Individual, Organizational, and Societal Empowerment: A Study of the Processes in a Nicaraguan Agricultural Cooperative[1]

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Defined and examined the personal (material and psychological), organizational, and societal goals of empowerment. This exploration of empowerment was primarily based on 7 months of participant observation in an agricultural cooperative in Nicaragua in 1989. The research focused on the perspectives of the participants, internal program functioning, and relations to local organizations and the national context. This study shows that some factors in the cooperative setting enhanced empowerment at each level, while others impeded its development. The cooperative met immediate needs, and provided social status and a degree of autonomy in society. Its structure allowed for broad participating in decision making and control. "Sense-making" and informal consciousness-raising processes facilitated psychological empowerment. These processes were hidden in apparent disorganization and thus not recognized by local service providers. Fears of speaking in meetings and the reluctance to face crises were intense and influential. Opinions and behavior of outsiders and the environmental context, although seemingly helpful, also had detrimental effects. Parallels are drawn to empowerment theory and findings from other populations.

KEY WORDS: third world development; social change; Nicaragua; cooperatives.

Around-the-world programs targeting the poor fall on a continuum between handouts and empowerment. In empowerment interventions, rather than being

process that allows them to increase control over their lives, access to resources, self-confidence, and status in society. The goals of empowerment are crucial in two thirds of the world where extremely poor people are plagued by many interwoven and self-perpetuating problems. Within poor countries there are often astronomical and worsening differences in resources, life conditions, opportunities, social control and value. These countries also often lack control and voice internationally (Figueroa, 1990). In fact, many analysts have recommended that to substantially diminish poverty, there must be large-scale structural changes as well as new psychological and community processes (Friedmann, 1992).

In the last 20 years, many indigenous empowerment programs have developed throughout the world in response to harsh sociopolitical situations and the realization that traditional social services are deficient (Korten, 1990; Rahman, 1994; Wiesenfield & Sanchez, 1991). Local groups work together to analyze their socioeconomic situation, create new forms of organization, develop strategies for action, and pursue external assistance, all in a struggle for local and large-scale social change.

As interest in empowerment increases, there is a growing consensus that the concept of empowerment is multilevel (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). In the international arena, group, social, and political dimensions are crucial, and often influence emerging social science theory and practice (Wiesenfield & Sanchez, 1991). To further clarify the theory of empowerment, this article defines the overlapping goals and process of empowerment in terms of the level they affect: the individual (material and psychological), organizational, and societal.

The article then examines each level of empowerment in an agricultural cooperative in Nicaragua. The research is primarily based on 8 months of participant observation in 1989 in a minisociety where work and personal life closely intertwined. Many factors interplay at each level, influencing empowerment in the cooperative. This article presents findings about only a few prominent processes that seem crucial to empowerment: consciousness-raising at the individual level, participation in group meetings at the organizational level, and relations to local service providers and the influence of national events at the societal level.

The particular elements of the condition and context of rural areas of poor countries are quite different from those encountered in the United States. However, the situations of extreme poverty similarly consist of complex, self-reinforcing processes, strongly influenced by social forces, and calling for empowerment responses (Ryan, 1976). Some of the factors uncovered as influential in the three levels of empowerment in Nicaragua might, therefore, be applicable to other populations.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Paolo Freire, Saul Alinsky, and Orlando Fals Borda are known worldwide for defining key principles of empowerment in light of their practice in disadvantaged communities. More recently, social scientists and practitioners in human service programs have been increasingly recommending empowerment programs for populations plagued by multiple needs (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Deficiencies in typical social programming have been recognized: Prevention is not prioritized, individuals are usually seen as the cause of problems, the needy are considered unable to help themselves and in need of experts, and broader social factors and the interrelatedness of problems are often ignored (Albee, Joffe, & Dusenbury, 1988; Kider & Fine, 1986; Seidman & Rappaport, 1986; Wolff, 1987).

Similar criticisms have been voiced about international assistance or "development" organizations. There is also a growing concern for the sustainability of programs, or for the desire to help people meet present needs while not compromising their ability to meet their own needs in the future (U.N. World Conference on Environment and Development, Bruntland Commission, in Friedmann, 1992).

