

Global Civil Society

Speaking in Northern Tongues?

by
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Extensive socio-ethnographic fieldwork among nongovernmental organizations, international donor agencies, and Church-related organizations in Chiapas, Mexico, suggests that global civil society—as an imagined terrain of transnational social action—can be viewed both as a site of expanded possibilities for social action and as a source of significant new constraints. It is a terrain where not all ideas and values are heard, promoted, or given legitimacy. There is, however, a transnationally resonant language into which Southern activists need to translate their issues and concerns if they wish to be heard.

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Global civil society, considered as an open process and an extended imagined community, is not generally seen as constituting a monolithic grouping of like-minded social actors. However, most contributors to this literature overemphasize both the diversity of global civil society and its shared progressive values. Indeed, most research in the field has focused on the capacity of transnational social movements and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) engaged in global campaigns to promote norms observance and to influence international politics with respect to human and women's rights, environmental sustainability, and fair trade (among other issues) by petitioning international organizations, corporations, and states. Less attention has been given to the extent to which the core actors in global civil society, such as transnationally active NGOs, actually share the values they are said to promote or to the ways in which they negotiate their diversity of views. Few scholars in this field have examined the extent to which the claimed globality of global civil society includes the views and priorities of actors from the South.

The term "NGO" is generally used in the literature to refer to organized entities whose fundamental objective is general community improvement rather than profit and that are private or not controlled by government (meaning that they do not receive more than half of their income from public sources), self-governing, and voluntary (Salomon and Anheier, 1997: 34, 39). Among both development

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scholars and practitioners, the term is usually used to refer to advocacy or service-providing intermediary organizations working on community-related issues such as health, education, rights, or development. Consistent with this use, in this study academic institutions and churches are considered not NGOs but simply local actors. "NGO" is used to refer to a local civil-society actor that acts as a primary intermediary between foreign aid donors and other local actors (among them formal and informal grassroots organizations, cooperatives, peasant federations, and agricultural workers' unions, the Catholic Church and related actors, evangelical religious groups and churches, academic institutions, social movements and coalitions, and left-wing or right-wing civilian armed groups). NGOs based in developing countries depend very heavily on funding and support provided from a wide variety of organizations (other NGOs, private foundations, and multilateral organizations) that are mostly based in Northern/Western societies.¹ Given the extent and nature of the resource asymmetry between NGOs based in the South and those based in the North and the hierarchical relationship that Southern NGOs are likely to experience vis-à-vis their Northern-based donors and supporters, an examination of the politics of global civil society from the viewpoint of Southern social actors is of vital interest. Do Northern and Southern actors have a comparable say in identifying the key ideas that become the centerpieces of global activists' campaigns? Do Southern NGOs conceive of themselves as part of a global movement in which their priorities and those of Northern-based NGOs are equally expressed? In short, how is global civil society viewed from the perspective of Southern-based local actors?

This paper explores these questions with an analytical concern for expanding the concept of global civil society to incorporate the views and priorities of the diversity of social actors it is often merely presumed to encompass. They are important questions because shifting the focus from privileged or core loci of enunciation to more marginal ones is key to reaching a comprehensive understanding of the subject (Harding, 1998; Tickner, 2003). The perspectives of Southern social actors must be taken into account if a truly global civil society that is more than a mere emanation of the North/West is to have promise for engendering normative changes in world politics. Examination of those perspectives leads to the conclusion that global civil society is a highly asymmetric terrain of social action, one to which Southern social actors often have limited access.

My discussion of Southern views on global civil society is based on extensive qualitative empirical work among NGOs and grassroots organizations in Chiapas, in southern Mexico, conducted in 2002–2004.² I chose Chiapas as the site for a case study because, first, in spite of its geographical and economic remoteness as an underdeveloped mountainous region on Mexico's border with Guatemala,³ it had received significant exposure in the international media and through transnational solidarity networks in connection with the Zapatista uprising of 1994. That uprising, which continues to this day as a resistance movement among both rural indigenous communities and urban activists, has received deep sympathy and strong support from local and transnational NGOs, which have identified with the Zapatista movement's rhetoric regarding democracy and global justice for the marginalized. Second, I chose

Chiapas because it had a well-established and well-connected (both regionally and globally) development and advocacy-oriented NGO community that had gained strength in the 1980s, during a period of civil unrest in Central America, and then grown enormously during the 1990s as a result of the Zapatista uprising and the increased availability of transnational funding and support.⁴ If a global civil society exists, Chiapas is a place where it should easily be observed in the views and rhetoric of local NGO activists engaging in their daily work with a multiplicity of foreign-based interlocutors.⁵

The first section of what follows reviews some of the literature pertinent to the study of Southern NGOs in global civil society, linking research from development studies, social anthropology, and international relations that problematizes the relationship between NGOs and donors, and shows that Southern NGOs are encouraged to speak a “transnationally resonant” language in order to be heard by their Northern-based interlocutors (e.g., Mawdsley et al., 2002; Tvedt, 1998; 2002). The second section presents the stories of two leading local NGOs, showing how they have come to adopt and negotiate the transnationally resonant language just mentioned. The final section analyzes the results of my research in the light of the theoretical insights suggested by the literature and sets out the contribution of my study to research on the prospects for a global civil society—a civil society that I and a few others find to be mostly speaking in Northern tongues.

THE CONTOURS OF A TRANSNATIONALLY RESONANT LANGUAGE

Global civil society encompasses multilayered channels of transnational social action, intersecting beyond localities and national boundaries to create an imagined community that is regional or planetary in scope. Research in this field no longer considers global civil society a unified or homogeneous corpus of like-minded, well-intentioned social activists making common cause on the basis of shared aims. Global civil society is in fact a diverse, sometimes contradictory, and often fragmented space including both progressive social actors and conformist or reactionary ones in strategic interaction across borders for purposes that may go beyond the domains of law and ethics (see Castells, 1996). The “globality” of global civil society refers less to a fixed shape or content than to the overlapping processes of social activism that transcend national borders to encompass regions of an increasingly interconnected world. Most contributors to this literature agree on the decentered, conflictive, fragmented character of a global civil society that is perhaps best viewed as an imagined community (Anderson, 1983; Lipshutz, 1992), a web of networks, or a transnational public sphere (Guidry, Kennedy, and Zald, 2001) that is a heterogeneous process in action and represents a purposive project (Keane, 2003) more than an existing macro-structure. It is best characterized in terms of heterogeneity and movement rather than in terms of uniformity or a fixed outcome, and it is the subject of a mushrooming literature in international relations, development studies, sociology, and geography pointing out that multiple nonstate actors have increasing agency in international politics.

