



On the Record: Central American Civil Society After Mitch (1999)

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From the AP Editorial Desk

Land Crisis Threatens Mitch Recovery, Warns Veteran Oxfam Consultant

NGOs, donors disagree over reconstruction strategy on the eve of Stockholm conference

Central America needs a national and regional framework of land taxation, to prevent "land alienation" and reinvigorate small farmers, according to Solon Barraclough, an eminent consultant for Oxfam America.

Barraclough's comments were made at the launch of several new reports on reconstruction in Central America that have been commissioned by Oxfam in the run-up to the donors conference in Stockholm, Sweden. The event took place last Thursday in Washington DC. In one of the papers, which he has co-authored with MIT professor Daniel Moss, Barraclough puts the total economic damage from Mitch at \$6.01 billion; 3,464,662 people have been affected – 10.9 percent of the entire regional population.

The disaster occurred at a time when all the agricultural trends in Central America are pointing in the wrong direction: the population is rising, forests are disappearing, the productivity of small farmers is falling, and food imports are rising.

Barraclough warned that the concentration of agricultural land, and the devastation caused to small farmers by Mitch, could greatly worsen the region's food security.

The World Bank and US Agency for International Development (USAID) have promoted "market-assisted land reform" in Central America, and provided credit for "land banks" so that

landless peasants can buy land from willing sellers. But, said Barraclough, this will have no impact on rural poverty unless accompanied by "a popularly based development strategy."

"Large landowners have no incentives or compulsions to sell their land at less than inflated prices. Legal systems remain primarily at the service of the large landholders, not the peasants."

One way of reducing land speculation and helping to finance municipalities, he said, would be a "progressive and locally administered land tax." This, however, would require a national framework as well as a regional one in order to avoid cut-throat competition among municipalities for investment.

Barraclough also argued for the "selective protection" of peasant grain producers. One third of the region's food is imported. Much of it is subsidized or food aid, which undercuts local producers.

Barraclough dismissed the idea that protection would threaten free trade, or that importing food is merely exploiting "comparative advantage." Many of the countries that sell food to Central America – including the United States – protect and subsidize their own farmers, viewing this as a social investment.

Thursday's event, and the release of the new papers, is part of an international effort on Central America by the 11 national Oxfams. It suggested, on the eve of the Stockholm conference, that the NGO community is increasingly at odds with donors.

Donors appear to have rejected any comprehensive new vision of community-based development, along the lines proposed by Barraclough and Oxfam's other consultants. They are even downplaying the long-term impact of Mitch. One World Bank official says that the agricultural sector in Honduras will quickly recover, and that the private sector was relatively unscathed.

In fact, said Barraclough, Mitch's impact on the poor has been greatly underestimated – precisely because they are on the edges of the market economy, and do not yield conventional market data. This makes it even more urgent to build reconstruction around support for the rural poor.

- "Towards Greater Food Security in Central America Following Hurricane Mitch – Rethinking Sustainable Rural Development Priorities." By Solon Barraclough and Daniel

Moss. Report commissioned by Oxfam America. Tel: 202-393-3544; Fax: 202-783-8739; Also available: reports on the impact of Mitch on Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua.

Guatemala Vote Kills Hopes of Indigenous Role in Peace Implementation

Exposes difficulty of engaging civil society

By a 2-to-1 margin, Guatemalan voters have rejected constitutional reforms that would have granted equal rights to the country's indigenous majority and curtailed army power.

The vote, on May 17, took place in the country's first elections since the 36-year-long civil war ended. It represents a blow to Guatemala's peace process and also shows the challenge that lies ahead in strengthening civil society in Central America - one of the goals of the Stockholm conference.

One of the most striking – and disappointing – aspects of the vote was the low turnout of indigenous voters who stood to gain most from the proposals. One estimate put their turnout at below 15%.

The proposed package of constitutional reforms would have recognized the rights of Guatemala's indigenous majority for the first time since Europeans arrived there in the 16th century.

Guatemalans also were asked whether to overhaul the executive, legislative, and judicial branches, and to reshape the Guatemalan army, which was blamed by a UN-monitored truth commission for committing 93 percent of the massacres, tortures, disappearances, and assassinations during the country's civil war.

A "yes" vote would have allowed for a civilian rather than a military defense minister and eliminated a covert military intelligence unit.

