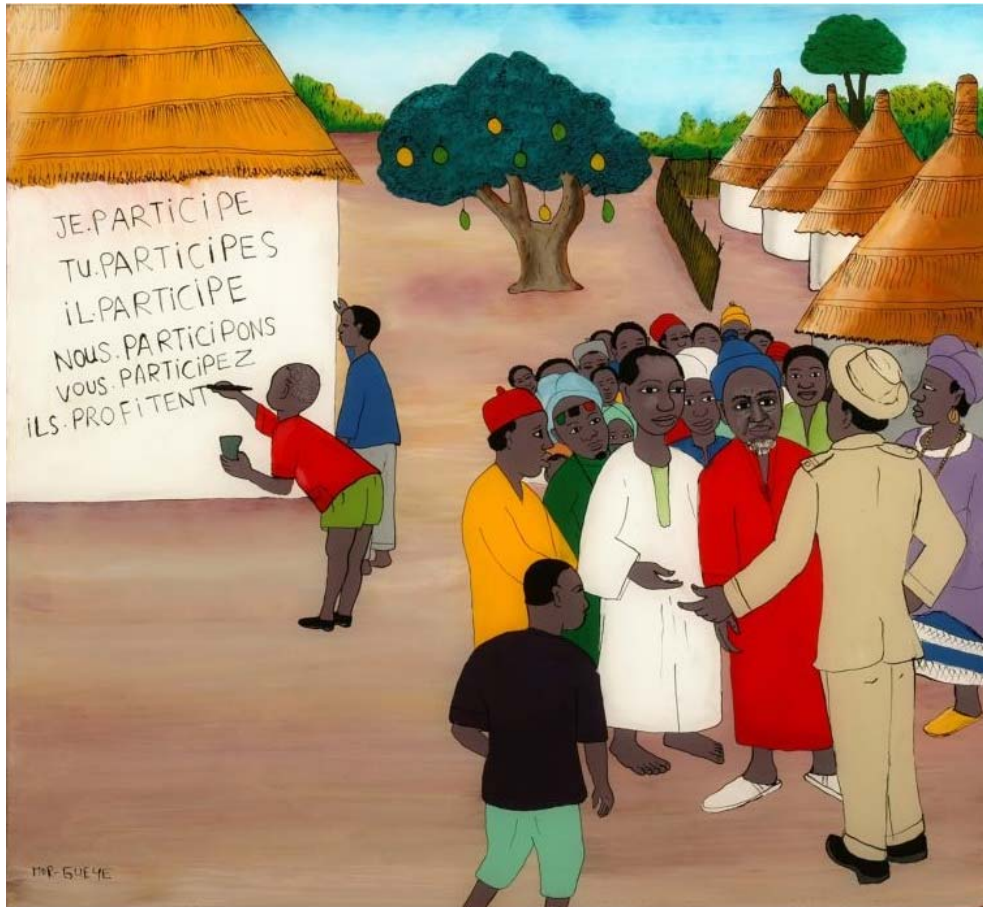


REPRESENTATION, EQUITY & ENVIRONMENT

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WP # 32

Party Politics, Social Movements, and Local Democracy: Institutional Choices in the Brazilian Amazon

by

Fabiano Toni



October 2007

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Choices in the Brazilian Amazon**

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Jesse RIBOT



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ABSTRACT

In the Brazilian Amazon, central government and international donors have chosen to empower civil society to carry out environment and development projects, while neglecting democratically elected municipal governments. This article explores the rationale behind these choices, as well as their impacts on democratic decentralization. The article shows that the central government distrusts local governments because they can be easily captured by opposition economic elites. Further, central bureaucrats can hold civil-society organizations accountable to them and by doing so they retain their prerogatives while extending their territorial coverage. In the development and conservation areas, central bureaucrats and NGO leaders share a common organizational/cultural identity that facilitates collaboration. Further, social movements, grass-roots organizations, and local NGOs are closely associated with the ruling party (PT). Financial support comes in exchange for political support. Although in the past this close relationship between civil society organizations and the PT helped strengthen democracy in Brazil, the current government-NGO alliance runs in the opposite direction by reinforcing centralization and fomenting neo-corporatist/clientelist practices.

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INTRODUCTION

Why do donors and central-government authorities chose to empower civil society rather than to work with elected local governments? What are the tradeoffs in this choice? To answer those questions we focus on the institutional choices made by the Brazilian Government and international donors in the Brazilian Amazon. Specifically, we present the case of Fundação Viver, Produzir, Preservar (FVPP—The Live, Produce, Preserve Foundation), an ‘umbrella organization’ representing some 100 grassroots movements along the Transamazônica highway, in the state of Pará, Brazil.

The Transamazônica region is an open agricultural frontier with a large population of small holders, known as colonos (colonists), who migrated to the region in successive waves of spontaneous and state-led colonization, during the 1970s and 80s. Their livelihoods are based on subsistence agriculture (maize, rice, beans, and cassava), some cash crops (black pepper, cocoa, and coffee), beef cattle, and to a lesser extent, small-scale timber extraction. There are other important groups in the region, such as indigenous, ranchers and loggers. Conflicts over land and forest resources are frequent.

FVPP is a non-governmental organization (NGO) that operates as the executive arm of the rural labour unions and grassroots organizations spread throughout the Transamazônica region. Those organizations constitute a network known as Movimento pelo Desenvolvimento da Transamazônica e Xingu (Movement for the Development of the Transamazônica and Xingu River Region—MDTX). Movement leaders created the FVPP as a NGO aimed at raising funds and carrying out development projects in eleven municipalities (municipalities being the most local level of local government—rural or urban).

Resources transferred by donors are substantial. FVPP has several sources of financial support, including, USAID, the Ford Foundation, the European Community, the Brazilian Ministry of Environment, and the Brazilian Social and Economic Development Bank (BNDES). Projects involve agricultural development, forestry, education and land-use zoning, among others. Municipalities have mandates to implement policies related to development and natural resource management. However, donors and the central government are neglecting these democratically elected governments. Accordingly, the FVPP prefers not to collaborate with municipal governments.

