

MEXICO AND THE UNITED STATES: IS
THERE A COMMON WAY TO PROMOTE SOCIAL
DEVELOPMENT FROM BELOW?

Silvia Núñez García

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PROMOTE SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT FROM BELOW?**

*"Civil Society doth more content
the nature of man than any private
kind of solitary living".
The Oxford English Dictionary,
16th. Century*

By Silvia Núñez García♦

The beginning of the year 2000 has found the destinies of Mexico and the United States tighten up together as never before in their recent history. Economic globalization on one hand, and regional integration on the other, have until now set a pattern of asymmetrical interdependence between them, but also an incomparable opportunity for an era of mutual collaboration.

With this in mind, our aim is to offer an initial approach for exploring the potential capabilities of social forces that could learn from each other and even work together, beyond traditional borders, to solve poverty and social exclusion as common problems.

Departing from the uneven development of these nations, it is clear that the extent of such dilemmas within them

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demand an in-depth analyses and a much careful comparison that still have not been studied sufficiently.

Therefore, our purpose is to contribute modestly to fire up a debate over similar challenges faced by social forces in both countries, beyond others that enhance their differences and are already handled by governments, as part of their official agendas (E.g. migration, drug trafficking, etc.).

For doing so, we will start by giving some basic features that would help us understand the particular dimensions of poverty in these countries. Secondly, we will focus on the characteristics of two civil organizations that are recognized as very active in promoting social cohesion DECA, Equipo Pueblo in Mexico, and ACORN, Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now, in the U.S.¹

In such context, the target is not state power but the figure of the citizen.² As there is an ongoing movement towards the formation and consolidation of citizen organizations, looking for strengthening their capacities for taking direct action and improving their societies, we will end up by reviewing their general performance and convergence.

¹ We do consider that DECA, Equipo Pueblo and ACORN are NGO's, because they are non-governmental and voluntary organizations "created to advance causes and issues of general social significance, as well as...serving the nonprofit interests of specific groups". See <http://www.mihancivilsociety.org>. "The New Force- An Introductory Guide to Building Civil Society Organizations", Jun. 2000, released by the Mihan Foundation.

Relevant facts and features on poverty

The question of a precise definition of poverty prevails in the academic and policy debates of Mexico and the United States, as relative and absolute standards of deprivation³ cut across the selection of arbitrary indicators, greatly influenced by social and cultural stereotypes.

In the case of Mexico, according to the World Bank, poverty is both a sizable and persistent problem, despite the fact that the country has the world's 13th. largest economy, as a result of a dynamic economic growth that in 1998 reached a 4.8% in GNP.⁴

Because there is a great gap between data provided by the government and by independent researchers, we account the professional expertise of Dr. Julio Boltvinik, when he states that considering Mexico's total population in almost 100 million people for this year, there are 54 million living in extreme poverty. 32 million out of them live in cities, and the remaining 22 million in rural areas. Paradoxically,

² Ibid, Chapter 1.

³ Relative deprivation refers to what the people believe are their minimum needs. On the opposite, absolute poverty relies as determinant on income. It is considered an objective measurement, fixed up usually by government agencies.

⁴ <http://www.globalexchange.org/campaigns/mexico/jornada091999.html>. "Poverty is on a Steady Climb in Mexico, Indicates the World Bank", Sept. 1999, released by Global Exchange.

according to the official anti-poverty program -PROGRESA-, only 15% of all Mexicans live in such conditions.⁵

A process of structural adjustment, embodied by privatization and deregulation, has widened the distance between rich and poor. Today the top 1% of Mexico's population concentrates 50% of the National Income.⁶ Furthermore, amidst 1994 and 1999, the number of people with daily incomes below \$3.00 US DLLs. increased from 32.85% to 36.09%.⁷

While malnutrition affects 40 to 65% of Mexicans, the diet of half of them falls below the minimum daily nutritional standard, established by the World Health Organization (2,340 calories), therefore resulting in 433 children dying every day. In contrast, 59% of the national wealth is in the hands of only 12% of its population.⁸

Special attention should be given to the fact that at least half of the people living in poverty are under 15 years of age.⁹ The lack of an increasing investment in education - which this year compiles around 3.9% of the nation's budget-

⁵ The feature of 54% comes out from the difference between the family total income and the actual cost of a Standard Food Basket. Taking into consideration other measurements, extreme poverty in Mexico under the Levy line method, scored 20%, and by CEPAL index, 29%. Julio Boltvinik, "Economía Moral. El Error de Levy", La Jornada, México, Feb. 25, 2000, p. 1.