The vote follows the assassination of Roberto Belarmino Gonzalez, a top official with the New Guatemala Democratic Front, who was organizing marginalized communities in the capital city on behalf of the "yes" vote. Guatemalan opposition leaders have claimed that the crime "was engineered to intimidate those who were planning on voting yes."

"We recognize democracy," Nineth Montenegro, a congresswoman for Guatemala's New Guatemala Democratic Front and backer of the "yes" vote, said in conceding defeat.

"But this is a tremendously conservative country," she said. "Once again, the racism of Guatemala has been exposed."

- Extracted from Casa Guatemala, press reports

US to Provide \$687 Million in Reconstruction Aid

The US Congress has authorized the expenditure of \$687 million in emergency and reconstruction aid for Central America.

The money is part of a \$15 billion package that was accepted by Congress on Thursday and signed by President Clinton on Friday. The bill also includes approximately \$300 million to cover expenses incurred by the US military while delivering emergency aid following Mitch.

Four months have passed since President Clinton proposed a \$956 million package of aid for Central America. The reluctance of Congress to release the money deeply angered governments in the region, and forced USAID to cancel many emergency reconstruction programs. For example, seeds could not be delivered in time for this season's planting season.

The delay had more to do with Congress than Central America. Initially, some Congressmen wanted to link the package to the debate over extending the NAFTA free trade zone. But this was dropped for fear of alienating American labor, which opposes NAFTA.

Next, Congress insisted on finding the money from elsewhere in the budget: \$25 million has come from the Global Environment Facility, which has funded scores of environment projects in Central America. This strikes many as robbing Peter to pay Paul.

At least the US will now be able to go to Stockholm with a substantial offer on the table. But it remains to be seen whether the money will be subsumed into a comprehensive program or dealt with bilaterally.

The original US proposal was tightly earmarked. It proposed \$621 million for the Economic Support Fund, with \$298.3 million going to the rehabilitation of transport; \$12 million for technical training to local government; and other (unspecified) monies to provide oversight and accountability.

Other major elements were: \$16 million to reduce the bilateral debt of Honduras and \$25 million for the World Bank trust fund that has been set up to help with repayments on multilateral debt; \$80 million to offset the cost of detaining illegal migrants.

The US package also proposed to strengthen the offices of Comptroller General. This might not be welcome to the Nicaraguan president, Arnaldo Aleman, who has been trying to weaken and discredit Agustin Jarquin, the Nicaraguan Comptroller General.

Feature of the Day: Nicaragua Civil Society

From the editorial desk

Hurricane Mitch has galvanized civil society in Nicaragua. No fewer than 320 separate organizations have formed a united Coalition (Coordinadora), to talk to the government and present a common position in Stockholm.

This is an extraordinary development in a country that has been ruled by dictators for most of this century. It marks a significant moment in Nicaragua's long transition from war to democracy. How has it happened? What does it mean? How can the momentum be maintained?

These are some of the questions addressed in this issue of On the Record. In the first article, Donna Vukelich and Iain Guest look at the origins of civil society in Nicaragua and its emergence in the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch. They also assess the exciting opportunities facing civil organizations in Nicaragua as the country's polarized political system shows signs of cracking.

The second article takes the form of an extended interview with Sofia Montenegro, a veteran of the social movement in Nicaragua and one of the country's foremost feminist thinkers. Sofia Montenegro edited the document that will be presented at Stockholm by the NGO Coalition, but she has not joined the Coalition. In the following discussion with Midge Quandt, a long-time observer of Nicaraguan civil society, she argues that NGOs are less effective at promoting political change than social movements. The interview is divided into two parts. Part 2 will run in the next issue of 'On the Record'.

From Somoza to Mitch – And Beyond

by Donna Vukelich and Iain Guest

In July 1979, while Honduras and El Salvador were still under the yoke of military rule, Nicaraguans were liberated from the dictatorship of Anastasio Somoza.

The future seemed bright. In many ways, Nicaragua's revolution was the ultimate expression of frustration by Nicaraguan civil society against authoritarian rule. It could have led to a blossoming of free speech and independent civic action.

But the 1980s did not prove conducive for this kind of democracy. The Nicaraguan contras began attacking Nicaragua in 1981, and throughout most of the 1980s the country was on a war footing. To their credit, the Sandinistas promoted community-based social programs – particularly in literacy and health. But in the words of one activist, they were "paternalistic" towards the nongovernmental sector. Unwilling to undermine the revolution, civil society withheld open criticism or protest.

