Expanding on Women’s Role in Development:

Intergenerational and Re-conceptualized Notions of Change

Gerard Huiskamp
Wheaton College

Lori Hartmann-Mahmud
Centre College

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Please send any comments to:

Gerard Huiskamp
Department of Political Science
Wheaton College
Norton, MA 02766
TEL: 508-286-3682
e-mail: ghuiskam@wheatonma.edu

Lori Hartmann-Mahmud
Department of Government
Centre College
Danville, KY 40422
TEL: 859-238-5250
e-mail: lorihm@centre.edu
On an otherwise unremarkable day, members of the Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas de la Huasteca (The Association of Peasant Women of the Huasteca, A.C., or AMCHAC), their families and invited guests gather to convene the Association’s semi-annual General Assembly. The purpose of the assembly is both pragmatic and social; only analytically can one separate out these two countenances. In the meeting, members present an overview of local group achievements, discuss any difficulties they have been experiencing, and collectively map out Association goals and a program of concrete activities. The presentations and resultant discussions are attentive and thoughtful, infused with an easy-going good humor. Within an hour’s time the women have settled a number of small matters, and hammered out a clear agenda of action for the next few months. With group affairs settled, they are able to settle in to enjoy music, children’s cultural performances, and friendly conversation over a festive meal – a celebration of their hard-won solidarity and improbable accomplishments.

The AMCHAC is a regional confederation of eleven locally based women’s groups in the Huasteca region of the Mexican state of Veracruz. The association is grounded in the principles of self-help development and local empowerment; and in this shares characteristics with a wide variety of popular sector organizations in the global South. The core of the AMCHAC local groups’ activities revolves around microenterprise social and economic projects – gasoline-powered maize mills, a tortillería, group agricultural activities (chicken-raising, small livestock, maize and citrus cultivation), and small consumer stores. Of these, the most critical improvement in each community was perhaps the most basic: the mill for grinding maize into masa, to make the staple tortillas. For without being unburdened from the traditional stone-grinding by hand, the groups’ other microenterprise projects and activities would not have been possible.

Other AMCHAC projects similarly seek to lessen women’s most onerous domestic duties, while simultaneously increasing community access to basic consumer goods and providing important social infrastructure to the community as a whole, and to women in particular. The women decided that – given resource constraints and opportunity costs – the combination of the mill and consumer store would provide revenues to pay off project loans quickly, and allow for the capitalization of new projects. The small consumer stores also offset the traditional opportunity costs of riding into the municipal center of Tempoal (anywhere from 2-30 kilometers in distance, and in many cases accessible only by a poorly maintained dirt road). In this, community members save time and money on transportation; and evade high consumer mark-ups, instead re-circulating pesos within the community. The generation of income for members is, of course, also a vitally important goal for the projects. In all, group collective action has helped members meet their goals of helping families, helping the community, and altering gendered imbalances in work. They are confident that the long-term fruits of their labors will be a dynamic and renewable source of group and individual income, and an engine for community well being and growth.

A move from Veracruz, Mexico to Niger, West Africa may be a giant geographical leap; in terms of life conditions, however, women in these two locations share many circumstances and development priorities. Nigerien women of the popular classes, too, seek to improve their physical and material well-being as a central objective – which for them similarly means easing burdensome tasks such as fetching water and firewood, pounding millet and other grains, and preparing family meals under rudimentary cooking conditions. It also means acquiring wealth in
order to improve power relations within the family, as well as to achieve a more comfortable existence.

There is more to the picture, however, than improving material conditions. Women in Niger (as in Veracruz) express repeatedly their desire to acquire new knowledge and participate more actively in their social milieu. They express great satisfaction in the benefits gleaned from experiences such as taking literacy courses, acquiring skills for managing small businesses, attending conferences, and participating in credit and savings organizations; and they frequently frame these benefits in terms of solidarity, increased self-confidence, wider circles of acquaintances and friends, and the expanding of horizons in general. So while the most obvious benefit of a credit project is to provide working capital to women, this economic benefit is mutually constitutive of social and political gains.

Assessments of development in a particular locale are usually based on snapshot views; perhaps taken at various points in time, but nevertheless static pictures of the project and the people involved. Rarely, moreover, does a formal evaluation take into account the broader social-psychological impact of community development projects, such as changing perceptions of “self” and “group” among the participants, evolving ideas and practices, and how these social forces impact extant relationships to shape the direction and nature of development and change. It is our position that we can better understand the dynamics of development and social change by examining these “intrapersonal” cognitive changes and their impact upon interpersonal relationships, with special attention paid to intergenerational relationships at the community level. Examining how both familial and organizational generations relate to the process of community development, and how these generational cohorts influence and interact with each other in this process, we can better understand development – and thus better be able to plan and assess it.

The paper is organized around three major sections. We begin with a thematic overview of our two case studies, focusing discussion on the initial organizing and project development experience in both Niger¹ and rural Mexico.² The second section provides a constructive critique of Abraham Maslow’s motivational theory, especially as appropriated to explain social and cultural change as a function of the mobilization potential of various populations. Specifically, we present evidence from our case studies to challenge Maslow’s “hierarchy of needs;” and thereby offer an alternative basis for understanding the origins and potential effects of poor women’s organizational efforts across the generations. We conclude, finally, by drawing out some of the practical implications of our findings for re-orienting professional development training processes and their evaluation.

In the paper, we use the term “intergenerational” in two distinct, but related, ways. The first and more familiar usage refers to the relationship between parents and children within the same family (and, in many cases, the extended family). It entails both the formal and informal socialization of culture, ways of life, and education; as well as the more diffuse transmission of attitudes, levels of confidence and role behaviors. We will also use the term to conceptualize relations between age-cohort peers within and beyond the community, distinguishing “generations” by levels of involvement in formal development processes. Specifically, we will
analyze the diffuse processes of behavior modeling that are an important part of women’s organizing in traditional communities.

Understanding intergenerational development dynamics is particularly important for those concerned with a more meaningful integration of women into the development process, given that women are quite often socially positioned as the torch-bearers of culture at the community level, responsible for the early upbringing and education of children, and the passing on of tradition, morals and ways of thinking. A comparative examination of intergenerational interactions among women in Latin America and Africa will thus provide a more perspicacious understanding of social change and development as it is practiced, as well as provide insights into how it could be enhanced.

**Motivations to Women’s Activism in the Global South**

With each subsequent visit to Niger, one marvels anew at people’s courage in the face of extremely difficult living conditions; and stands humbled by their faith, enthusiasm for life, and efforts to improve their condition, as they resist the many structural forces allayed against them. Yet for many, perhaps, it is not courage that is most readily visible. The first word that comes to mind upon landing in the capital city of Niamey is “poverty.” Invariably, NGO donors’ project proposals open with statements like that of the Catholic Relief Services: “Niger is a land-locked country in West Africa and one of the poorest nations in the world….“

At the macro level, the state of Niger is suffering under a mountain of debt, owing US$1.633 billion to external sources as of 1995. Its external debt as percentage of GNP was 34.5 percent in 1980 – jumping to 91.2 percent in 1995 – and as a percentage of exports of goods and services it stands at an astronomical 571.7 percent.

