

Working Toward Grassroots Democracy in a Corporatist Land: Initial Experiences of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program

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Summary

Although proponents have widely touted grassroots conservation and sustainable development as a means of maintaining the environment, building local economies, and increasing social equity, most discussions assume that a grassroots democratic process automatically accompanies this approach. Such an assumption is unfounded given that most conservation and sustainable development initiatives take place in contexts characterized by political marginalization of rural agrarian communities. This paper offers an initial analysis of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program (SDP), an initiative that explicitly attempts to promote grassroots democracy. First, it presents the program's approach and institutional structure. The Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program emerged in 1994 as part of the Global Environment Facility's (GEF) Small Grants Programme, which is administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). After four years, the SDP has grown beyond the small grants program and comprises both a network of grassroots NGOs and community-based organizations working in nine micro-regions and a regional credit fund.

The second part of the paper examines key organizational and political issues that have defined the SDP's experience to date. While the network of NGOs that comprise the program has made important advances in establishing financial and organizational autonomy, political dynamics at the local level present key challenges to the program's internal integrity. At one end of the spectrum, some participating organizations have successfully developed community-based organizations but are on the brink of extinction because they have been unable to generate their own resources. On the other end of the spectrum, certain organizations appear to have reproduced corporatist relationships with *ejidos* where the NGO generates income but a top-down style of decision-making impedes community development. This initial analysis of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program points to two conclusions. First, coordinating NGOs have helped to empower communities through a broadly participatory collegial decision-making process but in some cases have compromised their own effectiveness by ignoring questions of organizational sustainability. Second, a grassroots, decentralized organizational structure does not automatically produce a horizontal and participatory decision-making process. Despite important advancements in setting up collegial decision-making *structures*, the sustainable development program will need to monitor decision-making *processes* and generate clear procedures for compliance in order to guarantee that this grassroots democratic initiative survives over the long-term.

Working Toward Grassroots Democracy in a Corporatist Land: Initial Experiences of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program

Introduction

While proponents of sustainable development frequently point to the importance of maintaining environments, societies, and economies at the local level and beyond over the long-term, they tend to assume that a grassroots democratic political system underlies this development pathway. By grassroots democracy we refer to a broadly participatory social process based in consensual decision-making at the community level. This unexplored assumption is dangerous if we consider that most conservation and sustainable development initiatives take place in contexts typically characterized by political marginalization of rural agrarian communities. Even Mexico, with its history of agrarian reform, peasant organizing, and, more recently, community control of forests, continues to carry an institutional legacy of state control of resources, *caciquismo*, and community dependence. How can grassroots community-based conservation and sustainable development occur in such a corporatist setting?

This paper represents an initial exploration of one attempt to achieve conservation and sustainable development through grassroots democracy on Mexico's Yucatan Peninsula. The Sustainable Development Program (SDP) comprises a broad, regional strategy aimed at strengthening community-level organizations, generating alternative economic income opportunities, offering environmental protection, and rescuing rapidly disappearing cultural practices, particularly among Mayan communities. The Sustainable Development Network (SDN),¹ in turn, represents the nucleus of the program and joins micro-regional or "hub" NGOs and grassroots community organizations such that conservation and development problems can be addressed locally. In conjunction the efforts seek to produce a coordinated, regional impact. The first part of the paper examines the conceptual underpinnings and institutional structure of the Sustainable Development Program. The second part analyzes key organizational and political issues that have defined the program's experience to date.

In many respects, the SDP stands at a crossroads. It has garnered significant support from state and federal governments as well as international development organizations. At the same time, NGO members have successfully developed many community-level organizations and have channeled numerous small grants to local projects. However, the network as well as its member organizations face challenges that could jeopardize its internal integrity. Since the program is receiving increasing amounts of outside attention, participants constantly contend with the conundrum of accepting financial support at the risk of being co-opted by outside interests. Also, the member organizations are diverse in their approaches and, at the extreme ends of the spectrum, some NGOs face extinction while others appear to have adopted the very corporatist strategies that the network is attempting to circumvent.

¹ The name of the network in Spanish is: Red de Organizaciones del Sureste para el Desarrollo Sustentable A.C. or ROSDESAC. For convenience we have abbreviated its name in English.

Whither Grassroots Conservation and Sustainable Development?