The case analyzed here entails three levels of choices: 1) the central government chooses to create few incentives and provides few resources and little training to elected local governments to get involved in natural resource management (NRM); 2) government and international donors choose to direct funds to a regional non-governmental federation-like NGO; and 3) The FVPP chooses not to collaborate with local governments—of the thirty projects developed by the regional federation over six years, none involve elected local government.

Donors, the central government, and the FVPP share a common justification for avoiding municipal governments: distrust—they regard local governments as corrupt and easily manipulated by local elites. This argument is not unfounded. Local elites that head many municipalities in Amazonia mine natural resources for their living, antagonizing small-scale farmers and indigenous groups (Toni and Kaimowitz, 2003). We present further evidence that elites control local power in the Transamazonica, but we also show that

political competition has been increasing and there are institutional arrangements to render municipal governments accountable. Donors and the federal government nevertheless ignore those arrangements and fear that decentralization will reinforce elite power over natural resources, causing further deforestation and exclusion of marginalized groups.

An important explanation for the strategy of supporting civil society organizations is party politics. Although NGOs have somehow engaged in dialogues with the federal governments for some fifteen years, this relationship got stronger after the election of President Lula da Silva, in 2002, when an unprecedented number of NGO and union leaders ascended to the higher echelons of the federal government (Druck, 2006; Sampaio, 2006).¹ After the election, the relationship between political party, government, and grassroots organizations evolved to produce a mix of clientelistic and corporatist practices. The groups represented by cabinet members got access to increasing volumes of financial support ever since. They also played an important role in securing political support for the government during political crises, and in gathering votes in the 2006 presidential election.

Rendering electoral support does not seem to be a problem, for those social groups have always been allied with the Workers' Party (PT), one of the few political parties in Brazil that established extensive links with social movements. In fact, that is a consequence of the democratization of the Brazilian political system during the 1980s. Paradoxically, the outcomes of the 2002 presidential election to some extent represented a reflux in this trend. Social movements lost their will to protest and to mobilize. In other words, they were coopted by the central government. This was due to several factors: 1) ideological/party allegiance – social movement rank and file had a hard time protesting against a government that they helped elect²; 2) clientelism and cooptation – movement leaders were appointed to important prestigious positions at the higher bureaucratic echelons and; 3) corporatism – social organizations got unprecedented access to financial resources flowing from the central state.

Party affiliation also helps explain the lack of cooperation between the FVPP and local governments. In this case, the distrust is mutual. Mayors affiliated with other political parties do not want to cooperate with social movements closely associated with their political opponents.

Strengthening civil society is considered an important way to counterbalance the powers of loggers and ranchers. Somehow, however, this formula for balancing self-serving elites is achieved by maintaining a narrow focus on civil society. This avoidance of local government is also supported by the widespread neoliberal belief that states are inefficient and should play a modest, if any role, in development—a belief that brought NGOs to the forefront of development during the 1980s and 90s (Myer, 1992).

Another important argument in this paper is that supporting certain groups at the expense of others skews competition, which can empower interest-based organization at the expense of democratically elected and downwardly accountable local governments. In other words, in

¹ About a third of his first cabinet members were former leaders of the powerful *Central Unica dos Trabalhadores* (Unified Worker's Central Organization) (Flynn, 2005).

² The FVPP and the Workers' Party in the Transamazonica share the same roots—they both emerged out of the Catholic base communities—and it is hard to distinguish the party from the movement.

some realms of policy making, there is a replacement of elected with appointed authorities and a loss of channels for the population to influence decisions at the local level. Therefore, there is a reduction of the space of democratic public interaction, or the public domain. 'Civil society' and 'civil-society organizations' are not the same things. The argument that strengthening the latter will make the former more robust is logically flimsy and lacks empirical support.

The first section of this paper delineates our analytic framework. The next section presents data on the nature and amount of resource transfers from the central government and donors to the FVPP. Section three shows that even though municipalities are fragile, they have some powers and means to act in the development and NRM fields. But, we also show that economic elites tend to control local governments, although there are mechanisms to hold them accountable. In section four we look at the FVPP and social movements behind it. Our main point here is that although the FVPP has a legitimate role in organizing civil society and running projects, it is neither representative of all social groups nor politically neutral. Drawing on the data presented in the previous sections, in section five we explain the failure to strengthen state-society linkages at the local level based on three variables: 1) party politics; 2) the mayors' neglect of rural issues, and; 3) a deep rooted distrust in local government by social movements. In section six we point out reasons for this outcome, namely, the resistance to and the difficulties in promoting democratic decentralization, a cultural/organizational identity between the central bureaucracy and NGOs, and the emergence of a corporatist model of state-society relations that benefits social movements, the federal government and the Workers' Party.

FRAMEWORK OF ANALYSIS

Decentralization is usually referred to as the transfer of powers from central government to lower levels in a political-administrative and territorial hierarchy. A simple form of decentralization is deconcentration—the transfer of powers to lower-level central government authorities, or to local authorities who are accountable to the central government. Political decentralization refers to the transfer of authority to representative and downwardly accountable actors, such as elected local governments. In a truly democratic decentralization process, representative and accountable local actors should have autonomous discretionary decision-making power (Ribot, 2002).

Those who do research on democratic theory, public policy, and natural resource management argue that decentralization can be an important tool for making decisions more democratic and for increasing the efficiency of government initiatives (Binswanger, Shah and Parker, 1994; Borja, 1988; Carney, 1995). Decentralization has been regarded as a means to promote popular participation, which in turn can improve the outcomes of development projects (Isham et al., 1995).

