Organizing by Projects: A Strategy for Local Development—The Case of NGOs in a Developing Country

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ABSTRACT

North and South nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) have been “partners” in international development for more than a decade. Studies have documented their approaches and strategies, yet little is still known about how they organize and how their projects help them to achieve their mission. The authors propose a contextualized and historical perspective to better understand how and why NGOs organize by projects, and how this strengthens their strategy and commitment to local development.

KEYWORDS: international development; nongovernmental organization (NGO); organizing by projects; local development; contextualized perspective

INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are defined as “self-governing, private, non-profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people” (Vakil, 1997, p. 2060). They operate in all sectors of society and they have existed in developed and developing countries for more than 50 years. In developed countries—the North—history links their emergence to the 1950s in the realm of religious, philanthropy, and voluntary sector charity groups (Ryfman, 2004; Salamon & Anheier, 1997). In developing countries—the South—NGOs are often associated with the structuring and strengthening of social movements (Corsino, 1998), and they are also known as grassroots support organizations or membership support organizations (Carroll, 1992).

In the North as in the South, NGOs have historically been involved in development. Locally, they have supported community, social, and economic development initiatives; internationally, NGOs, specifically from the North, allocate their resources to finance and support local development initiatives in developing countries. Northern NGOs (NNGOs) that operate within the international development sector are known as those that are caught up in between the preoccupations of their own society and the needs of those in developing countries (Smillie, 1991). We are interested in these NNGOs, but more specifically, we will pay special attention in this article to their partners in the South, the local organizations that we will call Southern NGOs (SNGOs).

The work of NNGOs and their partners, SNGOs, was recognized publicly and internationally in the 1990s, in a context where the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) questioned the efficiency of the World Bank’s programs to tackle poverty in developing countries, and stated that economic growth was necessary but far from sufficient in bringing human development to large parts of the population in that part of the world (UNDP, 1990). In addition, UNICEF’s field officers witnessed, on one hand, how important contractions in public expenditure due to the World Bank’s structural adjustment programs deserted large parts of the population in developing countries, and, on the other hand, the increasingly important role that local and international NGOs played in providing the essential goods and services for the most vulnerable, while delivering not only humanitarian aid but also supporting development actions (Cornia, Jolly, & Stewart, 1987; Judge, 1995).

Both NNGOs and SNGOs had been actively involved in development for several decades before their work was recognized by UN institutions. Some of the NNGOs had already been working on humanitarian work in developing countries for several decades, some of which are very well known today, like CARE International and OXFAM. These NNGOs were created in the
mid-1940s in United Kingdom, as different responses to the consequences of World War II (Ryfman, 2004). Both the Red Cross/Red Crescent and Caritas Internationals, created in the second half of the 1800s, were also responses to wars and disasters. In fact, political crises and natural disasters motivated the emergence of many humanitarian NNGOs.

After World War II and the success of the Marshall Plan in Europe, bilateral aid arrived in the 1960s with the objective to give technical and humanitarian assistance to newly independent countries and poor countries in the South. NNGOs and their initiatives multiplied because bilateral funding became available from agencies like the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). In fact, CIDA’s development paradigm was based, at least in part, on a people-to-people approach that allowed Canadian NGOs to support and strengthen development initiatives by local organizations in the South (Audet, 2008). This approach, shared by other Western countries, contributed to strengthening NNGOs and their involvement in socioeconomic development. A few decades later, a globalized world and many close relationships built with SNGOs led them into getting involved in lobbying and policymaking, as they became the jealous guardians of democracy and governance within international institutions (Maria, 2006; Ossewaarde, Nijhof, & Heyse, 2008).

With the exception of humanitarian NNGOs, most of those born in the North and South to tackle social, economic, and political injustice in developing countries have supported projects and have organized by projects from their very beginning. What used to be called in the 1950s “development initiatives” within the “small is beautiful” paradigm (punctual interventions, small budgeted, and short-term) became within a decade the setting for a development industry organized by projects: multilateral, bilateral, people-to-people, short-term, long-term, multimillion, or a few thousands of dollars projects (Smillie, 1995). Some critical scholars argue that this is just another manifestation of Northern colonialism, where NGOs are instrumentalized by Northern governments and their dominant economic paradigm (Corsino, 1998; Zepeda, 2006). There is no doubt that is part of the structural North-South dynamics, and we cannot deny the methodological difficulties within international development to generalize about NGOs’ impact on development (Bourguignon & Sundberg, 2007; Ryfman, 2004). There are, however, North-South relationships that have been built between NGOs within this context, and our research shows that beyond neo-colonial dynamics, there are NNGOs who work with their partner SNGOs within a shared strategic mission, revealing a strong commitment to local development and community embeddedness. We observed that in such cases, NGOs, both from the North and South, instrumentalize the dominant economic paradigm to achieve their socioeconomic and sociopolitical goals. Our objective in this article is to shed some light on how these North-South relationships are built and to explain how organizing by projects is instrumental, particularly for SNGOs, in achieving local embedded development.

