

**Civil Society and Municipal Government:
Grassroots Organization Strategies in Santo Domingo's *Barrios Marginados****

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DRAFT: comments are welcome

Prepared for delivery at the 2000 meeting of the Latin American Studies Association
Hyatt Regency Miami, March 16-18, 2000.

*Research for this paper was made possible by a University of North Carolina - National Science Foundation grant for the study of democracy and democratization, and an Inter-American Foundation grant for dissertation field work.

Introduction

This paper will examine relations between civil society and municipal government in the Dominican Republic in the changing context of decentralization and the new emphasis on municipal participation. I will pay close attention to the contradictions between the *language* of decentralization and institutionalization which is used by both central and municipal government, as well as by civil society organizations, and the *actions* of these actors. The civil society organizations examined are Grassroots Organizations (GROs) of Santo Domingo's marginalized neighborhoods. These GROs are locally-based membership organizations which come together to seek and maintain basic services for their neighborhoods. These organizations demonstrate considerable interest in political decentralization C especially in terms of making better use of municipal government, which is the part of the decentralization process that I will focus on. I will examine political inter-action between Santo Domingo's municipal government and GROs that make demands on the state. Cases of central government-civil society interaction, in which municipal government is bypassed, are indicative of the limits of decentralization efforts at the grassroots. Therefore, this paper will analyze relations not only between grassroots organizations in Santo Domingo and the *Ayuntamiento del Distrito Nacional* (ADN), Santo Domingo's municipal government, but also between GROs and central government institutions. I find that Santo Domingo's GROs employ strategies that often contradict their stated interests of working more closely with the ADN, and that these contradictions reflect the realities and frustrations of the current Dominican political transitions C to democracy, and to decentralized government.

There is a popular consensus that decentralization leads to more effective and more democratic government. This academic view is mirrored in the intellectual shift in Latin American governments away from a strong central government towards a decentralized government (Diamond, Hartlyn, and Linz 1999, 18). Political and social pressures for governments to decentralize are seen by some as beyond government control (Dillinger and Fay 1999), and thus inevitable. It is expected that devolution of powers will lead to, among other things, enhanced citizen participation, and a deepened democracy (Diamond, Hartlyn, and Linz 1999, 18) in the form of a broader distribution of power (Dillinger and Fay 1999). The Dominican Republic is one of many Latin American countries having made this shift. This change is not without difficulties, however, as . . . the mixed results of current decentralization reforms also show the risks of a somewhat naive view that devolution of power to the regions should automatically enhance participation and responsiveness (Diamond, Hartlyn, and Linz 1999, 19). The key is that decentralization can foster political stability and economic development if transfers of resources and responsibilities are carefully coordinated and intergovernmental relationships are clearly defined (Dillinger and Fay 1999).

Contemporary works on democratization frequently emphasize the importance of civil society organizations in the process. Civil society can be defined as: . . . the totality of social institutions and associations, both formal and informal, that are not strictly production-related nor governmental or familial in character. The concept includes, then, everything from the informal card playing group to the parent-teacher association, from the local pub to the trade union, from church groups to political parties (Rueschemeyer, Stephens, and Stephens 1992, 49). Civil society is key to the democratization process in two ways. First, for the work within civil society organizations, where democratization leads to increased participation and civic skills. Second, civil society is important in the task of relating civil society's demands and ideas to the larger political context. A civil society that can articulate demands on behalf of the population at large is considered essential for the consolidation of democracy (Linz and Stepan 1996, 187).

A number of factors influence the effectiveness of civic GROs in their function of interest articulation. One of these factors is the organization's relationship with the state. An organization's ability to promote political change depends on that group's capacity to influence the state (Mainwaring 1985). These organizations enhance the quality of democracy by sensitizing other forces (such as the state and political parties) with which they come into contact. These movements, by their very existence, place new questions on the political agenda (O'Donnell and Schmitter 1986, 53).

Another factor concerns the nature of a civil society organization's relationship to similar organizations. This is why cooperation among GROs is crucial. Participation in civic organizations leads people to trust each other more (Brehm and Rahn 1997), and the more participation there is in different associations, and linkages among them, the more trust there should be. The grassroots cases discussed in this paper are examples of GROs from a barrio coming together as a common voice to make demands on the state. Putnam (1993) links the effectiveness of state institutions to the degree of associational life. He emphasizes the importance of social capital for a strong associational life. Social capital is defined as such

features of social organization as trust, norms, and networks, that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions (Putnam 1993, 167). Social networks, such as those provided by GROs, are crucial in developing social capital. The civil society and democratization literature emphasizes how the articulation of demands contributes to a more participatory and democratic role of civil society in creating the political agenda, even when the demands in question are not met.

One should keep in mind that civil society organizations are often assumed to be very participatory and democratic within. According to O'Donnell and Schmitter (1986: 53): A what matters here is that they [grassroots movements] are numerous and that their internal processes are quite often highly participatory and egalitarian. This has important implications for the emergent political culture of the transition. . . .@ Current works on associational life point to civic associations as models, 'schools' of democracy whose lessons can be applied in the real political world (Breslin 1991; Ghai 1989). Much of the current democratization literature cites Tocqueville when making this argument.¹ Yet the direction of cause and effect regarding civil society and democracy is rather complex. One contemporary observer notes that the relationship between a vital civil society and political democratization is circular, as each process reinforces the other (Jelin 1998, 409). De Tocqueville also indicates that the role of associations should increase with political development. He writes that, AIf men are to remain civilized or to become so, the art of associating together must grow and improve *in the same ratio* in which the equality of conditions is increased@ (de Tocqueville [1848] 1990 vol. 2, 110, italics mine). As citizens grow accustomed to political rights, they learn to make the best use of them (de Tocqueville [1848] 1990 vol. 1, 246).

