advances made by the three movements in their national processes of change? Of course, we are conscious that many factors play a role in determining the outcome of social change. However, the question was addressed and discussed at our regional seminar in August 2010 in Guatemala in which all the three research teams participated, as well as during the 'Knowledge and Change' conference in The Hague (September 2010).

In the case of Costa Rica, the anti-CAFTA movement represented the largest social mobilisation in the country since the mid 1940s, when a similar movement requesting democratic reform had been successful (and even managed to abolish the armed forces). The direct objective of the anti-CAFTA movement was not achieved: the free trade agreement was accepted in the national referendum. However, the energetic mobilisation had inspired many groups to join the movement: it had shown that citizens were able to organise themselves to counter an arrogant government that did not want to listen to the objections to CAFTA. The movement also indirectly challenged the bipartisan political system, giving a boost to the new Citizens Action Party.<sup>30</sup>

The Nicaraguan women's movement showed a similar pattern: it was less successful in achieving its immediate objective, to stop the penalization of therapeutic abortion. But it did achieve another objective, and that was to put the issue of 'full citizenship for all' central on the political agenda. As the researchers demonstrated, the women's movement in recent years managed to become one of the most important extra-parliamentarian opposition movements in Nicaragua, and the first to pinpoint at the undemocratic tendencies within the former revolutionary Sandinista party FSLN. But more than in the political sphere, where it actually did not get lots of support from other social forces, campaigns against domestic violence did have a lasting impact on the popular awareness about sexual and reproductive rights, on perceptions and values related to women, and in terms of the inequality, discrimination and social intolerance practiced against women and sexual minorities (Cuadra and Jiménez, 2009: 130).

In Guatemala the situation is different. Here, the national Maya movement, as well as local community organisations, recognise that major success is still to be achieved. One of the key indicators for success of the movement, as some of the participants commented, would be the future election of a president with indigenous origins, in a country in which the majority has indigenous roots. So far, this perspective seems to be

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<sup>30</sup> In fact, the anti-CAFTA movement likely contributed to a multitude of smaller policy changes, such as for example the prohibition shortly after the referendum to construct a large marina in Limón, close to a nature reserve.

obscured by a corrupt political system in which candidates can simply buy a presidential position as long as they get enough support from the country's elite. Transnational companies are therefore still very influential. The indigenous movement is still rather divided and has not yet been able to articulate its political potential.

The question whether these social movements have contributed to improve the situation of the marginalised and excluded cannot really be answered on the basis of the synthesis above, nor on the basis of the country reports. Expectations about their influence have been elevated and the danger exists that answers are mainly guided by wishful thinking. However, we do believe that the various examples have shown the intentions of the movements to stand for the rights and demands of the marginalised and underprivileged. Social transformation will, however, require more fundamental changes in the political and socio-economic structures in each country, which is a slow and complex process. In the final section, we point at a number of lessons that can be learned for our dialogue process that possibly can bring the discussion about the role of social movements in these change processes a step further.

## **7. Lessons for the future**

In this last section we propose a number of lessons that can be learned from this knowledge dialogue. Again, it has to be emphasised that the movements themselves have drawn valuable lessons from their own reflection process, which is probably the most important outcome of this knowledge programme. Below, we propose four possible lessons for future knowledge dialogues with social movements, and between researchers, and practitioners, and activists.

(1) A knowledge dialogue (*diálogo de saberes*) is a complex undertaking that requires careful preparation and active involvement of activists as well as (local) researchers. The knowledge dialogue as a participatory tool is indeed linked to the emergence of attempts towards reflection within social movements (Leyva Solando and Speed, 2008; Escobar 2008). In other words, the present programme would have been unthinkable three decades ago, when movements were closed and tightly linked to a party discipline. The structural changes stimulated by the three social movements can therefore be located in a new 'politics of knowledge generation'. For example, in Guatemala, the re-adaptation of participatory methodologies contributed to challenge hegemonic interpretations (commonly reproduced by academics, donors, and state agencies) on indigenous people as being disposed and unable to follow their own political project.

(2) Starting up an internal reflection process requires an open leadership that agrees to provide room for opposing views. The three movements demonstrated the existence of multiple foci of leadership: this heterogeneity seemed to be a direct result of a larger autonomy from orthodox political parties, giving room for more internal diversity of

strategies, and therefore more diversity in the leadership structure. But in a context of repression this internal diversity can also undermine the dialogue process: a movement will in principle always prioritise efforts that strengthen a movement. However, the central struggle is not about positions but about ideas. Therefore it is really important to make a distinction between 'organizations' (in which leaders have institutional interests to defend vis-à-vis the members that elected them) and 'movements', which have neither self-appointed leadership nor strict institutional restrictions.

(3) Participatory approaches and knowledge dialogues should not be idealised as the new mantra for knowledge production. Generating knowledges through dialogue and participation, involving a multitude of stakeholders, can be a slow and messy process, often generating more frustration than knowledge. High expectations about the outcomes are seldom realised, since success depends on a range of hardly controllable variables. It is much easier to hire a consultant for three months to 'extract' all the information required and put this in a well-written and neatly edited report. This is probably cheaper, more efficient, and leads to more visible results. However, we are quite sure, based on our knowledge dialogues, that traditional consultancy approaches are less likely to generate knowledge *from within* the movements that will also benefit the movement *itself* (rather than only the consultant).

(4) The distinction between 'new' and 'old' social movements is blurry and needs to be problematised. In many aspects the 'new' movements are still featuring many 'old' characteristics. They often rely on rather traditional charismatic leaders (even though they have multiple, and many young and promising leaders). They promote 'diversity' and internal debate when 'unity' is often required to be effective. They call for self-reflection even though they prefer to keep the dirty laundry inside. The new social movements are in theory run by those not directly affected by their actions, but in practice this is often the other way around. There is indeed less of a link with the orthodox left, but we also have seen that this is for many still a reference point. In other words, we have to rethink the categories 'old' and 'new' and come up with more 'hybrid' categories that do justice to the practice of social mobilisation in Central America.

(5) The question remains how and whether donors such as Hivos should (continue to) support social movements, including their constituent parts. The study suggests that the role of donors in forging and expanding social movements has been limited. Only in the case of Nicaragua did donors play a key role, but looking back, this role was probably at an earlier stage (1990s) and certainly not at moments in which the movement was maturing. The lesson is that Hivos will have to think through better what type of support is needed at which stage of a movements' evolution. Accepting that the role of external donors is limited, Hivos and other donors can probably expand their role by facilitating networking and knowledge production

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