

enro + biz - Studies in Development Policy and
Non-Governmental Organisations
edited by Michaela von Freyhold,
Elke Grawert and Anisha Schubert

Volume 4

Carsta Neuenroth

**We Make the Road by Walking:
NGOs and Civil Society in Guatamala**

Shaker Verlag
Aachen 2002

Die Deutsche Bibliothek - CIP-Einheitsaufnahme

Neuenroth, Carsta:

We Make the Road by Walking: NGOs and Civil Society in Guatemala /
Carsta Neuenroth.

Aachen : Shaker, 2002

(enro + biz - Studien zu Entwicklungspolitik und Nichtregierungs-
organisationen ; Bd. 4)

ISBN3-8322-0527-6

M.A. Programme Development Policy with
Focus on Non-Governmental Organisations (enro/dengo)
Universität Bremen, FB 8
Postfach 330440
28334 Bremen
Germany

Bremer Informationszentrum für Menschenrechte und Entwicklung (biz)
Bremen Information Centre for Human Rights and Development
Bahnhofsplatz 13
28195 Bremen
Germany
Homepage: <http://www.bizme.de>
E-mail: info@bizme.de

Copyright Shaker Verlag 2002

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a
retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic,
mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission
of the publishers.

Printed in Germany.

ISBN 3-8322-0527-6
ISSN 1616-7120

Shaker Verlag GmbH • P.O. BOX 101818 • D-52018 Aachen
Phone: 0049/2407/9596-0 • Telefax: 0049/2407/9596-9
Internet: www.shaker.de • eMail: info@shaker.de

Editorial

The enro + biz studies series is intended to elaborate on positions in development policies. It aims at supplying backgrounds on development issues to a critical and committed public. Most of the papers published in this series are theses of students in *Development Policy with Focus on Non-Governmental Organisations* (enro/dengo). All of the authors have been working in NGOs and, in addition to the examination in a previous study of a broad spectrum of disciplines, they have passed the final exam in the post-graduate programme of *enro*. The publications focus on the juncture of practice and theory of development policy. They are meant to provide ideas and theory-guided assistance in arguing for organisations and institutions in the area of development.

Carsta Neuenroth examines in her concise and seminal work the relationships between NGOs and civil society in Guatemala. That NGOs are not only useful in promoting social development but also in facilitating and stabilising democracy has been an assertion repeated over and over again. For those who use the term NGO to denote any voluntary association this assertion is a tautology since there obviously can be no democracy without citizens who organise outside the state and try to influence its policies. But does this also apply to NGOs in the more narrow sense, namely those intermediate organisations who initiate development projects, dispense charity and social services and try to protect human rights and the environment? Her primary question is whether and how these NGOs most of whom are engaged in small scale project work can contribute towards the strengthening of civil society and thus to the consolidation of democracy in Guatemala. Her work is theoretical and analytical, based on her own lengthy experience as a development worker in Guatemala, on interviews with eleven particularly knowledgeable experts in the country and on a wide variety of policy papers and studies that could be found in the various archives of NGOs and donor agencies. In summarising what she read and heard she merges her own assessment with the experience and the concepts current among Guatemalan intellectuals and NGOs giving us the perspective of the insiders.

Although her study has a regional focus the issues raised and the problems she pinpoints are by no means unique to Guatemala only: the patterns she discerned can be encountered in the whole of Latin America and in many developing countries elsewhere.

In a democratic state, as Gramsci observed, civil society as the network of civil organisations such as the mass media, political parties, churches, trade unions and numerous other groups produces the consensus and the political culture which provides the state and its apparatus with legitimacy and reproduces the consent of the economically weak to the existing property relations as well.

Although the state still guarantees the existing order through its monopoly of the means of coercion, such coercion remains unobtrusive and does not meet much resistance. Where, on the contrary, civil society is weak the state maintains its own rule as well as the dominance of the economically ruling classes through sheer force and intimidation and is vulnerable to counter-violence and military takeovers.

After the end of a civil war that lasted for almost forty years, all sectors of the Guatemalan society would agree that peace, democracy and a civil society strong enough to uphold them would be preferable to the previous state of affairs. The conditions for building such a civil society are, however, quite unfavourable: Guatemala has the most unequal land tenure system in Latin America with the majority of the population being dispossessed *Indios* living below the poverty line somewhere in the countryside. At the other end of the social scale there is a tiny bourgeoisie stubbornly opposed to land reform or a tax reform that would be necessary to finance basic social infrastructure and the creation of some economic opportunities for the poor. Worse still, the majority of the population cannot yet rest assured that the ruling elite might not revert to violent means if the pressure for social reforms gains momentum.

