Civil Society in Nicaragua

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Contents

Introduction

This working paper is mainly based on two reports commissioned by the Service Centre for Development Cooperation (KEPA) in 2006 to clarify the role of civil society in Nicaragua and with an additional focus on the Autonomous Region of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. KEPA cooperates with a number of local organisations in Nicaragua with a particular focus on the most impoverished area of the country, the Caribbean Region, which is divided into the Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic (Región Autonoma del Atlantico Norte – RAAN) and the Autonomous Region of the South Atlantic (Región Autonoma del Atlantico Sur – RAAS). This covers some 45% of the national territory and is inhabited by various ethnic and indigenous groups.

The reports are written by two separate independent experts on civil society in Nicaragua, Ana Quirós Viquez and Miriam Hooker Coe, on the basis of a series of questions presented in the Terms of Reference provided by KEPA[1]. Axel Borchgrevink's report on civil society in Nicaragua has been used as an additional source of information.[2] The information provided by these three writers has been compiled in this paper with the aim of giving a summarised description of civil society in Nicaragua. The same structure used in the reports of Ana Quirós and Miriam Hooker Coe has been repeated in this paper.

Defining civil society is a complex and contradictory matter. It includes a myriad of features, such as being everything that is not the state, market or the family. Some analysts want to include citizens' rights and citizenship. Ana Quirós considers civil society in her report to be everything that is not the state, market or the family and, additionally, it has to do with some manner of social organisation or association, networks, civil non-profit organisations, unions and cooperatives. For practical reasons, a number of actors have been left out of the analysis, namely universities, educational institutions, market oriented organisations, and churches (of all denominations). Axel Borchgrevink also leaves out religious organisations, the media and educational institutions from his definition of civil society, stressing a focus on the associational sector of society. In the Caribbean Region Civil Society Committees include representatives of both the denominational churches and the universities of the autonomous regions. Hence, to define actors of civil society various concepts are commonly used. In this working paper concept of non-governmental organisation (NGO) refers to such organisations that usually are officially registered and development or advocacy oriented organisations, and civil society organisation (CSO) is used as a general concept to cover all actors of civil society.

Brief history of civil society in Nicaragua

The history of civil society in Nicaragua can be divided into roughly four eras: the period before 1979, the 1980s, the period from 1990 to 1995, and the period from 1995 to 2006.

The period before 1979

The oldest CSOs in Nicaragua, which date back to the 1950s-1960s, aimed to provide basic public services in central sectors of society. They were private, non-profit organisations with a distinct character of Christian aid. The first of these was Caritas established in the 1950s. Some organisations founded at this time were based on the idea of social justice. The Somoza regime[3] did not support the existence of an autonomous civil society in any form. Efforts at furthering the development of civil society were, on the contrary, quelled and organisations and individu-

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1 Quirós, Ana (2006) La Sociedad Civil Organizada en Nicaragua, Composición y Experiencia en la Reducción de la Pobreza. KEPA's Working Papers no. 9. KEPA: Helsinki; Hooker Coe, Miriam (2006) Consulta sobre la Sociedad Civil de las Regiones Autónomas de la Costa Caribe de Nicaragua. KEPA's Working Papers no. 10. KEPA: Helsinki. Both reports are available at http://www.kepa.fi/palvelut/julkaisut/taustaselvitykset.

2 Axel Borchgrevink (2006) A Sudy of Civil Society in Nicaragua: A Report Commissioned by NORAD. NUPI Paper no. 699. The Norwegian Institute of International Affairs, NUPI: Oslo, 2006

3 The Somoza regime was a political dynasty that represented 33 years of presidency in Nicaragua. The first dynasty member was Anastasio Somoza, followed by his sons Luis Somoza Debayle and Anastasio Somoza Debayle. The regime was defeated by the Sandinista National Liberation Front in 1979 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Somoza, 05.04.2007)

als working in this field were persecuted. The government and certain liberal party supporters backed up a number of organisational initiatives that corresponded to their particular interests, such as trade unions, youth groups, farmers' groups and others. They were co-opted by the government and were linked to charity. The aim of the government was to win back the favour of the unions.

There was a variety of labour unions with varied political orientations. Little or no formal cooperation existed between them, nor between any of the organisations that were operational during this time period. The legal guidelines of these organisations were set by civil law. No particular legislation was created to regulate the operations of civil organisations. Some social movements and labour organisations distinctly opposed to the Somoza regime did emerge and were later transformed into organisations of the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Naciónal – FSL)[4] like the Luisa Amanda Espinoza Association of Nicaraguan Women (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses Luisa Amanda Espinoza – AMNLAE), Industrial and Sandinista Workers' Centre (Centro Sandinista de Trabajadores - CST), The Teachers' Union (Asociación Nacional de Educadores de Nicaragua – ANDEN), among others.

The period 1979–1989

From the Sandinista Revolution onwards, opportunities opened up for participation and organisation. The few non-governmental organisations that existed in the country experienced a favourable climate for implementing development strategies, although most of the social work conducted was within the governmental arena. Civil Society Organisations (CSO) were actively involved in making achievements in the social arena through their involvement with communities and the promotion of organisational skills and development efforts. Also, other organisations emerged that were affiliated with the revolutionary ideals, but had no formal

organised relationship with the Sandinista Front for National Liberation (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional - FSL). Organisations opposed to the FSL were also founded.

The first attempt at formal coordination between CSOs came in the beginning of the 1980s among organisations affiliated to the ideology of Augusto Sandino through a campaign which eventually, by the end of the decade, lead to the establishment of the Federation of Nicaraguan Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) (Federación de ONG de Nicaragua – FONG). It consisted of about 10 organisations interested in international cooperation and solidarity efforts.

The Sandinista government actively promoted different organisational forms for all age groups and social strata in society. The focal point of these activities was, above all, to support the revolutionary process. It was not successful in heeding social demands and suggestions. These organisations were clearly dependent on the party (FSL) and the state both politically and socially. Also, those opposed to the government tried to develop some forms of social organisation, but were unable to clearly state their social demands. Instead, they directed criticism and accusations towards the government for what they considered to be "the abuses of the Sandinistas".

Regardless of the political perspective, society started recognising the necessity, utility and advantages of being organised. Of equal importance was the institutional and formal recognition of the fact that the Nicaraguan political system, within its institutional structure, defined itself as a representative and participatory democracy.

The period 1990–1996

When the FSL suffered election defeat and the governing period of the liberal party president Violeta Chamorro[5] was initiated, a general liberalisation of the economy and re-structuring of the state took place. The change of government meant a rapid change of circumstances for those employed by the previous government and working in social organisations linked to the FSL.

Many individuals involved in social sector organisations thus decided to establish and register

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4 The Sandinista Front for National Liberation (Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional - FSL) was a leftist party that in 1979 led a revolution to overthrow the political dynasty of the Somoza regime. They ruled Nicaragua for 11 years, from 1979 to 1990. The FSL took its name from the leader Augusto César Sandino, who led the country's rebellion against the US invasion of Nicaragua in the early 1920s (http://en.wikipedia. org/wiki/Sandinista, 05.04.2007)

5 Violeta Barrios Chamorro of the National Opposition Union ended the 11-year ruling period of the FSL in 1990 when she won the presidential elections. Her term in office lasted until 1997 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Violeta_Chamorro, 05.04.2007).

new non-profit organisations and foundations to ensure the continuity of work planned, to secure their continued employment in the sector and to provide them the possibility to work with impoverished sectors of the population.