⁶ This number represents a group of 240 families. Arturo Gómez Salgado, "Se desploma el ingreso de los mexicanos: CT-UNAM", El Financiero, México, Sept. 02, 1999, p. 21.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Germán Torres Rojano, "Se apodera de México, la pobreza extrema", Proyección Económica, México, Feb. 1999, pp. 54-55.

⁹ Ibid.

aggravates the problem, as there are still 6 million illiterates and 18 million Mexicans that didn't even complete elementary education.¹⁰

The nation's educational average is only 7.7 years, when it's recognized that it needs to improve at least to 12 years, in order to catch up with global competitive standards.¹¹

As the informal sector concentrates between the 44% and 55% of the country labor force, there is an increasing population left outside the networks of social security.¹² In addition, there is only one doctor per every 800 people and 1.7 nurses per each of these physicians.¹³

Along with the great need for creating new jobs - whose record in 1997 was 13.3% and it is expected to decline to 2.8% for the current year¹⁴ -, the housing deficit has turned from 250 to 880 thousand per year. An aggravated situation results from the observation that 24% of Mexicans live in single room housing facilities.¹⁵

¹⁰ Taken from Miguel Angel Granados Chapa, "Plaza Pública", broadcast by Radio UNAM, México, Jun. 08, 2000.

¹¹ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2000/mar00/000313/soc3.html>. Alonso Urrutia, "Crece el promedio de escolaridad en México: CONAPO", Mar. 13, 2000, released by La Jornada.

¹² David Ibarra, "Con la apertura, más desempleo y marginación", La Jornada, México, Feb. 23, 2000, p. 22.

¹³ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2000/ene00/000111/pol3.html>. Rosa Elvira Vargas y Ángeles Cruz, "Los avances de salud 'motivo de orgullo', asegura Zedillo", Jan. 11, 2000, released by La Jornada.

¹⁴ "Pierde fuerza la creación de empleos en México: OCDE", El Financiero, México, Aug. 16, 1999, p. 25.

¹⁵ <http://www.jornada.unam.mx/2000/mar00/000325/eco1.html>. David Zúñiga, "En dos décadas más, el déficit de vivienda aumentará 12.6 millones", Mar. 25, 2000, released by La Jornada.

Now, for introducing the magnitude of poverty in the case of the United States, it is relevant to address the importance of a dominant set of public values that "tend to explain social inequality in an individualistic manner, as people are generally deemed responsible for their own socioeconomic fate..."¹⁶

Embodied by stereotypes, the debates over the causes of poverty take with restraint its relation to structural factors, such as the new labor market, the role of education, demographics, etc.¹⁷ Examples of this are the way poverty thresholds are set,¹⁸ the establishment of differences between the deserving vs. the undeserving poor in order to bring about public policies, as well as to under or overestimating the role of gender, race and social class.

In 1998, the poverty threshold for a family of four people in the U.S. was \$16,660 DLLs.¹⁹ The number of people within this rank for the same year was 34.5 million.²⁰

Taking into account that the total population of the U.S. for 1998 was estimated in 271,059 million, a 12.7% of

¹⁶ Emory Burton, *The Poverty Debate. Politics and the Poor in America*, Praeger, Westport, CT., 1992, p. 132.

¹⁷ See Margaret L. Andersen, "Restructuring for Whom? Race, Class, Gender and the Ideology of Invisibility", paper presented at the Presidential Address of the 69th. Annual Conference of the Eastern Sociological Society, Boston, MASS., Mar. 05, 1999.

¹⁸ See Martha Scheingart, "Poverty and Social Policies in the United States and Mexico: The Cases of Washington, D.C. and Mexico City", *Occasional Paper on Comparative Urban Studies*, No. 10, Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Washington, D.C., 1998.

¹⁹ Mary Naifeh, *Poverty in the United States: 1998*, U.S. Department of Commerce, Economics and Statistics Administration, Bureau of the Census, Sept. 1999, p. 1.

²⁰ *Ibid*, p. v.

Americans live in poverty, making at least that one out of every ten Whites lives in poverty, as do almost three out of every ten Blacks.²¹

Of all Americans in poverty, 45.8% are non-Hispanic Whites, 22.2% are White Hispanic, 26.4% are Blacks and 5.6% belong to other minorities.²²

More U.S. children live in poverty than in any other developed country. They continue to represent the 40% of the poor, showing that children under the age of six were the most vulnerable.²³

Although many people in the U.S. holding a job remain in poverty ("working poor"²⁴), the country also ranks sixth lowest among developed nations in its unemployment rate for adults aged 25 to 64.²⁵

There has also been a decline in the value of real wages, particularly for unskilled and less educated workers, as those in the lowest 20th percentile of the labor force have experienced a 22% drop in real wages since the 1970's.²⁶

²¹ Ibid, Table B-1, Appendix B.

²² Ibid, Cover Chart.

