



Grassroots Organisations - is transformation eradicating their roots?

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It is undisputable that civil society actors are playing an increasing role in the shaping of urban policies in local co-operations. Also Grassroots, respectively Community-Based Organisations, which are synonymous terms, have learnt to communicate on many levels. This lowest organisational level between people that is managed by its members themselves is particularly effective when several groups are organised in networks and coalitions that act on a wider scale. In Latin America, however, the scope of grassroots activities is limited. There are networks, but these are, with a few exceptions, not comparable to the networks active on other continents, as e. g. some people's federations in Asia.

Though Community-Based Organisations (CBOs) are biased to their local context, decision-makers increasingly recognise their importance and co-operate with them. This new context establishes a new role for grassroots organisations in society and also implicates alterations in their character and objectives. The shift is linked to the complex transformation of urban and national politics. If we discuss today the limits and potentials of CBOs, we have not only to consider the transformation of their context, but furthermore the resulting threats for the identity of the grassroots movements themselves.

Today participative decision-making processes are practised formally in most countries of Latin America, allowing also new forms of interaction between state, economy and civil society. People-oriented administrations and participatory budgets are promoted by national governments. Though the civil society now participates actively in the kind of politics they were demanding for a long time, their role in this setting has changed significantly. I refer here especially to CBOs in the larger cities of Mexico and Argentina, and partly in Brazil. However, I believe that some of my findings are common phenomenon in most Latin-American cities.

The sea change in the state–society relations is reflected in the course of urban politics and hallmarked by the responsibilities that Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) take in the new co-operations and coalitions. The historic role of pressure groups converted into the role of a partner. Today, “Grassroots Organisation” is one of the roles within the ensemble of development actors in most cities. And if we already use drama as a metaphor: the script and specific roles in urban development are written by the urban stakeholders during the act, although some attitudes are determined beforehand. In other words, GROs can, but must not be efficient collaborators, and if they are, they might not be in the next project. Though there

is an agreed reading of the term “grassroots organisations”, there is still little knowledge about their long-term performance in development projects. Some of their limits are known, as they are bounded by a reduced scope of action, maybe biased to their local setting, etc.

But the remaining questions are manifold: questions of legitimacy, about the new areas of their activities and how they approach them, the reason for their social commitment and how they transform that into action. If we come to speak about the specific role of Grassroots Organisations (GROs), it is imperative to describe them in their context and history.

CSOs and especially membership organisations are commonly motivated by a perceived need for action. Thus it can be helpful to roughly divide the different approaches and backgrounds of GROs from their point of departure. Generally, one can distinguish between three different groups within the sphere of grassroots organisations. These are:

1. Traditional organisations (community-focused)
2. Political organisations (with social concerns about society)
3. Local-development organisations (focussed on one or a few specific goals)

The first group might have some religious motivation or a common ethnical background. “Traditional” does not refer necessarily to the scope of their work, but to their organisational setting (traditional leadership, culturally bounded groups and alike) and their origins in the community. These organisations operate locally and membership oriented.

The second group of organisations is linked to social movements, old and new ones, and is defined by its political orientation. CSOs, and among them Grassroots Organisations, do stand outside party politics, as parties in democratic countries are represented in parliament and therefore form part of governmental structures, even when being in the opposition. However, political processes often involve GROs in party-political campaigning, and sometimes the line is hard to draw. We will see later, that it is nonetheless crucial to define civil-society movements as a third power and counter weight to the public sector and to government. Political organisations in Civil Society have a wider focus that goes beyond the local level and though they might work merely in one community, they link with other groups in order to work on social issues and on the improvement of the position of their class or population stratum.

Finally, the group of local-development organisations aims at the improvement of the conditions of a specific target group that is linked to the organisation’s members. These associations often receive support by governmental or non-governmental development agencies and sometimes are even founded with external support. They work for example as neighbourhood committees that represent the affected population and collaborate directly with a project or a programme for the implementation of measures. These activities include survey, organisation of self-help, monitoring and alike. They focus their work on their immediate surroundings: streets and households of the neighbourhood.

The given differentiation between traditional, political and local-developmental organisations is no strict division. Any organisation can pass through all of the phases during its institutional history or can fulfil the different criteria at the same time.

In Latin American cities, grassroots organisations have been predominantly political. They were related to movements that emerged out of social injustice and the neglect of the people’s needs by the governments. Groups and organisations in the cities gathered in urban movements such as the MUP (*Movimiento Urbano Popular*) in Mexico City or more recently the *Asambleas* in Buenos Aires.