According to most accounts, NGOs are key actors in this emerging global civil society. Definitions of civil society, whether domestic or global, vary considerably among writers depending on whether they are influenced primarily by Tocqueville or Gramsci, viewing it accordingly as an associational sphere independent of and yet counterbalancing the state (Fowley and Edwards, 1998; Schifter, 2000; Walzer, 1997) or as an autonomous space of resistance in which to articulate an antihegemonic movement (Cohen and Arato, 1992; Cox, 1999). Notwithstanding this important debate, civil society has also been defined as the “social, cultural, economic, and ethical arrangements of modern industrial society considered apart from the state” (Lipshutz, 1992: 398) and as including grassroots organizations, social movements, and NGOs as professional, intermediary organizations. Beyond pointing to what exists outside the state and the market and to social action that transcends the confines of the state, the term is fuzzy. In practice, however, development practitioners and scholars frequently use it to refer to a range of organizations among which NGOs tend to be considered the most accessible representatives of their societies (Howell and Pearce, 2001; Pinter, 2000; Roy, 2003; Van Rooy, 1998). Since it is accepted by practitioners and scholars alike that NGOs depend heavily on funding from private and multilateral sources (Hulme and Edwards, 1997; Howell and Pearce, 2001; Mawdsley et al., 2002; Meyer, 1999), a so-called global civil society that has NGOs as its core constituents also has donors as part of the picture.

Although NGOs are often considered the predominant actors in global civil society, the literature rarely examines the vital relationship of these organizations to the actors that support them. This is an important blind spot. Similarly, the literature tends to assume that (or exaggerate the extent to which) global civil society is diverse, horizontal in structure, and value sharing. A more specialized literature from development studies raises questions regarding the extent to which the resource-dependency of Southern NGOs complicates the prospects for a value-sharing, egalitarian global civil society and about who identifies the norms and values around which global civil society mobilizes. These can be seen as two poles in a debate between celebratory views of global civil society and a more critical scholarship that challenges those views on both analytical and empirical grounds.

Among the publications on transnational or global civil society most often cited are Keck and Sikkink's (1998) *Activists beyond Borders*, Edwards and Gaventa's (2001) *Global Citizen Action*, Keane's (2003) *Global Civil Society?*, Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco's (1997) *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics*, and the articles collected by Lipshutz (1992), Cox (1999), and Falk (1998). Aside from a subset on whether the concept of civil society can be extended to the global realm (Amoore and Langley, 2004; Baker, 2002; Bartelson, 2006) and one that attempts to define and empirically measure the current “global associational revolution” (Salomon, Sokolowski, and List, 2003),⁶ a central concern of this literature is establishing the empirical validity of the proposition that nonstate actors enjoy increased agency in world politics and determining the prospects of those actors in pressing for normative and regulatory change.

Most of the literature on global civil society is unsatisfying because of its celebratory mind-set. Whether it deals with constructivist assessments of the

normative efficacy of transnational social movements and campaigns (Brysk, 2000; Keck and Sikkink, 1998; Finnemore and Sikkink, 1999; Smith, Chatfield, and Pagnucco, 1997), liberal cosmopolitan visions of global citizenship as enhancing the prospects for democratic governance (Edwards and Gaventa, 2001; Falk, 1998; Held, 1995; Harvey, 2000), or neo-Marxist perspectives on the potential for popular resistance and counterhegemonic alternatives to corporate and elite globalization (Brecher, Costello, and Smith, 2000; Cox, 1999; Lipshutz, 1992), the literature is often overoptimistic about global civil society's promise of change, progress, and emancipation. As is particularly well illustrated by the work of Keck and Sikkink (1998), who define transnational activist networks as value-sharing forms of organization characterized by voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange, the literature also tends to exaggerate the egalitarianism and solidarity of these forms while paying insufficient attention to their North/South resource asymmetries, suggesting that at least some tension is inherent in their relationships. In short, I find this literature insufficiently concerned with assessing the location of Southern social actors and their views of global civil society, a perspective that would potentially thicken this concept and extend it geographically and culturally beyond Northern/Western industrialized societies.

More instructive is the literature on Southern NGOs, grassroots organizations, and social movements, which is cautious about using the term "global civil society," emphasizing the strategic rationales that lead Southern actors to become part of it and the systemic asymmetries in resources and ideas between its Northern and Southern constituents. Research by the political scientist Clifford Bob (2001; 2002), the anthropologist Daniel Mato (1997a; 1997b; 2001), the geographer Terje Tvedt (1998; 2002), and the geographers and social anthropologists of the Oxford-based NGO International Non-Government Training and Research Centre (INTRAC) (Mawdsley et al., 2002; Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley, 2003) stresses that, regardless of their geographical location, NGOs tend to speak much the same language.⁷ This language includes a set of key words referring to the development industry's changing priorities over time: from cooperative and participative development in the 1970s to women's groups and gender equity in the 1980s to sustainability, human rights, and civil society in the 1990s. These findings, based on a variety of fieldwork-informed case studies mostly from Africa, Asia, and Latin America, indicate that in order to secure much-needed support Southern NGOs often use a standardizing language that allows them to match their donors' concerns.

