Cover sheet

**The changing spaces of local governance in Nicaragua:**

**navigating between contention, collaboration and cooption?**

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**Abstract**

This article considers the new spaces for the participation of civil society organisations (CSOs) in local governance that have emerged in Nicaragua between 2000 and 2009, and how government and CSOs interact in these spaces. It discusses the significant changes that have taken place in Nicaraguan local governance during this period, and highlights the challenges for CSOs to engage with these spaces at different points in time. It finds that grassroots CSOs in Managua that based their engagement with the Bolaños government through these spaces on citizenship have been drawn into a more clientelist relationship with Ortega’s government.

**Key words: governance, participation, civil society, citizenship, autonomy**

**Introduction**

The proliferation of new spaces for citizen engagement in policy processes around the world – and particularly in Latin America, has been widely documented and debated (Cornwall & Coelho 2004, Delamaza et al 2006, Spink et al. 2009). These ‘new democratic spaces’ (Cornwall & Coelho 2004) or ‘new governance spaces’ (Taylor 2007) are found at the interface between state and society and, according to Cornwall & Coelho (2007), are situated not in the public sphere, or in the ambit of the state, but in a distinct arena, the ‘participatory sphere’. They are spaces of contestation as well as collaboration, and can become ‘crucibles for a new politics of public policy’ (*op cit*, p2). Yet, there are only a few examples of where the expansion of participatory governance spaces has enabled the emergence of new political actors – Heller (2001) cites participatory budgeting in Porto Alegre and participatory planning in Kerala. Cornwall & Coelho (2007) point to the gap between the legal and technical apparatus and the reality of exclusion. In this article, we argue that new governance spaces in Nicaragua provide political opportunities for civil society organisations (CSOs) to extend ‘the practice of democracy beyond the sporadic use of the ballot box’ (Cornwall 2004:2).

However, if the promise attached to such spaces - of greater state accountability and responsiveness, and of the democratisation of state-society relations (Heller 2001) – is to be realised, certain conditions need to be in place. Cornwall (2004) argues that there are four requisite factors: that the spaces have been won through popular demand, that the governance landscape includes a ruling party disposition to support popular participation, that people mobilise, and that the state bureaucracy is sufficiently resourced and coordinated. We argue that these spaces also need to be premised on citizenship rights and autonomous engagement (Taylor 2006). We consider how local governance spaces emerged in Nicaragua during the Bolaños administration (2000-06), and how these spaces have changed with the return to power of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (FSLN) in 2007. We argue that while the spaces in the Bolaños period were limited in terms of real democratic engagement, they catalysed the civic activism of ‘autonomous and competent actors’ (Dryzek 2000:29). The basis upon which people engage in governance spaces is of fundamental importance.

This article draws on research which explored how CSOs experience participation in local governance spaces in Managua, Nicaragua. We use social movement theory to conceptualise these governance spaces as ‘political opportunity structures’ and look for evidence that CSO participants are accessing public decision-making structures through new channels, and forming new alliances for influence (Tarrow 1998). We also consider whether participants are ‘extending the practice of democracy’ through these spaces, or if clientelist relations endure.

We draw on empirical data gathered from national interviews and from a case study site in Managua, to analyse how local governance spaces emerge and change, the opportunities for CSOs to participate and their experiences, and the extent to which they are able to maintain their autonomy and participate as citizens rather than as clients or users.

The first section sets out the methodology of the research, and the theories that frame the research questions. The second section discusses governance and state-civil society relations in Nicaragua. The third section explores the case study and considers how claims based on citizenship rights may contribute to the democratising potential of governance spaces. The final section discusses the implications for state-civil society relations and autonomous CSO participation in governance in the current context in Nicaragua.