Equally, a number of organisations that had emerged in the 1980s acquired legal status and were formally registered in the beginning of the 1990s. Many of the "mass organisations" became NGOs although they had a member corps and characteristics that differed significantly from that of traditional NGOs. This was carried out as a survival measure that made it possible for them to acquire funding to continue working.

In the beginning of her term in office Violeta Chamorro treated NGOs with suspicion and prejudice. The government aimed for maximum control of these organisations in order to acquire their funding for governmental activities. At the same time, some organisations started a gradual dissociation with the ideologies of the FSL, although many of them retained a political affinity with the party.

The Federation of NGOs, which was the only coordinating body of NGOs, did not encourage coordination between these organisations and they continued to be a restricted group. On the other hand, there was a number of coordination efforts that arose among the organisations formerly affiliated with the FSL. Some of these organisations survived while others discontinued their activities. Efforts to unite organisations were mainly based on working within similar thematic areas, such as the coordinating body of organisations working with children (CODENI), the Youth Council, networks of women's organisations, the Coordinating body of Environmental Organisations, and the National Commission of civil society working for the Prevention of AIDS.

At the same time, there were a number of organisations working with human rights and civic education, supported by USAID. Trade unions and mass organisations created in the 1980s experienced a loss of influence due to a loss of governmental funding support. Many of the members started developing alternative activities more geared towards their own specific interests. In relation to trade unions the formal labour force diminished significantly and in many cases the FSL leadership had a questionable role during various conflict negotiations.

There was growing pressure on the government to establish spaces for participation and consultation with CSOs. The National Health Council was created and statements were issued on Nicaragua's stance in international meetings and conferences. Organisations started challenging the state to increase organisation and participation in terms of CSOs-state relations. The level of participation was limited to negotiations and short meetings rather than a serious, sustained process of dialogue because there was a lack of trust between the CSOs and the state.

Despite these difficulties, there were a number of achievements, such as the approval of the General Law on the Environment and Natural Resources No. 217; working with the Ministry of Health towards the approval of Law 238 on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights in Relation to HIV/AIDS; Law of 1996 to protect the human rights of non-smokers; placing gender violence on the public agenda and ratifying the Convention to Approve the Prevention and Elimination of All forms of Violence Directed Towards Women and the approval of law 230; and mainstreaming of the National Commission on the Protection of Childhood and later the approval of the Child law.

The period from 1997 onwards

When Arnoldo Alemán's term in office6[6] began in 1997 state-NGO relations were once again characterised by tension. Alemán considered NGOs to be instruments of the opposition and the government, thus, aimed to control and diminish the autonomy of NGOs through a variety of legislative means. Pressure enacted by donors, national NGOs and the FSL prevented this from being implemented.

The rate of appearance of new organisations tapered off although the liberal party started creating new foundations and associations. Most of them did not get legally registered. At the same time, in response to the control measures enacted by the government, national organisations strove to establish and strengthen opportunities for coordination between civil society organisations on a global level. The coordinating body of NGOs (Coordinadora de ONGs) managed to transcend the problem of the sectarian practice of the Federation of Nicaraguan NGOs (Federación de ONG de Nicaragua - FONG) in order to bring

6 Arnoldo Alemán was president from 1997 to 2002. He represents the Constitutionalist Liberal Party of Nicaragua (formerly called the Liberal party). He was preceded by president Violeta Chamorro and succeeded by Enrique Bolaños (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arnoldo_Alem%C3%A1n, 05.04.2007)

about better working conditions for NGOs. The Network of Women Against Violence (Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia) was strengthened and started amplifying its scope of work by focusing on the theme of overall human rights of women and democracy.

Attempts were made to develop a national dialogue between the government, the political parties and the civil society organisations in order to deal with major problems affecting the country, but the process was not successful. Government-NGO relations became visible again when Hurricane Mitch hit Nicaragua and there was a need for a united image and voice in the country to deal with disaster efforts and post-disaster work. The Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstrucción (Civil Coordinating body for Emergencies and Reconstruction) emerged as a network of networks whose task was to integrate diverse thematic forces and dispersed sectors facing the emergency situation and the governmental stance to the crisis.

Many organisations continued developing a more autonomous position vis á vis the FSL, and among some women's organisations there was a felt need to distance oneself from the FSL due to accusations of sexual harassment and abuse directed towards the Secretary General of the party, Daniel Ortega.

As a result of pressure enacted by Nicaraguan organisations and international cooperation, the Statement on the Creation of a National Council of Economic and Social Planning (Decreto Creador del Consejo Nacional de Planificación Económica y Social – CONPES) was developed and was up and running in 1999. At that time it was the only space for citizens' participation that appears in the Political Constitution defined as a consultative arena that advises the president on economic and social programmes and policies. During President Enrique Bola ños term in office the legal framework for institutionalised civil society participation was broadened through the Law for Citizen Participation (No 475, Ley de Participacion Ciudadana) passed in 2003. The law defines citizen participation as "the process of involvement of social actors as individuals or collectively, with the objective and purpose of participating in the management, decision making and design of public policies in the different levels of the administration of the national territory and the public institutions, the aim being to achieve sustainable human development together with the state."

Characteristics of civil society organisations

Legal framework

The legal context within which Nicaraguan civil society organisations (CSOs) function is broad and forms part of the right to organise oneself stated in the Political Constitution (Constitución Política de Nicaragua) under article 49. The Civil Code (Código Civil) also enforces this by declaring that individuals have the right to organise themselves in a manner they consider suitable and with the resources that are available as long as they do not violate the law.

Trade unions and cooperatives are regulated through particular legislation and their registration procedure is controlled by the Ministry of Labour. All other forms of organisational activity are regulated by law number 147, the Law of Non-Profit Civil Associations that are registered and controlled by the Ministry of the Interior. This legal framework provides a distorted picture of reality because the ministry controls organisational forms that are very diverse. More than 3,300 associations, foundations and federations are registered with the Ministry of the Interior and many of these are definitely not operational. With the present system it is impossible for the ministry to judge which organisations are operating. At the same time, there are functioning organisations that are not formally registered. The reason why some organisations opt out of formal registration is that the procedure is too complicated and/or that it is a political decision taken by the member corps, as in the case of the Women's Network on Violence Against Women, the Commission of Civil Society Working for the Prevention of AIDS and the Civil Coordinating Body. A more recent law (number 475) has simplified the registration procedure for community-based organisations.

Coalitions and quantity of civil society organisations

Trade unions and centres

A total of 513 trade unions and trade union centres were registered with the Ministry of Labour in 2005. The number has decreased drastically since the 1980's when the number of registered unions and union centres was as high as 6 000. The Ministry of Labour only has membership information on recently registered unions, which illustrates that unions on average have 40 member organisations per union. It is probable that the older unions have a larger member base, but it is impossible to get exact numbers. An important change seen in the sector is that at present there are 21 federations or trade union centres compared to seven in the period before 1979. This indicates a significant fragmentation of the sector. The leaders of various centres recognise the need to join forces and unite, but, nonetheless, most centres act independently and are influenced by the party political ideologies that their leaders represent.

Cooperatives

Cooperatives are also registered with the Ministry of Labour, but here too the information available is limited and in many cases out-dated. The National Federation of Cooperatives (Federación Nacional de Cooperativas – FENACOOP), established in the 1990s, states that its membership primarily consists of 620 rural cooperatives. Most cooperatives of the 1980s were rural based and focused on the agricultural sector. A total of 490 new cooperatives were registered with the Ministry of Labour between 2003 and 2005 with a membership of 16,000 individuals. There is now an increase in urban-based cooperatives (out of the 490 new cooperatives 219 were rural-based and 208 urban-based).