From a contextualized and historical perspective, in this article we will seek to: (a) understand NGOs’ embeddedness in their local sociopolitical environment and (b) to shed some light on how organizing by projects becomes a strategy for local development. In the first part of this article, we present a brief historical account of NGOs; we will then discuss some of the recent issues raised by NGOs as they have become the focus of scholarly research. We then present a brief methodological note about our research before we continue with the presentation of SNGOs’ strategies for local development. We also present a discussion about how a contextualized approach sheds new light onto development project management. We conclude with a discussion about implications for further research.

A Brief History of NGOs and Their Debut in the International Scene
Northern NGOs, motivated by Christian charity, philanthropy, and the experience of the voluntary sector, emerged in the 1950s and operated missions in several countries in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Some years later, other NNGOs were founded within student unions and university circles, and others linked to trade unions or Northern cooperative movements. Most of these NNGOs implemented their own development initiatives: schools, clinics, wells, agricultural cooperatives, and literacy and vaccination programs. Their perspective was clearly one of humanitarian aid and social welfare (Fowler, 2002; Navarro-Flores, 2006).

Toward the end of the 1970s, “small is beautiful” was the name of the game, which translated into a series of small-scale projects aiming at ameliorating the living conditions of rural and poor communities in developing countries. As a result, the identification of the problem and the solution, the organization and mobilization of resources, the search for funding, the implementing, and evaluation of such initiatives became the core expertise NNGOs. Each initiative was a short-term project funded, in many cases, by different sources of funding. At least two decades went by before emerging organizations in the South developed their own “identity.” From organizations that responded faithfully to Western organizational structures—such as cooperatives, trade unions, or worker associations—to carbon-copied strategies and development models from the “developed” world, most of them failed to integrate local traditions and to respond to the specific
needs of the communities and to take into account the local context (Fall & Diouf, 2000; Ryfman, 2004). Without fail, local and community-rooted organizations emerged, they were enhanced and strengthened by local social movements, and they quickly started to collaborate with NNGOs and to obtain their support and funding for their own initiatives.

The end of the 1970s and the 1980s constituted an important milestone in the development approaches of both Northern and Southern NGOs. It went from essentially a small-scale short-term project, focused on the needs of a community, to an integrated long-term solution, grounded on the population needs assessment, and considering both the economic and political contexts (Fowler, 2002; Smillie, 1995). There was also a shift in their approach that went from humanitarian and social welfare interventions to socioeconomic projects (i.e., income-generating initiatives). NNGOs continued to fund their own projects but also became the funding source for local projects proposed by local—Southern—NGOs. Both types of organizations, from the North and the South, thus developed technical, socioeconomic, and even political knowledge about development, which translated into a multiplicity of approaches in the field: (a) humanitarian (building clinics and wells), (b) socioeconomic (supporting the exchange of expertise and technical knowledge about reforestation, encouraging women entrepreneurs, and ameliorating cooperative marketing strategies), and (c) sociopolitical projects (strengthening the mobilization capacity of local social movements and supporting human rights).

Over the course of half a century, the roles of NGOs changed considerably. From being responsible for specific humanitarian interventions in a crisis situation, they moved through socioeconomic approaches by providing social and welfare services, built North-South partnerships, and, more recently, assumed a policy-oriented role by doing advocacy, lobbying, and policy consultation (Collingwood & Logister, 2005; Smillie, 1995). Does that mean that their practice has changed their development paradigms, or rather that their paradigms have integrated different approaches?

NGO Current Issues: Classification Versus Legitimacy

Those interested in international development and the role of NGOs in the 1990s encountered the difficulty of classifying these organizations. Vakil (1997) presented an in-depth review of most of the Anglo-Saxon efforts to classify NGOs, including Korten (1990), who associates NGOs with the voluntary sector, and Salamon and Anheier (1992), whose approach on nonprofits is enlarged to include NGOs, and many other authors. Vakil proposed a unique framework for understanding NGOs based on two elements: essential descriptors and contingent descriptors (pp. 2063–2066). Essential descriptors include orientation—welfare, development or advocacy, development education networking or research—and level of operation—whether NGOs are international, national, or community-based. Regarding contingent descriptors, these include sectoral focus and evaluative attributes, such as accountability, efficiency, values, gender equality, and others. While Vakil’s classification enables both scholars and practitioners to better understand the complexity of NGOs, to describe these organizations, and to understand their operations and organizational needs, it excludes important issues that concern NGOs’ role within their own society and within the international scene. In fact, many scholars today are much less concerned about classifying NGOs than they are about understanding their legitimacy to act in the name of civil society within international circles (Collingwood & Logister, 2005; Lister, 2003; Navarro-Flores, 2006; Ossewaarde et al., 2008).