One exception was the labor movement. As inflation soared – and it reached the unbelievable level of 30,000 percent in 1987 – several powerful unions fought hard for higher wages and better living standards. They developed a voice in the 1980s.

In February 1990 the Sandinistas were defeated in elections, and Violeta Chamorro was elected president on a pro-Western platform. This ushered in a new era of confrontation between government and civil society.

There were several bones of contention:

The Economy. Chamorra and her influential son in law Antonio Lacayo, set about dismantling the social programs and subsidies introduced by the Sandinistas and replacing them with a neoliberal, export-oriented economy. Gradually, Nicaragua clawed itself out of one hole – inflation - and started to slide into another - foreign debt. Recession and public spending cuts ate away at the Sandinistas' main achievements – literacy, health, land reforms.

Political transition. Although the Sandinistas yielded power after the election, they still held 39 percent of the seats in the parliament and controlled the army. During the mid-1990s, Nicaragua was consumed by a divisive debate over constitutional reform. But at the end of the decade it remained very much of a two party system, highly polarized.

Property. The Sandinistas had instituted sweeping land reforms: 34 percent of the cultivable land changed hands, and about 77,000 families received land. But the process lacked a solid legal basis, and Chamorro's victory led to a clamor from former landowners and demobilized contras, who claimed land. There were violent clashes over land throughout the decade.

The reintegration of refugees and the demobilization of former soldiers. Six hundred thousand Nicaraguans – 15 percent of the population – had been directly affected by the war and needed help. But there was not the money, land, or political consensus to respond.

Summing up these tumultuous years, a 1966 report by the Boston-based Hemispheric Initiatives concluded that "major (social and political) conflict was inevitable." "Everything has been contested, and given the historical moment, everything was going to be contested."

Following the election of the right-wing Arnaldo Aleman to the presidency in 1996, relations between civil society and government deteriorated even more sharply. Aleman attempted to ride herd on the NGOs through restrictive legislation, and the government even blocked the delivery of aid destined for NGOs.

When Hurricane Mitch hit, a number of aid containers were stranded in customs, because the government was demanding taxes of between 40 percent and over 100 percent. It was not until after the hurricane that shipments were finally released.

The Coalition Forms

By now, many nongovernmental groups had concluded that conventional politics was not the answer. A series of networks (REDS) were formed around areas of social concern – education, housing, debt, health.

Mitch drew the threads together even more tightly. NGOs all over the country found themselves in demand during the emergency, much as they had been in Honduras. Working from their headquarters in Managua, they also coordinated their efforts by phone and email during the storm.

As in Honduras, they then decided to meet. A women's organization (Puntos Dencuentro) offered its office, and on November 13, 250 organizations came together for the first assembly of what was to be the Coordinadora Civil. They set themselves certain questions, and returned three days later with proposals.

The decision was taken to establish five separate commissions: coordination; evaluation of the impact of Mitch; information-sharing; communications with the outside world; and practical programs for reconstruction and disaster mitigation.

They also agreed to meet every three days, then every five. Now the assembly meets monthly; 250 groups attended the last meeting on April 13, called to draw up the proposals for Stockholm.

The Coalition's Achievements

In an interview with *On the Record*, Cirilo Otero, one of the Coordinator leaders, said that this process has produced several major breakthroughs.

In the first place, it has shown an ability to organize. Second, it has come up with concrete proposals, "instead of just standing on the sidelines and protesting."

Another major achievement was to conduct a community-based survey of the emergency relief effort. This took a huge effort. Working with funds from the Ford Foundation and Oxfam Spain, the Coordinator trained 150 interviewers, who interviewed 10,529 households in 85 municipalities over a period of two months. It took another month to process the replies.

The survey did not go into specific cases of mismanagement, as the human rights ombudsman had done in Honduras. But it certainly found that nongovernmental aid had been quicker to reach Mitch victims than that of the government, and that this had been appreciated. Only 2 percent of those questioned said they had received most of their help from the government. (See *On the Record*, Issue 3).

More important, the findings also showed that many Nicaraguans in disaster areas are still living on the brink: 52 percent have part-time piecemeal jobs and 32 percent of the victims are relying on food for work to feed their families.