In spite of these theoretical benefits, decentralization is not risk-free. There is no guarantee that the devolution of powers to local governments will lead to further transparency, accountability, and efficiency. Enthusiasts of decentralization fail to take account of local heterogeneity, inequity and power struggles (Meynen and Doornbos, 2005). A major risk of decentralization is that local elites may capture power (Burki et al., 1999; Olowo, 2003). Some authors, however, stress that power may also be captured at upper levels of

government, and capture is more dependent on party competition, flow of information, and inequalities than on level of decision making (Bardhan and Mookherjee, 2002). In natural resource management (NRM), local authorities may fail to prioritize resource conservation in the long run and at larger scales (Lutz and Caldecott, 1996), or simply do not have the incentives to worry about global externalities, such as carbon emissions and biodiversity loss (Kaimowitz et al., 2000).

Since the late 1970s, bi-lateral cooperation agencies and international development organizations have been conducting business based on the assumption that the State is an inefficient service provider. Markets, rather than states have been praised as the driving force of development. In part, this stance was a reaction against the failures of the developmental state all over the world. The World Bank played a distinctive role in imposing this doctrine (popularly known as the Washington Consensus) on developing countries, which experienced its devastating effects (Amann and Baer, 2002; Portes and Hoffman, 2003). At some point, the Bank found itself under intense criticism, and had to come to terms with the failure of its exaggerated liberal prescriptions (Stiglitz, 1997). Civil society came to the forefront as a key factor in promoting development. According to this perspective, effective governments are subordinate to civil society. Therefore, the new policy prescriptions focus on strengthening civil society through social capital and correcting market imperfections—not a radical departure from old prescriptions.

The idea of strengthening civil society to foster development echoed the demands for increased popular participation in public policy that arose during the Brazilian transition to the democracy, in the early 1980s. The 1988 constitution and the by laws enacted thereafter constituted a plethora of councils designed to promote participation in health, education, social security, agricultural, and environmental policies, among others (Di Pietro, 1993). In this same period, NGOs mushroomed in Brazil, exceeding 110,000 in 1993 (Clarke, 1998). At the same time, donors were moving towards increased support to NGOs, based on the idea that states were corrupt and inefficient (Myer, 1992).

The Brazilian government, as well as donors, have been supporting organized sectors of civil society hoping that they might be more efficient than state and municipal governments in delivering services to the poor. In many instances, that may well be the case. However, there is no reason to believe that strengthening some selected organizations will have a spill-over effect that in the long run will translate into strong civil societies. On the contrary, this discretionary support may promote clientelistic relations or, even worse, corporatism.

Schmitter defines corporatism as a form of representations based on ‘singular, noncompetitive, and functionally differentiated categories, recognized by the state’ (1974: 93-4). These categories are granted a representational monopoly in exchange for observing certain controls on articulation of demands and supports. Historically, corporatism in Brazil has been used as a tool for limiting societal demands during the authoritarian regime of Vargas (1937 to 1945) and the Military government (1964 to 1984), as well as a means to mobilize electoral support and co-opt groups to shape policy consensus during democratic periods (Power and Doctor, 2002).

The difference between this softer version of corporatism—societal corporatism (Schmitter, 1974; Katzenstein, 1985)—and plain clientelism is that benefits flowing from the state are

directed to interest groups, rather than to individuals. In practice, both have been operating in Brazilian political history. As Kaufman puts it: ‘...the fluidity and personalism of clientelistic orientations contradict the legalistic, bureaucratic implications of corporatism, and a considerable proportion of Latin American politics can be understood in terms of shifts in the balance between the two’ (1977: 113).

Strengthening identity and interest groups while neglecting the role of democratically elected local governments diminishes representation and the public domain—‘the public political space where citizens feel able and entitled to influence authorities’ (Ribot, 2007: 47). It may also affect the very groups that receive support from the state. As NGOs grow and get more funding, they frequently face four sets of problems: 1) providing services at a much larger scale than they can possibly afford, thereby lowering the quality of those services and their efficiency as a service provider; 2) compromising their performance in other activities; 3) weakening their legitimacy as independent actors; and 4) shifting accountability from their constituency to their donors (Edwards and Hulme, 1996). As we will see later, the FVPP is facing all those problems. But, first we will discuss choices made in the Transamazonica.

THE CHOICES: RESOURCE ALLOCATION IN THE TRANSAMAZONICA

In this section we will see that a local NGO is getting a disproportional share of funds invested in development and NRM projects, and sharing those funds with other NGOs and Grass-roots Organizations (GROs), but not with municipal governments.

Between 2000 and 2005, the FVPP executed thirty projects, with a total budget of roughly USD 7,300,000. In addition, it partnered in several projects led by other organizations, whose funds are not accounted for in this estimate. Most of this money (USD 5,800,000) came from the Brazilian Federal Government (Table 1).

Table1: FVPP’s funding Sources 2000 -2005

Source	Funds(USD)	%l
International NGOs	725,111	9.85
Bilateral cooperation	718,182	9.75
Others	77,557	1.05
Brazilian Government	5,841,510	79.34
BNDES	4,930,455	66.97
INCRA/MDA	71,655	0.97
Ministry of Environment	837,400	11.37
Ministry of Health	2,000.00	0.03
Total	7,362,359	100.00

SOURCE: FVPP’s archives

The donation made by the Brazilian Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES)—a Development Bank linked to the Ministry of Economy stands out in particular in project funding. This kind of grant is unusual, for BNDES usually loans

money to private enterprises and finances public infrastructure. Although in this case, the money has been used to build rural schools, this has been made by a private organization. Moreover, BNDES decided to fund this project before getting approval from the State Secretariat of Education, which is responsible for supervising elementary and secondary education. The central government not only financed a private organization, but also ignored state prerogatives.

The second most important source of support is the Ministry of Environment. Grants typically fund small pilot-projects to develop technologies related to community forest management, alternatives to slash and burn agriculture, and agroforestry. Projects funded by bilateral cooperation agencies and international NGOs or Foundations are very similar to those funded by the Ministry of Environment. Also, some international NGOs channel considerable amounts of money to capacity building, which includes holding meetings and training farmers to work as extension agents. Most of the projects are executed by the FVPP and one or more collaborating organizations, most frequently, the local Rural Labor Unions.

