

# CROSS-BORDER ACTIVISM AND ITS LIMITS

MEXICAN ENVIRONMENTAL ORGANIZATIONS  
AND THE UNITED STATES

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## INTRODUCTION

Non-governmental organizations have been at the spotlight of academic attention over the past two decades. Particularly analyses of globalization, democratization, and changing relations between state, market and civil society cannot go around the rise of these social actors in the local, national, regional and global spheres. As a result, there is a still growing amount of valuable publications on non-governmental organizations (NGOs) of all sorts and from all over the world, written by sociologists, political scientists, anthropologists and other social scientists.

Most of the studies and theories on non-governmental organizations, new social movements, and transnational activism tend to focus on the advancements and promises of these relatively new social actors and processes, and they tend to conclude in positive words on their influence. This is in part a natural result of the rapid emergence and influence of these groups and their local, national and transnational activities. However, the positive approaches seem to be also partly based on a hope – more than a reality - that new actors of organized civil society and their transnational relations will bring about the necessary political and social transformations that governmental agencies and traditional political actors (e.g. political parties and unions) have failed to bring about. This tendency of wishful thinking with respect to the role of non-state activities seems to be directly linked to the historical context of diminished expectations with respect to the role of the state. In the case of environmental issues, which are often of a cross-border nature by themselves, the slow and troublesome inter-

state initiatives to deal with urging problems NGOs could help explain why transnational relations and activities of environmental NGOs (ENGOs) have largely received positive assessments.

Scholarly attention for environmental organizations in developing countries may even be extra positively biased for they have a special position in various ways. First, compared to their counterparts from industrialized countries, the rise of environmental NGOs in developing countries only became strong in the 1990s, thereby turning them into a 'sexy', contemporary issue. Second, they have to operate with significantly less resources, support and governmental recognition than Western ENGOs. Third, these groups give voice to values and interests that have globally been increasingly recognized as indispensable yet are often of secondary or even less relevance to the majority of the population of the country in which they operate, due to the prevalence of economic, social and political problems, particularly economic crises, widespread (extreme) poverty, armed conflicts, etcetera. Fourth, as a result of their lack of funding and of governmental and/or citizens' support, environmental organizations in developing countries have been very active in establishing transnational relations. These special characteristics have turned environmental organizations from developing countries into an attractive subject for research.

However, optimistic scholarly attention for NGOs and transnational activism comes at a price. With theories and analyses focussed on the novelty of new social actors, the promise of them being a source of democratization and sustainable development, and their building of new 'spaces' of civil society beyond borders, certain contradictory elements may be underestimated. This can, for instance, be the fact that some of these ENGOs are elitist organizations and/or a one-person's hobby that hardly fit into the definition of 'organized civil society'; the reproduction of undemocratic practices by these groups themselves; the abuse of ecological images for corporate interests, or of 'non-governmental' actions for governmental purposes; the conflicts and weaknesses of NGOs; the opportunistic nature of some transnational relations; etcetera. In Latin America, these and other realities have contributed to a growing disillusionment among scholars as well as citizens about the role and power of NGOs, which is also linked to a more general decrease of confidence in the social and political transformation processes that are taking place.

The aim of this volume is to put some light at the neglected other side of the coin of environmental organizations in a developing country and their cross-border linkages. This is done by looking at the case

study of Mexican ENGOs and their relations with US counterparts, based on two chapters on local environmental activism in the Mexico-US border region and one chapter on national Mexican NGO activism with respect to the NAFTA. Central to each of the three chapters is an analysis of the complex realities of progress and setbacks of these groups and their transnational activism. And each chapter builds innovative analyses on extensive empirical information, with the aim to answer the following questions: How have environmental organizations in Mexico developed? What has brought them to cooperate with US organizations, and what is keeping or tearing Mexican and US groups apart? What have been the (practical, political, social) results and the limitations of these transnational relations?<sup>1</sup>

Together, the chapters in this volume aim to make a critical analysis of both the advancements in cross-border cooperation of Mexican ENGOs with the United States, and of its limitations. The spatial limits of this volume, however, force us to concentrate on some of the elements that tend to be forgotten in many other studies. While by no means meant as a substitution of other valuable studies, we do wish to point at some aspects, characteristics and trends that have been neglected by other scholars, and consider the theoretical implications of this 'other side of the coin'. By doing so, we hope to stimulate the debate on the national and transnational roles of Mexican environmental NGOs, and we also hope to provide some input to the more general debate on NGOs in a globalizing and increasingly complex world.

### **Mexico-US relations and the environment**

For a long time, neighbouring the United States had largely an economic impact on Mexico.<sup>2</sup> Mexico's external economic and financial relations have generally stemmed for more than three quarters from the United States. Entry into NAFTA has further increased the Mexican dependency on the US economy. For instance, Between 1992 and 1999, the volume of trade between the two neighbours more than doubled, while between 1993 and 2002 the share of Mexican exports going to the United States increased from 83 per cent to 91 per cent (*Latin American Weekly Report*, WR-2-40, p. 473; IMF, 2000). This growing integration shows most prominently in the border region as this region has been transformed from a largely deserted area into a zone with major industries (the so-called maquiladoras) and cities, and an ever growing flow of Mexican and other Latin American migrants moving to the United States. With increased economic

interaction, integration at other levels followed. Among other things, it turned out that the growing importance of bilateral economic relations and the sharing of a long border (of almost 2,000 kilometres) increasingly required coordinated governmental actions (see the Map).

Despite these economic interactions, the relations between the two countries have been far from uncomplicated, due to the large differences between them. Sydney Weintraub (1990, p.8) characterizes this well: ‘There are other pairs of countries whose destinies are intertwined. ... But in no other case has fate placed populous countries so disparate in levels of economic development and cultural tradition next to each other as Mexico and the United States’. For a long time, the Mexican government held a position of political distance to Washington and vigorously stressed the sovereignty of Mexico, while supporting that of other Latin American countries vis-à-vis the United States. In addition, Mexico-US relations have been complicated due to the fact that the political cultures and systems of the two countries greatly differ. Although formally both being federal systems, Mexico has a still largely centralist, presidential political system; and although formally both being electoral and democratic systems, Mexico was during most of the 20th century ruled by a de facto state-party. This has particularly troubled cooperation of governmental agencies in the Mexico-US border region. Above all, the power asymmetry between the two countries is bound to permeate cross-border contact, whether at a local or national level, and whether between state institutions, private sector actors, or organized civil society.

Over the past two decades Mexican environmental NGOs have been establishing numerous relations with counterparts in the United States. In the beginning, Mexico-US cooperation between ENGOs was largely restricted to the border region, a case of joint monitoring of World Bank projects, and some conservation programmes. At this stage, despite geographical proximity, Mexican environmental groups only partly focused on their counterparts in the region; European organizations were probably as important for their funding and information as were US sources, whereas Canadian partners were scarce (Kürzinger *et al.*, 1990, p. 120).

The plans for a North American Free Trade Agreement put Mexico-US environmental activism in a pressure cooker in the early 1990s, both for local groups in the border region as for national Mexican and US organizations. With the sudden (negative) attention for the Mexican government’s weak implementation of environmental policy, there was also (positive) attention for Mexico’s environmental organizations,



which had for more than ten years tried to push governmental agencies towards putting official policies into practice and turning environmental protection into a political priority, however, with little success. The new interest in the United States for environmental implications of deeper economic integration with Mexico, and the successful launching of a major political and public debate on trade and environment by US NGOs, contributed to the creation of extensive and active transnational relations. To Mexican groups, among other things, the NAFTA plan enabled for applying the boomerang tactic, that is to use foreign attention and actors to indirectly put pressure on their own government, since direct activities had only resulted in minor success. Interestingly, in a comparison of Mexico-US cross-border cooperation of NGOs and social movements on issues of environmental protection, labour rights and human rights, Jonathan Fox (2001) finds that cross-border activism has had most impact in the field of environmental issues.

With the signing of the trade agreement and the supplemental environmental agreement, the context of the environmental organizations and their transnational relations changed. On the one hand, working together became politically less urgent, but on the other hand, there were new regional and bilateral institutions that allowed for new relations and projects of environmental NGOs. At the regional (North American) level the Commission for Environmental Cooperation was established. For the Mexico-US border zone two new institutions came into being: the Border Environment Cooperation Commission (BECC) for supporting environmental infrastructure projects, and the North American Development Bank (NADBank) for the funding of environmental projects.

### **Organization of the study**

This volume focuses on the rise and development of transnational relations of Mexican environmental NGOs with US counterparts. It serves as a case study of cross-border activism in a context of asymmetric political relations. It is also an example of the links between neo-liberal economic integration and environmental issues. With these two specific characteristics, the findings from this case study can also make a contribution to broader discussions about the role of current cross-border activism in the context of neo-liberal policies and regional and global power asymmetries.

The first chapter, by Barbara Hogenboom, deals with the role of Mexican and US (national) environmental organizations in the preparatory phase to the NAFTA. The experience of the NAFTA environment debate is compared with optimist theories on global civil society (GCS). Much of these theories centre around the broader positive impact that transnational NGO activism may have on world politics: GCS allows for progressive and marginalized voices to gain volume and influence; transnational politics being a source of democratization; NGO activism contributing to an erosion of the state, and this being a positive trend. Hogenboom analyses and questions these assumptions, first by theoretically discussing them, and secondly by looking at counter-indications from the NAFTA environment debate.

Miriam Alfie Cohen reviews the constitution, classification and goals of Mexican environmental NGOs in the Mexico-US border region since the NAFTA. Her chapter compares environmental activism in the Ciudad Juárez-El Paso area between 1993 and 1997 with environmental activism in the Matamoros-Brownsville area between 1997 and 2000. These case-case studies show how environmental problems in a common border can bring out dynamic and new organizations that have to combat old structures and a vertical political culture. Alfie finds that NAFTA-linked institutions for the protection of the Mexico-US border environment in some cases limits the role of local environmental organizations, and especially grassroots groups.

The chapter by Edit Antal analyses the evolution of binational relations and interactions of ENGOs since the creation of the NAFTA-linked environmental institutions. She focuses on the Mexico-US border zone with a case study of the experiences of groups based in and around Tijuana, and their cross-border links with counterparts in the San Diego area. At the Mexican side of this region there is a history of several grassroots environmental groups, organized from 'below'. This type of citizen organization was significantly affected by the binational institutionalization of environmental issues in the border zone from 'above' that resulted from the supplemental NAFTA agreement on the environment. Antal's case study demonstrates that the representation and articulation of local communities interests in the Mexico-US border zone has been rather problematic in the context of institutionalizing bilateral environmental relations of the Mexican and US states.

In the conclusions, some of the findings of the three chapters are drawn together. In addition, the conclusions discuss the possible implications of the case of Mexican environmental organizations and their relations with US counterparts for the study of cross-border activism, transnational environmental politics, and the role of NGOs in processes of democratization and globalization.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> This project was presented at a panel discussion at the Third European Congress of Latinamericanists CEISAL, 'Cruzando Fronteras en América Latina', that took place from 3 to 6 July 2002 in Amsterdam. We would like to thank all participants of the panel, and particularly the discussants Stephen Mumme and Ton Salman, for their most useful comments and suggestions.

<sup>2</sup> We are here talking about the period after 1848, when Mexico lost more than half of its national territory (comprising California, Texas and New Mexico) to the United States.

Map of the Mexico-US border.

# AWAKENING FROM THE DREAM OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

## THE NAFTA EXPERIENCE

BARBARA HOGENBOOM

Over the past few years, many social scientists have been thinking, talking and writing about processes of globalization. One of the reasons for these efforts is the complexity and contradictory nature of the processes that have culminated roughly during the past 25 years. From a political perspective, on the one hand, worldwide economic liberalization allowed the market and market forces to obtain a more prominent position, partly limiting the size and power of the state, social safety structures, citizens' options for choosing among a range of political programmes, and governments' options for choosing among a range of policy alternatives. On the other hand, there has been a rise of new social movements and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the growing national and international role of this type of civil society actors show that new avenues for citizens' influence have been established. In his critique on 'predatory globalization', Richard Falk (1999) talks about 'globalization-from-below' as a means of citizens to resist 'globalization-from-above'.<sup>1</sup>

Interesting examples of civic resistance against globalization-from-above are the Mexican environmental organizations and their activities beyond national borders that took place in the preparatory phase of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). Their experiences with these transnational politics are the subject of the case study that will be presented here. The environmental debate with respect to the creation of NAFTA was the first major political debate on trade and environment. Shortly after it was announced in 1990 that this would

be negotiated between Mexico, the United States and Canada, environmental organizations from the three countries demanded the inclusion of environmental issues. Later on a wide variety of political actors became involved in this transnational debate, but environmental organizations were the initiators, and they remained crucial sources of criticism and proposals. The broad public and political attention for the linkages between trade and environment was at that time something new, although it did built upon the ideas of sustainable development of the 1980s, and on the simultaneous preparations of experts, governments, international organizations and NGOs around the world for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that would take place in Rio de Janeiro in 1992.

The increasing involvement of organized civil society in international politics, such as those of environmental organizations in the preparations of NAFTA, has brought some scholars to speak of (the rise of) global civil society (GCS). Although global civil society is a concept with various definitions – partly resulting from the various definitions of the concept of civil society – it has by now been widely adopted and used within and outside academic circles. One cause of confusion is the question whether organizations representing companies are included, or whether global civil society refers more narrowly to groups that represent the interests and beliefs of citizens. Without taking a position here on the best concept, this article focuses on the narrow civil elements of civil society, that is civic organizations and social movements, and specifically on their institutionalized building blocks: NGOs. These are also the key social actors in most GCS theories.<sup>2</sup>

In the scholarly debate on the rise of a global civil society, various optimistic notions, concepts and theories can be discerned. It is often pointed out that global civil society allows for citizens' voices to gain volume and influence at the level that is increasingly shaping national and local circumstances: the supranational level (this can be regional and/or global). The role of NGOs in international policy-making with respect to 'new' progressive political issues such as environmental protection, human rights, and the position of women is particularly stressed. And according to several theories, global civil society is a source of democratization of global and regional decision-making processes, as well as of national and local politics. While none of these views and expectations are simply false, they tend to overestimate the positive effects and possibilities, and neglect some of the more negative tendencies and results.

While the academic interest and enthusiasm for new developments and ideas, such as those on GCS, are natural and welcome, in this article I argue that some of the optimism of GCS theory can and should be criticized for short-sidedness. My analysis concentrates on four important notions of GCS theory: first, the idea of the deterritorialization of politics and the emergence of global identities; second, the focus on the shared values of NGOs; third, the assumptions that global civil society is contributing to democratization at all political levels; and finally, the idea that the rise of a global civil society automatically implies the decrease of the state and the state system. The case of the transnational NAFTA environment debate is used here to point at some of the weaknesses of these GCS notions, and to demonstrate the need for further discussion of current ideas, concepts and theories.<sup>3</sup> The NAFTA debate serves as a useful case since it has often been presented as an example of successful transnational cooperation of organized civil society. In addition, the NAFTA debate comprised clear North-South dimensions, so that it may be viewed as a regional test case from which one can draw more 'global' conclusions. Moreover, environmental politics has been an important area of transnational NGO activism, and it has been at the basis of many GCS theories.

### **Dreaming of global civil society**

There is a kind of sweetness hanging around the concept of global civil society – something positive and promising, like a sleeping baby. As Paul Wapner explains, to some scholars global civil society is a domain that possesses normative promise: a sphere transcending the self-regarding character of the state system that can work in service of a genuinely transnational public interest. In their approach, in global civil society people form relationships and develop parts of their identity outside their role as citizen of a particular state. To them, global civil society is 'a promising alternative domain of collective life, (...) in which one thinks and acts independently of one's role as a consumer and producer; (...) free from structural impediments of both state system and world economy' (Wapner, 2000a, p. 261).<sup>4</sup> To these scholars, in short, global civil society is a source of hope.

However, when reading GCS literature, one comes under the impression that because of this hope the analysis of transnational politics has become clouded. It seems as if these scholars turn a blind eye to counter-indications of global civil society as a promising alternative

domain: the conservative ideas of some actors of global civil society; undemocratic practices within and between organizations; global civil society as a source of conflict, competition and violence; interference of states and of corporate interests in this so-called 'civil' domain; etcetera. An illustrative example is that of Ronnie Lipschutz, a prominent writer on global civil society, who does notice that the emergence of global civil society does not automatically lead to a more peaceful and unified world, but nevertheless focuses on the promise: 'a new potential for counterhegemonic and progressive forces' (Lipschutz, 1992, p. 419).

A first element of the perceived promise of global civil society has to do with the idea of the deterritorialization of politics. Much has been written on the ways in which modern science and technologies are affecting political processes and actors (cf. Held *et al.*, 1999; Sassen, 1999; Scholte, 2000). The fact that travelling, transport and communication have speeded up tremendously in the Twentieth Century, and that their cost has been lowered similarly, have profoundly changed politics too. International relations are no longer exclusively available for states, political elites, and some major institutionalized interests (merchandisers, the church). An equally important revolution is the spreading of information. Nowadays, citizens are informed far more rapidly and intensively of things happening far away, whether in 'remote' areas or in the (real or virtual) centres of global power. Meanwhile even small or modestly funded organizations of citizens have the capacity to establish their own relations across borders. Parallel to these new or advanced worldwide possibilities, there are new or advanced global threats that are to some extent enhanced and/or known due to modern science. Among them are weapons of mass destruction, environmental destruction, and terrorism.

These various tendencies have been interpreted by some scholars as contributing to a deterritorialization of politics. GCS theory focuses on cases in which problems exceed (national) territories, which require solutions that involve more than one country. In various ways, the political processes of starting, framing, struggling over, and tackling these problems-beyond-territory are deterritorialized. For instance, in *Foreign Affairs*, Jessica Matthews (1997) describes the rise of an international public opinion as a 'new force on the global scene' that can be extraordinarily potent in getting things done, when informed by worldwide media coverage and mobilized by NGOs. GCS studies also analyse how after having attracted international attention, civic organizations cooperate beyond borders to pressure states, international



organizations and/or large corporations for change. Some scholars have come to speak of the non-territoriality of NGOs' point of view. According to Wapner (2000b, p. 90), this should be understood as NGOs assuming 'a view from no given geographical place in particular', which generates a non-national orientation. Yet it seems that in GCS theory the evidence from some cases of international public attention and transnational cooperation of civic organization is grossly extrapolated. Lipschutz (1992, p. 391, 398) states that 'civil society is becoming global', as civil society connections cross national boundaries and operate within the 'global, non-territorial region'.

This brings us to a second element of GCS theory, the idea of the prominence of shared values and norms. Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink explain that shared values are central to the transnational cooperation of NGOs. 'A transnational advocacy network includes those relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchanges of information and services' (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 2). Unfortunately, in their generally good and thorough book on these networks they say little about the limits of shared values, and the reality that organizations working for the same cause may come in conflict with one another over the precise ends and means. Although they do recognize that within environmental transnational networks there are ideological differences and left-right divisions, Keck and Sikkink focus on the joint efforts. However, it seems to be especially the case for environmental NGOs that ideological, political and strategic differences may cause the movement split in different camps.

The idea of shared values is taken a step further by Lipschutz who, in the line with his thinking on deterritorialization, talks of the rise of collective identities. In his view, the end of the Cold War was the starting point of the development of a politics of collective identity. 'As liberalism is now the operating system around the world, there is less identification with the nation-state as a primary social grouping. However, an individualized identity based on consumption and market is insufficient, which explains the rise of new forms of cosmopolitan, collective identity: human rights, environment, feminism, gay and lesbian rights' (Lipschutz, 1992, p. 415). Despite the fact that Lipschutz states that new collective identities may also be constructed around new nationalist tendencies – which is indeed one of the ingredients of contemporary cultural, ethnic and race conflicts – the idea of new forms of cosmopolitan, collective identity may be criticized of being a rather western, upper-class and overly romantic view of world politics.