²³ Vincent N. Parillo et al., Contemporary Social Problems, (Fourth Ed.), Allyn and Bacon, MASS., 1999, p. 190.

²⁴ See Thomas R. Swartz and Kathleen Maas Weigert (Eds.), America's Working Poor, Notre Dame Press, Notre Dame, IN., 1995.

²⁵ Parillo, Contemporary Social..., p.193.

²⁶ Andersen, "Restructuring for...", p.5, as taken from James Smith, "Race and Ethnicity in the Labor Markets: Trends over the Short and Long Run", paper presented at the National Academy of Sciences, Research Conference on Racial Trends in the United States, Oct. 15-16, 1998.

Taking into consideration that most U.S. households have no less than two income providers, can be useful to reinforce our argument. Other factors contributing to wage decline include a steep drop in the number and bargaining power of worker unions; a descent in manufacturing jobs with an increase in nonstandard positions, such as temporary and part-time employment.²⁷

Accounting for the distribution of wealth, it is important to notice that the richest 10% of U.S. households concentrate 85.8% of the growth in the stock market.²⁸

DECA, Equipo Pueblo, A.C.²⁹

Born in 1977, it is a civic association that promotes social development from below, through alternative projects mainly at the local or regional level. Working closely with grassroots organizations, citizen coalitions, the group main goal is to fight the negative impact of the current economic crisis on Mexico's most excluded population.

Its mission emphasizes not only the promotion of social justice, but to strengthen democracy and human rights in a

²⁷ See Lawrence Mishel, Jared Bernstein and John Schmitt, *The State of Working America*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, N.Y., 1999.

²⁸ Andersen, "Restructuring for...", p.4.

²⁹ Special thanks to Laura Becerra, Director of DECA, Equipo Pueblo, A.C. The information of this organization comes from: <http://www.irc-online.org/cbl/fairtrade/la/deca.html>. DECA, Equipo Pueblo, A.C., Jan. 11, 2000, released by Interhemispheric Resource Center; and DECA, Equipo Pueblo, A.C., Mar. 2000.

country where these basic claims, although included in the Constitution, are still jeopardized.

Taking into account that corruption and impunity need to be addressed as key factors against the promotion of a new and better social environment in Mexico, Equipo Pueblo understands the importance of proclaiming to the outside world the roughness reality of its country.

With an aim of playing a role at the level of the policy making process, this organization pays special attention to the formation of citizenship as a key that can be translated into people's empowerment.

The clinching impact of such trend would allow common people to participate in the design, management and surveillance of truly social scope public policies.

Departing from a critical point of view, Equipo Pueblo's core challenge attempts to influence all levels of government, from local to national and beyond. That is to say foreign governments and multilateral organizations.

Tasks and Programs

Equipo Pueblo tries to turn the ongoing process of globalization into an opportunity to strongly favor NGO's initiatives, in a context where the articulation with

transnational actors is absolutely crucial for promoting social justice.

They promote development at subnational areas. The group has been active in different states by promoting government decentralization and citizen participation.

By enhancing the participation and integration of a diversity of social actors, such as community based organizations, they believe it is feasible to advance and handle better public policies.

By having a comprehensive knowledge of the effects of globalization, as well as to follow up and assess the consequences of the ongoing process of structural adjustment, they are looking for an alternative approach capable of redeeming both the national economy and the leading place of social policy.

They demand a fair play between government and citizens, by virtue of the construction of a new culture deeply rooted in participation and commitment. With this in mind, ethical values would therefore pervade the public sphere.

DECA praises to defend and promote a solid democracy in Mexico, by means of working together with social networks and citizens organizations. Furthermore, they are committed to design, test and divulge new instruments of public policy.

According to local experiences, they tend to influence upper levels of the policy making process.

The organizational structure of DECA has different areas. The one in charge of management sets the rules and mechanisms to follow up each program goals, resources and funding. Its basic premises are transparency and efficiency.

The office of Planning and Evaluation has a leading significance as it advises and judges permanently all the projects, programs and actions of the organization. We can consider this as an asset, because the strict observation between ways and means entitles them to make in-time adjustments that can turn into better results.

A special place is also given for developing research initiatives and publishing purposes, as they are aware of their capacity for strengthening the power and visibility of the organization.

Regarding economic resources, Equipo Pueblo has been supported by many international foundations, foreign governments and development organizations from Europe, Canada and the U.S. Some other Mexican foundations and a federal agency have also been donors.

**The Association of Community Organizations for Reform Now
(ACORN)³⁰**

Created in 1970, ACORN has steadily grown from a small group of welfare mothers in Little Rock, Arkansas, to a membership of over 100,000 families in 30 cities today.

