

Political Dimensions of International NGO Collaboration with Cuba

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Since the evaporation of trade relations with the former Soviet bloc in the early 1990s, Cuba's realignment with the global economy has impacted strongly on social service delivery. Cuban authorities have adopted a more decentralized, locally sensitive approach to urban development that has brought state institutions into collaboration with a wide range of community organizations and neighborhood self-help groups. This has attracted the interest of international development agencies, which have become indispensable to Cuba in initiatives ranging from neighborhood revitalization to regional economic planning.¹ A recent United Nations report identifies over 2000 functioning partnerships between Cuban and foreign non-governmental organizations, a figure that is bound to increase as the Cuban Government continues to decentralize development planning and streamline its social service commitments.²

But Cuba differs from other emerging economies in the extent to which its government maintains an active role in regulating the flow of resources and avenues of collaboration. While foreign investors are permitted no more than a 49 percent share in commercial joint ventures, international development agencies are subjected to the meticulous background investigations and constant scrutiny of the Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration (MINVEC). They are also required to work closely with state affiliated partner organizations, ranging from centrally governed ministries to

1. M Sinclair, *NGOs in Cuba: Principles for Cooperation (working paper #3)*, Boston: Oxfam America, 2000.

2. United Nations, *Contribución de las ONGs Cubanas e Internacionales Radicadas en Cuba Para el Forum del Milenio*, La Habana: ONU, 2000, p 9.

local NGOs, which often limit collaborative development activities to a slate of pre-designed projects.

This level of legal regulation has enabled the Cuban State to coordinate the efforts of international development agencies more efficiently than authorities in post-socialist scenarios such as Eastern Europe, where service duplication and a lack of inter-agency communication have slowed the formation of nationally and regionally integrated strategies for economic recovery and social development.³ Nevertheless, the rapid changes of the 1990s have exposed the shortcomings of central planning and top-down control of resources, which have not been adequately sensitive to emerging problems at the community level, even when projects are locally designed.⁴ Working in an environment that is regulated from above to simultaneously protect national interests and promote formal sector commercial expansion, international development NGOs have faced challenges in Cuba that are becoming increasingly relevant around the world as governments (particularly in the ASEAN region) experiment with more robust regulatory frameworks to stabilize domestic economic environments and attract “sticky” foreign investment.⁵ Two particularly salient challenges are the definition of mutually acceptable NGO-state-community relationships and the balancing of public interest with commercial competitiveness in sustainable projects. Based on 18 months of fieldwork this article examines these challenges as they have emerged in recent collaborations between Cuban state institutions and foreign NGOs.

I begin by arguing that many of the problems that commonly beset collaborative initiatives result from a disjuncture of Cuban and foreign approaches to promoting popular participation and building “civil society.” Next I present two case studies of projects funded by the Australian Government’s Agency for International Development (AusAID) and managed by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), an environmental NGO that operated in Havana from 1993 until 2001. Required by AusAID to “strengthen civil society” through “participatory” and “sustainable” projects, the ACF was simultaneously obliged by the Cuban State to recognize its authority and sovereignty in development planning. The first case study shows how the understanding of “civil society” employed by Cuban authorities allowed a

3. Editorial, ‘NGOs: Sins of the Secular Missionaries’, *The Economist*, 354, 2000, pp 25-27; A Ishkanian *Women’s NGOs in Armenia: The Challenge of Working at the Global-Local Nexus*, paper presented at the American Anthropological Association Annual Meeting, Washington, D.C., 2001.

4. A Fernández Soriano, ‘Realidades, Retos y Posibilidades de los Municipios Cubanos en el Fin de Siglo’, in B Stolowicz (ed), *Gobiernos de Izquierda en América Latina*, D.F., México: Plaza y Valdés, 1999, pp 165-182.

5. D Jarvis, *Changing Economic Environment in Southeast Asia*, The University of Sydney: RIAP, 2004, p 10.

greater degree of state involvement than that followed by AusAID. The ambiguity of the term “civil society” in official contracts enabled the ACF to emphasize the goal of community participation in its reports to AusAID, even though project funds were ultimately managed by the Cuban State.

The second case study highlights the difficulty of reconciling community welfare with commercial growth. When the ACF sought to generate grassroots interest in urban agriculture through an educational magazine, a key AusAID requirement was that the publication become “sustainable.” The ACF interpreted this directive in terms of generating popular interest, but its Cuban partner organization viewed it solely in terms of achieving commercial viability. Despite the conceptual disjuncture over the precise meaning of “sustainability,” official progress reports sent back to AusAID stressed its gradual accomplishment. As with countless emerging development initiatives in contemporary Cuba, distinct readings of key reference terms enabled an international donor to achieve its stated development objectives while facilitating the Cuban State’s ability to maintain political sovereignty and to cultivate profitable commercial ventures.