In Bob's (2001; 2002) view, international aid and solidarity networks constitute a "global marketplace" in which local movements reframe their otherwise obscure issues to match the concerns of key global players, thus improving their chances of gaining support. Drawing on an analysis of more and less successful local movements and NGOs from Nigeria, Tibet, Guatemala, and southern Mexico, Bob argues that central to the success of such movements is the ability to frame local issues in terms of global discourses. Mato (1997a; 1997b; 2001), for his part, stresses the creation of new social representations through the interactions of social actors (such as NGOs) that perform "transnational intermediation" between global and local spheres and examines the

currency of key concepts such as “civil society” among Latin American NGOs. The existence of a transnational language among NGOs is examined in greater detail in the research of Tvedt (1998) on the interactions between Northern European aid agencies and primarily African-based NGOs and of Mawdsley et al. (2002) and Townsend, Porter, and Mawdsley (2003) on the relationships between European donors and women’s groups in Ghana, India, and Mexico. All of these observers point to the dominant role of donors in promoting a vocabulary that is used by Southern NGOs to make their concerns fit into the frameworks of their Northern-based interlocutors. In this literature the translation by Southern NGOs of their concerns into the words preferred by Northern supporters is seen not as mere word play but as reflecting the resource predominance of Northern-based participants in the “global development industry.”⁸ The work of Tvedt (1998; 2002) and the INTRAC team, in particular, suggests that the global development industry is a site for consecrating the hegemonic status of Northern ideas.

A range of research that is similar to the literature just discussed but closer to that of international relations is more explicit about the conclusions to be drawn from a critical study of NGOs and global civil society (e.g., Batliwala, 2002; Chandhoke, 2005; Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler, 1998; Munck, 2002) and about the extent to which global civil society is based in the North and characterized by the discursive predominance of the norms and values of Western-liberal societies in identifying priority issues. In a study of the participation of women’s NGOs in various UN conferences, Clark, Friedman, and Hochstetler (1998: 23) discuss the difficulty experienced by the Southern NGOs in defining some of the key terms to be used in recommendation documents to be presented to various UN meetings and report episodes, for example, of Northern NGOs’ substituting the term “gender” for “women” in spite of the preference of Southern activists for the latter. They conclude, as does Batliwala (2002: 397), that the globality of global civil society is elusive. Chandhoke (2005) discusses issues of representativeness and norm setting and observes enduring world-systemic asymmetries between Northern and Southern groups in global civil society, seeing Northern NGOs as its more visible participants and as mobilizing in favor of norms that seem largely liberal and Eurocentric in content (see also Munck, 2002). Examining resource transfers and ideas hegemony, Vogel (2006) appraises the central role of American philanthropy in the making of global civil society, suggesting that the role of U.S.-based donor agencies as global trendsetters for NGOs has been underexamined. Generally speaking, these studies suggest that global civil society is largely Northern-based.

My research in Chiapas provides an opportunity to examine these claims from the perspective of Southern-based social actors.

DESMI AND COLEM

Desarrollo Económico y Social de los Mexicanos Indígenas (Economic and Social Development of Indigenous Mexicans—DESMI) and the Grupo de Mujeres de San Cristóbal (San Cristóbal Women’s Group, also known as

COLEM [for Colectivo de Encuentro entre Mujeres] are two highly respected local NGOs, DESMI being the oldest and most reputable NGO in the region and one highly regarded for its work in indigenous rural communities in Chiapas. Since their foundation, both organizations have consistently been among the leading recipients of international funding in the region, receiving funding from a variety of donor agencies including Oxfam-UK, the Ford Foundation, the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), the Netherlands Organization for International Development, Catholic Relief Services, and smaller European-based NGOs and solidarity groups involved in Central America. Both have developed new areas of activity quite distinct from those of their original mandates, and these new areas coincide with the agendas of their donors. How do they explain these coincidences?

These two NGOs originated in major social movements and remain leading actors in their respective areas of mobilization. DESMI is closely related to the most progressive branches of the Catholic Church. Established in the late 1960s in Mexico City to carry out work in popular education and community development for the rural poor, it became established in Chiapas during and after the celebration of the Indigenous Congress convened by President Luis Echeverría in San Cristóbal de las Casas in 1974.⁹ COLEM arose in the early 1990s as an organization concerned with violence against women, mostly composed of activists who had taken to the streets to protest the state's lack of policies to protect women from bodily harm in both domestic and public spaces. Since the Zapatista uprising in 1994, both organizations have played a role in the network of transnational, national, and local solidarity organizations that grew up around the insurgent communities, in some cases serving as intermediaries.

While firmly rooted in their respective local social movements, these NGOs have developed important ties to foreign-based supporters of their work. As is often the case with Southern local NGOs involved in development and advocacy work and especially with politically active organizations for whom seeking state support is either difficult or inconsistent with their goals, both organizations are highly dependent on funding from diverse foreign sources. In Mexico, it is common for NGOs that have operated informally for some time to register formally with the regional and federal state authorities in order to meet legal requirements to qualify for foreign funding. This was the case with DESMI and COLEM, which had to acquire legal status as civil associations to qualify for funding from Catholic Relief Services or Oxfam-UK (Interview 14, lawyer and COLEM member, October 24, 2002; Interview 28, former archivist for DESMI, December 3, 2002).

SUSTAINABILITY: DESMI

DESMI is deeply involved with indigenous communities in both the highlands and the rain forest of Chiapas. It advises and assists with social organization and community economic development, designing productive projects based on the expressed needs of community groups. Its projects over the years have included basic adult education to develop accounting skills, the construction of granaries, livestock raising and farming, crop-disease control, the

strengthening of cooperatives, and the development of social economy linkages (such as bartering) between neighboring communities. A Catholic nun who was the organization's director during the 1970s and 1980s nicely summarized the organization's fluid identity "For me, DESMI is an institution that has no fixed objectives, that has evolved with the necessities of the people" (Interview 28, December 3, 2002).

Notwithstanding its determination to respond to the needs of the community, DESMI has sometimes had to negotiate to maintain some degree of autonomy from its donors. In its early years it relied on funding provided by Catholic Relief Services and Oxfam-UK to the point that it seemed to be becoming merely a local administrative branch of these donors. As its former director put it,

At the beginning even DESMI's name was very American [*gringo*]. The NGO had many connections with the United States; the very idea of social and economic development was very Americanized [*agringada*]. . . . Catholic Relief Services felt very at ease with us. We were almost becoming some sort of local branch for them. . . . However, later I came to realize that it was not very good that they intervened as much as they did and that their role had to change.

