

## **Organizational Empowerment versus Clientelism**

by

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Development projects are inscribed in concrete relations of power. These relations have multiple dimensions, presenting themselves at almost all levels of a project—between communities and their surroundings, among project beneficiaries, in connection with the conditions and circumstances that the project is attempting to change, among the institutions that participate in the project, and between technical advisers and beneficiaries. Many development projects do not recognize these power relations in their training and implementation regimes, focusing instead on formal institutional relations. Probably because they conceive of the individual as an abstract entity isolated from any social context, they tend to view that individual as an intellectual being rather than as a social being of flesh and bone inscribed in relations of power with certain circumstances of rank, of domination and subordination, of interests, values, and ideas. This approach neglects the relations that order society, defining positions and opportunities and generating and maintaining a system of incentives and punishments directed toward the consolidation of positions, channels of social advancement, values, and behaviors. Not viewing individuals within the power relations that are the basis of social organization makes it impossible to fully understand their motivations or the logic of their behavior toward institutions and their functionaries and toward the various groups and organizations in which they participate. When projects are designed and policies are formulated with the goal of a fair and efficient administration that will avoid clientelism, the assumption is that things will turn out as expected. Existing relations are ignored, overlooking the fact

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that the existing system of rewards and punishments will surely win out. There is no recognition of something that is readily grasped by anyone who has ever participated in a project: that “the beneficiaries perceive and value the policy in its concrete practice, not in its formal pronouncements” (Jorge Vargas-Cullell, personal communication, 1996).

This neglect of power relations has resulted in an absence of strategies for preventing or mitigating the negative effects of clientelism, the expression of power relations par excellence, despite the fact that development agencies rhetorically decry clientelism for its negative impact on civic culture and the pursuit of development goals. Clientelism is incompatible with technology and modern forms of administration and entrepreneurial organization—in short, with the postindustrial state. These new organizational forms demand ever-higher levels of empowerment and participation by citizens in the realms of institutions and the state and by workers in firms in order to achieve competitiveness and efficiency. In addition, clientelism interferes with the generation of integrative visions of the future. Moreover, it is vulgar in that it promotes the idea of “every man for himself” and stimulates the disintegration of state and society. Whereas the democratization process depends on citizens who can think, are free and autonomous in their decisions, and know their rights and duties, the spurious relationship of clientelism obliges them to renounce their rights in favor of those of another.

### **ACTION VERSUS RHETORIC**

The fight against clientelism has tended to remain in the realm of rhetoric (limited to declarations of social and economic policy) for lack of a focus and an operative method. Elsewhere I have shown how clientelism has provoked the failure of many development projects and experiments (Sobrado, 1996). In this article I revisit the problem and suggest, on the basis of the experiment in mass organizational training created by Clodomir Santos de Moraes, the construction of strategies for the democratization of power relations, empowering communities and groups with the organizational capacity to mitigate the negative effects of clientelism and gradually undermine its foundations.

By “political clientelism” I mean the relations that are established between a “patron” who offers certain services and a “client” who in exchange for those services (or goods) permits the patron to govern and resolve collective issues without the client’s participation. The relations of domination that are the basis of clientelism have in part the function of social ordering: the adjustment of individuals and groups to established roles. This means that social location defines opportunities and aspirations, and this, in caste societies and

discriminatory organizations, carries with it an a priori diminution of the aspirations and self-esteem of individuals on the lower rungs of the social scale, facilitating passive adaptation to their social and organizational roles and thus maintaining the privileges of those in higher positions. The formation and manipulation of political clienteles for the acquisition and exercise of power is a phenomenon of long standing. Max Weber (1969), in his studies of forms of domination, richly describes the forms assumed by clientelism throughout history. These relations, although they have varied over time, have been a constant and important component of systems of social organization. In feudal society, based on castes, clientelist relations were one of the bases of the formal institutional system, permitting it to operate for centuries. In today's republican societies, based on electoral systems and the separation of powers, clientelism no longer has a formal institutional character, but it maintains its currency through new, ever more subtle informal forms depending on the level of development of the economic and political system. In more advanced societies, the political decisions that seek to favor groups or sectors must be based upon general principles and policies, while in less developed societies, some people are favored simply for who they are and the rest are discriminated against.

The democratic system, as a system of separation of powers with general elections, does not by itself eliminate political clientelism, since it does not automatically suppress relations of domination and discrimination, but neither does it legitimate it. The legal and institutional nature of the democratic system turns clientelism into a shameful aspect of the informal sector. The reach of clientelism is reduced to the extent that organizational and institutional development, propelled by science and technology, places human development at the forefront, ahead of other factors of production, thus requiring greater participation by (and a higher quality of) workers and citizens (Drucker, 1994).