There is indeed a tendency to cluster NGOs as an isolated group, disembedded from both Northern and Southern societies, part of a “fourth sector” of their own, where they are “catalysts of sociopolitical action” and from where they “articulate” international social action (Fowler, 2000, 2002). Is it not legitimate to ask how they got to be that sort of “fourth sector . . . Olympus”? In our perspective, this and other questions about NGOs, whether concerned about their paradigms or their legitimacy, can be answered by understanding the role their local roots have played in the structuring of their organization and in the construction of their own development paradigm.

Integrating both a historical and contextualized analysis, we propose here a framework developed in earlier research (Navarro-Flores, 2006, 2009), and inspired from French and French-Canadian perspectives about the social economy and the solidarity economy (Laville, 1994; Lévesque & Mendell, 1999). By associating NGOs with either the social economy or the solidarity economy, we explain how NGOs instrumentalize the economy to achieve social and political goals. In other words, these theoretical frameworks help us understand how NGOs from the North and the South attain both of their missions by contributing to local development.

On one hand, the social economy has been a French conceptual reference to the 19th-century cooperatives, mutual groups, and associations. They are characterized as community-embedded member-driven organizations, founded to respond to specific social and economic needs of its members, who experienced some sort of social and economic exclusion and marginalization. Cooperatives and mutual groups evolved as social enterprises having both social and economic objectives—job creation, unemployed re-insertion into the labor market, or credit and savings services—whereas associations responded mainly to their members’ social needs—day care,
mutual aid, political representation, or social security. While emergence of social economy organizations was marked by members’ dissent of the market economy and its effects on social exclusion and unemployment, they were also marked by their determination to tackle their own exclusion by proposing a collective cooperative solution. Cooperatives and mutual groups succeeded to adapt and tame the economy, coexisting with other enterprises within the market economy—hence instrumentalizing the economy in order to achieve their social goals. Social economy organizations also contributed to strengthening their social movements through legal representation and lobbying for better regulation; as a result, the social economy contributed to local development and to the strengthening of the local civil society.

On the other hand, the solidarity economy represents a newer generation of cooperatives, social enterprises, and other hybrid-type grassroots organizations. While the social economy included a relatively homogenous group of user-members (i.e., peasants or health workers), solidarity economy organizations include different types of user-members (i.e., day care workers and parents and public regulation agencies and other community-based organizations). Like the social economy, solidarity economy organizations emerged to respond to the needs of their members, such as social welfare-type services, or economic needs, such as employment support and training. But they also had other needs like the political representation of their community/membership needs through lobbying and advocacy for their rights. Contrary to their ancestors in the social economy who stayed far from politics and concentrated on socioeconomic initiatives, solidarity economy organizations are very active within the civil society in their own contexts by responding to their members’ will to be represented and to be actively involved within the processes of local governance, democratization, and modernization of the public sector (i.e., participation in decision-making processes and public consultations and public-private partnerships contracts; Lévesque & Mendell, 1999). Solidarity economy organizations have a relatively clear political goal, but they also have socioeconomic and social-welfare objectives. Solidarity economy organizations instrumentalize the economy like their homologues within social economy, but they do it to attain their political goals.

How does this explain NNGOs and SNGOs operating within international development? On one hand, most of the social economy and solidarity economy organizations (i.e., cooperatives, associations, mutual groups, and other hybrid organizations) are member-driven or, according to Carroll (1992), membership support organizations, which means that they are embedded in a specific community, in geographical terms, and in sociological terms. Many other organizations within these sectors, however, serve and operate very closely to a community of users, but this community is not necessarily part of the organizational structure; in other words, the users are not members of the organization but they are served through research, training, funding, and organizational support in order to encourage their autonomy and good governance—these are grassroots support organizations (Carroll, 1992). Both types of organizations in the North eventually joined the international development sector by creating their own international development entities in order to pursue their mission on a North-South basis. Moved by Christian charity, by humanitarian principles, and by core values of mutual help and solidarity, these NNGOs were created at the heart of the cooperative movement, worker unions, student unions, peasant associations, women’s movement, universities and colleges, and so on. These NNGOs are thus not only embedded in their particular sociopolitical environ-
the economy to achieve political goals—militant organizations, for example—will have a “militant” development paradigm, which translates into activities such as support to local social movements, lobbying, and articulation of NGO international networks (see Figure 1).