As it happens, the inherently democratic aspect of civic organizations assumed by much of the literature is not borne out by observing many of these organizations at work (Ewig 1999; Fatton 1995). Much of the democratization literature posits that a democratic civil society is necessary for a democratic political society. I offer an alternate hypothesis: that democracy within civil society is constrained by the limited democracy in political society. Furthermore, once established, democratic institutions can benefit and be reinforced by a democratic civil society.

Works on democratization often leave too much responsibility for political democratization in the hands of civic associations: the dynamic relationship between the

¹It is worth examining de Tocqueville closely in order to understand what he originally meant in his writings. It seems clear that while development specialists see civic associations as teaching citizens about political life, de Tocqueville may have meant the opposite. In Democracy in America, he wrote: ACivil association, therefore, facilitate political association; but, on the other hand, political association singularly strengthens and improves associations for civil purposes. . . . Political associations may therefore be considered as large free schools, where all the members of the community go to learn the general theory of association@ (de Tocqueville [1848] 1990 vol. 2, 116). The January 2000 issue of the Journal of Democracy addresses this and other frequently overlooked aspects of de Tocqueville's work.

democratization of politics and of civil society create conditions in which civil society's contributions to democratization are not consistent. This paper will examine the reasons behind these inconsistencies from both civic and political actors. Ebbs and flows of activism are often linked to the high expectations created by the *establishment* of formal democratization, which are followed by the realization that much work remains to be done for the *consolidation* of democracy. Santo Domingo's GROs are a good example of this dynamic, as their enthusiastic support for less clientelistic and more decentralized politics often clash with their strategies.

The New Emphasis on Municipal Government

There is ample evidence of the renewed interest in decentralization and municipal government in the Dominican Republic, both on a theoretical and on a policy level. Academic publications are concrete evidence of interest in the topic (see for example Collado 1997a, Artiles Gil et al 1997). Conferences and events on decentralization and the importance of municipal government also abound. The *Pontificia Universidad Católica Madre y Maestra* in Santo Domingo, for example sponsored a nation-wide event called *Acción colectiva: El Municipio que queremos* in 1998. With the participation of NGOs and GROs throughout the country, and with materials developed by the university, workshops were held to educate citizens about the functions of municipal government and the role of citizens within municipal government.

On a policy level, there have been significant advances in decentralization. The ministry of health since 1997 has decentralized its operations nation-wide, and has subdivided the capital city into five *direcciones municipales* for efficiency. Under the decentralized system, the ministry has seen such improvements in services as a decrease in maternal and infant mortality (Hoy 2nd March 1999). The decentralized system also allows for greater community involvement in prevention programs, which allowed for efficient use of health services and disease prevention after Hurricane Georges in September of 1998 (Hoy 21st March 1999). In addition, a proposal to subdivide the sprawling capital city of Santo Domingo, where one third of Dominicans currently live, has been under discussion. The proposal, from the national congress and the ADN, suggests making the city of Santo Domingo smaller and dividing it into 6 administrative units, and creating a province of Santo Domingo which would be divided into three sectors and would include the suburbs of the city and neighboring small cities (Hoy, 23rd August 1999). These efforts to divide the capital city for greater administrative efficiency and citizen participation are certainly advances in decentralization.

Current political conflicts also reflect an interest in decentralization, especially in terms of a renewed emphasis on the role of municipal government. The controversy over the leadership of the *Liga Municipal Dominicana* (LMD) which included physical confrontations between security forces and opposition leaders in January 1999 has yet to be resolved. The LMD is the technical and advisory body to all municipalities in the Dominican Republic. Perhaps more importantly, it controls the budgets of all municipalities. Recent legislation meant that the Liga would operate on a much larger budget (4% of the national budget), than when the leadership was last elected.²

²The budget increase is fairly dramatic. For example, in 1995 RD\$ 318,019,729.92 went to the nation's municipalities, whereas in 1997 under the new law (17-97), RD\$ 1,177,594,898.49

In addition, the possibility of eventually increasing this amount to 10% has been under discussion. The controversy began a few months before elections for the LMD's leadership were to take place, when both the *Partido Reformista Social Cristiano* (PRSC) and the *Partido Revolucionario Dominicano* (PRD), the main opposition parties, claimed the right to control the LMD.³ Other than this being a simple power struggle between parties, it was also a struggle over money. Elections for the Liga took place on the date planned, January 26th, but in two different places: in Santo Domingo some of the electors gathered to elect the PRD candidates, while in San Pedro de Macorís the other electors chose the PRSC candidates. Although there remains a question as to which of the two is the true Liga, the PRSC-controlled Liga has de-facto control over the day-to-day affairs of the institution.⁴ The case of the two Ligas has been in the hands of the justice system to decide which is legitimate and is so far unresolved. This dispute clearly shows the new-found relevance of municipal government in the country, as a key part of the decentralization and devolution process.

Civil society organization activities also make clear their interest in municipal government, and especially in terms of municipal relations with NGOs and GROs. Various NGOs have published documents with suggestions as to how to improve municipal-civil society relations.⁵ Perhaps most noteworthy in GRO efforts to call attention to the potential for participation in municipal governments are the *Foros para la Participación Municipal*. This is a group of over 800 grassroots and non-governmental organizations which has met 5 times since 1996 in order to develop a proposal for increased participation by civil society in municipal government. In

went to the nation's municipalities (COPRyME 1998, 113).

³The PRSC claimed this right due to the fact that the PRSC did not yet control a national-level political institution, and the PRD claimed the same right because it controls the majority of municipalities in the country.

⁴The PRSC Liga has engaged in activities such as highly publicized ceremonies in which trucks and other supplies are provided to municipalities, with Secretary General of the Liga Amable Arísty Castro handing the keys to municipal officials in blatantly paternalistic fashion. It has also increased the stipends of municipal representatives by 50% and forgiven the loans incurred under the past administration of the LMD by municipal representatives and mayors (Hoy March 20th, 1999).

