

Global Civil Society: Speaking in Northern Tongues?¹ (10 928 words)

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Abstract: The goal of this article is to examine ideas regarding a 'global' civil society held by actors with non-Western/non-Northern perspectives, in order to articulate a more complete understanding of the 'global', one which transcends the limited conception which arises from viewing the subject only from one location. This examination is based on extensive socio-ethnographic fieldwork among NGOs, international donor agencies and Church-related organizations in Chiapas, Mexico (in 2002-2004). This research primarily suggests that 'global civil society'-- as an imagined terrain of transnational social action--- can be viewed both as a site of expanded resources for social action as well as a source of new significant constraints, a terrain where not all ideas and values are heard, promoted or given legitimacy. Secondly, it is argued that there exists a 'transnationally resonant' language into which Southern activists need to translate their issues and concerns if they wish to be heard.

Keywords: *Global civil society, North, South, NGOs, donors, transnational resonance.*

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Given the extent and nature of resource-asymmetry between Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) based in the South and those based in the North, an examination of the politics of global civil society from the viewpoint of Southern social actors is of heightened interest for critical scholars. Do Northern and Southern actors have a comparable say in defining those key-ideas which become the centre-pieces of global activist campaigns? Do Southern NGOs and activists conceive of themselves as being part of a broader global movement in which their priorities and those of Northern-based NGOs are equally expressed? In short, how is global civil society viewed from the perspective of Southern-based local actors?

This paper develops an analytical concern for expanding the concept of global civil society to better incorporate the views and priorities of the diversity of social actors it is often merely presumed to encompass. Shifting the focus from privileged or core loci of enunciation to more marginal ones is a procedure key to reaching a more inclusive and comprehensive understanding of the subject which tries to account for multiple voices (Harding, 1998; Tickner, 2003). This paper also posits that it is critical to account for the perspectives of Southern social actors, if a truly 'global' civil society that is more than a mere emanation of the North/West is to be shown to exist and to have promise for engendering normative changes in world politics as many proponents of the concept suggest. Taking account of those perspectives leads to the suggestion that global civil

society is a highly asymmetric terrain of social action, not one where all ideas or values are given voice to and granted significance, but one to which Southern social actors often have a restricted access, their voices filtered by significant constraints.

The discussion which follows of Southern views on global civil society is based on extensive qualitative empirical work among 63 NGOs, grassroots organizations and funding agencies active in Chiapas, Southern Mexico, while living in the field in 2002-2004. Chiapas was chosen as a site for a case-study because, in spite of its geographical and economic remoteness being an under-developed, mountainous region adjacent to Mexico's border with Guatemala, it is a region that gained significant global exposure in the international media and through transnational solidarity networks following the Zapatista uprising of 1994. That uprising, which has continued to the present day as a resistance movement both among rural indigenous communities and urban activists, has received both deep sympathy and strong support from local and transnational NGOs who have identified with the Zapatista movement's rhetoric regarding democracy and global justice for the marginalized. Chiapas was also chosen as a case-study because of the existence of a well-established and well-connected (both regionally and globally) development and advocacy-oriented NGO community which gained strength in the 1980s during a period of civil unrest in Central America and then grew enormously during the 1990s as a result of the Zapatista uprising and the increased availability of transnational funding and support for these NGOs. If a global civil society actually exists, locations such as Chiapas are among those where it should most easily be observed, at least in the South, in the views and

rhetoric of local NGO activists engaging in their daily work with a multiplicity of foreign-based interlocutors including donor agencies.

Section one of what follows reviews some of the literature pertinent to the study of Southern NGOs in global civil society, linking literature from development studies, social anthropology and international relations which, considered together, problematizes the relationship between NGOs and donors. Section two presents two narratives telling the stories of leading local NGOs from the women's and the community development sectors, illustrating how in the course of their respective histories they have come to adopt and eventually negotiate the 'transnationally resonant' language mentioned above, while coming to place only secondary emphasis on their own issues of concern in order to fit strategically into their donors' agendas. Section three analyzes the results of my empirical research in the light of the theoretical insights suggested by the literature and sets out the contribution of my study to the existing research on the prospects for a global civil society, a civil society that I and a few others find to be mostly speaking in Northern tongues.

1—The Contours of a 'Transnationally Resonant Language'

In response to many objections that have been raised to the naïve view that global society is a unified or homogeneous actor driven by shared values and good intentions, current research has instead looked into seeing global society as a loose space for transnationalizing social action. For many proponents, global civil society is defined as a diverse and fragmented space, encompassing progressive social actors as well as conformist

or reactionary ones, actors that are in strategic interaction across borders for instrumental purposes which do not necessarily pertain only to the domains of law or ethics (consider Castells 1998). Many authors in this literature pretty much agree on the decentered, conflictive, fragmented, character of a global civil society, that is in the end perhaps best defined as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Lipshutz, 1992), as a web of networks or a transnational public sphere (Guidry, Kennedy and Zald, 2001) that is a heterogeneous process in action, and represent for some activists and scholars a purposive project (Keane, 2003), more than an already existing macro-structure.

