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> You still don't have an NGO? C'mon, c'mon. Get with it! If you work in development, you must have an NGO. It's the wave of the '90s. . . . Don't fool yourself, colleague. . . . For those that lost time studying philosophy, social sciences, history, international relations, law, pedagogy, political economy, anthropology, journalism, ecology, and things that are no good for selling fried chicken, there is nothing left but a good NGO.
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> —Gino Lofredo, "Hágase rico en los 90," *Chasqui*

Founding an NGO, or securing a job with one, became an increasingly attractive employment option for many middle-class professionals in the 1980s and 1990s. In the midst of the worst economic crisis in a generation, cultivating international connections and establishing an NGO enabled some professionals to reestablish a modicum of social and economic stability. Successful NGO entrepreneurs even benefited from the economic crisis, because structural adjustment policies drove more people into greater poverty and prompted aid agencies to channel money to NGOs to mitigate the suffering. They were thus able to position themselves to speak on behalf of the poor, who were generally less successful in gaining access to development aid.

This chapter examines how the increase in foreign development funding via NGOs offers some people and popular organizations the opportunity to obtain resources and establish ties to powerful international "aid," or "cooperation," agencies.[1] Specifically, it analyzes the often contentious relationships between middle-class professionals of the erstwhile Left and poor alteños as they contend with each other for access to international funding. It also considers the tensions that emerge among the poor when NGOs incorporate some in their activities and exclude others.

I first argue that progressive NGOs—despite their stated good intentions—are not strengthening independent popular organizations to represent disempowered constituencies. On the contrary, the spread of NGOs has opened up new avenues of social mobility for some members of the professional middle class who have been threatened by declining living standards and in some cases downsized from the state sector. NGOs have

reinforced their ability to speak for disempowered constituencies, and this facility has increasingly tied the NGOs to the policy agendas of international development agencies.

I then demonstrate that NGOs have also created new, albeit limited, opportunities for some urban poor who live in the right places, have the right connections, and satisfy the criteria for appropriate beneficiaries set by international aid agencies. As popular groups organize in response to the availability of international funding, they frequently distance themselves from others whose economic circumstances do not improve and who cannot be incorporated in the small-scale projects of many NGOs. This not only creates cleavages between the NGO sector and unincorporated constituencies but may also aggravate problems of representation within popular organizations that ally with NGOs.

As the poor resituate themselves within a changing political and economic context, the distinctions between some NGOs and popular organizations frequently blur. This generally happens in two ways: an NGO creates a popular organization, which then becomes an example of the NGO's alliance with the poor, or an organization that emerges from a grassroots initiative takes on NGO-like characteristics as it seeks international financial support for its projects. The shifting and blurring of organizational forms raise questions about how the NGOs have affected the strategies of resistance and the ability of impoverished alteños to represent themselves.

Middle-Class Professionals and NGOs

Although Bolivia's economic crisis and the post-1985 neoliberal reforms weighed most heavily on the poor, middle-class professionals did not escape unscathed. The rampant inflation of the early 1980s devalued their earnings, and the subsequent shrinkage of state agencies reduced a major source of middle-class jobs. Between 1985 and 1991 the proportion of the Bolivian population employed by the state fell from 24 percent to 17 percent (CEDLA-ILDIS 1994), and salaries from public sector jobs were usually significantly lower than those for comparable positions in the private sector. The economic depression of the 1980s was particularly unsettling to professionals who had lived abroad during the dictatorships or who had benefited from scholarship programs to study in foreign universities. When they returned to Bolivia, they faced a drastic decline in the living standards that they had enjoyed in Mexico, the United States, and Europe. The pro-

liferation of NGOs, however, presented new possibilities, but neither establishing an NGO nor securing a job with one was a simple matter.

Technical skills were never enough. The "personal recommendation," or, as one person stated more bluntly, a *patrón,* was crucial, and race and gender always shaped the ways that patronage networks operated locally. With few exceptions, Aymara professionals experienced little success in founding NGOs. They were more likely to acquire work as "popular educators" within NGOs because of their knowledge of Aymara. These jobs demanded a high degree of contact with NGO beneficiaries, but they ranked fairly low in the hierarchy of positions available within the organizations. Knowledge of a foreign language, such as English, German, French, or Dutch, was more important for aspiring professionals seeking to make their way in the world of development NGOs, and those who could operate in transnational social contexts held a distinct advantage over those who could not. To a greater degree than their Aymara counterparts, white middle-class professionals had lived for months or years in foreign countries, where they established contacts with foundations and development organizations, became fluent in the languages of the host countries, and acquired university degrees, which were more prestigious than those earned in Bolivia. They also gained an understanding of the cultural practices, beliefs, and idiosyncrasies of foreign nationals. In Bolivia they parlayed these cultural understandings and international connections, as well as technical skills and family and party loyalties, into the creation of a series of fledgling NGOs or jobs within NGOs.

The size of NGO staffs in El Alto ranged from a handful of people to several dozen employees. With only a few exceptions, the professionals did not live in the city, although most "support staff" (e.g., secretaries, popular educators, and drivers) did. Professionals either commuted to offices in El Alto on a daily basis from the lower elevations of La Paz, or they came to the city from La Paz–based headquarters when specific activities required their presence. They generally held contracts of varying duration, and, although most were Bolivian nationals, a significant number were foreigners—primarily Europeans and North Americans.

Bolivia attracted foreign citizens for a number of reasons. Living in the country—at least for a while—was an adventure. Some were attracted by the perceived exoticism of Bolivia's indigenous peoples, and most—especially the Dutch and the Scandinavians—were committed to addressing the severe social and economic problems that plagued the country. Good jobs were scarce at home, and working with an NGO gave them a chance to de-

velop professional skills and enhance the attractiveness of their résumés for future European and North American employers. The foreigners generally negotiated contracts directly with development organizations in their home countries and worked with NGOs in Bolivia as "volunteers" or "advisers." They also received a series of benefits that their Bolivian counterparts did not enjoy, such as housing, health insurance, payment in U.S. dollars, and expense-paid trips home every year. When their contracts were completed, these individuals typically returned home or received new assignments in different countries or other parts of Bolivia. Only a few settled permanently in Bolivia. The latter were primarily European women who married local men and who had grown up in multicultural environments.