Conservation and development initiatives pursue the goal of sustainable development, echoing a number of broad policy statements made by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and others. The WCED defines sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (WCED 1987). Similarly, the World Conservation Union (IUCN), the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) made a joint policy statement called *Caring for the Earth* that defines sustainable development as "improving the quality of human life while living within the carrying capacity of supporting ecosystems" (IUCN 1991). Yet, defining sustainable development, however broadly, does not offer insight on the political dimension that largely determines the success or failure of conservation and development programs.

Silva (1994) notes that mainstream characterizations of sustainable development such as the one advanced by the WCED focus on the interrelated goals of economic growth, social equity, and environmental protection. Two problems arise with this conceptualization, however. First, the terms are too general to provide meaningful guidance for local application. Second, simultaneously satisfying all three goals is difficult, if not impossible, "because of inherent distributional--and therefore--political tensions between them" (Silva 1994):699. In attempting to think beyond conventional formulations, Lelé (1991:614-15) finds that groups must negotiate the meaning of sustainable development for each context in order to attend to diverse and often conflicting interests (Lelé 1991).

Any discussion of sustainability must first answer the questions "What is to be sustained? For whom? How long?" The value of the concept, however, lies in its ability to generate an operational consensus between groups with fundamentally different answers to these questions, i.e., those concerned either about the survival of future human generations, or about the survival of wildlife, or human health, or the satisfaction of immediate subsistence needs with a low degree of risks. It is therefore vital to identify those aspects of sustainability that do actually cater to such diverse interests, and those that involve tradeoffs.

At the heart of Lelé's call for negotiating the "details" of sustainable development lies the question of governance. Governance in this case refers simply to arrangements for decision-making and power-sharing. In Harold Lasswell's classic formulation of politics, it identifies "who gets what, when, and how" (Lasswell 1936).

Congruent with this logic, Murguía (1992) offers an alternative conceptualization of community-based sustainable development² that counters the large-scale rural development model that prevails in Mexico. This notion of sustainable development served as the initial point of discussion that launched the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program. Murguía proposes that social life emerges from the interaction among three types of subsystems:

² The term Murguía uses in Spanish is "desarrollo comunitario integral." In later documents this term is used interchangeably with "desarrollo sustentable," which translates as sustainable development.

economic, social, and ecological. Economic systems are defined as the sum of events and relationships linked to the production of goods and services. Social systems, in turn, are the events and relationships based in the biological and cultural production and reproduction of a given community. Ecological systems are defined as the relationships of living beings and non-living elements with their environment and among themselves (Murguía 1992).

Drawing on general systems theory (von Bertalanffy 1969), community-based sustainable development depends on the harmonious relationships among the three sub-systems. It is defined as, “the increased capacity of a social group to attain goods and services of better quality and greater quantity, which permits the full achievement of its biological and intellectual potential in such a way as to conserve the natural environment in perpetuity.”³

While this notion of sustainable development contains many of the same elements as the mainstream formulations mentioned above, it goes a step beyond these definitions by confronting the question of governance (*gestión*).⁴ In this sense, community-based sustainable development promotes *self-governance* through grassroots democratic process. Under such a process, decision-making is consensual and widely participatory, communities define their own conservation and development problems (*autodiagnóstico*), and establish how activities will be carried out, by whom, and in what order.

The Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program

The Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program emerged in the mid 1990s from a confluence of events including the work of the Human Ecology group at the Centro de Investigación y de Estudios Avanzados, the growth of grassroots NGOs working throughout the region, and broad cutbacks in state-sponsored assistance programs under the Salinas administration. When representatives from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) visited the Yucatán Peninsula in 1993, they found an existing proposal based on a decade-long project at Ría de Lagartos Special Biosphere Reserve (Murguía 1990), a blossoming NGO sector, and a void created by the termination of several government rural development programs.⁵

UNDP initiated its Small Grants Programme to Non-Governmental Organizations (SGP/NGO) in Mexico in March of 1994. The SGP was one of several such programs established in select regions around the world as part of an umbrella pilot project financed by the

³ “Bajo este concepto de Desarrollo Integral se define como el incremento en la capacidad de un grupo social para acceder a bienes y servicios de mejor calidad y en mayor cantidad, que permitan la expresión cabal de las potencialidades biológicas e intelectuales de la especie humana, vinculándose con su ambiente de manera tal que, lejos de degradarlo o destruirlo, conserve las condiciones de su reiteración permanente.”