**The research**

The study reported here[[1]](#footnote-1) was carried out between 2005 and 2008, and explored how opportunities and challenges for CSO participation in new governance spaces were experienced in each context. In Nicaragua, the case study site selected was District III of the capital city Managua. Up to 20 interviews were conducted with national and local stakeholders. Following a mapping of ‘governance spaces’[[2]](#footnote-2) in the site, six NGOs engaged in grass-roots work were selected from the fields of community development, primary health care and education. Selection was informed by the need to provide a range in terms of size, formality, maturity, membership/public orientation and involvement in policy-making and service delivery but balanced by the need to focus on a specific site in order to explore the significance of place, political culture and a more nuanced set of historical relationships between state and civil society.

Within each organisation at least two semi-structured interviews were conducted with up to six people involved in the organisation, as Board members, CEO, frontline employees or volunteers. The interviews covered: participant and organisational profile, views of the non-governmental sector and governance, experience of governance spaces, organisational consequences of participation, individual experiences of membership and evaluating governance spaces. Between two and three ‘inquiry groups’ were held at different stages of the interview process involving up to six participants from the selected organisations, as well as stakeholders from the local state and the local NGO infrastructure. These were used to discuss and further develop emergent findings and gather intelligence about local developments. Additional feedback sessions were held with all the participating organisations and also with those involved in particular governance spaces.

*Theoretical ideas*

In this research, we have interpreted ‘local governance spaces’ as cross-sector participatory forums, partnerships or other spaces, at the local or sub-local level - the object of which is to work collaboratively with government. Our understanding of governance space is developed from governance theory, and the theorisation around participation and citizenship carried out principally by Cornwall and colleagues at the Institute of Development Studies. Governance theory offers us a way of understanding how and why traditional governmental power is now dispersed beyond and within the state. Newman (2005:4) for example argues that ‘[t]his dispersal of state power opens up new ways in which citizens can engage in the politics of localities and regions and participate in “project politics” on specific issues’. Some of the leading UK scholars of governance have described current trends as ‘governing without government’, engaging not just in influencing policy but in the business of government (Rhodes 1997; Stoker, 1998). But critics have suggested that CSOs still feel marginalised in the new governance spaces that have been created (Taylor 2007). Indeed, this vision of governance in which citizens co-produce public goods in collaboration with the state does not fit in the context of neo-liberal reforms. Across Latin America since the 1990s, structural adjustment and poverty reduction strategies have rolled back the state, creating a vacuum in the provision of basic needs which require CSOs to substitute the state as it retreats from its responsibilities, rather than to co-produce. Governments are also turning to forms of participatory governance as a way of mobilising and channelling grassroots participation in and support for government policies, and to shore up their legitimacy (Panizza 2007). This however is a state-centric analysis, which ignores the democratising potential of ‘movements from below’, as Sara Motta argues (2006). In Motta’s view, power is mediated at a variety of spatial levels, and hegemonic power is contested at all these levels through ‘the development of practices, imaginaries and projects by the popular classes in [Latin American] society’ which contest the boundaries of liberal democracy and the market economy (2006:904).

An expression of such practices and imaginaries are the ‘popular spaces’ forged from below out of protest or in order for people to produce and coordinate their own services for their communities, as distinct from institutional spaces for citizen engagement provided by the state. Cornwall (2004:1) draws on Lefebvre’s use of the concept of space to bring greater richness to conceptualisations of arenas for public participation: ‘Thinking about participation as a spatial practice highlights the relations of power and constructions of citizenship that permeate any site for public engagement’. In practice, while an institutionalised governance space may guarantee the participation civic actors, their participation can be undermined by the unequal power relations that continue to govern the society in which the spaces are embedded.

Invited spaces may be technocratic and exclusionary or simply pay lip-service to a legal or donor requirement to involve citizens. Popular spaces may struggle to establish a channel through which to influence decision-makers. What gives both types of space potential as sites of democratic engagement is if participants see themselves as citizens rather than as beneficiaries or clients (Taylor 2006, Cornwall 2007). Who participates, and on what basis? Taylor (2006) finds that in Latin America, clientelist practices continue to thrive today in the form of neo-populism, which guarantees people access to resources on the basis of ‘client-ship’ rather than citizenship. In this article we look at the drivers for the emergence of governance spaces in Nicaragua, and consider the basis on which people are participate in them. What possibilities are there for new governance spaces in Nicaragua to be sites of democratic engagement?