Understanding NGOs’ local embeddedness means better understanding their legitimacy and their development paradigms. In a North-South context, these NGOs have hundreds of partner SNGOs around the developing world for which the first are an important source of funding. What is the effect of NGOs’ legitimacy and paradigms on their partners? What do we know about NGOs’ legitimacy and embeddedness? Better yet, what is the positive or perverse effect of having NGO-funded projects? What will it take to achieve NGOs’ development goals? We will look at these questions in the light of the results of our doctoral research, which took place in Guatemala, with five NGOs. Notwithstanding their differences, we think they provide an interesting ground for understanding how organizing by projects helps NGOs to achieve local development.

A Methodological Note
Our research focused on the experiences of NGOs and their partner SNGOs concerning the construction of their North-South relationships. Research on North-South partnerships is particularly rare, especially in a context where both parts, the NGO and their partner SNGOs, are taken into account (Navarro-Flores, 2006, p. 103). Our research was essentially qualitative and exploratory, as we were interested in explaining and understanding the process involved in building partnerships rather than testing hypotheses on the subject. In this article, we concentrate on the Southern part of the equation, regarding the impact of NGOs on their relationships. Specifically, we present and analyze the data about the experience of SNGOs’ managers concerning three elements: (a) building partnerships with NGOs, (b) organizing by projects to achieve their goals, and (c) being accountable to their constituencies—either members or grassroots groups they support.

Our methodology included a semi-structured open-question interview outline, which allowed us to gather information about the managers’ actions and experiences about their realities and their activities as they occurred throughout a period of approximately 10 years. We thus had access to rich and holistic descriptions of their representation of events, including the context and the history of the processes through which they built and consolidated their relationship both at the international level—with partner NGOs—and at the local level—with their constituencies (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

The Research Sites
Our criteria to chose between Canadian NGOs and their partner SNGOs in developing countries was inspired by Glaser and Strauss (1967), according to whom sources of data had to represent both differences and similarities to allow the analysis of an enriched context where concepts emerge, vary, and interact with other concepts: “Comparing as
many differences and similarities in data as possible [. . .] tends to force the analyst to generate categories, their properties and their interrelations as he tries to understand his data” (p. 55).

We had chosen two NNGOs in Canada that responded to the characteristics of social economy and solidarity economy: NNGO1 was founded by 15 cooperative institutions in Canada, and its mission is to support cooperative development and to internationally implement the inter-cooperation—one of the cooperative founding principles. NNGO2 is self-denominated as a “democratic movement” for international solidarity, and its mission is to support grassroots organizations in the South “that seek to transform social, economic and political structures that perpetuate injustice” (Development and Peace, 2009, p. 3). Both NNGOs had been present in Guatemala for at least 10 years and had built long-term relationships with local SNGOs. We were assisted by the NNGOs’ region coordinators and project officers for Guatemala in order to choose the SNGOs that best represented a typical partner each of them had in Guatemala. We then chose five SNGOs, which correspond to two cooperative federations—SNGO11 and SNGO12—and three grassroots support NGOs: one native-peasant association and two militant-type NGOs—respectively SNGO21, SNGO22, and SNGO23 (see Figure 2).

**Research Strategy**
We were in the field for three months (November 2002 to January 2003), and during this time we held 15 interviews, from 1 ½ hours to 2 ½ hours long, we had the opportunity to participate as observers in several meetings and work discussions in all SNGOs, and we also held at least six informal discussions with the people working in the targeted SNGOs. We interviewed three people in each SNGO: the general director/ coordinator, one of the project officers, and one field worker. The transcription of interviews represents more than 375 pages of data that we analyzed with grounded theory, qualitative data analysis software based on the model proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1994, 1998).

We adopted the grounded theory approach, which helped us to analyze and systematize the data not in the perspective to test hypotheses but, on the contrary, in the perspective to structuring a new conceptualization of a phenomenon that is not very well known. We then followed the coding paradigm proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1994), which assured the grounded character of the data and also of the conceptualization that emerges from the facts, taking into account the context and history of the facts: “Theories are embedded ‘in history’—historical epochs, eras, and moments are to be taken into account in the creation, judgment, revision, and reformulation of theories” (Strauss & Corbin, 1994, p. 280). We present in the following pages our research results by offering the most significant responses from SNGO managers interviewed.