For this and other reasons, DESMI began to distance itself from Catholic Relief Services and develop stronger ties with Oxfam-UK, which was perceived as more sympathetic to its desire for autonomy. Oxfam-UK's presence in Chiapas increased significantly in the 1980s in response to the intensification of civil unrest in Central America and the massive influx of Guatemalan refugees into Chiapas.¹⁰ Its agenda was primarily popular organization, social development, and human rights, most of which concerns neatly coincided with DESMI's own orientations. Subsequently, however, Oxfam adopted a new focus on gender and sustainable development, as its regional representative for Mexico and Central America at the time explained (Interview 59, July 21, 2003):

In response to the groundwork of several feminists within Oxfam (mainly in Latin America), after 1983/1984 gender was incorporated as a central organizing principle, with "gender" understood to be a fundamental component of democratic processes. . . . What is now understood as the "environment" was not adopted as a focus by Oxfam before the Rio Summit in 1992. Nevertheless, the concept of "sustainable agriculture" in relation to supporting agricultural projects was already in use.

Oxfam was not the only donor agency to develop a stronger emphasis on gender and sustainability. This emphasis became quite common among local NGOs in the 1990s in Chiapas and elsewhere in the developing world. While Oxfam explicitly prioritized these two topics starting in the late 1980s and mid-1990s respectively,¹¹ many other funding agencies such as the IAF, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Ford Foundation, and even the World Bank began promoting organic farming and sustainable development among Chiapas-based NGOs in the 1990s (Conservation International—Mexico, 1998; Ellison, 2002; Ford Foundation, 2002; IAF, 1988–2000).¹² The IAF was among the very first of these agencies to start promoting sustainable agriculture.¹³

In the late 1980s DESMI began to encourage its member groups to consider integrating sustainable agricultural techniques and greater environmental sensitivity into their development projects, eventually becoming a leader in the promotion of organic farming. Toward the end of the 1990s, it began to place greater emphasis on the promotion of "gender equity." However, given that its mandate was to assist with projects primarily defined by and responding to the needs of its members, encouragement of particular priorities was a delicate task, as the following remarks by a former field officer of DESMI (Interview 25, November 28, 2002, emphasis added) indicate:

At the beginning we did not tell them not to use chemicals because this *has to be a process in which people come to believe in things themselves* (you may facilitate as an NGO) and not one where they have things imposed on them because they need the money, in which case they may agree but once they find money elsewhere will no longer do so. Clearly, we were telling them [about organic farming], but we would not reject a project because they preferred to use fertilizers. Nowadays it does not work that way. *Now everything we work on has to be organic*, but at that time this was not yet the case and they first discussed it among themselves.

When I suggested that the NGO might have come to promote these new priorities in response to new guidelines provided by the funding agencies, she explained that, while topics such as organic farming and gender equity ranked high on the list of priorities of donors around the world, agenda setting in DESMI's community work was too complex to be called an imposition from above (emphasis added):

Well, they [community groups] are [also] engaged in some gender work. However, *they don't express it that way*. They don't use the term, the theoretical concept "[gender] equity," but it is present in their projects—not in all projects but in the majority of them. Therefore, we [in DESMI] decided that we would integrate it into our work as well, not as something all that explicit but more as something that was implicit in the projects. Increasingly, *funding agencies also demanded that we address these themes*, working with [gender and] organic farming; however, *the concern with organic farming also stemmed from our own consciousness*.

In fact, NGO members consistently claimed to be responding primarily to the self-identified needs of community groups (Interview 25, former member, November 28, 2002; Interview 27, founder, December 4, 2002; Interview 28, former director, December 3, 2002). Indeed, because of its experience and reputation as one of the very first Chiapas-based development NGOs, DESMI rarely solicits single-project funding from donors, instead managing to secure funding for its whole operation, which in principle allows it more room to maneuver than tends to be the case for less experienced NGOs.

In spite of its claims to autonomy, the experience of DESMI as recounted above suggests that it may have a pivotal role in translating the needs of community groups as they perceive them into the key words in circulation among NGOs and donor agencies. Thus it may not be the case that local NGOs impose their donors' priorities on the communities in which they work. Rather, they may be simultaneously translating both for donors and for communities in order to match the latter's perceived needs with the former's preferred language. This

idea of multilayeredness rather than unilinearity in agenda setting is reinforced by an extract from an interview with DESMI's principal founder in response to a question about how it began specializing in organic farming (Interview 27, December 4, 2002):

For us, one important thing was getting to know about Oxfam's experiment in Chimaltenango, in Guatemala, where they had a project with World Neighbors on soil reclamation. We attended these training courses there, not only us but also campesinos from the Margaritas zone [a mostly Tojolabal and Tzeltal indigenous municipality south of San Cristóbal de las Casas and close to the Guatemalan border]. Also, in Chiapas there were already some things happening around soil reclamation through the project of David Harvis, a Protestant pastor from the Summer Institute of Linguistics who was working in Oxchuc [a Tzotzil municipality in the highlands between San Cristóbal and Ocósingo] in the early 1970s. So the issue had already been raised. The INI [Instituto Nacional Indigenista] was into building soil reclamation terraces in Chamula [a Tzotzil municipality a few kilometers north of San Cristóbal], and we made a proposal to do the same thing in an agriculture project at Las Margaritas [funded by Oxfam]. Then we proposed another project that, more than dealing with organic fertilization, dealt with soil reclamation, terracing, and contouring. However, all that was not the result of any agency telling us that we had to engage in that kind of work. . . . It was a communication of experiences.

This interview excerpt is revealing in several ways. Above all, it illustrates how certain key themes may become prevalent in a locality in which development projects are being promoted by a great variety of actors (foreign donors, priests, government officers, local NGOs, and recipient communities) through a "communication of experiences" facilitated by the local NGOs.¹⁴ Once again it underlines the pivotal role of local NGOs as intermediaries between variously located grassroots recipients as well as between those recipients and foreign donors. Although the significance of the role of donor agencies is explicitly played down by the respondent, he also stresses that his organization got involved in work around organic farming after learning through a donor agency to which it was closely connected about the innovative farming experiments being conducted in northern Guatemala. Interestingly, this excerpt also exemplifies a reaction commonly observed among local actors involved in organic farming; they consistently reported that organic farming was a local initiative and one to which other actors came late, some even suggesting, as did the head of a major organic-coffee cooperative, that these actors "appropriated an issue that clearly came from the grassroots" (Interview 18, October 31, 2002).