A second line of enquiry has been framed by social movement theory. The internal and external pressures driving changes in legislation and even constitutional rights that frame citizens’ relationship with the state, can be understood as creating political opportunity structures; new channels of access to public decision-making (Tarrow 1998). Political opportunity structures emerge through contention and a temporary hiatus in the hegemonic power of the state. Social movement theoryholds that political opportunities emerge as the state undergoes [governance] shifts: ‘when institutional access opens, rifts appear within elites, allies become available, and state capacity for repression declines, challengers find opportunities to advance their claims’ (Tarrow 1998:71). Our research framework conceptualises the new governance spaces as political opportunities for CSOs – whilst acknowledging that in practice, they will not always be so. Thus we hypothesise that these spaces may offer; institutional provisions for participation, new external resources, new alliances, and realignments that can bring new groups to power. However, the dominant perspective of political process theory, from which the concept of political opportunity structures (POS) emerged, is structuralist. Della Porta and Diani (1999) and later Jasper (2005) provide a critique of POS on the grounds that there needs to be greater recognition of agency and ‘strategic choice’ exercised by social movement actors. There are struggles for autonomy where social movements struggle to gain or maintain their independence from political parties, and for protagonism between organised civil society and political parties, where ‘NGOs’ are viewed as competition to political parties. These struggles are highly complex - as Mitlin *et al.* observe, NGOs themselves have emerged over recent decades from relations with social movements, political parties and religious institutions (Mitlin *et al*. 2007, Bebbington 2004).

These perspectives on state-civil society relations allow us to develop the concept of the agency of collective actors, i.e. that they are not confined to responding to shifts in political structures. Jasper argues that social activists make strategic choices ‘within a complex set of cultural and institutional contexts that shape the players themselves, the options perceived, the choices made from among them, and the outcomes’ (2005:5). This resonates with Newman’s (2005) analysis of governance as a *process* whereby the boundaries of the public sphere are renegotiated and new actors and new possibilities for agency emerge. In this process, CSOs in governance spaces will need to navigate the tensions between conflicting incentives and aims, modes of action and between conflicting accountabilities and sources of legitimacy. An activist may have to navigate between a path that promotes democratic pluralism, and another that is more likely to bring economic benefits to the community but which is less open in democratic terms - a dilemma faced by social movement organisations in Nicaragua today. Given the conditions of poverty in most Nicaraguan communities, the power of neo-populist clientelism with its promise of immediate material benefit for the faithful, is likely to override people’s desire to uphold citizenship practices, with their more intangible or long-term benefits (Taylor 2006). To what extent do governance spaces offer opportunities for *autonomous* CSO participation in Nicaragua? How has the change in government changed the shape of these spaces and the kinds of choices available? The next section describes the evolution of state-civil society relations and the emergence of governance spaces in Nicaragua.

**The bitter dynamics of government/CSO relations**

State-civil society relations in Nicaragua have undergone a series of profound changes since the 1970s, as political power has swung from right to left, with different parts of the sector allied to successive and opposing governments. Many of the contemporary CSOs that participate in, or are excluded from, new governance spaces emerge from a complex history of contestation, mobilisation against, and at times, collaboration with the state. Somoza’s regime repressed autonomous civil organisations and promoted clientelist mechanisms. The grassroots resistance that ousted the dictatorship expanded their practice of organisation during the 1980s, imbuing it with revolutionary ideology often with Christian foundations. Participation was underpinned for many people with the ideas of liberation theology, which were promoted through the Christian Base Communities (CEB). Social movements held strong values of social justice and emancipation promoted through literacy and popular education. The shared experience of sacrifice and loss during the revolutionary and Contra conflicts developed strong solidarity links within and between communities in Nicaragua (Bayard de Volo, 2006). Combined, these organisations developed a sense of civil actors being key to national development, and of the rights of the grassroots.