About 55 percent of the aid received during Mitch came from non-governmental sources. The Coordinator has also sponsored an audit of this NGO aid in an effort to show where it came from and how well it was disbursed. Given that it could point the finger at its own members, this is a courageous, self-confident move, and it has made many NGOs nervous. But to be credible, transparency cannot be partial.

In spite of its deep antagonism to civil society, the government of Arnaldo Aleman has taken notice – under pressure from Nicaragua's donors and creditors.

In April 1998, the donors insisted that the government do more to encourage participation. Following Mitch, the government set up six consultative groups, comprising eminent Nicaraguans from all walks of life. They worked for two months and produced a series of reports. But they participated as individuals, not as representatives of an organization. In addition, it remains to be seen whether their perspective will be reflected in Stockholm.

Opportunities for Civil Society

The burning question is whether the Coalition maintains the momentum, and translates these successes into something more substantial. What role lies ahead? Can the Coalition evolve into a kind of permanent social audit – criticizing, monitoring, reviewing, exposing, and finally effecting social change? Nicaragua could certainly benefit from such "transparency."

After the last 20 years, politics is badly polarized. The electoral system is so entrenched and bipartisan that it is extremely difficult for small parties or independent candidates to break in.

Corruption is not only widespread, but also an issue of heated public debate. Media reports have put the government on the defensive and broken the fatalistic attitude that "everyone steals."

Corruption has also provoked a tumultuous confrontation between President Aleman and the Comptroller General, Agustin Jarquin. In February, the (independent) Comptroller General decided to investigate Aleman's wealth, which on his own admission increased by 900 percent between 1990 and 1996.

But Aleman refused to submit information, and launched a campaign of personal vilification against Jarquin (who had been jailed in the 1980s under the Sandinistas). On March 25, thousands of Nicaraguans took to the streets to demonstrate in Jarquin's support. Many feel that Aleman has overplayed his hand and turned corruption into a campaign issue. In so doing, he has handed civil society another major issue to mobilize around.

The country's dependency on international aid – and its debt burden – has also emerged as prime campaigning issue. Foreign aid has fallen sharply in recent years, from over \$600 million in 1996 to \$416.5 million in 1997. Yet Nicaragua has the highest foreign debt in Central America – \$6.1 billion. Last year, it spent \$250 million on debt servicing – two-and-a-half times what it spent on health and education combined.

Stockholm and Beyond

This is a challenging agenda. Civil society could play a decisive role - if it is permitted to do so. Stockholm will be the first test.

Will Aleman allow civil society representatives on the Nicaraguan delegation? Will donors talk to them directly? Will donors use their leverage to elevate civil society to a new level of credibility and respectability? Or will they turn away from the opportunity?

If the NGO Coalition can capitalize on Stockholm as it has capitalized on Mitch, it may even be poised to break open Nicaragua's highly polarized brand of party politics. While they disdain traditional politics at present, the leaders of Nicaragua's emerging civil society are political animals and they need politicians to translate their social agenda into laws. Are they preparing to enter politics?

The upcoming municipal elections, scheduled for next year, could provide some answers. During Mitch, NGOs at the municipal level played an indispensable role – providing information on how the hurricane had affected their area, doing rescue work and assisting in the distribution of relief aid. In the process, they forged close ties with local government.

The elections may well tell whether Nicaragua's civil society is ready to go a step further, and field candidates from the grass roots. Exciting times lie ahead. But first comes Stockholm.

Civil Society as an Agent of Political Change – An Interview with Sofia Montenegro

"People Organize in Social Movements, Not in NGOs"

A discussion about the future of civil society between Midge Quandt and Sofia Montenegro, executive director of the Center for Research on Communication (CINCO) in Managua.

Midge Quandt - Last year you talked about the need for the social movements and civil society to become internally more coherent and unified. It's ironic that the hurricane has speeded up that process. So what do you think about the politics and work of the NGO Coalition?

Sofia Montenegro - Well, I think almost everything about the NGO Coalition is positive. It is one of the first serious efforts to line up civil society. It is a beginning. It is a process. I think it has been making the effort of organizing the energy of different sectors and social movements. They have undoubtedly provided the relief aid that people needed. But the moment has come for it to leave the role of rescuer, like the Red Cross, and move to become a political actor.

There are plenty of organizations in Nicaragua, but this is the first process in which there is autonomy. And this is very important. It is not moved forward by the Sandinista Front, nor by any other party. And it has been defending its autonomy. This marks quite a difference from other experiences or spaces that exist in the country.