**Strategies for Embeddedness: Southern Strategies**
The cooperative federations, SNGO11 and SNGO12, reached out to more than 6,000 direct beneficiaries, all of them members of agricultural cooperatives in different regions of Guatemala. Each federation represents between 50 and 180 cooperatives, respectively. In the
case of the grassroots support NGOs—SNGO21, SNGO22, and SNGO23—they each support 15 to 20 native and rural communities scattered throughout the Guatemalan territory.

When our interviewees were asked about the most important actors in their sociopolitical environment, they all mentioned: (a) their memberships or grassroots groups/communities and (b) the funding agencies—NNGOs essentially. Regarding the latter, in addition to the NNGOs that were part of our research, these SNGOs were also funded by a number of other NNGOs from different parts of the Western world (namely Germany, the Netherlands, Spain, Sweden, and the United States, just to name a few). These are the Northern “partners” that fund not only the SNGOs' regular operations, but also the projects they propose and undertake to respond to the needs of their memberships and grassroots groups.

**SNGOs’ Realities**

Concerning the membership and grassroots groups, they constitute the *raison d’être* of the SNGOs. In the case of cooperatives, these are legally registered autonomous organizations; they are part of a federation in order to obtain from it the services they require for their organizational development (i.e., technical assistance, management/entrepreneurship training, and cooperative governance):

Our possibility to offer services, supported by projects, has increased our membership [...]. [Our members] became conscious of the work we were doing and [the assistance] we were able to offer [...]. We’re not interested in new additions; we are interested in what we can offer. (SNGO11Dd, 9: 31)¹

But federations also represent politically the interests of their members within a specific sector and at the national level:

Political representation consists, for example, in ensuring that cooperative interests are taken into account when laws are modified. It also means to have a representative at the Confederation of cooperatives, where the board is elected by the presidents of the member federation and they are there to defend the interests of the cooperative movement. (SNGO11Dd, 9: 55)

SNGO11 and SNGO12 are clearly part of the Guatemalan social economy, and as we mentioned in the previous section, their Canadian partner, NNGO1, is also a member of the social economy in Canada, as it was founded by 15 cooperative institutions to assist cooperative development in the South.

In the case of grassroots groups in rural and native communities, SNGO21 and SNGO22 give legal, financial, and organizational support to the rural workers, women, and youth living in those communities. The first one supports the organization and mobilization of people to participate in the democratization of their country at the local and national levels:

We got together to assist the military and society in general to understand the transition from civil war to democracy in our country. We would explain [...] the meaning of such change and the need to change our strategies as well: from popular revolution to a legal political struggle [...]. War was no longer an instrument [for change] [...]. We were part of a local and international effort in search of negotiated solutions. (SNGO21Dg, 6: 2)

SNGO22 funds income-generating activities, but also organizes training and assistance about democracy, local governance, and popular participation in order to encourage community implication in their own local development:

After working with those who returned from exile, we decided to work [specifically] [...] on the reinforcement of local democratic dynamics [...] We prepared people to participate, to assume responsibilities, to take informed decisions at the municipal level [...] We work with 10 or 12 municipalities and we work with grassroots organizations not with local government. (SNGO22Dg, 8: 3)

Finally, the native-peasant association, SNGO23, gives legal advice and support to community members, undertakes research on the situation of native people in Guatemala, organizes lobbying and advocacy to defend the interests of its native members, and denounces internationally the injustice and disrespect of human rights within native communities in Guatemala.

These three cases clearly represent the solidarity economy in Guatemala; their sociopolitical activity is encouraged by their Canadian partner, NNGO2, characterized in the previous section.

Membership and grassroots groups were very important for all SNGOs we visited. The differences notwithstanding, whether they are structurally part of the organization, in the case of member-driven federations, or just beneficiaries of the SNGOs' initiatives, SNGOs adopt organizational mechanisms to include them in decision-making processes concerning (a) the strategy of the SNGO and (b) the development program they adopt.

These mechanisms include both formal processes, such as general assemblies, and informal processes, such as recurring consultation meetings like strategic planning sessions, focus groups on particular problems, project evaluation, and planning sessions with personnel and beneficiaries:

We have a methodological framework, but the content and the construction of that content come definitely from the people themselves, from what they tell us. This includes [for example] the local.