The FSLN lost power in 1989, and the following decade was marked by a series of right wing governments, IMF intervention, rolling back of the state, civil conflict and increasing political bipolarism. Macro-economic structural adjustment imposed by the IMF was accompanied by a rapid increase in NGOs to deal with growing poverty and unemployment, and to channel the surge in foreign aid. International donors have a huge impact on civil society; international aid represents 21% of gross national product and CSOs are highly dependent on foreign aid which represents 90% of most organisations’ budgets. This dependency has given rise to what has been described as the ‘NGO-isation of civil society (Alvarez 1996, 2009) which undermines CSO capacity for representation and accountability to their social bases and encourages a focus on projects rather than processes. It has however increased their capacity to bring concrete proposals to the table for dialogues with government and donors (Clarke, 2007).

While the 1990s saw many social organisations become increasingly dependent on donor funding, it was also a period of struggle for political autonomy. The Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Community Movement) invested enormous time and resources into its process of *reconceptualización*: a lengthy process of debating the nature of its relationship with the FSLN and how it wished to assert its autonomy as a movement of community activists (Coda International, 1997). Civil society organisations were set up by ex-public sector employees from the Sandinista era, many of whom were critical of the party leadership and lack of internal democracy, especially in the women’s movement. These organisations have lobbied for greater government transparency and accountability, and the institutionalisation of the spaces for citizen participation guaranteed by law. Their voice and proposals have had national and international impact especially through the Network for Local Development and the Civil Coordinator[[3]](#footnote-3). Their leadership however – a number of whom joined the breakaway political party Movimiento Renovador Sandinista[[4]](#footnote-4) - have been targeted by the government since the FSLN’s return to power, with a systematic campaign to discredit them with accusations of corruption and with attempts to control or cut off their funding from international donors.

Civil society activism in Nicaragua needs also to be understood in the context of the pact between the socialist-leaning FSLN and the liberal right-leaning Partido Liberal Constitucional (PLC), which has distributed the state institutions between both parties (Parliament, Supreme Court, Electoral Council, Contraloria and Prosecution), distorted party politics since 2000 and has had a deep impact on state-civil society relations. The result is both weak institutions and widespread cynicism in the population towards political leaders – though at the same time recognising the need to stay on the bandwagon in order to benefit from political patronage. The party system lacks internal, democratic primary-style elections and parliamentary candidates are presented to voters on closed lists of candidates hand-picked by the party leadership. Such elements reinforce the concentration of power in the party elite, personal loyalty based on political patronage and the lack of accountability to the voters (Guadamuz 2006).

In large part, the existing governance spaces are the product of CSO activism. In 2001 the sector’s extensive political advocacy work paid off and the Law of Civic Participation was approved, which guarantees citizens the right to participate in decision-making about the design and implementation of public policies. The Bolaños administration (PLC 2000-06) saw an opening up of opportunities for civil society engagement with the state when the government distanced itself from the corrupt practices of its PLC predecessor, but in so doing lost its party backing in the Assembly and the isolated president turned to international donors and civil society to shore up his legitimacy instead. This constituted an important political opportunity for CSOs, as the government relaxed its control of citizen participation. The Law was finally regulated in 2003, when the Municipal Development Committee (MDC) was recognised as the principle and mandatory institutional space for local government-civil society dialogue. Even so, the municipal development committees were not uniformly created; 15% of local authorities by 2006 had failed to set up the committee, and only 34% of MDCs had created a commission to monitor the municipal budget, one if its core functions (Prado, 2008).

At national level there is a Participation and Concertation System (CONPES), a space which was achieved through the extensive lobbying of autonomous civil society organisations under the umbrella of the Civil Coordinator, for the purpose of ‘establishing mechanisms for relations among the government, civil society, the private sector and the international community for defining the objectives and priorities of public policies, laws and strategic development plans’ (Gobierno de Nicaragua, 2004).