⁴ The word “*gestión*” can also be defined as “management” but since, in this case, we are referring to the internal arrangements that communities establish for planning and carrying out sustainable development activities, we found “governance” to be a more useful translation.

⁵ Murguía performed an informal survey of community-based and non-governmental organizations prior to initiating the Mexico Small Grants Program and found at least 580 CBOs and NGOs. For the most part, these organizations were created to receive government support (and thus fell under the corporatist system). Following neo-liberal reforms under Salinas, most of these organizations were left with no “*patrón*,” that is, no source of income, and thus the Mexico SGP came to fill an important void.

Global Environment Facility (GEF)⁶ beginning in 1992. During the four-year pilot phase (1992-96), the GEF/SGP received US\$18.2 million and was subsequently allotted US\$24 million for the first two years of an operational phase (July 1996-June 1998). Of the latter sum, US\$17.95 million (75%) went to grant expenditures. Current estimates suggest that 750 projects were under development as of June, 1998 while a total of 347 projects were funded and underway as of the end of 1997 (Wells, Ganapin et al. 1998).

The SGP funds community-based activities carried out by grassroots NGOs or local groups that respond to the GEF's programmatic areas: biodiversity conservation, international waters, and global climate change. Fundamentally, these local activities seek to combine both community development and environmental protection. Average grant sizes for the two-year operational phase were US\$22,500. Given their small size and local impact, approximately 75% of grants were directed toward biodiversity conservation (Wells, Ganapin et al. 1998).

Of all the individual small grants programs, the Yucatán Peninsula initiative stands out for its high level of strategic planning and programmatic integration. It is important to note that although the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program remains structurally linked to the GEF/SGP, it is more independent than other country programs because the central network of grassroots organizations maintains a separate legal status. In addition, the country coordinator and network members have diversified the program's financial base by creating a separate fund. Indeed, the Mexico program received no funding from the GEF/SGP in 1995 and 1998 because the SGP global coordinator in New York encountered problems in disbursing monies.

Most SGP country programs are linked to a national-level NGO such that they become an extension of that organization's on-going projects. Although the Mexico program was initially housed in a well-known regional NGO--Pronatura Península de Yucatán, A.C.-- the national SGP coordinator subsequently chose to establish separate offices and pursue a pre-existing regional sustainable development strategy (Murguía 1990). In the remainder of this section, we will provide an overview of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program and discuss how it evolved together with an independent network of grassroots NGOs.

The Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program works in nine micro-regions that cover the breadth of socio-cultural and ecological zones in the area. Each of these micro-regions is summarized in Table 1. A hub, grassroots organization (*organización pivote*) works in each micro-region to facilitate activities and improve the flow of information, funds, appropriate technology, and other resources to marginalized rural communities.

The Sustainable Development Program features two central components and a complementary technical assistance program that help to maintain a regional cohesiveness among the individual activities. It is important to recognize that while the Mexico SGP represents the keystone of the Yucatán Peninsula initiative, it has evolved to the point where

⁶ The GEF is a multi-lateral financial mechanism for the environment that was created as part of negotiations surrounding the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It is administered jointly by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the World Bank. The Small Grants Programme represents one, global-level project among a diverse portfolio. The GEF funds projects aimed at conserving biological diversity, mitigating global climate change or protected international waters.

small grants are one component of a larger program. As we mentioned earlier, the core of the program is a network of 15 grassroots NGOs and community-based organizations, which allows continuous communication and interaction among the groups and projects. Second, the participants in the program have created a regional fund separate from the Mexico SGP that can channel credit to participating NGOs and community-based organizations. In most cases, community groups have no experience in soliciting and managing loans of any size. As a result, participants established the program's third element, a technical assistance program for micro-enterprises. For this component of the program, funds come from the UNDP country office (independent of the GEF) via the National Solidarity Institute (INSOL). The Network carries out the activities under an agreement with both UNDP-Mexico and INSOL.

