Chapter 9

CONCLUSIONS: The PLANAFLORO Experience and its Implications for Future NGO Participation in Regional Development

This study was aimed at analyzing three major issues surrounding the inclusion of NGOs in the development process: 1) their reliability in representing the political and economic interests of their named constituencies in the development process; 2) the degree to which NGO autonomy was compromised by their interaction with State and financial institutions, and transnational NGOs; and 3) the actual effectiveness of NGOs in influencing the development process towards the interests of their named constituencies. While the results of this study may not entirely reflect the experience of NGO participation in regional development programs, they do illustrate some of the important difficulties surrounding the partnership between NGOs, local State and the World Bank. The growing inclusion of civil society organizations in the implementation of economic development programs reflects the assumption by the multilateral development banks, especially the World Bank, that both local NGOs and local State have the social trust and social capital necessary to conduct this type of partnership successfully.
Some disturbing developments occurred during the PLANAFLORO period, such as increased rates of deforestation and deterioration in the living standards of the program’s intended beneficiaries. The evidence gathered in this study indicates that NGOs were ineffectual in their attempts to influence the process of policy-making within PLANAFLORO. In addition, NGOs seemed unable to maintain channels of political accountability to their constituencies. NGOs participating in PLANAFLORO exhibited the same institutional weaknesses of the State that they were trying to hold accountable. Moreover, most NGOs did not have financial autonomy and were heavily dependent on international donor funds to function. Among the MSOs, the lack of financial autonomy resulted in the lack of efficient channels of accountability that could have enhanced popular participation in PLANAFLORO. Meanwhile, most GSOs not only had very limited popular authority in Rondônia’s society, but also did not have any formal mechanism to democratize the information gathered within PLANAFLORO. In addition, the evidence showed that NGOs participating in PLANAFLORO were so heterogeneous in their interests that they were unable to formulate a cohesive set of policies to influence the implementation of the project. As a result, the participation of NGOs became excessively centralized in the
FORUM of NGOs. Consequently, the FORUM of NGOs that entered the process to function as a political umbrella gained more power in the process than did the individual NGOs.

This study also showed that the participation of NGOs in PLANAFLORO had very little effect on engaging the grassroots segments of civil society. The lack of grassroots engagement left the NGOs isolated in an internal struggle within the program’s governing organs. As a result, NGO representatives were outnumbered by State officials; they were technically ill-prepared, and did not have the social leverage to obtain meaningful concessions from the State government and the World Bank. The results of this study of PLANAFLORO also show that when service-provider GSOs became involved in the direct execution of program’s components, they seemed to lose interest in the advocacy roles that had initially justified their inclusion in the development process. This evidence challenges the idealistic notion of NGOs as the ultimate antidote against the malaise of the contemporary State. The results of this study also indicate that there is a need for the public domain to establish mechanisms to follow the participation of NGOs in economic development programs.

Local NGOs also became entangled in an intricate web of political barriers involving the State, the World Bank and
the transnational NGOs. Each one of these institutional actors had its own difficulties adjusting to the novelty of PLANAFLORO’s participation model. This was clearly demonstrated by statements of State officials and NGO representatives about their difficulties in establishing a more productive functioning of the PLANAFLORO’s governing organs. Meanwhile, World Bank management seemed ill-prepared to follow the complexity of the participatory model of PLANAFLORO.

Despite the large amount of PLANAFLORO’s funds that were spent to restructure State agencies, the Rondonian State was plagued by the same structural weaknesses that afflicted its NGOs. Moreover, the imposition of the participation model in PLANAFLORO created an intrinsic tension not only between the State and the NGOs, but also between the State and the World Bank. As a result, both the State and the World Bank were slow in adjusting to the dynamics of NGO participation in PLANAFLORO. This situation resulted in a political environment where positive dialogue became ever more difficult because of widespread suspicion regarding each actor’s actual agenda. Meanwhile, the influence of transnational NGOs working in Rondônia contributed to a globalization of PLANAFLORO which progressively undermined the possibilities of a productive
dialogue between State officials and local NGOs. The failure of the NGOs and the State government to achieve productive policy-reform resulted in enhanced control by the World Bank of the implementation of PLANAFLORO. Ironically, the political differences between the transnational actors (i.e., World Bank and transnational NGOs) seem to have undermined the local basis of political participation in PLANAFLORO, which may have further weakened the democratic political process of civil society in Rondônia.