Even though a growing number of people in the world of today may feel that their identity is less linked to one town, province or country, there seems to be only a relatively small group to whom such a cosmopolitan identity dominates over an identity based on where one comes from and where one lives.

Thirdly, GCS theory holds that the rise of global civil society makes an important contribution to processes of democratization. One source of democratization is identified in the already mentioned new information technologies. These technologies are seen to disrupt hierarchies and help to 'spread power among more people and groups', while cross-border cooperation offers citizens groups 'unprecedented channels of influence', creating 'circles of influence' that accelerate worldwide changes (Mathews, 1997, p. 54). Such democratizing tendencies are identified by GCS scholars at the local, national, regional and global level. With respect to regional and international politics, in which decision-making is traditionally dominated by governments and international organizations, GCS theory points at cross-border efforts of NGOs to open up the 'closed doors' of official politics, to influence the agenda setting and decisions, and to hold the major actors accountable for their behaviour. Through these roles various NGOs are believed to be constructing at the supranational level a civic counterweight for state power. Moreover, global civil society is seen as a counter-balance for the growing global economic powers, which result from the expansion of transnational corporate actors and interests. Transnationally cooperating civic organizations have also been praised for their ways of working beyond borders. Their relations are described as decentralized networks, and their organization as voluntary, reciprocal, and horizontal patterns of communication and exchange (Keck & Sikkink, 1997, p. 8). Although usually mention is made of the effect that North-South differences can have on transnational NGO relations, for instance because of different views or the inequality of resources, GCS theorists are primarily interested in democratizing tendencies of these relations.

In local and national politics, GCS theory expects equally democratizing results of transnationally cooperating civic organizations, particularly for countries with political systems that are undemocratic or in transition to democracy. NGOs from countries where governments (or companies) are hardly receptive for their demands may seek transnational routes to get their message home. With this so-called boomerang tactic, civic organizations approach foreign states or international organizations, usually with the help of some external

counterparts with more influence, contacts and/or resources. Sometimes the threat alone of mobilizing these better 'equipped' counterparts to attract international attention and to influence the international public opinion can be enough to give NGOs from countries with a (semi-) authoritarian regime more influence in national or local politics. Keck and Sikkink (1997, p. 36-37) stress that cooperation of NGOs through transnational networks is transforming the international arena as a whole, and that the application of the boomerang tactic contributes to undermining absolute claims to sovereignty.

This brings us to the fourth and final element of GCS theory to be discussed here: the idea that 'more civil society' equals 'less state' – and often also 'less sovereignty' – and this equation being a good thing. This approach is partly a reflection of the optimistic or even romantic analyses of the local and national role of NGOs, which were particularly dominant in the 1980s. Post-Keynesian disillusiones over the abilities of the state to build or maintain a welfare system, the slowness of states to pick up urgent non-traditional political issues (such as environmental degradation), and the impressive and worldwide rise of New Social Movements, NGOs and new grassroots organizations helped create the image of organized civil society as being better than the state, both in a normative and a practical sense. In this context, some scholars came to argue that with adequate funding NGOs can outperform government in the delivery of many public services, and that 'they are better than governments at dealing with problems that grow slowly; the 'soft' threats of environmental degradation, denial of human rights, population growth, and lack of development' (Mathews, 1997, p. 63).

GCS theory stresses the ways in which the involvement of civic organizations is undermining the international system based on states and sovereignty. Martin Shaw (1992, p. 431-32) argues that 'the beginning of the development of global civil society starts to try to make the state system responsible', which he describes as 'a challenge to principles of sovereignty'. Similarly, Lipschutz (1992, p. 391) believes 'transnational political networks are challenging the nation-state system', yet adding that the nation-state as an actor has not finished. Likewise he argues that 'participants in the networks of global civil society interact with states and governments ... and are not constrained by the state system itself'; global civil society 'has to recognize states, but it is not state centric, and the code of global civil society denies the primacy of states or their sovereign rights' (Lipschutz, 1992, p. 393, 398). Apart from some nuances, Lipschutz clearly regards modern

world politics as an area in which organized civil society can move around largely autonomously and unaffected by states, sovereignty and interstate relations. This approach also shows from the historical parallel he sees: 'global civil society mirrors the type of supranational civil society that existed ... prior to the Treaty of Westphalia and the emergence of the state system, (when) there existed a relatively vibrant trans-European civil society, linked to territories but not restricted to territory' (Lipschutz, 1992, p. 400).

This beyond-the-state element of GCS theory is partly a reaction to earlier analyses of cross-border activities of non-state actors. In most of the older studies on the growing importance of transnational politics NGOs were viewed as important mainly because they influenced state behaviour. In other words, in the 1970s scholars of cross-border NGO politics fell back on the traditional notion that genuine political activity is in (the relations between) nation-states, and that the state system is the arena for affecting human behaviour throughout the world. This one-sided view has motivated scholars such as Wapner to look into other directions, such as the ways in which NGOs directly affect the behaviour of larger collectives throughout the world. He sees the rise of what he calls world civic politics, understood as 'forms of governance that are civil as opposed to official or state constituted in character. ... (C)ivic power is the forging of voluntary and customary practices into mechanisms that govern public affairs' (Wapner, 1995, p. 320).

### **The transnational NAFTA environment debate**

Before examining GCS theory with the help of the case of the NAFTA environment debate, let us first review some of its main characteristics. The debate started in 1990.<sup>5</sup> Shortly after being publicly announced, the plan for a North American free trade area met political resistance from various sides. Especially in Mexico and the United States, further economic integration of such unequal countries caused great concern, especially about the protection of labour rights and the environment. The trade agreement was promoted by the Mexican government as indispensable for growth and development, but environmental organizations in both countries worried about the impact of the expected rapid growth in Mexico, and about the effects of free trade in a context of divergent levels of environmental protection. The excessive ecological degradation and health hazards caused by rapid industrialization in Mexico's border region with the United States became a very sensitive and hot issue in the (US) media and the relations

between the two countries. Simultaneously, labour unions and protectionist forces in the United States unfair competition from Mexico-based industry. Also the semi-authoritarian regime and the human rights situation in Mexico were subject of debate. As a considerable number of members of the US Congress lent a ready ear to the demands of the heterogeneous group of NAFTA critics, Mexico's environmental policy turned into a major issue.

Central to the NAFTA environment debate was Mexico's weak enforcement of its environmental regulations and standards at that time. This weakness was the result of fragmented policy efforts, reflecting the low priority of the environment for the Mexican government. Although environmental legislation had improved over the years, the implementation of laws and the enforcement of standards were largely neglected. Governmental environmental agencies functioned with insufficient resources and therefore insufficient and underqualified personnel, especially after the more than average budget cuts following the economic crisis and austerity policies of the 1980s. For example, while combating air pollution in Mexico City was president Salinas' major environmental policy objective, in 1990 the Environmental Ministry had only 9 inspectors to control the city's 30,000 industries (Mumme, 1992, p. 133). There was also a structural lack of environmental concern and commitment from the other government agencies, which inhibited genuine integration of protection measures in other policy areas. The Environmental Ministry focused mainly on pollution and the conservation of protected areas, while neglecting natural resources and ecosystems. Mexico's environmental policy thus remained disconnected from its general development strategy (Carabias & Provencio, 1994).

Due to the NAFTA plan, these weak environmental policies that had previously been mainly of concern to some Mexican citizens and to Mexico's environmental organizations, attracted the attention of US and Canadian citizens and NGOs too. Until then, the small Mexican environmental movement had struggled rather unsuccessfully for their government to take environmental protection seriously. The Mexican government had been embarrassed by internal environmental criticism for it might hurt its internal legitimacy, and its international image. However, with a combination of a few limited policy improvements and subtle repression of 'loud' groups, the government had been able to silence most of the environmental movement (Demmers & Hogenboom, 1992). It was clear from the start of the

NAFTA debate, that US and Canadian organizations could not be as easily silenced, and this meant a political watershed.

After the announcement of the NAFTA plan, the complex links between free trade and national environmental policy became a major subject of debate. Environmentalists and interested citizens learned that (relatively) stringent environmental and natural resources legislation, like export and import controls, may be considered as a trade obstruction under a free trade agreement. This could become problematic for Mexico, the United States and Canada, as different environmental policies and standards in matters that are somehow trade related might be challenged as either indirect subsidies (e.g. in the case of national subsidies for environmentally friendly farming or fishing methods), or as non-tariff trade barriers (e.g. in the case of special environmental protection requirements for imported products, or policies restricting the use of natural resources to national consumption). Stringent environmental protection is thus likely to be discouraged or even sanctioned by a free trade agreement. And since the negotiations of trade agreements as well as the dispute settlement processes take place behind closed doors, free trade agreements have also been accused of undermining national democracy (Ritchie, 1993; Shrybman, 1993).

Concerns over the short-term and long-term ecological effects of economic integration stimulated environmental NGOs from Mexico, the United States and Canada to undertake cross-border activism. During the three years of NAFTA preparations and negotiations, transnationally many contacts were established, information was shared, positions and proposals were jointly developed, and environmental NGOs (ENGOs) cooperated among themselves and with other organizations to have these proposals included in the trade agreement. The plan for the NAFTA thus gave way to a range of unexpected political events. First, the criticism of environmental NGOs on the free trade proposal and Mexico's weak environmental policy was not anticipated because previously few of these organizations had been working on trade issues and economic policy-making. Second, the number and variety of Mexican, US and Canadian organizations joining in the debate was not witnessed before. This was a result of the spreading of the idea of sustainable development, which stimulated environmental, development and popular organizations as well as various types of unions, church-based groups and other civil society organizations to join forces. Third, the transnational nature of the debate on NAFTA was unprecedented in North America. Never before

had there been such an extensive cross-border interaction of NGOs, labour unions and private sector organizations, among each other and with government agencies and politicians. Fourth, while the mobilization capacities of labour unions were known, the public and political support for the environmental criticism caught the three governments and other proponents of free trade by surprise. Evidently, US labour resistance against free trade with Mexico fed the more general resistance against NAFTA in the United States, which gave way to additional support for the environmental concerns that were raised (cf. Audley, 1997). In addition to US social self-interest (protectionism if you like), however, in each of the three countries there appeared to be a profound public interest in the links between regional economic integration and sustainable development.

As a result of these four novelties, the Mexican government found itself faced with an unknown pattern of political pressure for better environmental protection, which was linked up to a crucial project for Mexico's economic restructuring process. Moreover, as critics of the NAFTA were establishing transnational relations, their ideas turned out to have considerable political leverage. If the NAFTA were to become real, this criticism had to be effectively dealt with. The Mexican government as well as the US and Canadian government, and eventually also private sector organizations of these countries, were therefore forced to respond to the issues that were initially raised by environmental NGOs. Before turning to these responses, we will first shortly review the major environmental actors and their positions.

### **Environmental NGOs in the NAFTA debate**

In Mexico, NGOs criticized the free trade initiative and governmental proposals for largely ignoring sustainable development and environmental protection. Mexican organizations generally feared that NAFTA would intensify exploitation and degradation of Mexico's ecosystems and natural resources, and that the agreement would lead to a further subordination of ecological principles to economic expansion (Peña, 1993). Many of the ENGOs that strongly opposed the official proposals for NAFTA were organized in the Pact of Ecologist Groups (PGE). In the NAFTA process, the Pact acted mainly through the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC), created in 1991 by close to a hundred environmental groups, workers and peasants unions, organizations for development and social justice, human rights organizations and women's groups. As such, RMALC had a diverse

grassroots base. RMALC considered NAFTA a project that would be profitable for only a small elite at the cost of the majority of Mexicans and Mexico's environment and natural resources. According to this network, trade liberalization could only be beneficial for Mexico if it were part of a development strategy based on popular needs (RMALC, 1993, p. 157).

More moderate Mexican organizations that were involved in the NAFTA debate were the Autonomous Institute for Ecological Research (INAIN), the Group of Hundred (Grupo de los Cien), and the Union of Environmental Groups (UGAM). The organizations rather perceived NAFTA as a problematic but inevitable stage in the development of Mexico, which should be accompanied with certain environmental safeguards. They did not oppose the trade agreement, and aimed to play a constructive role by proposing environmental safeguards and institutions. Despite their somewhat better relations with the Mexican state than critical groups, they also struggled with certain political obstacles. UGAM, for instance, had also poor access to official information from the Mexican government on the negotiations. Most of what they received were documents in English obtained by their US and Canadian counterparts. In addition, similar to most Mexican ENGOs, many of UGAM's organizations had to deal with a minimal economic and physical infrastructure (Barba Pérez, 1993, p. 131-32).

Along the Mexico-US border some local Mexican NGOs attempted to influence the NAFTA negotiations, partly through existing cross-border relations. The Mexican environmental organizations in the border area with the United States that were most active in the NAFTA debate also opposed the negotiated agreement.<sup>6</sup> They worked with US border organizations and with the Mexican universities *Colegio de Sonora* and *Colegio de la Frontera Norte*. These border ENGOs and universities were all members of the binational Border Health and Environmental Network. Meanwhile, communication between Mexican border groups and Mexico City-based ENGOs on NAFTA was quite feeble because of differences in interests and position. And like other Mexican groups, border NGOs were discouraged by a lack of information, experience and finance (Alfie, 1998; Land, 1993).

In the United States, there was primarily fear that under NAFTA Mexico's weak enforcement of environmental legislation would be detrimental for US economic and environmental interests. Mexico was expected to derive unfair trade advantages from its low protection levels and might turn into a 'pollution haven', with the US losing industries and jobs. Many environmental concerns had to do with the



possibility of NAFTA legally and politically limiting the options for stringent US environmental policy.<sup>7</sup> Other issues of importance were food safety (fear for less inspection of agricultural products imported from Mexico, and harmonization of food standards) and the pollution of the border region. Especially after the US media presented a range of horror stories and pictures on environmental degradation along the border with Mexico, it became an important issue in the United States and the transnational debate. Apart from ENGO criticism, US labour unions illustrated their opposition to the agreement with examples of non-enforcement of environmental regulations in the *maquiladoras*. Finally, apart from these national US interests, there was also concern for the regional environment, including the conservation of animals, plants and ecosystems in Mexico.

Practically all major US environmental organizations as well as many local groups, particularly those in the border region with Mexico, became involved in the NAFTA debate. Among them were large moderate ENGOs such as National Audubon Society, Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), National Wildlife Federation (NWF), World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Nature Conservancy, Defenders of Wildlife, and Environmental Defense Fund (EDF). Major critical ENGOs on NAFTA such as Friends of the Earth, Sierra Club and Greenpeace found a powerful ally in the consumer organization Public Citizen. Through the network organization Citizens Trade Campaign (CTC) critical ENGOs also cooperated with the American Federation of Labor and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) as well as with NGOs for development, human rights, women, immigrants, Christians and minorities.

Border groups were a small but important faction in the group of critical US ENGOs involved in the NAFTA debate. They were among the first to warn of environmentally detrimental effects of free trade between the United States and Mexico (cf. TCPS, 1990; Kelly & Kamp, 1991). The Arizona Toxins Information, the Border Ecology Project (BEP), the Environmental Health Coalition and the Texas Center for Policy Studies (TCPS) publicly criticized official proposals and came up with alternatives. The border groups' experience with the environmental effects of economic integration and their relations with Mexican border organizations 'lent them credibility not enjoyed by many national environmental groups' (Land, 1993, p. 104). In contrast with the rather poor relations between Mexican border groups and Mexico City-based organizations, due to the NAFTA debate Washington-based ENGOs discovered the border organizations. US

border ENGOs serviced national organizations with information on the border problems, they helped shape the NGO agenda, and they were an intermediary between US and Mexican NGOs (Land, 1993, p. 103-104).

NAFTA and its possible environmental impact was less of a political issue in Canada than in Mexico and the United States. Very much against the will of critical Canadian NGOs, free trade with the United States had already been established, and extending free trade to Mexico was not expected to considerably affect Canada any further. Although many Canadian citizens viewed the issue of NAFTA's environmental impact as a Mexico-US affair, some organizations were actively involved in the debate. This was the case for the Action Canada Network (ACN), which - similar to RMALC and CTC - consists of a heterogeneous group of critical organizations, including the Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA). The network opposed the negotiators' plans and perceived NAFTA as 'one step more down the road of free trade', involving many broad issues of Canadian concern. Canada's moderate ENGO Pollution Probe also worked on NAFTA. Like its counterparts in Mexico and the United States, this organization had good relations with government agencies. Pollution Probe at times cooperated with moderate US organizations, especially the NWF. Its links with Mexican groups, however, were rather weak.

### *The three phases of the debate*

The transnational NAFTA environment debate started with an explorative phase. Through a range of studies, declarations and transnational meetings, NGOs developed and exchanged ideas, and came to know one another. Both moderate and critical ENGOs wanted environmental concerns to become an integral part of the trade negotiations. They advocated clear arrangements that would allow for stringent (US) environmental policy, as well as funding structures that would support environmental government agencies in Mexico with implementing policy. These ideas, as well as some labour issues, were shared by members of the US Congress, resulting in a majority in the US Congress linking environmental concerns to approval of the start of NAFTA negotiations.<sup>8</sup> In response to these demands, on 1 May 1991, President Bush declared that his government would make a review of US-Mexico environmental issues, and would negotiate NAFTA on the principle of maintaining its environmental laws, regulations and standards. The ecological problems in the Mexico-US border region would not be included as a topic for the trade

negotiations, but they would be dealt with via bilateral cooperation. This declaration satisfied a majority of the members of Congress, thereby giving a green light for starting the trade negotiations.

The debate's second phase revolved around Mexico-US environmental cooperation and the incorporation of environmental provisions in NAFTA. The official acknowledgement of the environmental issue regarding NAFTA negotiations shifted the NAFTA environment debate from exploring and raising issues to discussing and designing environmental arrangements. From that time onwards proponents of the agreement, in the first place the US and Mexican government, became actively involved in the debate, and rapidly developed their position on environmental issues. Ecological degradation of the border region became a sensitive issue, and the plans for Mexico-US environmental border cooperation turned out to be crucial for the governments to deal with the criticism on that point.

With the May 1 declaration the Bush administration had caused a split between moderate and critical environmental organizations. While interaction between critical and moderate groups continued, their perception of problems and solutions differed considerably, and so did their political strategies. Critical organizations wanted to convert NAFTA into a regional development agreement, and maintained that negotiations should be slowed down in order to at least draft a social and environmental charter. Moderate organizations, however, believed that the integration of a set of environmental safeguards in NAFTA could prevent environmental damage. While government teams were negotiating the contents of NAFTA, moderate NGOs presented specific Environmental Safeguard Clauses that could be included in the agreement. In general, moderate ENGOs proved to be more willing to compromise with government proposals than critical organizations. Still, when in August 1992 the negotiating teams presented what they called 'the greenest trade agreement'<sup>9</sup>, both critical and moderate environmental organizations declared that the agreement lacked the necessary 'strong' language, enforcement mechanisms, and financial arrangements for environmental protection. Even after the subsequent commitment that a regional environmental commission would be established, practically all ENGOs denounced the outcome. Since the US labour unions' opposition had also substantial support in US Congress, Bush was unable to achieve NAFTA's ratification before the end of his presidency.