¹These quotations are taken directly from our interview transcriptions, originally in Spanish. The author has translated them into English, taking into account the interviewee's response while preserving the language and the spirit with which they were spoken.
These mechanisms ensure SNGOs' good governance and accountability toward their membership and grassroots groups; these are, after all, their raison d'être. Furthermore, according to the interviewees, such mechanisms to encourage beneficiary participation are also related to SNGOs' strategic mission: to ensure people's empowerment and to contribute to build their autonomous organizations:

We don't have the truth. No, it just doesn't work that way. We have to be able to be at their level and make it possible for them to use their own ideas and enrich them with their experiences; we have to make sure they understand that it is their project and ours. In other words, they have to learn from their own experience [...]. They are the real players in the field. Us? Our role is to be a good coach. (SNGO12Dd1, 11: 32)

While undertaking socioeconomic and sociopolitical projects that aim to improve the situation of their beneficiaries, SNGOs also strengthen their own organization. If their mission is to respond to the specific needs of their members or grassroots groups by implementing an adequate strategy, SNGOs must develop strong links with the communities, coordinate with different actors, participate, or build networks. In other words, SNGOs must ensure that they know who their beneficiaries are, the social, economic, and political context where they are, and where they evolve:

Our source of power is the knowledge we have about our people [...]. An NNGO does not understand the situation of our people, whereas we understand their real situation: how they live, the characteristics of the region, of each cooperative. NNGOs don't have that. That's how we play their game: they have the money but not the knowledge. Us, we have the knowledge and we have the "know-how." We can play together then. (SNGO11ChP, 10: 42)

Our interviewees called it the contextualization of their projects. By doing this, SNGOs ensure the embeddedness of their practice in a process that takes into account the history and the context of the people with whom they work, but also their future aspirations:

When I told you that it is important to share the vision of a process and the vision of a project [with the grassroots groups], I meant that a project does not exist because we [SNGO21] exist. It is rather the opposite; the project exists because it is a political tool for popular and local organizations. (SNGO21Dg, 6: 42)

As SNGOs strengthen their responses to members and grassroots groups by adopting development strategies embedded in their history and context, this practice becomes, in return, an important source of power. Indeed, as they put it themselves, "power to negotiate" and "power to convince" donors about the need or the relevance of their projects. In other words, the more they are embedded in their own sociopolitical context, the stronger SNGOs' negotiating capacity is:

Insofar as we are totally immersed in our cooperatives' reality [...], we will have the capacity to negotiate with [NNGOs]. Otherwise, we'll be quickly put out of the game with their first questions [about the project]. I think that that's how we can build a good argument, by acknowledging thoroughly and systematically the needs of the groups that will benefit from the project [...]. That is what gives us the credibility and the power to convince. (SNGO12Dd1, 11: 25)

But SNGOs are only half of the North-South equation. A contextual analysis of SNGOs' reality must be completed with NNGOs' approaches to development in order to better understand Southern strategies at work.

**NNGOs' Approaches**

NNGOs' development approaches determine the type of relationship they establish with SNGOs. There are at least two different approaches: short-term and long-term. According to the interviewees we met, it is clear that the short-term approach, which translates into short-term one-time projects, neither encourages nor leaves any margin for long-term sustainable development:

In most cases, there is an idea, it is implemented, and that's it. After the project, everything is lost because there is no continuity [...]. From what I have heard and what I have seen, in projects like those [...] there is no vision, no provision for long term. In such cases, let's say that [NNGOs] don't allow you to transform it into a sustainable project. (SNGO22Dd2, 12: 11, 12)

Not only do such interventions have no vision, but they are also considered by SNGOs as part of the "colonial" attitude from the North, with no regard for local actors and local context:

I'll give you an example: an NNGO goes to the municipality and announces to the mayor that wells will be constructed in these and only these communities, period—without thinking that there is a local development agenda, that there is a local government that represents public interests, that such government is accountable to the people and to whom local actors are accountable too. (SNGO11Dg, 6: 12)

The short-term projects funded by NNGOs are also considered by SNGOs as a contradiction to local effective and sustainable development, because they
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break up communities and local power into fragments that could only serve foreign interests. From this myopic perspective, SNGOs’ efforts to build social cohesion, and be politically strategic on a long-term basis, are quite ineffective:

Donors have often replaced the power of local governments and local social actors. Development agendas in many Guatemalan counties are those of the donors and the agendas that have been collectively conceived, within a strategic framework to reinforce [democratic] spaces. (SNGO21Dg, 6: 10)

Short-term projects are accepted and implemented by SNGOs, particularly the ones we met, because they can help to fill in the gaps between long-term projects funded by their long-time partners. In this case, SNGOs accept a short-term project because it is close to their mission, it affects directly and possibly positively the communities with whom they work, or simply because they have the expertise required to implement the project as it has been designed by the donors. In any case, according to the interviewees, implementing short-term projects may distract SNGOs from their core activities but they can enrich both their experiences and knowledge about dealing with people’s needs and responding to NNGOs’ criteria:

We learn from the methods and suggestions that come from the Canadian cooperation, American cooperation, and the Swedish cooperation and we make our own [framework] with all that [...] We adapt the best approaches and we implement them. Of course we don’t accept everything they impose, [...] there are many things they ask that don’t make any sense in our context, so we ameliorate their ideas and then we use them. (SNGO12Dd1, 11: 41)

Long-term approaches allow SNGOs to build trusting and reciprocal relationships with NNGOs with whom they share a vision:

I think that we are fortunate to have a partnership with [NNGO1] with whom we share political values. We are not project machines looking for funding. We have a strategic vision and our own objectives, which are the basis of our negotiation with NNGOs. There isn’t really a “negotiation” [...] it is rather a discussion where we share visions [...]. There is a coincidence in our values and visions and that’s what makes [NNGO1] fund our initiatives. (SNGO11ChP, 7: 28)

Long-term approaches also encourage North and South NGOs to better integrate local needs into their long-term perspectives. This means that they work together, design joint projects, and define common and specific objectives and operations—all to ensure that the membership’s essential needs will be met in the short and long term:

There are many details in a project and it is a lot easier for us to understand where it is that we’re going when we know the NNGO with whom we are working. That’s one of the advantages we find in investing to know each other well [...]. It facilitates the definition of results we want to obtain and how the project will help us better respond to the needs of the federation [...]. If there is a mutual effort to understand each other well, it’s a lot simpler [...] and even the project has a better impact because we’re doing what we wanted and needed to do. (SNGO22Dd1, 11: 19)

Most importantly, long-term projects are at the core of long-term partnerships, where both NNGOs and SNGOs share a vision, share the preoccupation to respond adequately and effectively to the membership and grassroots groups needs—whether they are economic or political—and strengthen SNGOs’ embeddedness in their own sociopolitical environment:

The big difference [with long-term approaches] is that they come to visit [the communities], they come talk to the people, to the beneficiaries. They don’t necessarily ask what they produce, but they ask about their lives [...] they come to see [what has changed for them] and how that changed their lives. This is how [NNGO2] finds out if we have done a good job or not. (SNGO22Dg, 8: 40)

In our case, some of our partner NGOs asked us to give them our strategic plan [...] They want to know what our vision is, in the short and the long term [...] We find that there is a space for planning and access to funding on a long term, to make progress with our projects [...] For us, what is very important is to see how the process that we started continues and gives results; how we use effectively the funding we get [...] This is how [NNGO2] supports our strategic plan. (SNGO23ChP, 9: 18)

SNGOs seek to strengthen their embeddedness within their sociopolitical environment, and NNGOs can play an important role either in reinforcing SNGOs’ local roots or in dispersing their efforts. It depends on whether the NNGO works with a short-term or a long-term approach, and this is not as clear-cut as one would like it to be. We have observed that even those NNGOs that are themselves well rooted in their sociopolitical environments use short-term projects from time to time—commonly known as bottom-of-the-drawer funds. These projects can become useful, as we have seen, as they help SNGOs to fill in the budget gaps between one long-term project and another. Nevertheless, short-term projects may have perverse effects for SNGOs and their strategies for local development, if access to long-term funding is limited, inadequate, or inexistent. We will analyze the effects of Northern approaches versus Southern realities in the next section.
NGO Project Management: A Contextualized Analysis

By the time that North-South relationships started to be called “partnerships” in the 1990s, some NNGOs and SNGOs had been working together for more than 20 years. These relationships were carefully built on common visions and common objectives; yet, many of them started as a flirtation before they became long-term commitments. In fact, they started with a short-term intervention, a first “trial” project, a one-timer with a small budget; there would be a second project similar to the first but aiming to test trust and build accountability—perhaps even a third project. When results were positive and funds were available, and a trustworthy relationship was established, NNGOs and SNGOs would have a partnership (Navarro-Flores, 2006).

The reasons why NNGOs adopt a short-term approach are not necessarily related to a “power trip.” It may be more accurate to say that it is to “test the field,” to learn about potential future long-term partners. The consequences of this practice are more than just positive or negative for SNGOs, as they may determine whether or not local NGOs can have a meaningful contribution to local development, but such practice may also affect development effectiveness in the long run.

