The politics of civil society building: European private aid agencies and democratic transitions in Central America

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Citation for published version (APA):

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In early November 1998, just before this book went to press, hurricane Mitch passed through Central America. Tropical storms and heavy rain wrought destruction and despair throughout the region. Especially in Nicaragua and Honduras the human tragedy was enormous, leaving over 25,000 casualties, nearly two million homeless and considerable areas destroyed by floods and buried under mud. Suddenly, Central America was back in the headlines of the international press, after an absence of nearly a decade. The international donor community responded quickly with large emergency relief operations, while governments and multilateral institutions postponed debt service obligations in order to facilitate the reconstruction of these highly indebted countries.

As with most natural disasters that have struck the Central American countries in the past, the poorest layers of society were most affected. But the difference with earlier earthquakes and hurricanes is that these countries are no longer ruled by military regimes. Civil society has become better organised and the new (civilian) governments have been made more accountable to their citizens. However, democratic rule still remains fragile, not least because the level of poverty and social inequality is still very high. The inflow of additional international aid can possibly contribute to keeping the process of democratic transition on track and prevent a return to the decades of polarisation and deteriorating impoverishment. Fortunately, there are also lessons that can be learned from the recent past when international solidarity with the Central American people in their struggle against authoritarian rule flourished.

This study examines how European private aid agencies have contributed to democratic transition in these countries and what lessons can be learned for future policies to confront social injustice. It is the product of innumerable encounters in Europe and Latin America with people who have shaped and sharpened my thinking about social justice, political transformation and the search for alternative strategies. Those who were interviewed for this study are listed in the last section of the book, but several others deserve to be specially mentioned here. The person who encouraged me to start this research in the first place was Daniela Mangelschots, a Belgian solidarity worker living in Nicaragua and Honduras, with whom I shared many long and inspiring discussions. Another source of inspiration was Víctor González, a Salvadoran sociologist with whom I coordinated the initial stage of the fieldwork as part of a TNI-sponsored research project. Víctor’s death in 1993 and Daniela’s sudden dying in 1995 left a great emptiness. The book is dedicated to these two special compañeros, in memory of
their commitment to the struggle for social justice in Central America.

I am grateful to many others who provided key support and advice, among them Wilson Campos and the staff of ASOCODE, John Nielsen and the staff of IBIS-Denmark, Abelardo Morales, Rolando Rivera, Isabel Román, Danuta Sacher, Carlos Sojo, Edelberto Torres Rivas and the staff of FLACSO (Costa Rica); Xabier Gorostiaga, Finn Hansen, Els van Poppel, Jesper Ravn, Ivana Rios and the staff of CRIES, Welvin Romero, Klaus-Dieter Tangermann, Martha Thompson (Nicaragua); Deborah Barry and the staff of PRISMA, Stefan Deelker, Dorte Ellehammer, Ina Eriksson, Alfonso Goitia, Merete Hansen, Arnd ’Paolo’ Luers, Allan Martell, Edgar Palacios and the staff of CDPN, René Ramos, Karin Urschel (El Salvador); Doris Meliza Cardozo, Jorge Irias and the staff of CODEH, Ineke Jansen, Piet Schuijt, Carlos Talavera, Xiomara Ventura (Honduras); Hans Peter Buvollen, Maribel Carrera, John Contier, Manolo García, Rachel Garst, Carmen Rosa de León, Alberto Mazariuegos and the staff of FUNDADIGO, Oscar Maldonado, Amanda Rodas, Mario Silvestre, Ulrik Spanne, Helmer Velásquez and the staff of CONGOOP (Guatemala); Xavier Declercq, Monique Muntingh, Nan Valckx (Belgium); Hans Peter Dejgaard, Gitte Hermansen (Denmark); Henny Helmich (France); Klaus Linsenmeier, Barbara Lucas (Germany); Sally O’Neill (Ireland); Frank Amalric (Italy); Theo Bouma, Chris Bransz, Henk Dielis, Kees Hudig, Dineke van den Oudenalder, Karel Roos, Holke Wierema, and the library staff of CEDLA and the Royal Tropical Institute (the Netherlands); Vegard Bye (Norway); Christian Frères, Mariano Aguirre, José Antonio Sanahuja (Spain); Stephen Baranyi, Alun Burge, Mandy Macdonald and Pauline Martin (United Kingdom).

Research for this book was undertaken between 1990 and 1996 as part of several research projects at the Transnational Institute (TNI) in Amsterdam and the Political Science Department of the University of Amsterdam. I am grateful to TNI director Fiona Dove and Professor Gerd Junne of the International Relations section of the Political Science Department for their encouragement and for providing the conditions to facilitate the completion of the manuscript. Fieldwork in Central America and Europe was partly financed with grants from Buntstift, Christian Aid, NOVIB, SCIAF and Trocaire. Although these private aid agencies were aware that the research would critically examine their own activities, it is greatly appreciated that they never interfered in any stage of the project. The publication of the manuscript was supported with grants from the Jurriaanse Stichting, the Research Centre for International Political Economy (RECIPE) and the Social Sciences Faculty of the University of Amsterdam.

Fellows and colleagues of the Transnational Institute have been important sources of stimulation throughout the research process. Joel Rocamora and Anjali Sundaram encouraged me to continue my research on European private aid agencies from a Central American perspective. Marcos Arruda, Hanneke van Eldik Thieme, Jan Willem van der Raad, Jochen Hippler and Saul Landau gave me valuable input at the early stage of the research and the staff of the Amsterdam office provided an inspiring working environment. I would particularly like to
thank Martin Jelsma for his unconditional support at critical moments, and David Sogge for providing many ideas and resources in the framework of TNI's Private Aid Agencies project.

Discussions and encounters with other ‘NGO watchers’ at a number of international workshops and during private meetings were another source of inspiration. I would like to thank Mark Edelman, Mike Edwards, Alan Fowler, Martin Köhler, Laura Macdonald, Geraldine MacDonald, Stefan Mair, Maria Luz Ortega, Jenny Pearce, Laura Renshaw, Roger Riddell, Mark Robinson, John Saxby, Ian Smillie, Alison Van Rooy, Fons van der Velden, Frits Wils and Simon Zadek for giving valuable suggestions and exchanging (unpublished) manuscripts. The quality of the book was greatly improved by stimulating comments on draft chapters by Chris van der Borgh, Jean Carrière, Jolle Demmers, Alex Fernández, Gerd Junne, Hans van Heijningen, Barbara Hoogenboom, Martin Jelsma, Ans Kolk and David Sogge. The manuscript was edited and corrected for language by Lisa Chason. Jan van Arkel and Trees Vulto of International Books efficiently prepared the manuscript for publication.

The key source of stimulation throughout these years has been Alex Fernández Jilberto of the Political Science Department of the University of Amsterdam. He has become a close friend and never lost confidence in a positive outcome. I am also deeply grateful to my parents, and to my compañera Wilma den Uijl with whom I could share the encanto for Latin America. Experiencing the confidence, patience and commitment of all those who supported me over the past decade made the whole project a pleasant and rewarding undertaking. I hope their spirit also is reflected in the book.

Kees Biekart
Amsterdam
November 1998