Micro-region	Hub organization	Description
1. Laguna de Términos	Marea Azul, A.C.	The micro-region includes the Laguna de Términos protected area. Ecologically the region contains coastal lagoons, mangrove forests, tropical forests, coastal dunes and wetlands. Economic activities include oil extraction, fishing, tourism, forestry, livestock, and commerce.
2. Central Campeche	PROSELVA, A.C.	This area comprises tropical forested areas, and some wetlands. Local economic activities include forestry, commercial and subsistence agriculture, cattle-raising, and hunting.
3. Northern Campeche	EDUCE, A.C (Educación, Cultura y Ecología)	This area consists primarily of Mayan communities (los Chenes) and contains both primary and secondary tropical forests. Economic activities include subsistence agriculture, apiculture (bee-keeping), and cattle-raising.
4. Southern Yucatán	IEPA, A.C. (Investigación y Educación Popular Autogestiva)	This micro-region extends from Merida to the border with the state of Campeche. The area has been heavily altered from over 100 years of henequen (fiber) plantation production. Economic activities include subsistence and commercial agriculture, henequen production, commerce, industry, and horticulture.
5. Northwestern Yucatán	MOCUP, A.C. (Movimiento de Cultura Popular)	This micro-region covers the northern portion of lands dedicated to henequen production as well as western coastline of the state of Yucatán. While certain areas are highly degraded, others feature well conserved tropical forest. Coastal areas feature dunes, marshes and wetlands. The Celestún Special Biosphere Reserve is located here.
6. Eastern Coast of Yucatán	CIRN, A.C. (Centro para el Manejo Integrado de Recursos Naturales)	This area features lagoons, dunes, wetlands, and coastal forests. It contains the Ría Lagartos Special Biosphere Reserve. Economic activities include fishing, hunting, salt production, livestock, subsistence agriculture, and tourism.
7. Southeastern Yucatán	Red Chak, A.C. (Association of area grassroots NGOs)	This area contains predominantly Mayan communities. It is known for its <i>milpa</i> or mixed crop corn cultivation. The region is covered by low, tropical forests and eroded karst topography. Forests have been continuously disturbed through slash and burn agriculture.

Micro-region	Hub organization	Description
8. Northern Quintana Roo	YUMBALAM, A.C.	The region features a wide array of ecosystems including tropical forest, coastal lagoons, coral reefs, and wetlands. Economic activities include fishing, forestry, commercial and subsistence agriculture and tourism.
9. Central Quintana Roo	Red U Yumil Kaax, A.C. (Association of area grassroots NGOs)	This region is known as the Maya Zone (Zona Maya) and corresponds with the last refuge of rebel Maya from the Caste War. The area is characterized by primary and secondary tropical forest. It has been moderately altered by slash and burn agriculture (milpa).

For its part, the Mexico SGP component has financed a total of 63 projects since 1994. Of this total, hub NGOs associated with the network have carried out 26 and community-based organizations have administered 37 (Murguía 1998). Tables 2 and 3 show a breakdown of projects by type and by GEF Focal Area. In addition, the Network receives grant or technical support from the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), the National Fund for Social Enterprises (FONAES), J.P. Morgan Bank, the United Nations Women’s Fund (UNIFEM), the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and the Japanese Agency for International Cooperation (equivalent of the Peace Corps). Grants from these sources are managed under the regional fund.

Table 2: Mexico Small Grants Projects by Type

<i>Project Type</i>	<i>Total #</i>	<i>Total grant amount</i>
<i>Conservation</i>	12	\$217,009
<i>Education</i>	9	\$161,729
<i>Community-based Research</i>	6	\$78,585
<i>Organizational capacity building</i>	9	\$134,522
<i>Production</i>	27	\$451,150
TOTAL	63	\$1,042,995

Table 3: Mexico Small Grants Projects by GEF Focal Area

<i>GEF Focal Area</i>	<i>Total #</i>	<i>Total grant amount</i>
<i>All Four Focal Areas</i>	20	\$325,122
<i>Biodiversity Conservation</i>	37	\$616,247
<i>Global Climate Change</i>	6	\$101,626
TOTAL	63	\$1,042,995

Composing a Sustainable Development Network

Despite the apparent rigidity of the focal areas, GEF small grants project development criteria allow for a significant amount of resources to be dedicated to organizational capacity building. Each of the nine small grants projects dedicated to organizational capacity building had an important effect on the development of the regional program. One such project helped to create a technical support group for community-based organizations (known by its Spanish acronym GatoB⁷). The GatoB initially comprised four professionals, each with different

⁷ Grupo de Apoyo Técnico a Organizaciones de Base (GatoB).

disciplinary backgrounds, who worked in the diverse micro-regions (at the outset there were five) assisting community organizations to design and establish small projects using participatory planning methodologies. Based on this experience, five NGOs adopted the approach and soon came to call themselves “hub” organizations (*organizaciones pivotes*). In addition to coordinating activities for a given micro-region, the GatoB and later the hub NGOs served as “translators” by helping community groups to transform their ideas into projects that fit with GEF and Mexico-SGP criteria. Eventually four more organizations became hub NGOs once the program expanded to a total of nine micro-regions.