There is increasing research interest in the restrictions imposed upon democratic regimes by political clientelism and corporatism in contemporary societies, and there is a vast literature on the theme. Here, however, we are interested in political clientelism not as a sociological unit but as the setting in which the practices of domination that affect the design and execution of policies and socioeconomic projects are embedded and expressed. It is in clientelism that incongruencies and contradictions are most evident (1) between declared intentions and social policies, (2) between policies and project designs, (3) between project designs and their implementation, and (4) between proposed norms and the stimuli and disincentives that exist in reality.

Given the negative impact of clientelism on development projects (generating a culture of dependency, both in general and within development projects, and social backwardness in general), the study of ways of overcoming clientelism is of particular importance not just to those who finance particular programs or projects but to the stability and development prospects of entire countries. In the contemporary world, an essential asset for progress is the management capacity and organizational autonomy of groups and communities—their active participation in the search for solutions and alternatives. In this context, the patron-client relation is an anachronism that affects the development of human capital, the formation of social capital, and civic culture; it alters the conditions of democratic life and impedes the formation of an institutional system based on law. One of the most important challenges of the developing world is how to do away with these outdated relations while building new ones based on democratic practices. In this article, we will examine an experiment that has been able to impact clientelist relations in diverse contexts, generating the empowerment of popular sectors with palpable results.

### MASS ORGANIZATIONAL TRAINING IN AUTONOMY

In Costa Rica during the 1980s, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) undertook Project 034, one of the most expensive efforts ever at overcoming clientelist relations in the rural institutional setting.<sup>1</sup> The project was designed for execution by the Instituto de Desarrollo Agrario with an investment of US\$9 million. Pieter de Vries, who has studied the regions in which it was implemented, paints a rather pessimistic picture of the results achieved. The title of his work, *Unruly Clients*, clearly expresses the “effects” of this costly project. The handling and development of the project turned out to be a bundle of clientelistic relations. From the highest functionaries to the pastors of local churches, everyone with any position participated in some way in the networks that flourished around the project despite its formal goal of supplanting clientelism (de Vries, 1997: 5–7).

The project’s problem, like that of other such projects, was that it sought to do away with clientelist relations through institutional means without altering the real relations of power. It failed to transfer management and decision-making power within projects to the beneficiaries, thus limiting the development of citizens’ abilities and the organizational development of local communities.

Although many studies have pointed to the importance of management autonomy for successful development projects (Gay, 1994; Putnam, 1993;

Carmen, 1996), the need for real autonomy has been ignored in practice by the so-called development agencies in both the design and the execution of projects. In the last analysis, “pragmatism” has prevailed, and projects have been designed and executed according to the prevailing clientelist political-institutional framework.

The disappearance of the Soviet Union reduced the long-standing fear that popular organizations would become instruments of the “evil empire” and created important opportunities for critical thinking with regard to traditional paradigms. “Empowerment” is the catchword, but in the application of this principle one sees that autonomy and organization either do not occupy the space that they should or are simply empty words. Instead of participation, we get “participation” (Carmen, 1996: 42), and instead of organization, we get advice or formal pronouncements (Sobrado, 1999). In short, development projects are still fundamentally divorced from the needs and levels of development of the people who are supposedly their beneficiaries.

There is, however, a rich methodological experiment with concrete results on three continents that has gone farther in emphasizing the importance of autonomy. This is the organizational training method developed by the Brazilian sociologist Clodomir Santos de Moraes and applied in the Honduran agrarian reform process during the 1970s, in Costa Rica and other Central American countries, and in southern Mexico. At the end of the decade, it was introduced to Portugal, where it was applied through the Instituto António Sérgio do Sector Cooperativo. During the 1980s, it was used in several African countries (Botswana, Mozambique, Angola, Zimbabwe, South Africa), and since 1989, it has been implemented in Brazil for its National Programs for the Generation of Employment and Income (Carmen and Sobrado, 2000). This method has made autonomy an essential element of the training process and of the empowerment of individuals and groups. It has generated thousands of jobs and turned the unemployed into entrepreneurs, creating small businesses (sometimes without any credit at all) that have occasionally become medium-sized businesses (as in the case of Coopsilencio in Costa Rica) and even large-scale and high-level enterprises (such as Hondupalma and Coopalma in Honduras) (Carmen and Sobrado, 2000).