Civil non-profit organisations

The Ministry of the Interior announced in 2006 that a total of 3,300 non-profit associations were registered with them. The register is not open to public access so it is difficult to check the nature and number of organisations included in it.

Researchers and individuals working in the sector have developed a manner of categorising the organisations, but even so, it is at times difficult to differentiate between the different organisations. They have been grouped accordingly:

1. Traditional NGOs, their coalitions and federations
2. Religious groups linked to the Catholic Church totalling some 600 organisations. Most operate as church-based groups and some as NGOs.
3. Universities and educational institutions totalling about100. This is one of the most rapidly growing groups due to the explosive increase in private universities and educational institutions.
4. International NGOs totalling about 300.
5. Employers' organisations like labour union associations of employers, totalling some 300.
6. Associations of professionals and interest groups developed for exchange of information, communication on and defence of special interests. This is a large and diverse group including parents of children with disabilities, war veterans, former institutional employers, retired individuals, people living with HIV and AIDS, associations of ethnic groups. This category totals 300 organisations.
7. Social clubs, cultural and sport associations, totalling about 200 organisations.
8. Community and service based organisations, about 200 registered organisations.
9. Commercial groups like funeral homes, about 50 organisations.

Less than one third of the 3,000 organisations registered with the Ministry of the Interior come under the normal definition of NGOs. Organisations have demanded that the legislation on registration of organisations be made more precise so that it would more clearly reflect the reality of organisational work in Nicaragua. A more precise and complete overview of organisations is provided by the NGO directory developed by the Support Centre of Programmes and Projects (Centro de Apoyo a Programas y Proyectos – CAPRI) since the 1990s. The directory classifies the work of organisations on the basis of the thematic work areas they cover and the extent

of the activities they carry out. A total of seven directories have been published. Because the filling out of the questionnaire sent out to organisations by CAPRI is voluntary it limits the potential scope of the classification work.

Who is who in the civil society sector today

There are a variety of organisational forms, levels of activity and degree of formality represented by the Nicaraguan civil society organisations. This section will outline the nature of these various categories.

Association of settlers:

This is a recent phenomenon in the public sphere. It is not known how these associations have been treated in various municipalities or by the municipal authorities. Some have had a rather temporary role on the local level. Once the coverage expands and more time has passed these associations may be afforded the recognition and potential significance they can play on a local level.

Trade unions and trade union centres:

Although they continue to play a significant role in terms of numbers of members, their political clout has diminished in recent years. This is partially due to the diminishing role of state system, which has been proceeding since the 1990s and also related to employers policies aimed at restricting the freedom of unions and recruitment methods that discourage organisation of the labour force. Part of the deterioration seen within the sector has to do with bad management within trade unions. Links between union leadership and the government, political parties and other political groups has significantly influenced the way trade unions have functioned rather than them heeding member needs and demands. Other problems have been linked to fragmentation within the sector, decision-making mechanisms, electing leadership and accounting of union income.

Cooperatives:

The peak activity period occurred in the 1980s when the majority of cooperatives were geared towards agricultural production and obtaining land through the agrarian reforms promoted by the Sandinista revolution. Other, more recent cooperatives that emerged in the 1990s were formed by people displaced by the armed forces and the resistance movement and also focused on the agricultural sector. Their goal is more of an economic nature and to secure benefits and privileges outlined by the legislation like tax cuts. In recent years the number of cooperatives has increased, particularly those in the urban areas that focus on service provision, including transport services. This is the most belligerent part of the cooperative sector, although its struggles and demands have received less and less support from the citizens.

In terms of citizens' participation the cooperative sector has not played a belligerent role within public policy making outside of its direct area of interest. It has, though, played an active role as a critical voice in discussions on the Free Trade Agreement of Central America through demands placed by the National Federation of Coopertives (Federación Nacional de Coopertivas – FENACOOP).

Religious denominations:

Particularly organisations representing the Catholic Church have during certain periods and governments had an important political role within public policy making. In recent years this influence has diminished, excluding the governing period of president Bolaños, which was positively inclined towards denominational matters. This does not mean that the influence of these groups has been lost permanently or that state officials have started considering article 14 of the Nicaraguan Constitution, which clearly states that the Nicaraguan state has no religion. The separation of church and state continues to be a demand and aspiration voiced by citizens.

The significant links between the Catholic hierarchy and the government of President Arnoldo Alemán and the benefits offered by him to officials of the catholic hierarchy, as well as allegations of corruption, has meant that governmental institutions have given religious denominational groups less space and a certain level of

confrontation exists between these groups and governmental institutions. A similar pattern has been seen between non-denominational churches and President Arnoldo Alemán. In both cases the alliance between church groups and corrupt political leaders has had a detrimental effect on the general influence that these sectors have had on the public. Important parts of the membership of a variety of churches have, of course, continued to work with spiritual issues and have not involved themselves with traditional politics.

A belligerent role in relation to sexual and reproductive rights of women has been played by a group of fundamentalists connected to religiously conservative groups, such as the Association of Nicaraguan Women (Asociación de Mujeres Nicaragüenses – ANIMU). They are not large in terms of quantity, but their public voice is significant due to their links to the church hierarchy and the media.

National NGOs:

In Nicaragua, as in many Latin American countries, there has been an increase in national NGOs as a result of the implementation of structural adjustment policies. Some sectors of civil society have become less important while others have emerged more strongly. National NGOs have taken on a protagonist role in the process of social formation and politics in the current economic and social climate because sectoral and short-term interests do not limit them. A certain part of the NGO sector plays a key role in relation to the state.

International NGOs:

They have played a fundamental role of assistance and service to national NGOs, rather than one of pressurising and active participation as often is seen in other countries. One of the reasons for this is perhaps that national NGOs have taken on a belligerent role, which has reduced the need for international NGOs to exert pressure. The harassment directed towards international NGOs during the government of President Arnoldo Alemán between the years 1997 and 2001 is another reason for the background role they have assumed. At certain times national NGOs have requested international NGOs to extend financial support and to support them through

experiences gained in other countries, but at the same time letting the national NGOs assume the role that rightfully belongs to them. International NGOs have, in general, respected these wishes.

Professional sectors:

These sectors are actively involved in defining public policies and protecting their own interests closely. Due to their conservative stance and voicing interests that are in line with what the government strives for, these sectors have been given ample space for dialogue and a privileged participation in policy making. They have significant negotiating powers, which they have mainly used to further their own interests. These groups were until recently closely linked to the government and had a very uncritical stance in relation to the government. This changed with the governing period of President Arnoldo Alemán when these groups started issuing critical statements about the corrupt and highly irregular practices taking place and decisions passed by the government that they opposed like the privatisation of pension foundations in 2000.

In recent years these sectors have increased the spaces of their participation and themes of national concern, such as the National Health Council (Consejo Nacional de Salud). They have also established alliances and common actions with other citizens groups and social movements concerned with corruption and supporting governance efforts. Within this sector the agricultural producers are divided into two main groups: the Association of Agricultural Producers of Nicaragua (Unión de Productores Agropecuarios de Nicaragua – UPANIC), considered to be "right-wing" and Union of Agricultural and Cattle Ranchers (Unión Nacional de Agricultores y Ganaderos - UNAG) representing the "left-wing". In spite of differing political ideologies they have, nonetheless, joined forces in working on areas of common interest.

Micro, small and medium sized enterprises:

This growing group has an important role in the national economy. The organisation of this sector is geared towards its own economic and labour interests and dialogue with the government on access to markets and credits, legislation and effects of the Central American Free

Trade Agreement (CAFTA) on the sector, and being recognised for its contribution to the national economy.