In the search for prevention and the causes of poverty, many factors seem related to powerlessness. Powerlessness is the lack of access to resources that guarantee survival, decrease discomfort, and enable change and betterment in one's life. It involves a lack of opportunity for the inherently human characteristic of acting creatively, influencing and directing one's future, and transforming reality (Alinsky, 1946; Freire, 1971). The powerless have little leverage on the events and conditions that impinge on their existence, either directly or through access to arenas of economic, political, and social decision making (Goldenberg, 1978). In addition, powerlessness is a process of alienation that often becomes self-perpetuating. The powerless gradually accept the power differentials and begin to hold minimal expectations of themselves and their environment.

To reverse the process of alienation, low self-concept, and disbelief in change, and to increase access to resources and control over the conditions and decisions that affect one's personal life and environment, interrelated levels of empowerment are needed: personal change (material and psychological), organizational change, and societal transformation.

First, at the personal level, empowerment bears on both the material and the psychological, on acquiring access to resources as well as increasing control and value (Alinsky, 1946; Freire, 1970; Goldenberg, 1978). A goal of empowerment among the poor is to begin to meet immediate and concrete needs, to increase resources, and to eradicate the symptoms of poverty (e.g., obtaining housing, health, education, and employment; Albee et al., 1988; Alinsky, 1946; Fals Borda, 1968; Freire, 1970). The process of empowerment requires some immediate successes, in areas expressed as needs by the participants, particularly given the factors of psychological powerlessness (Goldenberg, 1978; Alinsky, 1970; Sanchez, Wiesenfield, & Cronick, 1991). However, empowerment does not occur if the process remains at the material level.

The psychological goals of empowerment are to increase feelings of value, self-efficacy, and control. Processes of consciousness raising and critical thinking are important in order to understand the forces that have reinforced powerlessness in the past (Fals Borda, 1979; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991). By understanding their reality and the possible consequences of acting upon it, the powerless begin to visualize possibilities of change and choices (e.g., to fight or to retreat, to seek help or provide assistance; Zimmerman, 1990). Nevertheless, psychological empowerment is not achieved through individualistic means, and it is strongly influenced by the ecological environment as, for example, Zimmerman (1990) and Chavis and Wandersman (1990) have emphasized. In fact, both the material and psychological goals of empowerment are best approached through collective processes.

Second, organizational empowerment aims at changing the power structures of society as they are expressed in a group or finite community, creating "alternative settings" (Rappaport, 1986) or "empowering organizations" (e.g., in a neighborhood or a social service program; Florin & Wandersman, 1990). Within an organization, new structures, values, and forms of interaction can be established. By sharing control and allowing broad participation in decision making, members are given value, respect and power in the group. The community can act a sa buffer from the rest of society, by confronting the dominant myths of individual responsibility for poverty, and by increasing feelings of belonging and the strength to act (Goldenberg, 1978; Wolff, 1987). Collective action also increases the potential of overcoming poverty. The group can carry out communal projects, pursue resources, and overcome dependence on handouts. The group can work to develop the skills and confidence of its members, which enhances the potential for other changes. When the organization increases its self-sufficiency in society, it also increases the level of control and social status of its members. The process of "organizing" themselves (i.e., talking together, networking, working together on issues, and sharing responsibilities; Alinsky, 1946; Fals Borda, 1968; Jacob, 1991) enhances psychological empowerment and facilitates societal empowerment.

Third, the aim of societal empowerment is to change larger social structures and institutions that keep people in positions of powerlessness and poverty (Albee *et al.*, 1988; Alinsky, 1946; Freire, 1971; Goldenberg, 1978; Rappaport, 1986). In large parts of the world, national and international structures command resources, influence policies, and often determine the potential for mere survival. Societal empowerment, or "political empowerment" (Friedmann, 192; Jacob, 1991) are crucial to sustain other levels of empowerment and to resolve the problems of poverty in the long term (O'Gorman, 1992). Key powerful actors and institutions must be held accountable, and are concurrently needed as allies. As societal empowerment deepens, groups increasingly solicit, direct, and evaluate assistance from other organizations or professionals from a basis of autonomy (Kidder & Fine, 1986).