The most striking feature of these numbers is that municipal governments are not partners in any of the thirty projects funded in the last six years. In short, there are two levels of choice involved in this process: a) the one made by donors and the central government, and b) the one made by the FVPP. Both choices neglect a role for municipal governments in local development and NRM. Obviously, the second choice reflects and is biased by the first one. In many instances, donors (and even the federal government) make clear in their calls for proposals that funds must be used by NGOs and GROs.

THE UNWORTHY: MUNICIPAL GOVERNMENTS

In this section we present background information on the local governments in Brazil as well as the legal and institutional frameworks in which they are embedded. We will see that fiscal imbalances render municipalities dependent on the state and federal governments. Also, self serving elite can easily manipulate local politics and natural resources. A significant proportion of mayors in the Transamazonica region are drawn from this elite. The arguments against decentralization, therefore, are not unsubstantiated however, donors ignore the existing mechanisms designed to render local governments accountable.

Political and Administrative Structure and Finance

In Brazil, the municipality is the lowest level of democratic government and usually includes both rural and urban areas. Geographic boundaries and size across Brazil vary greatly, so that there are municipalities as large as Tunisia, while others cover less than a couple of square miles. The same applies to population, which ranges from less than a thousand inhabitants to over ten million. The country has 5,561 municipalities, 775 in Amazonia.

Mayors head the municipality and appoint secretaries and the upper echelons of the bureaucracy. The local legislative body—the Municipal Chamber - is composed of elected councillors proportional to the municipality's population. Councillors and mayors are elected for a four-year term. Councillors can be re-elected an unlimited number of times. Mayors can run for a second term. Candidates for the executive and the legislature must be members of a national political party. Political elite have informal powers to chose

candidates. State governors are particularly strong within this system, as they can channel resources to municipalities in order to elect their preferred candidates (Abrucio, 1998; Souza, 1998).

Under the Brazilian constitution municipalities must have secretariats of health, education, and social assistance. Other secretariats are optional. Most municipalities have secretariats of planning and finances. The forest-rich municipalities of Amazonia usually have secretariats of Agriculture. In addition to the Municipal Chamber, the municipalities must have councils of popular participation. In areas such as education, health, and social assistance, these councils are mandatory. If the mayor and secretariats fail to constitute them, the federal government can block the transfer of funds assigned to decentralization programs. Some councils have discretionary powers over funds (health, education) while others are limited to overseeing their proper use.

Municipal Development Councils and Environmental Councils are becoming more frequent, although there are no decentralization programs in those areas. Usually, they are not very effective. This is because they lack resources and are overpowered by mayors and secretaries. Also, councillors lack political skills to negotiate with the executive and have limited access to courts to sue mayors who do not follow their decisions. Access to justice is hampered by costs, ignorance of existing laws and, sometimes, by distance to courthouses.

The financial fragility of small Municipalities is a considerable obstacle to decentralization of NRM. Local governments lack resources to build technical capacity. Municipalities, particularly the smaller ones, are dependent on transfers from the federal and state governments. Approximately 80 per cent of the Brazilian Municipalities rely on transfers from federal and state governments as their main source of income (Bremaeker, 2004). As shown in Table 2, municipalities in the Transamazônica region are even more dependent on transfers. That is due to their low capacity to levy taxes. Transfers, however, are secured by the constitution, which also stipulates that they must spend at least 40 percent of their revenues on education (25 percent) and health care (15 percent). Other than that, they have discretionary powers over the revenues they receive.

Table 2: Municipal revenues for Transamazonica municipalities in 2001 in USD

Municipality	Total	Transfers	Local revenue	% Transfers
Altamira	18,136,091	16,848,460	1,287,631	93
Anapu	1,891,987	1,864,515	27,472	99
Brasil Novo	2,555,309	2,355,642	199,667	92
Medicilândia	4,779,660	4,729,651	50,010	99
Pacajá	4,371,561	4,064,730	306,831	93
Placas	1,955,679	1,934,183	21,496	99
Porto de Moz	4,321,807	4,271,233	50,573	99
Rurópolis	n,a	n,a	n,a	n,a
Sen, José Porfírio	3,197,563	3,127,536	70,027	98
Uruará	5,821,669	5,546,049	275,620	95
Vitória do Xingu	2,218,221	2,149,596	68,625	97

SOURCE: Secretary of planning and finances, Government of Pará: <http://www.sepof.pa.gov.br/microrregiao.html>.

The role of local governments in environment and NRM

The Brazilian legal framework confers ample powers on Municipalities to develop and to execute environmental policies in their territories. Complementary laws and norms better define the balance of power and the allocation of responsibilities among the federal entities. Municipal governments can, for instance, license activities that have impacts on the environment on a local scale. They can also delimit and manage protected areas and public forests. In practice, there is a struggle among municipal, state and national governments over some prerogatives, particularly environmental licensing, which can generate significant revenues. The three levels of government can grant environmental licenses according to the potential geographic impact of the enterprise being licensed, though the boundaries are always contested.

Licensing responsibilities bearing high operational costs, little revenue and political burdens for administrators are commonly left to municipalities. This hinders the creation or strengthening of municipal environmental administration. Lawsuits over licensing powers involving municipalities, states, and the federal government are frequent. Some municipalities believe that they have technical capacity to license, and want the revenues generated. The upper levels of government, on the other hand, fear that municipal governments may soften licensing criteria and want the revenues as well (Toni and Pacheco, 2005).

Besides licensing powers, local governments can perform a series of tasks to protect municipal natural resources. These include land zoning, creation of protected areas and the provision of technical assistance to forest management and agro forestry. Conversely, they can put natural resources at further risk by providing technical assistance to cattle ranchers and building roads into forested areas (Toni and Kaimowitz, 2003). As mayors usually are members of economic elites who mine natural resources, it is usually easier to find examples of negative than positive effects of municipal policies in the area of environment. In Table 3 we show the profile of mayors elected in 2004 and 2000 in Transamazonica. The majority of them are ranchers, loggers and commodity traders. This profile somehow justifies the lack of trust of donors and the FVPP of the local governments.