⁵The *Unión de Vecinos Activos* and the *Centro de Planificación y Acción Ecumenica*, and the *Grupo de Investigación para la Acción Comunitaria, Inc.*, have published their suggestions in booklet form (UVA 1997; P. Hernández 1998a, 1998b; de la Cruz 1998). The *Unión de Vecinos Activos* also published a compilation of laws regarding municipal government (Collado 1997b). Several NGOs have published materials to be used in popular education efforts to better understand the role of municipalities. These include work by the *Equipo de Educación Popular y Comunicación Alternativa* (1996). Women's NGOs such as the *Centro de Investigación para la Acción Feminina* and *Equipo NOSOTRAS* have also included materials on the importance of municipal government in their newsletters and in materials for popular education.

between the general assemblies which are open to all member organizations, each organization addresses the work done and ideas proposed in the last meeting so that its representatives can return with member feedback. The final proposal made by the *Foros* was to be considered by a commission of the *Sala Capitular*, the legislative body of Santo Domingo's municipal government, in November of 1999. The *Foros* are a clear indication of civil society's capacity not only for mobilization, but also for participating in a formal and sustained effort.

Finally, on a nationwide level the interest in decentralization is evident in programs of municipal reform in Santiago, the country's second largest city, and in Salcedo, a municipality in the north of the country. This recent interest in decentralization and in making more C and more efficient C use of municipal government goes hand in hand with current national political activities. Despite advances in decentralization efforts, the factors of municipal-central government tension, along with the disproportionately strong Dominican presidency, show that central government continues to exert a significant and undue share of power in the capital city, as the next section demonstrates.

Contradictions in the Decentralization Process

One of the roadblocks to decentralization is the overlap in responsibilities in the capital city between central government and the city government. Four recent conflicts between central and city government illustrate the overlapping responsibilities. The first conflict is over the *buhoneros*, the street vendors of Santo Domingo. Some of the crowded streets in the business district of the city are lined with these vendors and their goods. They often fill up entire sidewalks, causing pedestrians to have to walk on narrow streets, which puts the pedestrians in danger and which obstructs the traffic on these streets. *Buhoneros* are regulated by the ADN, which provides them with work permits. The ADN is also responsible for providing them with a place to work. This was the function of the *Plaza del Buhonero*, which was finished shortly before the hurricane of 1998 and suffered enough damage in the hurricane to render it unusable. Since then the ADN has been granting temporary permits, allowing the *buhoneros* to legally work on the sidewalks until the Plaza is repaired. In March of 1999 however, the national police force forcibly removed the *buhoneros* from the streets where they worked. This provoked a reaction from the ADN which had allowed these *buhoneros* to work in the city and which is responsible for regulating their work. After some negotiation with the national police, and violent demonstrations by the evicted *buhoneros*, the ADN granted them further temporary work permits, allowing the *buhoneros* to return to the sidewalks, restarted work on repairing the Plaza del Buhonero, and provided temporary space for the vendors in a centrally located park. By the end of 1999, the Plaza was still under construction. The fact that the ADN authorities had to negotiate with national police forces for the right to regulate economic activity in its own city is indicative of the weakness of municipal government. Central also to this particular case is the fact that the ADN does not have its own police force to maintain law and order in the city⁶ C so that if

⁶This lack of municipal police forces is a result of laws passed in the Trujillo era, consolidating municipal police forces into provincial forces in 1933, and consolidating these provincial forces into one national police force under control of the executive power in 1935 (Ley 559 de 1933, Ley 1022 de 1935, reproduced in *Rumbo* 23rd August 1999, 39).

there were a legitimate need to restore order, the responsibility would lie with national police forces. The question then becomes one of deciding when a show of police force is necessary, and here the ADN found it unnecessary but was not consulted before action was taken.

The second case of ADN-central government conflict took place later in March of 1999. In this case, 2 of the central government's police forces, the anti-riot police and the *Autoridad Metropolitana del Transporte* (AMET, Metropolitan Transport Authority) used tear gas to disperse mini-bus drivers from a space they had been using as a central bus station for years. According to the AMET, the bus drivers had been using space designated for a park, and had no right to be there. These actions led to a strike in the Cibao, the province to which the buses were going, and to the arrest of 18 bus drivers. Two months before the eviction, the federation of bus drivers in question had requested and obtained written permission to use the space C which they had been using for 22 years regardless C from the ADN's director of urban transit (Hoy 30th and 31st of March 1999). The bus drivers were allowed to resume working in the same space within a week of the incidents. This and the buhoneros situation resulted in violence, injuries, and serious interruption of economic activity for people already marginalized socio-economically (especially in the case of the buhoneros).⁷

Related to this incident is the third example of central-municipal government conflict. In May of 1999, Santo Domingo's mayor confronted armed AMET agents to demand that they stop obstructing traffic on a main avenue C the obstruction was a result of AMET agents clearing space for the central government's public bus service (Hoy 6th May 1999). The lack of positive response to the mayor's demands led the ADN to take the AMET's executive director to court over the issue of who controls Santo Domingo's streets. An authoritative, unbiased judicial ruling in this case has the potential to clarify, for both government and citizens, who is in charge of key regulatory functions in Santo Domingo and other municipalities.