International NGOs and Civil Society in Contemporary Cuba

In a paper entitled, “Cuba’s NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?” Gillian Gunn has observed that many of the Cuban organizations that refer to themselves as “NGOs” are more committed to reinforcing the authority of the central State than building truly non-governmental initiatives.⁶ The director of Oxfam America’s Cuba program, Minor Sinclair, has explained this paradox in terms of productive public/private integration:

In broad terms, they [Cuban NGOs] have not looked to substitute or compete with the State in the delivery of services...They look towards an integrated approach, by engaging the citizenry and yes, by engaging the government, in the task of development...NGOs, as part of civil society, have a vital role in reverting the economic crisis.⁷

Sinclair’s inclusion of Cuban “NGOs” in “civil society” raises the question of what these terms actually mean, for as Jenny Pearce writes:

The same language and concepts are used by all, from the World Bank to Southern NGOs and grassroots movements. The reluctance to clarify the distinct meanings invested in these concepts, however, reflects collective collu-

6. G Gunn, *Cuban NGOs: Government Puppets or Seeds of Civil Society?*, Washington, D.C.: Center for Latin American Studies, Georgetown University, 1995.

7. M. Sinclair, *NGOs in Cuba*, 2000, *op cit.*, pp 2, 8.

sion in the myth that a consensus on development exists, or even that some clear conclusions have been reached about how to deal with global poverty.⁸

The way policy makers and scholars have dealt with and utilized “civil society” both in Cuba and internationally is a case in point: the consensus seems to be that civil society is an interactive, voluntary social arena that carries the seeds of participatory democratization and empowerment.⁹ Skeptical of this consensus, Keith Tester remarks that, “You won’t find anyone who has a bad word for civil society. Everyone sees it as a thoroughly good thing...but why?”¹⁰ Writing in 1992, Tester was among the first theorists to suggest that civil society may be best understood as “an imagination,” with a variety of applications and strategic uses.¹¹ Indeed, when the finer details of the concept are unpacked, Tester’s observation is borne out in the distinct, even contradictory, ways the term is used to describe and prescribe how governments regulate their economies and manage social affairs. International debates about the specific meaning of civil society reflect this ambiguity:

Civil society is so often invoked in so many contexts that it has acquired a strikingly plastic moral and political valence. The recent renaissance of the term began with anticommunist dissent in Eastern Europe, which gave civil society its association with opposition movements and “parallel polis” to the state...Civil society is sometimes conceived as spontaneous growth, prior to and independent of government, and sometimes as dependent on government for legal structure, robust recognition, or outright fiscal support.¹²

The fact that such different, even contradictory, scenarios can be referred to with the same term has important practical consequences in Cuba, where the notion of civil society has been employed to describe everything from a space for the expression of popular interests with “the active participation of the authorities” to anything that is “in counter-position to the State.”¹³ As

8. J Pearce, ‘Development, NGOs, and Civil Society: The Debate and its Future’, in D Eade (ed), *Development, NGOs, and Civil Society*, Oxford: Oxfam, 2000, pp 15-16.

9. See, for example, JL Cohen and A Arato, *Civil Society and Political Theory*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992; H Dilla, ‘The Virtues and Misfortunes of Civil Society’, *NACLA Report on the Americas* 32(5), 1999; N Fraser, ‘Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy’, in B Robbins (ed.), *The Phantom Public Sphere*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993; T Skocpol and MP Fiorina, *Civic Engagement in American Democracy*, Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1999; IM Young, ‘State, Civil Society, and Social Justice’ in I Shapiro and C Hacker-Cordón (eds), *Democracy’s Value*, New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999.

10. K Tester, personal communication, Melbourne, 4th August, 2004.

11. K Tester, *Civil Society*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p 125.

12. NL Rosenblum and RC Post, *Civil Society and Government*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002, p 1.

13. M Recio et al., ‘Sociedad Civil en los 90: el debate Cubano’, *Temas* (16-17), 1999, pp 155-175; see also H Azcuy Henríquez, ‘Estado y Sociedad Civil en Cuba’, *Temas*, 4, 1995, pp 105-110; H Dilla, ‘Civil Society’, in A Chomsky, B Carr and PM Smorkaloff (eds), *The Cuba Reader: History, Culture, Politics*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2002, pp 650-659.

Ariel Armony has argued, the ways that power relations operate in Cuba are determined largely by the question of how the Cuban State relates to civil society; that is:

...whether civil society in Cuba should be construed as being within or outside the State. This problem is not merely theoretical or terminological: this conundrum has vital implications for the organizing of hegemony in Cuba...It is important to ask, what are the tactical advantages of the phrase “civil society” in Cuban discourse? What is the legitimacy that actors can gain from “being part” of civil society?¹⁴

Actors ranging from community organizations to Cuban state institutions clearly have much to gain from “being part” of civil society, not least the capacity to attract the recognition and funds of foreign development agencies. Clearly the Cuban Government maintains significant control over the channels and destinations of such funding, with the aim of directing its flow to organizations that are administratively and ideologically connected to the State. As a result, the strategic initiatives of development agencies and the donors who finance them, which are usually phrased in terms of strengthening civil society and building democracy, are often implemented with much more involvement of the Cuban State than officially acknowledged.¹⁵ The U.S. State Department has attempted to minimize this possibility by requiring U.S. NGOs to demonstrate the independence of their Cuban counterparts when they apply for a license to operate in Cuba. This requirement, which views Cuban civil society as “oppositional” to state interests, is embodied in the Cuban Democracy Act (Track II policy), which seeks to “reach around” the Castro Government to support the growth of independent organizations.¹⁶

Guarding against the empowerment of domestic oppositional organizations is a key factor influencing the Cuban State’s insistence on authority in development planning. As Alfonso Quiroz puts it, “attempts to enhance the autonomy of non-governmental associations in Cuba have been regarded as suspicious and possibly contributing to foreign efforts to undermine the socialist character of the Cuban system.”¹⁷ Raúl Castro articulated this concern in a 1996 speech to the Central Committee of the Cuban Communist Party, when, as Joseph Scarpaci et al. write,

14. A Armony, ‘Civil Society in Cuba: A Conceptual Approach’, in ME Crahan (ed), *Religion, Culture, and Society: The Case of Cuba*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003, pp 22, 25.