Table 3: Professional background of mayors elected in 2000 and 2004

Municipality	2004	2000
Altamira	Bank clerk	Public servant
Anapu	Rancher	Rancher
Brasil Novo	Rancher	Rancher
Medicilândia	Teacher (PT)	Rancher
Pacajá	Catholic Priest (PT)	Rancher
Placas	Labor Union leader (PT)	Unknown
Porto de Moz	Rancher	Rancher
Rurópolis	Commodity trader	Shopkeeper
Senador José Porfírio	Rancher	Logger
Uruará	Rancher	Commodity trader
Vitória do Xingu	Rancher	Rancher

SOURCE: interviews conducted in 2004 and 2005.

In spite of their background and power, mayors are not the sole determinants of local policies. Municipalities can implement sound NRM policies (Toni and Pacheco, 2005). Also, there are mechanisms to render the local government accountable, such as the *Tribunais de Contas Estaduais* (State Comptrollers) and the state and federal district attorneys' offices.³ District attorneys have been increasingly taking action in environmental issues (Oliveira, 2002; Benatti et al., 2003). Some states in Amazonia have public attorneys who deal exclusively with environmental offences, but they are understaffed and underfunded. Donors and the central government have not engaged in serious efforts aimed at building capacity at the local level nor at strengthening the mechanisms of checks and balances on the mayors' authority.

THE CHOSEN: SOCIAL MOVEMENTS AND GRASS ROOTS ORGANIZATIONS

In order to understand the choice made by government and donors, it is important to get a better sense of what exactly the MDTX and the FVPP are. In this section we present a brief historical account of social mobilization in the region, stressing the common roots of both the Worker's Party and the social movements. This strong party identity helps explain why the central government intensified its support to them after the 2002 national election. We also demonstrate that although the FVPP covers a large territory in the state of Pará, it has limitations in terms of representation.

Social Mobilization: Historical Background

Social organization in this region is closely associated with progressive sectors of the Catholic Church, particularly the *Comissão Pastoral da Terra* (Pastoral Land Commission—CPT). The CPT deals with agrarian issues in the country. Inspired by the liberal winds that swept the Catholic Church in the 1960s, CPT was founded in 1975 during the accelerated process of agricultural modernization that was taking place in Brazil. The CPT's strategy was based on organizing rural workers around local associations, labour unions, and small community-based development projects. Particularly important was the struggle to gain control of labor unions (see Perani, 1985).

Brazil's labour legislation required that all peasant organizations be channelled through official state-sponsored unions. These unions had to be non-competitive and organized at the municipal level (one union per municipality) and membership was open to small farmers, peasants, and wage labourers. The local rural unions were hierarchically linked to a single State Federation of Unions, and the federations linked to a National Confederation.⁴ In order to attract and control the peasantry, the military created a rural welfare system (Fundo de Assistência ao Trabalhador Rural—FUNRURAL) whose control

³ In May 2007, responding to a lawsuit filed by a Federal state Attorney, a Federal court obliged the municipality of Altamira to deliver health care to river dwellers in remote rural areas. The judge scrutinized the municipal budget and concluded that the government had been spending too much on publicity to the detriment of basic services.

⁴ In 1963 the Brazilian Congress passed the Rural Labor Laws (Estatuto do Trabalhador Rural), granting rural workers the right to minimum wage and access to official retirement plans. The law also imposed corporatist mechanisms of representation and control on the peasantry.

was partially in the hands of the unions. The hierarchical structure and the distribution of benefits turned the rural unions into ‘extensions of state power’ (Grzybowski, 1990: 28).

In the Transamazonica, the progressive members of the clergy organized the rural workers who challenged the leaders of existing labour unions. Gradually they gained control of the existing structure by means of elections. Most leaders of the rural worker’s movement (MDTX) came from the rank and file of the catholic base communities. Many are also founders of the Worker’s Party (PT) in the region and have pursued political careers. Currently, in the region there are two state deputies, one federal deputy, and three mayors elected by the Workers’ Party, who are former leaders of the MDTX/FVPP.

Territorial coverage and representation

The MDTX congregates grassroots organizations of eleven municipalities around the Transamazonica and the lower Xingu River, in the state of Pará. FVPP develops projects and has partnerships in all these municipalities. Recently, it extended some of its projects to five other municipalities along the BR-163 Route, farther to the West. Altogether, those eleven municipalities have a population close to 300,000 inhabitants (see Table 4).

Table 4: FVPP’s Zone of Influence in the State of Pará

Municipality	Year of creation	Área (1000 km ²)	Population (x 1000), 2000	Urbanization rate (%)
Altamira	1911	161	77	80
Anapu	1997	12	9	33
Brasil Novo	1993	6	17	25
Medicilândia	1989	8	21	32
Pacajá	1989	12	29	26
Placas	1997	7	14	26
Porto de Moz	1937	17	23	43
Rurópolis	1989	7	25	34
Sen. José Porfírio	1961	13	16	34
Uruará	1989	11	45	29
Vitória do Xingu	1993	3	11	36
Total/Average for region		259	288	45

SOURCE: Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics - IBGE

Most of the rank and file and the majority of the leaders of the MDTX are colonists who migrated to the region to receive 100-hectare plots during the implementation phase of the National Integration Plan. A smaller number arrived later as squatters or to get land in more recent land-reform projects (assentamentos) that have been mushrooming throughout the region in the last decade.

The MDTX comprises some one hundred organizations. Those include the rural labour union of every municipality in the region, twenty three associations of farmers, twelve women’s associations and seven cooperatives. Although the Movement and the FVPP claim to represent the majority of the poor population in the area, their constituency is predominantly rural. Among the rural population, the colonists form the most powerful group. Women and minority voices are underrepresented.