My fourth example, and also perhaps the most salient for daily life in the capital city, is the struggle over garbage in Santo Domingo. The central government under Balaguer signed a contract with a garbage collection company, the Dixi company, for the city of Santo Domingo in 1993 (Hoy 22nd May 1999). Despite this arrangement, any visitor to Santo Domingo knows that garbage is not regularly collected in most parts of the city C the main exceptions being richer neighborhoods in which garbage collectors often collect informal fees to remove garbage items. The garbage problem, in addition to being grossly unpleasant in and of itself, is an obvious public health problem and has caused decreased tourism revenue. In November of 1998, Carnival cruise line ships stopped calling on the port of Santo Domingo largely because of the garbage problem. Each Carnival ship carried 2,600 passengers, with each passenger spending an estimated \$70 as a tourist in Santo Domingo (Rumbo 12th July 1999). Other cruise ship companies are threatening to

⁷It must be noted that one of the concerns for the buhoneros taking over sidewalks was how their presence facilitates pickpocketings and muggings. It is in fact believed that many of the so-called buhoneros are actually gangs of pickpocketers and thieves who take advantage of the improvised stands and crowded spaces to commit crimes.

abandon Santo Domingo as well, which has led to coordinated efforts between colonial zone GROs and government to clean up at least the touristy part of town. The garbage problem has led to repeated calls by the ADN to the central government for control over the contract (i.e., the resources to pay Dixi and the right to supervise and enforce the contract), using the argument that the ADN as a local institution can more efficiently supervise garbage collection. The ADN is currently reviewing contract options with other garbage collection companies, so that relief may be in sight for residents of Santo Domingo. The garbage conflict is largely viewed by observers as a political game in which the Partido de Liberación Dominicana (PLD)-controlled central government pits itself against the opposition Partido Revolucionario Dominicano (PRD)-controlled ADN, each blaming the other for doing a poor job of garbage collection and using this fact in electoral campaigns.

The undermining of municipal authority, obviously, works against decentralization. In increasing municipal revenue channeled through the Liga Municipal Dominicana, congress did not fully consider what some see as the guiding rule of revenue assignment: Afinance should follow function. This is because subnational governments need resources commensurate with their responsibilities (Dillinger and Fay 1999; also Diamond, Hartlyn and Linz 1999, 19 about similar financing problems in Brazil). These four cases show a lack of institutionalization of the decentralization process, the tension between central and ADN governments, and also the mixed messages to the citizenry as to who is really in charge. Why bother obtaining permits and complying with ADN regulations if the central government, which exerts authority in the same area, will ignore these? The overwhelmingly strong tradition of paternalism and the overarching importance of the presidency similarly undermine municipal authority.

Recent studies on political culture in democratic transition in the Dominican Republic point out that 81% of Dominicans believe that a good president should be like a father to whom one can go to resolve problems (Duarte, Brea, and Holguín 1998, 11). This idea that the president can take a personal interest in the activities and problems of each of his people is reflected in various popular expressions (Such as AQue el señor presidente me resuelva eso!). Or in a moment during a GRO meeting, when a participant turned to another, indignant over the injustices under discussion, and exclaimed: A(Leonel no sabe de eso! Which implies, of course, that if Leonel (Fernández, current Dominican president) did know, he would put an immediate stop to it.

The president's authority and his use of paternalistic tools to maintain loyalty to himself and his party are seen in a number of ways. A look at the nature of presidential decrees in the Dominican Republic illustrates this tendency. While the Dominican president's ability to rule by decree is limited by the constitution, Dominican presidents have typically exercised informal powers beyond the legal limits imposed by the constitution (Hartlyn 1998, 157). Presidential decrees are large in scope and, while this is contradictory, sometimes seek to institutionalize certain aspects of the current presidency. In 1997, for example, Leonel Fernández established a number of presidential commissions. These include the *Comisión Presidencial de Apoyo al*

Desarrollo Barrial (Presidential Commission for the Support of Barrio Development)⁸ to provide support to community development in the barrios of the three largest Dominican cities (Santo Domingo, Santiago, and San Francisco de Macorís). This commission seeks to institutionalize relations between the state and civil society in the barrios, so that a barrio's GROs can eventually identify and contact support systems in the larger political system on their own. The commission itself, however, is not on very solid institutional footing, as the next president (to be elected this May of 2000) can choose to discontinue any or all of the commissions. Another current presidential commission, the *Comisión Presidencial de Reforma y Modernización del Estado* (COPRyME), has as its objective to carry out the modernization and reform of the state. Tasks include work on decentralization, ironically enough for a presidential commission. This leads us to an examination of institutions involved in linking the state to civil society, and the ways in which this work is carried out. The daily tasks of these institutions, and their relationships to GROs, point to further impediments to the decentralization process.

Case Studies: the State

A study of all the different institutions of central government involved in working with the grassroots, through formal or informal links to the grassroots, is beyond the scope of this paper. I will briefly describe the main central government institutions currently active in poor neighborhoods of Santo Domingo. COPRyME, as already mentioned, is relevant to this study in its capacity as director of the decentralization project. In cooperation with the ADN, local NGOs, and with funding from the United Nations and the European Union, COPRyME has been carrying out a general consultation with citizens as to how decentralization should take place, and what role civil society envisions itself having in both the process and in a decentralized Dominican Republic (interview with Radhames Martinez, civic education consultant, COPRyME, 11th June 1999). Citizens were called to meetings that took place over a number of months at the neighborhood level, through the cooperating NGOs working with COPRyME, as well as through business groups, political parties, government organizations, and public announcements on Catholic radio stations. At the same time, citizens were invited to participate by sharing their opinion over the phone, by mail, or on the internet. Interviews and debates on TV and radio were broadcast to raise awareness of the process. COPRyME's work is designed to be able to continue regardless of who or which party might be in power in the presidency, though ironically its very existence depends on the whims of the next president since it was established by decree.