With the return of the Sandinista government at the end of our fieldwork period, its vociferous rejection of ‘NGOs’ (as opposed to ‘popular organisations’) and lack of interest in dialogue with organised civil society has significantly changed the nature of opportunities for CSOs to engage with the state. CONPES has now been sidelined by the National Council for Communication and Citizenship, with the President’s wife Rosario Murillo at its helm. This Council directs the work of the neighbourhood and municipal Citizens’ Power Committees (CPCs). The CPCs are mechanisms for grassroots organisation and distribution of state resources, which have been set up through FSLN local structures, and participation in them is mediated by the local party secretaries. In many localities, the MDCs continue to function, but recent research suggests that the CPCs are either substituting or working in parallel to pre-existing governance spaces (Prado, 2008). These new spaces for citizen engagement with government represent a challenge to the autonomy of grassroots organisations.

**Local governance spaces in Managua: a vacuum?**

Managua is the capital of Nicaragua, and home to over one quarter of the population. It has been divided into administrative districts, and the mayor names a delegate to each district. There has been no decentralisation of powers or resources to these districts, however. The Law of Civic Participation enables grassroots organisations to obtain legal recognition as resident associations through the municipal government,although such status only applies in the municipality in question. Our research found that in practice the mayor’s office had not responded to requests from many CSOs, it is assumed for party political reasons. Nor has it created the MDC - which is required by law as the official forum for local state-civil society dialogue and for participation in budget consultation processes. 85% of the 153 municipalities of the country have MDCs, and so Managua is a particular, and as the capital city, highly visible exception. This leaves a vacuum in terms of institutional space for citizens’ organisations to engage autonomously and systematically with the local state. As a local councillor observed:

*a weakness is that it [the local authority] doesn’t have a space where community groups can interact on a permanent basis with their councillors and the mayor … the most direct coordination between the Council and grassroots organisations is around the [annual] budget.*

But even this participation at the *cabildos* (public meetings to discuss the budget) is considered to be tardy and ineffective. Municipal Law requires these meetings to be prefaced by a series of participatory events in which local organisations participate in debating and drawing up the city’s investment and budget plans, but these events are rarely provided.

There are several other invited spaces for CSO participation in District III. The Health Council emerged through pressure from civil actors and with recourse to the Law of Citizen Participation which guarantees citizens’ right to participate in health decision-making, as well as national health policy which requires citizen participation. The Health Council is coordinated by the District III Delegation of the municipal government, but in practice the directors of the Health Centres often assume this role. It carries out activities such as clean-up and fumigation campaigns, led from the City Council in collaboration with community organisations that mobilise resident participation. The public sector members are delegated by national ministries, and include the local Health Centres, and representatives from the Civil Defence Director, the Ministry of Education, the Water Company, the Ministry of the Family and the National Police. The CSOs that participate are the Martin Luther King Association, Peace and Third World Association, Community Board of Works and Progress (JCOP), Nicaraguan Communal Movement (Managua), AHIMSA, Red Cross Nicaragua, Si Mujer Foundation, Alliance of Organisations of the Southwest Periphery, and the Mutual Health Association of Street Vendors. Participants described a lack of continuity of delegates, irregular meetings, insufficient notice of meetings or circulation of information, invitations or contracts given out only to organisations of political affinity - adding up to a lack of commitment by state officials – individual and institutional - to citizen participation.

There are several further governance spaces which meet more sporadically and are not discussed in detail in this article. These include the district level disaster prevention committee (participants include national public agencies and local branches of the Fire Department, Red Cross and the Communal Movement), a committee for prevention of youth violence, a social network for young people at risk, the district commission for children and young people, and an inter-institutional consultative council.

The majority of the civil society organisations which are active in the governance spaces of Managua’s District III are of Sandinista heritage. Only one of the grassroots organisations is aligned with the Liberal Constitutional Party (PLC), the Communal Boards of Works and Progress (JCOP). This community network was set up by the PLC in the mid-1990s in an effort to compete for control of community organisation which was dominated by organisations historically linked to the FSLN.