In the literature, NGOs can be considered to be key actors in an allegedly emerging global civil society. Definitions of civil society, be it domestic or global, vary considerably among authors influenced primarily by either Tocquevillian or Gramscian conceptions of civil society, who define it accordingly either as an associational sphere independent from yet counter-weighting the state (Fowley and Edwards, 1996, 1998), or as an autonomous space of resistance in which to articulate an anti-hegemonic movement (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Cox, 1999). Notwithstanding important debates which preoccupy a range of the literature, civil society has predominantly come to be defined as the ‘social, cultural, economic and ethical arrangements of modern industrial society considered apart from the state’ (Lipshutz, 1992: 398), a definition mostly designating grassroots organizations, social movements and NGOs as core actors of civil society. In practice, development practitioners and scholars have as well come to frequently use the term civil society to refer to a range of organizations of which NGOs constitute a distinctive type prioritized by multilateral agencies, such as the World Bank or the Inter-American Development Bank, as the most

accessible representatives of civil society (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Pinter, 2000; Roy, 2003). In addition, since it is a fact well-accepted by practitioners and scholars alike that NGOs depend heavily on funding from private and multilateral sources for their both their local and more global activities (Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Mawdsley et al., 2002; Meyer 1999), an assessment as well confirmed in my own empirical research, a so-called global civil society that has NGOs as its core constituents necessarily implies that donors are also part of the picture.

While NGOs are often considered to be the predominant actors in global civil society, the literature rarely examines the vital relationship of these organizations to the actors that are financially supporting them. Such an omission is troubling; it constitutes an important blind spot in the literature. Similarly, the literature tends to presume that, or exaggerate the extent to which, global civil society is diverse, horizontal in structure and value-sharing. On the other hand, a more specialized literature from development studies does raise questions regarding the extent to which the resource dependency of Southern NGOs complicates the prospects for a value-sharing, egalitarian global civil society and raise concerns about hegemony in who gets to define the norms and values around which global civil society mobilizes. These general tendencies can be seen as two poles in a debate between celebratory views of global civil society and a more critical scholarship which challenges the first on both on analytical and empirical grounds.

As it relates to my own research, most of the literature on global civil society is dissatisfying in its celebrative mindset: between constructivist assessments of the normative

efficacy of transnational social movements and campaigns (Brysk, 2000; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Smith, Chattfield and Pagnucco, 1997); liberal cosmopolitan visions of global citizenship enhancing the prospects for democratic governance in world politics (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001; Falk, 1998; Held, 1995) or neo-marxist perspectives regarding the potential for popular resistance and counter-hegemonic alternatives to corporate and elite globalization (Cox, 1999; Lipshutz, 1992), the literature often appears trapped into an excessive optimism about a global civil society promising change, progress and emancipation. As particularly well illustrated by the often-cited Keck and Sikkink (1998), who define transnational activist networks as values-sharing forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange, the literature tends to also unrealistically exaggerate the virtues of egalitarianism and solidarity which are associated with these social actors while paying insufficient attention to the North/South resource asymmetries that may complicate the notion of a global civil society and that suggest at least some hierarchy and tension is inherent in their relationships. In short, I generally find this literature insufficiently concerned with assessing the location of Southern social actors and their views of 'global civil society', a perspective that would potentially thicken such a concept and extend it geographically and culturally beyond Northern/Western industrialized societies.

A more satisfying range of literature specializing on the study of Southern NGOs, grassroots organizations and social movements but which is still cautious about using the term 'global civil society' partly compensates for some of the shortfalls of the previously mentioned range of studies, by placing an emphasis on the strategic rationales which lead

Southern actors to be part of a global civil society as well as on the systemic asymmetries in resources and ideas between its Northern and Southern constituents.

Research by the political scientist Clifford Bob (Bob, 2001, 2002), the anthropologist Daniel Mato (Mato, 1997, 2001), the geographer Terje Tvedt (Tvedt, 1998, 2002) and geographers and social anthropologists with the Oxford-based NGO International Non-Government Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) (Mawdsley et al., 2002; Townsend, Mawdsley and Porter, 2003) all coincide in stressing that regardless of their geographical location, NGOs tend to 'speak' a language that is remarkably similar in form. This language designates a set of key-words referring to what tend to constitute the development industry's changing priorities over time: from cooperative and participative development in the 1970s, women groups and gender equity in the 1980s, to environmental sustainability, human rights and civil society in the 1990s. These findings, based on a great variety of fieldwork-informed case studies mostly from Africa, Asia and Latin America, indicate that in order to secure much needed support, including funding from Northern NGOs and donors, Southern NGOs often use a standardizing language allowing them to 'match' donor concerns and speak the 'right words' in use among the transnational aid community.

In Clifford Bob's view, international aid and solidarity networks constitute a 'global marketplace' where local movements get to reframe their otherwise 'obscure issues' in order to match the concerns of key global players, thus 'improving their chances of gaining support'. Based on an analysis of more and less successful local movements and NGOs from Nigeria, Tibet, Guatemala and Southern Mexico, Bob persuasively argues that central

to the success of such movements and organizations is a 'preexisting familiarity with transnational discourses', and their ability to 'frame', 'pitch' and 'match' their local issues with these preexisting global discourses (Bob, 2001; 2002). The existence of a transnational language among NGOs is examined in greater detail in the research of Tvedt (1998) on the interactions between Northern European aid agencies and primarily African-based NGOs, and of Mawdsley et al. (2002) and Townsend, Porter and Mawdsley (2003) on the relationships between European donors and women's in Ghana, India and Mexico, all of whom observe the dominant role of donors in defining and promoting the vocabulary which ends up being used by Southern NGOs, who often translate their priorities and concerns to fit into the frameworks used by their Northern-based interlocutors in spite of their capabilities or their original mission.