The final phase of the NAFTA debate started with the proposal of Bill Clinton, the then Democratic candidate for presidency, to add

supplemental agreements on environmental protection and labour rights to the trade agreement. After being elected, President Clinton convinced Mexico and Canada they had to go along with these side agreements if they wanted to realize the North American Free Trade Area, but serious disagreement arose between the three governments. The most heavily debated issues with respect to a supplemental environmental agreement were the authority and powers of the regional Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC), and the possibility of introducing trade sanctions against a country that would relax or not implement its national environmental legislation. Meanwhile, the Clinton administration established close relations with the major moderate US ENGOs. And also private sector organizations became actively involved in this stage of the transnational debate.

The final phase of the debate involved many interests, positions and actors. While moderate US NGOs cooperated with the US negotiating team, lowering their previous demands and focusing largely on a strong CEC, critical NGOs worked on a transnational proposal for an (alternative) agreement for sustainable trade and development. The issue of trade sanctions triggered serious tensions between the Clinton Administration, which was the main proponent of trade sanctions, and the Mexican (and to a lesser extent the Canadian) government as well as US and Mexican private sector organizations. In Mexico, many feared that these sanctions could be abused by the United States for protectionist or other reasons. Also NGOs had a hard time dealing with the issue: moderate US NGOs like the NWF and WWF did not demand sanctions, but they did not support the opposing position of their Mexican counterparts either. And in the drafting of a transnational alternative agreement by critical organizations, the subject was a source of serious discussion which ended in leaving proposals for fines and trade sanctions out of the final version.

In the end, the negotiation teams of Mexico, the United States and Canada agreed on the supplemental agreements for the environment and for labour protection, which were then signed by their governments, and finally ratified – after serious wealing and dealing in US Congress – thus allowing NAFTA to start at the first day of 1994. The supplemental environmental agreement included certain limited supranational responsibilities for the CEC, and the possibility to impose trade sanctions (in some very specific cases) on a country that is not enforcing its environmental legislation.<sup>10</sup> Although the latter was a novelty in trade agreements, the supplemental agreement contains a

range of provisions that can prevent such measures from being used, even in the event of a clear violation of the supplemental agreement. Also the CEC's mandate was such that it would be a reactive device for disputes rather than directing and regulating policy processes (Mumme, 1993). The supplemental agreement left the issue of environmental funding largely out, but Mexico and the United States agreed on the creation of the bilateral North American Development Bank (NADBANK) and the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC).

### **Transnational politics: some awakening realities**

Let us now turn to the question what the case of the NAFTA environment debate tells us about the usefulness of GCS theory, its shortcomings, and some of the neglected – and less attractive – aspects of transnational politics. We will discuss this here along abovementioned four elements of this theory: deterritorialization, shared values, democratization, and less state and sovereignty. As explained before, and as a misdemeanour of what might at certain instances be viewed as rather blunt reasoning, one of the purposes of this exercise is to boost (further) scholarly thinking and debate on GCS theory.

#### *Territorial influences.*

First, with respect to the element of deterritorialization, the NAFTA environment debate shows that national identity and context remain of great influence, despite intense cross-border contacts and cooperation of ENGOs. The rather large institutional differences, such as the size, membership and financial basis of organizations and the professionalism of their staff, proved to be cause of certain tensions between Mexican, US and Canadian organizations, yet without turning into a real obstacle for cooperation. Differences in membership and resources of Mexican versus US and Canadian organizations produced at times certain distrust. Several groups in the United States and Canada have a large number of members (e.g., at the time of the NAFTA debate, 2.3 and 5.5 million in the case of Greenpeace USA and the WWF respectively). On the contrary, most ENGOs in Mexico have few official members. Instead of the type of membership whereby people pay contribution and receive the organization's magazine, members of Mexican environmental organizations generally are, or have been, personally active in the organization. So US ENGOs had some reservations about their Mexican colleagues, because the latter did not seem to (officially)

represent a wide group of citizens in the way the former were seen to do. According to Barkin (1994, p. 351), US organizations also viewed the Mexican environmental movement as very incipient and immature, with its activities reflecting its middle-class bias. Vice versa, the fact that various moderate US organizations receive considerable funding from the corporate sector gave occasion for some distrust among Mexican organizations, which were not always sure how much the former cared about the inclusion of environmental provisions in NAFTA, and to what extent those providers of funds influenced the position of the US ENGOs.

More significantly, the views, priorities and impact of environmental organizations in the NAFTA debate were also partly linked to their territorial origin. Environmental protection meant something else to Mexican and American citizens and organizations. In Mexico, on the one hand, the main environmentalist concerns were uncontrolled industrialization, deepened social inequalities, and unsustainable exploitation of natural resources. In various interviews, Mexican environmentalists argued that one of the interests of the US in free trade with Mexico, as previously with Canada, was access to its abundant natural resource base. With the average US citizen consuming more natural resources than citizens of any other country in the world, US resources have been depleting and have become insufficient to support the US lifestyle. In that context, NAFTA could strongly affect Mexico, especially in the areas of fossil fuels and water (Barkin, 1992, p. 280-81; Shrybman, 1993, p. 275). On the other hand, an important US concern was that the NAFTA would produce legal and political obstacles to stringent environmental legislation. In addition, US citizens worried over more ecological degradation in the border region, and the import of toxic goods. As Mexico's weak environmental policy enforcement added to the broader fear in the United States of relocation of plants to Mexico, many US NGOs focused on the border region and industrial pollution – and these became the major environmental issues in the NAFTA negotiations. Although the protection of natural resources was an important issue for Mexican as well as Canadian groups, it never became much of a priority in the transnational NAFTA debate.

The power asymmetry in the region shaped the transnational relations, hampering cross-border identification and trust. Equal partnership was difficult to achieve, even when actively searched for, since the enormous political inequality between the United States, on the one hand, and Mexico and Canada, on the other hand, affected

NGO relations too. Mexican and Canadian organizations were very concerned about the regional economic and political dominance of the United States. Unlike US ENGOs, critical groups in Mexico and Canada did not have the feeling that they would really be able to change or obstruct the NAFTA proposal, as a result of their own limited influence in national politics and the weakness of their government towards the United States. This was to be a motive for solidarity as well as for developing a different political strategy. Particularly critical organizations in Canada focused more on analysing the NAFTA process and looking for alternatives coming from the major players, whereas US groups were busy developing their own proposals and helping government officials to formulate their ideas. Mexican organizations tended to combine these approaches. This difference stems also from the fact that US ENGOs tend to be more single-issue organizations, whereas in Mexico and Canada organizations generally look at environmental issues from a broader economic and social perspective.

The fact that the environmental issues were primarily dealt with at a parallel, bilateral track by the Mexican and US governments further accentuated the enormous regional power asymmetry. Due to this asymmetry, US political decisions determined the course of the negotiations (e.g. Bush's May 1 declaration, and Clinton's proposal for supplemental agreements) and US concerns prevailed. The domination of the US government and US Congress provided NGOs from the United States with a key position in the NAFTA debate. This was particularly the case for the major moderate US ENGOs: apart from various informal relations, in 1991, the National Audubon Society, NRDC, NWF, WWF and Nature Conservancy were invited by the Bush Administration to join policy advisory committees of the US Trade Representative (USTR), and in 1993, the negotiating team under Clinton further intensified cooperation with these ENGOs. Moderate Mexican groups tried to influence their influential counterparts, but these relations were evidently very unbalanced.

Taken together, the NAFTA case suggests that notions of deterritorialization should be applied more carefully in GCS theories (and theories on globalization). This is supported by other analyses of transnational politics, which point, among other things, at the influence of domestic political culture (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 293) and domestic political structures (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 162) in transnational politics. Asymmetries are most clear in cases of North-South cooperation, especially in funding issues, even though there is usually awareness about this in transnational networks (Keck & Sikkink, 1998,

p. 161, 206). In addition, deterritorialization is not exclusively but still dominantly an elite thing, generating new inequalities, as we will discuss further on.

### *Values and politics*

Turning to the second element of GCS theory, namely that of shared values, the NAFTA case demonstrates that also transnational relations are heavily affected by political and ideological differences. In particular, attitudes towards existing economic and political (power) structures are crucial. In the NAFTA debate, organizations that shared many environmental principles became split over their attitude towards the neo-liberal policy of regional free trade and investment. Moderate groups believed that some environmental safeguards and the CEC would prevent from excessive eco damage and that increased economic growth would provide for more prosperity for all and the resources for environmental protection. In the eyes of critical groups, only an agreement for sustainable development would achieve these aims – neo-liberal development would rather harm than benefit ecosystems as well as the poor.

Such a split between groups accepting prevailing power structures and groups attempting to overcome them is quite a general feature in both national and transnational civil society (Macdonald, 1994). Power and attitudes towards power structures are important ingredients in NGO relations, and NGOs can have strong links to the state and the corporate sector. The split of environmentalists in the NAFTA debate was not an accident or a complete endogenous process: it was first orchestrated by the Bush administration (with the May 1 declaration), and later on deliberately fed by all NAFTA proponents. Especially in the third phase of the debate, governmental agencies and private sector organizations opened their doors for moderate US organizations for the purpose of exchanging information and views as well as some forms of cooperation. The US ministries of Trade (USTR) and of Environmental Protection (EPA), for instance, treated the moderate ENGOs much better than critical organizations and their networks. The Mexican government's NAFTA office in Washington DC was another important institution for the transnational pro-NAFTA lobby by stimulating the relations between the Mexican government and US Congress, US and Mexican business organizations, and on environmental issues also with the seven major moderate US ENGOs. The Center for Public Integrity (1993, p. 1) found that Mexico 'mounted the most expensive, elaborate campaign campaign ever



conducted in the United States by a foreign government'. The involvement and the divide-and-rule strategies of private sector organizations in the NAFTA environment debate also added to the split between moderate and critical environmental groups. In addition, several moderate US ENGOs received direct corporate financial support, and particularly the NWF and WWF counted on considerable funding of companies, which stood to benefit from NAFTA.<sup>11</sup>

Ideologically, the basic difference between moderate and critical ENGOs in the NAFTA debate was related to their positions on dominant economic and political structures, which were in general opposed by critical groups and accepted or neglected by moderate groups. In their alternative plan for North American integration, critical organizations from Mexico, the United States and Canada argue that citizens are faced with a fundamental choice between two visions: the free trade or neo-liberal vision offered by NAFTA promoters, and the alternative vision that 'offers a democratic program for North American integration based on the principles of justice and sustainability' (Alliance for Responsible Trade *et al.*, 1993, p. 1). These ideological differences caused different attitudes towards political actors, politics, and political strategies. Especially in the United States, moderate organizations tended to be more willing to make political compromises with the government, and therefore they had better relations with government agencies than critical groups. After being a source of environmental proposals, pressure and criticism during the first and second phase of the debate, moderate US ENGOs in the end actively supported the NAFTA package when US Congressional support for ratification required an extra push.

The environmentalists' split profoundly affected the direction and outcome of the political struggle over NAFTA and the environment. Partly as a result of the strength of critical organizations, moderate US ENGOs could provide valuable input in the NAFTA negotiations. The success of their constructive role proved to depend on the continued threat of critical US groups and their ideas, which had produced a lack of a secure majority in US Congress for NAFTA. It was this threat that enabled moderate organizations to gain government concessions. In addition, moderate groups were able to dominate the US ENGO input by not supporting critical initiatives, while convincing critical groups, which needed the legitimacy moderate groups offered, to endorse their proposals (Audley, 1997).

These ideological and political differences between non-governmental organizations strongly influenced their transnational

relations too. Although occasionally there were initiatives, such as joint letters or transnational meetings, in which both moderate and critical groups participated, they increasingly operated separately. The need for moderate US organizations to cooperate across borders was relatively limited since the United States was evidently the most powerful party in the negotiations, and these organizations had both reasonable access to the government and considerable support in Congress. The cross-border relations of moderate ENGOs were therefore occasional, and these organizations hardly worked on a transnational position, even less so in the debate's third phase when US moderate environmentalists were spending much of their time in Washington. Conversely, critical ENGOs in all three countries had far less access to the governments, and their strategy was to expand participation (across borders and with other types of NGOs). In their case, transnational relations only deepened towards the end of the debate as they focussed on developing a common transnational alternative for the NAFTA, and a transnational lobby against the negotiated agreement. Thus rather than one, in the NAFTA environment debate there were two transnational issue networks involved: one of NGOs with a moderate position that occasionally cooperated, and another of NGOs with a critical position that cooperated more structurally. The first may be called a coalition; the latter an alliance. Recently, similar differences can be seen in the transnational politics with respect to a hemispheric trade area, the FTAA. In their analysis of this process, Korzeniewicz and Smith (2001) speak of 'insider' and 'outsider' groups.

In short, with respect to the idea of shared values, the case of the NAFTA environment debate holds certain warnings. Apart from abovementioned political and ideological explanations, social dimensions can be of importance too. In a critical article on GCS theory, Pasha and Blaney (1998) rightly argue that societal actors must be differentiated for their interests may vary and conflict. They point out that civil society and activists are implicated in social divisions such as class, race, ethnicity and gender. In the case of the NAFTA debate, moderate NGOs had good contacts with 'the powers that be', while critical environmental groups cooperated largely with actors closer to the bottom of power structures, including a wide range of grassroots organizations that asked attention for the position of the poor, indigenous people, women, etc. Rather than talking in very general terms such as the 'shared values' of transnational networks, analyses of these networks should thus distinguish more precisely the various actors involved, and look at their specific interests and demands. This

conclusion is relevant for the discussion of the third assumption of GCS theory: the issue of democratization.

*Transnational activism and democracy*

As we have seen, some scholars expect that the rise of global civil society will have important democratizing effects, among other things by giving way to new channels of influence and the spreading of power. The NAFTA environment debate shows that indeed new channels were created. Although the actual negotiations still took place behind the traditional closed doors, NGOs had considerable leverage at the negotiators, and for the first time environmental issues became a prominent subject in trade negotiations. However, the distribution of influence within such a new channels does not seem to deserve the label 'democratic'. The influence of some major moderate US ENGOs may have been somewhat related to their large number of members, but simultaneously the Mexican and the US government attempted to ignore demands of critical organizations with many members (e.g. Greenpeace USA), and those of critical networks with an extensive heterogeneous grassroots basis (e.g. RMALC, CTC and ACN). In addition, in the course of the debate the concerns of US citizens and organizations dominated over those of Mexican and Canadian citizens and organizations. Besides political elements, this regional inequality was caused by the already mentioned inequalities of funding, as the revenues of US and Canadian organizations exceed by far those of organizations in Mexico.

In the NAFTA environment debate, transnational activism added to the contacts and avenues of influence of marginalized groups, but also to these of already influential NGOs, and of private sector organizations. After a request of the Mexican government, Mexico's business council CCE in 1990 created the COECE (Coordinating Organization of Business Agencies of Foreign Trade), which became the principle intermediary for communication between the Mexican government and the pro-free trade Mexican private sector organizations while also lobbying for NAFTA in Washington. Similarly, US economic sectors that stood to gain from NAFTA lobbied in Washington, and promoted the trade agreement throughout the United States. As we have seen, in the NAFTA debate these proponents of free trade increasingly cooperated with one another as well as with the governmental agencies involved. This experience legitimates the warning that information technologies have the potential to divide society along new lines, separating ordinary people from elites. It should

be noted, however, that here elites are understood not only as major corporate interests and the rich, yet they include NGOs with transnational interests and identities that frequently have more in common with counterparts in other countries, than with countrymen (Matthews, 1997, p. 52). Next to the elitist inclination of some NGOs, there are the (well known) questions of their internal democracy: who decides over their agenda, demands and strategies? Who do they represent? And who holds their leaders accountable? (cf. Jordan and Van Tuijl, 2000)

The NAFTA case also illuminates that transnational NGO activism having a national policy impact is not necessarily a democratizing development. To Mexico, the transnational debate on NAFTA and environment was crucial for many of the policy changes between 1991 and 1993. Contrary to the very limited previous success of Mexican environmental organizations, external criticism and pressure turned environmental protection into a prioritised policy issue for the Mexican government as a whole, resulting in a very substantial increase of federal resources, the establishment of a number of environmental standards, and institutional reform. President Salinas' success in attracting foreign financial support for environmental projects (e.g. from the World Bank, the IDB and the governments of the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom) contributed to these changes too. Industrial compliance with environmental legislation subsequently rose. However, a review of the policy areas that were stressed shows that especially US ENGOs were more influential than groups of Mexican citizens. While earlier policy had already focused on pollution control in Mexico's major cities, the border efforts were rather new. Similarly, the relatively rapid progress made with policy compliance of large industrial companies cannot be separated from the sudden external pressure at this point. Yet, due to the preponderance of trade-related issues and US concerns in the NAFTA environment debate, several of Mexico's environmental issues continued to be largely ignored. In general the NAFTA process reinforced the prioritization of environmental policy in Mexico: urban over rural problems; industrial pollution as well as nature conservation over natural resources issues. Meanwhile, little headway was made with respect to the problem of the fragmented nature of its environmental policy.

What is more, part of the progress of Mexico's environmental policy made in the context of the NAFTA debate proved to be of limited durability. Shortly after the NAFTA debate, the environmental budget went down as the environmental ministry was made to pay a dispro-

portionate share of the costs of the peso crisis.<sup>12</sup> Despite of some valuable improvements in the environmental ministry, environmental protection lost part of its urgency for the government as a whole, and environmental institutions remained relatively isolated within the government. The NAFTA environment debate changed surprisingly little to Mexico's environmental politics. After the attention of US and Canadian NGOs decreased, the lack of political openness and public access to information on policy initiatives and performance of the Mexican government persisted, and structural avenues for NGO influence improved only slightly. Above all, while the input of Mexican environmental organizations in the NAFTA environment debate was enhanced by the new transnational relations, at the national level participation of critical groups remained minimal, whereas moderate groups experienced only a slow increase of access to government agencies.

At a more theoretical level, Pasha and Blaney have attempted to downsize the idea of global civil society (or what they call transnational associational life, TAL) as an autonomous and unambiguous agent of global democracy. The abovementioned situation that activists are implicated in the existing social division generates 'identities, movements and social and political conflicts that may enrich democracy, but also may debilitate democratic processes'. They argue that 'TAL can only be an ambiguous source of democratic energies since associational life should be placed within the wider political and economic context' (Pasha & Blaney, 1998, p. 422).

### *State and society*

This brings us to the fourth and final assumption of GCS theory to be discussed here, that of destatization and desovereignization, or the abovementioned equation: 'more civil society = less state'. The transnational NAFTA environment debate definitely supports the view that the times of purely internal affairs and exclusive interstate affairs – if they ever were – are over. The NAFTA debate itself was an influential step in the process of opening up traditional 'behind-closed-doors' interactions of state officials to NGOs, independent experts, the media and citizens. Therefore, doubts about the just mentioned equation do not concern its first part (more civil society) but the part behind the equation mark: less state. NGO activities nor their demands in the NAFTA debate were directed at 'less state', but instead at a more responsible and responsive state. This was, for instance, evident in the criticism on Mexico's weak implementation of its environmental standards, which is about more rather than less state efforts in realizing

environmental objectives. And this was also clear in the NGO proposals for a strong regional environmental commission that was to function as a structure for regional cooperation, including mechanisms for governments, citizens, NGOs and companies to check upon the doings of these states in environmental matters. Even though Mexican organizations were concerned about a US bias in the functioning of this commission due to the regional power asymmetry, they supported a strong commission.<sup>13</sup>

Rather than talking about state-society relations in a normative and quantitative way, we should be looking at the nature and quality of these relations. With Risse-Kappen (1995, p. 282-83) I would argue that 'the interesting question is not whether transnational relations would somehow make the state system irrelevant, but how transnational relations interact with states'. Transnational actors would not exist without states enabling them, and they need the state to have an impact. At the same time, transnational activism can counter state control, and transnational relations can reduce the state autonomy vis-à-vis society, resulting in a strengthening of society in its relations to the state (Risse-Kappen, 1995, p. 294-95). This approach is complemented by Pasha and Blaney (1998), who stress that NGOs themselves often demand an expansion of the state apparatus as an agent of social reform, and that the capacity of the state to respond to these demands is crucial. Indeed, 'transnational associational life is constituted in relation to and as a check on, rather than a replacement for, the state and state system (Pasha & Blaney, 1998, p. 428, summarizing the approach of Shaw, 1994).