Despite their shortcomings, the importance of these spaces is recognised by all their members, and particularly by the health authorities, as the director of the Managua SILAIS points out:

*if we didn’t work like this the tasks or plans that the ministry implements would never get done; of course we bear the great responsibility…such as the vaccination campaigns, the hygiene and clean-up days… but if the brigade workers didn’t do their part in the barrios I believe we wouldn’t be able to complete many of the actions, above all in promotion, prevention and community participation.*

The role of CSOs and ‘community participation’ in delivering public health policy is recognised by state partners. The CSOs however are pushing for a more proactive role as citizens with rights and responsibilities. This is a move that pushes the boundaries of their accepted role of mobilising the health brigades. They introduced social auditing of health services in the San Judas neighbourhood: ‘*We did a little survey at the San Judas health centre to see people’s opinion of the care they are getting, and we also did it in Altagracia but the health centre director told us she was going to call the police’*.

*Filling the vacuum: the creation of a ‘popular space’*

In 2004, a group of community organisations, tired of lobbying for an MDC to be set up, formed an alliance to increase their potential to influence the local state and to promote collaborative working between their organisations and the state. This ‘Alliance of Civil Organizations of the Southwest Periphery of Managua’ became an alternative or ‘popular’ governance space, and defines itself as such, as an arena from which to engage with government:

*This alliance of community organisations was born of the need to find arenas for civic participation and to motivate government officials … to enable actions hammered out among citizens to improve local living conditions’* (Letter to the Council, 2006)

Initially, the Association Martin Luther King (AMLK) was the driving force and established links with the District III Communal Movement (MCN), the Sandino Memorial Community Association and the Voluntary Municipal Development Brigade: organisations that shared a political ideology and interest in community development. Later, CSOs of San Judas and surrounding barrios such as the Christian Base Communities (CEB), the San Judas Association, the Communal Boards of Works and Progress (JCOP), Sisters of the Ascension and others were invited. As an MCN respondent explained, *‘There were many community organisations in and around San Judas. We figured that by joining forces, we could bring about institutional changes through channelling the views of the communities directly to the mayor’s office, the Education Ministry and other ministries’*.

In addition to creating their own space from which to establish dialogue with government organisations, members of the Alliance attend meetings of other spaces, notably the health council and the disaster prevention council. As an MCN activist notes, the fundamental work of the Alliance has been to *‘make coherent proposals to the local government, MINSA [Ministry of Health], MECD [Ministry of Education] and the Police, to follow up on the execution of the municipal budget, to evaluate the functioning of the district delegation and the attention it provides to the communities.’*

The Alliance used their new platform to develop a coordinated approach to civic activism: the ‘social audit of municipal investments’. As a CEB activist described: ‘*We have organised oversight committees in the sectors where municipal government projects are being developed, so that they can see if they are really using resources appropriately’*. Social auditing has not been looked on kindly by the municipal authorities, as an AMLK activist explained: ‘*we once went to see a bridge construction; the sign said it cost 150,000 córdobas [US$1 = approximately 18.50 córdobas], so we grabbed three building contractors and said do up a budget. They all came in at between 80 and 90,000 córdobas, so we informed the District 3 Delegate of this. The price we paid for it was that the delegate now virtually refuses to see us in his office’*.

The Alliance remained undaunted by the lack of cooperation from local government. They used the Law of Citizen Participation and other legislation to legitimise their actions in terms of citizens’ rights to participate, and to be informed on how municipal budgets are spent. The popular space of the Alliance became a space for developing new political practices and the reconfiguring of citizen engagement. Citizens became proposers and scrutinisers of public policy, rather than beneficiaries and ‘mano de obra’.

When government policy to promote Citizens Power Committees was made public, The Alliance put itself forward as a pluralist, inclusive space from which to host the CPC for District III. Its proposal was turned down, and a CPC was set up by the local FSLN leadership. As a result, the activities of the Alliance have stalled. The majority of the activists in the Alliance are members of the FSLN, and while they continue to work in their community organisations, they also participate as individuals in the CPC.