The *Comisión Presidencial para el Apoyo al Desarrollo Barrial*, with its offices located inside the presidential palace itself, has a staff of 32 in its Santo Domingo office (Mercedes interview, 12th April 1999). It seeks to institutionalize links between GROs in the barrios and government agencies which can support community development initiatives. Because of this, the Comisión perceives itself as a decentralization mechanism despite its dependency on the presidency (Cela 1999, 19). In 1998, the Comisión along with 11 other central government institutions began working on a development project called *Comunidad Digna*. This project has

⁸In the Dominican Republic, the word ›barrio‹ does not just mean a part of town, but strongly implies working-class or poor neighborhood.

as its main objective to reduce poverty and improve living conditions in the poorest sectors of the country (Mercedes presentation, 29th March 1999). It includes programs in formal education, civic education, income-generation, nutrition, housing, attention to vulnerable groups, and health, and is being implemented in the poorest barrios of Santo Domingo. Carrying out the project involves first getting in touch with GROs via NGOs working in the area, and meeting with them to see if there is any interest. From there Comisión officials arrange workshops in which priorities for community development are selected, and projects proposed. The Comisión does not then execute the projects, but rather facilitates contact between GROs in the barrios and the government institutions in charge of the priority area selected (for example, if a community decides a new school is the priority, the Comisión will facilitate communication between the GROs and the Ministry of Education).

A third office active in fostering state-civil society relations is the *Consejo Nacional de Asuntos Urbanos* (CONAU, National Council of Urban Affairs). Its main role is in urban planning and coordination of government institutions working on urban development projects (interview with Nelson Toca, CONAU vice-president, 12th April 1999). CONAU's direct relationships with civic associations began in 1996 under the Fernández presidency, when with the assistance of NGOs working in barrios marginados they prepared a presidential decree which nullified a previous decree of Balaguer's for eviction of certain barrios, a decree which essentially imposed a state of siege on these barrios (Toca interview, 12th April 1999). The institution has maintained contact with these NGOs, and has since then made contact with local GROs in some 20 barrios of the city in order to set development priorities in each of these barrios and create proposals for community development in them. While some 30 to 40 million pesos were spent on projects approved by CONAU in each barrio, CONAU did not follow up on these projects or ensure their completion. CONAU has no records of which project were completed and which were not, and admits that not all were completed (Toca interview, 12 April 1999). Such lack of follow-up is not unusual in the Dominican Republic, where the government is in the process of carrying out about four thousand public works, with an undetermined number of them paralyzed (interview with Ayax Mercedes of the Comisión Presidencial para el Apoyo al Desarrollo Barrial, 12th April 1999). In April of 1999, the government promised to complete 700 of these stalled projects in the next 14 months, giving an indication of the scope of the problem (Hoy 25th April 1999). What this means for the citizenry is disillusionment with democratic government institutions, which promise specific projects and even start carrying them out, setting up high expectations only to leave these projects unfinished. This potentially discourages the GROs and NGOs that had lobbied for the projects, and also delegitimizes these associations in many of those communities, as they are seen as not having accomplished what they set out to do.

Turning to the ADN, there are three offices in charge of establishing working relationships with civic associations: the office for NGO relations, the department of *Juntas de Vecinos* (neighborhood associations), and an office called *Acción Comunitaria*. The newest of these is the office for NGO relations (also known as the office of coordination with civil society). It was created in 1996 and is staffed by 10 people. The office serves as a >window= for proposals for municipal work and projects of collaboration with civil society organizations (interview with Alejandro Abreu, director of the ADN's office of coordination with civil society, 9th April 1999).

The office has signed agreements of cooperation with NGOs for collaboration on various types of projects, including affordable day care and effective garbage collection.

The department of Juntas de Vecinos was created under the administration of José Francisco Peña Gómez in 1978, and was originally called Acción Comunitaria (Torres 1993, 3). Its functions include keeping a record of the creation and existence of Juntas de Vecinos throughout the city, and recognizing each one as the official Junta for an specific area. The office has a record of nearly 3000 Juntas existing in the city (El Siglo, 12th April 1999). In order to register with the ADN, a Junta must submit a map indicating the territory in which it functions (in order to avoid overlap among Juntas) and a census indicating the number and names of people of voting age living within this territory. Each Junta is also to invite ADN representatives to witness and legitimize Junta elections, which take place yearly. The current head of the department acknowledges that the Juntas were originally created in order to facilitate assistentialism to poor neighborhoods (interview with Ramón Ramírez, head of Departamento de Juntas de Vecinos, 21st April 1999). Official policy of the department is to provide technical assistance to all the Juntas of Santo Domingo within the realm of the department's financial capacity, regardless of personal party affiliations, religion, and the like. There is disagreement among community organizers interviewed as to the degree to which this office is politicized. According to some, the office extends recognition and financial assistance only to those Juntas whose leaders or members claim some affiliation to the PRD. The assistance provided to Juntas ranges from engineer assessments for community infrastructure (for example, for building stairways to informal housing built on hillsides in poor neighborhoods), to water deliveries in neighborhoods without running water, to financial support for literacy programs (interview with Ramón Ramírez, 21st April 1999). Financial support and materials are not provided directly by the department, which has a budget covering only administrative costs. Rather, support from other ADN institutions is channeled through the department of Juntas de Vecinos. While the PRD originally promoted the Juntas de Vecinos, and many Juntas continue to be led by PRD activists, currently there are Juntas led by PLD or Reformista activists, as well as activists of smaller parties, in addition to apolitical Juntas de Vecinos. The department has a staff of 47 (interview with Ramón Ramírez).

Finally, Acción Comunitaria⁹ is an ADN office which was first created during the Peña Gómez administration, but deactivated during Corporación's administration (1990-1994), to be reactivated during the current administration of Johnny Ventura (1998-2002) (interview with Virtudes Alvarez, director of Acción Comunitaria, 2nd November 1999). The office is in charge of two projects: supporting day care centers in selected poor neighborhoods, and formulating a proposal to regulate street economic activity (i.e., the buhoneros). The office is hardly institutionalized: according to the ADN working manual, it does not even exist. Santo Domingo residents are in general unaware of its role, and groups often come to the office for business that would best be handled by the office of Juntas de Vecinos (such as with requests for street paving or other public services). Acción Comunitaria with its staff of 3 tries to help in these cases as

⁹Acción Comunitaria is often confused with the Juntas de Vecinos office as it has the latter's old name.