The case of DESMI reveals a local NGO translating exchanges between donor and recipient communities while trying to give priority to the needs of the latter but eventually coming to use the language of the donors to label its work. It illustrates both the role of donors in thematically orienting the work of local NGOs and the multilayered nature of the process involved. It further illustrates the systemic nature of the transnational development community, in which key ideas that eventually become favored by the donors circulate beyond the direct channel of their communication to grantee NGOs and come to be promoted by many other actors, including the recipient grassroots communities themselves. It points to the pivotal role of local NGOs in simultaneously translating for donors and for recipient communities, communicating

the former's priorities and the latter's needs and helping to match them. Finally, it shows that some NGOs with long experience and established reputations may be granted more room to maneuver in their transactions with donors and even a substantial degree of autonomy, although this does not mean that they can ignore the fact that some themes resonate more than others with donors when they are soliciting their support.

REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH: COLEM

COLEM is known for its sustained activist work with urban and rural women from the environs of San Cristóbal de las Casas. In addition to denouncing public and private violence against women, it provides medical, legal, and psychological services to victims of rape and domestic violence. It maintains a support center in its main office, and doctors, social workers, and a lawyer were among its founding members. However, it soon became apparent that sexual violence against women did not rank high on the agendas of foreign donors. One of COLEM's founders explained, "We did not have money for the support center, but we were taking money from other projects to sustain it" (Interview 14, October 24, 2002). Following this logic, the organization developed a specialized team to work on a more resonant theme, reproductive health. Similarly, instead of presenting itself as solely concerned about sexual violence against women (COLEM, 1990–1991), the NGO held itself up as an organization dealing with domestic abuse, reproductive health, and women's human rights while "supporting as well the victims of sexual violence" (COLEM, 1995) and gradually adopted more legalistic language to describe its work. This shift in language reflected some significant changes in the organization's priorities.

While many donor agencies, of which Oxfam and the Ford Foundation were among the earliest, adopted "gender" as one of their principal strategic priorities in the late 1970s and 1980s,¹⁵ reproductive health became a related strategic priority for many donors in the 1990s. The increase in saliency of this theme among the actors in the transnational development community was closely related to the convocation of important UN conferences in Cairo and Beijing in 1994 and 1995, both of which COLEM's leaders attended.¹⁶ Concurrently with its involvement in these conferences, the Ford Foundation played a crucial role among Chiapas-based women's NGOs and research institutes.¹⁷ Having begun by speaking of "sex discrimination" (Ford Foundation, 1986; 1990; 1991b), in the early 1990s it began speaking of "gender bias" and "equity" and developed a "Reproductive Health Strategy for the 1990s" to be promoted worldwide (Ford Foundation, 1991a).¹⁸ International grants for reproductive health programs grew exponentially, from 2.4 percent of the foundation's budget in 1991 to 18.27 percent of it in 2000 (Ford Foundation, 1991b; 2000).

In Chiapas, the donors' new orientation toward reproductive health had lasting echoes. Over the course of the decade, some of the more activist members of COLEM came to realize that, although their decision to work on reproductive health issues had been only tactical—made in order to secure stable funding that would allow them to pursue their work on sexual violence—reproductive health had become the issue on which most of their time and

resources were spent. They felt that continuing with that work would compromise the organization's political identity by making violence against women of only secondary importance. One of COLEM's founding members provided an account of some aspects of this process in which she emphasized the role of donors in orienting the agendas of NGOs (Interview 14, October 24, 2002, emphasis added):

Soon we realized that the Ford [Foundation] was giving us money to convince women not to have children, using these buzzwords about voluntary maternity. . . . "If you can guarantee that you will reduce the number of births in Chiapas, here is \$25,000." There is a politics of reproductive health that has to do with slowing down the "brown threat." . . . And we were playing that game as well, because we had become *institutionalized*, adopting an *assistantialist vision* and political position. We became *depolitized*. We were performing assistantialist work closely associated with the state, without really generating any change in the relations between women and men. Because our work does not raise questions about the reasons [women] are beaten: we heal their eyes, we soothe them, it's good that we give them the opportunity to talk about what happened to them, we bring complaints and we support them, but in a way we simply send them back to this cycle of violence. . . . We were becoming more institutionalized, while working more closely with the state, while aligning ourselves with the politics of the donors. Before long, the donors were telling us, "There's no more money for assistance projects, but there is some to work on reproductive rights with indigenous women." And so our project would turn out to be a health project for indigenous people, a reproductive health project.

Increasing awareness that COLEM was losing its activist identity and political autonomy produced an internal crisis. The organization eventually reaffirmed its feminist identity while redefining its "gender focus" as aiming for full equality between women and men rather than "gender equity" (another buzzword promoted by donors including Oxfam and the Ford Foundation since the late 1980s) (Interview 12, founder of the Centro de Investigación-Acción para la Mujer Latinoamericana, October 27, 2002; Interview 14, lawyer and COLEM member, November 24, 2002; Interview 40, COLEM staff member, January 27, 2004).

The organization's crisis was made more acute by the Zapatista uprising, which was enthusiastically supported by some of COLEM's members but regarded with more reserve by others. In the course of several years in the late 1990s, the organization split into two camps, and those who favored the emphasis on reproductive health and rights were eventually forced to leave. However, to the surprise of the organization's remaining leaders, some of their most committed foreign donors suggested that the decision should be reconsidered and threatened to withdraw their funding. Already highly sensitive about the intervention of donors in its affairs, COLEM strongly resisted further pressure (Interview 40, January 27, 2004):

So we told them, "Well, they are not staying." And they said, "Well, we won't give you the money." And we responded, "Well, don't give it to us, thank you very much, but these women are not staying here." We also told them that they could not do what they were doing, that it was intervening in the NGO's affairs. Obviously, we did not get the funding. But then we went on to develop this kind of relationship with all the funding agencies. . . . In fact, we got into a lot of trouble.

Because of this, we were sometimes left without any funding. But this is the price we have paid for keeping our autonomy and for trying to develop a more equal relationship [with donor agencies]. . . . True success in dealing with donor agencies would be to maintain the relationship despite disagreements or tensions—being able to negotiate, finally. Thus, we were not always successful, because we destroyed our relationship with some of them.