Women:

Women's organisations have extensive experience of organisation and mobilisation, but most of it is centred on "women's" themes such as gender violence, sexual and reproductive rights or creation of the Ministry for Family Affairs. In recent years these organisations have started directing their work towards more global themes and problems like democracy, governance, access to justice, and development of public policy divorced from the church, political parties and economic interests. Various organisational forms unite, including Women's NGOs, groups of special interest (e.g. disabled women), collectives, spaces of articulation (e.g. the Women's Network of Violence Against Women) and individual women who share a vision and common objectives in terms of bringing about change in society. This corresponds more closely to the classical definition of a social movement with a defined and concentrated political agenda.

Consumer movements:

This is a young phenomenon in Nicaragua, but it has managed to have a lot of visibility and public recognition, on the one hand due to the fact that there has been so many abuses of consumer rights and, on the other hand because it has been able to present its demands on a public level and the militancy with which it has done so. The impact of the movement has been in the legislative arena and in communicating with various institutions rather than in its capacity to mobilise the masses.

Communal movement of Nicaragua:

With an organisational experience of three decades the Communal Movement of Nicaragua has managed to adapt itself to changing contexts. Some organisations of the movement have started functioning as NGOs, running projects combined with a member base and voluntary work. They work or have some form of activities in most of the municipalities of the country. This movement has worked towards gaining political autonomy from the Sandinista Front, but during elections this aspiration falters and acts as a set back for those organisations that have failed to consolidate their autonomy.

Geographic location

All the provinces and autonomous regions of the country have organisations, although the quantity and concentration of organisations varies. Not all municipalities have local civil associations, but the majority of them do and in all municipalities there are some kinds of organisations working towards common goals. According to the registry of the Ministry of the Interior most (2,000) associations have a head office in the capital Managua and 700 of these are NGOs. This reflects the concentration of services and individuals in the country's capital. Some of these organisations also work and/or have branch offices in other provinces of the country. The province that has the highest concentration of associations is León (182 associations), followed by Masaya (175). The province with the smallest number of associations is Río San Juan (24) where a most organisations are NGOs.

Relations between civil society organisations

The diversity and quantity of civil society organisations is large. They are, firstly, a product of the context and evolution of the country, firmly linked to the national reality of Nicaragua. Secondly, it is important to emphasise the history of polarisation in Nicaragua. Before 1979 there was a distinct demarcation between those groups and individuals that sided with the Somoza regime and those who opposed it. In the 1980s the division was between the Sandinistas (those siding with the government) and the anti-Sandinistas (those siding with the opposition) which was aggravated by the war and the role played by the United States of America in the war. At the beginning of the 1990s this division continued to exist, but roles were inverted in relation to the government and were modified as time went by. Some organisations tried to play a constructive role in relation to the government.

More recently, this development has to an increasing degree been discontinued due to the

pact between Daniel Ortega[7] and Arnoldo Alemán which made it possible for them to distribute important quotas of power and extend mutual protection in terms of the accusations directed at Ortega on sexual harassment and abuse and Alemán on accusations of political corruption[8].

Some groups and individuals feel that Nicaraguan civil society is dispersed and lacks a voice and unique position in society. This, of course, can act as grounds for disqualifying the opinions and participation of civil society in influencing public policy. Pretending to have a unique position as a voice of the masses is an illusion and contradicts the very nature of what civil society is. What could be affecting this view is the image and position of organisations in the 1980s unified under the common ideology of the party. To a large extent, they ignored sector based interests and visions like reacting to external aggression and issues of national defence. The criticism here was that there was no freedom to dissent or express oneself.

The diversity of activities and organisations in no way affects the validity and activity level of these organisations. On the contrary, the variety of approaches indicates in a positive way the strength that characterises the sector, rather than it being a weakness and criticism of these activities. There are a variety of important experiences of coordination and cooperation between organisations, including moments characterised by unified efforts.

Within the enterprise sector the Private Enterprise Superior Council (Consejo Superior de la Empresa Privada – COSEP) represents the most traditional economic sectors, but not the whole sector of private enterprises. It unites the stances of an important sector and generally presents unified positions, even though it is a result of extensive and intense internal discussions.

On the other hand, one can also distinguish spaces of coordination organised around specific themes that extend over a large number of organisations like Nicaragua's Coordinating Body of NGOs Working With Children and Adolescents (Federación Coordinadora Nicaragüense de ONGs que Trabajan con la Niñez y la Juventud - CODENI), the Network of Women against Violence

(Red de Mujeres Contra la Violencia), the National Commission of Civil Society Fighting against AIDS (la Comisión Nacional de Lucha contra el SIDA desde la Sociedad Civil), the National Youth Council of Nicaragua (el Consejo de la Juventud de Nicaragua). All these have been operating for more than 10 years and have made significant achievements within the thematic areas that they represent, the manner in which they work and relations they have with the state. Another important network is the Network on Democracy and Local Power (Red por la Democracia y el Poder Local).

The first networks listed are the most famous ones and have their own special features. As mentioned earlier, the Network of Women against Violence has for political reasons chosen not to be formally registered. The CODENI is registered, but more because of formal requirements and for reasons of cooperation rather than due to having a certain political stance. In both cases the participation of the membership is extensive and diverse in terms of political affiliations, but they prioritise consensus, cooperation and complementarity of the themes that they deal with. The Network of Women against Violence brings together more than 120 organisations. CODENI has 41 full members and 11 affiliated organisations connected to the network.

The Federation of NGOs of Nicaragua (Federación de ONG de Nicaragua - FONG), which dates back to the 1980s has for a number of years diminished in strength and belligerency. At present it seems to be largely inactive, but in the past it played an important role in defending the interests of NGOs.

Another important coordinating experience is represented by the Civil Coordinating Body (Coordinadora Civil, previously called the Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y la Reconstruccción[9]), which was developed in the wake of Hurricane Mitch as a network of networks. It also later allowed organisation and individuals to join the network. It strived to transform itself into a unifying and catalysing force of civil society. One of the instances where it managed to play this role was when in a participatory manner it developed the document "Turning a Tragedy into an Opportunity, Proposal for the Reconstruction and Transformation of Nicaragua", which outlined a proposal on how to initiate just and equal development in Nicaragua.

7 José Daniel Ortega Saavedra of the Sandinista National Liberation Front is the current president of Nicaragua as of January 10, 2007. His previous term in office lasted from 1985 to 1990 (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Daniel_Ortega, 05.04.2007)

8 For more information on the power-trading pact please see: http://www.envio.org.ni/articulo/2095.

9 The Civil Coordinating Body for Emergencies and Reconstruction.

The Civil Coordinating Body (Coordinadora Civil) consists of around 450 organisations (although this estimate may be slightly higher than the actual number). This includes the district and municipal branches of many of the national organisations and groups that have not previously participated in network activities. Most of the organisations have their roots in the Sandinista movement. Within the network there operate organisations that have an autonomous stance or critical perspective vis á vis the FSL and those that have a close link to the FSL party like AMNLAE, the Youth Council (Consejo de la Juventud) and Centre for the Promotion, Investigation and Rural and Social Development (Centro para la Promoción, la Investigación y el Desarollo Rural y Social- CIPRES), among others.

There are various ways of defining the functions of the Coordinadora Civil and tensions in terms of the practice of decision-making, the key role that individual participation has taken over that of organisations and spaces of coordination, or a focus on projects rather than focusing activities on the priorities set by the members. The Coordinadora Civil's position has become weakened in recent years - it lies in the nature of networks that they go through more or less active periods. The most significant achievements made by the network were in its early phases when its structure was less permanent.[10]

A group of organisations allied with the FSL created the Coordinadora Social (Social Coordinating Body), which brought together labour organisations, social movements and NGOs that aimed to rectify the weaknesses of the Coordinadora Civil, although some of these organisations still retained their membership in the Coordinadora Civil.