Building on these authors, the existence of a transnationally resonant language is seen as having several implications for thinking about global civil society. The translation by Southern NGOs of their concerns and issues into the key-words preferred by Northern supporters is not seen as mere word play, but rather as a phenomenon which indicates the discursive predominance of Northern-based NGOs and donors who tend to define the priorities of the day in the 'global development industry'. More tangibly, Tvedt (1998: 86) shows that the fact that Southern NGOs display a significant tendency to conform to 'the development jargon of the day' primarily reflects the resources dominance of Northern NGOs and donors. Tvedt thus argues that NGOs and donors are part of a highly integrated yet rather unequal system, in which donors' 'conceptual' and 'sanctionary' dominance prevails. More generally, the research of Tvedt (1998, 2002) and the INTRAC team

suggests that the global development industry, one of the cores of global civil society, constitutes a site for consecrating the hegemonic status of Northern ideas.

Other implications relate to the 'global' character of global civil society. Another range of research, which is similar to the literature just discussed but closer to that of International Relations, is more explicitly about the extent to which global civil society seems to be largely based in the North, while characterized by the discursive predominance of the norms and values of western-liberal societies which prevail in the process of defining what constitute priority issues. In a study of the participation of women's NGOs in various UN conferences, Clark, Friedman and Hochtetler (1998: 23) discuss the difficulty experienced by the Southern NGOs in defining some of the key-terms to be used in recommendation documents to be presented to various UN meetings, and reports episodes, for example, of Northern NGOs substituting the term 'gender' for 'women' in spite of the preference of Southern activists for the latter. They conclude, similarly to Batliwala (2002: 397), that the globality of global civil society is elusive. Chandhoke (2005) discusses at length issues of representativity and norms-setting and also observes enduring world-systemic asymmetries between Northern and Southern groups in global civil society, seeing Northern NGOs as constituting its most visible participants, ones which mobilize in favor of norms which seem largely liberal and Eurocentric in content (an observation also shared by Munck, 2002). Similarly, yet more specifically examining the issues of resource transfers and ideas hegemony in global civil society, Vogel (2006) appraises the central role of American philanthropy in the 'making' of global civil society, suggesting that the role of U.S.-based donor agencies as global trendsetters for NGOs has been under-examined. Generally

speaking, these studies all raise the question of the extent to which global civil society seems largely to be a Northern based phenomenon.

My own research in Chiapas among the local NGO community provides an opportunity to empirically illustrate some of the claims which have raised by critical research on global civil society, and to examine, from the perspective of Southern-based social actors, the existence of an alleged transnationally resonant language which suggests the asymmetric systemness of global civil society. I next turn to setting out two brief narrative histories of local NGOs which came to prioritize, respectively, environmental and reproductive health issues in their work, two prevailing themes of the global development industry during the 1990s.

2— ‘A Rose by Any Other Names’: the Stories of COLEM and DESMI

Economic and Social Development for Indigenous Mexicans (DESMI) and the Women’s Collective (COLEM) are two highly respected local NGOs which were founded between the late 1960s and early 1990s, with DESMI being the oldest and most reputable NGO in the region and one highly regarded for its on-going work in indigenous rural communities in Chiapas. Since their foundation, both organizations have consistently been among the leading recipients, when not the leading recipients, of international funding in the region, receiving funding from a variety of donor agencies including OXFAM-UK, the Ford Foundation, the Inter-American Foundation, Novib, Catholic Relief Services as well as smaller European-based NGOs and solidarity groups known for their involvement in Central America. Since their foundation, both NGOs have come to develop new areas of activity which are quite distinct from those which were within their original mandates, changes which coincide with similar changes in the agendas of their donors, who have tended to pursue rather similar priorities worldwide. How have these coincidences occurred as viewed by these local NGOs? The following narrates the stories of DESMI and COLEM and their experiences as Southern local NGOs interacting with global civil society, in a process mediated by their core relationship with foreign-based donors.

Environmental Sustainability: The Story of DESMI

DESMI is an organization deeply involved with local indigenous communities from the regions of the Highlands ('Los Altos') and the Rainforest ('La Selva'). Its general mandate is to advise and assist with long-term processes of social organization and community economic development, while designing productive projects based on the expressed needs of community groups. Projects undertaken by DESMI over the years have included: basic adult education to develop accounting skills, construction of granaries, livestock and crop farming, crop-disease control, the strengthening of cooperative organizations and the development of social economy linkages (such as bartering) between neighboring communities.

Notwithstanding its mission to be led by and respond to the needs of the community, DESMI has nevertheless at times had to negotiate to maintain some degree of autonomy from its donors. In its early years, the NGO relied heavily on funding provided by donor agencies such as Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and Oxfam-UK, to the point where the NGO felt it was becoming merely an administrative local branch for its principal donors, as recounted by its former director, who was well placed to witness the dynamics that existed with donors at the time (Interview 28, 3 December 2002).

For several reasons, including a growing sense that the organization's affairs were being intruded upon, DESMI began to distance itself from Catholic Relief Services and to develop stronger ties with Oxfam-UK which was perceived as being more amenable to the organization's desire for autonomy. Oxfam-UK's presence in Chiapas increased significantly in the 1980s in response to the intensification of civil unrest in Central

America and the massive influx of Guatemalan refugees into Chiapas. OXFAM's agenda at the time was primarily focused on popular organization, social development and human rights, most of which concerns neatly coincided with DESMI's own orientations. After the mid-end 1980s, however, Oxfam also adopted a new focus on gender and sustainable development, as explained by the Regional Representative for Mexico and Central America (1984-1991), who had close ties to the founders of DESMI:

In response to the ground work of several feminists within Oxfam (mainly in Latin America), after 1983/1984 gender was incorporated as a central organizing principle, with 'gender' understood to be a fundamental component of democratic processes... [...] What is now understood as the 'environment' was not adopted as a focus by Oxfam before the Rio Summit in 1992. Nevertheless, the concept of 'sustainable agriculture' in relation to supporting agricultural projects was already in use. (Interview 59, 21 July 2003)