The implications of this national financial crisis have been disastrous for Nigerien families. The country’s population of nine million have an average per capita GDP of US$207, life expectancy of 47 years, and an adult literacy at 12.4 percent. The combination of these statistics means that Niger’s standing on the United Nations Human Development Index (HDI) is one of the lowest on the planet. For the rural population (85 percent of the total population), 30 percent have access to health services and 59 percent to safe drinking water. Countrywide, there is 1 doctor per 18,000 people (compared to industrialized countries, which have 1 doctor per 390 people). In the 1990s, this situation of deprivation was exacerbated by the introduction of structural adjustment programs (SAPs), and diminishing demand on the world market for Niger’s uranium. Finally, the 1996 and 1997 harvests were poor due to a lack of rain, forcing many people to migrate to Niamey looking for scant food and work.

A characterization of Niger’s material poverty is offered here, because it is real and should not be ignored; yet it is provided somewhat reluctantly as the word “poverty” often invokes unwarranted images of moral and spiritual poverty, in addition to material deprivation. These broad-brush sketches are thus provided not to paint a picture of vulnerable, agent-less victims, but rather to draw out the parameters within which people live, work, raise children, and express dreams for a better life. For despite these economic difficulties, Niger’s recent history is not without its bright moments. After a long history of authoritarian political leadership since independence in 1960, the 1990s saw an opening up of the political system that has allowed forces
in civil society such as women’s groups to emerge, and for women to express themselves more freely in general. Indeed, despite obstacles and periodic setbacks, women in Niger (and throughout Africa more broadly) are increasingly forming groups unaffiliated with either the state or political parties; and because they have generally not benefited from patronage politics, they often push a truly democratic and rights-based agenda, in addition to their struggle for material security.

**Crediting Participatory Organization in West Africa**

Women’s desire to engage in economic activity to supplement their families’ income and to acquire some personal wealth is a central motivation to mobilize and organize in West Africa. In interviews with Nigerien women regarding organizing and development priorities, then, it is not surprising that respondents most frequently discussed the priority of credit access. Gaining access to credit has the potential to both empower and enlighten women, even if it is not a panacea for all poor countries’ woes. Women’s credit and savings associations in Niger tend to be more active than most other women’s associations; and are consulted by other members of their communities. The men tend to admire the women for their activities; and, indeed, most husbands encourage their wives to participate. As one of the participants put it:

The women’s *groupements* [women’s credit associations] are a good initiative because economic power can translate into social power. Women’s eyes are opened, they gain some autonomy. And because of this *sensibilization*, often the husbands support their wives in these activities. This is how economic power gets translated into social or personal power.

Yet credit projects, like any development intervention, may be helpful or harmful, depending upon how agencies insert themselves into larger constellations of social and cultural networks. A comparative assessment of Nigerien women’s experiences with two different types of credit-based development initiatives – the Gafati credit project, and the *Mata Masu Dubara* (Women Coming Together to Strategize [alternatively, Women on the Move], or MMD) – is suggestive of the factors determining success or failure; and will additionally allow us to outline some of the important material and the ideational elements of women’s development priorities.

The first case was situated in the rural village of Gafati, where the women explained how consultants from a project co-financed by Government of Niger and UNICEF had come to their village, called together all interested women, and provided loans of approximately 20,000 cfa (US$40) to whomever requested them. The repayment terms were agreed upon and the women were expected to repay the loan plus a fairly high interest rate over an eight-month period. The one other incontestable fact amongst the women is that the program was not renewed after the initial loan cycle – stopping before it ever really got started. Beyond this, there was considerable controversy over whether or not the credit project was successful, and why its sponsors had withdrawn their commitment.

Some women, such as Hadjia Saadi Lawali, saw project as an example of development that worked. She argued that the program was well-conceived – explaining that the money was given at a good time of the year (during *lokacin hatsi*, or harvest season), when there is usually plenty of food so that women would not be tempted to use the loan to buy food for their families – and claimed that everyone repaid their loans on time. She noted a potential structural
problem, in that those in charge of loan collection could easily embezzle funds; but she seemed assured that this did not happen. Other participants, however, told a different story. The primary failure, according to Fatima Lawali, was that project coordinators did nothing to prepare women for credit management. She thought that in order to conduct a successful credit project, one must do some research on the village to ascertain “who is competent and who is not;” and that there should also be a public debate about how the project should be implemented in the village, “instead of just coming and giving every woman credit!” None of this occurred, she said, and that was why the project had failed; and why the project consultants not returned to give out more loans. She said that many women in Gafati took the loan and gave it to their husbands (who presumably spent it); so when it came time to pay the monthly installment, such women were forced to sell cooking pots, chairs, or other utensils. “Credit is not good for everyone. One should be very careful about who takes credit. It is best to give to those who have a job or profession or have proven themselves as a petty trader.”

It can be argued that Fatima Lawali’s financially secure situation – she is cloistered and her husband provides generously for all her needs – allows her to make a somewhat more objective analysis of the credit project than other women who may be experiencing financial crisis and grasping at every opportunity to get cash in hand. But even if we recognize the inherent subjectivity of (and perhaps class bias behind) her perspective, the appraisal does suggest some important shortcomings in the Gafati endeavor. In a word, the project lacked organization. There was no training or orientation for the women on the use of credit, nor any exchange of ideas pertaining to credit before project implementation. The donors did not ask women for a “plan” before granting the loan; but simply disbursed funds to anyone who made a request. Many women thus saw the funds as a gift, and spent it accordingly. The loan then became a burdensome debt, causing these women to sell their possessions when it came due. The project designers, moreover, did little to help create a sense of process or an organizational infrastructure of support. The project ignored the Grameen-style strategy of promoting social solidarity as a means to promote both mutual assistance and accountability; instead, linking each woman to the program as an isolated client – unaware of other’s loans and ideas for investment. In the end, finally, the project reneged on its promise to come back with a second set of loans, leaving the women waiting and wondering. Several sources in the village reported that the village women had been deemed “not credit-worthy;” which if true threatens to dissuade other donors from starting such a project in the village.

The second project, by way of contrast, was both “user friendly” and procedurally-detailed. The Mata Masu Dubara Project (MMD) was carefully designed for women in Niger, giving central attention to the larger social and cultural context of development. MMD was created in 1991 by CARE International to address the difficulty women have accessing credit through formal channels, by forming women’s collective credit associations, or groupements, emphasizing both savings and credit. The groupements build upon the traditional tontines, women’s savings associations that have been active in the communities as long as anyone can remember, as the MMD project planners consciously sought to reinforce women’s traditional organizational forms.