Coordination efforts were also formed around specific themes and issues such as the Alliance for the Protection of Biodiversity (Alianza de Protección de la Biodiversidad) that emerged to oppose the introduction of genetically modified organisms and to influence public policies on these issues. Later they amplified their perspective. Another similar effort is that of the Coalition on the Right to Water (Coalición por el Derecho al Agua).

In 2005 a new initiative of citizens' mobilisation against political corruption came into being. It aimed to oppose the pact entered between former president Arnoldo Alemán and current president Daniel Ortega (mentioned earlier in this report) and resulted in the staging of four large protest marches of up to 100,000 participants. The novelty of this initiative is that it spanned organisations from the political right to the political left, including both radical and conservative groups. This diverse group of organisations and individuals managed to find a common, uniting theme and to for a moment forget the differences that existed between them. The movement managed to capitalise on a national feeling of rejecting corruption and to translate this into an act of citizens' mobilisation, something that had not taken place for a long time in the country. It also fragmented the image of it only being organisations affiliated with the FSL that take to the streets to publicly protest. This later led to a concentrated demand to initiate an extensive and inclusive national dialogue that provided space for civil society organisations in addition to the traditional actors – the political parties and the government. However, this did not materialise, though it does not diminish the validity of the effort and the process followed to make it happen.

In conclusion, there are relations and experiences of coordination between civil society organisations with very encouraging outcomes, especially in terms of influencing public opinion and public policies. In many cases there are still improvements to be made. Naturally, it would be easier for the government to have a dialogue and cooperation with a unified civil society voice, but it is an illusion to believe that it would be possible to create a common voice of such diverse actors. It is also anti-democratic and un-natural to strive for it. More importantly, the diversity of perspectives is not a sign of weakness or fragmentation, but one of strength and growth.

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10 Borchgrevink, Axel (2006) A Study of Civil Society in Nicaragua. A Report Commissioned by NORAD, NUPI.

Tasks of civil society organisations

Themes and types of activities

There is no detailed information available in the registry maintained by the Ministry of the Interior on the types of activities in which organisations are involved. Organisations are annually requested to send in information, but this is not processed in any manner so that it would be available for use.

According to available information, NGOs deal with themes such as health, education, environment, local and community based development, agriculture, human rights, rights of women, children, youth and adolescents, disability, governance and citizens' participation, livelihoods, and micro-credits.

The type of service and activities that they develop are capacity building; provision of basic services like health, literacy and education; seed distribution and agricultural inputs; technical assistance; information and documentation; monitoring and follow-up of government policies and programmes; awareness raising on issues of marginalisation (disability, HIV/AIDS, indigenous rights, gender); prevention of social and gender violence, etc.

Organisations usually prioritise certain themes and areas of work. Some of the principal types of activities are developing human resources and capacity building combined with technical assistance. Another area is the development of research, although this has not been carried out systematically and often enough.

The most commonly covered themes are environmental; social and economic rights; rights of women and children; development and local power and governance. The availability of international cooperation to a large extent guides the types of theme areas developed and the types of activities carried out. In recent years a number of themes have become increasingly relevant, such as the prevention of social and gender violence, local power on a municipal level, governance and monitoring of elections. At the same time, some themes have diminished in importance like health and education, particularly with the implementation of the Sector-wide Approach (SWAp) by the government and official international cooperation.

With the implementation of SWAp the government and international cooperation indicated that economic support should be primarily channelled through the government, who is responsible for defining the national sector-wide plans, cooperating, in theory, with civil society. The NGOs are expected to transform themselves into suppliers of governmental services. This will in the future affect government and state relations with CSOs.

On the other hand, in recent years organisations have to an increasing degree been incorporating various ways of involving themselves in the electoral process, some at the national level and others at the municipal level. The results of some of these efforts are very visible, such as the approval of the Law on Children and incorporation of the HIV/AIDS issue in national politics, preparation and approval of the Law on Citizens' Participation and initiation of a system of integrating participation.

Civil society organisations and poverty reduction

A majority of NGOs and social movements integrate the goal of bringing about poverty reduction, working with marginalised and vulnerable groups and improving the living conditions or other activities of a similar nature. The group that most clearly departs from this perspective are those that work with governance and transparency issues.

Many of the organisations work to find solutions to the problems facing impoverished sectors of the population. However there are less organisations participating in discussions on the national Poverty Reduction Strategy. The reasons for not participating are varied. An important group stated from the beginning that that participation in the negotiation process was a waste of time and forced them to play the games of the government and international monetary institutions (IMI) such as the World Bank. This will give the government and IMIs reason to state that the CSOs just criticise them and lack constructive proposals on how to bring about change. Another group opted to participate in the process and sincerely felt that their contributions would be taken seriously and would impact on resources

going to those groups that truly needed them. Both groups agreed on the fact that for the government and the IMIs the intent of the Poverty Reduction Strategy was not to modify the structures that cause and perpetuate poverty. In hindsight, they were partially right regarding their suspicions. In any case, the non-participation of some organisations in the process made it easier for the government and the World Bank to realise their plans[11].

What relevance does work on poverty reduction and the structures that produce poverty have? Organisations working within agriculture and technical assistance find that this is one of the major problems that they face, because poverty is largely a rural problem. The organisations working in the Autonomous Regions also face this situation, stating that the most extreme poverty of the country is found in these regions. Those who work with marginalised groups like indigenous groups and disabled individuals stress that these are the most vulnerable groups. The same is stated by groups working with women. It is difficult to measure the impact of the work of all these groups.

Organisations have proposed different measures to come to grips with reducing poverty. On the one hand, they stress that it is important to define a model of national development that place people and their rights in the centre rather than the market and the exploitation it represents. On the other, some say that one must strengthen the market and the internal production, prioritising survival and food security, taking into account the respect of nature. Equally, one proposes that investments be made in individuals above paying off the public debt. Local governments should be given more resources and should increase tax collection as a means of achieving fiscal equality.

The role of organisations is, thus, to actively support impoverished groups with advice, capacity building, and development of mechanisms in order to give them better opportunities and control over what public institutions are doing. Some of these organisations also believe that they will be implementing some activities resulting from these plans like the provision of certain services.

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11 *A report titled La Nicaragua Queremos (What we want in Nicaragua) edited in 2001 by the Coordinadora Civil described experiences of parallel discussions dealing with poverty reduction and the development of a counter-proposal. The Coordinadora Civil did not unfortunately make sufficient use of this publication or follow-up this important activity.*

Relationship between civil society organisation themes and citizens' interests

CSO define the themes of their work based on distinct sources. On the one hand, there are the definitions and interests of the organisation itself that have to do with the expertise and knowledge found within the organisation. On the other, they to a large degree heed the opinions and interests of the groups they work with and also, in some cases, the influence exerted by international movements or networks. One such is example is the theme of genetically modified organisms that can have an impact on people's quality of life. Taking into account the diversity that characterises the Nicaraguan CSOs one can claim that organisations deal with themes that interest citizens. At the same time, it is true that CSOs have also played a role in incorporating new themes onto the public agenda, such as HIV/AIDS, which at the time it emerged did was not an interest of any particular group, but was an issue of overall concern.

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Relations between civil society organisations, state and private sector

Relations with the state are neither uniform nor homogenous. On the contrary, they are characterised by diverse stances and ways of thinking because the Nicaraguan state is weak and has a low degree of institutionalisation. This is definitely reflected in relations between CSOs and the state. These relations have evolved in the course of time. There have been periods characterised by much confrontation and mutual lack of trust, particularly during President Arnoldo Alemán's term in office. There have been times when there were no relations between the state and CSOs, but also times of collaboration and smooth dialogue.