Oxfam was not the only donor agency to develop a stronger focus on the topics of gender and sustainable environment. In fact, in the 1990s a focus on these topics became quite common among local NGOs from Chiapas, as was the case among such organizations elsewhere in the developing world at the time. While Oxfam explicitly prioritized these two topics starting in the late 1980s and mid-1990s respectively,² many other funding agencies such as the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation and even the World Bank played a role in promoting organic farming amongst Chiapas-based NGOs during the 1990s (Ellison, 2002; Ford, 2002; IAF's annual reports

1988 to 2000) and, more generally, in promoting the increasing saliency of ‘sustainable development’ as a key development theme over the course of the decade.³ The IAF was among the very first of these agencies to start promoting sustainable agriculture, having supported organic farming since the late 1970s something it began to do more actively in Chiapas during the 1990s Sustainable agriculture, in fact, became during the 1990s one of the most particularly salient themes among donor agencies, one which resonated even more powerfully once it became part of the donor-NGO conversation, as the case of Chiapas suggests.

As could be predicted, towards the end of the 1980s and more so in the 1990s, DESMI began to encourage its member community groups to consider integrating sustainable agricultural techniques and greater environmental sensitivity into their development projects, eventually becoming a leader in the promotion of organic farming among other NGOs and grassroots organizations.⁴ Towards the end of the 1990s, DESMI also began to place greater emphasis on the promotion of ‘gender equity’ in its community development projects. However, given that the mandate of the NGO was primarily to assist with projects primarily defined by and responding to the needs of their beneficiary community groups, such encouragement of particular priorities was quite a delicate task which needed to be undertaken avoiding any semblance of intruding on community processes, as the following remarks by a former field officer of DESMI suggest:

... At the beginning we did not tell them not to use chemicals because this has to be a process in which people come to believe in things themselves (you may facilitate

as an NGO) and not one where they have things imposed on them because they need the money, in which case they may agree but once they find money elsewhere will longer do so. Clearly, we were telling them [about organic farming], but we would not reject a project because they preferred to use fertilizers. Nowadays it does not work that way, now everything we work on has to be organic, but at that time this was not yet the case and they first discussed it amongst themselves ... (Interview 25, 28 November 2002; added emphases)

While I had offered the suggestion that the NGO may have come to promote such new priorities among the community groups with which it worked as a result of new guidelines provided by the funding agencies during the 1990s, the former DESMI field officer took pains to explain that while she was aware of the fact that topics such as organic farming or gender equity ranked high on the list of priorities of donors around the world, the process of agenda-setting in their community work was too complex to be defined in linear terms as an imposition from above:

Well, they [community groups] are [also] engaged in some gender work, however they don't express it that way, they don't use the term, the theoretical concept: "[gender] equity" but it is present in their projects, not in all projects, but in the majority of them. Therefore, we [in DESMI] decided that we would integrate it into our work as well, not as something all that explicit, but more as something that was implicit in the projects. Increasingly, funding agencies also demanded that we address these themes, working with [gender and] organic farming; however the

concern with organic farming also stemmed from our own consciousness...

(Interview 25, 28 November 2002)

In fact, as illustrated by these remarks, while clearly aware of the possibility that funding agencies play a role in defining some of the topics which are the focus of its community work, the NGO consistently claims to be responding primarily to the self-identified needs of community groups while insisting on having a genuine sense of autonomy from its donors and their guidelines, as repeated interviews with three different members of the organization including its founders all indicated (Interview 25, 28 November 2002; Interview 27, 4 December 2002; Interview 28, 3 December 2002). Indeed, because of its solid experience and long-standing reputation as one of the very first Chiapas-based development NGOs, DESMI rarely solicits single project funding from donors so much as it manages to secure global funding for its whole operation, including its institutional needs, which in principle allows it a wider margin of maneuver than tends to be the case for less experienced NGOs.

However, in spite of its claims to enjoy a strong sense of autonomy from its donors, the experience of DESMI as recounted above by its former field officer suggests that a process of labeling takes place in which the NGO may have a pivotal role in translating the needs of community groups as they themselves perceive them using the key-words in currency among NGOs and donor agencies. Thus, as vividly illustrated by the case of this NGO, it may not necessarily be the case that local NGOs simply impose their donors' priorities on the communities in which they conduct their work, so much as they may play a more multi-

faceted role in which they are simultaneously translating both for donors and for communities in order to match the latter's perceived needs with the former's preferred language. This idea of multi-layeredness rather than uni-linearity in agenda-setting is reinforced by an extract from an interview with DESMI's principal founder in which he was responding in rich detail to a question regarding how the NGO began specialize in organic farming:

For us, one important thing was to getting to know about Oxfam's experiment in Chimaltenango, in Guatemala, where they had a project with World Neighbors on soil recuperation. We attended these training courses there, not only us, but also 'campesinos' from the Margaritas zone [a mostly Tojolabal and Tzeltal indigenous municipality South of San Cristobal de las Casas and close to the Guatemalan border]. Also, in Chiapas there were already some things happening around soil recuperation, through the project of David Harvis, a Protestant pastor from the Summer Linguistic Institute who was working in Oxchuc [a Tzotzil municipality located in the Highlands between the towns of San Cristobal and Ocosingo] in the early 1970s. So, the issue had already been raised. The INI [the National Indigenous Institute] was into building soil recovery terraces [...] However, all that was not the result of any agency telling us that we had to engage in that kind of work. [...] [Instead] it was a communication of experiences. (Interview 27, 4 December 2002)