Most groups meet once per week, and participants each deposit 100-250 cfa into the common treasury. The members decide how the money should be divided among loans, savings,
emergency funds, and investment in income-generating projects. For example, members of a groupement in the town of Tibiri meet every Thursday and put 100 cfa into the treasury for loans, 100 cfa into the tontine, and 50 cfa into an emergency fund. Two women per week share the tontine money on a rotating basis. Separately, group members desiring a loan of 5000, 10,000, 15,000 or 20,000 cfa put in a request on Thursday, and if approved would be given the money the next week. The loans are very short-term (1-2 weeks) and the borrowers pay 5-10% interest. Group bylaws also impose sanctions (small fines or “taxes”) to instill discipline in the group meeting process – 25 cfa for being late to a meeting, 25 cfa for being seated when one should be standing (and vice versa).

Groupement regulations additionally speak to which matters are to be kept confidential, and which are to be made public. Importantly, one does not have to explain the reason for borrowing the money, as protecting individual privacy is a key component of the process for the women participating. Trust and confidence, however, does not mean a lack of control and accountability: All members know who is taking a loan; and the loan funds are publicly disbursed and repaid. Group funds are kept at the treasurer’s house in a metal strong box with three separate locks; while the keys to the box reside elsewhere, with one key each held by the president, secretary, and a project consultant. This way, the box can only be opened when the committee comes together. The groupement, in other words, seeks to maximize accountability and transparency in financial transactions; while preserving a degree of personal privacy internally, in addition to counseling member discretion regarding group business in conversations outside of the group.

As suggested, an element of control is present at every step in the process – sanctioning members for being out of line, maintaining several locks on the money box to avoid tempting corruption, and the like – but more significant than the existence of these safeguards, per se, is that MMD’s control structure was imposed by the women on themselves. Both CARE and women members realize a need for more discipline in these new associations, which differ from traditional tontines in that they accumulate working capital for loans. Together, the consultants and participants have thus devised methods for strengthening the organizations that are compatible with the social context of the credit program. The transformation of the “traditional” tontine into a groupement is a challenge, as the latter demands greater competency from its members (e.g., numeracy and literacy, as well as management skills). This issue points to the importance of credit projects taking a cross-sectoral approach to development; meaning, for example, that the consultants address literacy/numeracy and women’s domestic labor burden in tandem with credit initiatives. Such an approach gets away from a narrow definition of poverty that simplistically equates it with lack of money, by addressing other sources of vulnerability.

The MMD Project has flourished. The treasury for the four Tibiri combined groupements now stands at 700-800,000 cfa; and they were awaiting word from the Minister de la Promotion de la Femme on support for a project proposal they had submitted. Mariana, the initiator and secretary of the most successful groupement, maintained that members were satisfied with the results of their work and participation; and were very motivated to continue their success. The group, she said, gives them clear financial benefits; but also importantly an opportunity to “se defoller” – have fun, socialize, learn of each other’s news.
MMD thus stands as a considerable advance over the Gafati credit project, and the differences between the two are suggestive of some generalizable lessons for constructing credit programs specifically, and other types of development interventions more generally. First, while local knowledge and practices have no a priori superior standing over the machinations of professional development planners, the MMD experience reveals the value in endeavoring to understand the larger social and cultural context in which a program is envisioned. Second, the failure of the Gafati Project to give women borrowers a good orientation in the use and abuse of credit underscores the fact that training in specific information and skills is important to project success; but the structure of decision-making and information-sharing is also key. In other words, while no training and no effort to create support infrastructure is clearly ruinous to a project’s long-term prospects, the MMD experience further suggests that building on already-existing women’s groups – in which trust and a generally agreed upon “modus operandi” have already been established – provides additional dividends. Projects should endeavor to tap into already existing social organizations and build upon them, as women have clear ideas about their development priorities, how to organize themselves, and how to combine addressing their material needs with their social and intellectual needs. In sum, a better understanding of context on the part of donors – combined with full participation of women and a cross-sectoral approach to poverty – go a long way toward bettering the lives of women in the global South.

**Identifying Paths to Development in Rural Mexico**

The AMCHAC women’s organization, located in the northwestern corner of the state of Veracruz, shares a number of similarities with the more successful MMD groups – although in the past members have had ample experience with ill-conceived and underfunded development interventions like the Gafati Project. Also mirroring the general experience of women’s organizations in Niger, the AMCHAC had its origins in the experience of economic crisis and malign neglect. Over decades in Mexico, both unfavorable global market trends and skewed state development policies have steadily eroded the position of the rural smallholder – or ejiditario – underclass vis-à-vis all other sectors of society. The Tempoal municipality, in which the women of the AMCHAC reside, is characterized by an essential division between fairly well-to-do private landholders concentrated in cattle production, and the ejido sector based largely in subsistence cropping, limited market participation, and seasonal wage labor opportunities in the private agricultural sector. Participation in this semi-formal labor market is poorly remunerated when such work is available during approximately one-third of the year; and the absence of even this option for the remainder of the time makes long-term migration to other parts of Mexico and the United States part of the regular economic rhythms of most communities in the region. Limited opportunities for market participation in agriculture and long-term demographic pressures on the availability of land have exacerbated these problems. Moreover, these economic patterns reinforce a physical-geographic isolation of the communities into a social and economic separation, which has made rural dwellers’ desire to maintain the integrity of the ejido as a viable space for living increasingly untenable.

Beginning in the late-1970s, women from eight different ejidos in Tempoal began working with a visiting social worker from the Ministry of Agriculture (SARH), who helped them petition the government to form Women’s Agricultural and Industrial Units (UAIMs), as part of a new program structured to provide rural women access to land, credit and technical
extension services.

A number of women living in the…ejidos in and around the Tempoal municipal district began to feel the sting of long-deteriorating economic conditions within their families and communities. Their husbands’ day labor wages – which augment what foodstuffs they can produce on their small plots of land – had for years been outstripped by inflation, and an already tenuous situation had become desperate. Deepening family crises began to develop into a sense of general crisis, as it became increasingly clear to the women that this current economic challenge was one the traditional division of labor within the family could not solve.26

The local women’s groups thus hoped that the government program would allow them to initiate small income-generating projects. But while SARH provided the UAIMs with some perfunctory initial training in record-keeping and other paperwork to report back to the state, it was considerably less forthcoming in assistance with other essentials required to make their projects successful. As was often the case with national social policy initiatives in Mexico during the PRI’s rule, the UAIM program proved to have more form than substance.27

Even at this very embryonic stage of organizational development, however, Klaus Bethke argues that the participatory nature of UAIM meetings helped build the women’s self-esteem, creating expectations and the motivation necessary to pursue more ambitious projects, and a deepening of their organization.28 Despite the limited objectives of state policy makers and local intermediaries, the women found the organizational infrastructure of the UAIM to be conducive to their needs: as a forum for communication of goals and objectives, and as a vehicle for coordination of potential solutions.