**Analysis**

Before the introduction of the CPCs, the new governance spaces in Managua were limited since the Municipal Development Committee had not been created. There were indications however, as we have documented in this article, that the health council and popular space created by the Alliance were developing as spaces for democratic engagement. These are spaces that emerged through local activism backed up with recourse to legal frameworks, a process which may be less prone to clientelist practices (Mitlin et al. 2007, Delamaza et al. 2006). The CSOs active in these spaces were predominantly Sandinista, but these organisations were also actively striving to broaden participation and involve non-Sandinista grassroots organisations. They had interpreted their role as citizens’ organisations to be one of proposal and of oversight, as well as of delivery of local policies.

The political shift to the left with the return of the FSLN to power in 2007 was welcomed by many Sandinistas. It brought with it a long overdue challenge to the neo-liberal paradigm, with economic support from Venezuela which allowed Ortega to flout IMF recommendations and to increase public spending on anti-poverty (Hambre Cero) and literacy campaigns (Yo Sí Puedo), and to increase public sector wages. The pro-poor policies of the FSLN administration have a democratic cost however, since they use partisan structures for their redistributive mechanisms. Newman’s (2005) analysis of governance as a *process* whereby the boundaries of the public sphere are renegotiated is useful for thinking about the impact of the FSLN government on local governance. The governance spaces created by FSLN are used to channel resources; which provides the state with its own mechanism for transferring resources to the poor, but which increases clientelism. While the previous government often excluded CSOs altogether from governance, the CPCs exclude according to party affiliation. The public sphere thus becomes an extension of the political party.

The pluralism and inclusion practiced by the Alliance appear as brief moments in an otherwise powerful tradition of clientelism and political patronage, further entrenched by the political polarisation that has endured since the Somoza years. The organisations of the Alliance were struggling against this divisive political culture in their attempts to work together with other social organisations in the community:

*There are still residues of political polarisation that have hugely divided us … it is inconceivable that someone with an ideological-political thinking different from mine could work with me* (community leader).

The reframing of local governance spaces should not come as a surprise. Pearce argues that while the Latin American public sphere has developed, its evolution has been inhibited by entrenched traditions of clientelism and patronage politics (Pearce, 2004; see also Cunill, 1997). The collective action of the 1960s and 70s challenged the repressive state and constitutes a counter hegemonic force but one which is inherently ambiguous about democracy and it remains a crucial challenge for CSOs to develop autonomous ways of working with the state (*ibid.*). Pearce suggests that profound changes in political culture will need to take place before pluralist participatory institutions can effectively complement Latin American representative democracies. In Nicaragua, the institutional (and pluralist) participatory governance spaces that had emerged to a great extent through persistent civil society lobbying, have been sidelined by the partisan CPCs in many municipalities, although this is not uniform. In some municipalities where the Municipal Development Committee was well-established and seen to work well – in particular in the north of the country, in Matagalpa and Somoto – this space continues to be the key space for collaboration between local government and civil society actors, and the CPC is taken little into account (Prado 2008, Ramos 2008).

*Constructing citizenship through participation*

An important resource for Nicaraguan CSOs in their struggle for autonomy and social justice are the legal frameworks provided by UN declarations and through national law. A sense of citizenship based in civil, political and welfare rights underpins the strategies of the CSOs in this research. Organisations like AMLK grew up defending the rights of shanty-town dwellers; Si Mujer defends the rights of women to reproductive health. They founded their struggles on human rights and fostered political consciousness in ordinary people who discovered their own capacity to organise and change the world, and in some cases, ‘to question both the rhetoric of equality emanating from parties (especially those of the left) and the supposedly superhuman capacity of god-like populists’ (Taylor, 2006:221). Basing their demands in citizen rights, the mainly Sandinista organisations in District III did not hesitate to challenge their FSLN council and demand greater accountability.

The space created by the Alliance reframes participation in terms of rights, creating a normative framework within which their interaction with government can take place (Molyneux and Lazar 2003,Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi 2004). The focus on citizenship grounds what is often criticised as an abstract rights-based approach within the local political reality (Molyneux and Lazar 2003, Duni et al. 2009). Most of the CSOs that we have observed combine their participation in the new governance spaces with protests, marches and other forms of direct action, to challenge the state over issues such as the insufficient provision of electricity and water (subject to frequent cuts), increases in the cost of public transport, failure to devolve the constitutional 6% of the national budget to the universities, and the penalisation of therapeutic abortion. As an MCN activist in District III explains:

*As a principle, citizen security for us is a human right and it is an obligation of the state to guarantee it. The situation would be better if the communities worked together more with the relevant institutions with an approach that is preventive rather than repressive*.