This interview excerpt illustrates above all how certain key-themes may become highly prevalent in a locality in which development projects are promoted by a great variety of

mobile actors (foreign donors, Christian priests, government officers, local NGOs and recipient communities) through a 'communication of experiences' between these actors, as well as between the recipient communities who may come to discuss their experiences with one another with the assistance of local NGOs which facilitate meetings and training sessions.⁵ It also underlines the pivotal role of local NGOs as intermediaries between variously located grassroots recipients, as well as between those recipients and foreign donors. Also, it should be observed that the respondent refers twice in this excerpt to the particular role of donor agencies, such as Oxfam, in creating the conditions in which such information transmission may occur. Although the significance of the role of donor agencies is explicitly down-played by the respondent, the respondent's short account also stresses that his organization got involved in work around organic farming after learning about the innovative farming experiments being conducted elsewhere, knowledge it had gained through a donor agency to which it was closely connected since its foundation in the late 1960s. Interestingly, this interview excerpt also exemplifies a reaction commonly observed among local actors involved in organic farming, who consistently made the point that organic farming was an initiative which arose locally as a way of giving grassroots organizations greater autonomy and to which other actors such as the state or foreign-based donors 'came late', some even suggesting that these actors 'appropriated an issue which clearly came from the grassroots' (as claimed by the head of one major organic coffee cooperative, Interview 18, 31 October 2002). Of course this suggestion is not entirely accurate, in view of the fact that organic farming was not invented in Chiapas nor was its emergence there an isolated case in a world which the adoption of these practices has been steadily increasing in recent decades, and particularly so in the 1990s.

This first narrative provides a soft case of donor-NGO interaction, in which global civil society was viewed through the lens of a local NGO involved in translating exchanges between donor and recipient communities while trying to give priority to the needs of the latter. However, even while doing so, that NGO came to use the language of the donors to label its own work in terms preferred by the donor. It is also a case which illustrates both the role of donors in thematically orienting the work of local NGOs and the multilayered nature of the process involved ('it is a communication of experiences'). It illustrates the broad character of systemness of the transnational development community, in which key-ideas that eventually become favored by the donors circulate beyond the direct channel of their communication to grantee NGOs and come to be promoted by many other actors, including the recipient grassroots communities themselves. However, this case primarily suggests the pivotal role that local NGOs have in simultaneously translating for donors and for recipient communities, communicating the formers' priorities and the latter's needs, and helping to match them. Finally, this first narrative also illustrates how some NGOs with long experience and an established reputation such as DESMI may be granted a wider a margin of maneuver in their transactions with donors and even a substantial degree of autonomy to pursue their stated mission. However, this does not necessarily mean that they can or do ignore the fact that some themes resonate more than others with foreign donors when soliciting their support. While this first narrative only provides soft evidence of local NGOs aligning with the agendas of their foreign donors, the next narrative will provide a more vivid illustration of this phenomenon.

Reproductive Health: The Story of COLEM

COLEM (The Women's Collective) is another highly regarded local NGO, known for its sustained activist work with urban and rural women from the environs of San Cristobal de las Casas. It was founded in the late 1980s as an organization primarily dedicated to denouncing public and private violence against women and to providing medical, legal and psychological services to women who are victims of rape and domestic violence. It opened a support center in its main office, integrating its staff with doctors, social workers and a lawyer, who were among its founding members. However, the NGO soon discovered that sexual violence against women, which was its highest priority issue, did not necessarily rank high on the agendas of foreign donors. One of COLEM's founders explained: '...we did not have money for the Support Center, but we were taking money from other projects in order to sustain it' (Interview 14, 24 October 2002), suggesting that the NGO was only able to address the top priority on their original agenda by developing other areas of work more likely to receive the support of donors. Following this logic, the organization developed a specialized team to work on a more resonant theme: reproductive health, work around which foreign donors were willing to support more generously. Similarly, instead of presenting itself as solely concerned about sexual violence against women (COLEM 1990-1991), the NGO nuanced its presentation holding itself out as an organization dealing with domestic abuse, reproductive health and women's human rights while 'supporting *as well* the victims of sexual violence' (COLEM 1995) and gradually adopted a more legalist language to describe its work. This shift in language reflects some significant changes in the organization's priorities.

While many donor agencies, including Oxfam and the Ford Foundation who were among the earliest to do so, adopted 'gender' as one of their principal strategic priorities in the late 1970s to 1980s, ⁶reproductive health came to be adopted as a related strategic priority by many donors in the 1990s. The rise in the saliency of this theme among the actors in the transnational development community is closely related to the convocation of important U.N. conferences in Cairo and Beijing in 1994 and 1995, both of which COLEM's leaders attended. On the ground, concurrently with its involvement in the preparation and holding of these conferences, the Ford Foundation in particular played a crucial role among Chiapas-based women's NGOs and research institutes. After having used for a time a stronger language speaking in terms of 'sex discrimination' (Ford, 1986, 1990, 1991c), in the early 1990s the Foundation adopted a new language speaking in terms of 'gender bias' and 'equity', and defined a new 'Reproductive Health Strategy for the 1990s' to be promoted worldwide (Ford, 1991c).⁷ During that decade, international grants for reproductive health programs grew exponentially, from 2.4 % in 1991 to 18.27% in 2000 of the Foundation's total budget (data from Ford, 1991b, 2000a), strikingly indicating the growing force of reproductive health in the Foundation's global agenda.