Legal framework

The Political Constitution outlines that Nicaragua as a representative and participatory democracy should recognise citizens' right to organise themselves, express their opinions and participate in public affairs. It also confirms the creation and functioning of the National Council of Economic and Social Planning (Consejo Nacional de Planificación Económica y Social – CONPES).

On the other hand, there are other laws that regulate and confirm the right to organise oneself, including the Law of Cooperatives and the General Law of Non-Profit Juristic Persons. More recently, the Law of Citizens' Participation stresses the obligation to increase and integrate citizens and their organisations into various institutional spaces and is directed at the creation of opportunities for dialogue on the national, district and municipal level.

Generally speaking, the legal framework is positively inclined towards broad citizens' participation. The existing limitations are not related to legislation as such, but to practice and the will to implement legislation.

Types of civil society organisation – state relations

There are different types of relations with the state that determine the level of development and importance given to participation within co-ordination efforts:

1. **Substitutive and/or complementary relation**
   Within this type one finds NGOs that in their relations to the state are mainly oriented towards the implementation of projects within the framework of state policies and developing activities that previously were the responsibility of the state. Within these projects the state's role is to regulate, facilitate, lead and finance.

2. **Relation of relative indifference**
   This type of relation characterises organisations working to further religious values, such as charity and the salvation of souls. The organisations have a limited scope of action in terms of implementing social projects with limited objectives and social and territorial scope. Their projects are not directed towards supporting the development model currently in use.

3. **Relation of goal-oriented activities**
   Within this type one finds NGOs whose goals are oriented towards a transformation of society, unequal gender relations, corruption, aid, of social injustice and exclusion as a whole. Involvement in policy making and questioning the model of development are part of the goals of the actions that they present together with their beneficiary groups and through relations with other NGOs pursuing similar goals.

Other relations between the state and citizens are citizens' control aimed at checking that programmes and resources respond as efficiently as possible to identified needs and objectives. Lastly, there is direct collaboration, which is usually more easily implemented with local governments because it circles around responding to local needs.

These five types of relations coexist in reality and it is not possible to generalise which type of relation is most predominant in terms of the whole state. In recent years, relations with the

state have been characterised by less open conflict than from1997 to 2001. The openness expected of the Enrique Bolaños regime was not been realised to the extent expected based on the promises he made during his election campaign. During this period a major institutionalisation of the participation and dialogue between the CSOs and the state has taken place. What is still missing is that institutionalisation is transformed into concrete products.

Relations between Nicaraguan civil society organisations and international organisations

Nicaragua has had excellent relations with the rest of the world and particularly with other NGOs due to the solidarity movement based in the revolution of the 1970s and 1980s. Relation with Northern NGOs based on economic cooperation through project work has been one of the most important forms and mechanisms of cooperation. Various organisations have stated that they want to establish relations of association, rather than that of dependency. These relations are, naturally, always unequal and dialogue almost always terminates when funds and duration of assistance is discussed, despite the best intentions.

In relation to coordination and activities there are at least two types of relations: on the one hand, links have been established with networks and groups with specific mutual themes or interests. Among these are links with Greenpeace, the Jubilee 2000 Campaign, The Global Network of Women for Sexual and Reproductive Rights, Women for Biodiversity, The International Population health Council, among many others. On the other, alliances and coordination efforts have been established with Northern networks and organisations around various campaigns and specific themes. One of the most important experiences of this type of initiative is linked to the Heavily Indebted Poor Countries

(HIPC) initiative, and the discussions in the Consultative Groups of 1998, 1999 and 2000. Within this process the relations took on various modalities like when Northern NGOs were collecting information and exerting political pressure in their home countries on the government's stance on some problem related to Nicaragua, or transmitting this information to an NGO in Nicaragua so that they could appeal to the government or to official cooperation efforts in order to bring about coherency. Northern NGOs would join their partner organisations in Nicaragua at times when statements or motions were presented to international monetary institutions. These relations were based on a fluid exchange of information in both directions; documentation and actions being complementary, as well as mutual respect.

Recently, a similar type of relation was evident in discussions on the Free Trade Agreement between the United States and Central America. A number of campaigns based on specific themes, including access to generic medicines and the impact of free trade agreements where Nicaraguan organisations were joined by Physicians Without Borders, and Farma Mundi. These organisations played an important role in providing information in support of one's position, in facilitating communication among organisations interested in the issue and working on it in other Central American countries in order to coordinate efforts and present a common stance in official negotiations.

A slightly different type of alliance between the North and the South is the South North Group on Advocacy and Lobbying (Grupo de Incidencia Sur Norte - GISN). This is an alliance of CSOs, local governments and international NGOs that aim to in a participatory manner build and direct a strategy of political advocacy and lobbying. A total of 17 Nicaraguan organisations, 11 local governments and 9 Northern NGOs form part of the alliance. At first the national counterparts were actively involved, but gradually their activity level tapered off and only a few organisations and individuals involved in the Coordinadora Civil and local governments remained. The alliance has carried out a number of advocacy and lobbying activities and education, like the process of economic literacy and a gender study on the local level. It has also been involved in information exchange with Zambia, Ghana and Bolivia, among others.

One issue that has been the subject of discussion is the participation of Northern NGOs

and their influence in defining the agenda and action plans while at the same time providing funding for these activities. One example is the gender analysis carried out in the municipality of Larreynaga León, which was the result of an international decision and was not based on a national proposal or demand. This is not necessarily negative, but it is an issue that should be taken into account when analysing these types of experiences.

In conclusion, the experiences of dialogue and planning of shared activities between Nicaraguan and Northern NGOs have been positive and some have been more visible or important than others. The most important and positive aspect of these relations has been the sharing of information and the coordination of activities of advocacy and lobbying.

Recent achievements

The experiences of CSOs in Nicaragua are rich and diverse. There are certain areas in which CSOs have managed to develop experiences and reach important achievements. To summarise and evaluate these experiences is always risky, but an attempt will be made below.

1. *Educating and raising the awareness of the society and public opinion* on themes that previously were unknown or little known within the public agenda. One recent example of the impact of this work is related to the issue of gender violence, a theme that some 20 years ago was considered to be very taboo and private.
2. *Advocacy INCIDENCIA on the development of legislation.* Various organisations have been working within this area. A number of important laws have been approved and existing laws have been reformed. There have also been proposals made for the formation of new laws such as the Biodiversity law.
3. *Strengthening and opening up of institutional spaces for dialogue and advice.* The challenge faced is to ensure continuity of these spaces and that the agendas incorporate themes of interest to citizens so that discussions and proposals impact on the plans, programmes, projects and actions of public institutions.

4. *Placing new themes or including specific situations into the public agenda* such as discussions on the public debt or the national budget.
5. *Developing citizens' monitoring and control of certain public policies* like the Governance Observatory, Education Observatory, monitoring of human rights, developing an index of budgetary transparency, carrying out national social audits, and monitoring of public policies.
6. *Having the capacity to unite with different sectors on themes of national interest and generating citizens' mobilisation* like the marches to oppose the Alemán-Ortega pact mentioned earlier which brought together political parties and a number of networks and movements in a manner that reflected respect and tolerance.