15. M Cisneros, *Respectful Engagement: Cuban NGO Cooperation with Latin America, Europe, and Canada*, Philadelphia: The American Friends Service Committee International Division, 1996, pp 7-8, 18.

16. E González and RA Nuccio, *Conference Proceedings: The RAND Forum on Cuba*, Washington, D.C.:RAND, 1999, p 33.

17. A Quiroz, ‘The Evolution of Laws Regulating Associations and Civil Society in Cuba’, in ME Crahan (ed), *Religion, Culture, and Society: The Case of Cuba*, Washington, D.C.: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2003, p 56.

He emphasized that the Cuban concept of civil society is not the same as that in the United States, and he claimed that some foreign NGOs in Cuba, “attempt to undermine the economic, political and social system freely chosen by [the Cuban] people...[their] only aim is to enslave [Cuba].”¹⁸

Nevertheless, the support of foreign NGOs has clearly functioned to ease the State’s budgetary commitments particularly in the area of social service delivery. It is worth noting that some of the most effective community projects in the past decade have resulted from the work of religious congregations, both Christian and Afro-Cuban, often in collaboration with decentralized state institutions. The organization CARITAS, for example, in conjunction with the U.S.-based Catholic Relief Services, invested more than U.S. \$10 million into Cuban “living parishes” between 1993 and 1997, the years most severely affected by the economic crisis.¹⁹ CARITAS officer Rolando Suárez Cobain explains that, “because of shortages of medicine, for example, people in the parishes can identify their neighbors who need something like insulin, and we can try to get it to them”²⁰ Committed to the wellbeing of their congregations, over Christian 54 organizations and community centers had emerged in Cuba by 1997, with over 50,000 members.²¹

The emergence of organizations like the Centro Católico de Formación Cívico-Religiosa (Catholic Center for Civic-Religious Education), the Equipo Promotor para la Participación Social del Laico (Team for the Promotion of Lay Social Participation), and the Comisión Justicia y Paz (Commission for Justice and Peace) represents a new Catholic appetite for social engagement. By 1998 the Cuban Catholic church was operating 20 childcare centers, 21 retirement homes, 5 hospitals, and numerous free medicine dispensaries.²² The Church’s public voice has gained further tenor through the circulation of new pamphlets and journals (currently over 20), plus the revival of old ones like the *Vida Cristiana*. Meanwhile, the multi-denominational Christian Centro Memorial Dr. Martin Luther King, supported by the U.S. based Pastors for Peace, has developed a public street lighting project in collaboration with the government’s electricity provider in the Popular Council of Los Pocitos, and worked closely on social programs with the Psychiatric Hospital of Havana.

18. JL Scarpaci, R Segre and M Coyula, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2002, p 165.

19. L Chauvin, “Cuba Opens its Doors to Greater Church Life and Charity Services”, *National Catholic Reporter* 33(18), 1997, p 10.

20. L Chauvin, 1997, *op cit.*, p 10.

21. JM Wall, “Diplomatic Dance: Cuba’s Religion Factor”, *Christian Century* 114(19), 1997, p 579.

22. R Orozco and N Bolívar, *Cuba Santa: Comunistas, Santeros Y Cristianos en la Isla de Fidel Castro*, Madrid: El País, 1998, p 460.

Perhaps no organization has been more active than the Centro Cristiano de Reflexión y Diálogo (Christian Center for Reflection and Dialogue). Founded in 1991 by the Presbyterian pastor Raymundo García Franco, the Centro has begun to deliver basic social services in the city of Cárdenas, assuming a large share of previously state-administered responsibilities (Margaret Crahan, personal communication May 12, 2003). With funds from religious institutions in the United States, Canada, Germany, and Spain, the Centro repairs public buildings, supplies state schools, hospitals, and nursing homes with fresh agricultural produce, and runs environmental care programs with newly purchased trucks and other heavy equipment.²³

Despite its considerable social impact, García Franco is careful to point out that, “Our organization is a modest resource for the nation and our people that in no way competes with or substitutes for the State...we respect the political authority of the government.”²⁴ Nevertheless, researchers at Havana’s Centro de Investigaciones Psicológicas y Sociológicas (Center for Psychological and Sociological Research, CIPS) detect a changing of the guard in the area of social service delivery, characterized by “religious organizations assuming roles and functions, particularly in basic services to the population, at a time when state social institutions cannot deliver them as they used to given the real limitations of the period”²⁵ Welfare activities, they write, have facilitated Christian evangelical efforts:

- The distribution of medicine and other products, such as prizes for children’s and young people’s activities, produces a kind of attraction in participating communities at the grassroots, which could be characterized as the “japonización [disinfecting] of evangelization.”²⁶
- To the extent that church related welfare programs respond to local demands, they serve to ease some of the pressure on the State to fund social services at the grassroots. It is difficult not to connect these kinds of projects with recent state tolerance for religious expression in Cuba. As I have discussed elsewhere,²⁷ Afro-Cuban religious communities have also emerged as key participants in collaborative state/non-state welfare projects in the past decade, though their capacity to form official international linkages with donors is currently less developed than that of their Christian counterparts.