Definitely, transnational activism affects national, regional and global political relations. As Keck and Sikkink (1998, p. 1-2) have observed, advocacy networks contribute to transform the practice of national sovereignty 'by blurring the boundaries between a state's relations with its own nationals and the recourse both citizens and states have to the international system'. The NAFTA environment debate supports this observation. At the same time, the NAFTA case demonstrates that the transformation of sovereignty has much to do with the context of existing power relations and the dominant economic model. Looking at the NAFTA effect of decreased Mexican state control over Mexico's natural resources, one must conclude that this change has rather served the interests of major (US) investors and consumers than responding to demands of Mexican citizens for better protection, fair prices for exploitation, or self-determination over natural resources.

## Realities of transnational politics

The transnational NAFTA environment debate that took place between 1990 and 1993 is an important case of cross-border activism. Within a short time span, NGOs from Mexico, the United States and Canada started to cooperate on the relatively new issue of trade and environment. Their national and transnational activities brought about major developments. First, the issue became the subject of public and political debates, in which numerous citizens, various types of NGOs, social movements and corporate organizations, and a range of political and governmental institutions became involved. Second, many transnational contacts were established among these social and political actors. Third, the issue was included in the NAFTA negotiations, and became more of a priority for the Mexican government and in the bilateral cooperation of the Mexican and US governments. Fourthly, as a result of the previous changes, new environmental institutions were created, more resources and attention were directed to environmental protection, and overall environmental awareness and knowledge expanded.

Despite these important achievements of transnational activism, we may conclude that GCS theory has not passed the test of the transnational NAFTA environment debate. While the debate showed various signs of deterritorialization, shared values, democratization and decreased state control, we also witnessed the ongoing importance of territory, the split of transnational environmental relations over ideological positions, many undemocratic tendencies, and old and new forms of state control. Moreover, several processes which GCS theory would label as stepping stones towards a global civil society seem to counter the expectation that this will lead to a better world: political influence of NGOs may be undemocratic, while less state sovereignty can be captured by corporate interests and spoiled (foreign) consumers rather than by marginalized citizens.

The discussion about the meaning of transnational relations of NGOs would therefore better be based, first, on the recognition that conflict and power are important ingredients of these relations. Second, these actors and relations are only partly autonomous from the state, the state system, the corporate sector, and the world economy. Contrary to romantic GCS notions, political, economic and social (class) structures may also be reproduced by transnational actors and relations. Third, it turns out to be extremely difficult to fundamentally change or remove these structures. As Korzeniewicz and Smith (2001, p. 32)

have argued, 'power operates in a sphere in which (...) civil society networks are at a significant disadvantage'. The NAFTA case confirms the more general finding that the environmental movement 'has not changed the essential character of corporate life', but has played 'at the margins of global corporate understandings and practices' (Wapner, 2000b, p. 101).

The most important shortcoming of GCS theories is that it isolates the analysis of transnational activities of NGOs from the simultaneous national, regional and global processes to which they are linked. In the case of the NAFTA environment debate, this would result in ignoring the increasing influence of US corporate, consumer and state interests in Mexican politics. Looking at the whole picture, and combining the globalization-from-below with the globalization-from-above perspectives, there is far less room for optimism than in GCS theories. When doing so, one can only mildly disagree with the gloomy overview of Pasha and Blaney (1998, p. 432) who point at old and new political North-South asymmetries and inequalities, and state that the emerging constellation of global political institutions, economic governance, and associational life appears 'more akin to oligarchy than democracy'.

Rosy GCS ideas could thus better be replaced by more balanced concepts that describe actual actors, processes and structures, while leaving room for seeing how they are related to their actual economic, political, social and cultural context. Instead of speaking of global civil society, it is preferable to discuss the nature, role and impact of transnational relations, activism and politics. Furthermore, analyses and theories of these transnational phenomena stand to benefit from IPE studies, which can illuminate, among other things, that states are an initiator as well as a victim of economic integration; that the spreading of formal democracy has been matched with growing economic inequality; and that the most impressive transnationalization of non-state actors has taken place in the corporate sector.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the participants and supervisors, and especially Paul Wapner, of the ACUNS Summerschool 2000 held at Warwick University, for their most useful suggestions to my first ideas about this project.
- <sup>2</sup> Evidently, less institutionalized grass-roots groups and the mobilization of large groups of citizens are also very important and interesting building blocks of social movements and organized civil society. This analysis, however, is largely focussed on the role of NGOs.
- <sup>3</sup> The information about the NAFTA environment debate that will be used here is borrowed from a previous research project. The project was based on extensive fieldwork research between 1993 and 1995, including over sixty interviews with fellows of NGOs, government agencies and private sector organizations in Mexico, the United States and Canada (Hogenboom, 1998).
- <sup>4</sup> Wapner (2000a, p. 273) himself argues in more modest terms that there seems to be some consensus that GCS 'is part of the equation of what would ultimately constitute humane governance at the global level', and that GCS is 'one of the most promising places to look for emerging progressive political thought and action'.
- <sup>5</sup> The Canada-United States Free Trade Agreement had come into force in 1989. Plans for free trade between Mexico and the United States had been developing for over a decade. After President Carter had proposed a common North American market in 1979, and Ronald Reagan's mentioning a US-Mexico free trade agreement in his campaign for the presidential elections of 1980, several bilateral talks and initiatives had followed.
- <sup>6</sup> Predominantly, the following organizations were involved: *Bioconservación*, *Comité Cívico de Divulgación Ecológica*, *Enlace Ecológico*, and *Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental*.
- <sup>7</sup> Stringent US environmental standards were expected to be challenged by Mexico-based producers as non-tariff barriers to trade. In addition, if not challenged, tougher US standards might be indirectly harmed by lax environmental policy enforcement in Mexico via political pressure for downward reform of US laws.
- <sup>8</sup> The Bush administration sought for approval of so-called fast-track authority, which provides the government with greater freedom vis-à-vis Congress in trade negotiations.
- <sup>9</sup> Parties of NAFTA have, for instance, the right to determine the acceptable level of risk with respect to the protection of environment, health and safety (art. 904.2 and 907). The agreement establishes the right of a party to set its own 'appropriate level of protection' in order to protect its citizens (art. 712.1), while each country has the right to maintain and enforce its environmental, health and safety standards, if necessary by prohibiting import of products that do not meet domestic standards (art. 904.1). The

parties are encouraged to harmonize their regulations (art. 906.2), and 'upward harmonization' principles are introduced (art. 714 and 906). With regard to certain international environmental agreements, an exception is made to the rule that the NAFTA takes priority over other international agreements between the parties. Finally, the parties are allowed to take measures 'to ensure that investment activity in its territory is undertaken in a manner sensitive to environmental concerns' (art. 1114.1). Relaxing domestic environmental, health or safety measures to encourage investment is labelled 'inappropriate' (art. 1114.2).

<sup>10</sup> Central to the supplemental agreement is article 5, which requires each party to enforce its environmental laws effectively. If not, dispute settlement may be set in motion, the process of which is very complex. The CEC is the institution responsible for responding to allegations of non-enforcement of environmental laws, either by a person, an NGO or a government. In case of the latter, a fine or ultimately trade sanctions may be used against a country.

<sup>11</sup> The WWF, for instance, received a \$2.5 million donation in 1993 from Eastman Kodak, a prominent company in the pro-NAFTA lobby (*The Nation* 28/06/93, p. 894-95). The NRDC formed an exception among major US moderate groups and did not receive any funding from the private sector.

<sup>12</sup> This was revealed in interviews with several high-level Mexican officials.

<sup>13</sup> In order to protect sovereignty and allow for strong and effective regional environmental institution at the same time, RMALC for instance proposed to complement the regional commission with a Mexican commission.

## RISE AND FALL OF ENVIRONMENTAL NGOs ALONG THE MEXICO-US BORDER

MIRIAM ALFIE COHEN

Studying non-governmental organizations (NGOs) implies entering a broad and heterogeneous terrain. As a result of the many themes these organizations raise and their development, they have increasingly obtained scholarly attention. And in the context of processes of globalization, NGOs are considered new, democratizing subjects of social and political change, which use new ways to express civic interests and contribute to finding solutions to pressing problems

The environmental problems in the Mexico-US border region have given way to the rise of dynamic and new non-governmental organizations that combat old structures and traditional political culture. Our objective is to review the development of environmental NGOs in this border area since the creation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In particular, we will emphasize the role of environmental organizations of two Mexican border cities: Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros. We will be looking into the creation, activities, goals and cross-border relations of environmental NGOs, but like any other social actors these groups are in constant change. An issue of special interest here is the role of these organizations in the democratization of their society, their role in solving environmental problems in the border, their alliances, as well as their future challenges.<sup>1</sup>

First, we will discuss different attitudes to classifying NGOs, and the links of such classifications with theories on global civil society. Next we will analyse the roles of environmental NGOs in the Mexican border with the United States, and we will present a comparative analysis

of environmental NGOs in the border cities of Ciudad Juárez (1993-1997) and Matamoros (1997-2000). We will conclude with some final ideas on the future of environmental NGOs in the Mexico-US border area and elsewhere.

### **NGOs in national, international and global politics**

As the rise of NGOs is still relatively recent, for they have only become important actors in national and international politics in the last thirty years, so is the study of these actors in sociology and political science. Nevertheless, an increasing number of scholars has been analysing NGOs, attempting to assess the characteristics, capacities, shapes and goals of these organizations at the local and global level.<sup>2</sup> Among other things, NGOs have been perceived as new social actors that will improve the position of marginalized countries and groups, contributing to national and international policy changes. A primary objective of NGOs is access to decision-making, and in many cases not only in their own country but also at a transnational level.

Since there is a wide variety of NGOs, ranging from small grassroots groups to large, well-financed and powerful organizations, most academic analyses of NGOs include a definition and classification of these organizations. Among these equally varying ways of classification, three main approaches to classifying NGOs can be discerned. The first approach is divided into two: one focuses on the identity and actions of organizations (cf. Carroll, 1992; Bebbington and Thiele, 1993); the other examines the role of NGOs in the emergence and strengthening of civil society (cf. Slater, 1985; Fox and Hernández, 1989; Salazar, 1990; Ghils, 1992). The second approach defines NGOs according to their activities and goals, for instance 'charity NGOs' and 'political NGOs' (cf. Ruiz Vargas, 1999). A third approach to NGO classification is based on their use and expression of discourse, including concepts and theories.<sup>3</sup> However, the heterogeneity and complexity of NGOs renders this task of classifying extremely difficult.

Over the past few years, several analyses of the development and role of NGOs have been linked to the concept of the emergence of a global civil society, which involves an alternative way of looking at the political sphere. From this perspective, the state is no longer the central political actor, and more attention is paid to new subjects, identities and actors contributing to more dynamic political participation in the public space. Especially NGOs, social movements, and international organizations are seen as important forces for encouraging democra-

tization around the world. While some NGOs are struggling for self-organization and autonomy from the state, other groups try to extend the influence in official decision-making processes. In this way, a vital civil society coincides with substantive democracy, and NGOs can play an important role in democratizing local, national and transnational politics.

Also on the conceptualization of Global Civil Society, however, there is much scholarly debate. To Jan Aart Scholte (1999), Global Civil Society includes neither the market nor the state; it appears when different individuals are concerned about common interests and concerns, and join in voluntary and informal associations. Networks of such associations give them voice and contribute to their legitimacy and to the political debate. To Paul Ghils (1992, p. 429), NGOs are nuclei of counterbalance against state authoritarianism, and intermediaries between the masses and the state. They either operate as pressure groups, as autonomous actors, or as subjects competing with state institutions. International NGOs, then, are fundamental actors for the transformation of transnational politics, contributing to the creation of a Global Civil Society. Other scholars, such as Pasha and Blaney (1998), argue that NGOs can share transnational goals, but they divide NGOs into two groups: those that are dedicated to lobbying, which are basically located in the North; and others that are dedicated to the creation of networks and primarily come from the South.

According to Laura Macdonald (1994), the long-term potential of NGOs lies not in their resources but in their ability to create new identities as well as new linkages between people from different parts of the world. She stresses that NGOs are not completely autonomous actors, and that they are often subordinated to economic and international interests. She distinguishes between three types of NGOs that are important for development in the South. First, international NGOs are non-profit organizations with development projects in more than one country. They have their own sources of funding, and manage their projects with the help of local communities. Second, national NGOs develop projects to benefit popular sectors. Their financial support stems from international NGOs and governments of industrialized countries, and their members are usually from the middle class. These organizations mediate between beneficiaries and the government, international NGOs and other financing institutions. Third, popular organizations are made up of people from the same community and/or people who share experiences and objectives. They

are locally organized and receive support from state institutions and national or international NGOs. These popular organizations can be part of social movements (Macdonald, 1994, pp. 277-278).

In short, we can observe a wide typology about the roles, functions and discourses of NGOs in the current international political context. To some, NGOs are a bridge that overcomes differences between the North and the South, while others view NGOs as a mediator between individuals and the state. Notwithstanding the positive roles and potential of NGOs, it should be remembered that 'Global civil interactions reproduce the conflicts and contradictions of the domestic civil societies they emerge from, and also create new ones reflecting the dynamics of power at the international level' (Macdonald, 1994, p. 285)

### **Environmental NGOs in the Mexico-US border region**

In the Mexico-US border region exists a heterogeneous mix of environmental organizations with different experiences and roles, with unequal financial resources, and with various identities. Analysing these environmental NGOs touches upon many aspects, as organizations represent different social backgrounds, ideological views, and political goals. An assessment of these NGOs requires an examination of many elements: their successes and failures; their funding, professionalism and political effectiveness; their relations with other groups, the state and political parties; their communication with the community they work with; their international relations, etcetera. The environmental concerns of these border groups and organizations result from an interesting combination of factors: the social and political context; the type of damage to health, quality of life and the environment; and the economic and cultural characteristics of the shared region of Mexico and the United States.

Since the 1970s, numerous NGOs have been active in the Mexico-US border region. Early on, church-based groups started working in communities, and they became important players in promoting local development. Though representing several social sectors, these groups have been largely urban and often lead by women. In the 1980s, major political and social changes marked the Mexican border region. Due to the rise of opposition parties and social movements, and the ongoing environmental deterioration, new environmental NGOs were set up and they started to criticise local governments about their violation of human rights, electoral fraud and weak environmental policies.

At the beginning of the 1990s, when the plans for the NAFTA became public, the activities of environmental NGOs shifted from localism to also influencing binational politics, and in some cases even global politics. Some of the organizations took up the role of intermediary between citizens, the government and international NGOs. In the context of the negotiations for free trade between Mexico, the United States and Canada, and a growing opposition against this free trade area, environmental concerns became linked to other (particularly economic and social) issues and demands.

An important period in the history of environmental NGOs in the border region is the beginning of the 1980s, when various social movements started to develop and mobilize. While previous relations between Mexican and US environmental groups had been based on conservationist interests, from then on cross-border political actions were increasingly directed at problems of the deterioration of water, air and soil caused by industrial growth and the region's lack of environmental equipment, infrastructure and financing.<sup>4</sup> With the announcement of the NAFTA plan in 1990, cross-border cooperation intensified and many environmental NGOs aimed to exert pressure and participate in decision-making on the border region. The first half of the 1990s, then, was the stage of triumph when cross-border 'bridges' were established, groups were actively lobbying, and NGOs created and participated in forums and organizations. New and influential networks were set up, based on common interests of Mexico's and US civil society, which contributed to the creation and sense of a shared region. Among the members of these networks were organizations politically operating in the border region with a range of cultures, shapes and expectations.

Later on, however, in the period from 1997 to 2000, a political, ideological and also financial impasse hit some of the environmental organizations in the border region as they were facing several problems. First, the border institutions created by the NAFTA had a difficult start. For instance, the negotiations to elaborate a large project for regional infrastructure and to present it to the Binational Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC) were slow and troublesome, and only few groups really participated in the process. In the case of the North America Develop Bank (NADBANK), in these first few years only about 10 per cent of the officially allocated financial resources was actually made available. Second, due to the ongoing scarcity of funding, NGOs depended on financial programmes from abroad.<sup>5</sup> Third, there was a lack of continuity in cross-border NGO actions, as

a result of limited commitment and programmes, as well as the time-consuming and permanent daily local activities of groups. In this period, the development of cross-border environmental relations slows down, the financial, cultural and organizational differences show more strongly, and Mexican NGOs start looking for new partners further away.

From 2000 onwards, a regrouping has been taking place of organizations, themes and partnerships. In this last stage, NGOs have been particularly active in legislative affairs, such as pressuring for the implementation of (state) environmental laws, demanding citizen's 'right to know' about the operations of maquiladoras, and critically following the making of local legislation. There seems to be a trend of merging political and financial resources, which gives occasion to a situation in which some environmental groups have both substantial funding and state support whereas others both lack financial resources and are politically excluded. Only a few Mexican border groups have become professional, with connections with colleges and technological centres, and with activities and relations beyond the local level and the border region.

Our study includes two stages and two sites: Ciudad Juárez - El Paso between 1993 and 1997, and Matamoros - Brownsville between 1997 and 2000. These two sites represent important factors for studying environmental and social issues: they are centres of maquiladora industry and economic growth; they face overpopulation and large migration flows from the centre of Mexico; they have limited natural resources and a lack of public services and infrastructure; and they have high levels of ecological destruction and human health damage.<sup>6</sup> The two studied periods help us to understand the ongoing processes of change in environmental activism and to analyse the relations between these changes and the rise of binational environmental institutions in the border region.<sup>7</sup>

### **Ciudad Juárez - El Paso (1993-1997): development and mobilization**

The rise of environmental NGOs in Ciudad Juárez, as in the rest of northern Mexico, cannot be separated from the broad social mobilizations of the 1980s. The weakening of the ruling party, the PRI (Partido Revolucionario Institucional), and the occasions of civil disobedience initiated by the opposition party the PAN (Partido Acción Nacional) created a political opening which allowed for more political



competition and alternation, and in which social participation was promoted. The Comité de Defensa Popular, for instance, was already a prominent organization at this stage, representing people from different social backgrounds. The Comité used spontaneous practices and generated spaces of social participation that later on gave way to new forms of organization. Also church-based groups and the coordinating NGO Coordinadora Nacional del Movimiento Urbano Popular were a strong precedent in Ciudad Juárez for participatory experiences. In short, structural changes took place at the political top as well as at the bottom, resulting in a start of other social actions.

A catalyst for environmental activism in Ciudad Juárez was the 'accident' in 1985 caused by the mining company Frisco, which illegally disposed large quantities of sulphuric acid, which affected many people. In addition, in 1986 there was a large fire in a factory of the oil company Pemex. Besides these incidents, there was the constant damage caused by the (open air) brick-making factories, the maquiladora industry, and the many old and polluting vehicles. Also the discovery of large amounts of Cobalt 60 at a clandestine garbage dump caused great anger among the region's inhabitants. At the end of 1986, then, the first environmental organizations appeared.