In 1984, after two years of unsuccessful attempts to secure credit for microenterprise projects, the groups were able to obtain some organizational training assistance from the INCA-FAO Project, a joint Mexican-United Nations program charged to help establish a more participatory dynamic in rural extension programs.29 In their first meeting, the women told the technicians that they wanted to learn how to express themselves with each other, and with other people both inside and outside their communities, as well as to receive technical direction for small-scale chicken- and pig-raising projects.30 This primary concern on the women’s part – to learn how to communicate in a group – might to most seem something to be taken for granted. However, in addition to their lack of cultural experience in collective work and public action, the great majority of the women were moreover hindered by a lack of basic literacy and communication skills. The women’s enforced physical and cultural isolation made the acquisition of these rudimentary skills a prerequisite to all other accomplishments.

Working with the women first entailed coming together to participate in a series of workshops introducing the Project’s methodology of reflection and critical analysis. In training sessions with the women, INCA-FAO technicians sought first to identify the women’s general circumstances, needs and goals by surveying the women themselves. In this, technicians hoped the women would develop a critical attitude toward their situation. The initial training sessions revolved around very informal exercises or “games” designed for promoting both a sense of camaraderie, and to explore possible bases for a collective project.31 One of the most powerful of these consciousness-raising exercises proved to be one entitled, “A Day in the Life of a Woman,” in which the women broke down into small groups and filled out poster boards
detailing their activities from when they rose in the morning until they laid down to bed at night. Coming back to discuss as a whole what they found in their small groups, the women and technicians were able to reconstruct a composite sketch of a typical day.

The length and onerous nature of their domestic workload was certainly something the women were cognizant of in a general sense; but recounting its minutiae in this collective forum helped to crystallize these dull facts into a greater insight about their lives. Moreover, they very soon came to the practical conclusion that their first priority in addressing this problem was to secure funding for social-economic projects – e.g., electric or gas-powered corn mills; water pumps – that would lessen their most onerous and time-consuming domestic responsibilities. This, in turn, would free up time for other activities of their own choosing.32

The women participating in the workshops found this simple problem-posing method of collective analysis to be powerful and animating. The local groups initiated a number of microenterprise projects; and within a year formed the AMCHAC umbrella organization. This new federation, made possible by a grant from the United Nations Development Fund for Women (UNIFEM), allowed the local groups to carry out regional projects, and to administer a revolving loan fund among the groups. Under the auspices of the Association, they also began to engage in outreach work to other communities in the region, incorporating new member communities into the Association. AMCHAC members provided the women in these communities with some basic technical training, as well as rudimentary problem-posing conscientization and organizational skills. Finally, the Association came to serve as a quasi-official liaison between the UAIMs and various governmental offices and state agencies, as well as to participate as coequal partners with other (almost exclusively male) organizations in regional working forums conducted by the state.33

The Satisfaction of Basic Needs: A Pre-requisite for Strategic Action?

There exists a general presupposition in most social science writing that participants in poor people’s organizations are tragically (if understandably) myopic in their activities and goals: that is, by focusing on material needs, and aiming their efforts at the local level, such organizations can only be understood as coping mechanisms – instinctively reacting to structural forces and political decisions made by others – rather than proactively engaging in work to create social change, attacking the roots of the problems confronting them as individuals and as a community. In the gender and political development literature, for example, women’s groups that focus activities around securing basic needs are seen to motivated by “practical gender interests,” fixated on the epiphenomenal consequences of women’s subordination. Organizations engaged in issues usually associated with a modern feminist agenda, on the other hand, are understood to be concerned with “strategic gender interests,” which seek to attack the root causes of women’s subordination.34 Women’s organizations focusing on material needs at the community level are thus generally considered to be pre-political, and largely incapable of altering the power balances in either the public and private realm. Indeed, it is commonly held that while positive short-term gains might be achieved by materialist organizations, their underlying coping strategies remain “appallingly ‘feminine’” – atomistic, individualist and apolitical – and therefore effectively deepen, rather than lessen, gender subordination.35 Even sympathetic analysts, then, tend to position materialist groups as bystanders to political and
social change – aggrieved victims, incapable of meaningful participation in efforts to struggle for progressive change.\textsuperscript{36}

A partial explanation for this lies in the unstated, and perhaps unconscious, acceptance of the social psychology underlying Abraham Maslow’s theory of a universal “hierarchy of needs,”\textsuperscript{37} in recognition of the unequal distribution of resources in society, and its hypothesized effects on citizen capacities for political action. Maslow argued that individuals are motivated to action by an ordered sequence of basic human needs, and that the level of need one experiences shapes a person’s basic character and personality at a given point of development. Human existence is understood as a process in which the gratification of lower needs will create new, higher-order needs; which may ultimately lead to personal “self-actualization.” Maslow thus hypothesized a deterministic hierarchical relationship between lower-order materialist needs – physiological requisites (food subsistence) and personal safety (basic economic and physical security) – higher-order postmaterialist social needs (belonging; esteem), and finally self-actualization motivations (intellectual growth; aesthetic expression).\textsuperscript{38} In essence, until basic materialist needs are satisfied to some considerable extent, postmaterialist concerns will not become manifest as motivations to human action.

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\textbf{Figure 1. Maslow’s “Hierarchy of Needs”}\textsuperscript{39}
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The highest drive in humans is to become self-actualized – to realize the fullness of being human, by actively developing and engaging one’s latent capacities – but Maslow maintained that this postmaterial “growth” motivation cannot emerge until the individual is released from the pull of basic “deficiency” needs.\textsuperscript{40} As an individual climbs the rungs of the ladder, they are understood to being moving closer to self-actualization;\textsuperscript{41} yet, there is no assurance that self-actualization follows automatically from the satisfaction of these needs. Negative life circumstances can intrude to stifle human growth potential at any given level; or through crisis even lead to regression to a lower level. Indeed, even in the best circumstances, to become self-actualized is to undergo a qualitative change in motivational development, to become internally-
motivated by one’s species being rather than by external deprivations:

Self-actualization is not a lack or deficiency in this sense. It is not something extrinsic to the organism that the organism needs for health, as for example, a tree needs water. Self-actualization is intrinsic growth of what is already in the organism, or more accurately of what is the organism itself. Just as our tree needs food, sun, water from the environment, so does the person need safety, love, and status from the social environment. But just as in the first case, so also in the second, this is just where real development, i.e., of individuality, begins. All trees need sunlight and all human beings need love, and yet, once satiated with these elementary necessities, each tree and each human being proceeds from within rather from without, and paradoxically the highest motive is to be unmotivated, i.e., to behave purely expressively. Or, to say it in another way, self-actualization is growth motivated rather than deficiency motivated.

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs makes intuitive sense, and indeed provides a number of useful insights into the material bases of human motivation and action. It does not, however, give much purchase into understanding the origins of women’s mobilizations in the global South; nor provide much in the way of guidance for how nascent impulses for individual and collective self-improvement might be harnessed to facilitate the creation of sustainable community development – at least beyond the self-evident (and teleological) proposition that populations with greater security over their material needs will be better able to provide for those needs. Indeed, it follows ineluctably from Maslow’s logic that socioeconomically-deprived individuals and groups will be essentially incapable of engaging in meaningful social change action; because, living at the margins of existence, they are too absorbed in attending to practical, material concerns to invest any time, energy, or attention elsewhere. As Maslow put it:

For the man who is extremely and dangerously hungry, no other interest exists but food. He dreams of food, he remembers food, he thinks about food, he emotes about food, he perceives only food and he wants only food…. For our chronically and extremely hungry man, Utopia can be defined simply as a place where there is plenty of food…. Anything else will be defined as unimportant. Freedom, love, community feeling, respect, philosophy, may all be waved aside as fripperies which are useless because they fail to fill the stomach. Such a man may be fairly said to live by bread alone.

