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Planning rural development in local organisations in the Andes: what role for regional and national scaling up?

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Much of the enthusiasm for participatory grassroots level planning by NGOs and peasant organisations has often neglected the broader regional and national political economy with which these institutions operate. Yet this context has great influence over the opportunities and constraints that face non-governmental and peasant organisations. Moreover, many of the factors influencing the dynamics of these wider systems occur beyond the immediate influence of local organisations. It is perhaps the fact that the impacts of such wider processes and relationships are felt at a community level that has stimulated the search for local level diagnoses to the neglect of higher level solutions.

Nonetheless, diagnoses conducted only at a local level may fail to identify underlying causes of local problems. Land use degradation, for example, might be identified as a central problem for communities during the planning activities of local organisations, who may then embark on participatory soil conservation strategies based on local knowledge. But the deeper causes of that degradation, such as product prices and lack of off-farm employment in local labour markets, cannot be directly addressed by such local institutions; nor can they be solved inside the community.

Local organisations suffer further limitations. Their local focus frequently impedes information flows among different organisations, leading to the duplication of mistakes and the failure to multiply a successful innovation from one organisation to others. Similarly, a local orientation may be an obstacle to addressing problems which cut across the borders of several organisations (such as irrigation systems). While the socio-political orientation of many such organisations may play the important role of criticizing inappropriate government activities, it can also imbue excessively critical, and indeed mistaken, images of a monolithic government.

This may lead local organisations to overlook offices and individuals within the public sector who are broadly sympathetic to local NGO concerns. Consequently, potential complementarities and co-ordinators between the two sectors are not exploited (such as the technological contributions that the public sector could make to local organisations that frequently lack technological skills). This represents an inefficient use of resources. It is likely that such inefficiency will be the greater with the increasing proliferation of non-membership local NGOs.

There are good reasons why Andean non-membership NGOs adopted such strategies in the past. Having frequently been formed in resistance to non-democratic governments, a local orientation allowed them a closer contact with the bases, facilitating efforts to strengthen popular organisation. In addition, it allowed a more efficient (and adaptive) delivery of economic and social services, which in turn helped to strengthen the NGO's relationship to these popular organisations. Being critical of, and distant from, the public sector also helped NGOs to avoid co-optation and any implication in the policy failures and politicisation of government programmes, protecting the NGO from the loss of popular legitimacy that would automatically result from this.

Nonetheless, the last decade in Latin America has seen two changes of significance for such

NGO strategies. Transitions to electoral democracy have meant that states are not now so overtly repressive as they previously were. This change also presents NGOs with the difficult fact that government is now to some degree popularly elected whilst NGOs are not. Secondly, in recent years, governments have also been under the pressure of donors to reduce the size of the state, and collaborate with NGOs for the implementation of social programmes. While flawed in many respects, these policy orientations open channels through which NGOs may now have more opportunity to influence state policy and structure. This more favourable political environment has allowed both NGOs and some of their advocates to address more explicitly the limitations of local NGO projects in a way that would have been inappropriate in earlier, more repressive atmospheres. The issue of how NGOs should move from a hostile toward a more collaborative and influential relationship with the state is of especially increasing concern.

In this context the idea of "scaling up" takes on particular significance. While loosely defined, "scaling up" deals with strategies aimed at widening the impact of local NGOs. Many would argue that this ought to imply some form of relation between the NGO and the state. There are, however, several layers to the concept. Firstly, is the concern to replicate local innovations in other local organisations across a wider area. Replication, however, may not address the deeper causes of local problems, and other variants of "scaling up" strategies are concerned to identify how to move from a local project to a regional or national programme, and indeed how to move from the experience of a local project and local organisation to fora which achieve national policy reform.

These concerns suggest that it is timely to devise strategies that cut across spatial scales and institutional boundaries: strategies that think explicitly about the relationship of local projects to regional and national processes of social development, and that bring NGOs and the state together. Such strategies would also build practical bridges between recent work on participatory development and the contributions of earlier theories of regional underdevelopment.

These concerns are current among many Andean NGOs, and are the topic of a collaborative research project involving the Overseas Development Institute-London, the Centre for Tropical Agricultural Research-Bolivia, a Colombian NGO, Celater, and the author. A range of emerging NGO strategies have been identified, of which the following are some examples. One Ecuadorian NGO, concerned that its local activities have achieved few sustainable impacts over the last decade is now moving toward a multi-level research strategy addressing local, regional and national processes in an attempt to generate policy alternatives that embrace the three levels simultaneously. with the support of its foreign public sector donor, another Ecuadorian NGO has long sought to co-finance rural projects with the public sector. The NGO's and donor's goals are to influence the state's thinking and policy, and to achieve a wider implementation of the NGO's participatory approach to planning and administration in the state sector. In short, the aim is to change the state rather than simply criticise it.

In Bolivia, groups of NGOs have collaborated in co-ordinated agricultural research and extension projects, sharing information and this year beginning to address area-wide problems of water management. One implicit concern of the co-ordinators of these projects is that such integrated NGO projects could serve as a model for future state initiatives. Within Bolivia there is also a trend towards the formation of NGO co-ordinating networks at a departmental level aimed at improving collaboration and information exchange among NGOs.

A future goal of one such network is to develop agreed upon departmental policy alternatives to offer to the government. The network is also intended to provide a united NGO front around these policy alternatives when the government approaches NGOs for collaborative relationships in rural development programmes (as donors are currently encouraging it to do). In the process, the network aims both to influence policy and to press from the NGO sector for the decentralisation of government policy making processes in order to make them more relevant to local conditions.

These strategies suggest institutional innovations in the non-governmental sector that donors could support in order to overcome the constraints of an excessively local focus. One or a group of donors could, for instance, fund similar programmes in both non-governmental and public sectors, and use this position to bring the two sectors closer together in a way that allows NGOs greater influence over public sector policy, and greater access to the public sector resources that NGOs lack. Such funding could also improve co-ordination between the two sectors and among NGOs. It may not be the role for large policy and programme lending agencies to fund NGOs directly, and many NGOs express great concern at being overburdened by such donors. Nonetheless, such large donors could still strengthen NGO influence over regional policy and programme reform by fostering NGO-state collaboration in both the administration and design of the programmes supported.

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