Unlike most of their foreign counterparts, Bolivian NGO staff members were concerned with making careers for themselves locally, because they considered La Paz to be home. They were generally more attuned to the subtleties of local politics and culture than their foreign colleagues, and, unlike most of those colleagues, they had usually been politically active at some point in their lives, bringing their activist concerns to the NGOs that they joined or founded. By the late 1980s and 1990s, however, they were emphasizing the professional, rather than the political, importance of their work. This was partly the result of shifts within NGOs and the international development arena.

By the late 1980s NGOs were beginning to upgrade the technical and administrative capabilities of their staffs, because they needed to sharpen their competitive edges vis-à-vis other NGOs. The concern with professionalism also emerged because European funding agencies had grown more conservative. With the return of civilian rule in Bolivia these agencies were no longer interested in supporting overtly partisan causes and started to make more rigorous demands of their clients, who operated in an ever more competitive funding environment. The NGOs wanted quantifiable project results and required much tighter accounting procedures. In addition, a domestic debate about the role of NGOs in Bolivian society emerged in the early 1990s, as the government of Jaime Paz Zamora raised questions about NGO funding, control, and accountability, and as some popular organizations began to criticize NGO behavior. One director commented to me that, "formerly, concepts like efficiency and competitiveness were sins to us, but now they are very important here."

Although NGOs continued to contrast their projects to the bureaucratic and ineffective programs of the state, they also presented their initiatives as contributions to broad improvements in social welfare and progressive change that transcended the divisive and opportunistic activities of

the political parties. By adopting the appearance of political neutrality, the NGOs sought to legitimize themselves and their organizations to international financial entities and to Bolivian society in general. In El Alto, however, this apolitical stance inadvertently exacerbated alteños' alienation from the traditional political parties, which local people widely viewed as venal, corrupt, and unable to represent the interests of poor city residents.[2]

Most urban dwellers had expected the traditional political parties to improve the standard of living in the aftermath of military rule, but when elected leaders decreed unpopular economic measures and abused state power for personal enrichment, people became disillusioned with the political process. Similarly, many activists grew pessimistic about the prospects for meaningful social change. They often withdrew from the parties and frequently affiliated with NGOs; this behavior both reflected and reproduced a widespread cynicism. Some NGOs shared this disaffection and distanced themselves from the parties.

A public forum convened by a prominent El Alto NGO in October 1994 exemplifies the efforts of many NGOs to transcend the fractious infighting of local political parties. The purpose of the forum was to inform residents about the recently passed Popular Participation Law and its implications for El Alto. A staff member presided over the event and began the meeting by carefully distancing himself and the NGO from any association with the parties. He further emphasized that the NGO was sponsoring the event as a community service and that it wanted to encourage greater political participation—in any party—by city dwellers. About sixty people listened intently; most were members of neighborhood committees, civic organizations, youth groups, and women's organizations, and all had some experience with the parties.

The NGO representative began his analysis of the law by stating that it constituted a new way of relating to the state, one that was less paternalistic than in the past and that gave more power to local groups to set forth their demands. The law was giving to the citizenry the responsibility for creating livable neighborhoods in El Alto, he said, so that instead of continuing to make demands, people could become "active subjects" in the resolution of their problems. He then carefully elaborated both the perceived benefits and disadvantages of what the law would likely entail for El Alto. On the positive side, he explained that the law for the first time recognized the existence of historically marginalized local organizations and gave them more power to determine their future. This was particularly important in the countryside, where the state had long denied the legitimacy of indigenous *ayllus*.[3] By empowering ayllus, as well as urban neighbor-

hood committees and other grassroots organizations, the law embraced the cultural diversity of Bolivia and acknowledged that the old discourse about *mestizaje* effaced important cultural differences.[4] He added that the law mandated the assignation of state resources to municipalities on the basis of population and that, theoretically, this would benefit El Alto.

On the negative side, he continued, the law posed a problem of representation. El Alto's numerous neighborhood committees would constitute what the law described as "territorial base organizations" (OTBs), the local entities charged by the state with initiating development projects, providing services, and so forth. In many neighborhoods, however, the committees were corrupt, ineffective, and unrepresentative of the needs of local people; moreover, political parties frequently controlled the organizations and manipulated them for partisan purposes. The speaker added that the country needed another law to control the parties, and many people in the audience nodded enthusiastic agreement.

In relation to the problems of representation, he said that the OTBs could fragment social life and undermine, rather than advance, local initiatives. How, he asked, were small-scale entities going to make broader alliances and connections? The danger was that territorial concerns would take precedence over broad-based solidarity. He also noted that, although the law recognized different cultural traditions, people must bear in mind that "the traditional" had long contributed to the marginalization of indigenous peoples, especially women. He summarized his presentation by stating that the law might offer some new openings for popular expression, but it contained significant dangers and pitfalls.

In the discussion that followed, the NGO representative urged those present to take control of the neighborhood committees so that the parties could not manipulate them. He cited a local example to drive home his point. Residents of the neighborhood, he said, had recently asked the mayor's office for help in transforming a garbage dump into a plaza for children, but local officials presented a budget for the project with excessive costs. The NGO then decided to take over the project and build the plaza with the help of residents. Together they eliminated the garbage dump and built the plaza for a fraction of the cost estimated by local officials, but the mayor took the credit for the plaza in a report on the accomplishments of his administration.