In Chiapas, the donors' new global orientation towards promoting reproductive health had lasting local echoes. Over the course of the decade, some of the more activist members of COLEM came to realize that although their decision to work on reproductive health issues had been only tactical, having been made in order to secure some stable funding for the organization which would allow it to pursuing its work on sexual violence, it had

nevertheless quickly become the dominant issue on which most of the NGO's time and resources were spent. They also came to realize that if the organization continued with that work, it would be compromising its political identity by acquiescing to pressures to pursue work that was displacing the issues of primary concern to the organization (in this case, violence against women) and rendering them of secondary importance. One of COLEM's founding members provided a rich, detailed account of some aspects of this process, in which she emphasized the significant role of donors in orienting the agendas of NGOs:

Soon, we realized that the Ford [Foundation] was giving us money to convince women not to have children, using these buzz-words about voluntary maternity (...). "If you can guarantee that you will reduce the number of birth in Chiapas, here is 25,000 dollars." There is a politics of reproductive health that has to do with slowing down the 'brown threat'... And we were playing that game as well, because we had become institutionalized, adopting an assistentialist vision and political position. We became depoliticized. We were performing assistentialist work closely associated with the state, without really generating any change in the relations between women and men. (...) Before long, the donors were telling us: 'there's no more money for assistance projects but there is some to work on reproductive rights with indigenous women'. And so our project would turn out to be a health project for indigenous people, a reproductive health project. (Interview 14, 24 October 2002, added emphases)

As a result of this increasing awareness that COLEM was progressively losing its activist

identity and political autonomy from the state (note the repeated use of the terms ‘depoliticizing’ and ‘institutionalizing’ in the previous interview excerpt) and was aligning itself too closely with the agendas of its donors, the organization experienced a serious internal crisis while trying to redefine its own vision and re-assert its autonomy. COLEM eventually came to reaffirm its feminist identity while re-defining its ‘gender focus’ as one aiming for full equality between women and men rather than pursuing softer goals such as ‘gender equity’, another buzzword promoted by donors including Oxfam and the Ford Foundation since the late 1980s (Interview 12, 27 October 2002; Interview 14, 24 November 2002; Interview 40, 27 January 2004).

The organization’s crisis was made more acute by the impact of the Zapatistas uprising, which was enthusiastically supported by some of COLEM’s members, while being regarded with more reserve by others. In the course of a process which took place over several years in the late 1990s, the organization became split between two camps of which one, those who favored the emphasis on reproductive health and rights, was eventually forced to leave. However, to the surprise of the organization’s remaining leaders, some of their most committed foreign donors expressed their disapproval with the process that had been followed, suggested that the decision should be reconsidered and threatened to withdraw their funding. Already highly sensitive about the intervention of donors in its affairs, COLEM strongly resisted further pressure:

So we told them ‘well, they are not staying’. And they said ‘well, we won’t give you the money’. And we responded ‘well, don’t give it to us, thank you very much, but

these women are not staying here'. We also told them that they could not do what they were doing, that it was intervening in the NGO's affairs. Obviously, we did not get the funding. [...] True success in dealing with donor agencies would be to maintain the relationship despite disagreements or tensions. Being able to negotiate, finally. Thus, we were not always successful... (Interview 40, 27 January 2004)

This interview excerpt provides a clear illustration of the significant power imbalance and the resulting tensions that may exist between NGOs and their donors, in its recounting of the story of a once relatively compliant NGO that came to disagree with and then reject some of the priorities of its donors and was then sanctioned for doing so by the cancellation of its funding. This particular NGO, because it had a strong activist identity which it felt unable to compromise for the sake of receiving funding, was willing and able to cut its ties to a donor which was trying to play too active a role in defining the focus of its grantee's work. However, such firm resistance to a donor is rather unusual, as NGOs are generally more willing to find an accommodation between their needs and their donors' priorities, or to acquiesce to their donors' guidelines strategically while continuing to pursue their own priorities with a lower profile:

What happens is that [funding] is a double-edged issue... For instance, we more or less know what kind of projects each donor organization may support, therefore we ask for funding according to what each of them does. (...) there can be a good match between their priorities and what we need. (Interview 16, 28 October 2002, added emphases)

In fact, one project is designed to raise funds. But the [NGO's] political project is something else -- and this changes, it is always changing. Sometimes we already know that the project will not be the same in the end. It is an act of transgression... (Interview 40, 27 January 2004, emphasis added)

The first quotation is from the current director of CIAM, another women's NGO established in the 1980s (whose founding director has now joined COLEM) and it presents an interesting account of an organization developing new orientations in its work which reflect the encouragement of its donor to pursue a rights-based agenda in its work (see Benessaieh 2004 for a more complete analysis of this case). The second quotation is from the previously cited leader of COLEM who provided an account of her organization's conflict with a donor. Both quotations suggest the respondents' acute awareness of the potential discrepancies between the agendas of their organizations and those of their donors. The second quote emphasizes the idea that local NGOs don't always do exactly what they tell their donors they will do and that they may find some space for agency through such measures as partially reporting their activities and stressing facts that best fit most donors' expectations. This is a more informal version of a similar practice, in which a less activist and more professionalized NGO will compartmentalize its activities into separate spheres of activity involving a variety of donors so that it need not offer its donors an explanation of its entire range of activities and can instead only focus on the specific projects for which support is being sought. Both provide an example of strategic acquiescence, a common practice in which local NGOs look for ways to fit donors' agendas

in order to secure the funding that may allow them to pursue other activities of greater priority to them.

This second narrative offers a strong case of donor-NGO interaction illustrating the potential for the process of agenda-setting to be perceived as a unidirectional process in which pressure is brought to bear on local NGOs to conform to the stated priorities of the donors. Although in COLEM's case such pressures were met with active resistance, their case is rather unusual among the community of less resourceful local NGOs which more often than not do not have the broad a range of contacts and alternate sources of funding that this well-established organization could rely upon. As reported repeatedly by the NGO representatives I interviewed in the course of my field research, strategic acquiescence to, as well as reluctant accommodation of, the priorities of donors constitute the usual experience of local NGOs. COLEM's story clearly contrasts with that of DESMI discussed earlier. DESMI presented a softer case of an NGO whose response to donors appeared more diffuse than direct or confrontational, a case in which the pattern of agenda-influence seemed multi-layered and multi-directional, involving an extensive system of relations going beyond that of direct donor-recipient interaction.