GROs dedicate scarce resources for such trips to the ADN. Making exceptions when the office so chooses does not contribute to the institutionalization of that office, nor does it lead to a collaborative relationship between Acción Comunitaria and the Juntas de Vecinos department.

Case Studies: the Grassroots

Santo Domingo's barrios are host to a series of problems that could be addressed by any number of the state institutions described. In general, the barrios have few educational institutions for their population; problems with rule of law including drug dealers who work with impunity, too few police patrols and/or corrupt police, and police brutality; and a lack of basic services such as garbage collection or potable water, with obvious health consequences for the barrio's population.

While the barrios are considered marginalized, the population of the barrios far outnumbers the population from what is considered the center of the city: it has been calculated that over 75% of the capital's population lives in the barrios marginados and rural sectors (Hoy 9th July 1999).

Overall, only 30% of the city has infrastructure which allows adequate housing and basic services (Rumbo 17th August 1998), so that it is surprising these issues are still considered to be at the margins of the political agenda. This paper examines the grassroots strategies of two of Santo Domingo's barrios: Guachupita and Sabana Perdida.

The barrio of Guachupita has a population of about 25,000 (ECOG 1998, 4) and has at least 21 different GROs, including cultural and sports clubs, church-based groups, women's groups, and 5 different neighborhood associations. In September of 1997, 16 of Guachupita's organizations met with the *Comisión Presidencial de Apoyo al Desarrollo Barrial* to elect GRO representatives and to select development priorities for Guachupita. Following the Comisión procedure, 3 priorities were selected: fighting violence, general barrio infrastructure improvements, and the establishment of a technical high school. To work on the first priority, the Comisión is funding an ECOG (*Espacio de Coordinación de Organizaciones de Guachupita*, comprised of 9 Guachupita GROs) project in which at-risk youth from the area participate in sports events, educational programs, field trips, and technical training, all coordinated by ECOG GROs. For the second priority, a safety fence is being built, with manual labor provided by the ECOG and other GROs, to prevent children playing in the open space above a water treatment plant C one of very few large open spaces in the area C from falling down the incline leading to the plant. This project was started, unfortunately, after an accident in which a child fell to his death at that spot. The project is therefore not an example of advance planning, but of an immediate and undeniable need. No work has been done concerning the third priority.

Guachupita has a key personal link to the Comisión Barrial: one of the Comisión officials is not only a resident of Guachupita, but has also been very active in community organizing, both in Church-based groups and with work with NGOs working in Guachupita, before joining the Comisión. Despite this key contact, Guachupita GROs have not seen all of their demands met. In December of 1998, Guachupita GROs along with GROs from neighboring barrios thanked the Comisión for its mediating efforts, but denounced the lack of follow-up on the chosen priorities. This is particularly ironic when one considers that the Comisión charged itself with following up on promises the government makes to the barrios (Ultima Hora 2nd October 1997). In addition, the wall project was stalled from June to November of 1999, and GRO representatives were told

while making additional demands that too much had already been done in their sector. The youth project, by comparison, has progressed quite smoothly, with only minor snags of disagreements among the GROs concerning book-keeping and the logistics of carrying out activities with the teenagers. Guachupita GROs rely excessively on assistance from the Comisión and the key contact. The ECOG directs most of its correspondence and phone calls to him, although he is not the only official responsible for the northern zone of Santo Domingo. Individual GROs also call on the Comisión for demands related to GRO activities C to channel written GRO requests, or to physically accompany GRO representatives seeking assistance from government institutions.

Despite this disproportionate reliance on the Comisión, and particularly on the Guachupita resident in the comisión, most of Guachupita's GROs also have some contact with the ADN. Along with GROs from neighboring barrios, they are planning a community garbage collection program in close cooperation with the ADN, so that not all significant projects depend on the capacity and will of the Comisión Barrial.

An underutilized political resource for Guachupita is in its GROs very infrequent contact with national legislative representatives. This is through no fault of the GROs, as legislative representation for Santo Domingo is not based on geography: congresspersons, as well as municipal representatives, are elected as at-large representatives, representing the entire district and no particular area at all. Many informally represent areas or consider the interests of where they live. Unfortunately for Guachupita, none of the current municipal representatives or congresspersons have chosen to represent their area. Therefore appeals to Congresspersons, an approach very popular and fairly effective in US politics, is not an option for these GROs. The second case study in this paper differs from Guachupita in this respect.

The second example of grassroots strategies is that of organizations in the barrio of Sabana Perdida. Sabana Perdida is a newer and larger community (becoming an urban settlement in the 1970s, whereas Guachupita became one in the 1930s), further from the city center, with a population estimated around 180 thousand. It is now urban, but was rural still in the 1970s right before evictions from the city center forced people further out on the margins of the capital city. Due to its larger size than Guachupita, it has many more GROs, at least 57 of them. This includes 19 Juntas de Vecinos (which have formed a common space in Sabana Perdida's Unión de Juntas de Vecinos); a Lion's club; the Acción Comunitaria para el Progreso (ACOPRO); a human rights advocacy group; several parent-teacher associations; cultural and sports clubs; women and housewives' clubs; a Catholic church; and several evangelical churches.

Sabana leaders, as many GRO leaders throughout the capital, are well aware of the problems of institutionalization in the country. They attribute the problem of having several institutions with similar tasks to institutional fragility, improvisation, clientelism, and corruption, among other things (Sanz 1998). This leads not only to confusion among the citizenry concerning who is truly in charge, and to whom one should go to with a problem, but it also leads to competition for resources and clients at the level of the institutions; both within the central government and within the ADN (G. Hernández 1999, 9). The problem is not only that several institutions are responsible for the same basic tasks, but also that the rules for each institution are

not clearly spelled out (Sanz 1998,25). This is made clear by the case of Acción Comunitaria in the ADN, which does not even exist according to the ADN's working manual. There is also an obvious lack of coordination among institutions of government working on the same projects (Agenda para el desarrollo de Sabana Perdida, 31), as exemplified by the CONAU's ignorance of how many of their projects were ever completed.