Throughout the meeting the NGO representative consistently placed the organization outside the realm of local politics and characterized it as solely concerned with informing citizens of their rights and improving living conditions in El Alto for everyone. He advanced his seemingly bal-

anced presentation of the law within a general understanding that whatever its strengths and weaknesses, the Popular Participation Law was now *the law,* and the time for protesting it was essentially over. Local people, he stressed, had to find the best ways to accommodate their interests within the state's parameters.

The reality, however, was somewhat more complicated. Far from being above the rough-and-tumble of local political struggles, the NGO was a major actor. On the eve of the Popular Participation Law's passage, the NGO had reorganized its programs so that it could exercise more power with the municipal government once the law went into effect. It did so by concentrating in one villa of particular strategic political importance a number of programs that had been spread out across the city. And, although the NGO moved to accommodate the new law in late 1994 and 1995, the mayor's office and CONDEPA were still refusing to recognize the law and were blocking the creation of OTBs in the city. The CONDEPistas, who basically controlled the municipality of El Alto, saw the law as an attempt by the coalition of ruling parties to wrest control of the city from them. Thus mutual antipathy shaped the relationship between CONDEPA and the NGO, which many people identified as aligned with the Movimiento Bolivia Libre (MBL), CONDEPA's political rival.

Although the NGO's apolitical self-representation did not always convince local people, it was central to the success that NGOs—old and new, neoliberal and not-so-neoliberal—enjoyed with international donor agencies. By the mid-1990s NGOs had captured considerable foreign financial support and assumed a much more dominant position as the representatives of the poor. As a director of Coordinadora Nacional de Redes (CNR), the NGO umbrella organization, explained: "During the dictatorship, NGOs were not seen as actors in their own right. They were supposed to support the popular movement, which was understood as peasants, the COB and so forth. With the return of democracy and the weakening of the popular movement, NGOs began to act more independently and take the lead in proposing solutions to problems."

The relationship between middle-class professionals, NGOs, and political parties was in fact quite fluid and complex, belying the simplistic and self-serving public representations. Although some NGOs remained closely affiliated with particular parties, this was not always the case. The consolidation of international funding connections frequently enabled individuals and groups to challenge party orthodoxy and to renegotiate their positions within party patronage networks or break with the parties altogether. Daily contact with the poor also moved some middle-class profes-

sionals to question rigid political dogma and to understand social life in more nuanced and complex ways. This was the case, for example, with some female professionals who were in touch with the broad currents of international feminism and who founded several NGOs in El Alto. To capture financial aid for a series of feminist projects these women capitalized on a growing concern with gender among international development organizations. By so doing, they not only secured employment for themselves but also used international ties to advance a domestic debate about gender that was not on the agendas of the political parties of either the Left or the Right.

For example, Paula Cuéllar and a friend, Mireya Balcázar, created an NGO in 1982 after the restoration of civilian rule allowed them to return from exile. Cuéllar had worked with women and children in a poor neighborhood of La Paz, and Balcázar had been involved with Catholic Church activities in El Alto. Both women were self-described feminists, and before the 1980 military coup d'état preempted their efforts and drove them into exile, they had been active in the Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria (MIR).

They were drawn to the MIR because it was the only party at the time with a clearly defined position on women. Yet, according to Cuéllar, the MIR's stance on women was never entirely satisfactory. The party did not seriously engage the feminist issues of the day, and it was, she told me, "more interested in women's votes and the presence of women at rallies than in addressing the particular concerns of women." While in exile, Cuéllar and Balcázar reassessed their relationship with the MIR, and when they returned to Bolivia, the two women decided to establish a feminist NGO that dealt specifically with the concerns of poor urban women.

The organization began modestly with a $5,000 grant from Christian Aid, a British agency run by Anglican friars. The NGO operated out of a small room that Balcázar's mother loaned them for an office and almost immediately encountered problems with the MIR, which viewed the feminist example as a threat. The leadership asked Cuéllar and Balcázar, who still maintained ties to the party, to close the organization, but the women decided to leave the MIR instead. Cuéllar said, "We told [the MIR] to go to hell."

During the next fifteen years the NGO prospered and became one of the most successful agencies of its kind in El Alto. In 1995 twenty-five professionals worked for the organization, and many former employees had moved into a variety of staff positions elsewhere. Some had jumped to different NGOs. Others, like Cuéllar herself, made their living as indepen-

dent consultants for both state agencies and private development organizations, and a few had found employment in the Ministry of Human Development after 1993. The NGO's top-level directors were ideologically identified with the MBL, although not everyone belonged to the MBL or even other political parties, and the NGO obtained a steady stream of financial support from a variety of liberal European development organizations that were eager to fund projects focused on women.

As the organization expanded and consolidated, it deemphasized the "movement issues" that spurred its creation and focused more on "development" and the elaboration of income-generating projects. When I interviewed Cuéllar in 1995, she was not completely comfortable with this transition, but to account for it she pointed to the devastating effect of the economic crisis on poor women. She argued that the economy created a pressing need to respond to deepening poverty in concrete material ways. To raise money for projects Cuéllar and other staff members engaged in the increasingly competitive, and continuous, practice of writing proposals and submitting them to international aid agencies for consideration. In some cases, the projects were quite creative, and when implemented they were generally well received by local beneficiaries. A library, for example, offered a variety of books and study space for neighborhood children; a radio station broadcast news and educational programs; a women's soccer tournament drew women into leisure activities outside the home; and courses on baking and sewing attracted many women, who were encouraged to create their own "microenterprises." The success of these and other projects won the praise and the largesse of development agency representatives, who periodically visited El Alto. The NGO eventually became so successful that it enjoyed the relative luxury of operating on a five-year plan, whereas some of its less fortunate competitors struggled to survive on a project-by-project basis.