Even if disposed toward engaging in change action, the materially deprived would lack the necessary resources (money, education, political skills, and/or experience) to do so effectively; but for Maslow, at least, the greatest problem is the fixation on material motivations to action. While it is true that Maslow allows for some degree of fluidity in the hierarchy of needs, noting some exceptions in the order of needs prioritization, the general theoretical point remains that one should not expect higher-order needs to be a significant motivating force in behavior until individuals (or whole societies) are relatively free of material want.

Our case studies thus suggest a powerful counter-intuitive finding: i.e., that the gratification of self-actualization needs actually turns out to be an important requisite to the satisfaction of material needs. Based on evidence from rural Mexico and Niger, in other words, we found that securing a subject identity that affirms one’s fundamental value as a human being with reason and agency, and specifically the value of the experience of women, is part and parcel of successful attempts by subaltern women to organize themselves, so as to promote their agenda of practical needs.
For women who initiate self-help organizations, the initial motive cause to action is most often one of serious material deprivation and a sense of desperation – *something* needs to be done, something different than what they were now doing. At the same time, however, the act of collective mobilization itself produces new values and motivations: the shift from a concern for one’s individual family and neighbors, to a common cause with others in the community; from a concern with enlarging family income, to the strategic goal of lightening the burden of women’s work and providing local control over the provision of basic needs; and from an extension of the traditional maternal identity of being in charge of feeding the family, to a concern for the role of women and the “right” of women to assert their dignity and value publicly – the right to speak and be heard.

It is difficult to describe these transformations in women’s lives as anything less than self-actualization, as claiming one’s core humanity in the face of profound cultural denial. Many of the women in the Tempoal ejidos, for example, explained in detail how their pre-mobilization life experience was characterized by a debilitating self-image; and also how their struggle has changed this. In interviews, the women repeatedly remarked that prior to their involvement in the groups they had come to internalize the unworthiness, incapacity, and powerlessness ascribed to them from without. Importantly, this cultural structure of gendered oppression was enforced primarily through silences more than an active, overt socialization; and thus the airing of debates and negotiation over the proper role of women in the household and community that accompanies group mobilization brings submerged issues to the surface, which are then subject to public scrutiny and contestation.45 Similarly, the securing of specific rights and recognition heretofore denied women – the right of women to work as a group; the right to travel to other villages as a function of that work; the right of women to participate as an equal partner in family decision-making; to be free from the indignity of domestic violence; to actively participate in the community and regional governance – represents a series of “battles won” to which the subsequent generations can then add.46

In the initiation and development of the AMCHAC, collective action success has been dependent on – and possible because of – a sense of common purpose and mission, beyond the narrow self-interest of individual and “amoral familist”47 coping strategies. Individual and family materialist needs cannot – indeed, should not – be divorced from this larger social attachment, but these more narrow, particular concerns cannot suffice for sustaining a common endeavor. Such interests have historically proven to be incapable of engendering enduring collective commitments, of overcoming suspicions of others’ motives and interests, and other obstacles to effective community action. By virtue of their poverty and sociocultural marginalization, the women share a common fate; yet it was only through a discursive process of coming to recognize the commonality of their experience as poor rural women that they came to tap into collective sources of strength. This identity formation, borne of the process of mobilization itself, has enabled the organization to realize a number of concrete achievements that, in their former isolated existence, they only held as dreams. Moreover, these same collective identity resources have allowed them to sustain and build upon their mobilization over a period of almost three decades. Indeed, it is precisely this on-going commitment to each other, through organization and collective problem solving, that AMCHAC members celebrate in their Assembly.

12
A similar phenomenon can be seen among the women in Niger. Interviews reveal that of those women who were active in an organization, 75% in village and town sites and 53% in the capital city reported the organization to be economic in nature; implying that the satisfaction of basic materialist needs was a central priority. However, when asked, “How has participation in this group or organization affected your life?” many women expressed postmaterialist attitudes in their responses, particularly the value of gaining knowledge and greater understanding through participation. Respondents spoke of their enhanced understanding of society, of being better informed, and how this leads to feelings of fulfillment and self-confidence. In some cases, one can see a merging of economic goals with self-actualization goals – learning more about a trade, improving commercial activities, and then the more general conceptualizations of “improving one’s quality of life” and issues of self-help – but most telling is the repeated allusion to increasing one’s knowledge, either about a specific activity, or more generally, about one’s community.

In general these women are describing enlightening experiences. “Wayewa kai” – a Hausa expression meaning variously a broadening of horizons, “blossoming”, becoming more aware or enlightened – was used repeatedly, both in this context and when they talked about educational opportunities. According to M. Abdou Mijinguini, director of educational reform for Niger’s Ministry of Education, in many Nigerien contexts the meaning of wayewa kai goes beyond the more abstract “enlightenment” or “mind-opening experience”, to specify “a wider perspective on problems of everyday life.” In this, the expression seems to describe at once both an abstract ideal and a specific utilitarian ideal – which further suggests a lived cultural tradition where the radical distinction between self-knowledge and quotidian practice is meaningless.

Nigerien women expressed much enthusiasm over their group experiences, whether describing participation in a political organization, a women’s cooperative or informal credit bank. Any opportunity they had to increase knowledge, awareness, contacts or skills, they welcomed as a true benefit, implicitly proposing that these growth opportunities are central to a meaningful development process. The links between enlightenment and development – and their recursive nature – was made even more explicitly in responses to questions about the many newly-created women’s organizations. Almost all Hausa-speaking respondents spoke of women’s organizing in terms of wayewa kai; both as a motive cause for mobilization (“I am very happy that women are more free [to organize]…it is because of wayewa kai;” “…it is good, women flourish in the organizations…this has happened because of wayewa kai”) or as one of its primary salutary effects (“It permits one to expand one’s horizons, learn, discover and develop;” “It is good; we are enlightened; now, nothing important will happen without the participation of women”).