Although the initial proposal for the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program promoted coordination among local organizations across micro-regions, it was the hub-NGO concept that eventually led participants to pursue the idea of creating an NGO network with an independent legal status. Initially the Mexico-SGP approved a \$25,000 grant that permitted members of the hub-NGOs to meet on a regular basis and allowed technical interchange among members working on like projects in the diverse micro-regions. In October of 1994, three organizations affiliated with the SGP--Marea Azul, A.C., Fundación Tun Ben Kin, A.C., and Forestería Rural, S.C.P.--as well as the GatoB convened a meeting in Ciudad del Carmen, Campeche to consider the direction of the Mexico SGP after its first five months in operation. The meeting set the stage for the creation of a legally constituted network of organizations.

Participants at the meeting decided that the network should be a collegial body, independent from any state or international agency. The member organizations worked informally as a network for two years and legally constituted the Sustainable Development Network (SDN) in February, 1997. The SDN is composed of fifteen non-governmental organizations including hub NGOs and other legally constituted groups working under the regional sustainable development program. In all, the SDN has a core membership of approximately 50 professionals including biologists, economists, business administrators, agronomists, foresters, and others. The network maintains a small office in Mérida and has cultivated ties with other regional cooperatives, artisan federations, and non-governmental networks.

In examining the SDN’s structural character, one can view the network as a “regime” or governance institution that provides certain rules that normalize participants’ behavior in pursuit of a common set of goals (Young 1989). Such institutions can be more or less formally articulated. In general, institutions are structured around rules from which participants garner certain rights and responsibilities. Procedurally, regimes feature norms for collective decision making and typically they develop compliance measures to encourage participants’ conformance with the rules. The Sustainable Development Network is still in its infancy and as a result many of the institutional specifics are still being negotiated as members gain experience with collegial governance.

The network’s statutes recognize two types of members: active members and cooperating members. Of these two, only active members may form part of the SDN’s general assembly. Active members include the fifteen founding members and any additional organizations the network’s general assembly unanimously allows to join. Each active member has one vote in the

general assembly. In general, active membership is predicated upon full acceptance and implementation of the mission and approach of the sustainable development program. Cooperating members, in turn, may provide financial and/or technical support and work in conjunction with the network. Cooperating members do not enjoy voting rights within the general assembly. Like active members, their participation is contingent upon unanimous approval of the network's general assembly.

Regarding collective decision-making, the members of the SDN have established that major decisions will go into effect only if full consensus is reached by representatives of all member organizations. Major decisions are those that require obligatory action on the part of member organizations. Ordinary decisions require a simple majority to pass. Unlike many decision-making bodies that require two-thirds of members to vote in favor of a resolution in order for it to pass, the SDN has elected to pursue a more challenging, and more time-consuming, approach. Another important procedural rule makes collective decision-making even more difficult. For those collective decisions that might impact member organizations individually, consensus must be reached within each organization based on its own internal procedures first. Once each member organization reaches agreement on a resolution of this kind, then the network as a whole must arrive at a consensus before it becomes a policy. Members of the network suggest that, while arduous, consensual decision-making is fairest to all members. And although resolutions take significant amounts of time to pass, once decided upon they tend to stick.

Perhaps the greatest oversight in the SDN's statutes regards compliance. Although they outline who may participate and how decisions will be made, the network's statutes do not discuss procedures by which the general assembly might discipline or even deconstitute a member organization that does not follow the rules. Currently members of the network are developing a draft resolution that considers compliance. As we discuss below, some concern has emerged among network members that certain organizations have ceased to work in a way that is congruent with the network's grassroots sustainable development approach.