Yet as staff members adopted the concepts and concerns that informed official policy and the prevailing development discourse—for example, microenterprise development–their political prescriptions grew increasingly ambiguous. Small-scale projects, rather than broad-based protest and the creation of popular alliances, had become the order of the day. Although the NGO did, and continues, to contribute to improvements in living standards for some local people within its newly circumscribed sphere of influence, the organization could not extend its achievements beyond a relatively small constituency. The approach reflected a new, and perhaps more realistic, assessment of the balance of power, but it increasingly constituted less of a challenge, or an alternative, to dominant neoliberalism.

NGO-sponsored women's soccer league

The achievements of this NGO demonstrate how some professionals positioned themselves between international development agencies and local people to become the representatives of the poor. By so doing, the NGO professionals considerably strengthened their own position vis-à-vis international organizations and the state. They also managed to successfully contend with national political parties in furthering their programs and agendas by representing themselves as disinterested professionals detached from the rude partisan squabbles that occupied the parties. Rather than being one actor within a broad-based popular alliance of unions, citizen groups, and some political parties, however, the NGO and others like it were increasingly becoming the most powerful act in town.

NGOs and Grassroots Organizations

With the weakening of labor and popular organizations in the wake of structural adjustment, poor Bolivians had greater difficulty representing and defending their interests vis-à-vis the state. Some people, however, could appeal to international agencies through NGOs for support for their agendas. NGOs could circumvent the state, but unlike many state officials, they were not accountable to local people. This made it relatively easy to

encourage some organizational forms and actively ignore others. Indeed, the popular organizations that NGOs supported frequently lacked concrete political agendas or visions for social change.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, for example, when the Caritas mothers' clubs still controlled food handouts in the city, several emerging European-financed NGOs that lacked organized constituencies among El Alto's poor targeted the clubs in the hope of winning the women over to another agenda. They typically tried to capture the groups with their own programs and then reorient them around different agendas that frequently stressed the rights of women and placed considerable emphasis on consciousness-raising seminars and discussions about timely issues. Yet many women in these clubs had little interest, or time, for consciousness-raising programs. Nor were they particularly motivated by the sincere efforts of some NGOs to strengthen popular organizations and encourage greater citizen participation in local politics. Most had to confront a much more fundamental question: how to cope with the depressing daily realities that economic structural adjustment and grinding poverty forced on them. The clubs and the NGOs offered a partial answer for some by expanding their repertoire of temporary survival tactics, but very poor women, who hardly ever enjoyed "leisure time," could not spare the time necessary to become politically active. To dedicate themselves to politics, such women required concrete and immediate material remuneration for their efforts.[5]

Genera Cusicanqui is a rural immigrant who moves easily in the world of El Alto's development NGOs, and she is also a longtime organizer of mothers' clubs with Caritas. In 1995 she was earning $47 per month and receiving other benefits from work with a variety of NGOs, because her husband—a local police officer—could not support her and their seven children on a monthly salary of $165. Cusicanqui turned the patio of her home into an NGO-sponsored day care center during the morning. She also participated in a garden project sponsored by the same NGO; it provided her with fresh vegetables and a small income from their sale. Three afternoons a week she traveled to the headquarters of another NGO, where she attended leadership courses. Part of the attraction of the courses, she told me, was the transportation stipend given to participants. Cusicanqui considered it part of her salary and chose to walk to the classes rather than spend the money. Finally, Cusicanqui advertised a low-cost housing program for still another NGO, and in exchange for her efforts the NGO gave her materials to construct a bathroom in her house.

The extent to which Genera Cusicanqui drew on NGOs to satisfy her family's needs was unusual, but the way in which she did so was not. As

part of their ongoing struggles to survive, some alteños periodically harnessed the flow of goods and benefits from foreign-financed development programs. When the NGO programs ended, or shifted to other areas, people like Cusicanqui generally returned to the limited means that they controlled and had never entirely abandoned. This typically involved the astute use and constant re-creation of their own social networks.

Consequently, NGOs had to offer some concrete material incentive to ensure the participation of these women in their more ambitious educational and consciousness-raising programs. NGOs actually grew less by supporting preexisting popular organizations than by creating new ones through the offer of economic aid, and they were thus never able to completely escape from the clientelism that they condemned. Moreover, whereas local people turned to NGOs for economic largesse, the NGOs needed the groups to justify their development activities to international donor agencies. Clientelism toward those below was thus important for maintaining the flow of funding from donor agencies in Europe and the United States. Indeed, despite their much proclaimed "autonomy," NGOs were deeply immersed in upward- and downward-directed clientelistic relationships.

As NGOs spread throughout the city, they frequently found themselves competing with each other and with political parties for constituents. The nature of this competition was not the same throughout the city. NGOs were virtually absent in some neighborhoods, while as many as ten organizations operated projects in others. Similarly, some villas were more strategically important for the parties. A number of political parties and NGOs operated in the Villa 16 de Julio, where some of the chaos, rivalry, and confusion that shaped their interactions with local people was apparent when I visited an adult literacy class.

The class was sponsored by an NGO that specialized in adult education and consisted of about thirty Aymara women whom I met through Leonarda Alea, a math teacher with the NGO. Alea allowed me to sit in on her math class, but I soon discovered that another NGO and a political party had also laid claim to the group. As we entered the classroom and Alea introduced me to the women, I recognized Angélica, an MNR militant whom I had met the previous day at a mothers' club meeting. She greeted me and immediately began to complain about that meeting. Angélica asserted that the Federación de Amas de Casa was claiming her club for itself, and she stated indignantly that "I organized that group." She went on to explain that because of her efforts, the women had managed to save about 400 bolivianos ($80) for various group activities. This money,

according to Angélica, was then taken by the leaders of the Federación de Amas de Casa, who claimed that the money represented unpaid dues. Angélica was clearly furious.