The social injustice caused radical movements, radical both in the modern sense as well as in the original sense of the word *radic alis*: from the roots. The social movements in the 70s

and 80s were mainly organised through independent small groups. They opposed the political exclusion of the people that were oppressed by the governing political and patronist classes in power. Therefore, in Latin America, social struggles were always “popular”, i. e. in the name of the poor population that often represents the nation’s majority.

The ban from political participation and decision-making was perceived as the principal obstacle for the development of the affected population, much more than its economic exclusion. In rebellion to the established system, political GROs participated in social movements that are defined by generations, shortly described in the following paragraphs.

Old social movements, that include labour movements and trade unions but also housing cooperatives and alike, have more material group interests, their origins were more class-conflict oriented but they were then incorporated in the fordistic social-welfare state.

New Social Movements (NSMs) act more progressively and focus on specific themes (such as gender, environment, human rights etc.). The citizen movements that emerged since the 60s are generally associated to these issue-based movements.

Another distinction of social movements is norm-oriented and should at least be mentioned: There are social movements directed to the creation of new social order; and others directed to the defence of existing social order (‘counter-movements’). Both are anti-system and both constitute themselves to claim social justice, as a reaction to a perceived inequality in society.

These explanations are necessary to classify GROs in the complex setting of social movements: Though grassroots organisations integrate in their agendas many of the themes that are typical for NSMs, they also preserve a materialist approach demanding access to services, the improvement of their living conditions, social security etc. And political grassroots organisations are anti-system, too. They were new-social-order oriented during the times of dictatorship but some became defenders of the existing social order when the social paradigms changed, as e. g. during the Menem Era in Argentina.

That makes most of the GROs hybrids, as they combine different approaches in their numerous tasks. This social-political background is of crucial importance to understand grassroots organisations still today. Though it is often not easy to notice, some of their history prevails in the present. Clear signs of the historical imprints are their subliminal resistance and distrust to their public counterparts, their political discourse and their often archaic internal structures.

However, since the late 80s GROs were also struggling to be recognized and accepted as partners in local development, both by local public institutions as well as by the international donor community. They are today, at least in the big cities in Latin America, widely accepted and there are impressive records of cooperation projects done with GROs.

But now the boot is on the other foot. Being partners to governmental agencies or foreign donor organisations that bring funds and operate budgets, they have undergone significant changes. We witnessed the professionalisation of Development NGOs in the 80s and 90s which belonged to the first sphere of civil society to be integrated as a collaborator in governmental projects. NGOs also involved some GROs by means of intermediation, but only as “second-class” civil society, as some of the GROs complained. NGOs, as non-membership, professionalized small organisations that work in a variety of social projects and also in urban development, have a traditional and long-lasting relationship with CBOs that are membership, volunteer-based local organisations. However, it should be pointed out that the closeness of NGOs and CBOs is not always a proof for their tight links, but is strategically necessary.

Now, GROs and their supporters demand their own stake of the budget and indicate their utility for development. A good example for this desired shift is to be found in the response of *Homeless International* to DFID's White Paper consultation document "Eliminating world poverty":

"In a context where increasing volumes of aid are channelled through Direct Budgetary Support to national governments and/or through multilateral institutions, reform of aid delivery can best be achieved by strengthening grassroots organisations to develop working partnerships with such institutions. Rather than demanding 'rights' in an abstract sense, grassroots partnerships can help poor people realise rights through practical action. Local mechanisms (such as participatory planning and budgeting; community-led design, construction and management of services through local organisations; and community contracting) strengthen governance systems in practice, from the bottom up, thereby contributing to more effective state systems."

Not only, that this quotation describes clearly the new scope of the work, GROs should undertake in the future, but it even neglects to continue with a genuine task of social movement organisations: the demanding of 'rights'. Who, then, will be demanding rights?

THE NATURE OF GRASSROOTS

Grassroots are no stable organisational form but can appear and disappear or transform out of a chain of circumstances provoked by other actors in the sphere of social politics. The recognition of the dynamics of grassroots organizations is of crucial importance for the fine tuning of urban politics towards civil society.

As an important component of social movements, grassroots organisations have a much more complex mission, than to improve the conditions of their local communities. They challenge opinion, convert the people's discontent into action and constitute the basis of social movements and civil society.