Future challenges

Civil society organisations face a number of challenges, a few of which are listed below:

1. To develop and strengthen the analytical capacity and monitoring of public policies and international cooperation plans in a critical and systematic manner and ensure that this is translated into demands and proposals to bring about change.
2. Strengthening the autonomy of CSOs vis á vis governments, churches and religious denominations, but, above all political parties so as to enable CSOs to have more independent and objective stances towards various actors.
3. Overcoming the "NGOisation" of civil society. A key task in the strengthening of civil society and participatory democracy is to supplement the role of the NGOs with social and political movements.
4. Improving the capacity for communication between actors that have common interests in certain matters and differing interests in others, recognising the strengths and capacities of each actor from a perspective of respect.
5. Developing efficient alliances with CSOs in the Central American region in order to join forces on common problems.

6. Establish better links with Northern CSOs to get information on positive experiences related to accompaniment, mutual feedback and coordination of strategies and actions on political advocacy.
7. Improve mechanisms of participation and accountability in platforms for exchange of information, taking into account the difficulties faced by those organisations that are not based in Managua and do not have funds to ensure participation.

At the same time, it is indispensable to develop a broad and open dialogue with the actors of national cooperation on the modalities and tendencies of the cooperation, including the SWAp, the budget support and the impact of trade agreements, especially with the European Union and its member states within negotiations held with Central America.

This dialogue clearly indicates to governments and cooperation partners that the participation and mobilisation of citizens has costs and generates expenses that are not covered by countries or governments, including the need to supplement modes of cooperation through projects to more broad based strategies of cooperation.

Civil society organisations of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast

A particular feature of the Autonomous Regions of Nicaragua is the multi-ethnic composition of the population consisting of Miskitos, Sumomayagnas, and Ramas in addition to the Mestizo population and people of African descent, namely Kriols and Garifunas. Another feature that sets the area apart from the rest of the country is its autonomous governing system. The law establishes that there be a structure of government consisting of Regional Autonomous Councils of the North and the South, which is more akin to a parliamentary system than to the presidential system found on the national level. The structure of the regional autonomous governments

operating in the Caribbean Region extends to the municipal and communal level with local level elections in addition to national ones.

Civil society in the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua is organised according to Committees of Non-governmental Organisations (Comités de Organismos no Gubernamentales) and Civil Society Committees (Comités de la Sociedad Civil). These committees consist of representatives of non-governmental organisations working on human rights, agricultural production, community health and traditional medicine, micro-industry support, as well as regional universities of the Caribbean coast, regional labour organisations of fishermen and sailors, environmental and eco-tourism organisations; groups with denominational interests like the Ecumenical Council of the Church of Morava, and the Catholic, Anglican, Adventist and Baptist churches; the youth movement and womens'organisations and disability organisations. There are also individual committee members.

All these representatives have the common mission of influencing the national, regional, municipal and communal governments to promote the formulation of public policies that are of interest to the society on the Caribbean Coast within the framework of the autonomous governing system. Through distinct forms of organisation civil society tries to influence the formulation, transformation and implementation of public policies by interacting with other non-governmental organisations, labour organisations, regional organisations and external cooperation in an efficient manner.

The members of the Civil Society Committees share the following values:

- social compromise
- respect of the autonomous rights of indigenous people and people of African descent
- historical compromise
- citizens' participation
- conservation of natural resources according to the principles of sustainable development

These values are based on the principles of autonomy, solidarity, equality, transparency, co-responsibility, ethical standards, responsibility and humanity. The general aim of the Civil Society Committees is to contribute to the construction of an active and democratic society.

The strategies used to achieve this goal are:

1. Strengthening the role of civil society organisations in the media as a means of spreading information about their plans and objectives, and that the media project a positive and active image of the committees.
2. Supporting the improvement of the living standards of the population of the autonomous regions through the implementation of programmes and projects with entities of central, regional, municipal and communal governments.
3. Influence the definition of public policy that supports the social, economic and cultural development of the autonomous regions by presenting proposals by civil society and promoting the integration of civil society in local power spaces.
4. Project the Civil Society Committees as a reference point for civil society in the Autonomous Regions.

It is important to stress that the Civil Society Committees work towards strengthening and consolidating the process of autonomy. Other organisations based in the Pacific region of Nicaragua that participate in the Civil Society Committees do so because they plan to at some point implement projects or already have projects in the Autonomous Regions. There is coherence and shared efforts on general themes such as governance, biodiversity and sustainable natural resource management, poverty, education and human rights. Contradictions do arise in theme areas directly related to the process of autonomy and the particular features of the social environment of the Autonomous Regions like the exercise of collective or autonomous human rights, particularly in relation to issues of exclusion, inequality and inequity that the population in the Caribbean Region suffer from as a result of public policies that Caribbean Region CSOs consider to be racist and discriminatory.

The CSOs of the Pacific Region consider that the problems of the Caribbean population are a result of poverty and a lack of democracy. The Caribbean CSOs, on the other hand, stress that the Autonomous Regions are impoverished and that this situation has racist origins and manifestations that further exclusion and marginalisation. Civil society thus directs its efforts towards influencing the removal of public policies that generate impoverishment and those that generate exclusion on racial or ethnic grounds.

The basis of this differing perspective is that CSOs of the Pacific Region still do not grasp the subtleties associated with a multi-ethnic and multi-cultural democracy that is being developed in the Caribbean Region of Nicaragua. This has adverse repercussions in the consolidation of a legal framework on autonomy, particularly in relation to regional elections and the struggle to achieve governance and institutionalisation of autonomy.

Relevant themes of civil society organisations

The work of CSOs in the Caribbean Region is centred on the following themes:

- Governance and institutionalisation of autonomy
- Political€ advocacy exercised by civil society in communal, municipal, regional and national management
- Exclusion, inequality and inequity based on racial or ethnic motives
- Empowerment of youth, women and children
- Development of micro-enterprises and access to credit
- Biodiversity and sustainable natural resource management
- Human rights and autonomous rights based on an inter-cultural perspective
- Approval of the Educational System of the Autonomous Region (Sistema Educativo Autonómico Regional – SEAR) and the Regional Health Model (Modelo Regional de Salud)
- HIV-AIDS and sexually transmitted diseases
- Citizens education and electoral observation in regional elections of the Caribbean coast and the national elections of 2006
- Modernisation and alliances with regional and national political parties
- Dominican Republic – Central America – USA Free Trade Agreement (DR-CAFTA) and its impact on the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua
- Intra-family violence and citizens' security
- Economy and agricultural production
- Approval of the Administrative and Judicial Model for the Caribbean coast of Nicaragua
- Development and implementation of the Minimum Agenda of the Caribbean coast
- Capacity building and development of human resources

Regional governments still do not carry out the responsibilities that they are meant to and there are also cases of corruption. In light of this situation it is necessary that CSOs orient some of their resources towards political advocacy and the execution of Regional Development Plans as well as towards ensuring that these regional plans are incorporated into the National Development Plan. In this manner the economy, now centred on the use of natural resources, can be revitalised through the establishment of a Regional Development Fund, the development of micro-enterprises in the agricultural sector, within the service sector and for the development of eco-tourism.

Through these measures it may be possible to alleviate the serious unemployment situation in the Autonomous Regions which stands at about 90%. This is twice that found at national level. Additionally, eleven out of the twenty-five poorest municipalities of the country are found in the Autonomous Regions. Monitoring of the achievement of the Millenium Goals and their implementation on a regional level has been carried out by the UNDP, the University of the Autonomous Regions of the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua (URACCAN), The Association of Indigenous Women of the Caribbean Coast (AMICA), the Centre of Human Rights, Citizens and the Autonomous (CEDEHA) together with the governments of the Autonomous Regions and municipal mayors' offices. Structures that increase poverty should also be dealt with through a process of ensuring that a number of legal measures and laws are implemented in support of greater equality and regional development.