I think that in due time the NGO Coalition will become what it should – a strong representation of civil society that is capable of representing all the sectors of society, of dealing with the government, or with the debt. I really hope so, and I would push for this. But it is too soon. It was just born out of the winds of the hurricane. Perhaps (it could happen) by the end of the year.

MQ - What about the obstacle that you referred to elsewhere – the fact of NGOs being "less radical?" Is that a roadblock?

SM - No, I don't think so. I think there is confusion about the role of the NGOs and their relationship to the social movements. It is in the nature of the social movements to be more radical (but not NGOs).

Take for example, an NGO that works in reproductive rights. That is as far as they will go. That is the logic. They have the money just to work on reproductive rights. But the social movement wants to change the notion of women in the country.

But I would also say that NGOs also need to reflect on their role. Are they to do the job that the State should be doing? Are they going to substitute or represent social movements? Or do they exist to back up and develop social movements?

MQ - Which is what you would like to see happen, right?

SM - Yes, I think that the NGOs should promote the development of social movements.

MQ - Can you expect these organizations (NGOs) to take a back seat, though?

SM - But the people organize in social movements, not in NGOs! Of course, the ones that are dedicated to political work, the social movements, tend to be more radical. The NGOs are

institutions that are part of society, and they are supposed to be stable and permanent. They have to be accountable.

MQ - In 1998 you talked about the need for each social movement to become more "internally coherent" in order to present a united face, and then for the movements to come together and work with the political parties. How do you think the NGO Coalition is measuring up?

SM - Well, I think you see the need for a common discourse, vision and strategy. This has been speeded up obviously by the magnitude of the catastrophe of the hurricane. Which proves that in the NGO Coalition – and you can also see it in the National Feminist Committee (CNF) – the need for survival is pulling everyone together. The hurricane made people realize that either you make a joint venture or you're going to become weak very fast.

In the case of some social movements, it's a matter of life or death. And this is the way I put it to the women's movement. Either we move now or we are condemned to disappear. The hurricane not only battered the infrastructure or the economy, it also has been breaking the feeble political structure of the movements.

MQ - Oh, yes?

SM - Well yes, because it promotes dislocation of people. People who were already organized have been dispersed. So they are displaced, they don't have money, they have to start all over again.

So reconstruction for me is not only the possibility to reconstruct at the level you were before the hurricane, but also to reconstruct beyond the level you were before the hurricane. That means that this reconstruction must also be social and political. Particularly political, otherwise you have no possibility whatsoever for bettering the situation. And I think it is incredible that some (NGO) discussions that had been going on for five years, were finished in one month.

MQ - You are referring to the women's movement?

SM - The women's movement. Something of the sort has also happened in the NGO Coalition. But there is a difference between the way it has happened in the NGO Coalition and in the CNF.

MQ - Tell me what you see as the difference.

SM - The groups that came together in the Coalition were reacting to the emergency – you know, to help people. But conceptually it has not been defined very clearly what its role is. The majority of groups in the Coalition are NGOs rather than social movements. These NGOs are in a political limbo.

Let me try and explain what I mean. NGOs are not social movements, they are not private enterprise, they are not the state. So what are they? They are intermediaries. They are institutions that mediate between the state and civil society, but they are not all of civil society.

There's an antagonism between the state and the NGOs, because they are seen as competitors, and are very critical of the government. Private enterprise sees them as competitors – the only difference being that private enterprise works with capital and the NGOs work with subsidies. The political parties don't like NGOs. Either they want to use the NGOs for their own ends, or they see them as a source of pressure.

There is another difference between the NGOs and the social movements. Mostly the NGOs have a short-term objective and they work by themes. The social movements tend to be more radical than the NGOs. There is a danger of the NGOs trying to represent the social movements. And that's what we don't want.

The other problem is that while many people in the NGOs feel like they belong to the social movements, they also have the identity of their institution. And they have to comply with the mission and objectives of their institution. So the problem, I think, with the NGO Coalition is that the NGOs are hegemonic, dominant.

We women are in a minority in the NGO Coalition. First we have had to fight all over again in the NGO Coalition, so that more gender concerns can be included in any proposal on disaster or reconstruction. On the other hand, the organized feminists tend to be more radical and more critical of the neo-liberal model, the economy, the government. They are loudmouths, you see.