Maintaining a Grassroots Conservation and Development Initiative: Negotiations with Power

Organizationally, the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program has made important and innovative advances that have allowed it to grow well beyond the scope of the GEF Small Grants Programme. At the same time, the network and its grassroots NGO members continue to face internal and external political challenges that will determine the initiative's future. On one level, the network has worked diligently to establish autonomy from external constituencies such as state agencies and international donor organizations. To that end, the network has signed formal agreements with different parties to establish boundaries for cooperative relationships. In addition, the network has created a regional fund to channel low-interest credit to community-based organizations. On a second level, however, individual grassroots organizations within the network face developmental challenges that could cause the network to rupture. On one hand, some organizations face extinction because they have chosen a development path which generates minimal resources. On the other hand, other member organizations have established corporatist style relationships with local communities that allow

the NGO to flourish but run against the network's mission of grassroots democracy. We consider each of these examples in turn focusing on the power dynamics at the heart of all three processes.

The Network's Moves for Autonomy

The grassroots NGO members of the Sustainable Development Network are keenly aware of the paternalistic legacy of state-run rural development in Mexico. Under this model, local or regional bosses or *caciques* linked to the PRI, the dominant political party, monopolize control of financial, legal, and other resources. As a result, these powerful actors or groups directly and indirectly dominate local communities through co-optation and other means. In many cases, communities have little recourse except to politically support local bosses in exchange for access to resources. This type of political relationship is typically referred to as *caciquismo* or *corporativismo* and the SDN has taken important steps to overcome the circle of dependence. In particular, members of the network saw a political opening to begin reorienting rural development interventions when the Salinas administration instituted massive reductions in state-sponsored social welfare and agricultural development programs.

In an effort to maximize the autonomy of the Sustainable Development Program, the network has pursued two main strategies including explicit agreements with donors and a regional fund, in addition to the procedures for self-governance mentioned above. In the first case, the SDN has signed agreements with each of the national and international donor organizations from which it receives financial and other support. The accords clearly establish the respective roles and responsibilities of each party and help to stabilize expectations on both sides. The network's aim in signing agreements with donor organization is to establish partnerships that will not degenerate into over-dependency on any one source. As a result, the SDN has attempted to diversify the number and kind of organizations that it solicits for support. In addition to the GEF, the Sustainable Development Program works with groups such as UNDP-Mexico, the Inter-American Foundation, the National Solidarity Institute (INSOL) and the National Social Enterprise Fund (FONAES).

The program's second strategy focuses on financial autonomy. In the past the state has largely controlled access to grants and loans for rural development, driving the paternalistic power relationships discussed above. In an attempt to open access to grants and credit, the SDN has established a peninsular fund. Unlike the small grants program, the peninsular fund operates as a trust and is designed to offer credits to community-based organizations. To date the fund has offered only one loan but has approximately US\$575,000 in available capital. Of that total, US\$200,000 represents targeted funds from the United Nations Women's Fund (UNIFEM). Another US\$375,000 were offered from the National Social Enterprise Fund (FONAES). The Inter-American Foundation (IAF) has stated that it will support the fund with US\$350,000 and US\$500,000 are under negotiation with the Inter-American Development Bank (IBD). In each case, the financial relationship between the donors and the SDN is mutually beneficial. The network recovers the loans offered to community-based organizations and the donor organizations can claim that they have mobilized the funds.

Interestingly, the SDN initially sought to develop both a finance company (Sociedad Financiera de Objeto Limitado) and a trading company (Comercializadora de Productos Social y

Ambientalmente Justos). The ambitious goal of the finance company was to create a banking structure that could receive and channel funds directly from the multi-lateral development banks. However, negotiations with federal and international organizations entered into a vicious circle that suggest that neither sector wanted to change existing modes of moving and controlling funds. Representatives of the multi-lateral development banks, including the Inter-American Development Bank and the World Bank, agreed to underwrite the creation of an independent finance company if the SDN attained the approval of the Mexican Finance Ministry (Secretaria de Hacienda y Crédito Público (SHCP)). For its part, the Mexican Finance Ministry would only grant approval to create the finance company if the SDN had prior approval from the multi-lateral banks. As a result, the SDN opted to step back and work to create a smaller peninsular fund.