Relations with the state and private sector

Relations with the private sector are characterised by supporting local initiatives emerging from civil society or the political parties. These may be events connected to the celebration of autonomy, such as vaccination days, development of a beach plan, cleaning the local environment or recylcling efforts.

Relations with the state are mainly related to advocacy initiatives on the development and implementation of laws that support the autonomy process and many important achievements have been made by civil society in this arena.

Civil society also has collaborative relations with communal governments and territorial assemblies particularly in relation to land rights issues of communal land and active defence of rights to the land. This mainly takes place through conflict resolution of lands rights conflicts between the Mestizo population and indigenous communities. On the level of municipal governments civil society has played a key role in the development and capacity building of Committees of Regional Development (Comités de Desarollo Regional).

The Committees of Non-governmental Organisations and members of civil society of both the autonomous regions find that the role of civil society is to use advocacy and to monitor state institutions and the private sector to ensure that they fulfil the responsibilities expected of them so that citizens' rights are guaranteed and services are available to bring about development in the region.

In the Autonomous Regions there are a number of international and national organisations, including CARE International, Habitat for Humanity, Physicians Without Borders, Help in Action, Christian Medical Action, and Christian based organisations, that mainly work in the area of humanitarian aid or in the provision of services in the areas of health, education, food security that partially or totally substitute the work of state institutions in some communities and municipalities. The discrepancy in terms of how one views what the role of civil society should be has at times created fragmentation between members of the committees as the CSOs of the Caribbean Coast consider that civil society should not replace services that are the ambit of the state. Additionally, they believe that the resources should be used to bring about more active citizens' participation and to mobilise citizens to demand that the state fulfils its responsibilities in the Autonomous Regions.

In recent years the central government has been imposing more administrative and financial restrictions on the activities of civil society and, particularly following public scandals, on the misuse of funds by religious organisations and some NGOs based in the pacific region of the country. On a general level relations with the state and private sector in the Autonomous Regions have on the whole indicated mutual respect and tolerance.

International relations

On the whole, the Committees of Non-governmental organisations and Civil Society Committees organisations have not made efforts to become incorporated into alliances or networks of civil society in the North. Some organisations are members of the Organisations of Blacks of Central America (Organización Negra de Centroamérica – ONECA), the Afro-American XXI Network and the Executive Council of the Minority Rights Group International, The Latin American Educational Commission and the Association of Students and Academics of Norway.

The Committees of Non-governmental Organisations and Civil Society Committees are founding members of the Black Parliament of the Americas and the network of Youth United for Central America and are members of the Latin American Forum of Childhood. Regional universities have links with a number of universities in the North.

Until just a few years ago civil society resented the fact that Northern NGOs defined themes that civil society felt it should be deciding upon. It considered that the themes did not take into account the context and socio-economic and political reality of the poorest countries. This conception has changed gradually and civil society of the South is now exercising more advocacy in terms of the themes that impact on the lives of citizens on the local, national and Central American level.

Recent achievements

The Committees of Non-governmental Organisations and members of Civil Society Committees consider that some of their main achievements have recently been:

- Supporting local government to influence the national government and the Inter-American Commission of Human Rights of the American states to prevent the National Assembly of Nicaragua from approving the Dry Channel Project. Motivations used were the adverse environmental impact and the destruction of the Maíz Indian Reserve.
- Advocacy directed at the Inter-American Development Bank to ensure that civil society and the governments of the autonomous regions are represented in the Executive Council to manage the loan given for administrative and institutional strengthening of regional governments and municipalities of the Autonomous Regions.
- Advocacy directed at the World Bank so that it supports civil society in making the central government consult indigenous communities and communities of people of African descent when proposing a law on the demarcation and land entitlement of communal territories in the Autonomous Regions. Law 445 was thus approved in 2003 and is now considered to be one of the most advanced laws on land tenancy in indigenous communities and communities of people of African descent.
- Establishment of Regional Planning Committees (Comités de Planificación Regional-COPLAR) where civil society can advise the regional autonomous governments on the planning and evaluation of regional development. Representatives were also elected to participate in CONPES at a national level.
- Influencing the National Assembly to approve the Regulation of the Statute of Autonomy, which was approved in 2003 after 16 years of struggle.
- The preparatory work and advocacy on getting the Models of Education and Health of the Autonomous Regions approved.
- Creating spaces to facilitate dialogue between regional and municipal authorities and the population, such as the dialogue between various ethnic groups of the Caribbean Region.
- Participation in the development of the Minimum Agenda of the Coastal Region (Agenda Mínima de Costeña).
- Development of a position paper on the position of the Autonomous Regions in relation to the Free Trade Agreement of Central America and the Dominican Republic with the United States.

Application of themes

In recent years civil society organisations in the Autonomous Regions have had to concentrate on fighting for the institutionalisation and democratic governance of the autonomy process. This led to the campaign to bring about the regulation of the Statute of Autonomy and the strengthening of its legal framework. In an equal manner civil society took stock of the regional sentiment

on the importance of promoting the approval of Law 445 on the Demarcation and Land Entitlement of Communal Territories in the Autonomous Regions. Civil society denounced the appropriation of forestry concessions and fishing licenses on communal territories by the Central Government.

The achievements in terms of the legal framework of autonomy are very important and one must continue along this development path. But, it is equally important to recognise that in the last instance it is economic development that will sustain autonomy. This perspective on the problem has received less attention. For this reason it has been recognised that it is important to develop programmes and projects to create employment in the Autonomous Regions, to develop regional infrastructure and respecting the laws and rights of the indigenous people, Mestizos and people of African descent to participate in decision-making so they can benefit from the rational use of natural resources.

Future challenges

The major challenge continues to be mobilising the population and the regional autonomous governments to actively defend the consolidation of the autonomy process, both in terms of its political and social aspects and in the creation of an economical base to sustain the development process. In order to create this economical base civil society can support the education and capacity building of professionals and technicians that can contribute to the development of the rational and sustainable use of natural resources in the Autonomous Regions, such as fisheries, forestry, and mining. Also, landscapes should be protected to support the development of ecotourism. The final goal is the creation of employment as a means of preventing brain drain.

A very important achievement is the approval of laws that consolidate the legal framework of the autonomy process. What remains is advocacy work to ensure that these laws are implemented using the necessary human and natural resources. Equally important is reform of the law on elections in to ensure maximum participation of individuals of indigenous groups and African descent within the structures of Regional Autonomous Governments.

A number of ethnic communities need to be re-integrated into the regional administration of the Autonomous Region of the North Atlantic (Región Autonoma del Atlantico Norte – RAAN) and Autonomous Region of the South Atlantic (Región Autonoma del Atlantico Sur – RAAS). This will contribute to a population increase of one ethnic group (Mestizos). Civil society in the Caribbean region has formed a Consortium of Regional Autonomy in order to have the greatest impact on public policy which furthers the development and consolidation of the autonomy process.

Taking into account the globalisation process and free trade agreements, civil society needs to ensure that its opinions and proposals are heard. In relation to negotiations on the political, commercial and cooperative association between Europe and Latin America and particularly in relation to Central America it is vital that civil society adopts a regional and political strategy, in combination with a commercial relations that contributes to improving access to markets, developing and diversifying export products, and strengthening the negotiation capacity of the region.

At present civil society is preparing a request that donors that share the same interests in the Caribbean Region join forces to establish a multi-donor fund. Such a fund has been set up by donors from Denmark, Norway, Holland and the UK with an executive secretary based in Oxfam, UK and an assembly of Nicaraguan civil society consisting mostly of organisations from the Caribbean Region.