Organizations that begin to succeed in creating societal empowerment, while also being empowering internally, have been called "empowered organizations" (Zimmerman, 1992). Such groups can begin to affect their environment, policy processes, and the distribution of resources, influence, and control through coalitions, joint activities to increase their power, and direct challenges of agents of power.

Social transformation may be slow and difficult and may lead to resistance or conflict, depending on the context. The processes of societal empowerment seem to be facilitated with the pursuit of easier goals within empowering organizations for gradual strengthening, organization, skill development, and analysis of the determinants of one's situation (Alinsky, 1970). However, the three areas of empowerment are not necessarily sequential. Psychological and organizational empowerment help increase societal empowerment, and yet societal empowerment often results in personal empowerment and helps organizational empowerment.

Despite the rising interest in empowerment, there is still a lack of knowledge about the processes through which empowerment is achieved, and factors that enhance or impede it (Florin & Wandersman, 1990; Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Price, 1990). There are still few examples that give extensive details about the empowerment interventions' functional dynamics, organizational structures, and interactions with surrounding agencies and national contexts. Such details are particularly important because empowerment processes are directly linked to these factors, and cannot be clarified or evaluated without an in-depth study (Chavis & Wandersman, 1990; Zimmerman, 1990). In addition, there is a lack of research that considers the perspectives of participants instead of speaking for them. There is a need for ethnographic studies. The naturalistic approach is particularly suitable for the study of subtle process of empowerment, since the researcher gathers extensive details, and values the participants ad negotiates with them, rather than treating them as research subjects (Brown, 1985; Kider & Fine, 1986; Wolff, 1987).

Internationally, much of the empowerment practice and theory has not been systematically studied or documented, and very little has been published (Friedman, 1992). Development workers in Nicaragua have noted the same deficiencies in the literature on Nicaraguan cooperatives as those in the empowerment literature. Available accounts lack detailed analyses based on observations. Analysts find similarities in the problems encountered in different cooperatives, but they have an incomplete understanding of the causes and possible solutions to these problems (Kroeker, 1993).

METHOD

This article outlines some findings of a broader study of agricultural cooperatives in Nicaragua (Kroeker, 1993). The study examined intricacies of program functioning (history, inner group dynamics, communication, roles, crises, and means of resolving problems), of program relations to local organizations and the national context, of the participants' perspectives, and the effect of these factors on empowerment (Kroeker, 1993). Although many of these elements interact in circular and complex patterns influencing the processes of empowerment, the scope of this article only permits the description of a few of the most prominent factors.

The main portion of the research was done through 7 months of participant observation in one agricultural cooperative in Nicaragua, and four follow-up visits. I lived in the cooperative, observing formal and informal meetings. I shared their living conditions and food, in exchange for assisting in the education of the children and in a peer adult education program. By living among them, I was able to integrate, listen, engage in many conversations, ask questions, and determine subtle feelings and meanings. The notes of the cooperative's meetings, conversations, and observations were supplemented by documents and observations of processes and interactions in the village and in the town close to the cooperative. The research also included a general study of other cooperatives in Nicaragua through a literature review, interviews of key informants, and visits to 15 cooperatives around the country. The analysis consisted of a reiterative process of categorizing information, building causal links, patterns and interpretations, and verifying them. The initial analysis and verification occurred during the participant observation period and in follow-up visits. Then, through a comparison of the actors and context in each instance of an emerging theme, causal networks and alternative explanations were identified, and the evidence was weighed.

BACKGROUND TO THE NICARAGUAN
AGRICULTURAL COOPERATIVE

The Nicaraguan cooperative movement has a long and complex history. Political pressures and policies intertwined with the creation of indigenous alternatives and the struggle for national demands by the poor themselves (see Kroeker, 1993; and Serra, 1991, for detailed descriptions and analysis of the cooperatives' history). Private voluntary cooperatives were spontaneously formed by severely disadvantaged peasants, and later nationally encouraged by the government, together with sweeping land reform, in the decade of the 1980s. Peasants organized themselves into more than 3,000 agricultural cooperatives, farming over 20% of the arable land in the country. This movement was one of many social services programs, movements, and organizations that grew based on principles of empowerment very similar to those described in this article.