Its longevity, size and scope make this group unique. They pursue an absolute commitment to organizing the poor and powerless, plus great experience to break new ground. It pioneered multi-racial and multi-issue organizing, led the way in electoral organizing, and branched into innovative housing development, community media and labor organizing.

All of its members must play an active role in the organization, as ACORN is committed to organizational democracy and grassroots leadership. Members, not staff, speak for and lead the group. They elect leaders from within their communities to serve on city, state and national boards, in charge of setting policy for the organization.

ACORN stresses the importance of being visible at the level of mainstream politics, so they held open campaigns to register new voters (E.g. Project VOTE, a nonpartisan voter registration organization became member of the ACORN family in 1994), as well as to enact campaign finance reforms and

³⁰ Most of the information about ACORN was given in an interview with Jen Kern, from ACORN National Headquarters, Washington, D.C., Mar. 22, 1999. It also comes from ACORN, 25, Years (1970-1995): The People United. El Pueblo Unido.

even create a progressive grassroots alternative to the two party system - the **NEW PARTY**.

Among ACORN successful activities are the establishment of local housing corporations to rehabilitate homes (ACORN Housing Corporation-AHC). Also, it pressures on banks to provide mortgages and home improvement loans in low-income communities, as well as the ACORN Tenant Union (ATU) that organizes nationwide public housing residents on issues such as repairs, and security.

On issues like jobs and income, this group has had a leading role in developing city policies that uphold employers who benefit from public subsidies not only to hire community residents, but also to pay a living wage and provide opportunities for their advancement.

Relying substantially on developing grassroots leaders, The Institute for Social Justice serves as the group's training arm.³¹

Regarding financial support, ACORN is committed to be self-sufficient. Members pay dues and organize fundraising events making up for 75% of the entire organization's budget.

³¹ David Walls, "Power to the People: Twenty Years of Community Organizing", from The Workbook, Summer, 1994, p.2.

Final Remarks

These two NGO's have an open range of programs that include policy analysis and advocacy, education, grassroots organizing and technical assistance, designed to support local or neighborhood groups, as well as other organizations or institutions, in their comprehensive effort to empower people.

They both provide a source of leadership, in terms of linking a broad range of diffuse interests, and rebuilding them into an effective social network. As of these, they can be considered "expressions of the real values and the real needs of people in society".³²

By building an organized and articulated citizenry, they have the ability to influence both structural and immediate issues. Departing from a tolerant and inclusive perspective, such attitude will preserve their autonomy as social actors.

The first assumption to make after analyzing their goals in common, is that it is necessary to recognize that poverty is a social problem that do not exist apart from politics. Therefore, it is in such organized spaces where people that suffer from deprivation are not only able to inform themselves, but to develop gradually a rational and positive

³² Peter L. Berger and Richard J. Neuhaus, To Empower People. From State to Civil Society, AEI Press, Washington, D.C., p. 164.

attitude towards social interaction and communication,³³ as basic steps for political action.

Only by means of commitment and reciprocity can these organizations be accountable.

In this sense, the role of these groups is crucial to modern democracy, because they do not only show us a real shift on emphasis, "but promote [a refreshing] political diversity and vitality generally [absent] at the level of traditional political parties"³⁴. As they were born out of the concerns of common people sharing the same problems and aims.

They agree that the key issue of the problem is to attack the structural causes of poverty, seeking to build a stronger political force through collective leadership.

From this point of view, focusing on legislation reform is only a mean but not an end in itself.

By stressing the importance of building social capital, access to power and resources have become feasible for these NGO's.

However, it is important to consider that the task of evaluation in these cases becomes critical, as it could enlarge people's capacity to become a more effective polity.

³³ See the innovative approach for using communication to promote social change in: *Comunicación para el Cambio Social*, The Rockefeller Foundation, New York, Jan. 1999.

³⁴ Jim Baumhol (Ed.), *Homelessness in America*, ORYX, Phoenix, AZ., 1996, p. xiv.

We want to insist about the enrichment of learning from each other experiences, as they can become cumulative to guide those who used not to have a voice in contemporary Mexico and the U.S.

People empowerment implies a permanent construction process from the bottom-up. For its success, it is necessary to bind up individuals and communities, with citizen and economic rights whose legitimacy should come from a new and more effective way to distribute social wealth.³⁵

Social and economic justice needs to be address as a core value of democracy. Establishing the way to assure this right to the people, is a permanent challenge for those in charge of making democracy visible.

Mexico City, July 02, 2000.

³⁵ See Rafael Reygadas Robles Gil, *Abriendo Veredas. Iniciativas Públicas y Sociales de las Redes de Organizaciones Civiles*, Convergencia de Organismos Civiles por la Democracia, México, D.F., 1998.