That this experiment has not been studied before is partly because it springs not from the handbooks of development agencies—although some of them, such as the Food and Agricultural Organization and the International Labor Organization, have sponsored the projects—but from popular organizations linked to leftist political parties. This relationship and the use of terminology based in historical materialism gave rise to fears of Marxist penetration and limited the study and diffusion of these development experiments until after the fall of the Soviet Union. The *América Latina Formación*

Académica (Latin American Academic Formation—ALFA) project, in cooperation with the European Union, involving four European and four Latin American universities, marked the beginning of academic interest in the Morais model as a possible mechanism for overcoming clientelism (see Lewis, 1998; Carmen et al., 1999).

Morais's method establishes autonomous organizational practices as a prerequisite for the development of projects, but it also formulates an organizational sociology and a training methodology that are highly operational. His theory stems from the work of Marx and Lenin on the differences between artisan and proletarian organization but does not invoke their notion of class struggle. The framework for its development was provided by his labor, political, and professional trajectory. He was an artisan and musician in his hometown of Santa Maria da Vitoria, Bahía, and later a factory worker for Ford in São Paulo; still later, he was a lawyer, journalist, professional sociologist, and popular leader until he was condemned to exile in 1965. He then worked with several international agencies in Latin America, Europe, and Africa and eventually founded the Institute for the Support of Third World Nations in Brasília in 1989 (Sobrado, 2000: 14–24).

Morais identifies four social strata: (1) artisans, those who begin and end the productive process; (2) salaried workers, involved in processes with a social division of labor; (3) semiworkers, salaried workers who also work as artisans; and (4) lumpen, those who do not want to work. He notes that artisanal production generates mental models of organizational self-sufficiency that are expressed in the forms in which work is planned and carried out. These forms are functional for such production but absolutely dysfunctional when they are transferred to complex organizations with a social division of labor. These transferences provoke deviations—artisanal “vices” that underlie the difficulties and weaknesses of peasant organization in its struggle against repressive apparatuses and in its implementation of projects and associative enterprises. These deviations also provoke many of the difficulties and failures of cooperative and associative organizations in the popular sector during the takeoff and consolidation phases that frustrate the legitimate demands of artisan organizations—including those of the peasantry, the artisans of the countryside—and keep them subject to clientelistic relations of power (see Carmen and Sobrado, 2000). The salaried workers of the formal sector, for their part, have more collective discipline and the ability to transfer the organizational forms of large-scale enterprise to their unions or productive organizations.

Morais (1987) explains the successes and failures of various attempts by former banana workers to form cooperative production models with peasants

in terms of differences in mental models. His typology of organizational capacities has been very useful in the accurate identification of successful projects (Barrantes, 1998: 25). According to this theory, differences in organizational mental models are determined by organizational practice and can only be modified through a new type of organizational activity. Changes are produced through organizational laboratories, real theoretical-practical experiments that he has created (Labra and Labra, 1995). An organizational laboratory must have certain characteristics: (1) It must have at least 40 persons (there is no upper limit on participants). (2) Participation must be voluntary, and there must be a need that can be satisfied by concrete means—anything from tractors to teachers—that undergirds the organized action. (3) It must enjoy real autonomy, bounded only by the law. (4) It should last from 15 to 40 days, according to the composition of the group. (5) It must have a director who imparts organizational theory and techniques.

The participants undertake a process of self-training in management and organization, assisted only during the first few days by the director, who prepares the conditions and delivers theoretical content according to the group's requirements. Through his actions, the director seeks to speed up the change in mental models and stimulate the organizational capacity of the group as the laboratory develops. Once the project has completed the first phase of organization, he assumes a lower profile. The fundamental principle of the method is that when the group encounters a problem whose resolution requires organization with a social division of labor, the "object" (the reality being faced) provides the organizational training. This obliges the group to create the requisite network of relations (organization) to resolve the problem and address its need. In this process, the theory explains artisanal limitations and the method introduces basic techniques of organization such as agendas, plans, record keeping, oversight, and control.

By their nature, organizational laboratories tend to be massive, incorporating other groups and communities near the project site. For example, during the Honduran agrarian reform process of the 1970s, there were more than 400 laboratories, 1,064 associative enterprises (of which the previously mentioned Hondupalma and Coopalma had 15,000 and 30,000 hectares respectively), and several industrial processing plants. The scale of the results depends primarily on the popular movement's ability to make alliances and on the interest and ability of relevant political circles (Erazo, 2000: 60–69).