This is the first thing we observed in the NGO Coalition . We also decided that we would not lose our identity. We would support the NGO Coalition because we think it's right to promote this space for common discussion and debate. But we would keep our own space for our own discussion because we have a more elaborate identity. The NGO Coalition is a collection and a mixture of everything. And so far it has not been able to build a collective identity, which the women's movement has.

Of course, the NGO Coalition is the first chance in so many years for civil society to try for a common identity, a common vision. I was editing the document for Stockholm. In 90 pages not once did the word "neo-liberalism" appear. What was missing was a systematic and critical analysis of that model. It is already there but it has the tendency to describe the model in technical terms. Moreover, the document was politically weak.

MQ - I would like to ask what it means to be "politically weak." I saw the summary of the document that went to Washington, and I understand that it is quite similar to the Stockholm document. Women, the environment, sustainable development, an emphasis on the rural areas, on the poor, empowerment – these seemed to add up to a coherent alternative plan for reconstruction. Now does that not add up to an adequate political vision in your book?

SM - The elements for formulating a vision are there, but from my perspective the methodology used to gather information was not very good. What they did was to ask everybody in an impromptu way, confusing what is democratic with calling everybody, which for me is populism. For a position paper, you have to discuss politically first, construct a framework, and arrive at a consensus based on a common understanding of development.

But the document was built by getting this proposal from this sector, another from the other sector, and they tried to merge all the documents. This is what makes it weak, because obviously you have not made explicit what is your reasoning for the critique and the alternative – which is the work that needs to be done.

Obviously there wasn't the time. We were running against the clock to get the document done to present it to the government and to get it to Stockholm. But it's a job that has to be done if you want to construct a discourse on development that integrates environment and gender as the central critique of the neo-liberal model. Then you have to translate all this into a national plan.

At the least, the (NGO) document should have been a little more critical. I incorporated a preamble to it. I don't know if they will take it out because it is quite direct. Because they didn't make any critique of the international finance agencies, like the World Bank. They didn't say one damn word about structural adjustment.

MQ - Is this because they want to stay in good with the international lending agencies? The NGO Coalition seems to have such legitimacy with international donors.

SM - That's perhaps the reason they don't want to fight. There is a saying in Nicaragua, "Courtesy does not diminish your courage." You can be polite, but you can be also critical. You can not chicken out in front of all these people.

Implicit in the document was the tendency to emphasize rural areas. What was not sufficiently developed was the linkage with the urban areas and what was inferred by integral development in the cities.

So (the Stockholm document) had these weaknesses. They were understandable because of the rush and because the NGO Coalition is the sum of its parts – not yet a body. To become a body, it needs more work, more time and a very clear-minded leadership, which I don't think it has yet. And for my taste they are too populist.

MQ - Would you elaborate, because I have an insufficient understanding of what populism means here?

SM - It is a mixture of the culture of Sandinismo and a vague identification with the poor. There is this tendency to think you're being democratic because you can bring together a bunch of people in the midst of disorder. Just because you consult with a variety of groups doesn't make you democratic. Because what makes a thing democratic is that you can propose, counter-propose, and decide together.

MQ - Let me just see if I have this. The calling on different groups to give their opinion and then throwing it all in the pot to produce this stew is not what you'd like to see. How would you describe the process that you want? Coming together to conceptualize?

SM - Of course. For me it's a political debate until everybody is clear and has taken an informed position. This does not mean adding antagonistic ideas and then trying to reconcile what is

irreconcilable – which would be a mess. Of course you have to have a dose of pragmatism. But not excessive. Just enough to be flexible, but not to get lost in the process.

MQ - Do you think The Coalition's aims are not sufficiently clear?

SM - Absolutely not. This is something that I wrote in the document for them. You must make explicit: what is the NGO Coalition; how does the NGO Coalition see itself; what do you propose; what do you want? Do you want to be proactive? If so, then say it and say how you are going to organize and for what.

MQ - As is often the case when I interview you, I think something is fine and you don't, and we go back and forth on it. So I'm going to play devil's advocate. Because, to an outsider like me, the summary of the DC document looked pretty coherent. What's missing here?

SM - No, the document is a good effort. Let me make it clear, I'm not diminishing what has been done. I'm just saying that in the future, this lack of definition as an actor can become a weakness. You have to do active political work within the NGO Coalition to create coherence and not just respond to Stockholm, to the government.