The participation of religious groups in officially sanctioned collaborative projects indicates the gradual emergence and diversification of civil society in Cuba. This process is of great interest to international NGOs, most of

23. R García Franco, ‘La Participación de los Religiosos Cubanos en la Vida Social del País’, *Transcript of La Mesa Redonda*, 25th December 2000, published by Juventud Rebelde, 2000, p 6.

24. R García Franco, 2000, *op cit.*, p 6-7.

25. A Del Rey Roa and Y Castañeda Mache, ‘El Reavivamiento Religioso en Cuba’, *Temas* 31, 2002, p 99.

26. A Del Rey Roa, and Y Castañeda Mache, 2002, *op cit.*, p 99.

27. AH Hearn, “Afro-Cuban Religions and Social Welfare: Consequences of Commercial Development in Havana,” *Human Organization* 63(1), 2004, pp 78-87.

which identify the fortification of civil society as a central development objective. The controversy surrounding collaboration with the Cuban Government as a means to accomplishing this goal is reflected in the range of approaches taken by foreign donors. At one extreme are organizations like the Ford Foundation, which according to one of its program officers, complies with U.S. State Department regulations by maintaining strict distance from Cuban State institutions:

- Ever since the Ford Foundation was accused of funding the 1960 Kennedy election campaign, we've been required to prove that our grantees satisfy a set of "due diligence" regulations. In Cuba this requirement is applied with extra care because we have to make sure that partner organizations are independent from the State. This affects the kinds of projects we can fund... One recent project was to provide resources for a female symphony orchestra in Santiago de Cuba.
- Some educational and humanitarian aid agencies are less constrained in choosing who they work with. The organization Global Exchange, for example, gives a lot of autonomy to its on-site employees, who have pioneered a form of close person-to-person contact and developed really strong grassroots relationships. Global Exchange does this because technically it is a private organization with an educational and humanitarian mission. But I think its enthusiasm for building relationships with Cuban institutions comes at the expense of really investigating the backgrounds of those institutions. In other words, Global Exchange has no "due diligence" regulations. As a commercial enterprise, it only seeks to satisfy the requirements of its customers.²⁸

Governed by "due diligence" regulations, the Ford Foundation is clearly not at liberty to develop collaborative projects with Cuban state institutions. Global Exchange, on the other hand, works with governments—socialist or otherwise—around the world to promote grassroots development, community activism, and cross-cultural understanding through face to face contact, despite a history of legal difficulties with the U.S. State Department. The director of the Global Exchange Cuba Program described the organization's links with Cuban state institutions in terms of respect for the country's political sovereignty:

We bring ordinary U.S. citizens to Cuba to show them the reality behind all the U.S. media propaganda, and we always conduct these "reality tours" through Cuban host institutions. Many of our groups arrive at hospitals and other locations with backpacks full of antibiotics and want to be directly involved in the donation; to see with their own eyes the delivery of goods. We tell our customers to ask their Cuban chaperone about this before handing things over, because this kind of direct giving can aggravate inequalities and encourage a sort of dependence. That's why the Cuban government calls the Economic Crisis a cancer, for which tourism is the chemotherapy: it can work as a short-term cure, they say, if it doesn't kill us!²⁹

28. Interview with author, New York, 15th May, 2003.

29. Interview with author, San Francisco, 25th April, 2003.

While Global Exchange treads a middle ground between direct community engagement and collaboration with the Cuban State, the eleven United Nations bodies operating in Cuba represent the most explicit form of cooperation with Cuban authorities. The director of the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) in Cuba spoke of the benefits and limitations of this relationship:

- We always work through the Ministry of Foreign Investment and Economic Collaboration [MINVEC], which operates very effectively as a coordinator of foreign donors and investors. It can do this precisely because it has knowledge of all the foreign initiatives in Cuba. And so it directs funds to the projects that need them most. Following MINVEC's instructions, we turn over resources to a designated ministry, be it health, education, environment, or whatever, and then the project is out of our hands. So we never deal directly with the population or community groups. If I went, for example, to a hospital as a UN representative to assess its needs or to talk about a donation then I'd get into serious trouble with MINVEC.³⁰
- The testimonies of these three development workers indicate intense contradictions underlying international approaches to engagement with Cuba. Case studies of two projects undertaken by the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) show how these contradictions surfaced in distinct approaches to promoting community empowerment and commercial growth, ultimately reflecting alternative political interpretations of "civil society" and "sustainability."