This interview excerpt illustrates the significant power imbalance between NGOs and their donors and the tensions it may create. This particular NGO, because it had a strong activist identity that it felt unable to compromise, was willing and able to cut its ties to a donor that was trying to play too active a role in defining the focus of its grantee's work. However, such firm resistance to a donor is rather unusual; NGOs are generally more willing to accommodate their needs to their donors' priorities or to acquiesce in their donors' guidelines strategically while continuing to pursue their own priorities with a lower profile. According to the current director of another women's NGO established in the 1980s (Interview 16, October 28, 2002, emphasis added; see also Benessaieh, 2004):

What happens is that [funding] is a double-edged issue. . . . For instance, we more or less know what kind of projects each donor organization may support; therefore we ask for funding according to what each of them does. For example, we knew that Peace and Solidarity [an international NGO from Spain] was supportive of work on issues related to rights, and we also had some work in that area, and therefore *there was a good match between their priorities and what we needed at that time*.

Similarly, the COLEM activist quoted earlier (Interview 40, January 27, 2004, emphasis added) explained:

In fact, one project is designed to raise funds. But the [NGO's] political project is something else—and this changes, it is always changing. Sometimes we already know that the project will not be the same in the end. It is an act of *transgression* we engage in toward the agencies. To tell them that we will do something, when we already know that we won't do it, or that we'll do something else.

Both quotations suggest the respondents' acute awareness of the potential discrepancies between the agendas of their organizations and those of their donors. The second emphasizes the idea that local NGOs do not always do exactly what they tell their donors they will do and that they may find some space for agency through such measures as partially reporting their activities and stressing facts that best fit most donors' expectations. Similarly, a less activist and more professionalized NGO may compartmentalize its activities into separate spheres so that it can focus on the specific project for which support is being sought. Both are examples of *strategic acquiescence*.

The case of COLEM illustrates the potential for agenda setting to be perceived as a unidirectional process in which local NGOs are pressured to conform to the priorities of the donors. Although this pressure was met with active resistance, it is rather unusual for this to occur; more often than not local NGOs do not have the broad range of contacts and alternative sources of funding that this well-established organization could rely upon. As was reported repeatedly

by the NGO representatives I interviewed, strategic acquiescence and reluctant accommodation are the usual experience.

GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY: SPEAKING IN NORTHERN TONGUES?

While identifying themselves as local organizations principally dedicated to serving the needs and priorities of the grassroots, DESMI and COLEM are also deeply immersed in day-to-day contact and communication with more distant actors, including donors, other NGOs, Church-related organizations, universities, specialized branches of international organizations such as the Organization of American States (OAS), and specialized bodies of the UN. They are both members of various regional and global networks such as the Mexico-based Network Against Extreme Poverty (part of the Global Development Network) or the Latin America-wide Women's Network Against Violence; their representatives regularly travel to international conferences to meet with representatives of like-minded organizations and expand their range of contacts, and they have learned to use international venues for advancing legal claims such as the Inter-American Human Rights Commission of the OAS.¹⁹ DESMI and COLEM, like many other Southern-based NGOs primarily supported by foreign funding, are members of a putative global civil society.

From the perspective of Southern local NGOs, donors not only provide resources but also play a central role in facilitating access to global civil society. "A lot of these international networks are related to funding: Oxfam connected us with other donors, and then we realized that these donors acted like networks related to one another" (Interview 14, November 5, 2002), reported one of the leaders of COLEM regarding her transnational networking experience. Yet at the same time as they facilitate these global connections, donors encourage the multiplication of subnational linkages among similar NGOs, providing support for the formation of local, national, and regional networks and partnerships among their counterparts. When I asked how and when COLEM began interacting with foreign actors, the unexpected response of this leader was as follows:

I think that the first international contact we had was with Oxfam; this also connected us to other networks and led to our developing a network of our own. Oxfam-International gave us our first funding in February 1990. . . . And then we realized that the agency had other counterpart organizations doing the same work that we were doing, that were civil or nongovernmental organizations working on health, social issues, the defense of human rights, and so on. This, at least for me, who had never been involved with these things, opened up a whole new panorama: this network was operating on a national level, and they were called Oxfam's "counterparts." They [Oxfam] invited us to a meeting of counterparts in 1991 and then to many other meetings that allowed us to get to know each other, be in the same space, share [information about our] work and goals, share what did not work [in our respective organizations]. . . . We were also sharing tips on how to ask for funding.²⁰

This observation, which was echoed by other NGO leaders who described donor agencies as "bottle-openers" that gave local organizations access to

transnational networking opportunities (Interview 1, Asesoría, Capacitación y Salud [ACAS] member, October 8, 2002) is an additional illustration of Tvedt's (1998) of the systemic nature of the global development community. Donors promote particular issues and priorities not only directly through their interactions with local NGOs but also indirectly by extending circuits of communication among otherwise more isolated organizations. From the perspective of local NGOs, donor agencies are not only centrally positioned in global civil society but also facilitate their access to an extended sphere of social relations, from the local to the global. In other words, as viewed by Southern local NGOs, donors not only are trendsetters but also open doors to transnational networks.

How, then, is global civil society to be defined beyond the interactions between donors and recipients that seem, at least to Southern NGOs, to constitute its core? Clearly, in contrast to the celebratory view taken by some of the scholarly literature, global civil society is not necessarily a sphere of like-minded or value-sharing partners. Instead, many informants I interviewed expressed reservations about the term, which sounded to them rather corporate in orientation compared with the more straightforward term "international community." When they were willing to elaborate on the idea of an emerging global civil society, a number of respondents were eager to emphasize that the main rationale for their transnational networking was an instrumental interest in gaining access to resources rather than any like-mindedness. The ACAS member quoted above (Interview 1, October 8, 2002, emphasis added) explained:

Well, [these international contacts] are *circumstantial*. They allow you to conduct some of your work, they facilitate your life, but I don't consider them to be fundamental . . . because where I want to have some impact is mostly at the local level. . . . Finally this is the reality that I know the most about. Well, when the local can be related to international projects, it is welcomed, but the international aspect is not giving me my purpose as an activist. . . . My international [contacts] are *useful*, but I don't consider them to be fundamental.