In Brazil, the method has sought to take on a systematic form through public institutions. The National Programs for the Generation of Employment and Income, with 11 programs in various regions of the country, has produced hundreds of small and medium-sized enterprises and even some large

ones (with more than 500 members) such as Mange Seco in Giurú (Ceará). In the private sector, there are also hundreds of cooperative enterprises created by the Landless Movement, such as the regional cooperative of Coagri in the municipality of Cantagalo, with more than 1,000 members.

Each of these programs has been set in motion by the intensive training of dozens of economic development technicians and hundreds of investment project assistants. The former are conceived of as “combat economists,” trained in a few months in course laboratories (Carmen and Sobrado, 2000) to set up field laboratories in communities and develop community and business projects. The latter are members of the communities who have at least a primary education, and they are trained to gather the information needed to set up projects and promote organizations and enterprises, working with the economic development technicians. The goal is project self-sufficiency—replacing dependence on external financing with a System of Social Participation for the Identification of Projects for the Generation of Employment and Income, a new type of nongovernmental institution that is supported by the community’s own projects. Although no such system has yet become entirely self-sufficient, the experiment deserves further analysis and continued attention.

Projects based on organizational laboratories differ from conventional development projects in a number of ways:

1. They incorporate larger numbers of people at a lower per-person cost for the results obtained. As mentioned earlier, they have no upper limit on participation. In the laboratories of Brazil’s National Programs, the average participation is 250 persons (Jacinta Castel Branco Correia, personal communication, 1997), but there have been experiments with more than 1,000 persons. This reduces the per-participant cost to levels substantially below that of other training methods.

2. Their effective organizational training empowers groups and communities with an instrument of strategic individual and collective development. This important training cannot be realized through traditional informational courses and advice in the absence of practice; nor can it be realized through the formal elaboration of by-laws in meetings called by project promoters who are interested in filling in the gaps of other methodologies.

3. They are directed to the unemployed and underemployed, especially those who have no experience in microenterprises but do have experience as salaried workers. Social policies designed by economists recommend microenterprises for the chronically unemployed, especially those who are nearing age 40 and can no longer receive vocational training. Leaving aside the problems that stem from the mechanical transfer of a microenterprise

model taken from the developed world, where notions of “small” and “micro” are on a different scale (and where technological and human-capital levels are also very different), the model cannot be effective unless it takes into account the organizational mental models of the participants. To be a microentrepreneur, one needs some minimal understanding of the management of a family enterprise. Those with artisan backgrounds have this understanding to some extent, even if their family enterprises have gone under, but those who have spent all of their working lives as salaried workers in division-of-labor processes do not have it. This latter group, according to Morais, may lack an artisanal sense of self-sufficiency and thus be ill-suited to the role of microentrepreneur, but it possesses the labor discipline and teamwork skills required by larger scale productive associations, which are usually more productive than microenterprises. This strength of unemployed or underemployed workers from the salaried sector is ignored by prevailing social programs; the microenterprise remedy is prescribed for all of the unemployed instead of taking advantage of the particular experiences of each. This creates the conditions for the failure of those microenterprises (the failure rate in the first year is over 80 percent) and deepens the desperation of participants.

During the late 1960s and early 1970s, the banana plantations of Honduras and Costa Rica were the objects of wide-ranging modernization processes that reduced the labor force by as much as half. Thousands of workers were displaced. This situation led to land invasions, especially in the abandoned plantations of those same multinational fruit companies. These agrarian conflicts led to various proposals, ranging from the “repeasantization” of former rural workers on small parcels of land to the formation of large-scale banana production cooperatives. The subsequent (1970s) experience of agrarian cooperatives in these two countries demonstrated that this was in fact a better option for promoting development and family well-being than the traditional parcelization undertaken by land reform agencies in the region. Most of the parcels distributed to ex-workers did not flourish; generally, they built their houses and sowed some crops for subsistence but sought salaried labor to earn an income. When they got an attractive offer for their land, they sold it and went elsewhere. In reality, most of these parcels have ended up in just a few hands. In contrast, while some of the cooperatives formed at that time were just a transitional means of subsistence or suffered for lack of sufficient land or land of high enough quality, others have become medium-sized or even large-scale agricultural enterprises.