After listening to her complaints, I took a seat among the women who had started gathering for Alea's math class, but what ensued more closely approximated a three-ring circus than an adult education course. As Alea began her class, she was able to maintain the attention of only those seated closest to her, because Angélica had initiated a political meeting at the other end of the room. Angélica was announcing that food donations would soon arrive from Bolivia's first lady, the wife of MNR president Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, and Angélica proceeded to call out the names of the women—nominal MNR members—who were eligible to receive them. An argument developed as some women expressed skepticism about the long-promised food that never seemed to actually arrive. As the debate heated up and became mixed with Alea's frustrated efforts to teach double-digit addition, three representatives from another NGO entered the room and greeted everyone loudly. Undaunted by the activities already underway, they began calling out names and distributing certificates to women who had recently completed a primary health care course sponsored by their institution.

After everyone had finished, I left with Alea and asked her how she felt about the class. She expressed frustration at the distractions and the disorganization of the meeting. She said that even though the party and NGO representatives had tried previously to divide the afternoon into discrete time slots for each organization, the women had no respect for time and simply wandered in and out. They were, she said ruefully, really only there for the food donations.

It would be an error to assume that NGOs are simply imposing themselves on local people. In a desperately poor city, where people frequently have no alternative means to help themselves, residents frequently welcome NGOs into El Alto's neighborhoods, and they maintain cordial long-term relationships with many well-meaning staff members.[6] Yet because of their localized approach to poverty alleviation, NGOs cannot include everyone, and their programs may create divisions as people compete for access to their benefits.

Consider, for instance, a day care program initiated by an NGO in 1987 during the depths of the economic crisis. The NGO decided to support poor women, who were working longer hours outside the home, by promoting a series of neighborhood day care centers. It acquired several locales and then taught neighborhood women the basic principles of early

childhood education through a series of classes and group discussions. The plan was for the women to eventually take over the centers and manage them as neighborhood resources. Before the centers could be handed over to the communities, however, problems arose. The NGO allowed some women who participated in the courses and had completed some prerequisites to work in the centers on a volunteer basis. The NGO provided them with small transportation subsidies to reach the centers from their homes and allowed them to bring their children, who, along with the mothers, received a hearty lunch and afternoon snack. From the NGOs' perspective, these women were volunteering their time to help others like themselves—women who had to work long hours during the day and who had no place to leave their children.

Child in NGO-sponsored day care program

The women not selected as volunteers, however, had a very different view of the situation. They felt excluded from an attractive employment niche, one that provided meals for women and their children at a time when the crisis left them hungry and unable to feed their families. Along with representatives of some neighborhood committees, these women proposed to the NGO that local women rotate through the centers, so that more people could have access to the free meals that accompanied the "jobs." An NGO staff member, who reflected on the conflict several years later, remarked somewhat ruefully that the women had not shared his enthusiasm for early childhood education and had viewed the centers, now defunct, primarily as a source of subsistence.

The NGO boom has indeed opened new opportunities for some urban poor. Fashionably exotic groups, such as women's and indigenous peoples' organizations, have been most successful in attracting NGO attention and support.[7] Yet as individuals and groups acquire international funding, forging horizontal ties becomes a complicated endeavor. The experience of Fernando Mejía and his wife, Estela Escandón, illustrate this phenomenon.

Both Mejía and Escandón were born in the Catavi-Siglo XX mining complex, where they and their families were intimately involved with the labor movement. Mejía was a mine worker for years and was deeply involved with the union. Escandón's father had been a national labor leader until he was killed in a mysterious automobile accident, and her mother was a founding member of the Housewives Committee of Siglo XX, which fought for women's and workers' rights during the dictatorships. Mejía and Escandón were forced into exile because of their political activism.

In 1976, for example, the Banzer regime took Mejía prisoner and shipped him and several other Bolivian political prisoners to Chile, where the men were placed in a southern prison camp with victims of General Augusto Pinochet's reign of terror. Mejía and a small group of companions managed to escape, and with the assistance of the Chilean underground they sought asylum in the Dutch embassy in Santiago. The men were eventually granted Dutch visas and left Chile for Holland, where Mejía remained in exile for a year and a half. He returned to Bolivia in 1978, when the fall of Banzer and a tenuous democratic opening made it safe for him to do so. Democracy, however, was never consolidated, and the 1980 military coup d'état forced him and his wife to return to Holland. This time Mejía remained for six years.

During their residency in Holland, Mejía made contacts with Dutch citizens involved with development in Third World nations and with solidarity causes. He also learned Dutch and acquired a university degree.

When he finally returned to Bolivia in 1986, it was not to work in the mine, because, as he said, "The situation had changed, and I had a profession." Indeed, Paz Estenssoro had just issued Supreme Decree 21060, the state operated mines were closing, and unemployed miners and their families were streaming into El Alto. Mejía discovered that not only working conditions had changed in Bolivia. Many of his friends and associates were different as well. Mutual hostility often poisoned the relations between those who had remained behind and suffered in Bolivia and those who had left and prospered in exile. The former were often envious of what they perceived as the self-serving accomplishments of returned exiles. The exiles, for their part, were suspicious of the political commitments and alliances of the people who stayed. Mejía's friends told him that he should have remained in Europe, because Bolivia had no jobs. As Mejía explained, "The situation in Bolivia had changed. All of my friends—compañeros from work, political associates—asked me what I was doing, why I had come back. Even my family asked me why I returned. They thought that I was very 'irregular'—imprisoned, exiled, here, there. But I came back because I had finished studying and gotten a job in Holland to work in Bolivia. My return had to be well planned, and it was."

Mejía had landed a one-year contract with a Dutch NGO that specialized in fitting disabled individuals with prostheses. After he fulfilled his contractual obligations, he and Escandón, who had earned a pharmacology degree in Eastern Europe, then returned to Holland. They went with their own ideas for projects to support displaced miners, and they came back to Bolivia with financial support for a soup kitchen and an auto repair shop in the city. Husband and wife eventually parlayed these projects into two NGOs. Escandón's organization targeted women in El Alto who had been forced out of the mining communities, and Mejía's NGO supported peasant communities in the surrounding countryside, as well as displaced miners in El Alto. Mejía and Escandón were among the few NGO professionals who lived in El Alto, and their institutions enjoyed a relatively constant stream of international support.