CONCLUSION

This paper has examined ideas regarding global civil society held by actors with non-Western/non-Northern perspectives in order to articulate a more complete understanding of the global. I have suggested that global civil society—as an imagined terrain of transnational social action—can be viewed both as a site of expanded possibilities for social action and as a source of significant new constraints. In the case studies presented here, local NGOs have come to prioritize themes and issues that became salient in the transnational development community during the 1990s. This process may be perceived sometimes as multi-layered and sometimes as more unilateral and coercive in nature but is often experienced as full of tension and power asymmetry. The NGOs are acutely aware of this process and cannot, therefore, be denied some degree of agency, including both active resistance and strategic acquiescence. Viewed from the South, global civil society is a site of power relations in which strategic interest

rather than shared values or solidarity prevails. Local NGOs do not always adopt donors' priorities as a result of like-mindedness; sometimes they do so in order to secure funding that allows them to pursue other goals in tandem with donor-supported projects.

The access of Southern local NGOs to global civil society is not as fluid or direct as one might expect: it seems to be heavily mediated by donor agencies acting not only as trendsetters but also as door openers—both encouraging local NGOs to fit themselves into priorities established elsewhere and linking together similar organizations from other places. The influences on agenda setting are multifaceted and made complex by the fact that a number of actors outside the direct channel of NGO-donor interaction are involved. However, Southern local NGOs are rarely in a position to identify for donors the salient themes of the day; more often they are required to translate these themes in ways that may allow recipient communities to match their needs with the priorities of donors.

The two cases on which this paper relies are not fully representative of the spectrum of local NGOs and their experiences in dealing with foreign donors. I have in fact chosen two well-established, activist-oriented NGOs that have multiple donors and therefore perhaps more autonomy than others. Even so, the influence of donors on the agendas of local NGOs can still be clearly identified. Southern local NGOs actively participate in translating and labeling priorities between donors and recipient communities: they play a pivotal role in such transnational intermediation. If indeed there is a “transnationally resonant language” into which they need to translate their concerns and priorities in order to be heard by and receive support from their donors, then global civil society is an asymmetrical field of play in which not all voices and ideas are heard on their own terms. As viewed by Southern local NGOs, global civil society is less a site for street theater accessible to all than a venue for a stage play for which they need to know the lines, mostly spoken in Northern tongues.

NOTES

1. The NGO activists I met said that they relied on a variety of types of funding organizations: (1) multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank, (2) government-sponsored aid agencies such as the Inter-American Foundation (IAF), (3) large nongovernmental cooperation organizations such as Oxfam and Conservation International, (4) Church-related organizations such as Catholic Relief Services, and (5) private foundations such as the Ford Foundation. In addition to these there are smaller, more informal organizations, often playing an intermediary funding role, such as the American-Canadian Rights Action, and solidarity groups such as the Italian “White Monkeys.”

2. I worked with 30 NGOs that were based in Chiapas or had a significant presence there and interviewed field staff or program officers from eight funding agencies operating in Chiapas. I conducted 63 interviews between August 2002 and January 2004, 43 with local actors and 20 with global actors, most of them in the city of San Cristóbal de las Casas.

3. Chiapas occupies the highest rank on the country's “marginalization” index. The Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía estimates that between 1995 and 2000 the number of municipalities rated as “highly” and “very highly” marginalized increased from 31 to 65 and from 39 to 44 respectively. Whereas the population was highly or very highly marginalized in 63 percent of municipalities in 1995, this proportion has risen to 93 percent in 2000 (Chiapas, 2002).

4. Of course, Chiapas was not completely unknown to the world before 1994. Since the mid-1970s, with the intensification of civil unrest and military repression in neighboring Guatemala, which has a large indigenous population, southeastern Mexico, with its similarly large indigenous population, had been a favorite destination for anthropologists, liberation-theology priests and fieldworkers, foreign and national religious evangelists of all tendencies, left-wing militants from Mexico City and elsewhere, development experts and fieldworkers, and many other actors.

5. There were 60 legally registered NGOs in Chiapas when I conducted my fieldwork (García Aguilar and Villafuerte Solis, 2001; González Figueroa, 2002). Many of these organizations, all registered as civil associations, were based in San Cristóbal de las Casas. In Mexico, liberal federal and state legislation dealing with the constitutional right of association allows for the formation of nonprofit organizations of all sorts that are not subject to government or public scrutiny so long as they respect the principles set out in their own founding documents. As private, nonprofit entities, they are exempt from paying taxes or having to declare their sources of revenue to state authorities.

6. The worldwide proliferation and growing importance of NGOs since the 1980s are well documented. Lester Salomon describes this "global associational revolution" as the "massive upsurge of organized private, voluntary activity in virtually every region of the world" (Salomon, Sokolowski, and List, 2003: 1). Salomon, with Helmut Anheir of the Johns Hopkins Comparative Nonprofit Sector Project, has been studying NGOs from more than 35 developed and developing countries, and he estimates that nonprofit organizations constitute "the world's seventh-largest economy," sharing up to 5.1 percent of the combined gross domestic product of all 35 countries studied and absorbing 4.4 percent of their economically active population—which is ten times the level of employment in these countries in industries such as textiles and five times the level of employment in the food and manufacturing sectors (Salomon, Sokolowski, and List, 2003: 14–15). The nonprofit sector in these countries is estimated by these researchers to employ up to 40 million full-time workers.

7. I am indebted to Michael Edwards, director of the Civil Society and Governance Unit at the Ford Foundation, for suggesting some of these key references.

8. Tvedt (1998: 86) specifies this dominance as "conceptual" and "sanctionary," pointing to the capacity of donors to define the ideas that become part of the agendas of NGOs and the capacity to sanction NGOs by either offering or withdrawing their support.

9. Closely related to the community work of the Catholic Church under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ruiz, the rise of an organized, independent, and politically contentious peasant indigenous movement in Chiapas can be traced to the celebration of this congress. The Chiapanecan historian Juan González Espónda (2001) reports that up to 1,230 delegates from over 327 indigenous communities met for three days to discuss topics such as land, trade, education, and health and set a common agenda for further action.