Findings elsewhere confirm the importance of social psychological changes and other non-material collective goods to women’s organizing efforts:

Studies that have observed women in self-help or “functional” organizations agree on the beneficial effects these organizations have on their members. Within such groups, members show a democratic respect for each other’s concerns and derive positive psychological benefits from group interactions….In these organizations, women recover the ability to speak, which is very significant because silence is one of the most evident forms of women’s oppression….The
women involved in [self-help] food programs perceive an improvement in their lives.....They can acquire new skills learning to manage the budgets of the communal kitchens and to share responsibilities, which brings an awareness of solidarity. They learn to speak, to share, to be responsible for others – to “grow”....Economic necessity is the incentive for women to get involved in these programs, but.....the women stay because of the solidarity they come to feel with the other women in the group.\textsuperscript{59}

Yet as interviews with the women of the AMCHAC reveal, at least in their case, “learning to speak” is not merely a matter of “recovery,” but rather one of \textit{discovery}. Indeed, this process of self-actualization is the foundation upon which all of their mobilizations, goals, and both practical and strategic successes have been built. The process of enlightenment experienced as a series of epiphanies of self-discovery and new knowledge perhaps confirms Maslow’s general sense that self-actualization is a matter of uncovering those capacities already within us. Yet it is also clear that this growth process is accessible even to those with little in the way of basic needs security. Indeed, the practical exigencies of struggling for survival appear to provide a potent motivation for self-knowledge and self-growth.

\textbf{Influence across the Generations}

The notion that the materialist and postmaterialist aspects of development are recursively related is not, of course, entirely new. Prominently, popular education theorist Paulo Freire sought to develop and employ a pedagogy that would enable intellectuals, in partnership with the urban and rural poor, to transform conditions of oppression.\textsuperscript{50} Predicated upon the “liberation” of the “colonized mentalities” of the oppressed, such a transformation of society is to come in the first instance through the poor’s cognitive self-actualization. Freire’s use of \textit{conscientização}, or consciousness-raising, was thus intended to awaken people to their collective capacity to analyze and critique a larger social context for the injustice in their lives. And, in this, Freire affirmed the existence of synergistic links between the attainment of new self-awareness, and a resultant proactive commitment and capacity to engage in social change action.\textsuperscript{51}

Beyond personal development, then, our findings suggest that the individual-level cognitive and behavioral changes discussed above have the potential to make a broader impact on social dynamics in the community at large. Among others, we wish to highlight here the intergenerational effects of women’s mobilization and organizing, as women’s accomplishments through these changes re-shape the environment in which children will act and interact. Perhaps the most immediate intergenerational effect of women gaining new knowledge and skills is that the women will be better able to care for their children (armed with a greater awareness of pre- and postnatal care, hygiene, general health issues, and the like).\textsuperscript{52} Studies likewise confirm that better educated women generally place a higher value on education for their own children, and therefore tend to push for their own children to attend formal schooling.\textsuperscript{53} Educating a woman, in other words, is not a singular activity; as it tends to have positive ripple effects across generations. Similarly, a successful and sustainable development organization will provide concrete improvements in community living standards – e.g., better nutrition, greater access to basic services, rudimentary health care, etc. – which further enhance the life chances of subsequent generations.
Much more could be said about the positive synergies of improving the material conditions of local communities; however, the most powerful intergenerational effect of women’s organizing is more diffuse than the tangible material achievements of such work. By unsettling the cultural common sense and social norms of the community, women’s activism affords new opportunities for further innovative social change action. Subaltern women’s community organizing, in other words, helps to engender social and cultural change by transforming in practice the available repertoire of ideological frames and identities of which community members have use in self- and community development. That women are culturally situated as the torch-bearers of culture means that women are empowered with shaping the next generation, either explicitly by explaining and teaching children about the ways of the world, or implicitly by providing a model to which girls aspire and boys admire (and later expect women to act). In sum, women’s public action provides a ground-breaking model for both gender relations and community activism, for both the next generation and generational peers; inuring in practice new expectations about women’s role in the affairs of the community.

The most obvious change at the community level comes in terms of these ideational-cultural constraints, although these are recursively related to material constraints and structures of opportunity. Just as self-empowerment facilitates organizational success, and in turn material well-being; the visible signs of the group’s success helps to change others’ perception of women’s capacities, role identities, and social worth. Within the community – and in the society more generally – the ability of materially-deprived populations to engage in self-directed organizational activity stands in stark contrast to the maslovian-inspired understanding of popular political capacities outlined above; and given the historical marginalization of the rural and urban working class women from effective participation in the polity, the struggle for simple political equality has potentially radical implications.

As suggested, however, the most profound effects of a project may not be felt until a generation later. And if we are correct regarding the significance of these intergenerational effects, state agencies and donor NGOs considering only specific, isolated “target populations” in project planning are neglecting a significant source of influence for reinforcing development objectives and promoting sustainable change. Such neglect, moreover, is never benign. We hypothesize that a mother’s experience in the development process (both practical and ideational) compounds exponentially for her children – either negatively or positively. Consider again, for example, the credit project implemented in Gafati, which targeted women of child-bearing age. When the project fails and closes – for lack of training and support infrastructure – it leaves the women not only with a debt, but also with a confused and certainly negative view of NGOs, credit, and organization. But beyond the consequences for each individual woman who participated, the negative effects are compounded for their children; as they hear their mother’s frustration with the project – and with herself – reinforcing a culture of learned impassivity and powerlessness. Conversely, if the women’s efforts bear fruit, their success and confidence are compounded in the next generation.

In addition to its significance within families, women’s activism may also be expected to catch the attention of other women in the community heretofore reluctant to engage in community affairs. This is the organizational intergenerational effect referred to previously, premised on the different position women occupy in the life cycle of local community
organizations involved in the development process. Specifically, it refers to the dynamic that takes place between the founding members of such an organization or movement, and the subsequent (would-be) generations of members as a successful organization seeks to expand and deepen its presence in the community. It may be argued that this generational trope is a conceptual stretch, but we believe it is useful as a way to reconceptualize “development” as a sustained endeavor. For while states and development NGOs may implicitly – or even explicitly – intend for projects to take root and endure beyond its initial parameters, both narrowly political considerations and the institutional culture of development organizations tend to vitiate this long view in practice.54

An example of this peer demonstration effect from a Peace Corps Women’s Conference in Humdallaye, a small village just outside Niamey, underscores (anecdotally, at least) the importance of behavior modeling; and specifically that socioeconomic and cultural affinity between women in such a situation would tend to strengthen the effect. In this particular instance, women from all over the country – most of who had never traveled, nor seen the capital city – were brought in to participate in a women’s conference organized by very well educated women of the Nigerien elite. Although women of varying education levels gave presentations (on women’s rights in Islam, family planning, traditional soap-making, bead making, bread baking), most of the participants were village women with little education, or socioeconomic standing.

After the event had concluded, it was suggested to the organizer of the event, Madame Assalama Sidi, that village women seeing their educated “sisters” (that is, those leading the conference) in positions of authority might have an empowering effect on the former. She replied, on the contrary, that the active participation of other village women (that is, those directing demonstrations on soap-making, bead-making and the like) was more important. In these cases, she argued, the cultural gap between those demonstrating and the participants is very small – all that separates the two groups is a little bit of initiative and creativity – and thus would be more truly empowering, resulting in women gaining confidence and self-esteem.55 One must be able to imagine oneself doing something before one can do it; and the presence of women from similar backgrounds, who had been creative and had acquired a new skill, allowed for that imagining to take place. Having readily available role models of women taking charge of their lives, attaining self-awareness and new confidence, acquiring useful skills, and talking about it in enthusiastic ways, all could have profound effects. Whether for peers or children, then, we maintain that it is important to have available close (in terms of space and in terms of trust) models to emulate, so as to be able to imagine oneself in that role.