Case 1: The Politics of Plant Life

In the four years following the withdrawal of Soviet support, total economic activity in Cuba was reduced by 40 percent, so that by the mid 1990s Havana residents were consuming only 20 percent of the FAO's recommended vegetable intake.³¹ From 1993 until 2001 the ACF developed a series of programs to help compensate for these losses in inner city Havana through the dissemination of a horticultural technique called permaculture. Originally developed in the early 1970s by Tasmanians Bill Mollison and David Holmgren,³² permaculture integrates the cultivation of nutritional and medicinal plants in such a way that diverse organisms benefit each other as they grow. Shade dwelling plants are grown beneath taller plants, whose seeds and shade-giving leaves fall to the ground in autumn. These are consumed by free-range chickens, which fertilize the soil for a productive harvest the next year. The result is ordered chaos: plants of remarkable diversity planted not in regimented rows but in seemingly arbitrary—though carefully planned—positions relative to each other. The technique's use of small spaces is well suited to the cramped conditions of urban Havana, and the Cuban Government has

30. Interview with author, Havana, 25th February, 2002.

31. AJ Jatar-Haussmann, *The Cuban Way*, West Hartford: Kumarian Press, 1999, pp xv, 38; Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF), *AusAID/NGO Cooperation Program: Activity Proposal*, Melbourne: ACF 2000, p 5.

32. M Caridad Cruz, *Educación Sobre Permacultura en la Ciudad de La Habana*, La Habana: Fundación de la Naturaleza y el Hombre, 1997, p 2.

supported the project by offering open tracts of public land free of charge to anyone willing to cultivate them.

The ACF's Cuba Project coordinator, Adam Tiller, remarked that the symbiosis of organisms in the permaculture model metaphorically reflects the ACF's political philosophy: just as the plants flourish through their natural interdependence, grassroots community groups are most effective in addressing local needs when they are allowed to collaborate on neighborhood welfare projects without being overly regulated by the State.³³ One Cuban neighborhood organization that shared the ACF's community focus was the Proyecto Comunitario de Conservación de Alimentos, Condimentos, y Plantas Medicinales (Community Project for the Conservation of Foods, Condiments, and Medicinal Plants, or PCCA). Based in the Havana municipality of Marianao, the center had worked through neighborhood CDRs (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution) since 1996 to conduct public workshops on the benefits of home-made medicine and inexpensive methods of food preservation.³⁴ The center's commitment to community welfare was reflected in its publicity brochure, which stated that it, "does not commercialize the products that it creates" and that it, "operates without monetary ambitions and without charging for its training and educational programs."³⁵

FIGURE 15-1. Residents of Marianao at work in the PCCA kitchen



33. Interview with author, Melbourne, 23rd September, 2000.

34. The CDRs are organized at a street-by-street level, each square block of four streets forming a larger administrative unit or *manzana*. A CDR's primary responsibility is to ensure compliance with the law at the neighbourhood scale, ideally resolving problems without involving higher authorities or the police. CDR representatives are elected in their neighbourhoods and *manzana* presidents usually maintain communication with the delegates of their local government and other locally relevant organisations, such as the Federation of Cuban Women (*Federación de Mujeres Cubanas*, or FMC).

35. Proyecto Comunitario de Conservación de Alimentos (PCCA), *Condimentos y Plantas Medicinales*, La Habana: PCCA, 2000.

Impressed by this commitment the ACF began to raise money in Australia to donate to the PCCA, seeking support from private donors and from the Australian Government's Agency for International Development, AusAID. At the same time the ACF began to build a relationship with its officially designated Cuban partner organization for the project, the Instituto Cubano de Amistad con los Pueblos (Cuban Institute for Popular Friendship, or ICAP).

ICAP has historically been the Castro Government's primary mechanism for handling international donations. Having secured foreign funds, ICAP takes sole responsibility for assessing development priorities and designing projects. In this way it insulates citizens from direct foreign contact by positioning itself as the sole intermediary between donating agencies and target communities. Many donor organizations are content with this arrangement because it relieves them of complicated tasks like analyzing project budgets and evaluating reports of project outcomes in Spanish. ICAP, they feel, can do this more effectively. Furthermore, most Cuban solidarity and friendship groups around the world adopt this form of support as an expression of respect for Cuba's national sovereignty.

While ICAP offers a relatively simple mechanism for foreign donors to support Cuban development projects, it has drawn criticism from inside and outside Cuba. Concerns have been raised about ICAP's exclusion of community input in its centrally planned projects, but even sharper criticism has focused on ICAP's lack of transparency. Prior to 1989 ICAP's ambassadorial activities earned it great national prestige, along with a generous budget allocation. The economic crisis precipitated ICAP's fall from grace both in terms of its capacity to finance domestic projects and its ability to keep pace with the changing expectations of international development institutions. According to a Norwegian NGO officer:

ICAP is more concerned with politics than development, and it's just not up to speed on the rules of neoliberal cooperation. For example, it has no transparency at all. You can't let anything go unspoken with ICAP, so you have to say, "it is a requirement of our funders that every dollar is accounted for."³⁶

An inside perspective on this problem was offered by a woman employed by ICAP in the mid 1990s, the most austere years of the economic crisis:

Listen, at ICAP we used to take whatever came through the door: pens, books, calculators, clothes. I got this sweater from there. I used to bring books and stationary home and send my daughter out to sell them. I think the Italians sent us these things to forward to other ICAP offices and then on to schools in the countryside. It wasn't a problem when my boss found out because she was worst of all: she took more than anyone; she was just trying

36. Interview with author, Havana, 17th March 2002.

to feed her family. Life has become a bit easier since then and now ICAP is more careful...those were very difficult years.³⁷