Organizations on the Brink of Extinction

Ironically, the growth and relative autonomy of the sustainable development program, including the network and the peninsular fund, have generated stresses upon several grassroots NGO members. The original goal of the program--originally under the umbrella of the GEF small grants programme--was to promote grassroots democracy (horizontal decision-making) within an independent, sustainable, community development initiative. In many respects, participants have reached that goal. Yet, there is no guarantee that this organizational structure can sustain itself. The flip-side, therefore, is that, while the network and the peninsular fund have been established, the grassroots organizations themselves in some cases have become weaker. The experience of Yumbalam, A.C. is illustrative.

In terms of grassroots, community-based action research and project development, few of the program's member organizations have been as successful as Yumbalam. For the past eight years, Yumbalam has worked with Mayan and ladino communities in northern Quintana Roo, maintaining offices in the towns of Kantunilkin and Puerto Morelos. True to the sustainable development program's mission, Yumbalam has worked closely with communities, cooperatives, and regional organizations to carry out participatory rural appraisals of environmental and social problems. Through a combination of mapping and dialogue, communities have developed a sense of their own needs and have produced project proposals accordingly. One of the organization's main achievements was facilitating the creation of a locally managed protected area. While Yumbalam has successfully encouraged community development, however, the organization itself has generated very few resources to sustain itself.

The following statement from a recent internal strategy document clearly illustrates Yumbalam's philosophy. "Our approach is consciously non-protagonistic. With respect to local leaders, we try to enrich and strengthen other groups, to encourage their development without depending on Yumbalam over the long-term. This task has implied a process of mobilization and awareness-building within the communities, the recognition and identification of their own problems as well as the possibilities for their own self-governance" (Yumbalam 1997).⁸ In

⁸ "Nuestro estilo de trabajo es conscientemente no protagónico, con respeto a los líderes locales, trata de enriquecer y fortalecer a otros grupos para propiciar su permanencia sin hacer imprescindible la presencia a largo plazo de la organización Yum Balam A.C. Esta tarea ha implicado el desarrollo de un proceso de sensibilización,

essence, Yumbalam seeks to simultaneously strengthen community organizations *and* work itself out of a job. It has been quite successful in both respects.

Yumbalam has helped to produce a regional community development and environmental protection strategy. It has encourage some 40 community-based organizations and at least 14 of these have prospered. At the same time, however, Yumbalam has withered as an organization. Of an original nucleus of eight professionals, only four remain. In large part, this is because the organization has minimal sources of income such that its members cannot sustain themselves or their families. Unlike some other members of the network, Yumbalam has not collected fees for services rendered, and has not received significant grant support. In addition, one of Yumbalam’s founding members has spent a significant amount of time working as the (unpaid) president of the sustainable development network. As a result, it is unclear whether Yumbalam will continue to exist as a hub organization within the program or whether one of the community-based organizations that it helped to develop will assume that role.

Figure 1: Grassroots Organizational Development viz. Community Autonomy

	NGO	Strong	
Community	PROSELVA		Community
Dependence		YUMBALAM	Autonomy
	NGO	Weak	

Social Reproduction of the Corporatist Approach

Unlike Yumbalam, the hub NGO ProSelva based in Escarcega, Campeche, has grown rapidly as an organization since it was founded in 1995. ProSelva operates as a forestry and rural development consulting firm, offering technical assistance to ejidos. The NGO generates sufficient income to maintain several salaried technicians as well as its overall system of operations. In sharp contrast to Yumbalam’s efforts, also, ProSelva has been accused of domineering and even corrupt tactics in its relations with communities. The NGO also participates minimally as a member of the SDN. Because of its alleged authoritarian style of interaction with communities and its lack of participation in the network, several members of the general assembly have begun to question ProSelva’s dedication to grassroots sustainable development.

In conjunction with the well-known Pilot Forestry Program (Plan Piloto Forestal) operating in southern Quintana Roo, a group of forestry engineers began working in the area around Escarcega in 1990 to encourage community-based forestry enterprises. Following the organizational model established in Quintana Roo, this group helped to create an umbrella organization (sociedad) called Forestería Rural that is composed of representatives from forest production ejidos. Forestería Rural first became involved in the small grants program in 1994 when it solicited and received funding for captive breeding of white-tailed deer.

concientización y motivación hacia las comunidades, el reconocimiento e identificación de sus propios problemas y de las posibilidades autogestivas de la misma comunidad.”