From the start, the environmental NGOs in Ciudad Juárez had a broad thematic profile and good relations with church-based groups and human rights organizations, and they were mostly led by women. The organizations usually define themselves using a 'social justice' concept that includes issues of labour, gender and dignity, anti-centrist and anti-authoritarian ideologies, while referring to the context of urbanization, the maquiladoras, and increasing levels of education. In general, these are grassroots groups, with low levels of professionalism, a lack of resources, and few external connections. At the other side of the border, in El Paso, environmental organizations had initially largely focused on air pollution caused by the oil refinery Asarco, the emissions of Chevron, and the long lines of cars waiting for the cross-border bridges. This changed radically, however, in the 1980s, when it became known that there were plans to construct a toxic waste facility in the Sierra Blanca County and a sanitary filling in Sunland Park. Actions against such plans are examples of LULUS (Locally unwanted land uses) y NIMBY (not in my backyard), but in this case they also had an 'ethnic touch' as the Sierra Blanca County and Sunland Park are made up of black, Indian and Mexican neighbourhoods. Environmental organizations in El Paso then started to organize activities for 'environmental justice'.

The NAFTA plan favoured in an immediate way the cross-border cooperation of environmental NGOs, initiated by US organizations searching Mexican counterparts to oppose the free trade agreement. Together they developed joint strategies, and for the first time it was recognized that the regional environmental problems should be identified, examined and tackled in a regional manner too. A new Cobalt 60 scandal became the pivot of a series of cross-border actions that publicly questioned the role of the maquiladoras and their effects on the border environment and the health of the border region's inhabitants. Binational citizen brigades were organized to attack clandestine garbage dumps, a campaign was started against 'environmental racism' in relation to the Sierra Blanca and Sunland Park plans, and a transnational flow of environmental information between groups was initiated. Opposition to NAFTA stimulated the creation of the first binational NGO, the Alianza Ecologista del Bravo, composed by the Consejo Ecológico of Ciudad Juárez, and the Grupo Sierra Blanca and the Alert Citizens for the Environment of El Paso.

These binational networks bloomed from 1993 to 1997. They spread information about environmental accidents on both sides of the border and critically watched the maquiladora industry. They cooperated with various 'community movements' that were active against pollution caused by maquiladoras. With cross-border environmental information, communication and problem-solving initiatives, the style of organization of NGOs changed. The new binational organizations strengthened the local Mexican groups, not only injecting them with a new discourse but also giving them a more professional platform for action by starting to collect external funding and becoming a relevant political actor. For the US groups the joint experience taught them about a new way of doing politics by combining different action practices, while it encouraged their presence vis-à-vis their local authorities. All this took both the Mexican and the US government by surprise, but as this started around the time the NAFTA was to be signed they had little opportunity of co-opting these groups without attracting external (media) attention.

The Ciudad Juárez-El Paso case did not stand at its own as this kind of mobilization of environmental NGOs took place at other parts along the border. Together with attention and pressures from the rest of the United States and Mexico for the border situation, the environmental mobilization along the border gave way to the creation of the NADBANK and the BECC. In addition, the rise of cross-border actions also played a role in the political debate over NAFTA as

a whole, which in the end gave way to the parallel agreements for environmental protection and workers' rights. Due to the mix of Mexican-style activities and US NGOs' lobbying, the surprising actions towards federal and local governments, and the intensive and ongoing activism during these years, environmental organizations in the border region achieved an open space that allowed them to start participating in decision-making processes.

The development of environmental NGOs in Ciudad Juárez also shows from the figures. Between 1993 and 1997 about 26 groups with environmental concerns were formed, including four foundations and two binational groups (see Table 1). This rise can be partly explained by the context of the NAFTA debate, the availability of new financial resources, and the increasing possibilities to influence in political decision-making. A number of these new groups chose to relate more closely with the government and enterprises, to become more professional and bureaucratic, and to focus on environmental programmes for environmental education and legislation. While some of these NGOs continued working with communities on local concerns, other organizations preferred to negotiate directly with powerful actors, including political parties. Among the new NGOs were also highly professional organizations that are usually better linked to their American counterparts, and can therefore obtain external financing. Such professional organizations focussed on negotiating environmental legislation and management with local governments or companies, they contributed to changes in environmental education, and they pressured for influence in the BECC and NADBANK (among them were FEMAP, Proyecto del Río, Sierra Madre Alliance Program, Alianza Internacional Ecologista del Bravo, Grupo Ecologista y Participación Ciudadana, Coalición Pro-justicia de las Maquiladoras).

At the other angle there were organizations (often church-based) that were strongly linked to communities. These groups aimed to encourage local development, they involved new local leaders, and they worked on different themes such as work, human rights, gender and the environment (e.g. Organización Popular Independiente, Promoción Social Kolping A.C., Comité Independiente de Chihuahua pro Defensa de Derechos Humanos, Comité Ecológico de Ciudad Juárez, Centro de Orientación a la Mujer). Also environmental NGOs that were still little by little professionalizing created new binational and international relations.

In sum, between 1993 and 1997 environmental NGOs in the Mexico-US border region were a dynamic social and political actor,

Table 1. Characteristics of some NGOs in the Mexico-US border region.

<i>Name</i>	<i>Place</i>	<i>Activity level</i>	<i>Funding</i>	<i>Issues</i>
Organización Popular Independiente	Ciudad Juárez	Local	Minimal internal contribution	Labour, human right environment
Promoción Social Kolping	Ciudad Juárez	Local	Donations, internal	Human rights, environment
Grupo Sierra Blanca	Ciudad Juárez - El Paso	Regional	Networks, external	Toxic waste
Comité Ecológico de Ciudad Juárez	Ciudad Juárez	Local	Various organizations, external	Water, waste, pollution, maquiladoras
Alert Citizens for the Environment	Ciudad Juárez - El Paso	Regional	Network, external	Maquiladora industry
Red del Suroeste para la Justicia Ambiental	Ciudad Juárez - El Paso	Binational	External and extensive	NAFTA, maquiladoras, health, work
Alianza Internacional Ecologista del Rfo Bravo	Ciudad Juárez - El Paso	Binational	Network, external	Water, work, migration, human rights
Coalición Pro Justicia de las Maquiladoras	Mexico, US and Canada	International	External and international (churches, enterprises)	Work, environment, maquiladoras
FEMAP	Ciudad Juárez	Local	Internal	Air, brickworks, health

(to be continued on next page)

Table 1. Characteristics of some NGOs in the Mexico-US border region (*continued*).

Texas Environmental Defense Fund	Texas	Regional	Government and entrepreneurs, internal	Border environmental problems
Pastoral Juvenil Obrera (PJO)	Matamoros	Local, international	Network, external	Work, maquiladoras, environment
Comunidad Ecológica de Matamoros (CEM)	Matamoros - Brownsville	Regional	Minimal external funding	Environmental legislation
Texas Center for Policy Studies	Border region	Regional - International	Network, external	Water, maquiladoras, ecosystems
Maquiladora Health and Safety Network	America, Asia, Mexico - US border	International	Network, external	Maquiladoras, environment, health
Casa de la Mujer – Factor X	Tijuana	Local	Little external budget	Maquiladoras, work, gender
Cañón del Padre	Tijuana	Local	Internal	Toxic waste, maquiladoras
La Neta	Mexico	International, binational	External	Health and environment
Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental	Tijuana - San Diego	Binational	External, Network	Environmental education
Yeuaní	Tijuana	Local	Internal	Environmental legislation
San Diego Environmental Health Coalition	Tijuana - San Diego	Binational	Network, External	Health, maquiladoras environment

which created new spaces, which developed new local and binational proposals, tactics and strategies of environmental action, and which opened a range of new possibilities and political attitudes. This rise of environmental NGOs raised major expectations of new opportunities to solve the region's enormous environmental problems (Alfie, 1998).

### **Matamoros - Brownsville (1997-2000): fragmentation and stagnation**

The situation of mobilization on environmental topics in Matamoros-Brownsville differs greatly from what we have seen in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso. In Matamoros there have been few civic protests or structural NGO initiatives for solving problems, despite the fact that this region's environmental situation is much worse than in Ciudad Juárez, and that the deterioration of the natural environment is increasing due to the type of economic growth. Matamoros lacks sufficient access to water, and the consumption of water on this side of the border is more than twice as low as on the other side in Brownsville, in the county of Cameron (573 litre per day per inhabitant in Cameron, while this figure is 216 litre in Matamoros). As in most other Mexican border districts, there are hardly any facilities for waste disposal and no records whatsoever of the dumping of hazardous (solid and liquid) waste of industrial origin.<sup>8</sup> Political circumstances are an important reason why this extensive pollution did not give way to the kind of social mobilization as we have seen in Ciudad Juárez. While Ciudad Juárez already witnessed democratization at the state and municipal level, citizens of Matamoros were waiting for a real democratic transition. At the time of our analysis, between 1997 and 2000, Matamoros was still a bastion of the PRI, with a political system based on old habits, such as the status of the godfather, clientelism and corruption.<sup>9</sup>

In Matamoros, the maquiladora industry has specialized in the assembly of cars and electronic devices, in which 60 per cent of manpower is working. In these highly competitive maquiladoras there are few personnel shifts and the salaries are somewhat higher than elsewhere in Mexican industry. More than 80 per cent of the main plants in this city operate with quality certification systems or are preparing to do so. Nevertheless, the Matamoros maquiladoras already produced such quantities of (toxic) waste that it has become a great health and environment risk. In the 1990s, the number of maquiladoras increased and so did the use of (new) hazardous substances and the bulk of industrial toxic waste. As maquiladora production tends to be

very complex, technologies to limit the industry's environmental damage are costly. Even though companies in Matamoros can produce cheaply because of the very low wages of workers compared to the United States, they are unwilling to pay for such technologies as long as environmental legislation and its implementation are rather loose, and workers are relatively docile (in Matamoros there is only one trade union active).

The maquiladoras of Matamoros cause extremely dangerous environmental and health damage. From 1983 to 1990, there have been 23 recorded cases of environmental and health problems caused by maquiladora enterprises in the Matamoros district. Most of the toxic waste is disposed without any treatment, and much of this flows into the Río Bravo. In May 1991, in the water of this border river high levels of pollutants were detected, including naphthalene, xylene, acids, chlorid-methylen and ethyl-benzenes (Coalition for Justice in the Maquiladora, 1993). And in the canals close to the maquiladora industry the environmental laboratory Ciudadanos detected high levels of toxins including carcinogens and substances that can cause serious (sometimes fatal) neurological defects in unborn children (Alfie and Méndez, 2000, p. 203). In addition to the damage of maquiladoras, the region suffers from a constant migration flow of people in search of work. As a consequence, Matamoros has turned into a polluted paradise in which an important part of the population is exposed to permanent health risks, and the regional ecosystems are heavily deteriorating.

However, interviews with maquiladora workers show that the consciousness of environmental problems in Matamoros is very low. In September and December of 1998, 174 workers of 41 maquiladoras were interviewed, 80 per cent of them worked at the car industry, the electrical or the electronic industry, and 81 persons worked at one of the seven largest maquiladoras of the region.<sup>10</sup> While the interviewed workers recognized solvents and thinners, 82 of them did not know the risk damage that these can cause. Of these 174 workers, 104 named noise, dust, smoke and steam as the polluting agents in their maquiladora and 107 were unaware of the final destination of their plant's toxic waste. Some 70 workers told that their company does not recognize professional illnesses; they were all member of the only union in Matamoros, and 165 of them received medical services of the enterprise (Alfie and Méndez, 2000).

While these findings are very interesting and invite to further analysis, for this study the most relevant finding is that only ten of the

interviewed workers were participating in a political or civil organization that deals with the environment. In addition, the Matamoros NGOs that we studied had relatively few members, never exceeding the number of forty. Together with other information and direct observation, our study shows Matamoros as a place of disorganized social answers towards the region's environmental conditions and damage. The combination of economic maquiladora modernity and politically staying behind thus created a kind of social selfishness. Only in a few isolated cases, there have been groups or people in Matamoros active on environmental issues. However, these were mostly incidental lawsuits that hardly can be considered social mobilizations, because of the limited number of participants but mostly because of these lawsuits' purposes and results. These were basically individual initiatives, but what is lacking is a collective identity; a whole that ties the participants.

In Matamoros we found two NGOs that are structurally working on environmental problems: the Comunidad Ecológica de Matamoros (CEM) and the Pastoral Juvenil Obrera (PJO).<sup>11</sup> The latter focuses on the links between work, health and the environment. Both organizations belong to the Coalición Pro Justicia de las Maquiladoras (CJM), which is a tri-national associative union working on environmental and labour themes, and on the relation maquiladora-environment. More than two hundred NGOs are member of the CJM, including a large number of church-based US groups. Although the CEM and the PJO both participate in this transnational organization, they do not cooperate at the local level, and they even seem to be competing for community support. Such division and competition render it difficult to jointly fight the serious environmental problems of Matamoros.

The actions of CEM are fully focussed on environmental matters: fauna, flora, investigations on toxic products, etcetera. These activities started after two conflicts with maquiladoras (of the companies Kemet and Química Flúor). In these conflicts CEM cooperated with the US NGO Texas Center for Policy Studies, which provided them with logistic and financial assistance. Since then, the concerns on which members of CEM have been active have been greatly extended: they have demanded attention of the district government for the serious problems of open-air drainage in the city; they have worked on ideas for industrial and urban planning and development; and they have brought the polluting maquiladoras under the attention of the US Congress. Their actions have not been constant and have suffered from a lack of thematic focus, but grassroots organization CEM is clearly



striving for professionalization. This is done with financial support of several US foundations and NGOs, and CEM holds relations with over sixty US environmental organizations. Recently, CEM initiated the procedure to formally create a Centro de Derecho Ambiental (an environmental law centre as recognized under state law).

The Pastoral Juvenil Obrera has a religious background (it comes from the Juventud Obrera Cristiana) and applies a participative approach with workers while holding relations with church groups. The maquiladora damage to the health of its workers is a key issue in the activities of this grassroots NGO. With its ten members, it has developed information campaigns about the effects of toxics in order to train workers. In addition, they train workers to be 'health promoters'. The PJO's actions started in the early 1990s in the company Autotrim. This maquiladora does not recognize work-related diseases as long as there is no evidence of deformation of bones and muscles disturbing the productive process. PJO started international lawsuits blaming the enterprise of neglecting the carpal tunnel illness. Over the past few years PJO has become associated with the Maquiladora Health and Safety Network, a professional NGO network of organizations of doctors, nurses, social educators and others, which supports grassroots groups and provide information about workers' risks in maquiladoras.

It is interesting to compare the two prominent environmental NGOs of Matamoros, which were both born out of the community's necessities. The CEM has achieved a professionalization of its funding and equipment, although it is a small organization that is constantly shifting the direction of its attention. The PJO is a real grassroots group with few members, which operates almost clandestinely from the inside of enterprises and supports health workers and citizens on labour issues. Nevertheless, these organizations coincide in having the type of strong, personalized leadership that can be associated with the regional political culture: one person decides for the group on the tactics and strategies to be followed.

The environmental activism in Ciudad Juárez-El Paso at the beginning of the 1990s is in great contrast with the situation in Matamoros-Brownsville at the end of that decade. Contrary to the advancements of the first case, the second case is characterized by inertia as the diverse and fragmented civil society could not find a common project in which environmental demands would accumulate. Although new institutional structures for the border environment had come into being, in reality the budgets of the NADBANK were minimal whereas

the proposals to the BECC did not pass the 'paper stage' since approval of the community requires a huge amount of approvals and bureaucracies. These circumstances fundamentally discourage NGOs' confidence in institutional change. Other explanations for the weakness of environmental activism in Matamoros are the conflicts between organizations, the general lack of social participation and especially the region's political culture. At least in Matamoros, the NAFTA did not stimulate the creation of more NGOs nor the continuity of social actions. Moreover, the Matamoros case clearly demonstrates that extensive environmental damage and high levels of health problems do not guarantee that there will be equally extensive environmental activism and high levels of participation of civil society. Finally, also the ways in which the environmental NGOs of Matamoros are structured and operating help to explain their low levels of development and mobilization. While organized labour in Matamoros is completely dominated by a single, old-style corporatist union, also environmental groups are dominated by powerful leaders and vertical decision-making processes. Both the CEM and the PJO have several external relations and belong to tri-national organizations (and the PJO also to an international NGO), but their external links are often changing which limits their opportunities and funding for activities. Taken together, we see that at the time when the Mexico-US governmental environmental initiatives for the border started to take shape in the late 1990s, non-governmental environmental organizations had not advanced from the level of activism of the early 1990s (see Table 1).

## Conclusions

The rapidly expansive globalization process is generating a series of changes for the role of civil society. One of the most optimistic approaches towards these changes envisions a widening of the democratization of societies through the activities of social movements, pressure groups, NGOs and networks. From this point of view, the social actors are challenging the contradictory development of the current world system by questioning not only the actions of their national state, but also those of other political and economic actors. Indeed, several social movements are nowadays globally successful in levelling out physical borders and opening up closed cultural spaces. These movements are made up of individuals who have adopted a global perspective in their thinking, as can particularly be found in the environmental movement and the human rights movement.

Nevertheless, the role of social movements is substantially influenced by the real characteristics of the regional, national and/or local context in which they are active. In Latin America, social movements face a range of particular regional circumstances, including unsolved ancient problems and new challenges. The dynamic Mexico-US border region also has a specific political culture, specific physical conditions, specific problems and a specific constellation of social actors. Environmental NGOs and their activities are partly shaped by these specific regional and local circumstances.

A key period in the organization and activities of social actors on environmental matters was the early 1990s. As we have seen, in Ciudad Juárez between 1993 and 1997 there was a strong and important rise of environmental activism with numerous concrete actions, demands and lawsuits. The cross-border cooperation with US groups strengthened the demand-capacity of Mexican organizations in their confrontations with the state. The mobilizing activities of these emerging NGOs have the potential to bring about a change in the large power of the governmental authorities and their lack of attention for citizens. The space gained by NGOs vis-à-vis the state shows the significant promises of organized civil society, in which there would be more room for hybrid political practices and balancing different interests.

Although our research involves the case studies of two different Mexican border cities in two different periods, it shows that the social participation in environmental activism is a result of many accumulated experiences, the regional political culture and the local social landscape. In the case of the Mexico-US border region, Mexico's political transition, its history of social organization, the nature and causes of environmental damage, and the proximity of the United States are crucial elements shaping the character, level and extent of environmental activism. In the case of Matamoros between 1997 and 2000 it becomes clear that the institutionalization of concerns and demands by the new NAFTA-related environmental agencies does not necessarily stimulate environmental NGO activity and may in fact discourage and reduce collective action. The creation of specialized environmental institutions at the bi-national level also gave an impulse to a bureaucratic approach towards NGO demands. In addition, the different interests and discord among groups help us to understand the weaknesses of social organization in these years, which shows from their lack of continuity and a common agenda. Also the lack of a consolidated democratic culture within groups played a role. Furthermore, their

broad topical approach rendered the two environmental organizations in Matamoros rather fragile.

While it is interesting to see that environmental activism in the Mexico-US border region developed and expanded rapidly in the early 1990s, it should also be noted that many of the Mexican NGOs have had trouble to bring continuity in their organization and activities. Although still of importance, these NGOs therefore often remain a source of temporal, reactive and fragile social organization against environmental destruction. For long-term social action a democratic political culture is essential. Social actions are never an immediate result of changes in global structures. For NGOs and social movements to respond to such changes it is necessary that they take initiatives, formulate projects of their own, and deal with their political context. Therefore, democratization of a political system and society is neither automatic nor rapid.