In some cooperatives, the members are only linked for joint credit, services, machinery, transport, or marketing. Nevertheless, in many cooperatives they share almost everything. Members work in a collective economic unit, live together on the grounds, and provide for some of their own social services. In 1989, there were 1,221 cooperatives of this type, with a total of over 25,000 members (Kroeker, 1993).

The cooperative reported here is one such mixture of an economic group, neighborhood, and voluntary association. In this fairly typical cooperative, 60 members share a land deed, its work, responsibilities, and rewards. Over half of the members live on the grounds and the rest in a nearby hamlet. The main economic activity is coffee production. The cooperative provides various benefits including education, housing, a plot for personal farming, and occasional wood, fruit, milk, or meat. The cooperative owns 1,750 acres of land, of which about 175 are used for coffee production, and the rest for cattle or personal plots. The cooperative was formed in 1985 through the organizing and negotiations of a dozen of its members.

The time of the initial data collection was toward the end of the Sandinista presidency in 1989. Cooperatives had been encouraged and assisted by the state with, for example, training, supervision, credit, and marketing services. Concurrently, the Contra war targeted and severely weakened many cooperatives. The economic embargo also had a negative impact. In 1989, structural adjustment policies began to be implemented. Social services and credit were severely reduced, and the economic policies were less favorable to agricultural cooperatives and small farmers. The cooperatives were nevertheless still critical to the national economy. This mixture of national support, pressures, and vulnerabilities affected the cooperatives, and underscored the societal changes necessary for empowerment.

LEVELS OF EMPOWERMENT IN THE COOPERATIVE

In general, the cooperative represent a setting that fosters some aspects of personal, organizational, and societal levels of empowerment. the cooperative met at least one immediate need, increased personal control, and provided opportunities to increase feelings of value and self-efficacy (personal empowerment). It provided a structure where members can participate in decision making (organizational empowerment). It increased, at least to a small degree, the power and voice of the members in the local area and in the country (societal empowerment). These general characteristics were found in most cooperatives around Nicaragua (Kroeker, 1991; Serra, 1991). However, the intense study of the coffer cooperative showed that there were numerous factors that affected each level of empowerment. Some personal, organizational, and societal factors enhanced empowerment, while others impeded its development.

Personal Material and Psychological Empowerment

The agricultural cooperative addressed immediate and concrete needs, since it provided for the minimum necessities of job, food, and housing. The cooperative also gave autonomy to the peasants through collective land ownership. Coffee growing was valued in society and enabled a fairly stable source of income (despite disadvantageous fluctuations in the international terms of trade and markets). Because of the cooperative unit, the members were able to farm a larger piece of land than they could individually, which resulted in financial profits and gave the necessary collateral for bank recognition and credit. They were also able to provide for their families with their personal plots, the use of common cooperative resources, and assistance from the cooperative in time of need.

The members were rewarded according to the amount of work they performed. Some additional cooperative benefits were distributed equally to all members (e.g., fruit, meat, milk). The cooperative paid for the education of the children out of general profits. Unfortunately, they had severe difficulties retaining a teacher in such a remote and harsh area, and most of the other members had a low level of education (on average second grade). On occasion they initiated peer adult education programs. They started a project of housing construction, collecting wood, and making roof tiles. In addition, the cooperative occasionally gave a loan to a family, members frequently borrowed and shared personal property, and they depended heavily on each other for protection and support.

Based on the comments of the participants and their self-evaluation, the cooperative enabled the further deepening of self-esteem and self-confidence processes. Nevertheless, this did not seem to be automatically guaranteed. Despite these positive changes and the economic benefits that they attained, the members' life-style was still one of extreme poverty. The members participated less in production then was necessary to guarantee profits for communal social services (e.g., the housing, which was never completed). Although the cooperative had survived several periods of severe financial crisis, and repaid debt, it was and still is in a stage of bare economic survival. Although its existence is not threatened daily, a crisis could cause the loss of everything attained. The most threatening crises seemed to be related to psychological and interpersonal processes.