As the network of grassroots NGOs working with the small grants program began to consolidate in late 1994 around the organizational support project (GatoB), the original group of forestry engineers decided to incorporate themselves, creating a consulting firm separate from Forestería Rural aimed at producing a regional sustainable development plan. One year later, the Grupo ProSelva, A.C. was granted legal status. Since the appearance of ProSelva coincided with the “micro-regionalization” of the small grants program, the NGO was invited to take on the role of hub organization for the area in and around the municipality of Escarcega.

Many factors help to explain why ProSelva’s technical interventions in ejidos in central Campeche have spawned criticism both locally and from within the SDN. First, unlike Yumbalam, the members of ProSelva have relatively little experience in managing the complexities associated with grassroots democratic process. Each of ProSelva’s eleven core members are highly qualified foresters, agronomists, and biologists but have had limited success at sustaining strong relationships of mutual trust and respect with communities.

Perhaps most importantly, however, both ProSelva and Forestería Rural came to occupy very similar roles in the local political economy. Both offer technical services to communities ranging from forest management, chicle production, and beekeeping, among others. Since both groups collect fees from communities for their services and representation, they began to compete for clients. In an attempt to control as much of the sector as possible, ProSelva, for example, has pursued a corporatist approach wherein the NGO grants community access to the considerable resources that it controls. As a hub organization within the sustainable development program, ProSelva serves as an intermediary, identifying and recommending community projects for small grants. In addition, ProSelva has established its own rural development trust fund to encourage chicle and honey production. Control over these key resources has allowed ProSelva to impose a top-down decision-making structure which reproduces paternalistic relationships of dependence between the NGOs and its client ejidos. Thus while ProSelva has generated the greatest profits and production levels of any of the hub NGOs, its authoritarian management style has stifled moves toward grassroots democracy at the community level.

Conclusion

The experience of the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program presents several important lessons regarding the pursuit of grassroots democratic initiatives. Two primary observations stand out. First, a grassroots organizational *structure* does not guarantee a horizontal and collegial democratic decision-making *process*. The example of Pro Selva and associated ejidos in central Campeche suggests that domination of communities by the outside, intermediary organization impeded community development at all levels and thus reproduced the corporatist style of intervention that the regional sustainable development program seeks to overcome. Second, a grassroots democratic process does not necessarily encourage organizational development over the short-term. The case of Yumbalam illustrates that grassroots development NGOs must attend to their own organizational sustainability if they expect to continue working over the long-term.

To date the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program has successfully established grassroots democratic structures and is navigating important challenges aimed at maintaining them. Since conservation and sustainable development outcomes are largely determined by politics, we can begin to trace the outlines of modes of power that are in play. The central goal of grassroots democratic process is power-sharing. While this ideal probably cannot be fully realized, the sustainable development program represents an important alternative to the corporatist rural development model that has predominated in Mexico. The collegial decision-making procedures of the SDN general assembly, the peninsular fund, and the formal agreements with donor organizations are all strategies for balancing the scales of power.

At the same time, our brief analysis of the organizational and political challenges facing members of the SDN suggest that certain types of action could destabilize the sustainable development program. Obviously if organizations like Yumbalam disappear, important political intermediaries will be lost and an unstable power vacuum may develop. On the other hand, the remaining members of Yumbalam may take on a different role and one or more of the community-based organizations they helped to develop may take their place.

More worrisome are the trends in domination apparent in the case of ProSelva. Our initial investigation suggests that not only has the NGO worked to co-opt community leaders, ProSelva also maintains indirect forms of control over ejidos because it controls key resources and channels of influence. Max Weber referred to this dynamic as “domination through constellation of interests” (Weber 1978) and warned that it is a most insidious form of control since the dominator does not actually exert power over the dominated. In such cases, the dominated act in their own interest but end up serving the dominator for lack of other options. This is the core of the corporatist mode of domination--absolute dependence.

Fortunately, participants in the Yucatán Peninsula Sustainable Development Program are aware of the organizational and political dynamics that pose risks to the initiative’s long-term survival. As the program continues to mature, it will be important to institute activities to carefully monitor and evaluate not just the advancements made in each micro-region but also the decision-making processes by which development activities are carried out. Fundamental to this

oversight process will be clear procedures that guarantee compliance with the sustainable development program's goal of grassroots democracy.

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