Men tend to dominate the decision-making structures of the movement, particularly the Rural Labour Unions. To the day no woman has ever presided a rural union in the region. Although women are gaining more power and visibility within the movement, they complain that this has been very difficult. As a leader of a small women's association stated: '...everyone says that equality is very important, and women need to be part of the decisions. However, whenever we have large meetings, you see all the women doing the cooking and the cleaning, whereas men discuss politics. The discourse is updated, but the practices are still old-fashioned.'⁵

As for indigenous people, representation is even more limited. In some areas indigenous groups and colonists are at odds, particularly where colonization sites and indigenous lands overlap. Occasionally, colonists and indigenous peoples mobilize around common interests. That was the case in the late 1980s, when the federal government announced its plans to build a hydroelectric plant in the Xingu River. As the dam would flood large areas of indigenous and colonization lands, these groups successfully mobilized to protest. However, after the election of President Lula da Silva, the federal government re-enacted the proposal to build the dam. This time, the movement split and part of its leaders decided to support the plan, due to party allegiance. A colonist leader explained: 'we must understand that it will be built anyway; so it better be built when our president is in power.'

This shift caused some friction between colonists and indigenous groups, and even between the former and the Catholic Church, who has been the main ally of both groups in the region. It is also a perfect example of how social movements render political support to pay back the recognition they gained from the central government.

EXPLAINING CHOICES

Donors and the central state in Brazil believe that transferring resources to local NGOs and GROs is an efficient tool for strengthening civil society—a prerequisite for sound institutions to foster development and sustainable use of natural resources. Nevertheless, the disappointing fact that the FVPP does not seem to find ways to cooperate with or lobby local governments, runs against the idea that good governments require strong civil societies and strong civil societies lead to the creation of good governments. According to Putnam,

Civic engagement matters on both the demand side and the supply side of government. On the demand side, citizens in civic communities expect better government and (in part through their own efforts) they get it.... On the supply side, the performance of representative government is facilitated by the social infrastructure of civic communities and by the democratic values of both officials and citizens. (2000: 346).

We do not claim that empowering civil society is harmful or useless. Rather, it has been overemphasized as part of strategies that ultimately serve to consolidate central state power. In spite of the donor's reliance on and investments in civil society organizations, there has been no spillover to local governments, or local state-society relations in the Transamazonica region. Mayors, secretaries, and city councillors are still unresponsive to

⁵ These interviews were recorded in September/2005, in the municipalities of Altamira and Uruará.

popular demands and the society fails to organize to pressure them to ensure better performance, or to deploy the legal means to do so.

There are three possible hypotheses to explain this failure to promote better democratic local government. The first one is that there is no causal link between strong civil societies and good governments. If that is the case, one can claim that investing in civil society is a flimsy strategy for good governance or good government. It is based on a leap of faith, rather than on hard evidence.

A second hypothesis is that the local society is not becoming stronger at all, in spite of all the efforts made by donors and the federal government. In that case, the strategies and policies have been poorly evaluated, if evaluated at all. Civil society organizations, such as the FVPP have been used as a kind of paid service sector, which implements centrally designed projects.

A third hypothesis is that local governments have insufficient powers to be worth engaging. We have presented evidence to dismiss this hypothesis. Despite the difficulties they face, municipalities do have means to engage in NRM and rural development. Collaboration with civil society organizations could create synergies, since they have complementary capabilities (municipalities have stable staff, infrastructure, and official mandates; NGOs are more flexible to hire people on a temporary basis and have easier access to private funding sources). Successful experiences already exist and have been documented (Toni and Kaimowitz, 2003; Toni and Pacheco, 2005).

The key to understanding the failures in strengthening local democracy—which in theory has been a goal of the state since the enactment of the 1988 constitution, and also a priority in the Workers' Party's political agenda—is a combination of the first two hypotheses. Civil society is important, but social engineering efforts aimed at strengthening it are of little use, particularly by means of transferring funds to a limited number of civil society organizations. It is clear that the current strategy has little chance of engaging and strengthening local governments due to mayors' neglect of NRM, party identity/political polarization, and a distrust in the institution of local government.

Mayor preferences and electoral dynamics

It is necessary to acknowledge that NGOs have a comparative advantage *vis-à-vis* local governments: they care about NRM and development aimed at reducing rural poverty. Most mayors in Amazonia do not care. This is either because they suffer from an 'urban bias' (Lipton, 1977) or because they do not want to change the patterns of access to natural resources (Toni and Kaimowitz, 2003).

Urban public goods are less costly and tend to reach out to larger shares of the local population as urbanization rates grow (Arnott and Gersovitz, 1986). Urbanization is a trend in Amazonia (Browder and Godfrey, 1997). Despite the fact that municipalities in the Transamazonica have a relatively balanced proportion of rural to urban population (Table 2), mayors will have higher electoral returns by investing municipal resources in the urban area, especially because of the vast territorial extension of municipalities in the region. This is obviously the case in municipalities like Altamira, which has 80 percent of its population living in a relatively small urban area, whereas the other 20 percent is spread throughout

160,000 km². It makes more sense for mayors to build schools and health clinics in town than in remote and sparsely populated rural areas.

The most important reason, however, is the lobbying power of urban elites (Lipton, 1977; Bates, 1981). In this case, this lobbying power has two distinct facets. First, economic elites live in urban areas and demand urban services from mayors. These include road paving, drainage, public lighting, etc. Second, most elites in this region are somehow linked to rural areas. Cattle ranching, for instance is a common side-business for merchants, lawyers, doctors, and other urban professionals. Loggers commonly finance mayors' and counsellors' campaigns, when not running for office themselves. It is not in the best interest of these groups to cooperate with small-scale farmers and indigenous groups. On the contrary, they usually compete for access to land and forest resources. It is not uncommon to find partnerships between loggers and mayors to build roads into forested areas, even in indigenous lands, in order to expand the agricultural frontier.

These conflicts render collaboration between social movements and local governments very unlikely. However, they do not prevent mayors from tapping large shares of votes in the rural areas. They do so by deploying pork-barrel politics, usually in assistance by members of the city council who have power over rural communities. Although the labour movement is well organized and relatively strong in the region, only a minority of farmers are unionised and an even smaller proportion is affiliated with the Workers' Party. Local politics are divided not only along class or ideological lines, but also along religion, personal ties, geographic origin of colonists, and other factors that make up a rather complex picture.