Fernando Mejía and Estela Escandón illustrate how some former members of the working class could establish and use international connections to their own advantage. These connections helped the couple to weather the social and economic difficulties of repatriation, and, more important, they enabled the pair to move out of the working class at a time when working people confronted serious economic problems.

Several anthropologists have described the stereotypic ways in which various Third World activists represent themselves and their causes to for-

eign funding agencies in order to garner political and economic support. Brysk (1996), Conklin (1997), and Jackson (1995), for example, discuss how South American indigenous peoples use political strategies that rely on representations of "authentic Indianness" that conform to Western clichés about them. Edelman (1991) documents a similar phenomenon among Costa Rican peasants, who understand and use European perceptions of peasants as quaint rustics to advance their own agendas. Estela Escandón and Fernando Mejía, however, did not make use of such stereotypical representations as they appealed to and negotiated with European funding agencies. To do so could have been counterproductive. The cliché of the Bolivian tin miner—militant, Marxist, revolutionary, and organized—had a certain romantic appeal for segments of the Left, but it was much too radical for most funding organizations in the 1980s. The cold war was not over, and the miners were on the defensive but not completely defeated. The miners' militancy and the danger that they posed to the status quo had not receded into the past. Furthermore, most international development organizations had never embraced an agenda that made a priority of the social and economic problems of laborers.

Thus Mejía and Escandón did not play on their "authenticity" as mine workers, yet they did not deny their past, either. They courted potential funders with many of the same organizing skills that they had learned in the labor movement—patience, analysis, persuasion, and sociability. They could talk from personal experience about the situation in the mining communities, and they were well aware of the problems that confronted residents of El Alto. They also understood the broader political and economic ramifications of neoliberal policies, and they could operate effectively within the world of NGO cultural politics. When, for example, European development agency representatives visited El Alto, Mejía and Escandón would invite them to lunch and serve wine, rather than the more typical soda, with the meal.

As Mejía and Escandón consolidated their NGOs and international contacts, however, they faced growing criticism from former mine workers, who struggled to secure employment and survive amid the harsh conditions of the city. These people were enormously suspicious of the motivations and means by which the couple actually succeeded. Many ex-miners, for example, singled out Estela Escandón as an example of opportunism and corruption in their discussion with me about NGOs. Some insisted that she used development funds to build her home. Others claimed that she was only concerned with personal advancement. Still others pointed to a failed bid for local political office as an MBL candidate to

illustrate her political opportunism and hypocrisy. None of these individuals offered any proof to substantiate their claims.

El Alto was indeed rife with individual opportunism and corruption. Yet who had the right to speak for whom was not at all clear. Charges of embezzlement, rumors of corruption, and accusations of opportunism surfaced in situations in which the visible advances of some people contrasted with the plight of others from similar backgrounds who had been left behind. Escandón's NGO also raised expectations among local people—especially women from the mining camps—that were beyond her capacity and the capacity of her organization to address. These critiques by local people spoke to the inequality that separated them from the largely middle-class professionals who staffed the NGOs, and they reflected the divisive effects of economic clientelism on grassroots constituencies.

Such complaints were by no means directed at Estela Escandón alone. They were also advanced against the directors of NGOs in other parts of the city by many ordinary people and the leaders of popular organizations. Usually, the latter had participated in NGO programs, but they often resented NGO clientelism and coveted NGO monies for their own activities. They reproached staff members for developing projects in the name of the poor and using development aid to finance comfortable lifestyles. A local female leader claimed that "there are many NGOs that receive money in our name and do projects that we know nothing about" (UNITAS 1991:79). Similarly, during a meeting organized by six El Alto NGOs in 1992, local women criticized the NGOs' consciousness-raising programs. They explained that the NGOs permitted women only to "reflect and become conscious of our problems" but excluded them from the planning, execution, and evaluation of programs (Comité Interinstitucional 1992).

Several popular organizations and their leaders have tried to circumvent established NGOs and assert their own claims to international funding because of their suspicions and critiques of the established NGOs. Doing so, however, is never easy. The leaders of popular organizations recognize that they usually need advice, as well as financial assistance, to carry out their duties, which are often new to them. Forging alliances with more powerful, better-connected professionals from the white middle class can offer them a certain amount of security, but these ties can also bring humiliating forms of dependency, and they may raise questions among constituents about a leader's honesty and commitment to their concerns. Similarly, as popular organizations assert their claims on international financial aid, the distinctions between NGOs and grassroots organizations become less clear cut. The case studies that follow demonstrate how the boundaries between

NGOs and popular organizations are increasingly blurred, as impoverished groups try to gain access to new kinds of resources.

The Pachamama Center and the Sole Federation of Popular Women's Organizations of El Alto

In 1995 the Pachamama Center operated a handicraft project involving about thirty groups of women in a number of El Alto villas. The groups, which consisted of five to twenty women, produced alpaca scarves, hats, and gloves; leather handbags; and small dolls for export and sale to tourists through a retail outlet that the center managed in La Paz. The project began in 1991, with funding from the Catholic Church, and the Pachamama Center grew up along with it. Some of the first groups that participated in the program were Caritas mothers' clubs, but when food handouts stopped flowing to the clubs in the early 1990s, the groups either dissolved or looked for other sources of institutional support. Those that became affiliated with the Pachamama Center were often seeking a means to minimally satisfy some of their household needs, but the small group of progressive Bolivian women and European volunteers who staffed the center had other ideas.

Although the immediate goal of the handicraft project was to provide poor women with an income, the long-term objective was much more ambitious. Project personnel hoped to strengthen a women's federation—the Sole Federation of Popular Women's Organizations of El Alto—that the NGO helped to establish among the El Alto artisan groups and a few La Paz–based cooperatives. The purpose of the federation, according to Pachamama's director, was to defend the social, economic, and political rights of poor women and not, she stated emphatically, to serve a few beneficiaries in the insular fashion of an NGO.