The cooperative clearly nurtured consciousness raising, which was a critical process in the cooperative. From an analysis of the content of official and informal meetings, this process, which was the most frequent one and involved the broadest level of participation, also appeared in the midst of apparent anarchy. At first glance, the daily meetings between the members seemed to be totally disorganized and ineffective. The conversation jumped form topic to topic, sometimes in a seemingly illogical pattern. Members communicated with incomplete bits of information, in stream of consciousness. Several members often talked at once. Nevertheless, in the midst of this fluid mode of interacting, important processes occurred, far beyond merely making decisions about concrete issues. "Sense-making" (Weick, 1979) was the main thread throughout the meetings.

The process represented, through various forms, their analysis of the meaning of "the cooperative"; a definition of their identity, goals, and purpose. The members made prescriptive statements about goals and ideals. They described and analyzed elements of the past or present situation of the cooperative, or events and their consequences. They compared themselves with other social units, evaluated themselves, and illustrated meaning with stories and examples from concrete situations. For example, members would often say, seemingly out of context, "it's up to us to decide because we are a cooperative," "we are all equals, so . . .," "we are responsible," "you can/should hold me accountable . . . ."

The lack of formality in meetings, a process of consensus decision making, and an organic mode of building knowledge seemed to be preferred by the peasants. Through "puzzle-building," story-telling, and verbal free-associations, members analyzed factors affecting their situation, and the crucial characteristics of the cooperative mode of organization. These sense-making processes enabled feelings of unity, the development of a sense of responsibility and collective consciousness, and the analysis of problems and options for action. The participants were validating themselves as a social

system. They considered themselves a unit and defined themselves by "the cooperative." They valued the collective, and seemed to prefer being organized in a cooperative form. The members realized that as a cooperative they were valuable to society (e.g., for their export production, for participating in social change). Membership in the cooperative also seems to increase the associates' personal sense of value. This is particularly the case of the women, who considered the cooperative to provide many advantages to their lives (e.g., security and social support).

The sense-making activities reflected an internal consciousness-raising process in the cooperative. The consciousness raising or "politicization" promoted by outsiders often remained at the level of slogans and ideologies. In the cooperative, on the other hand, the members turned slogans into useful and inspiring symbols by redefining them with stories, justifications, and concrete comparison in their experience. Through these processes the participants demonstrated a strong sense of responsibility and ownership of the cooperative, and a belief and struggle for empowerment principles. Nevertheless, in their self-analysis, the members admitted that they could show a higher level of responsibility and participation and could value the collective more.

Organizational Empowerment

The structure of the cooperative, which took shape under the influence of national laws and the pressures of the peasants' organizations, allowed for direct participation of all members in decision making and oversight of the organization. They chose and elected their own leadership, which they could change at will (a president, vice-president, finance manager, production manager), Many other members assumed informal roles and represented the cooperative in its relations with outsiders. The members of the cooperative had equal voice through general assemblies and informal networking.

Although the members have the rights to participate and control the collective affairs, some did not exercise them. Some problems were left unresolved. There was a lack of communication and especially of verbal and clear mutual accountability. This seemed closely related to fears of participating in meetings.

A crucial goal of empowerment is to increase the level of participation of all the members in decision making, to increase their freedom to express opinions and critiques, and to increase their feelings of control in the organization. In the cooperative, most members lacked self-confidence and had intense fears of speaking in meetings. About nine members contributed frequently to the decision making and ongoing analysis. Another dozen

people spoke occasionally when there was a topic that affected them, or confirmed, repeated, or illustrated what someone else had said. Most of the others only verbally interacted in meetings when there was a general pandemonium with many people talking at once (i.e., 12 to 25 people depending on attendance). Members did not want to be singled out, or to be visible alone in front of the group. To hide one's contribution within the noise seemed to help associates feel less fearful. However, at the same time, the pandemonium seemed to make the contributor feel disrespected, which, in turn, continued to reinforce the fears of speaking. Another fear accommodation mechanism was to keep quiet until their frustration rose and finally they exploded, speaking loudly and fast. As a result, sometimes other members reacted defensively, or they turned the communication into a joke, or ignored or misunderstood the speaker.