MQ - On a different note has the creation and work of the NGO Coalition had any discernible influence on social movements?

SM - Well I think it has given them a point of reference, a meeting point, where to come to. It is very important that this space has been organized and opened, because it makes everyone feel less alone, less isolated. At least you have a focal point, where documents and ideas are beginning to circulate. It is promoting a type of effervescence, and particularly of ideas, of discussions; and just because of that it is good.

MQ - Now there is an idea that interests me, but it is really not related to what we have been talking about. Most people would say that it is in the nature of social movements to be local, to lack a larger vision, to lack a coordinated effort, to be too fragmented, and so on. The minority would say that this is the result of historical circumstances, and therefore can be changed. Would you comment on that? Do you see social movements as inevitably a certain way, inevitably single issue and fragmented?

SM - No. First because I think social movements are plastic, malleable. In the case of Nicaragua – let's put it this way – necessity is the mother of invention. They will change as the need determines. For example, in Nicaragua there is a need for having more coherent and cohesive social movements with an intellectual leadership, which is the prerequisite to have political movement. If you have no ideas, you have blind political action.

Why are we feminists insisting that we should form the National Feminist Committee? Obviously if you do not have the leadership that tries to put all of the pieces of the movement together, you will never ever have one. The ones that usually have been the organized force are political parties. But political parties have become a liability for the life of the citizens of

Nicaragua. So we have to invent the forms of organization that are needed in order to be actors of our own destiny.

MQ - To me, the great strength of your position is that you think about the need for coherence and political focus. In the States we tend to be more pragmatic; moreover postmodernists would say that your thinking is too...

SM - Vanguardist.

MQ - Yes, too vanguardist, too monolithic, too much theoretical unity. You know, like Marxism with the "grand narrative." Postmodernists and those involved with identity politics say that the strength of progressive movements in the US is that they all do their own thing, and they don't have to have a final theory of the political universe.

SM - The difference is that their lives are not on the line up there, as they are in a country like this where 80% of the people are poor, have no running water, no infrastructure for communications. That is the reason I think that the women here were wrong about the networking. Networking is an urban thing. It is very difficult if you do not have an infrastructure with telephones, with roads – now that the whole geography of the country is absolutely destroyed. Just tell me how are you going to construct the network.

It has been proven that it can be done also in Nicaragua. But it is weak because you have no infrastructure to make it run fast. So you need patience, or a combination of strategies of organization. I can organize and march one million people in the States, because everybody has Internet access, but I can't organize a march from Matagalpa to Managua.

MQ - I have to switch hats for a minute and not be the interviewer. It's not just because our lives are not on the line that we have the kind of political organization that we do. It's also because of the absence of an effective, organized left in the United States. So fragmentation is the natural thing. And then we have a society that does not think in terms of social class or class politics. We think in terms of what we call "identity politics." You know – gay rights groups, women's groups, groups based on race, and ethnicity.

SM - But my comment is on this idealization of fragmentation. They are fragmented because of the reasons you said, but it is becoming a truism for postmodernism to say that this is a virtue. But, as it has been proven here in Nicaragua, the more split you are the weaker you are. If you don't unite efforts, you do not survive in this country. If you don't join forces with other groups with money, with political force, with thinking, you are dying.

MQ - I remember in 1992, we were talking about the women's movement in the United States and here when there were all these groups springing up. And you said, "without organization, we're lost."

SM - Enough time has gone by now so that we can create unity without uniformity. It is a unity that must be built within diversity to be dialectical.

MQ - I've never understood what dialectical means.

SM - It is to live with difference without losing coherence and cohesion. Difficult to build, but this is the only model that can survive. Because you need enough space to breathe as an individual within your differences, but enough commonality to act collectively. How you achieve that is hard. In Nicaragua, we went from absolute uniformity to complete and absolute diversity. Now the pendulum is swinging to the center. It will have to find a balance between unity and common vision – which we need – and the equally important need to keep our own identity and autonomy.

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- **Global debt relief: European Network of Debt and Development**: Tel: 32 2 543 9060; Fax: 32 2 544 05 59.
- **ENVIO**, the Monthly magazine of the University of Central America (UCA) contains excellent analysis of the aftermath of Mitch, corruption and other issues of interest.

In the next issue: The Debt Trap