10. By official estimates, in 1982 alone 20,000 Guatemalan refugees crossed the border and settled precariously throughout Chiapas, a good half of them in the region of Marqués de Comillas. Estimates informally provided by NGOs working with this population climb as high as 100,000 refugees in total. For more information on Guatemalan refugees in Chiapas, see also Chiapas (1989: 45–47), Melesio (1989), and de Vos (2002).

11. While earlier annual reports rarely included organic farming as a topic, Oxfam took an interest in sustainable agriculture for fair-trade markets after 1995. Between 1995 and 2000, total funding from Oxfam-UK for organic farming projects in Mexico rose from less than 5 percent to 10–15 percent of its budget for the country (Oxfam-UK/I, 1996; 1997; 1998; 2000; 2001). Today the organization is a major player in fair-trade markets, having launched a major campaign for fair trade in 2001–2002.

12. Since the late 1980s, the term "sustainable development" (referring to development that in providing for current consumption does not deplete the resources available for future generations) has gradually been adopted by the transnational development industry following the work of the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) during the 1980s, the Brundtland Commission Report in 1987, and the UNCED Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. After the Rio Summit, according to Colombian social anthropologist Arturo Escobar (1995: 195, 204), development and poverty began to be represented as problems of "great ecological significance," with indigenous people viewed as "stewards of nature" and hence priority subjects for development strategies.

13. In the late 1980s it established a Sustainable Agriculture Group to study ways to promote sustainable agriculture and organic farming through its grant-making policies, but in the 1970s it was already promoting organic farming in some parts of the South. For example, it brought peasant leaders from the Caribbean to visit an American organic farm and research center in Pennsylvania, and the experience is said to have persuaded these leaders to adopt similarly innovative farming techniques in their own countries (IAF, 1990: 10–13). Among the grassroots organizations receiving funding from the IAF are Indígenas de la Sierra Madre de Motozintla (ISMAM), the Asociación Rural de Interés Colectivo (ARIC), the Union of Unions, the La Selva Union, the Pajal Union, and the Cuatro de Octubre Union of Ejidos. The foundation has also provided support to intermediary NGOs specializing in agro-ecology such as the Chiapas chapter of Conservation International, the Fray Bartolomé de las Casas Center for Indigenous Comprehensive Training, Foro Chiapas, the Institute for Sustainable Development in Mesoamerica, and the Mexican-American NGO Dana, a leading specialist on organic farming and commercialization (IAF, 1988–2000).

14. Such “communication of experience” nicely expresses the multilayered nature of the processes of diffusion of organic farming in Chiapas. In addition to the experiences of the actors mentioned by DESMI’s founder, significant experiences with organic farming in the region included early experiments with “biodynamic” agriculture on a German-run farm in coastal Chiapas starting in the late 1960s and the experiences of the Union of Indigenous Communities of the Isthmus Region, an organic farming cooperative established in the neighboring state of Oaxaca, and similar cooperatives in Chiapas, including ISMAM and the Majomut Union. Also of crucial importance to the development of organic farming in southern Mexico was the pivotal role played by foreign and local Catholic priests since the mid-1980s in bringing together some of the first organic-coffee cooperatives, such as UCIRI and ISMAM, and connecting them with the emerging Europe-based fair-trade market (Bray, Plaza, and Contreras, 2002; Nigh, 1997; Renard, 1999; VanderHoff Boersma, 2002).

15. The Ford Foundation officially adopted a “women’s policy” after 1972 (Ford Foundation, 1986), following the lead of the UN, which in 1979 adopted a Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. On the initiative of some of its female staff, Oxfam-UK established a Gender and Development Unit in 1984–1985 and made gender a criterion for evaluating funding requests shortly thereafter (see Oxfam-UK/I, 1999 [1993]; Smyth, 1999).

16. UN conferences focusing on women have brought together representatives of NGOs, governments, and UN specialized agencies. These conferences were first held in 1975, with the celebration of International Women’s Year and the declaration of the United Nations Decade of Women. The Women’s Decade was celebrated in July 1985 in Nairobi, Kenya, with the adoption of a Plan of Action for the Advancement of Women (no UN document used the term “gender” at that time). The International Conference on Population and Development of September 1994 stressed family planning (<http://www.unfpa.org/icpd/icpd.htm> [accessed March 10, 2008]). The Fourth World Conference on Women, held in Beijing in September 1995, stressed women and decision making (<http://www.un.org/womenwatch/confer/beijing/reports/> [accessed March 10, 2008]). Other international events of importance for the women’s movement in Mexico include the signing of the 1979 UN convention on discrimination against women and its ratification by the congress in March 2002.

17. In Chiapas, the main Ford Foundation grantees are research institutions and NGOs engaged in research work alongside of work of more developmental nature, such as the environmental organization Pronatura, the Mexico-City-based Catholics for the Right to Decide, the Center for Higher Education in Social Anthropology, and the Comitan Center for Health Research (which is among the top Ford Foundation grantees in all of Mexico).

18. The strategy resulted from a consultant’s report prepared in 1987 that advised the foundation to adopt a “women-centered, community-based approach to reproductive issues” (Ford Foundation, 1991b: 16). Recognizing that its new emphasis on reproductive health had many rationales at once, the foundation stressed that it hoped to “demonstrate that it is possible to be concerned about population growth, women’s rights, and equity at the same time” (18).

19. For instance, in 1996, COLEM brought to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission the complaint of three young indigenous women who were detained and raped by Mexican soldiers in 1994 (the case was accepted for consideration after some delay in 1998).

20. In this formulation (“también compartimos cómo funcionaba eso de pedir financiamiento”), fundraising is presented as “asking for” or even “begging for” funding rather than “requesting” or “applying for” funding or “taking advantage of” funding opportunities. Most

interviewees used similar vocabulary, suggesting a sense of inferiority, when talking about their relationship to their foreign sources of funding. In a later interview with another founding director of COLEM, this was made explicit: "Well, it seems that we NGOs are always subordinating ourselves [to funding agencies], with our attitude that we are asking for something, with our attitude that they are helping us, or that we have to 'show them a nice face,' even if there are things we don't like, no, these things cannot be spoken about so as to avoid damaging the relationship, to avoid jeopardizing the funding we are receiving. Indeed, it is a power relationship. . . . It is a very unequal relationship in which they sit on top and we place ourselves below" (Interview 40, January 27, 2004).

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