But, how can they achieve all this out of their disadvantaged position? Civil Society Organisations are independent when referring to their political autonomy, but they have only reduced means of power. The deficiency in terms of political and economical power is a characteristic of civil society by definition. In the classic division of state, market and civil society, the latter acts without power as it lacks political authority as well as economic influence. Deficiency in this case refers to the absence of a direct share in decision making and the lack of an immediate influence in power.

GROs have other means to achieve influence. They have an important share in decision when it comes to the areas they work in. They are highly flexible and will take on themes that others ignore, calling attention and moving issues further. This is possible due to their unique starting point of "*I do what I want to do*", which is a principle of any civil society organisation. This might sound selfish, egocentric and even hedonistic, but it makes an important difference to the structures of the state system and the market forces and separates them also from parties that have to align their agenda to external forces in order to gain political power.

Joe Foweraker points out that "the reform of the state apparatus, and especially its decentralization, sometimes promotes new forms of popular participation. Grassroots organizations may begin to move from service delivery to influencing social policy at least at the municipal level." – or vice versa. "But decentralization does not always dissolve and may even strengthen clientelist politics, and so the risk of co-optation remains. State policy may seek greater participation through the creation of its own user groups rather than responding to autonomous grassroots activity". (Foweraker 2001)

However, the purpose of civil society organisations is lately often disputed. Some say, they serve as a corrective to the system, that they shall monitor social equilibrium and react to malfunctioning of state and market forces. Others argue, their task is nothing less than to transform society and to challenge the ruling system in order to contribute to social progress (for a resume of the different views see Veltmeyer 2005). Both positions are right to a certain degree, but both put CSOs in the position of autonomous and self-controlled actors. However, they themselves can be transformed by the system and society.

We have witnessed the rise and fall of NGOs in Latin-American cities. They have a much more significant role within the development community by now, but many have lost their grounds in the local communities. Is it now up to the grassroots level, to go through this process? When their staff is engaged in activities that were formerly done by volunteers and now get paid by external donors, when they get contracted by local administration to provide services for the communities, when their leaders start to make a living out of their position?

I do not want to diminish the importance and much less argue against involving and remunerating GROs when implementing a project in their community. External support to local small initiatives is crucial for their development. But any new task for a local organisation should be in addition to its previous scope of work, not in order to impose a new portfolio on it.

Social movements have more functions to perform than to be partners in the design and implementation of aid projects. Reducing them to that role or to their functional utility for development cuts off important other features and potentials of their work. Such reduction tends to ignore the historic ethical and political background of the GRO. As pointed out before, they represent the disadvantaged in society and therefore sought and fought for better opportunities. GROs emerge *out* of a context – not *for* a context. They gain their legitimacy through their roots and by being proactive and independent.

The objective of grassroots organisations is not to “reduce poverty” or to alleviate the consequences of being poor. They aim at changing conditions. If they get engaged in governmental or private enterprises, then they have a practical opportunity to do so, but this could end in the dissolution of their genuine purposes on the long run. Again, the point I want to make here is not *against* supporting them, including them in urban coalitions or funding their initiatives. My worries rather derive from the experience with incorporated NGOs in Latin America that have turned into some kind of civil governance agencies. Other stakeholders in local development should learn from this experience. Donor organisations and local governments, but especially the aid industry, have to avoid absorbing GROs into their local structures and make them work for their own objectives.

For the last 30 years, the number of urban poor in Latin America has significantly increased, and though some interpret the percentage of urban poor as declining, in absolute figures the social gap is wider than it has ever been before. The course of social development in all countries points out that the need for demanding rights for the excluded is not decreasing. Social movements just recently have had a renaissance in the Andean region. In the economically more powerful, hence more polarised countries, however, there is an ongoing debilitation of civil society that was generated also by the inclusion of CSOs into the concepts of New Public Management. The recent developments in Mexico, Brazil and Argentina reveal how these new urban politics weaken the position of the more established parts of civil society.

There are new emerging groups now that also keenly observe the Asian grassroots experiences. The context, however, is different and we should also be careful with helping the dissemination of so-called *best practices* from other continents. I am confident that people’s organisation can find their own way from the grassroots. It is therefore imperative to

support them in their whole scope of work and listen rather than talk to them. They might best know the interests of the population.

A priority for the local level is still to build functioning and transparent systems. These can be achieved with the help and critical support of civil society, not by incorporating them. Those that have worked at the local level, may it be with the public, the private or the third sector, know that no one will demand this transparency but the people themselves. That is why the need for self-determining organisations that are deep-rooted in their communities is as important for local development as it has always been.

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