Notwithstanding its concerns about ICAP, the ACF secured funds from AusAID with a proposal that emphasized the “strengthening [of] civil society,” “sustainable development” and “community participation,” while describing ICAP’s role in the project as a “funds transfer agency.” In an interview three years after the fact Adam Tiller noted that at the time his primary concern in dealing with ICAP was to “elicit transparency,” which he attempted to do in letters and emails to ICAP like the following:

The project process is quite straight-forward and uncomplicated...we are very pleased that ICAP is able to play its role in this project, as we believe that ICAP brings another level of accountability and legitimacy to the international assistance process, indicated by its flawless track record of annual financial and organizational arrangements over the last 15 years or so. We also appreciate that this decade ICAP has established itself in a significant role as a coordinating international network and clearinghouse for [the] setting up and funding of aid and development projects in Cuba.³⁸

But for ICAP this was not business as usual: it was accustomed to receiving donations and distributing them as it saw fit, and not accustomed to acting as a “funds transfer agency” for a specific project. Nevertheless, after some months of negotiation an ACF officer based in Havana sent an email to Melbourne: “The money can now be sent, and should be as quickly as possible, to the account of ICAP, who will pass it on to the PCCA.”³⁹ The project money was divided into two installments, the first of which, AUD \$12,000, was sent to ICAP on 23rd May, 2000. This was where the problems began.

ICAP never acknowledged receipt of any funds, and despite the efforts of the ACF field officer and PCCA staff, the situation remained unresolved for over two months. Finally, on the 1st August, the ACF attempted to reverse the money transfer, but was unsuccessful. Later that month, the director of ICAP’s Australia and Asia Division visited Melbourne and Sydney to work with the Cuban Olympic team and to promote ICAP to Australian donors. In a meeting with an ACF officer she noted that banking problems are common, and that a more reliable method of sending money would be to give her cash to carry on her person. A different Australian donor, she explained, had recently given her AUD \$10,000 for her to take in her suitcase. “I told [her],” said the ACF officer, “that I didn’t think that this was appropriate for the ACF’s situation!”⁴⁰ The missing funds were finally recovered and it was

37. Personal communication, Havana, 26th February, 2002.

38. Email to ICAP, 23rd September, 1999.

39. Email to ACF, 24th April, 2000.

40. Email to ACF, 9th September, 2000.

decided that the project money should be sent as bank drafts with ACF staff visiting Cuba on three separate occasions.

Prolonged negotiations with ICAP about the handling of the funds resulted in a delay of almost two years before the first two instalments arrived in the hands of the PCCA community project, and this was only possible by passing the money through a special branch of ICAP that supervised its spending. I visited the PCCA community center in March 2002, by which time the third instalment had still not arrived. Its director told me her understanding of the situation:

To be honest we're not looking for any financial support from foreign NGOs. What we're doing is already working fine. Everything we do has its base right here in the neighborhood, and from here the project has expanded right across Cuba. Too much collaboration with foreign donors, NGOs, and tourists can damage our community focus. Dealing with foreign agencies requires a huge amount of time and energy, and detracts from our community work.

Over six months ago we were supposed to receive a [U.S.] \$6,000 donation from the ACF, with which we were going to buy a computer and some books for the center. For some reason the ACF never sent us the money. I'm sure it has to do with bureaucracy at some high level of administration, but really no one knows exactly what happened. So the end result was a loss of valuable time and energy, which we could have used much better here in our community.

We don't refuse these kinds of donations, but nor do we ask for them...The mass organizations like the FMC and the CDRs, and the Ministry of Agriculture all help us by printing our pamphlets and distributing them around the country, so it's natural for us to work with the State. Why try to invent a new set of relations and networks when we can use those already in place?⁴¹

In a context where state organizations like the Federación de Mujeres Cubanas (Federation of Cuban Women, or FMC) and CDRs provide the supporting services necessary for the functioning of the PCCA and the dissemination of its educational materials, its director did not appear to be concerned about strengthening civil society and reforming modes of community participation. By contrast, ICAP was extremely concerned about protecting state authority, particularly its own role as the supreme intermediary of international relations: "Everything," it wrote, "should be sent through ICAP, both ways."⁴² As the ACF on-site officer explained, ICAP was neither accustomed nor content to act in the capacity of a "funds transfer agency:"

41. Interview with author, Havana, 8th March, 2002.

42. ICAP fax to ACF, 16th July, 2000.

ICAP got very upset that the ACF was not corresponding enough with them. What was actually happening was that the ACF was trying to work directly with the PCCA. But ICAP felt that it should be able to use the funds according to its own priorities.⁴³

ICAP was not accustomed to dealing with the requirements of the ACF, particularly when these involved simply passing on donations to a community group. Behind this methodological difference was the underlying conceptual disjuncture of Cuban and Australian approaches to “building civil society,” which found practical expression in delayed financial transactions and confusion on the ground about the workings of “bureaucracy at some high level.” The ambiguity of “civil society” enabled the ACF to claim in its project renewal proposals that, in line with AusAID strategic goals, civil society (whatever its finer interpretations) was indeed being “strengthened” through community empowerment and participatory project design.⁴⁴ Like thousands of development initiatives in contemporary Cuba, foreign and Cuban collaborators emerged having promoted their own distinct interpretations of the key reference terms. The situation resembles recent decentralized development initiatives in Old Havana that I have discussed elsewhere,⁴⁵ where the collaboration of state development agencies and Afro-Cuban religious communities has resulted in unifying projects that ostensibly address common goals, and yet allow actors to derive very different—even contradictory—benefits, ranging from personal commercial gain to broader community consolidation. Carmelo Mesa-Lago has argued that the reconciliation of commercial and community interests has become a key challenge for Cuban authorities,⁴⁶ and in this light a second case study of an ACF project is instructive. As with the case above, distinct Cuban and foreign objectives were masked behind the veil of discursive consensus, built this time on the mutual goal of “sustainable development.”