The lack of interest of mayors may explain their attitude towards collaboration, but is not a sufficient excuse for donors and the central government not to invest in municipal governments. Managing natural resources and promoting local development are constitutional duties of municipal governments, and they should be encouraged to do so, or held accountable for not doing that. Of course private and international donors cannot impose sanctions on municipal governments, but they could create incentives. Nevertheless, one can easily understand that private donors may believe that it will be more efficient for them to channel resources to those who already share their interests than to use part of those resources to create incentives for local governments.

Perhaps as important as the fact that mayors tend to be part of a self-serving elite is the fact that most of them are not affiliated with Workers' Party; The workers' party is acknowledged as the 'only political party in Brazil that developed and maintained an organized web of connections to local, regional, and national political and social organizations, such as church groups, neighbourhood associations, and unions (Samuels, 2006: 2). These ties are very strong in the Transamazonica, where the Workers Party and the social movement can hardly be differentiated.

During many years, grassroots organizations opposed mayors and politicians from other parties. Most mayors, in turn, were never enthusiastic about supporting initiatives coming from social groups which had such a clear party identity. Animosity has been mutual, but the difference now is that the balance of power has shifted in favour of the Workers' Party at the federal (in the 2002 election) and state (in the 2006 election) levels. The party now controls significant amounts of resources that can be directed to either municipalities or

civil society organizations. Party affiliation, therefore, affects the choices of whom to support at the local level, e.g. to collaborate or not with municipal governments, made both by federal government and the FVPP.

Distrust in local governments

Distrust is determined by party identity, but only partially. As shown in Table 1, the Workers' Party has increased its power at the local level. In the 2004 election the party elected three mayors and seventeen councillors throughout the region. This result has turned the Workers' Party into the second largest party in the region. To this day, this growth has not been translated into further collaboration between the FVPP and the municipalities controlled by Workers' Party. The reason, according to a leader of the FVPP is that municipal governments are ineffective and still not trustworthy:

At the end of the day, they (Workers' Party mayors) do not go beyond what other local governments are doing. They are stuck in their daily business, and do not have either the skills, or the initiative to write projects and seek grants.

Asked if the Foundation could help build capacity at the local level, she explained that:

It could, in theory, but even in places like Medicilândia, where we won elections, the party was supported by a conservative coalition, otherwise it would not have been able to win. Part of that coalition does not want to deal with the movement at all. They see us on opposite sides. We are the party in the region.⁶

The statement above is apparently contradictory—the interviewee alleges that conservatives won't collaborate with the FVPP due to party identity, but at the same time, those same conservatives have allied with the Workers' Party to win local elections. It seems that the issue is really about political opportunism: the rural workers—and the Workers' Party—make alliances when it is necessary to seize power, but at the same time try to keep exclusive control over the maximum amount of resources. Their privileged relationship with the federal government allows them to tap considerable amounts of resources.

Donors and the federal government also distrust local governments. This distrust plays a role in their choices, although they will be reluctant to publicly admit that. The possibility of elite capture of local power is particularly worrisome to them. But if elite capture of local power is the real obstacle to collaboration, as the self-proclaimed popular party seizes power there should be more collaboration.⁷ Considering that this same party controls a few municipal governments, as well as state and federal governments, neither elite capture nor party identity should be a barrier to more cooperative intergovernmental relations. Yet, this is not happening, which leads us to delve into donor and central government motives behind the choice of NGOs as their preferred partners.

⁶ Interview conducted in May, 2006, in Altamira.

⁷ Theoretical models also predict that party competition should decrease capture at local level (Bardhan, and Mookherjee, 2002). The results of the last elections (Table 3), is evidence of increasing competition in the region.

RATIONALE FOR KEEPING THE MODEL

Donors and the Brazilian federal government have not challenged the assumptions behind their policies nor evaluated the impacts of those policies on civil society. They purposefully decided to ignore the weaknesses of their approach, not to avoid public criticism, but because the civil society discourse provides a convenient veil for their variable rationales. The central state wants to avoid democratic decentralization, so it can keep making the decisions, controlling resources and holding NGOs accountable. Also, its organizational culture is closely linked to NGOs, which shape its preferences. Finally, by transferring funds to political allies, the Workers' Party secures votes and the federal government gets valuable political support for its policies.

Donors have different approaches in different political settings. Many of those present in Amazonia follow World Bank policies, so it comes as no surprise, that they choose to support civil-society organizations.⁸ According to this perspective, governments are not trustworthy, and if there is any remedy to market failures, it has to be civil society. As with federal governments, they can easily hold NGOs accountable. In other words, recognition can shape the accountability of institutions, which is a key factor to understanding the politics of choice in Amazonia. As Conyers (2002 cited in Ribot, 2007) argues, when transfers are conditional or insecure, recipient authorities need to respond to the demands of those making the transfers, lest they will lose their privileges. Although municipal governments in Brazil are far from enjoying autonomy from the central government, they are much more independent than NGOs in the field of natural resources.

Local governments may be pressed to accept centralized decisions, but funding coming from the central government will hardly create financial dependence, particularly because municipal civil servants are paid by the local government, have job tenure, and a large share of municipal finances are guaranteed by constitutional transfers. If the local government disagrees with centralized programs, the central state can refuse to implement them, or disengage during the implementation phase. NGOs, on the other hand may feel forced to accept specific projects, and certainly will have to stick to them during implementation, otherwise they will have serious problems maintaining their organizational structure. Channelling resources through NGOs is, therefore, a way to avoid formal decentralization and informal negotiations to share decision-making powers.

The cultural/organizational explanation has to do with the recent history of environmentalism in Brazil. The Ministry of Environment has been too closely associated with, and influenced by NGOs since its birth, and many of its top officials and bureaucrats were recruited from amongst the leaders and rank and file of those organizations. Many of these public servants earnestly believe that NGOs are the most reliable and efficient partners in implementing public policies, although one cannot rule out the possibility that some Ministry officials privilege their pet NGOs. Be it as it may, the relationship between NGOs and the Ministry of Environment is still too intimate.