It seems that in the period from 2000 to 2002, the slow process of democratization that affects the political system and culture, and the actions of NGOs and social movements, has continued in the border region. Some groups have been replaced, others have adopted new ways of organization, alliances between groups have been changing, and some of the structures and relations have been modernized. It is too early to foresee the direction and outcome of these diverse, complex and partly contradictory changes in the long run. Unfortunately, the depth of the environmental destruction in the border region with its serious impact on the inhabitants' health does not allow for a slow approach. From an ecological point of view, time is running out for the shared border of Mexico and the United States, and this is a key moment to reorient the practices, actions and goals of interest groups, and to let social actors participate on official decision-making processes on solving and preventing environmental problems.

Joint efforts of Mexican and US NGOs have now also been officially recognized as a central element to save the shared region's environment and natural resources. However, our two case studies demonstrate that such cross-border NGO cooperation is far from easy as cultural, political and economic differences continue to complicate relations. The limited technical and scientific knowledge of Mexican NGOs put them in disadvantageous position in their relations with US counterparts, which continue to expand their connections with research centres and universities. Financial support is an additional obstacle: few Mexican NGOs have been able to gather sufficient funding, and they depend heavily on support of US organizations to finance their projects. Only

in a few cases has cross-border cooperation lasted more than a few years, yet it are usually the more structural, long-term relations and efforts that have the greatest impact. It thus remains a most important challenge to build on the existing willingness and some fruitful experiences of Mexico-US NGO relations, and to search for more effective approaches to long-term cross-border cooperation.

The Mexico-US border region is a fascinating laboratory for transnational environmental activism, with a great diversity of organizations and actions as well as joint efforts of Mexican and US groups. Even though there are still numerous barriers to be defeated, the border experience of the early 1990s did bring about influential social actions that contributed to a new way of doing border politics. It has shown that it is possible for NGOs to open an innovative field on key issues like environmental education, workers' safety, recording industrial pollution, and providing technical assistance. Nevertheless, even today most of the Mexican environmental organizations in the border region have experienced little success in this respect. To empower these organizations they should at least have better access to technical and policy information, and they should be allowed to really and structurally participate in decision-making processes on the environment. Under these circumstances, Mexican NGOs can play their part in finding solutions to one of many issues that Mexico shares with the United States.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> The analysis is based on several sources of information that were gathered with various research methods: opinion polls of environmental actors, an analysis of the perceptions of environmental values in the region, opinion polls of maquiladora workers, and interviews with representatives of environmental NGOs (see also Alfie, 1998, and Alfie and Méndez, 2000).
- <sup>2</sup> A few important studies are those of Ulrich Beck (cf. Beck, 2001), Cohen and Arato (2000), Jordan and Tuijl (2000), Keck and Sikkink (1998), Keohane and Nye (2000), Wapner (2000b), Scholte (1999), Edwards and Hulme (1996), Brecher and Costello (1994), Frederick (1994), and Thorup (1991).
- <sup>3</sup> In the case of environmental NGOs, a classification can be made on the basis of discourses that range from catastrophist (limits to growth) to permanent and constant growth (the Prometheus response); from administrative rationalism (the state as central actor in solving problems) to economic rationalism (the polluter-pays-principle); from conservatism to green radicalism (cf. Smith, 1999; Manes, 1997; Dryzek, 1997).
- <sup>4</sup> The environmental problems in the region are basically a result of the intense population growth since the 1940s and the industrial expansion since the 1970s.
- <sup>5</sup> This often involves funding or a guarantee from a US foundation, which implies that Mexican programmes need to reflect the interests of the financing foundations.
- <sup>6</sup> For an extensive analysis of these factors see Alfie (1998) and Alfie and Méndez (2000).
- <sup>7</sup> Several research methods were applied for these case-studies. In Ciudad Juárez-El Paso, both in 1993 and in 1997, 150 members of binational environmental organizations answered a list of standardized questions, and eight leaders of NGOs were interviewed. In Matamoros, 174 maquiladora workers and four leaders of NGOs were interviewed.
- <sup>8</sup> It needs mentioning that not all maquiladoras pollute to the same extent. Actually, the most serious problems are detected in small and medium-sized plants which are situated outside industrial parks and operate without the required permits and facilities for toxic waste disposal. Besides, these plants do usually not inform their workers about the health risks of the production processes.
- <sup>9</sup> Our fieldwork was about tracking various sources of information, including interviews with maquiladora workers, officials, hospital personnel, NGOs and environmental groups, in order to assess the environmental damage caused by the maquiladora industry as well as the environmental mobilizations and NGOs.

- <sup>10</sup> Of the interviewees 106 were women; 58 were natives of Matamoros; their ages were usually between 18 and 25 years; and 105 had 1 to 5 family members working in this industry too.
- <sup>11</sup> The Environmental Education Resources Guide 2001 mentions 27 institutions and organizations with an environmental profile in the Matamoros region. Some of them are centres of higher education, other government agencies, and some are largely dedicated to other themes; the CEM and PJO are the two most serious NGOs.





## CROSS-BORDER RELATIONS OF MEXICAN ENVIRONMENTAL NGOs IN TIJUANA - SAN DIEGO

EDIT ANTAL

The influence of environmental NGOs on international policy and the repercussions of such activity on national policies is a subject that has been widely discussed. However, since the number of empirical studies is still rather limited it has proven to be difficult to draw general conclusions on the issue of transnational environmental activism. This chapter analyses the case of Mexican environmental activism in the Tijuana - San Diego border area, and particularly focuses on the NGOs' capacity to surpass the frontiers between Mexico and the United States. By reflecting on the limits and scope of cross-border interaction and collaboration between NGOs, this analysis aims to provide both an understanding of this interesting case, and to contribute to the general debate on the role of environmental NGOs in border areas and transnational politics.

From an environmental standpoint, the Tijuana-San Diego area has received a very favourable treatment in bilateral politics. This region received a disproportional large share of the special funding for the improvement of the environment, including the Border XXI Programme<sup>1</sup>, the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC) and the North American Development Bank (NADBANK).<sup>2</sup> Given these circumstances and the obviously asymmetric context, it is interesting to study the interaction between US and Mexican groups. The institutionalised, top-down efforts of binational governmental agencies in the nearly ten years of their existence have been widely studied, and their evaluation has given rise to much controversy and

criticism.<sup>3</sup> Especially the lack of transparency and public participation has been criticized. Building on an extensive empirical research, the present study centres on this issue of participation by reviewing the role and capacity of environmental NGOs based in the Tijuana-San Diego area with regard to regional environmental integration.<sup>4</sup>

The environmental side-agreement of NAFTA raised high expectations of cross-border cooperation of NGOs. It was generally assumed that a close relationship would develop between US environmental NGOs, with their long experience and high degree of organization, and their younger, less experienced Mexican counterparts. And this relationship was assumed to have a democratising influence on the Mexicans in the sense of fostering civil participation in environmental issues. It was likewise – yet somewhat naively – expected that there would be a sort of magic effect in that cooperation of NGO networks on both sides of the border would be able to minimize the existing tensions, to overcome the great inequalities proper to the North-South context, and to solve the enormous difficulties resulting from the differences between the political and social systems of Mexico and the United States.<sup>5</sup>

As a result of two major developments, academic approaches to the actions and the scope of environmental NGOs in international policy have multiplied over the years. First, from the late 1970s onwards, the study of non-governmental organizations as (potentially powerful) non-state actors has increasingly received attention from the angle of different disciplines, initially from that of social theory and, later on, from that of international relations. Second, over time some radical changes and divisions have taken place in environmentalist discourse, the way of understanding environmental problems, and their links to other policy matters. This has caused very different and not necessarily compatible ways of thinking about the environment so that, at present, there exist several important breaches in the environmental movement.

One of the main theses of this work on Tijuana is that the far-reaching divisions in NGOs' environmental discourses have placed limits on the possible interaction between groups. This situation adds to other hindrances for cooperation in Tijuana-San Diego, particularly asymmetries between groups caused by the asymmetric binational context. Cross-border interaction between NGOs is also restricted by the dissimilar phases which the environmental movement and environmental policy making are going through in Mexico and the United States. Furthermore, the profound differences of the Mexican

and US political systems affect the role of NGOs in their national system too.

## Conceptualising cross-border environmental activism

### *Global Civil Society and the function of NGOs*

For an analysis of the relation between the activities of NGOs and their discourse, Keck and Sikkink's definition of cross-border environmental networks is useful for its emphasis on shared values and ideas. According to this definition, NGO's main function in cross-border interaction is to carry out lobbying activities, to exercise influence, and to generate and disseminate knowledge about environmental problems, both in order to pressure international organisms and national or local governments. Keck and Sikkink (1998) even suggest that cross-border networks tend to erase the line between domestic and international policy. Less clear, however, is the effectiveness of cross-border networks formed by NGOs in order to change global and national politics (cf. Silva, 1998).

Scholars writing of a global civil society observe that in some cases states are being replaced by NGOs, for example in the overlapping of governmental environmental activities (top-down) by that of a local and informal type (bottom-up) (cf. Caldwell, 1988; Princen and Finger, 1994; Josseliny and Wallace, 2001). Others stress the interaction between large corporations and large environmental groups, both of which are operating across borders (Rowlands, 2001, p. 140). The best known example is the case of the joint project of *McDonalds* and *Environmental Defense Fund* to achieve common environmental aims. Critics consider this case as a co-opting of environmentalism, whereas its defenders see it as the beginning of a positive interaction. There are even people, including Ulrich Beck (cf. Beck, 2001), who foresee that the initial hostility might be followed by a rapprochement between large corporations and global movements that are opposed to free trade, and that in the future they might manage to regulate economic activities.

In this study it is assumed that the role played by NGOs and their networks in international policy has to do with their capacity to link up the local sphere with the global one. By doing so, among other things they attempt to overcome the problems generally linked to formal and institutional forms of international cooperation. In addition, it is assumed here that the NGOs' capacity to build cross-border bridges

between the local and the global level has to do with sharing identities, norms and values on the environment, which shape the NGOs' discourse.

### *Cross-border interaction*

There are two perspectives to define environmental interactions in border areas. The first centres on the internal factors defined around the analytical relationship between being situated in a border zone, and the very nature of environmental problems. According to Helen Ingmar and Robert G. Varady (1996), the border influences the environment in four different ways: it separates the problems from the solutions; it creates perverse economic opportunities; it marginalizes the interests of the residents of the border area in national politics; and it erects barriers to the solutions provided by grassroots organizations. Whether a region is a cross-border area – which is basically a social definition – depends not only on institutions but first and foremost on the behaviour of the population, its history and its current social composition. According to this idea, the concept of cross-border area should include aspects such as: a common history, a shared border culture, relations of kinship between the population on both sides, a common language, an integrating economy, and informal networks between politicians and civic groups.

The second perspective of environmental interaction in a border area is much broader and also involves external factors that influence the process of cross-border cooperation. As developed by Joachim Blatter (1997), this perspective shows that political levels beyond the border have great influence on the success of cooperation. It is precisely the interrelationship between the different political arenas that determines the real incentives for and obstacles to political activity, and the institutionalization of relations. Beyond the territorial level of a region, Blatter mentions eight fields which, in his opinion, play an important role in cross-border cooperation: horizontal relations at the international or continental level; vertical relations between governments; horizontal relations between the states; between municipalities across the border; between different sectors; between the executive branch and legislative power; and also relations between the private and the public sector.

An important element that affects approaches to cross-border regionalization is the conceptualization of the border itself. This may be conceived of as a line that causes clashes between two cultures and systems which may become more or less conflictive over time; or the border may be considered as a dynamic process that generates multiple

border spaces, which turn into cross-border areas with their own characteristics and effects - economic, environmental, historical, cultural, social and formalized.

Following from the above, the role of environmental NGOs as political actors can be classified as follows: 1) when NGOs play the part of an agent for social change, generally these are grass-roots organizations that act politically at the local and national level, centring on issues and levels linked to the national political agenda; 2) when NGOs act as a force for building alliances and coalitions at the level of regional and international integration, organizations are creating identities channelled toward cross-border interaction as a whole, with other interests. What we see here is a distinction between two forms of political action.<sup>6</sup> The first one, more closely related to the *local-national axis* of political action, is linked to the specific political system of each country and the specific phase of the national debate on the environment. This approach emphasizes the differences between the two national systems, and therefore considers that the border may become a factor hindering binational collaboration. The second approach is related to the *regional-international axis* of activities, where NGO actions are more independent of the political system of their country. However, the lack of institutionalization at the regional and international level may limit NGO cooperation too.

In the Tijuana-San Diego area, demographic pressure and environmental decline are of such magnitude that they cannot be controlled merely by means of informal relations. As Ingmar and Varady (1996) propose, new institutions are needed to strengthen cross-border ties. These institutions must start off from the understanding that they are dealing with a cross-border area, not with a border between two countries. The new institutions should not be centralized, but of a local or regional character, and it would be desirable to have some sort of a cross-border jurisdiction in order to improve the exchange of information and the enforcement of laws. The only way to obtain institutions of this kind is to build them from the bottom up, together with the communities and civic groups.

Blatter's approach differs from the general view on NGOs since it widens the factors and levels of relations that play an important part in cross-border interaction. In this case, the important links in the formation of a region depend not only on the relationship with the predominantly low-income grassroots groups, but also other external elements are incorporated therein, such as the fostering of successful integration of a cross-border nature, the increase in the number of

actors and interactions between them, and also their relations with the outside world.

In the Tijuana-San Diego area there is a long-standing process of creating binational environmental institutions. However, these institutions do not always fit in with local interests and often even give rise to tensions between national and regional interests. In spite of the existence of bilateral agreements at the governmental level since 1889, the 1983 *La Paz Treaty* and the creation of a series of institutions and programmes stemming from NAFTA, the interest and participation of different sectors of local civil society in environmental matters continues to be much lower on the Mexican side than on the US side of the border.

### *Evolution of environmental discourse*

In this text, environmentalist discourse is understood in a broad sense, as socially constructed conceptions on the environment. Environmental values have become widespread in all spheres and have penetrated political discourses throughout the world. Therefore it is important to distinguish, on the one hand, the different types of environmental discourse, and on the other hand, the concrete political use made of them. In spite of the fact that since the beginning of the twentieth century there has been international concern about the environment - mainly in the Anglo-Saxon world and in Europe - from conservationist and preservationist interests, the first really global view of the problem arose much later under the auspices of the United Nations.

In the 1960s - the decade in which the first wave of environmental movements arose in the industrialized countries - the first environmental laws came into being. In 1972, governments and NGOs met at the first international conference on the environment, held in Stockholm. This conference was a very important event because from then on the debate on environmental issues became linked to the problem of social development. Twenty years later, in 1992 at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, the links between environment and development were formally accepted. For the first time an environmental agenda was drawn up on a worldwide scale and the different responsibilities of rich and poor countries were recognized, which implied introducing the North-South dimension into the environmental debate. These differences also show in NGO activities. Northern NGOs concentrate mainly on the consequences of industrial development and consumerism (principally water and air pollution), whereas Southern NGOs are rather concerned about the environmental consequences of

poverty, deforestation and the lack of equity in the world economic system. Of course not all environmental groups accept or identify with this differentiated way of understanding the relationship between man and nature, which has produced a first breach in the environmental movement.

In the second half of the 1990s, with the inclusion of environmental issues in international institutions and treaties - the WTO and NAFTA - the environmental debate became linked to trade. This produced a second breach in the environmental movement: one part, starting off from the basis of pragmatism vis-à-vis the environment was absorbed by multinational commercial and business interests while the other devoted itself to resisting and seeking other, more autonomous paths which often implied the radicalization of its positions on environmental risk. At the same time new fields of political participation opened up to the NGOs since, with the arrival of international environmental laws, there came a possibility of building strategic alliances between NGOs.

By the end of the 1990s there was a clear ideological division between environmental groups favouring free trade and those criticizing it. The former act at the national and international level and focus, above all, on the enforcement of environmental laws and cooperation with companies in environmental projects. Radical NGOs conversely demand that world trade includes extensive environmental protection and regulation. More diversity in environmental thinking stems from different philosophical and epistemological concepts regarding the relationship between man and nature, power relations in society, and the definition of social actors. John Dryzek (1997) distinguishes four basic types of environmental discourses: those tending toward *solving problems* within a given political context; those on *sustainable development*; those of *green radicalism*; and those of *survival*. This approach more or less coincides with a frequently used differentiation of four types of environmental NGOs (cf. Smith, 1999). First, there are *pragmatic* environmental groups, which seek environmental means within the given political context, and are often of a socially conservative background. Second, *green* NGOs, on the contrary, believe that only far-reaching changes in the relationship between man and nature can offer solutions. Third, *radical* groups hold that conventional political processes are part of the problem, and they demand more NGO participation in decision-making. Fourth, there are many sorts of *socio-economic groups* that also have a certain interest in environmental issues

and take part in environmental debates, but they are mostly interested in other matters such as labour rights, minorities and gender.

### **Environmental NGOs in Tijuana and cross-border interaction**

According to the level at which they are active, one can distinguish three types of NGOs. The first is the community group, even if not legally established, which is the basic unit of social movements. The second is the intermediary NGO that builds bridges between local communities and global levels. These NGOs are legally and institutionally well established and channel support to affiliated groups. Intermediary NGOs can either take the form of a grassroots organization or a membership organizations. The third type is the international NGO that operates and lobbies in the field of international relations, and channels funding toward the intermediary NGOs (Carruthers, 1995). Network organizations are another type of NGOs. In the Tijuana-San Diego environmental NGOs are very interested in being on the lists of NGO networks and in forming new ones. However, it is important to also differentiate between networks, since they differ greatly in their relations with member-NGOs, and in their political performance. Equally important is the level at which the networks act: some groups are linked to local institutions; others prefer to belong to national networks, while there are also regional, binational, international and global networks. The function performed by the networks is different at each level, as is the political activity to which they are related.

Not many empirical studies have been made on the activity of environmental NGOs on the Northern border, and even fewer using the approach we are interested in here.<sup>7</sup> An interesting study is that by Carol Zabin (1997), who holds that in contrast to other regions of Mexico Mexican border NGOs usually do not have strong ties to grassroots and community movements. In her view, this limits the border NGOs' power in promoting democracy and overcoming backwardness. The author identifies three reasons for this feature of border NGOs: the political culture of the border region, their relations with US NGOs, and the fact that environmental groups are relatively new. With regard to the first reason Zabin points out that the majority of NGOs in the Centre and South of Mexico are closely linked to resistance movements and struggles for the autonomy of poor urban and rural sectors. Along the border, Mexican environmental NGOs are more oriented toward political activity and there is an obvious lack



or weakness of grassroots NGOs.<sup>8</sup> This paucity of links between NGOs and grassroots organizations is due to the lack of autonomous grassroots organizations of a lasting nature in the border area. Partly as a result of paternalistic and clientelistic practices of local governments, social movements easily arise and disappear. In the border region NGO leaders also tend to be unwilling to take on commitments to community groups as they feel that their role is separate from the political struggle and the mobilization of the poor. Generally, the first have more individualistic and business-oriented ideologies, as opposed to the collective mindset of grassroots groups. According to Zabin (1997, p. 60), the influence of US NGOs on Mexican organizations acts in favour of technical approaches and legislative strategies, to the detriment of representing the interests of community organizations.