Conclusions

Maslow’s hierarchy of needs finds so much theoretical resonance – across groups of ostensibly opposite political-ideological stripes – because it encourages, or at least gives comfort to, both the elite-centered model of conventional politics and the vanguardism of the traditional left. It accommodates both the mainstream liberal and conservative fixation on homo economicus, in which the answer to the problem of human misery is tied to a certain functioning of the macroeconomic system. It also facilitates crude marxist visions of an inevitable future, where humanity’s alienation will be swept away by the humanistic rationalization of the economic engine of post-capitalist society. Maslow’s theory thus fits well with the self-interests
of those Paulo Freire characterized as “rightist and leftist sectarians,” by helping these (actual or would-be) elites to excuse their distrust of common people, and thereby validate their leading role in society. For if it is accepted that the poor cannot think for themselves – beyond their short-term needs of material self-interest – the materially secure, with a longer horizon of the future, are justified in deciding for them.

This ideology, of course, is inherently self-serving for those conferred with cultural prestige and social standing. As it turns out, moreover, the assumptions underwriting it are empirically unsubstantiated. Indeed, we found that women in even dire poverty were capable not only of rational contemplation and action, but also creative innovation – once those latent capacities could be made manifest. The women in Veracruz and Niger are not merely “coping” in a reactive manner to the conditions of material deprivation confronting them; rather, they are collectively assessing problems; working out plans of action; seeking relevant skills and training; putting appropriate skills into action; and attaining goals that are commensurate with self-actualization.

Beyond critique, then, our studies point to a number of practical lessons, which might be readily drawn upon to construct more meaningful – and sustainable – development partnerships with women in materially impoverished communities. First and foremost, while it is certainly true that most women in the global South lack the material resources and personal security that would make collective action more accessible; we maintain that the greater deficit is one of self-awareness, self-confidence and self-esteem. Thus, in addition to any new skill sets to be acquired, and any materialist advantage that might accrue from these, we maintain that development project interventions with women must give central attention to the self-actualization needs of project participants. It is this investment of this newly self-discovered whole person – not any skill learned, per se – that will increase project longevity by giving women the identity resources required to sustain their struggle.

Secondly, as educational encounters, development trainings are essentially formalized socialization processes; which occur in specific localized contexts with their own embedded socialization processes. And as such, the type of training received – in addition to the specific practical content of that training – may well be a significant factor in both the short- to medium-term success of projects. Specifically, training methodologies that prioritize participation, dialogue and consultation with local knowledge do a better job linking the formal and the more diffuse socialization processes. Indeed, treating participants as partners in development – by actively seeking participants’ input at every stage of the project – itself goes a long way toward meeting women’s self-actualization needs. Discourse and consultation imply a respect for the agency and capacity of participants, and therein pre-figures the women’s awakening self-discoveries, active learning and creative responses. In a practical sense, this requires consultants and participants to discursively negotiate between external development priorities and extant practices and forms – with both sides of the partnership open to the new possibilities for creative and innovative responses that such encounters can engender. Such a process can be difficult and time-consuming, but we argue will make the “reach” of the projects into participants’ lives and practices “deeper” than is otherwise possible.
Finally, the chances for creating sustainable development will be enhanced by integrating the positive effects of intergenerational influences into the regular rhythms of women’s collective practices. To facilitate this, projects need to incorporate participatory democratic learning into an on-going organizational ethos. The sense of wonderment and excitement that comes from participation in new ways of doing things seems to be a universal and organic phenomena; and development planners should explicitly and directly seek to infuse this ethos into the development process by creating organizational support structures that take advantage of the powerful sense of personal awakening that accompanies women’s initial mobilization experiences. Ideally, then, one should endeavor to include women and girls of various ages into the development process, as a means to both formally constitute the positive demonstration effects of mentoring relationships; and to establish a greater sense of organizational continuity and commitment across generational lines.

All of the above means to strengthen communities and engender the sustainability of progressive change follow from attention to the social-psychological aspects of women’s organizing, and the importance of intergenerational dynamics in the development process. As our case studies suggest, the professional development organizations that are successful in making meaningful connections with project participants are those who actively consult the wisdom and agency the “client;” treating them not as a client, but a partner in a shared endeavor. And the method employed to energize the women with that profound and powerful sense of wayewa kai is centered precisely on coaxing out the process of “imagining” discussed above – to allow the women to think of themselves as capable not only of meaningful action, but self-directed action.

There are constraints on a project like this, the most obvious being how to evaluate it. Looking at development as an intergenerational enterprise, of course, entails a long-term commitment to communities that runs counter to the prevailing institutional culture of both private NGOs and state development institutions. The greatest challenge, then, is to come up with ways to imagine development outside of the restrictions of “projects.” What would that look like? It would involve long-term commitments on the part of donors or individuals, with a desire to work with and exchange ideas with local populations. One of the problems with development as it is practiced currently is that projects must succeed in order to get renewed funding; and thus the donor organization is pressed to boast of its accomplishments and work hard to create a “success” quickly and efficiently. This precludes long-term, patient work that is prepared to take small steps, in the spirit of trial and error. Alex de Waal argues that relief work will do good only if donors cease seeking self-publicity and instead aim for solidarity with progressive political forces. Required of this type of commitment is a sense of responsibility and accountability that is not currently demanded of donor institutions.

As of now, NGOs’ own institutional norms, and the norms and practices embedded in the “development apparatus,” yield a perverse climate of marketized myopia and rivalry, antithetical to their ostensible raison d’être. Save the Children has to produce “results” – that is, to put donors in contact with third world recipients, and foster a meaningful exchange between them – or the donor funds will dry up. Care International has to Vaccinate x number of children in y number of months (that is, to constrict “development” into quantifiable short-term goals) in order to stay in business. And all of these agencies compete against each other for qualified employees (with high salaries thus taking a chunk out of donor contributions), success stories,
and operating funds. Ideally development agencies would work together, pooling their knowledge and resources, and – perhaps this, at least – is happening more often. Beyond more fruitful collaborations, however, we argue that we still need either change how projects are evaluated; or we should seek creative ways to engage in development without the restrictions that “projects” carry.

Notes

1 Information presented here on women and development in Niger comes from a larger study entitled, “Beyond Dichotomies and Assumptions of Development Discourse: The Case of Women and Gender Relations in Niger,” Ph.D. dissertation, University of Denver, 2000 (Lori Hartmann-Mahmud). Research was conducted in Niger, West Africa over the course of six months (November 1997-April 1998). Interest in the research topic and establishing of important contacts were due to a two-year stay in Niger as a Peace Corps volunteer (1988-1990) and a nine-month stay in Senegal as a Rotary Club Ambassadorial Scholar (1992-1993). My research assistant (Rabi Ibrahim) and I interviewed 104 women and 17 men (mostly in French and/or Hausa), as well as conducting 4 large-group interviews/debates in 7 research sites in Niger – in Niamey (the capital); Tahoua, Mirriah and Tibiri (towns); and Gafati, Dabnou, and Doumoulougué (villages). We also engaged Nigeriens in countless informal discussions at these sites. In all interviews with non-officials, respondents’ confidentiality is protected by the use of pseudonyms. The research was made possible by two important funding sources: a Foreign Language and Area Studies (FLAS) fellowship from the University of Denver’s Graduate School of International Studies (GSIS), and a research grant from PEO (a philanthropic organization committed to supporting women in higher education).