Another difficulty in the area of direct participation was that certain issues were never raised, and other issues were never fully explained or resolved. In the cooperative, people live and work in close proximity, with little privacy, despite having personal conflicts. For example, women abandoned by their partners continue to live next to and work with the new couple. They have learned to handle the situation by avoiding issues and repressing dissension. In some cases, the members were even willing to forgo a benefit to avoid internal fights (for example, a communal laundry and shower area). Members resisted confronting or singling out others, evaluating or being evaluated in front of the group. In the cooperative history there had been some thefts and problems of accountability that never were fully aired, confronted, explained, or understood. Unfortunately, unresolved conflicts have future repercussions, as with the theft of a substantial sum of money, which influenced future trust of leadership. Serra (1991) and others (Kroeker, 1993) have also found that conflicts had been repressed and left unresolved in other cooperatives around Nicaragua, and that the resulting tensions often continued to affect the functioning of the cooperatives.

It appears that some processes could counteract the fears of speaking. In several meetings the members addressed critical issues over which they were in disagreement. Some remarks left open the possibility of being interpreted to imply accusations or public judgment. Some members who usually showed apprehension about speaking contributed nonetheless. When provided enough time for flexible and informal communication, and given encouragement, the group was occasionally able to face certain conflicts and analyze their causes and repercussions. Members also often voiced their opinions and bolstered their confidence by discussing issues and lobbying in informal caucuses. This seems to suggest that the members are able to overcome fears, and face crises and resolve them. However, it takes considerable courage and the process is therefore easily thwarted.

Societal Empowerment

Through their membership in the cooperative, extremely disadvantaged and previously landless participants had access to some services and gained a voice and value in society. Several members argued that before the existence of the cooperative, they never dreamed of entering through the doors of a bank. They believed that the country needed cooperatives, and needed people who were organized, producing, and building the future.

The cooperative was a part of a national movement to change the conditions of the poorest farmers. Cooperative members participated in a union for cooperatives and networked with cooperatives in the municipality and the region. Through such organizations and movements, agricultural cooperatives through Nicaragua have influenced national policy and processes on several occasions. These groups successfully demanded autonomy in the definition and forms of organization imposed on cooperatives, an increase in technical services, more adequate regional and national representation, and large changes in the land reform policy and process. Furthermore, they were occasionally able to influence changes in national price, marketing, and banking policies.

Many cooperatives actively participated in working with and challenging national institutions and policy makers. Nevertheless, some cooperatives, and several members in the coffee cooperative, were still isolated from these processes. In addition, there were national forces that simultaneously undermined the cooperatives and limited the range of options at their disposal. The participants of the cooperative I studied still expressed feelings of lack of value and respect in society. These feelings were found in other cooperatives in Nicaragua, even though a majority of cooperative peasants spoke of increased value in society due to the organization of cooperatives (Kroeker, 1993; Serra, 1991).

Despite the status gained by the cooperative, members deprecated their value and culture, and sometimes lacked feelings of ownership. These attitudes were partially influenced by the cooperative's lack of external control. For example, when they owed money to the bank, the bank and agricultural technicians dictated the way they should invest profits and the type of work they should do.

Feelings of empowerment were also threatened by the subtle condescending perspectives of outsiders. Several support organizations had the goals of helping cooperatives to become self-sufficient and sustainable. Their descriptions of their role indicated a desire to empower the poor. Cooperative members appreciated their assistance. Nevertheless, they had difficulties facing inflexible operating procedures in these local organizations. The cooperative participants sensed that they were not accepted and that some outsiders considered them "backwards" and lacking "culture" or "conscience."

The local professionals often failed to see the abilities, intelligence, and strengths of the cooperative members. Despite a low level of education and a depressing standard of living, the cooperative participants had abilities that outsiders often did not recognize or consider. The local service providers did not believe that the cooperative members engaged in social analysis or consciousness raising. As discussed earlier, the analysis or sense making occurred hidden in the apparent disorganization, at the initiative of the members themselves. The outsiders believed this lack of "conscientization" was one of the causes of ongoing cooperative problems and of their inability to change themselves and their situation. Concurrently, the service professionals usually did not consider or address the lack of conflict resolution, lack of accountability, or fears of speaking, issues that are possibly more threatening to the cooperative.