Sabana Perdida's GROs seek to work in cooperation both with central government institutions and with municipal government institutions. In a notable effort, the Catholic Church in Sabana has provided space for GROs to work with both central and municipal institutions in reconstruction efforts following Hurricane Georges in September of 1998. Sabana GROs both individually and in groups have met with municipal government authorities to establish contact and open channels of communication. Sabana is different from Guachupita and has an advantage in this respect, as mentioned earlier. The community has two residents serving as *regidores* or municipal representatives. The two are often invited to GRO workshops, celebrations, and important meetings, allowing GRO members to identify them as allies in community development. Sabana Perdida also has a resident, Isidro Torres, currently serving in the national congress as a deputy. Prior to his election as a deputy, Torres was active in community organizing and well known among GROs.

As a community organizer in 1993, Torres wrote about the authorities' insensitivity towards citizens, pointing out that although government should be providing basic services, there is a need for collective action if citizens want their demands to be met (Torres 1993, 20). He is a vocal critic of the *Comisión Presidencial de Apoyo al Desarrollo Barrial*, and sees its function as an *apaga fuego* for social protest (Torres 1999, 17). In voicing local frustration with the Comisión, Torres points out that it has been unable to satisfy the demands of the community due to its dependence on other parts of government (Torres 1999, 17). Sabana Perdida GROs in general are frustrated with this Commission. Various GROs of Sabana signed an accord with the Comisión in July of 1998, in which the Comisión agreed to channel demands of the GROs to the appropriate central government institutions. This accord includes basic demands for the paving and repair of streets, potable water, drainage systems, and new classrooms for existing schools. In exchange, Sabana GROs agreed to withdraw support for a strike called for the 20th and 21st of July (the accord was signed on the 17th of July, lending credence to Torres' characterization of the Commission as *apaga fuego*), to provide space for community development projects, and to follow up and facilitate government agency work (Acuerdo Priorización de Necesidades 1998). The commission's lack of follow-up on the accord has led Sabana's GROs to take action in a variety of ways. GROs have picketed, protested, struck, and visited government institutions to demand that the accords be fulfilled. 45 of the GROs have also come together in a process of leader training funded by USAID, in which they independently surveyed and discussed Sabana's basic social and economic problems, and developed an agenda for the development of Sabana Perdida. This agenda was published in booklet form in May of 1999 and distributed to all central and municipal government institutions which have some responsibility towards Sabana Perdida.

Despite the setbacks encountered by Sabana's GROs in getting government institutions to meet their demands, they have persevered in this effort. This 'fighting spirit' is encouraged by

various government representatives which are invited to speak at Sabana events and write in their newsletters/magazines. Even as deputy, Isidro Torres writes in ACOPRO's Construyendo magazine that citizens must overcome obstacles which limit their access to leaders in congress and other institutions, since nothing is ever given for free to the poor, and that social and democratic conquests are always preceded by patriotic struggle and sacrifice (Torres 1998, 17). Similarly, at an event celebrating the beginning of the second phase of leader training, the ADN's secretary general stressed the need for sustained pressure of a community through its organizations to get things done by public institutions. He said that "Nothing is given free to anyone. Things need to be fought for, to be struggled for" (30th October 1999). These facts that government figures endorse demand-making on behalf of communities indicates their recognition that community needs are not systematically considered, much less satisfied, by the authorities. Their encouragement of GRO struggles recognizes the lack of institutionalization in government, as needs are met on an individual " squeaky wheel gets the oil " basis.

Through the leader training program and the many publications of ACOPRO, many of Sabana's GROs are made aware of the fact that asking the President of the country for a favor, rather than demanding of the government institutions what a community rightfully deserves, buys into existing unfair and clientelistic patterns. Under this system, "Rights are begged for, under the criteria that it is more effective when it comes to obtaining results for communities (González 1999, 22)." Herein lies the dilemma: despite efforts to make demands through decentralized appeals to government institutions, that is, to play by democratic rules, it remains obvious that to get results, a community's best bet is still a direct appeal to the president. For all the good intentions of Sabana's GROs to play by the new democratic rules, realistic GRO strategies are exemplified in the case of an imminent eviction of residents in part of Sabana's community, El Milloncito II. During this crisis, Sabana's GROs arranged for a meeting between residents of the threatened sector and the Comisión Barrial, but still hedged their bets with a direct appeal to the Dominican President (Construyendo 9 (September 1999), 31).

Finally, an overview of GRO strategies in Santo Domingo would be incomplete without calling attention to the rule of law problems GROs face daily. While GROs in Sabana Perdida and elsewhere have been outspoken about making their demands, the lack of rule of law in the Dominican Republic complicates GRO activities in two important ways. First, GROs demanding respect for human rights, as many do, have to consider potential reprisals by the authorities which they denounce (community leader interviews 1999), usually the police. Second, these concerns lead GROs in some cases to bypass regular institutional channels in order to appeal to higher ranked authorities. In one example of this strategy, one barrio's GROs had met with police to denounce drug-related activities; within hours these GRO leaders received death threats from the drug dealers in question, a clear indication of complicity between corrupt police and dealers. As a result, these GRO leaders now demand meetings with none other than the chief of the national police. The lack of rule of law is a considerable obstacle to associational life, as the need for security is crucial in the development of effective associational networks (Chalmers et al 1997, 579).