2 Fieldwork for this study with the Asociación de Mujeres Campesinas de la Huasteca conducted between 1991 and 1994. The research and analysis is based upon participant observation of group activities, over 35 formal group interviews and innumerable informal conversations with women and men of the ejidos in the Tempoal, Veracruz region; as well as 30 interviews with policy-making elites in both the Mexican national social service bureaucracy and United Nations Development Programme. Research was conducted with funding and support from the Mellon Foundation, The University of North Carolina’s Institute of Latin American Studies, and the United Nations Development Fund for Women.

3 Quoted from “Tera Food Security Development Project” (Draft: December 1, 1997), p. 1. This portrayal of Niger is quite common and can be found in many introductions to project proposals.


5 Statistics from the United Nations Development Programme’s Human Development Report (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995). Other sources report even lower per capita incomes (e.g. UNICEF and République du Niger, Analyse de la situation des femmes et des enfants au Niger (Niamey, Niger, May 1994), especially considering the 1994 fifty-percent devaluation of the CFA, the currency for francophone West Africa. The rate of exchange during our research period was: US$1 = 500 cfa.

6 The Western assumption that lack of material possessions is to be equated with poverty is challenged by Salamatou Alhassoumi Sow, in “Mots et Maux pour décrire la pauvreté: opinions des femmes peules,” Annales de l’Université Abdou Moumouni, Actes du Colloque de Département de Géographie (FLSH/UAM) (July 4-6, 1998): 25-33. In her research with Fulani women, she found “poverty” to be defined as lack of intelligence, poor upbringing, lack of faith, and (reflecting the pastoral tradition of Fulani people) a shortage of cows. Sow’s work is especially relevant to this study as she examined women’s priorities expressed in their own words.


9 An exception to this general rule occurred in one Niamey neighborhood, where the chief wanted to disband the association – perhaps because he felt that the women were getting too powerful. The women, however, held their ground; and because the community was basically convinced the association was a good thing, the chief lost. This is an example of economic power translating to political power. Interview with Fatima Abdou, December 10, 1997.

10 Interview with Ramatou Abdou, December 24, 1977. Along similar lines, Cecile Jackson (1996, 498) notes that while money, itself, does not necessarily change gender relations; “the non-financial leverage gained by women
from project participation” may very well alter gendered power dynamics. See Cecile Jackson, “Rescuing Gender from the Poverty Trap,” World Development 24, no. 3 (1996): 489-504.

11 This is a valid complaint, yet Fatima Lawali gave examples of already-established traders as competent women – certainly not the poorest of the poor who are supposed to be the targets of credit projects. The problem of credit not reaching the poorest is discussed in Nan Dawkins Scully, “Women See Gaps, Can’t Give Bank Credit for New Loan Program,” http://www.igc.org/dgap/women.html, November 14, 1998. See also, Ben Rogaly, “Micro-finance evangelism, ‘desistute women,’ and the hard selling of a new anti-poverty formula,” Development in Practice 6, no. 2 (May 1996): 100-12; and Warren Nyamugasira, “NGOs and income-generation projects: some further thoughts,” Development in Practice 5, no. 2 (May 1995).

13 Women seeking credit usually work through informal channels – friends, family or community members – which entails sometimes onerous social obligations. The intent of credit programs such as MMD, then, is to avoid these obligations.

15 One of the central social reforms accompanying Mexico’s post-revolutionary rural land redistribution, was the ejido system, the regime’s official association of communal peasant land cooperatives. Since January 1, 1992, the traditional ejido has ceased to exist, at least officially. As part of a larger agenda of neoliberal social reform instituted by then president Carlos Salinas de Gortari, the ejidos were privatized, dividing up the communal
land and granting each individual *ejiditario* property rights to his commensurate share. While this reform has had many important repercussions for the social structure of rural community life, the basic physical place of the ejidal community has not changed considerably. For an overview of the causes of socioeconomic decline in rural Mexico, prior to the decline of the Mexican economy as a whole, see Merilee S. Grindle, “The Response to Austerity: Political and Economic Strategies of Mexico’s Rural Poor,” in *Social Responses to Mexico's Economic Crisis of the 1980s*, eds. Mercedes González de la Rocha and Agustín Escobar Latapí (San Diego: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California, San Diego).

20 Gerard Huiskamp, “Identity Politics and Democratic Transitions in Latin America: (Re)organizing Women’s Strategic Interests through Community Activism.” *Theory and Society* 29, no. 3 (June 2000a): 404.


22 Klaus Bethke, “Rural Development for and with Women: The Case of Tempoal, Veracruz,” internal report, United Nations Development Fund for Women, Mexico City (1989): 7-8. Bethke, an agronomist working with the UN’s Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), would subsequently come to work on and off with the Tempoal UAIMs and the AMCHAC over a ten-year period.

23 The INCA-FAO Project was coordinated between associates in the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the Mexican government counterpart National Rural Productivity Training Institute (INCA RURAL), part of the Mexican national government’s larger Training and Organization Project for Rural Development (PRODER).


25 These mainly verbal and pictorial exercises were also a concession to the group members’ skill bases, and the special requirements for working with illiterate and semi-literate communities.


32 Maslow (1954, 80-98) actually places belonging, self-esteem, intellectual growth and aesthetic needs in an intermediate position, just above the materialist physiological needs. That is, he prefers to group these as basic needs, to emphasize their conative, as well as cognitive, nature; as well as to further distinguish the special stature given to true self-actualization as the highest – and rarest – form of human motivation (203-228).


This recognizes, at the same time, that all victories are tenuous, subject to backlash and counter-mobilizing activism by opposing interests; as well as to atrophy as a function of inaction.

The term, “amoral familism,” is from Edward C. Banfield’s *The Moral Basis of a Backward Society* (New York: Free Press, 1958). Banfield describes amoral familism as a social ethos of survival in “backward societies,” summarized axiomatically as “maximize the material, short run advantage of the family; assume that all others will do likewise” (85).


The foremost statement of Freire’s theory probably remains his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (New York: Continuum, 1993 [1970]).


We will return to this issue below.

Interview with Madame Assalama Sidi, April 14, 1998. Interviews with members of the AMCHAC confirm this sentiment, if from a slightly different angle. Although not universally true, there was in general a great deal of friction between the rural women in Veracruz and outside women with greater levels of education, especially those working for the government. The latter were viewed with a certain initial skepticism: in part because of a negative history with government officials regardless of gender; but also in part a certain resentment toward those with a higher socioeconomic and cultural standing.