To this end, the NGO required every participant to attend popular education courses as part of the program. The individual groups met once a week for two to three hours with a staff member to read the Bible and relate biblical themes to members' lives and the goals of the federation. These sessions drew on the pedagogical teachings of Paulo Freire and were modeled on the Christian base communities promoted by the progressive wing of the Catholic Church in many parts of Latin America.[8] The staff of the center hoped that these groups would produce community leaders and attract more participants, thus expanding the size, scope, and potential influence of the federation.

Members of handicraft project

Since its inception the federation has achieved a semiautonomous existence from the center. It organizes events and makes public pronouncements that appear in the local press on a range of issues that affect women. Yet despite the federation's activities, it represents a relatively small, inward-looking group of local women who have little interest in becoming part of a broad inclusive organization. Because of the highly competitive market for local crafts, members of the artisan groups are more interested in defending their positions within the craft program than in expanding the federation's membership.[9]

While working with one group of five women, for example, a European staff volunteer constantly chided the participants for not recruiting more women into the program, but her entreaties were usually met with uncomfortable silences or unconvincing excuses. The women understood the

center's limited ability to market their products rapidly and at a high price: the tourist season in La Paz lasted from mid-July through late September, and many vendors competed for the tourists' dollars. The center also did not have a well-established international marketing network; it relied on a few unreliable contacts to place products during the Christmas and New Year holidays. The artisans knew that additional participants in the handicraft program would lower their earnings and threaten the already narrow market niche that they had carved out for themselves. Members therefore quite naturally sought to protect themselves by limiting the number of beneficiaries.

Women's determination to protect their limited prerogatives also extended beyond these small groups. In October 1994 the federation participated in a march that it organized with the help of the Pachamama Center to celebrate Bolivian Women's Day and the anniversary of the federation. The center's staff encouraged members of the individual artisan groups to take part in the march, which other residents of El Alto perceived as an "NGO event." Approximately five hundred women from the federation and other El Alto–based NGOs participated, because, as many stated, it was important to speak out in support of women's rights. Yet in private conversations and murmured discussions before the event, some women made it clear that they felt that a failure to participate would jeopardize their relationship to the center. Some even believed that they would be fined for not taking part.[10] These beliefs left many of the center's staff members aghast.

As participants in the crafts project defended their limited claims to resources, their organization, with its ties to the Pachamama Center and beyond, to the Catholic Church, more closely resembled an NGO that provided project support to a limited number of beneficiaries than a broad-based representative organization that supported women's rights. Through these alliances some women secured—at least momentarily—a minimal income for themselves. Yet the part-time insecure nature of the work and the piece rates they received hardly made this an adequate source of income; indeed, the work mirrored in many ways the industrial homework and production systems described in other Third World settings (e.g., Benería and Roldán 1987; Seabrook 1996). In at least one villa women abandoned the handicraft program altogether in 1995, because piecework for a La Paz–based Korean contractor was more attractive.

By 1995, with funding for the Pachamama program drawing to a close and no new benefactor in sight, the center decided to shift its emphasis after acknowledging that the artisan groups had become closed cliques that

were not blossoming into a broader popular movement. Staff members decided to place their energies behind a series of technical training courses for women at the center's headquarters; these courses would teach the fundamentals of sewing and knitting so that poor women would have a marketable skill. Such efforts, however, did not address the low prices that artisans receive for their products or the labor issues that urban workers face. For workers—particularly women—low wages, limited employment opportunities, insecure working conditions, and lack of benefits constitute major impediments to improving their livelihoods.

Not surprisingly, the punishing discipline of the free market was, at least momentarily, overwhelming for the women of the federation. Small-scale projects, rather than broad-based protest, appealed to them because of the intense competition that characterized the struggle for survival in El Alto, and because NGOs like the Pachamama Center offered the opportunities to a limited number of beneficiaries. Developing ties to a broader constituency remained problematic in this context, and the federation continued to operate less as the combative popular organization envisioned by staff members of the Pachamama Center than as an NGO geared to the needs of a limited number of aid recipients.

The National Federation of Household Workers

Unlike the El Alto women's federation, the National Federation of Household Workers has wavered between two different strategies of struggle and organization. The federation is an umbrella organization that links local domestic workers' unions in several Bolivian cities; it is affiliated with a Latin America–based confederation of domestic workers. The federation's dilemma is whether union members should seek closer ties with and project support from numerous La Paz–based NGOs that focus on gender issues, or whether the federation should concentrate on building union membership and promoting domestic workers' rights independent of NGOs. These questions have engaged the membership with varying degrees of intensity for several years. The answers have not been easy or straightforward.

Although the chapters of the National Federation of Household Workers—established during the 1990s—were not born from an NGO, the current membership and the national leaders in La Paz are attracted by the possibilities that international financial support offers their federation. When the federation has established relationships with NGOs, however, they have often been tense and filled with mutual misunderstandings. The

domestic workers have an abiding mistrust of the NGOs and the people who staff them, because they and members of other popular organizations believe that NGO staff members are basically corrupt and use foreign aid to support extravagant lifestyles. They are also highly suspicious of the intentions of the middle-class women who work in NGOs, because these women have domestic workers in their own homes, and relationships with them can be extremely demeaning.[11]

These misgivings have attenuated the union's contact with NGOs. At the same time, however, the domestic workers recognize that they cannot realistically sustain an organization with local contributions, such as membership dues, and they know that NGOs can provide badly needed financial assistance. They appreciate that the conditions demanded by NGOs are usually less onerous than the demands made by political parties, which have made occasional overtures to the women, but union leaders know that they must also reach out to popular organizations for solidarity and support. They have sometimes turned to the COB for guidance, but the COB's male leadership basically ignores them (see Gill 1994:126–29). Like the female staff members of the NGOs, male unionists employ servants in their households. "Unionists are terrible employers," said one member of the domestic workers' union. "They are so hypocritical with their worker speeches."[12] The domestic workers also resent the COB's failure to attend their events or even acknowledge their invitations, and they unfavorably compare the labor leaders with President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada, whose office regularly responds to their invitations with thank-you letters that explain why the president's busy schedule precludes his attendance. But more important than the COB's lack of etiquette is its overall weakness vis-à-vis the state and its inability to develop a strategy that incorporates the gender and ethnic diversity of the working class. Because of these problems, the domestic workers have increasingly, albeit hesitantly, turned to international organizations and their NGO intermediaries for collaboration and financial support.