In the early 1990s the influence of the World Bank and other donors also became evident, and pushed the ministry farther in the direction of supporting civil-society organizations.

⁸ In Amazonia, the German Cooperation Agency (GTZ) has been working to build capacity at state and municipal levels.

This was clear in the negotiations and implementation of the Pilot Program to Conserve the Brazilian Rain Forest (PPG7), created in 1992. The Ministry and the PPG7 implemented several programs designed to transfer resources to NGOs and GROs. Most of the programs funded by the Ministry of Environment and the PPG7 give grants on a competitive basis; yet, the number of organizations that gain access to the funds is limited. Some have developed close relations with the Ministry of Environment. Also, we need to consider a learning effect—those who succeed in getting grants accumulate experience in writing proposals and developing projects, which increases their chances of being awarded again in the next calls. This creates a cycle in which some NGOs gain privileged access to public funds in exchange for providing services for the state.

The federal government, particularly the Ministry of Environment has limited resources and lacks the capacity to be present in the 775 municipalities of Amazonia. Therefore, the natural way for the ministry to perform its tasks would be through decentralized arrangements. However, this would entail a transfer of decision-making powers to municipal governments, which are mistrusted. So, instead of decentralizing powers and responsibilities, the federal government outsources its services to private organizations that are accountable to the central state, rather than to the local population.

Increased participation ideally should bring a broader cross-section of the local population into the decision-making process. However, it is often neither representative nor binding (Mosse, 2001, cited in Ribot, 2007). Despite FVPP's decisive role in supporting social movements, it is becoming increasingly more accountable to donors than to its constituencies, as it acquires more privileges.⁹ Also, it does not equally represent all stakeholders who should have voice in NRM in the region.

Since NGOs act as executive branches of line ministries, they become upwardly accountable. The space for democratic participation is reduced, for the resources they receive could otherwise be transferred to downwardly accountable local governments. This enclosure of the public domain became more serious after the 2002 presidential election. Because the majority of rural labor unions' leaders are affiliated with the President's party (PT), after Lula's election the exchange of goods for political allegiance has become rampant.

Within this political context, participation was further limited and upward accountability gained a party twist. It is important to stress, however, that this sort of corporatist exchange is practiced on behalf of an interest-based group, not for rent-seeking leaders (Stepan, 1978). Nevertheless, it seems that it has contributed to the deepening of existing cleavages and to creating new ones, further fragmenting the local arena (Ribot, 2004). A good example is the split of the movement over the proposal to build the Hydroelectric dam in Altamira. Due to party identity, the local social movements lost the capacity to protest, and some of their members publicly supported the proposal. This sudden turn split the colonists

⁹ Leaders of the FVPP have been concerned that the movement is drifting away from its rank and file, and announced plans to slow down its projects (that is, donor-driven activities) in order to reach out to their constituencies. This is not new— in early rounds of unrelated interviews, conducted in 1997 and 2000, leaders of the movement expressed the same preoccupation, but nothing has been done to solve this problem.

and definitely drove the indigenous people away from them. At the same time, the demobilization paved the way for the government to go ahead and build the dam.

CONCLUSIONS

This paper has described and explained two levels of institutional choices. The first one has two facets: Brazilian federal government and, to a lesser extent, international donors, have chosen to support NGOs and GROs in Amazonia. At the same time, they decided not to build institutional capacity at the local level of government, that is, municipalities. In the Transamazonica region, they elected the FVPP. Second are the local institutional choices made by the FVPP, which decided to establish partnerships and support several local GROs. At both levels, central government, donors and the FVPP fail to work with municipal governments, although they are democratically elected and constitutionally mandated to play a major role in natural resource management.

One reason commonly advanced to explain the choice to avoid municipal governments is that local elites who benefit from the exploitation of natural resources tend to control local governments—therefore they risk overexploiting resource for their own personal and political gain. But the marginalization of local governments only obstructs the consolidation of local democracy, further hurting prospects of sustainable management of natural resources.

Central authorities and donors avoid municipal governments based on the arguments that they 1) distrust local governments; and 2) believe in civil society as the driving force of development and governance. These civil society arguments cover up other reasons that are more persuasive in explaining this systematic avoidance of elected local governments: 1) the central bureaucracy does not want to give up its prerogatives, but as it is not able to cover the vast territory of Amazonia, it outsources some of its tasks to NGOs, who are held accountable to it; 2) an organizational/cultural identity between NGOs and bureaucrats within the ministry of environment contributes to the choice of NGOs as the preferred local partners; and 3) party identity makes some civil-society organizations attractive as partners, for they receive resources from the central government in exchange for political support.

The federal government uses civil society arguments to centralize policies and to reinforce privileges granted to some NGOs. These arguments do not help strengthen public debate at the local level. On the contrary, those who are represented by the FVPP are the only ones who have a chance to participate in decision making, although this participation is also curtailed, for the FVPP becomes increasingly accountable to its donors, rather than to its constituency.

What is at stake in the choice between civil society organizations and democratically elected municipal governments is power. By choosing NGOs over democratically elected local governments, the bureaucracy retains control over resources and decision-making processes. Funds are transferred on the basis of party preferences and benefit interest groups that support the federal government. Hence, we can see that civil society arguments do not hold water. Increasing upward accountability and centralization of powers in a federal system runs against the idea of strong societies coupled with good governments.

The strengthening of civil society in Brazil during the 1980s and 90s, and the close association between social movements, grassroots organizations and the Workers' Party

represented a great step towards democratisation, both at the national and at the local level. However, as the Workers' Party ascended to power, the central government started choosing its allies at the local level on a party basis, bypassing democratically elected local governments, and reducing political competition. This strategy certainly reduces the public domain of decision making and hurts local democracy. As social movement acquiesce to the central government and loose capacity or will to protest, democracy at the national level may be compromised as well.

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