The empirical results of NGO participation in PLANAFLORO may have some important theoretical repercussions. When contrasted against the theoretical models developed by Tocqueville and Gramsci, the participation of NGOs in PLANAFLORO seems to fall short of expectations implicit in both models. If contrasted against the Tocquevillean model, NGOs lacked the social capital necessary for them to act as socializing agencies that could ultimately obtain meaningful changes in PLANAFLORO’s implementation. Moreover, when contrasted against the Gramscian model, NGOs did not have as a goal the utilization of their participation in PLANAFLORO as an instrument to dispute the political hegemony of the State in Rondônia. On the contrary, the NGO leadership seemed to have increasingly become adjusted to the institutional arrangements proposed
by the World Bank. Meanwhile, the intervention of transnational actors (i.e., the World Bank and transnational NGOs) seemed to pose an additional challenge for the autonomous development of both the local State’s and civil society’s institutions.

The evidence also suggests that NGOs were not a monolithic group and had conflicting views of their roles within the process. Therefore, the typology used in this study (MSO and GSO) to distinguish different organizations of civil society was useful to unveil the distinct conceptions guiding NGO participation in PLANAFLORO. Nonetheless, more attention should be given to developing a more complete model to better identify the distinct organizations composing civil society and their, sometimes, conflicting agendas.

The results of this research show that the participation of NGOs can not be considered a panacea for deficient popular involvement in the implementation of regional development programs. Nevertheless, it is also necessary to resist the temptation of “throwing the baby out with the bathwater.” The results coming from Rondônia also show that local NGOs and State officials started a slow process of institutional learning in PLANAFLORO. However, this learning process was hampered by the absence of strong
State and civil society institutions that could have improved the conditions for democratic governance.

Therefore, if the World Bank is genuinely interested in embracing the notion of participatory development, a primary requirement will be the transformation of its existing approach to institutional strengthening. Presently, the World Bank continues to prioritize the development of the capabilities of State agencies. A more inclusive process of increasing organizational capabilities must necessarily include the organizations of civil society. In Rondônia, MSOs and other grassroots organizations have the potential to provide the democratic channels necessary to engage their constituencies in the process of economic development. However, their present institutional weaknesses leave such a potential unfulfilled. In addition, there are no indications that local NGOs will be able to become financially autonomous.

Furthermore, it is necessary to indicate that, given the present institutional reality in both State and civil society, achieving a more participatory process of development in Rondônia will not be a quick process. Rondônia does not have the financial conditions nor the political capabilities to engender such a process on its own.
The World Bank or other multilateral development agencies interested in engaging in participatory development should concentrate on policy-reform in three important domains. First, the results of PLANAFLORO demonstrate that the simple establishment of ambitious physical targets (i.e., roads' construction, demarcation of reserves) does not guarantee success. On the contrary, the chances of long-term success reside primarily in the establishment of realistic targets that reflect the strength of existing political institutions.

Second, the World Bank must recognize the need to structure the participation of NGOs in its programs according to the specific realities of each case. In PLANAFLORO, the model of participation was not sensitive to the social and ethnic diversity of the program’s beneficiaries. Moreover, the World Bank did not identify the institutional capability of Rondônia’s civil society during the design of PLANAFLORO. As a result, the participation of civil society organizations in PLANAFLORO became a process concentrated in an elite group of people while the majority of the population was unaware of the program’s objectives. Therefore, the identification of institutional capability of both State and civil society organizations must be a priority during the design of economic development programs.
Third, the World Bank should have clear targets regarding the development of democratic and administrative capacities in both the State and civil society. Among these capacities, the Bank should aim at developing conflict management systems and channels of political accountability at the grassroots as components of its participatory models.

Finally, policy-reform should also be embraced by the NGO sector. Local NGOs should focus on the strengthening of their own democratic channels, which could allow their named constituencies to become fully engaged in the economic development process. Meanwhile, the partnership between ECOPORÉ and OSR demonstrates the need for MSOs and GSOs to further pursue mechanisms of cooperation that could enhance the effectiveness of NGO participation within programs like PLANAFLORO. Also, in countries where State and NGO institutions are weak, transnational NGOs should strengthen the institutional structures of MSOs. In the case of PLANAFLORO, transnational NGOs reliance on the FORUM of NGOs as their primary partner did not take into account the fact that other important segments of civil society were not convinced that this should be the case.