A study by Benedicto Ruiz Vargas (1998, p. 15) comes to the conclusion that NGOs in Tijuana remained on the sideline during the intense and complex debate on organizations' social practice and aims that took place in the 1970s in Mexico. His study emphasizes the NGOs' scattered, assistance-oriented character, very dependent on the source of funding, and often on the local government itself. He considers that they are very little involved in designing social policies and in diagnosing the real situation in their locality. Both Zabin and Ruiz Vargas argue that in countries such as Mexico the function of environmental NGOs is to strengthen civil society and that the NGOs must be involved in long-term social change, although not all NGOs share this view of their role (cf. Thomas 1992). However, the present study suggests that among the radical groups in Tijuana one can notice a great diversity of arguments and economic and political interests, giving way to an apparent atomization of the NGOs, but at the same time there are attempts of NGOs to redefine their aims, methods and their connections to networks. Here, a differentiation is applied between two types of environmental NGOs: community groups and intermediary organizations.

### *Community groups for environmental justice*

Environmental justice is a relatively new trend within the environmental movement in the United States. Originally, this trend was based on the thesis that environmental laws tend to be unequal because they are formed and applied in an exclusive way, without the participation of minorities, gender and ethnic groups. Environmental justice proposes a new notion and relationship between nature and human beings. The environmental justice approach has also appeared among Mexican

groups, although it does not necessarily mean the same thing as in the United States. In Tijuana, among the community groups for groups for environmental justice one can distinguish between those with a traditional discourse and others having more novel profiles.

Among the environmental justice groups of a rather traditional political kind is Factor X, an activist group set up in the 1980s which is at present undergoing a difficult process of ideological and social change. Another example is the Cañon del Padre group, which was very pugnacious during the PRI era, and has a clientelistic style of operating and is formed around a charismatic leader. This organization is now facing serious problems of a lack of identity in the context of multipartyism. These type of groups lack professionalization, and mechanisms and capacity to accede to computerized knowledge and the Internet, hampering their connections to other groups. In spite of their being respected by many citizens, their activity is in decline.

The first environmental NGO in the region, the Movimiento Ecológico Mexicano en Baja California (MEBAC), which has a discourse of sustainable development, is another example of an organization that has underwent a significant decline in membership and activities. This has hampered its connection to the new binational institutions, such as the BECC. Nevertheless, this group has made progress in awareness raising, professionalization (including professional leadership), and enhancing environmental rights and duties. Like the MEBAC, the Gaviotas group has been able to progress into the age of binational networks and institutions, and has also promoted citizens' participation. The Gaviotas, however, apply a rather conservationist discourse, and have more personalized forms of leadership. Eco-Sol, an NGO devoted to education on the environment, in the past sought opportunities to work with government support, but it seems to have become confused on its position with the new political and institutional conditions.

Among the more recently formed groups with novel discourse and activities is the Yeuni group, set up in 1997 by two young lawyers, which deserves some special attention here. It differs from the older groups because of its level of professionalization and its activism directed towards legal issues, labour rights, women's matters and human rights. This group strives for fair application of legislation, and it has played an active role in the discussion about the reform of the state's environmental law in the Special Roundtable on Environmental Policy. This has been the first time that NGOs have been able to take part, next to the municipality of Tijuana, the State of Baja California and

the business sector. The Yeuaní group considers that one of its major successes was to bring to the debating table - with the support of some parliamentarians, industrialists and community groups- the clause on the right to information, the obligatory nature of environmental impact studies, and in cases of non-compliance the payment of a bond, in municipal bylaws.

The activities of the Yeuaní group show that there are important differences between the concerns of NGOs on each side of the border. In the United States, environmental regulation dates back several decades, while in Mexico, it is a relatively new affair that is still in full development. Furthermore, in the Mexican states, the relations between NGOs and local authorities are not without serious conflicts. For example, when drawing up a draft bill for the defence of children and the family, the Yeuaní group received reprisals, threats, blockages in the courts, and some of the group's properties were even stolen, presumably by the local authorities. These repressive actions are a clear illustration of the situation and the social and political status of NGOs in Mexico. In situations like this, US NGOs can only offer very limited support. In fact, cross-border linkages may even create problems, when (false) arguments of protecting sovereignty are applied.

Another characteristic of Mexican NGOs is that they devote themselves not only to environmental issues but also to a series of issues regarding social justice, linking issues of human rights of immigrants, labour-related matters concerning women, and environmental and health problems, while enhancing citizens' participation in politics. In doing so, the Yeuaní group has set up relations with a wide range of political actors, such as women workers in maquiladora plants, industrial groups, and political groups of both the right-wing PAN and the left-wing PRD - a novelty for NGOs in this region. In addition, the Yeuaní group has participated in organizing anti-globalization events, and has maintained relations with many other groups and networks: a range of different groups of activists in Tijuana and San Diego, including groups working on migration issues, such as the Centro de Apoyo al Inmigrante; the EZLN (Zapatista National Liberation Army); international movements such as the Proyecto de Excluidos de América Latina, and the Fundación Esperanza; and in the United States, with groups in Oregon (on the labour-related matters), and with San Francisco-based Global Exchange (on human rights).<sup>9</sup>

There is an interesting example of successful horizontal cross-border collaboration between community groups that seek identity around

the concept of environmental justice, even though the meaning of the term may be somewhat different at the other side of the border. The US group Environmental Health Coalition (EHC), located in San Diego, works through campaigns with six Mexican groups, among which is the Comité Prorestauración del Cañon del Padre, the Grupo Yeuani and Factor X. The EHC was founded two decades ago, and it also participates in other networks such as the Border Environmental Health Practice, founded in late 1990s. This network and the EHC, in turn, are linked to other networks engaged in anti-free trade struggles, such as 'Stop the FTAA'. They want to reform NAFTA because they consider the NAFTA provisions insufficient to offer legal instruments and solutions to serious environmental hazards. Among the EHC's staff of 22, there are some people who formerly worked in mainstream organizations, but left because they were disillusioned about the work and its distance from real problems. Representatives of this group criticize major US environmental organizations such as Sierra Club for not focussing on environmental problems that most affect people, such as toxic waste.

As the Environmental Health Coalition holds that environmental problems have more of an impact on low-income people, it carries out work in low-income neighbourhoods on both sides of the border (in San Diego and Tijuana), especially in those located near to maquiladora plants. For instance, in collaboration with Mexican groups in Tijuana, the EHC presented a plea to NAFTA's Commission for Environmental Cooperation with respect to the toxic waste of the company Metales y Derivados. Before this company went out of business years ago, it left behind 6 metric tons of toxic waste, which ever since has been contaminating a neighbourhood of over a thousand families and causing serious health problems. Representatives of EHC have complained about the lack of information on pollutants since in the absence of evidence no legal proceedings can be started. Cases of lead poisoning have been identified which prove the relationship with the toxic waste case of Metales y Derivados. The group offers economic support for the people to undergo medical examinations and train them so that they themselves may be able to detect lead in their blood. In their opinion, environmental education for the communities is a key factor because people cannot find solutions unless they can identify the problems.

### *Intermediary NGOs*

Contrary to community groups, intermediary organizations are more related to initiatives stemming from the top, particularly governmental environmental programs. A typical case is that of the Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental, which was set up in 1991.<sup>10</sup> According to its leader, this NGO is sponsored by the Border Ecological Project, which offered them funding from the very outset. The organization's aim is to serve as a source of information, and therefore it publishes the four-monthly magazine *Ecos de la frontera*, and it has set up a specialized documentary centre on environmental issues. The Proyecto maintains contact with a large number of organizations working on environmental education in the United States and some in Mexico. In addition, this NGO organizes so-called Encuentros Fronterizos: a twice-yearly binational forum for environmental NGOs, academic groups, local government agencies and information centres, and national institutions, such as Mexico's Ministry of the Environment and the National Institute of Ecology.

Among the concrete environmental activities of the Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental is the Proyecto Bioregional de Educación Ambiental (Bioregional project for environmental education), which it carries out in collaboration with the Proyecto Fronterizo and a dozen groups in San Diego and Tijuana, oriented toward giving (officially certificated) courses on environmental education to teachers. The group also draws up the Record of Emissions and Transfer of Pollutants in collaboration with the Mexican Ministry of the Environment (SEMARNAT). Furthermore, it has coordinated participation in the reform of local environmental laws, in particular on the right to information, in the Mesa de Coordinación Ciudadana de Gestión Ambiental (Citizens' coordinative roundtable for environmental policy) which is set up to raise awareness about the law. One of the problems facing the Proyecto, however, is limited communication with, and between, local environmental organizations. Possibly, the lack of technical and professional knowledge on environmental issues has made it difficult for this organization to establish channels of communication, and to achieve recognition among already existing environmental movements. Other Tijuana groups, above all the more radical ones working in communities, complain about a lack of trust and that they are excluded from the Proyecto events.

A number of other intermediary NGOs are active in the Tijuana-San Diego area. Among them is the Alianza para la Sustentabilidad del Noroeste Costero Mexicano, which is the most outstanding of the many networks in the area of Northern Mexico. The Alianza is of a conservationist tendency and has relations with large US organizations such as World Wildlife Fund and The Nature Conservancy. La NETA, with headquarters in Mexico City, is another NGO set up with the aim of providing paid service for grassroots groups. It specializes in support with computerization and setting up contact with other groups, offering access to Internet information on environmental issues. It maintains only sporadic contact with NAFTA's Commission for Environmental Cooperation and is more linked to UN organizations. An important NGO for establishing links in the North American region, and even worldwide, is the Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network - a well-known support network for workers in maquiladora plants. The network, with headquarters in San Francisco (United States), was set up in 1993 and it is a remarkably professional.

### **Cross-border divergences among NGOs**

Many of the environmental NGOs in Tijuana are engaged in cross-border contacts and activities. Of the 18 groups that were located in the research performed in 2001, the characteristics regarding their capacity to cooperate binationally can be analysed by looking into five important aspects: the linkage between the environment and other issues; differences in agendas; level of professionalism and technical knowledge; number and size of the groups; and divisions between the groups.

#### *Linkage between the environment and other issues*

The orientation of environmentalism as such and, above all, the linkage between the environment and other subjects of interest to NGOs tend to be very different in Tijuana compared to San Diego. Many Mexican organizations, and in particular community groups, not only dedicate themselves to attending to environmental problems but also to other major issues, such as elementary needs for their communities. In some cases environmental activities are even only marginal in comparison with activities related to labour-related matters, health and gender issues, and/or community services in general.

This is the case for the group Casa de la Mujer - Grupo Factor X, founded in 1982, with headquarters in Tijuana, which is primarily

interested in the labour rights of women workers in maquiladora plants, the problems of women in poor neighbourhoods, and the health problems in parts of town where the people both live and work. The Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network, founded in 1993, with headquarters in San Francisco, California, is a support network for safety and health in maquiladora plants. It involves 400 professional staff, ranging from physicians, toxicologists to engineers. It operates in the United States, Canada and Mexico to provide technical assistance on dangerous materials in the work processes of 3200 maquiladora plants in the border area, and it is linked to global networks which carry out similar work in Asia and Central America. The group Environmental Health Coalition, with headquarters in San Diego, was founded in 1980. It is not, properly speaking, a binational organization but it does have permanent campaigns in the working-class neighbourhoods of Tijuana. This NGO focuses on issues of environmental justice which - by definition - understands the environment as a concept of nature in close relationship with work processes, health and the living conditions of the poor and social and ethnic minorities. Another organization dedicated mainly to health is the Iniciativa de Salud Fronteriza. This binational NGO was founded in 1996 and has its headquarters in San Diego and offices in Tijuana and Mexicali. The Yeuni group of Tijuana, which was founded in 1998, carries out a novel work since it combines environmental issues with labour rights and even human rights. Finally, the Comité Ciudadano Pro-Restauración del Cañon del Padre is one of the oldest NGOs. It was founded in 1983 in the Chilpancingo neighbourhood, a working-class area of maquiladora plants in Tijuana, and it centres its attention on the living conditions of this neighbourhood's low-income inhabitants. The leader of the Comité states that his greatest aspiration has been to clean up the working and living areas, obtain elementary services and bring in urban services. Among other things, the organization offers training courses for workers in the maquiladora plants.

### *Differences between local and binational agendas*

In the Tijuana-San Diego area there is a certain tension between the prioritised issues in official bilateral agreements and those of local interest. From the local perspective it is doubtful whether being in a border area is an advantage or rather a disadvantage for the protection of the environment. In a border area national as well as binational policies are materialized, but these do not necessarily respond to local

interests. The Tijuana-San Diego region demonstrates well the typically border condition in which the interests of the region's inhabitants are marginalized. This tends to inhibit the efforts of community organizations for solving their problems.

Despite the fact that many of the environmental groups on the Mexican side of the border arose precisely thanks to institutional efforts of the governments of Mexico and the United States, later on, their cooperation has been hampered with the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC). The NGOs founded in the early 1980s - that is to say the oldest groups and those with usually the greatest impact and social support - are also the ones that do not collaborate with the official binational institutions. In fact, of the groups interviewed in Tijuana, the majority - 7 out of 11 - admitted that they had no, or only very sporadic and distant, relations with the BECC. Only the Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental (founded in 1991) stated that it had good relations the Border Commission. The Comité del Cañon del Padre explained that it had no such relations because its way of acting is through social pressure which it considers to be incompatible with the ways of the BECC. Other groups stated they had been rejected and discriminated against, and that they were not invited to the meetings initiated or supported by the BECC. We will here review the experiences of three organizations.

The Movimiento Ecologista Mexicano en Baja California (MEBAC) claimed that it has never been able to establish any dealings with the BECC. This NGO was set up in 1989, it has 900 members, and its main objective is to achieve the participation of different sectors of society in the handling of environmental problems. MEBAC analyses and channels complaints and reports on environmental problems, promotes the right to information, and carries out environmental and ecological projects, such as plant nurseries and an ecological park. In the opinion of MEBAC, the BECC has no future because its loans for environmental projects have very high interest rates, instead of preferential rates. As a result, projects that had been authorized have been abandoned due to the high costs, and other funding is sought. MEBAC thinks that the assigning of resources is very uneven and the process is too long and complicated, while the Mexican Bank Banobras acting as the official intermediary causes a lot of unnecessary red tape. Even when the BECC certifies a project, access to funding is not guaranteed. However, MEBAC has a favourable opinion about some of NADBANK's activities, such as its funding amounting to US\$ 50,000 for sanitary landfills for municipalities.



For other groups, for example the Grupo Ecologista Gaviotas, their radical position renders cooperation with official institutions problematic. The Grupo Ecologista Gaviotas is a group founded in the early 1990s, with a rather wide-ranging membership. Its meetings are attended by over 400 people who carry out an on-going campaign for cleaning up the beaches, planting trees in the parks and monitoring the quality of water. In an interview, the group's leader stated that they are not invited to events having to do with the Programa Fronterizo because they are considered to be 'activists' and a part of the ecologist movement: 'these (official) networks only want coffee-shop ecologists, here there are many people belonging to the extremist wing of ecologism, ... they have refused us ten scholarships for high school students because they only want people who they know; ... I don't think this is the right attitude, the thing is that we should pull together so that there are more people who know each other'.

The representative of the ECO-SOL group, which was founded in the early 1980s and devotes itself to education about the environment, expressed the opinion that the BECC is an institution that pays the people who work for it very well and that at the beginning it used all the environmental groups to fulfil the requirements, but that later on stopped inviting them. ECO-SOL believes that instead of drawing up infrastructure programmes, what should be done is training both promoters and the communities in general so as to make people aware of what is being done, for example on the subject of hydraulic works. The BECC's main problem is that it is only interested in infrastructure without looking at the environmental impact of urban development. In general, there is an abyss between the priorities of ECO-SOL and those of the BECC.

#### *Level of professionalism and technical knowledge*

In interviews, representatives of Tijuana environmental organizations stated that they have little technical knowledge, and some even showed little familiarity with environmental terminology. This is due for the most part to the fact that the groups were formed through experience acquired in the field, often when a pressing environmental problem had cropped up. In the vast majority of Tijuana NGOs, their representatives are not environmental professionals. The lack of information and technical knowledge is an enormous handicap for identifying environmental problems, disseminating information on these problems, and – supported by popular participation - channelling these issues correctly and effectively to the binational institutions.

The environmental groups have only limited contact with academic centres that generate information on the problems of pollutants, toxic waste and dangerous chemicals, but it is interesting to note that when Mexican NGOs establish cross-border contacts the search for knowledge is an important motivation. Collaboration with US academic centres and experts, for instance, helped Mexican groups to gather the necessary didactic materials to hold workshops for workers in the maquiladora plants so that they can identify dangerous chemicals or monitor the quality of water or air. And there are some other examples: Grupo Ecologista Gaviotas has relations with US environmental groups in order to obtain information for its water monitoring; the Factor X group has been host to specialists from the University of California at Berkeley to give workshops on safety in the workplace and dangerous chemicals; and, to train women workers in the maquiladora plants, the Comité del Cañon del Padre has acquired educational material from various US universities.

#### *Size and funding of the groups*

In the Tijuana-San Diego area, Mexican NGOs tend to be smaller than their US counterparts. This may have to do with their level of radicalism – in general moderate organizations tend to be larger than radical groups. The average number of group members is low and that of full-time, or at least part-time activists is even lower. Of the 18 groups that were identified in the research project, the largest groups are the Comité Ciudadano Pro-Restauración del Cañon del Padre y Servicios Comunitarios, which has 500 members, and Maquiladora Health and Safety Support Network, with 400 activists, followed by the Environmental Health Coalition, with 22 staff members, the Movimiento Ecologista en Baja California (MEBAC) with 18 activists, and ECO-SOL with 15 members. The organizations with the least number of activists are the Grupo Ecologista Gaviotas (6); the Casa de la Mujer-Factor X (4 activists and 14 promoters); the Proyecto Fronterizo de Educación Ambiental (4 persons); and Yeuaní (2 full-time and 2 part-time activists). With respect to funding, not more than 4 out of the 18 environmental groups support themselves at least partially by membership fees, while there are only three cases of groups providing paid services. The typical means of funding the activities of the groups is direct or indirect assistance from foundations, sometimes national or binational, mainly US foundations, and in some cases from European and Canadian churches and trade unions.

*Divisions between the groups*

The complexity and fragmentation of environmental legislation in the Mexico-US border area add to the dispersion and divisions that already exist among the environmental NGOs. As the border is the meeting place of different systems and interests, there is a real labyrinth of rules, regulations, and different institutional frameworks, which tends to frustrate the activities of local movements. The same thing occurs with international treaties that are based on national interests: they often do not reflect the local needs and the preferences of the region's inhabitants, nor do they take local actors into account. This situation should receive serious attention since the behaviour and attitude of the inhabitants are what may determine the success of applying the agreements. The best examples are the NAFTA institutions set up with the aim of achieving a more rigorous control on the border. What their success seems to depend on a correct gathering and dissemination of (technical and social) information about the real nature of environmental threats, but this has never been contemplated.

With regard to the environment, the existing groups and networks do not converge into one social force with a unified approach towards the border issue. Rather, each NGO has its own experience and, therefore, its own concept of the border. The groups that work with poor women workers from the maquiladora plants have little in common with the professional, middle-class groups that search for the participation of citizens in improving green areas. For the former the border is closed, while the latter can visit the green areas and well-kept beaches of San Diego. And while some groups want to clean up their communities from the dangerous waste left by firms in order to avoid illnesses, others are interested in the more general right to information and environmental education. The most important factor in defining a territory as a cross-border area is the permanent movement of people which, day by day, is feeding the specific culture and system of this area. From this point of view, the Tijuana-San Diego area is becoming a cross-border area since its formal and informal relations are vast, accumulative and, furthermore, they have a long history. However, one must also take into account the existence of many different histories and experiences which make for a great variety of ideas about the border and which, in turn, tend to fragment the participation of society in solving environmental problems.