Case 2: Se Puede: “It can be done”

Despite their often conflicting visions of State-civil society relations, one goal that most governments and development NGOs have increasingly in common is the building of political legitimacy through commercial effectiveness and management strategies adopted from the corporate sector.⁴⁷ For

43. Interview with author, Havana, 24th March, 2002.

44. ACF, *AusAID/NGO Cooperation Program: Activity Proposal, Year 2*, pp 4, 15.

45. See AH Hearn, 2004, *op cit*.

46. C Mesa-Lago, *Market, Socialist, and Mixed Economies - Comparative Policy and Performance: Chile, Cuba, and Costa Rica*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2000, pp 289-290, 321-322.

47. D Salskov-Iversen, HK Hansen and S Bislev, ‘Governmentality, Globalization, and Local Practice: Transformations of a Hegemonic Discourse’, *Alternatives* 25(2), 2000, pp 183-222.

Marx, capitalist expansion resulted not only from an ability to incorporate new technology or even to generate income through trade, but also from a capacity to create new commodities out of goods and services that were previously not for sale.⁴⁸ Contemporary development financing institutions promote this entrepreneurial spirit by emphasizing the need for transparency and democratic governance not as ends in themselves but as means to marketisation and commercial competitiveness.⁴⁹ This has prompted some researchers to argue that even when the commercialization of services is not an explicit operational goal, NGOs in the 1990s have implicated themselves in a “new colonialism” that mystifies processes of social marginalization through a rhetoric of global economic integration and sustainability.⁵⁰ While global socio-economic inequalities have been legitimized and even exacerbated through privatization schemes supported by Northern corporations and neoliberal governments through affiliated NGOs, a dire need for hard currency has made the Cuban Government itself a key proponent of commercialization. A second scenario involving the ACF shows how the commercialization of community services can have social costs, but also that these costs have become a generally accepted consequence of “sustainability” in a market-driven world.

From 1994 until the ACF’s withdrawal from Cuba in 2001, its principal official partner organization was the Fundación de la Naturaleza y el Hombre (Foundation for Nature and Mankind, or FNH). According to an FNH publication, the organization is “a civil, non-governmental, cultural and scientific institution dedicated to researching and promoting environmental programs and projects, in particular those that relate to society and culture.”⁵¹ Like other Cuban NGOs, the FNH is in fact closely linked to a central state ministry, in this case the Ministry of Agriculture. One of the ACF’s primary projects with the FNH was the publication and circulation of a short bi-monthly magazine called *Se Puede* (“One Can,” or “It Can [be done]”). Financed by the ACF with a grant from AusAID, the first seven issues were dedicated to practical matters like popular recipes, home medicinal remedies, and permaculture gardening techniques. Articles were written by a combination of FNH specialists and community permaculture activists, and since it was sold at 5 pesos (about U.S. 20 cents), it circulated widely among Havana gardeners, reaching an estimated 50,000 people in 1997.⁵² By encouraging readers

48. K Marx, *Capital*, Middlesex, England: Penguin Books, 1981: 445-448.

49. World Bank, *Governance and Development*, Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 1993; Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), *Participatory Development and Good Governance*, Paris: OECD, 1995, pp 13-15.

50. J Petras, ‘NGOs: In the Service of Imperialism’, *Journal of Contemporary Asia*, 29(4), 1999, p 434.

51. M Caridad Cruz, 1997, *op cit.*, p 4.

52. M Caridad Cruz, 1997, *op cit.*, p 3.

to grow their own gardens the magazine's populist orientation was central to the ACF's strategy for making permaculture self-sustaining in Havana, in line with AusAID project guidelines.

FIGURE 15-2. The front cover of an early issue of *Se Puede*, which focused on natural medicinal remedies



Also in the interest of project sustainability, the FNH gradually assumed editorial authority as *Se Puede*'s readership grew. But the FNH had always been more interested in the philosophical implications of environmental awareness than the technical details of planting gardens; that is, it saw its mission as ideological: from “the awakening of citizens to the promotion of values and principles...the defense of life, and not only from the biological point of view but also the psychological, socio-cultural, economic and political.”⁵³ This orientation surfaced in *Se Puede* when the FNH made its first executive editorial decision: to start replacing the magazine's practical content with naturalist poetry by the FNH's deceased founder (and close friend of Fidel Castro), Antonio Núñez Jiménez. Around the same time the new editorial committee unveiled its strategy for making *Se Puede* self-sustaining: “When the [next issue of] the magazine is finished, we will proceed to its dis-