Global Civil Society: Speaking in Northern Tongues?

While primarily defining themselves as local organizations principally dedicated to serving the needs and priorities of the grassroots, NGOs such as DESMI or COLEM are also

deeply immersed in day-to-day contact and communication with a variety of more distantly located actors, including donors, other NGOs, church-related organizations, universities, and specialized branches of international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), or specialized bodies of the United Nations. They are both members of various regional and global networks such as the Mexico-based Network Against Extreme Poverty (part of the Global Development Network) or the Latin American-wide Women's Network Against Violence; their representatives regularly travel to international conferences or gatherings to meet with representatives of like-minded organizations and expand their range of contacts, and they have learned to use some of the international venues which are available for advancing legal claims such as the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS. While DESMI and COLEM, like many other Southern-based NGOs primarily supported by foreign funding, are perhaps not the most visible of its members they are, nevertheless, members of a putative global civil society.

In the perspective of Southern local NGOs, donors are not only resource-providers, they also play a central role in facilitating local NGOs' access to global civil society. 'A lot of these international networks are related to funding: Oxfam connected us with other donors, and then we realized that these donors acted like networks related to one another' (Interview 14, 5 November 2002), reports one of the leaders of COLEM regarding her transnational networking experience. Yet at the same time as they play a role in facilitating these global connections, donors also play some role in encouraging the multiplication of sub-national linkages among similar NGOs, providing support for the formation the of

local, national and regional networks and partnerships among their ‘counter-parts’. For example, when I asked how and when COLEM started to interact with foreign actors, including both Northern NGOs and donors, the unexpected response was the following observation stressing the central role of donors even in local and national networking:

I think that the first international contact we had was with Oxfam; this also connected us to other networks and led to us developing a network of our own. Oxfam-International gave us our first funding in February 1990 [for the opening of the Support Center] [...]. And then we realized that the agency had other counter-part organizations, doing the same work that we were doing, that were civil or non-governmental organizations working on health, social issues, the defense of human rights, and so on. This, at least for me who had never been involved with these things, opened up a whole new panorama: (Interview 14, 5 November 2002, added emphases, author’s clarifications in brackets)

This observation made by COLEM’s director, reinforced by similar comments made by other NGO leaders describing donor agencies as ‘bottle-openers’ which give local organizations access to transnational networking opportunities (Interview 1, 8 October 2002) is revealing. In particular, it provides an additional illustration of Terje Tvedt’s (1998) idea about the ‘systemness’ of the global development community, exemplified here by the central role played by donors in promoting particular issues and priorities not only directly through their interactions with local NGOs, but also indirectly through their role in extending circuits of communication between otherwise more isolated organizations. More

precisely, the same remarks suggests that from the perspective of local NGOs, donor agencies are not only centrally positioned in global civil society but also play an important role in facilitating their access to an extended sphere of social relations, ranging from the local to the global. In other words, as viewed by Southern local NGOs, donors are not only trendsetters, they are also door-openers to the realm of transnational networking.

Now, how is global civil society to be defined beyond the interactions between donors and recipients that seem, at least for Southern NGOs, to constitute its core? Clearly, in contrast to the celebratory view taken by some of the scholar literature, global civil society is not necessarily viewed as a sphere of like-minded or value-sharing partners. Instead, many informants interviewed from all the NGOs that were the subject of my research were intrigued by my use of such a concept. They often expressed reservations about the term, among other reasons because they themselves generally used the more straight-forward term ‘international community’ to terms such as ‘global’ or ‘transnational’ civil society, which to them sounded rather corporate in orientation. The ‘international community’ (‘la comunidad internacional’) included in their view what scholars now define as global civil society: staff and representatives from international organizations, the aid agencies of foreign governments, foreign NGOs, donor agencies and more informal solidarity groups, including church groups and organizations. In addition, when they were willing to elaborate on their ideas regarding an emerging global civil society, a number of respondents were eager to emphasize that it was an instrumental interest in gaining access to resources that was the main rationale for their transnational networking rather than any motivation arising from like-mindedness in the views of the actors:

Well, [these international contacts] are circumstantial, they allow you to conduct some of your work, they facilitate your life, but I don't consider them to be fundamental... (Interview 1, 8 October 2002; added emphases)

In a later interview with another founding director of COLEM, the strategic and unequal nature of NGOs to donors relations is more strenuously pointed out:

'Well, it seems that we NGOs are always subordinating ourselves [to funding agencies], with our attitude that we are asking for something, with our attitude that they are helping us, or that we have to "show them a nice face", even if there are things we don't like, no, these things cannot be spoken about... (Interview 40, 27 January 2004)

Conclusion

The primary goal of this paper was to examine ideas regarding a 'global' civil society held by actors with non-Western/non-Northern perspectives, in order to articulate a more complete understanding of the 'global', one which transcends the limited conception which arises from viewing the subject only from one location. This examination was based on extensive socio-ethnographic fieldwork among NGOs, international donor agencies and Church-related organizations in Chiapas, Mexico (in 2002-2004) while focusing on the

experiences of two specific Southern local NGOs in their interactions with global civil society, as mediated by their core relationship to foreign-based donors. In these pages I have primarily suggested that 'global civil society'-- as an imagined terrain of transnational social action---can be viewed both as a site of expanded resources for social action as well as a source of new significant constraints, an asymmetric terrain of power relations where not all ideas and values are heard, promoted or given legitimacy.