The national context of the cooperative was beneficial during the cooperative's early stages by creating a buffer to allow the cooperative's growth in a difficult and complex environment (e.g., with preferential economic policies, services, and assistance informing a union and networking). However, the national pressures also had a detrimental effect. In 1989 during the research, there was a national economic crisis (in 1 week the currency was devalued nearly 500%, drastically raising the cost of all basic goods). This national situation worsened cooperative relations with local service organizations. As these service organizations had fewer resources, they could provide less services, had more inflexible and complex rules and procedures, and often became more autocratic. When the national context worsened radically, internal difficulties seemed to be heightened within the coffee cooperative as well. At that time, there seemed to be less trust in the cooperative , and seemingly buried tensions resurfaced. In this context, there was a much greater need for organizational processes that facilitate accountability, explanations, and crisis resolution. At the same time, it was increasingly difficult for cooperative members to engage in such processes, partly because they were not in the habit, and partly because the situation was more complex and they were less patient.

CONCLUSIONS

The agricultural cooperative provides a useful model for programming, enabling the creation of initial processes of personal (material and psychological), organizational, and societal empowerment. However, the cooperative model in itself is not sufficient for sustainable empowerment. There were complex and subtle processes within the cooperative and in its local and national interactions that acted as barriers to the attainment of deeper empowerment at each level. Helpful sense-making and informal consciousness-raising processes were hidden in apparent disorganization.

These processes enhanced personal empowerment. Unfortunately, they were not recognized by local professionals. Fears of speaking in meetings and the reluctance to face conflict were intense and influential. These were barriers to organizational empowerment. The opinions and behavior of outsiders and the environmental context, although they seemed helpful on the surface, also had detrimental effects.

This study shows that the local and national context can impede or facilitate all levels of empowerment. In this case, local and national relations, policies, and events both enhanced and deterred the empowerment of the cooperative members. In the years following the main portion of the research, with the end of the Sandinista presidency, the societal encouragement, buffer and resources for cooperatives and for the poor were totally removed. Many cooperatives still exist. Some of the changes they facilitated do not seem reversible. Nevertheless the macropolitical and economic contexts are now negatively pressuring against them. Further research should explore how much long-term change is possible at each level of empowerment in a detrimental national context.

The empowerment factors described in this article might not be limited to the Nicaraguan context. Mansbridge (1980) found a reluctance to face conflicts or to criticize, fears of speaking in meetings, and various mechanisms to deal with those fears in participatory organizations in the United States. Schwartzman (1989) documented the sense-making processes in an empowering social service organization, concurring with Weick (1979) that many useful and influential processes occur in organizations, and particularly in meetings, even when the participants are not reaching decisions and seem to be wasting time.

Fairweather, Sanders, Magnard, Cresler, & Black (1969) and Goldenberg (1971) documented the positive and negative effects of the opinions and behavior of outsiders, particularly in terms of the consciousness level of the participants and their disbelief in their own abilities. Although the societal focus of empowerment has received less attention in the recent empowerment literature, it was a key component in the thinking of Alinsky, Freire, and Fals Borda.

For any potential generalization of the findings, further in-depth study of these processes is important. The internal fears and barriers for verbal participation and the potential for overcoming them should be further explored, given that participation in decision making is a crucial element of empowerment. The process of sense making should be described and clarified further, with the examination of alternative indigenous forms. It would be useful to have more research comparing empowerment processes across different environments, in order to weight their effect (e.g., the relative importance of having a sympathetic government and supportive national policies, or of being part of a struggle for the transformation of society).

We still now very little about the barriers and enhancing factors of each arena of empowerment. It is not yet clear which processes are necessary to trigger other processes. To strategically design programming for extremely disadvantaged populations, which addresses the various levels of empowerment, it is crucial to study the proportion and form of each key factor necessary to ensure or enable some personal, organizational, and societal empowerment. For example, through participant action research, service providers could broaden their perspectives about the strengths and resources of participants and the subtle processes of empowerment through intensified contact and shared experiences. Concurrently, as knowledge is developed, the program participants and integrated researchers could develop creative solutions for immediate crises, internal tensions, external pressures, and long-term change and growth (Fals Borda, 1979; Fals Borda & Rahman, 1991).

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