53. Fundación de la Naturaleza y el Hombre (FNH), ‘Crecimiento Económico y del Consumo con Criterios Sustentables’, *Medio Ambiente y Consumo*, 2(9), 1997, p 2.

tribution and commercialization by the company Copretel. Once this is done the magazine will be available to anyone who is interested...[it] has the potential to reach 150,000 readers."⁵⁴ Along with a 300% increase in the magazine's price, these editorial innovations did not please the ACF, whose 1998 progress report to AusAID noted that:

The focus of the magazine [has been] altered from that originally conceived by Cuban and ACF staff in 1994. Articles with a general environmental theme have been introduced, in addition to the articles on practical food and household solutions. The committee is also promoting a more intellectual/scientific and commercial presentation, with the aim of increasing its economic viability, including international sales to earn scarce foreign currency income. These changes, however, may be compromising the original core practical, educational and populist aims of the magazine.⁵⁵

Pressure from the ACF eventually led the FNH to reintroduce community-authored content in the magazine, though this amounted to little more than a "letters to the editor" page. According to the ACF Cuba Project Director, Adam Tiller, the situation reflected a fundamental paradox of sustainable development:

It's like Cronus and Zeus. At some point you have to respect the autonomy of the thing you helped create. We put years of work into *Se Puede*, but ultimately it's the FNH's project, and it's important that we don't try to impose our priorities on the FNH. One of our goals from the beginning was to help the FNH to develop sustainable projects...for better or for worse we accomplished that goal.⁵⁶

The evolution of *Se Puede* suggests that sustainability and commercialization have become kindred ambitions in the global era. Indeed, the future of the Cuban State depends very much on how successfully it re-links itself with the currents of international trade, an objective made no simpler by the U.S. trade embargo and its fortification in the 1996 Helms-Burton bill.⁵⁷ The FNH's commercialization of *Se Puede* was an attempt to introduce a Cuban commodity to the world market: a survival strategy deemed necessary regardless of how much it deviated from the wishes of its foreign benefactor. Ultimately the magazine was a collaborative project underwritten by the

54. M Caridad Cruz, *Educación Sobre Permacultura en la Ciudad de La Habana*, pp 37, 9.

55. ACF, *AusAID NGO Environmental Initiative: Annual Project Report, Year 1, July 1996-December 1997*, Melbourne: ACF, 1998, p 2.

56. Interview with author, Melbourne, 15th May, 2000.

57. The Helms-Burton Bill, signed in December 1996, strengthens key aspects of the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act by prohibiting international corporations and governments that trade with Cuba from trading with the U.S. Specifically, it "urges the President to take steps to apply sanctions described by [the Cuban Democracy] Act against countries assisting Cuba" (quoted in M Cisneros, 1996, *op cit.*, p 50).

shared ambition of sustainability, though the meaning of the term ranged from self-sufficiency to profit maximization according to the interpretations and objectives of the collaborating parties. As in the previous example, this semantic flexibility resulted in a functioning alliance that adhered to key project reference terms while allowing participants to pursue distinct interpretations of those terms. The achievement of sustainability across a range of projects resulted in the ACF's withdrawal from Cuba late in 2001. By that time permaculture "skills transfer" programs had been effective enough for the FNH to run its own training course. According to the ACF on-site officer, her three years in Cuba had been a successful, though uphill battle. She felt that the ACF's basic objectives had been accomplished, even though there was still much to be done in the area of promoting dialogue and interdependence between community groups. She had just returned from a month of researching organic farms in the Western province of Pinar del Rio, and while she was away some local project trainees had looked after her permaculture garden. As we sat there chatting on a bench I was struck by the diverse colors of the fruit bushes, medicinal plants, and vegetable patches, which her new recruits had neatly arranged, to her dismay, into perfect rows and columns.

Conclusion

The case studies suggest that emerging collaborative linkages between international NGOs and the Cuban State are often forged through deceptively consensual development discourse, and that this has facilitated the latter's efforts to conserve political authority. When the ACF sought to "strengthen civil society" by financially supporting a grassroots community organization, ICAP's mediation of the relationship ensured that the flow of resources remained firmly under state control. The financial confusion resulting from this level of regulation proved frustrating to the ACF, though ultimately it reflected an alternative interpretation of civil society that endorses state stewardship over community interests, democratic governance, and national sovereignty.⁵⁸ The project's eventual settlement of a mutually acceptable NGO-State-community relationship resulted from an integration of these political philosophies behind the practical goal of supporting the PCCA community center, while the finer political details of "civil society" were never openly fleshed out.

The precise meaning of "sustainable" development in the second case study was no less obscure. The ACF's working definition of the term was based on generating local interest in permaculture training while its partner organization, the FNH, adopted a more commercial interpretation. The Se

58. M Harnecker, 'Democracia y Socialismo', *Temas* 16/17, 1999, p 120.

Puede project was ultimately forced to subordinate the interests of its target community to the pursuit of economic sustainability, a compromise that has emerged over the past decade as a key national challenge with Cuba's gradual adoption of market-driven development strategies. While Cuba's gradual re-integration into the global economy raises questions about the impact of commercial expansion on community welfare, it is clear that the Cuban State remains determined to defend national sovereignty through whatever resources become available, be they material, legal, or linguistic.