The stories of these organizations underline how, in the course of their interaction with donors these two leading NGOs have each come to prioritize new themes and issues that had become salient in the transnational development community during the 1990s. They have also illustrated how this process may be perceived sometimes as multilayered and sometimes as more unilateral and coercive in nature, but is often experienced as full of tension and power asymmetry. They have also suggested even more importantly, how local NGOs are acutely aware of this process and cannot, therefore, be denied some degree of agency, with scope existing for a range of action including both active resistance and a type of acquiescence that can be considered strategic, as in the case when an NGO agrees to adopt the priorities of its donors while continuing to pursue its own goals while also carrying out donor-funded projects. It was therefore pointed out in these pages, that global civil society when viewed from the South is seen as being a site of power relations where strategic interest rather than value-sharedness or solidarity seems to prevail.

Also as illustrated in these pages, the access of Southern local NGOs to global civil society is not as fluid or direct as one may expect: such access seems instead to be heavily

mediated by donor agencies acting not only as trendsetters but also as door-openers, both actively encouraging local NGOs to fit themselves into priorities established elsewhere and linking together similar organizations from various neighboring and more distant locations—functions which may reinforce the character of multilayered yet integrated systemness of NGO-donors interaction. It must also be noted that the two cases on which this paper relied are not fully representative of the entire spectrum of local NGOs and their experiences in dealing with foreign donors: I have in fact chosen two less common cases of well-established, activist-oriented NGOs which have a multiplicity of donors and thus whose relationship to these donors could be presumed to involve a greater degree of autonomy than is the more generally the case with less-experienced organizations or ones that work on a small number of projects and have only a few core funders. Thus, these stories also illustrate that even when the analysis is based on such less common cases of greater autonomy, the influence of donors on the agendas of local NGOs can still be strongly identified. That suggests as well that in the case of the many NGOs with less funding autonomy or which only rely on a few donors—a situation rather common for most southern NGOs--, the influence played by donors is likely to be even stronger.

In conclusion, the preceding pages have explored the view that there exists a ‘transnationally resonant language’ into which local NGOs need to translate their concerns and priorities in order to be heard by and receive support from their donors. If it is indeed accurate to speak of such a transnationally resonant language, the necessary implication is that global civil society constitutes an asymmetric field of play to which not all voices and ideas are given access and heard on their own terms. Thus, as viewed by Southern local

NGOs, global civil society seems rather far from being a site for street theatre accessible to all, so much as a venue for a stage play for which they need to know the lines, which are mostly spoken in Northern tongues.

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Interview 28: Nun, ex-Archivist for DESMI. Interview by author. Hand notes. San Cristobal de las Casas, 3 December 2002.

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Endnotes:

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2. While earlier annual reports rarely included organic farming as a topic, Oxfam more explicitly took interest in sustainable agriculture for fair trade markets after 1995. Between 1995 and 2000, total funding from Oxfam-UK for organic farming projects in Mexico rose from accounting for less than 5% of its budget for the country to a more substantial 10-15% (Oxfam-UK/I, 1996; 1998; 2001). Today the organization has become a major player in fair trade markets, launching a major campaign for fair trade in 2001-2002.

3. Since the late 1980s, the term ‘sustainable development’ (referring to development which in providing for current consumption does not deplete the resources available for future generations) was gradually adopted by the transnational development industry following the work of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) during the 1980s.

4. Organic farming involves a complex set of systematic production practices and sophisticated pest control systems such as terracing, crop and tree diversity, soil conservation and the use of biologically made compost and pesticides. While the exact origins of organic farming cannot be traced, experiments with alternative farming methods to the chemically-intensive practices encouraged by the ‘Green revolution’ were primarily carried out in the United States and Europe starting towards the 1960s, and tentatively promoted in Mexico during the 1980s by ethno-agronomists mostly from the University of Chapingo, some of whom were influenced by the research of the Berkeley specialist Miguel Altieri (see Altieri, 1987).

5. In addition to the experiences of the actors mentioned by DESMI’s founder, significant experiences with organic farming in the region also included early experiments with ‘biodynamic’ agriculture on a German-run farm in coastal Chiapas starting in the late 1960s, or the experiences of UCIRI, an organic farming cooperative in the neighboring state of Oaxaca. Also of crucial importance to the development of organic farming in Southern Mexico was the pivotal role played by foreign and local Catholic priests since the mid 1980s in bringing together some of the first organic coffee cooperative organizations and connecting them with the emerging Europe-based fair trade market (Nigh, 1997; Renard, 1999).

6. The Ford Foundation officially adopted a “women’s policy” after 1972 (Ford, 1986), starting with an internal staff re-structuring, and closely following the lead of the U.N. that

had in 1967 adopted a Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW). On the initiative of some of its female staff, Oxfam-UK for its part established a 'Gender and Development Unit' (GADU) in 1984-1985. The agency integrated gender as a new criterion for evaluating and approving funding requests shortly thereafter (see Oxfam, 1993/1999; Smyth, 1999).

7. The Strategy resulted from a consultant's report prepared in 1987 which reviewed the work of the Ford Foundation during the 1980s and advised the Foundation to adopt a 'women-centered, community-based approach to reproductive issues' (Ford, 1991c: 16). Recognizing that its new emphasis on reproductive health had many rationales at once, the Foundation stressed that it 'hopes to demonstrate that it is possible to be concerned about population growth, women's rights, and equity at the same time' (Ford, 1991c: 18).