Short-term projects are disembedded from their context. Though they are often vehicles for humanitarian assistance in crisis situations, most of the time they are punctual interventions that do not tackle the real causes. Development projects are supposed to solve social isolation, illiteracy, economic exclusion, political marginalization, and the like. All of which require, needless to say, long-term solutions.

Insofar as those projects are defined by NNGOs, the short-term relationships that result from them are defined in unequal and hierarchical terms, allowing little or no possibilities for SNGOs to link such interventions with their strategic plans. Moreover, the uncertainty associated with such types of funding creates competition among SNGOs, rather than collaboration, which contributes further to the fragmentation of the local social dynamic, particularly in the case of countries coming out of decades of civil wars, as is the case with Guatemala.

What is the result? In best-case scenarios, SNGOs learn approaches, build expertise about project implementation, and strengthen their accountability records. In worst-case scenarios, SNGOs are prompted to be executors, who respond to immediate and disarticulated types of interventions organized and defined by NNGOs, in detriment of being strategic and adequately respond to membership or grassroots groups and, worst of all, in detriment of their own embeddedness in the local environment. In our perspective, the latter is the most perverse effect of Northern short-term approaches.

Our research reveals that SNGOs chose to implement short-term projects for organizational and strategic reasons. Nevertheless, their history and knowledge of the context contribute to make them less vulnerable to being uprooted from their communities, and to having their initiatives aimlessly scattered among communities. Younger SNGOs with less history and shallower roots in their communities may be more attracted to short-term projects, rightfully to build their expertise, but they also set the precedent that by becoming experts in short-term approaches, they contribute to help build a community of “short-term best practices” of Northern defined projects, disembedded from the contexts and the realities of developing countries.

What about the long-term approach? For both NNGOs and SNGOs, partnerships are built with time. They have to “tame” each other, identify common interests, build trust and reciprocity, and above all, share their vision: their development paradigm.

NNGOs that encourage long-term relationships also encourage SNGOs’ local embeddedness in the social, economic, and political dynamics of their own contexts. This is particularly true for those NNGOs that understand embeddedness because they are very much rooted in the social economy and solidarity economy in Northern societies. Indeed, as NNGOs are accountable to their own memberships and associated groups in the North, they account for how and with whom they construct their North-South relationships. The “how” is about negotiating structurally unequal North-South power with their SNGOs—as for the “with whom,” this refers to whether or not they have common values, common vision, and common strategies—in short, whether or not they share their development paradigm.

By sharing their development paradigm, NNGOs and SNGOs reinforce both their own embeddedness in their own sociopolitical context—namely, the social economy and the solidarity economy—and reinforce their legitimacy to act as important development agents in the local and international scenarios. Finally, the ability of SNGOs to structure a local development agenda and succeed with its implementation depends on their organizational capacity to manage short-term and long-term projects strategically without losing their vision: local development. If development projects are managed taking into account the history and the context of the interventions, they are more likely to be effective in responding to short-term and long-term needs of local populations. Thus, SNGOs can contribute to local development.

Conclusions

Theories in project management are dominated by perspectives centered on single projects and isolated initiatives. We have discussed in this article how important it is when understanding project processes and results to consider not only the project but also the organization that implements it. This is particularly important when dealing
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with international development project management.

By acknowledging that projects are embedded in a history and a context, we have illustrated how to better understand the role of projects within the development dynamics on both the local and international levels. For project management, this means that short- and long-term projects cannot be disembodied from their organizational embeddedness in order to understand how to define it, to manage it, and finally how to evaluate its results and long-term impact. Furthermore, when planning development projects, it is important to consider that a project does not happen in a vacuum; on the contrary, whether it is short- or long-term, it is going to affect the organization as well as its context on a long-term basis.

International development practitioners and scholars could benefit from embedded approaches to project management, especially by considering that the project is not the end in itself, but a means by which organizations, both in the North and the South, use them strategically to achieve both social and management, especially by considering that short- and long-term processes, provided that they contribute to reinforce SNGOs’ embeddedness in order to understand how to define it, to manage it, and finally how to evaluate its results and long-term impact.

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International development practitioners and scholars could benefit from embedded approaches to project management, especially by considering that the project is not the end in itself, but a means by which organizations, both in the North and the South, use them strategically to achieve both social and political goals. From a historical and contextualized perspective, development projects’ results are likely to be effective in responding to the needs of local populations, through short-term and long-term processes, provided that they contribute to reinforce SNGOs’ embeddedness as a strategy to achieve local development.

Author’s Note
This article is largely based on part of the fieldwork from my doctoral research (Navarro-Flores, 2006). The data analysis presented here is different, however, from the one in my doctoral dissertation, as it responds to a different research question.

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