## Conclusions

The division of the environmental movement in the Tijuana-San Diego area is a trend that can be found in many places around the world. On the one hand, there is a large number and wide range of grassroots groups built from the bottom up, which often tend to be radical and contribute vital energy to the movement. These NGOs consider it part of their task to be included in official decision-making processes, and they organize communities as vehicles for the self-determination of social groups, ethnic minorities, and labour-related or gender-related groups. Although they sometimes link up with broader social groups and with academic centres, there is a fragmentation and lack of coordination among these environmental groups, which requires further analysis (in particular on the effectiveness of horizontal networks). On the other hand, there are NGOs made up of professionals who are middle-class citizens and who are usually guided by intellectual and scientific ideas. Sometimes they develop joint actions with economic actors in support of business activities considered to be environmentally friendly; this line of activity is known as association between the corporate and the environmentalist community. Due to the differences between these two trends within the environmental movement it is highly difficult for groups to collaborate or interact, and in the Tijuana-San Diego area this incompatibility seriously inhibits joint activism by the movement as a whole.

In addition, we can identify five more important features of the environmental NGOs in the Tijuana-San Diego area. First, the breach between the two trends within the environmental movement seems to increase. The middle-class NGOs have more connections with groups from San Diego, while in the case of grassroots groups interaction is hampered by a lack of shared identities and values. In general, cross-border collaboration faces problems ranging from lack of trust in the context of an asymmetric relationship, the different roles of NGOs in the two countries, their degree of specialization to the definition of environmental priorities.

Second, in the second half of the 1990s some changes forced the NGOs to rethink their objectives and strategies. The fragmentation of the movement had not been overcome while also new divisions were arising, partly as a result of the creation of official binational institutions. Recently, a process of reorganization and a search for new trends have started. However, not all the groups face these circumstances with the same capacity for change: some of the groups are strengthened by this,

while others lose ground and, consequently, become isolated, weakened or simply disappear. And precisely some of the groups that were most successful during the 1980s - the pioneers of environmentalism in Tijuana - now seem to be the victims of this process of change.

Third, there is division between the supposedly activist and non-activist groups, or as they themselves phrase it: between those that shout out and those that do not. And there is also a breach between environmentalism in the United States and in Mexico, due to the different political systems and the phase of the regulatory process that the two countries are going through. These divisions hinder NGOs to build bridges between the local and the global sphere. Activist groups have a good deal of willingness but little technical knowledge and financial resources, as a result of which they become hardly involved in formal and legal processes at the local level. Nevertheless, there are some innovative groups and new forms of organization that contribute to the building of more effective networks.

Fourth, the groups that were basically created by official binational institutions lack sufficient popular support and their discourse is often alien to the regional and local context. They are more likely to be professional project-makers and apt at setting up linkages, but they show limited awareness and sensitivity to environmental concerns. In those cases, cross-border collaboration is often a purely nominal affiliation of networks and/or related to the availability of financial resources, but with few shared ideas, projects and actions. On paper there is a good deal of connection between local, national, international and global networks, but in the best of cases these links are largely used to obtain donations and technical knowledge on particular and isolated matters. This sporadic interaction may be of advantage to local groups in the sense of obtaining political advantages on some matters, while for the global networks they offer a certain 'moral support' stemming from the community groups. However, one cannot yet speak of the existence of channels and permanent flows of information and support, nor of suitable mechanisms for connecting the local sphere to the global one.

Finally, the difficulties for forming social networks in the Tijuana-San Diego area is due in part to the typical characteristics of the North-South context: asymmetries in democratization processes, the power of social groups, interaction between different levels of politics, and the decentralization or centralization of decision-making. Generally, NGO networks of democratic societies seek to collaborate with the aim of achieving better policy decisions, while those of the South are

still operating in an authoritarian political system or in a system that is in the process of democratization. Therefore, the purpose of NGOs of the South in general, and those of Tijuana in particular, is to promote networks primarily as a form of self-defence and representation of their interests. The development into networks that contribute to better policy decision is not an automatic, easy and rapid process, and it is, of course, conditioned by the changes in the whole social and political context.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> See 'Border XXI Program. Executive Summary', in *Documentos de frontera*, (<http://yosemite.epa.gov/oia/MexUSA.nsf>), pp. 1-14, and Kourous' analysis of this programme (1999).
- <sup>2</sup> Most papers on these institutions conclude that their performance is deficient (see 'Ojos al BANDAN', *Borderlines*, Vol. 4, No. 11). The NADBANK was created, with US\$ 3 billion, to improve conditions along the Mexico-US border, but high interest rates and a focus on environmental infrastructure mean that most interested parties cannot obtain credits (cf. Kelly et al., 2001). An NGO statement, made in June 2001, defended the BECC and NADBANK in spite of criticisms, and demanded strengthening its public and transparent nature (<http://www.nwf.org/trade/finallatterspanish.html>).
- <sup>3</sup> Mary Kelly et al. (2001) state that given the poor conditions for credit, namely high interest rates, only 3 percent of the resources were used on environmental infrastructure. The failure of the institutional programs was not due to inefficiency of the BECC but rather to a lack of functionality of the NADBANK.
- <sup>4</sup> The fieldwork was carried out from January to May 2001 as part of and financed by the UNAM project 'Procesos, significados y representaciones de las fronteras mexicana y canadiense con Estados Unidos' (PAPIIT IN304400). The tasks of localizing groups, registering, surveying, interviewing and data processing were performed by a research team consisting of researchers Edit Antal and Miriam Alfie, and students Tamara Sánchez Arias, Sandra Muñoz Sepúlveda, Linda Alejandra Gámez Sánchez, and Manuel Villegas Mendoza. In the Tijuana-San Diego region a total of 33 environmental groups were located electronically; of these, 18 groups were found physically. Most of the interviews with the group representatives were carried out in the Environmental Border Meeting held in Tijuana from April 25-28, 2001. The second part of this work will be published in Antal (2002).
- <sup>5</sup> Conceptual vagueness about NGO networks may partly be explained by the use of the idea of the Internet, as a metaphor, in the context of social science. From this perspective, networking can be interpreted – due to the web's democratic nature – as a mechanism that can overcome structural power problems (de Bustos, 2001, pp. 129-170).
- <sup>6</sup> Spener and Staudt (1998) make a difference between two concepts of a border: the first one is a single space involved in a constant and dialectic process of transformation; and the second one is a sensitive line in which two different cultures meet face to face. Bustamante (1989) describes the border as a microcosms of the relationship between two countries. Another interesting work is by Vilas (2000), who stresses that there is not a sole border identity and suggests numerous border identities depending on place, people, class and gender.

- <sup>7</sup> Academic publications that contain extensive empirical information are by Alfie Cohen (1998), Lara (1999), and Barkin (1994).
- <sup>8</sup> Zabin (1997) states that the main functions of NGOs are: economic and technological support, social assistance and advocacy given by popular education, legal assistance, cultural and health promotion, as well as networking in order to form lobbies.
- <sup>9</sup> In the educational field, NGO Yeuni has trained over 30 promoters on health matters and many more on labour-related issues in 20 of Tijuana's maquiladora plants. According to the Yeuni group, one of the major problems in the city is the lack of regulation, zoning plans and elementary infrastructure, which leads to a chaotic situation in which maquiladora plants set up shop in areas where workers live.
- <sup>10</sup> This group's precise views on the environment are hard to discern as it shows no congruent framework, but it seems to hold rather conservationist and/or preservationist views while it has limited systematized knowledge as to the technical aspects of the environment.



## CONCLUSIONS

Processes of globalization have been decisively influenced by the political role that NGOs play as new subjects at the local, national and international level. These organizations have also contributed to the trends of democratization, particularly in the countries of 'the South' since the late 1980s. The democratic transitions in Latin American countries, conditioned by their socio-political conditions, have largely involved top-down electoral and institutional changes. Although many of these changes have been accepted and have created important prerequisites for democracy, there has generally been little room for 'bottom-up' democratization in the form of active and structural participation of civil society organizations in political decision making. This modest book has been an attempt to analyse a specific case of the efforts of citizens and their organizations for political participation. By looking into the activities of Mexican environmental NGOs and their relations with US counterparts through the lenses of Sociology and International Relations, we have studied the influence and importance of NGOs as well as the obstacles they can meet, in opening democratic spaces and influencing local, national and international official politics.

Recent shifts in political relations and practices around the world force us to rethink the relations between state, market and civil society. While the state has radically modified itself by transferring many of its functions to the market, large enterprises and conglomerates have increasingly dominate the latter. Also civil society has changed considerably. The rise of social movements, pressure and interest groups, and other NGOs has made several academicians to theorize that within

contemporary civil society new autonomies and spaces are created, which will promote a more broad and profound democracy. The role of NGOs is especially interesting as many of them have been establishing relations with foreign counterparts, while linking internal and external problems and interests. Moreover, their actions are no longer focussed towards the state and its institutions, but are increasingly directed towards corporations and supranational institutions. The central aim of this volume has been to analyse the activities and cross-border relations of Mexican environmental NGOs on Mexico-US issues, and to assess the obstacles and effects for participatory democracy.

As the chapter by Barbara Hogenboom shows, the public announcement that Mexico, the United States and Canada were to negotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) catalysed cross-border cooperation between Mexican, US and Canadian NGOs on regional environmental problems. At both sides of the Mexico-US border a variety of organizations was creative and persistent in opposing the official NAFTA plan and developing alternative views and proposals on regional integration, and the level of transnational cooperation between NGOs, trade unions and private sector organizations was unprecedented in Mexico-US relations. A key issue of concern, debate and activism was the environmental situation along the Mexico-US border, and the additional environmental damage that free trade would cause. Although concern for the environmental effects of NAFTA brought together a heterogeneous and international group of NGOs, they became increasingly divided over the governmental plans for North American integration. Some Mexican and US organizations adopted a moderate position and looked for ways to link environmental safeguards, institutions and funding to the free trade agreement, which in the end indeed happened by means of the supplemental environmental agreement and the creation of the Border Environmental Cooperation Commission (BECC) and the North American Development Bank (NADBANK). More critical Mexican and US organizations, which experienced that their proposals to put sustainable development before free trade, tried to block NAFTA, but without success. The transnational relations between Mexican and US critical groups were better developed than the cross-border relations of moderate organizations; the latter depended more on relations with governmental institutions and sometimes corporate actors to achieve political influence, while the first, lacking these avenues and being largely ignored as intermediaries, needed broad NGO networks and popular mobilization to be heard.

The 'NAFTA-effect' on Mexican NGOs and their relations with US counterparts changed after the trade agreement, its supplemental agreements, and the border institutions were formally accepted. While the plans for NAFTA gave way to strengthened cross-border ties and joint proposals and programmes, ten years after the agreements' signing a main characteristic of Mexico-US NGO relations is (still) the inequality of resources, training and recognition, not only between Mexican and US organizations, but also between grassroots groups and large and powerful organizations in Mexico. Interestingly, the transnational NGO relations on trade and environment were for an important part based on the similarity of concerns for environmental problems, but cross-border cooperation itself made groups also more aware of the national differences and particularities. The economic and political asymmetries between the two countries easily cause unequal participation in decision making, and mutual distrust. Also the different political systems and cultures of Mexico and the United States affect NGOs and their external relations. Whereas most US NGOs can establish at least some channels of communication with their state and federal governments, in Mexico NGOs have been used to being ignored and excluded by governmental agencies. Recently, more contacts are established between Mexican NGOs and these agencies, and certain advancements are made in the communication between government institutions and non-governmental groups. Closer interaction, however, may limit NGOs' room for actions, especially in the case that organizations want to apply for governmental funding for their projects, such as from the BECC and the NADBANK.

The unequal influence of NGOs that were involved in collective action on the environmental dimensions of NAFTA, leads to questions about the use of the concept of global civil society. At the time of the NAFTA debate, there was a great difference between the influence of grassroots groups and elite organizations, and this difference was mostly not related to the amount of people they represented. Since North American free trade has started, the trends of democratization and civil society participation in (environmental) politics have been mixed. In fact, after the media and public attention on trade and environment decreased, the differences between NGOs seem to be showing even more strongly. Organizations with reasonable or high levels of funding have been able to continue influencing the old and new institutions, but grassroots groups and badly funded (critical) NGOs with limited political influence are easily marginalized, and they usually lack the capacities to participate in the new institutional avenues for binational

and regional environmental protection. In the Mexico-US border region, most of the local Mexican grassroots organizations that are working on the complex mix of factors that inhibit sustainable development (environmental destruction, maquiladoras, gender relations, health problems, low quality of life) have had minimal influence in environmental and other policies.

The limitations of the top-down democratization of environmental policy-making show in Miriam's Alfie chapter about environmental activism in the Mexican border cities Ciudad Juárez and Matamoros. In her analysis of Ciudad Juárez in the early 1990s she finds a lively and heterogeneous 'assembly' of collective practices, euphoria and joint plans of NGOs at both sides of the border. In Matamoros at the end of the 1990s, conversely, Alfie finds very little social mobilization on environmental issues. The Mexico-US institutionalization of environmental protection in the border region has not stimulated local Mexican NGOs, and has left them rather confused and isolated from each other and groups north of the border. Unfortunately, so far even in the more successful cases of cross-border cooperation and participation in the new official avenues, it has proven to be extremely difficult for NGOs to make real changes to the environmental destruction along the border. The author suggests, however, that more time is needed to assess the long-term effects of these social actions that made a rise from 1993 to 1997 and then experienced a fall between 1997 and 2000, for democratization is a time-consuming and tortuous process.

Mexico's democratization experiences, and those of the rest of Latin America, do not have very much in common with the European political history. It is likely that transforming Mexican politics, culture and social relations as proposed by organized civil society will be a long process. There is usually a great distance between the goals of NGOs and Latin American realities, and changes in socio-political affairs tend to be slow. To know the impact of the views, activities and projects of civic groups requires further and more long-term research. Perhaps the main lesson of the 1990s is that the democratization trend of Mexico consists of two major processes that are not necessarily linked: on the one hand, formal top-down democratization, and on the other hand, participatory bottom-up democratization. Whereas the first has advanced considerably, the second is passing through ups and downs, and successes and failures.

In the shared border with the United States, a decade of NGO activism has brought a particular way of social participation. Although

the Matamoros case of the late 1990s clarifies some of the difficulties of NGOs in local and binational politics, coinciding with the strengthening of the institutions brought about by NAFTA, there are also positive experiences with the BECC and the NADBANK. These institutions do provide a useful setting in which serious cases of environmental deterioration in the border are presented. Critique on their operation has to do with the institutions' rules and procedures that result in privileged access of certain organization, favouring NGOs that are capable of presenting projects based on technical knowledge of the problems. Meanwhile, project proposals with limited background information are refused, and political complaints are not taken into consideration, thereby largely excluding grassroots organizations. This is a missed opportunity for a region where environmental problems are most serious, damaging the ecosystems (fauna or flora), human health and the quality of life at both sides of the border. Alfie emphasizes the need for more cross-border environmental cooperation at the governmental as well as the non-governmental level between Mexico and the United States in the (near) future. This will allow for establishing relations of trust and improving the institutional avenues by reforming the NAFTA agencies. Also the relations between the border region's governments, social movements, NGOs and other actors should improve in order to effectively combat the environmental damage. For this purpose, new ways of participatory politics that combine upward and downward channels of communication are needed.

Recent processes of restructuring in the environmental organization and mobilization of NGOs and social movements are analysed in Edit Antal's study of Tijuana-San Diego between 2000 and 2002. Her analysis points at some of the limitations of cross-border interaction due to regional asymmetries (including North-South differences) and the extensive differences between the political and social systems of Mexico and the United States. These asymmetries and differences show not only in the discourses of environmental organizations, but also in NGOs' knowledge, capacities and influence. Although far from inhibiting cross-border relations, the differences and asymmetries within and outside Mexican and US NGOs form substantial obstacles for effective transnational cooperation in the Tijuana-San Diego area. In addition, Antal distinguishes between several types of NGOs, including community organizations, intermediary NGOs, international organizations, and networks (which can again be local, national, binational, regional and international). A problem of several Mexican

groups working on environmental issues is their lack of a clear discourse and topical focus, insufficient technical knowledge, documentation and information, and little to no access to sources of funding.

These factors help to explain why the rather large number of groups and networks dealing with environmental issues in the Tijuana-San Diego area do not converge into a strong binational environmental movement with a joint programme. Cross-border cooperation between Mexican and US NGOs is complicated, and it often occurs that formally established relations become little more than links 'on paper'. Professional (elite) Mexican organizations relate better with US NGOs, but activist groups and grassroots organizations have more (financial and practical) difficulties to become involved in formal cross-border links and to deal with official cross-border institutions. Antal's research shows that environmental activism at the Mexican side of the border remains in a dynamic process of old groups and relations changing, weakening and/or disappearing, and new groups and relations coming into existence. Cross-border cooperation for environmental protection of the Mexico-US border region therefore remains a major challenge.

Together, these three studies of Mexican environmental activism and the influence of the relations of Mexican environmental NGOs with US counterparts allow us to re-think the problems of democratic opening and cross-border cooperation of organized civil society. While people, goods, information and capital are increasingly crossing territorial borders, there is still a range of difficulties to overcome in order to achieve open, equal and long-term cross-border social organization. The NAFTA opened a door to closer interaction between the civil societies of Mexico and the United States – two countries that differ widely in political, economic and social circumstances as well as in values and views. However, apart from creating tensions and obstacles, these differences also give way to new and rich forms of interaction, and thereby to diverse and tolerant new forms of social participation. This was especially the case at the time of the NAFTA negotiations, as environmental organizations from the two countries saw free trade as a serious threat for the (protection of the) regional environment but also recognized that these negotiations were a window of opportunity for influencing governmental decision-making. These cross-border relations of environmental groups, and similar relations between and with other types of NGOs and social movements (e.g. on workers' rights, human rights, gender issues) were an important experience of transnational civic cooperation, even though it was not part of a broad and consolidated process of democratization in Mexico.

More long-term research is needed to assess the influence of the early cross-border relations and their follow-ups on Mexican environmental NGOs, on environmental protection in the border region and beyond, and on democratization and social mobilization in the Mexico-US border region and in Mexico in general.

Mexico-US relations are complex and special, and so are the circumstances in their shared border region, and the related environmental issues. Moreover, the case-studies of this volume demonstrate that these relations are often changing, and that there is great variety in environmental activism and cross-border relations within the border region itself. In some parts, activism and relations are weak as a result of local political, economic, social and cultural circumstances and the major differences between the North of Mexico and the South of the United States; in other parts, Mexico-US differences and asymmetries are overcome and NGOs have created temporary or more structural avenues for joint environmental activities, and possibly the building of border identities. This reality of varied and partly contrasting experiences is difficult to fit into existing political and sociological theories of globalization, democratization and regional integration. Next to this theoretical challenge, and the need for more long-term research on Mexican environmental activism in the context of regional and global integration, the changing nature of this issue makes that every time new pending questions are coming up: What will be the role of NGOs in the reforms of the BECC and the NADBANK? How will these institutions further affect environmental protection and Mexican environmentalism in the border region? What will be the reaction of environmental groups and networks when economic and fiscal problems lead to a lowering of budgets for the environment? And, most of all, how will the participation of NGOs affect the political spaces and democratic expansion in Mexico in the next few years?





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