According to the author, NGOs in this context may define their tasks in two different ways: they may either concentrate on assisting the poor in solving their problems without much recourse to the state and by the same token foster political stability through reproducing political apathy among the underprivileged, or they may try to work towards empowerment of the poor and towards social actions which might change the consensus within civil society and step by step also the orientation of the state. Apparently, most NGOs in Guatemala are more active in the first type of pursuit although even there they face a lot of obstacles, the most important one being lack of reliable funding by Northern donor organisations who only commit themselves to short term projects thus endangering the sustainability particularly of those NGOs who specialise in providing social infrastructure. NGOs tend to admit that their own development work will never be enough and that there is a need for political reforms. In practice, however, representatives of NGOs usually do not have the political prestige to influence policies since they cannot claim to represent the grassroots nor to represent superior expertise and analysis. Nevertheless, in their commitment to social transformation, service and solidarity with the poor, NGOs may, as the author concludes, continue to play an important role in a society where both the state and the private sector have yet to recognise that they too have social responsibilities.

Neuenroth's thesis is full of thought provoking observations and a worthwhile read for both practitioners and scholars in the field of NGOs.

German summary

Der sich verändernde Kontext im Rahmen der Demokratisierung in Guatemala und anderen lateinamerikanischen Ländern hat Nichtregierungsorganisationen (NROn) in eine Identitäts-, Legitimitäts- und Nachhaltigkeitskrise gestürzt und die Frage nach ihrer Rolle in der Zivilgesellschaft aufgeworfen. Zivilgesellschaft kann unterschiedlich konzipiert und interpretiert werden. So weisen Konzepte, die auf der liberalen Tradition beruhen, der Zivilgesellschaft eine die Politik des Staates unterstützende Rolle zu. In diesem Zusammenhang befreit das Engagement von NROn bei der Armutsbekämpfung den Staat von dem Handlungsdruck, den Forderungen der Armen auf ihn ausüben würden. Dagegen konzipieren Neo-Marxisten Zivilgesellschaft als politikdefinierende Kraft. NROn haben die Aufgabe, die von politischen Entscheidungen ausgeschlossene Bevölkerung in dem Prozess, der ihre politische Artikulation zum Ziel hat, zu begleiten. Zahlreiche NROn haben den Anspruch, der neo-marxistischen Position entsprechend zu agieren. Dazu müssen sie sich jedoch der Probleme stellen, die sich angesichts mangelnder Finanzierung, konfliktiver Beziehungen zu Staat, Zielgruppen und untereinander und nicht zuletzt struktureller und organisatorischer Schwächen ergeben.

Spanish Summary

Después de muchos años de dictadura militar y guerra civil en Guatemala inició – como en muchos otros países de América Latina – un proceso de democratización.

Sobre la importancia de la “sociedad civil” para la construcción de la democracia se discute animadamente en ciclos gubernamentales y no gubernamentales. Numerosas organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONGs) reclaman la participación activa en el proceso de construir la democracia.

Carsta Neuenroth muestra en el presente estudio como el ambiente social, político y económico ha definido el carácter y el desarrollo de la sociedad civil y específicamente de las ONGs en América Latina. Analiza las influencias de liberalización económica y ajuste estructural, globalización y democratización sobre las relaciones entre ONGs y sociedad civil. Se aclara, que las acciones de las ONGs como organizaciones de la sociedad civil depende de la manera como sus líderes interpretan y conceptualizan la sociedad civil. ONGs que favorecen un concepto de sociedad civil basado en la tradición liberal de pensamiento tienen la inclinación de apoyar la política del estado. Organizaciones que interpretan la sociedad civil en un sentido neo – marxista quieren principalmente influir en la definición de políticas. Pero – tienen la capacidad de hacerlo como representantes de una sociedad no articulada?

A base de una serie de entrevistas con representantes de ONGs en Guatemala se muestra de que manera tratan las organizaciones de cumplir con este compromiso dentro de su sociedad, que tipo de relación mantienen con el estado y como se relacionan con los movimientos sociales.

Contents

Editorial

German summary

Spanish summary

1	Introduction	1
2	The role of NGOs and civil society in the discourse of development	6
2.1	NGOs in Latin and Central America: Origin and characteristics	6
2.1.1	Origin of NGOs	6
2.1.2	Characteristics of NGOs	8
2.2	Interpretations of civil society and the role of NGOs	10
2.2.1	The liberal position	11
2.2.2	The neo-Marxist position	13
3	Civil society and NGOs in the Guatemalan context of development	17
3.1	Journey through the past	17
3.2	Guatemalan views of civil society	24
3.3	The situation of NGOs	27
3.3.1	Sustainability	27
3.3.2	Identity	30
3.3.2.1	Relationship with the state	31
3.3.2.2	Relationship with the population and organizations NGOs work with	34
3.3.2.3	Institutional learning and development	36
4	Conclusions	40
	Acronyms and Abbreviations	44
	Interviews	45
	Bibliography	47