This ability to provide a solution for unemployed/underemployed salaried workers has particular relevance in the struggle against unemployment and poverty. There is an important aspect of social exclusion that occurs with

workers in physically demanding jobs in the agricultural sector; as they approach age 40 and their physical abilities start to decline, their labor options are reduced. Employers prefer to contract younger workers with more energy and strength and a generally higher educational level and perhaps (if they are job-seeking migrants) higher motivation. Bit by bit, older workers are displaced and end up moving to other regions as seasonal harvest workers. This starts them on a spiral of underemployment and declining income that leads to increased impoverishment and social exclusion. The case of Coopetulga, formed in 1971 in San Ramón (Costa Rica), is an eloquent response to this phenomenon. The partners in this cooperative, former coffee harvesters who had lost their jobs because of age, organized to purchase (through a rural loan fund) a small coffee farm—14 hectares of very broken land. They created their own employment even though the youngest was almost 50 years old. For more than 20 years, they resolved their economic problems through the cooperative as their children grew up. Then, when the land became insufficient for the growing population, the children sold it; the struggle for employment and against poverty had been a success, without state assistance.

### **BREAKING THE POWER OF CLIENTELISM**

Morais's organizational training model is based upon a theory and practice of cooperation and solidarity. As the training progresses, a climate of confidence is created among the members of the organization and then with the social surroundings with which the organization's members share interests. In this sense, the experiment cannot be said to be neutral. Beyond generating a technical capacity that enables groups to run organizations autonomously, it produces from the outset a cooperative and solidarity-minded organization that grasps those values in practice by experiencing their results. It is not a teaching of values through sermons, ethics lessons, or good advice as dispensed by development agencies. This type of organization, producing cooperation and social confidence, is an important contributor to the formation of social capital and civic culture. Indeed, Hondupalma in Honduras, made up of a series of cooperatives with 1,800 former agricultural workers and controlling 23.5 percent of the land dedicated to African palm cultivation in the country (Erazo, 2000: 65), shares many elements with the industrial districts of northeastern Italy, perhaps the best-known regional example of the formation of social capital.

Organizational and management training familiarizes groups and communities with the handling of a very powerful instrument—autonomous

organization—that permits them to reach goals that were previously inaccessible. This ability empowers the group and raises its aspirations and self-esteem. It first erodes and then destroys the mental models of dependency and passivity that are generated by social relations of domination between classes or groups. Organization, for those who participate in it, creates a new life cycle that opens new perspectives. Increased self-esteem is reflected not just in motivation to learn to read and write, as is the case with “popular education” programs, but in a dynamic process of organizational empowerment that raises the perceptions and self-valuations of all group members.

In this process, clientelist relations do not necessarily disappear, but from the outset they are transformed: the quality of dependence is gradually eroded. Although such relations may appear to persist for a long time, levels of dependence decline as the abilities and possibilities of the group or enterprise increase. The group, enterprise, or organized community is transformed into a proactive actor, with greater abilities to resolve its problems on its own. This is a systemic change that impacts the vicious circle of dependence by empowering groups and communities as it weakens dependence and passivity.

From the very start of the training experience, traditional passivity is broken and dependency and impotence are shaken. The clientelist relation can be maintained in institutions and politics only on the basis of a qualitative change—a new relation that permits autonomy in the internal management of the group and stimulates its growth. Anything that might restrict its autonomy would no longer fit—the profound antagonisms that would be generated would lead to a profound rupture. In any event, even if the clientelist relation is maintained for strategic or tactical reasons, a process is set in motion that leads to an irreversible rupture with classic dependence and an increase in the abilities, aspirations, and autonomy of the organized groups or enterprises. And as the number of autonomous organizations grows, the rupture is deepened.

The experiment in mass organizational training promoted by Morais on several continents and in different institutional contexts and fundamentally sustained by popular organizations themselves constitutes an important topic of study in the social sciences and an obligatory reference point for development theories. From this perspective, it is an object of special attention for students of clientelism as a modality of domination, particularly for its ability to empower the excluded and break relations of passivity and dependence. Above all, the experiment is of interest because of the possibility of generalizing its achievements as a generator of the civic culture and social capital that are indispensable for the generation of employment and income and for national development.

## NOTE

1. According to de Vries (1997), "The 034 Program . . . was funded by USAID. Its wider objective was that of restructuring the then prevailing pattern of institutional-beneficiary relationship in Costa Rica by strengthening the operational capacity of the IDA. It started in 1980 and ended in 1987. The 034 Program included the following components: (1) Agricultural asset redistribution, which included the establishment of three settlements in the Atlantic zone, in formerly invaded haciendas. (2) Increased tenure security, which involved cadastral and titling activities in a 160,000-hectare area of the northern part of the Atlantic zone. (3) Strengthened IDA participation, which included introducing a data management system for activities such as adjudication, credit, titling beneficiaries, and program evaluation. The total budget of the 034 Program consisted of \$9,500,000, out of which \$3 million were destined as a revolving credit fund. . . . The 'style' of the program was distinctively top-down: it was predominantly directed to the enforcement of state presence in order to regain political initiative in the region."

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