These case studies of state institutions and two of the barrios they work in point to some

flaws in the state institutions, leading GROs to adopt strategies which contradict their stated and demonstrated interest in decentralization and municipal participation, and in less personalistic and more democratic relations with the state. The Comunidad Digna program, for example, has been critiqued on several different levels. First and perhaps most important, the Comisión does not have an independent budget for carrying out Comunidad Digna projects. There is therefore no guarantee that projects will be carried out, as the institutions responsible for different areas of expertise may not be able to finance new projects either. Second, many see it as an extension of political campaigning for the president's party (PLD) (interviews with community organizers, 1999). The critique that these central government institutions are run exclusively for the benefit of the PLD ruling party are called into question, however, when one considers their working relationship with the PRD-controlled ADN, and the number of apolitical activists that have been hired as civil servants to work in them. While this cooperation by activists is seen by some as cooptation, it would seem there is no better way to establish linkages with civil society than by hiring people already familiar with the universe of civic associations. In a third critique, the workshops and information sessions provided by the Comisión are seen by many as lacking real participation. One observer says of the participatory sessions: "This is not participation, this is consultation. . . . without any possibility of affecting the consequences of consultation" (interview with Isis Duarte of Participación Ciudadana, author's translation, 16th June 1999). It is also possible that facilitating agencies will tend to adopt projects that are in line with political priorities. As a result, the agencies are unable to obtain a true commitment to the projects because the people have asked for what they think they can get, and not what they really want (interview with Arelis Rodríguez, executive director of Fundación Falconbridge, 28th April 1999).

As for the Comisión Barrial in general, as GROs channel their demands to institutions through the Comisión Presidencial Barrial, it reinforces the idea that barrio demands in and of themselves are not legitimate. The added influence of the Commission is needed to legitimize demands to other government institutions. Rather than lead to more regular institutional relations between civil society and the state, this reinforces an arbitrary system of satisfying demands according to who is requesting the service, and provides no new mechanisms civil society can use to access the state. This might work well as an emergency measure for needed barrio projects, but accomplishes little in terms of decentralization or institutionalization in the longer term.

The CONAU's initiative of working with NGOs and through them to reach out to GROs should be applauded,¹⁰ yet the lack of coordination and follow up with these projects is a problem. Such projects in their initial planning stages set up expectations of residents in the barrios, which are dashed when there is no follow up or no project. Indeed, a general critique

¹⁰Such a tactic involves the risk of making NGOs to be more representative of the popular sectors than they want to be: "The representative role for NGOs is problematic if NGOs claim to speak directly for popular sectors, or assume that their technical expertise overrides popular sector perceptions of their needs and wants. . . . International and state actors often find it easier to consult NGOs working in popular neighborhoods rather than the series of small committees that compose popular organization in that area" (Segarra 1997, 515).

which applies to all of these central government efforts to establish institutional linkages to civil society is that many proposals are collected, but then few of them become successfully completed projects. The proposals come from workshops in which citizens and GRO members invest a lot of time and energy, only to see their proposals bear no fruit, and then to have a different government institution C sometimes using the same facilitators C come organize workshops asking the same questions (interview with Arelis Rodriguez, 28th April 1999). This *¿feria de las propuestas,*¹¹ could lead to the exhaustion of civic organizations.

In general, central government involvement in the barrios of Santo Domingo may serve to undermine ADN legitimacy. Yet the ADN as it currently operates is not fully institutionalized or free of paternalistic influence. Due to patterns of paternalism and clientelism within the ADN, decentralization or institutionalization within the ADN itself are hindered (G. Hernandez 1998, 9).

Conclusions

The Dominican case shows that many government officials and civil society organizations want to work towards a more democratic and less centralized political system, with a renewed emphasis on civic participation in municipal government. The logic of working with local government which knows local context better is obvious, as is the strong appeal of democratization and increased citizenship rights through municipal participation. People are attracted by the way a democratic system ideally works. Yet despite the rhetoric of government and of NGOs (possibly for funding purposes) supporting decentralization, social and political actors recognize that the system is still highly centralized, and that appeals to municipal government need to be supplemented by appeals to more important central government bodies. The case of the Dominican Republic shows that civil society will adapt to the ways of institutions as a survival mechanism, regardless of whether these institutions are run democratically. The survival strategies of the poor emphasize basic survival mechanisms, which may or may not include doing things democratically (Cela 1997). People cannot be expected to change their ways if the system doesn't change its ways. Fox (1997, 420) points out the reciprocal relationship between democratization in all of its dimensions, and between the process of constructing respect for associational autonomy. This type of relationship has been illustrated in the case of Mexico, where clientelism remains but where there is also increasing respect for apolitical independent organizations, and increasing participation of these organizations past making demands (Piester 1997, 470). The Dominican case is similar in this respect. The case studies examined prove the working hypothesis that in the Dominican Republic, civil society's internal democracy as reflected in its demand-making strategies, is constrained by the transitory and incomplete democratic conditions of political society. While there are significant aspects of civil society's work that push for a deepening of democracy in political institutions, the day-to-day work of GROs in the Dominican Republic causes them to respond to the less democratic aspects of the political system in order to best serve the interests of their communities.

¹¹I would like to thank Mu-Kien Sang, executive director of the US AID-funded Project for Democratic Initiatives, for this colorful and accurate description of the process.

On a positive concluding note, the Dominican Republic's active civil society, with its significant capacity for popular citizen education, is more than prepared to continue socializing citizens into a functioning decentralized political system. This capacity has been demonstrated in civic organizations' ability to mobilize people both for specific events as well as for sustained interaction between civil society organizations. Once a democratic political system is truly put into place, citizens should be ready with civic skills and knowledge to take advantage of it. Additionally, there is great hope in the upcoming effect of electoral reform: beginning in 2002, Santo Domingo's barrios will benefit from direct geographic representation in elections for municipal and congressional representatives. The area GROs and people at that point will no longer need to depend on the squeaky wheel rule, or luck of the draw for representation.

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