In addition to financial backing for their daily activities, union leaders need advice about how to carry out some of their duties. Certain leadership responsibilities may be new for them and involve dealing with people and organizations that appear strange and unfamiliar, especially to those who have little experience in leadership positions. The leaders know that NGOs can often provide useful counsel. The guidance the leaders need may range from an explanation about how to operate a fax machine to advice about coordinating a national meeting to recommendations for acquiring the services of professionals, such as lawyers or social scientists.

Leaders, however, fear that behind the advice and the stated good intentions of many NGO staff members are unspoken agendas.[13] Because of these fears the unionists may remain aloof and try to learn little by little, or they may wait until they personally encounter someone in whom they can place their trust.[14]

When they do engage NGOs, they may do so as a defensive move designed to control the ability of these increasingly powerful organizations to speak on their behalf. In 1995, for example, union members hesitantly accepted the invitation of an NGO to participate in a video about domestic service that would be part of a project to sensitize employers about the needs and feelings of servants. The unionists questioned the NGO's ability to represent their concerns and feared that the organization would exploit them by using the video to raise money in Europe for staff members' salaries. After much internal debate the rank-and-file eventually assented when they realized that the NGO planned to go ahead with the project with or without their participation.

NGOs have in fact not been the best allies. A proposed law to regulate domestic service did not receive the critical scrutiny from feminist NGOs that it deserved. The proposed law mandated a minimum ten-hour workday for live-in domestic workers, even though other sectors of the labor force had won the right to an eight-hour workday decades earlier. The argument in support of a longer day for live-in servants was that the extra hours were a form of compensation to employers who provide food and lodging for peasant girls with no other means of support in the city. This was a position commonly advanced by employers, but in 1995 it started to be articulated by the Subsecretariat of Gender—a section of the Ministry of Human Development that is developing the legislation and is staffed almost entirely by middle-class women from the NGO sector.

After assessing the balance of forces, the federation grudgingly supported this legislation, because leaders reasoned that a law—any law—was better than nothing at all. In private, however, they were quick to condemn the provision for a ten-hour day, pointing out that employers do not allow the servants to use their rooms as if they were private quarters. Federation leaders noted that employers strictly control visitors and reserve the right to store mops, brooms, and other household items in the servants' quarters. Moreover, in many cases domestic workers did not even have their own rooms and were obliged to sleep on kitchen floors.

Leaders understood that their organization did not have the organizational and political strength to push forward alternative legislation, and in the absence of stronger support from organized labor, they had few allies

in their struggles for better working conditions. Consequently, they cautiously engaged NGOs in the hope of benefiting from the financial support that these organizations could provide. As they did so, the vision and the possibility of forging a strong union that fights for better conditions for working women faded from view, and the union increasingly adopted the project-centered focus of an NGO.

NGOs have assumed the right to represent some impoverished groups to the state and international funding organizations. They have done so by creating grassroots organizations and collaborating with preexisting groups to support specific kinds of initiatives. Although the NGO boom has benefited some women who are positioned to take advantage of the new opportunities offered by economic restructuring, it has thus far done little to strengthen the ability of disadvantaged constituencies to organize politically and fight against neoliberalism. The NGO boom has aggravated the rifts and fragmentation that divide people from each other, as some people manage to resituate themselves within emerging configurations of power, while others see new possibilities and old ways of surviving closed to them.

Equally problematic is that the NGOs have not backed the struggles of politically organized public school teachers. During the 1995 strike, examined in chapter 5, NGOs based in El Alto and La Paz neither supported the labor movement nor spoke out against the detention of leaders, the suspension of the right to assemble, and the police repression. For NGOs and their international patrons, public school teachers were too culturally mundane. They manifested none of the exoticism of indigenous peoples or the trendiness of gender; indeed, they were frequently criticized by middle-class professionals in the NGOs for being alienated from their own culture and constituting a hindrance to the reform of public education. But more important than teachers' cultural ambivalence was that public support for workers' rights—especially those of state workers who belong to one of the most radical unions in Bolivia—was never on the agendas of the NGOs. Such a display of solidarity could alienate them from their international patrons, and this was a risk that NGOs were not willing to take. In addition, NGO directors, who were primarily social democrats, were reticent about collaborating with Trotskyists.

When asked about support from NGOs, teacher Alex Morales, head of education and culture for El Alto's Central Obrera Regional (COR), the local chapter of the COB, said that NGOs not only failed to participate in the demonstrations that preceded the imposition of martial law but did not even display symbolic solidarity through the publication of statements in

the newspapers.[15] Indeed, the director of a La Paz NGO most noted for its work in the public education system limited himself to writing a series of editorials in a national newspaper that addressed technical aspects of the educational reform, but the editorials never mentioned the strike or the demands of the teachers.[16] In addition, the director of another NGO, which specializes in the production of radio programs in health and mathematics for elementary school children, felt comfortable broadcasting the programs during the strike. "The teachers know that we support them," he said awkwardly, "but we have to honor our contract with the radio station." Such statements and practices illustrate the difference between NGOs' self-representation as the advocates of "civil society" and their actual practice when groups of working people dared to challenge neoliberalism and the Bolivian state.