Mobilising around rights, can be a strategy to demand greater accountability of the state towards citizens, and also to propose a way of engaging and collaborating which enables a positive transformation of power relations (Cornwall & Nyamu-Musembi, 2004). The CSOs in this research emphasised the importance of training on laws and issues relating to civic participation:

*To strengthen that space [the Alliance], we said that our colleagues needed to be given the instruments … So we reviewed the law of participation, Law 40, Law 261, the arbitration of 261; we did that with support from the Civil Coordinator (community leader).*

These organisations do not identify themselves as ‘rights’ organisations, nor would they talk of a ‘rights-based approach’. As Bradshaw (2006:1339) found in her study of women’s groups in Nicaragua, they view rights as a tool that can help to challenge unequal power relations’.

The new Citizens’ Power Committees have set up a competing logic for participation. While the Citizen Participation Law was based on citizens’ rights, the CPCs engage people as clients through welfarist participation in programmes such as Zero Hunger. The discourse of the CPCs (based on the models of Khaddifi and Chavez) is that of power to the grassroots, and of direct influence and benefit to the citizen rather than intermediary organisations (especially NGOs). The government thus issued a wide ‘invitation’ for civic participation which bypasses existing ‘local governance spaces’ and attempts to re-organise state-civil society relations. The CPCs distribute state welfare resources (Hambre Cero, Usura Cero, Yo Sí Puedo, Casas para el Pueblo), and government departments now require a letter of approval from a CPC in order to consider any requests for resources. Government has thus been able to justify excluding CSOs from distributing donor resources for poverty reduction, through the discourse of grassroots democracy, thereby giving the government control of resources and credit for solving grassroots social problems. This discourse has also been used to justify its campaign against ‘NGOs’ which are labelled as reproducers of capitalist values, and attempts to neutralise the feminist and critical Sandinista NGOs which are questioning both the political and personal legitimacy of Daniel Ortega (Kampwith, 2008).

The governance landscape under Ortega’s administration reduces the opportunities for participation based on citizenship rights. The current FSLN government came to power partly through their decision to support religious doctrine over human rights, when they voted to outlaw therapeutic abortion and aligned themselves with the Catholic lobby. The strong collective action tradition of mobilising against the state is a critical counter-hegemonic force in Nicaragua which the FSLN has attempted to contain. In August 2008, the government began to send in riot police to break up public demonstrations, and the areas frequently occupied as protest points such as the roundabouts in Managua, were occupied by groups of ‘rezadores’ (people praying), under the direction of the FSLN, substituting the collective rights-based activism for individual faith-based action.

For many CSOs who have struggled to establish their independence from political parties and worked towards a more pluralist approach, the challenge of engaging with the CPCs heightens tensions around autonomy, dependency and democracy, and has elicited different responses within civil society. Now that participation in the CPCs is based on party affiliation rather than on citizenship, civil society has fractured into three groups. One group is those CSOs which are allied to the FSLN such as the National Workers Front, the MCN, the Union of Farmers and Ranchers and others. A second group is of those CSOs which maintain autonomy from the government and have a critical stance regarding freedom of citizen participation and organisation, such as the Civil Coordinator which brings together 630 CSOs and networks from across the country. In between these two positions sit those CSOs which try keep a balanced view, protect their own organisations and avoid direct criticism of government, preferring to collaborate (Serra, 2010).

The interface between civil and political society is complicated, and relationships between NGOs, social movements, political parties, religious institutions and international agencies as well as with the State are ones of varying degrees of *inter*dependence. Our research finds that CSOs are often characterised by a dependence on a ‘mother’ organisation; this is a result of the complex interwoven histories of community organisations, social movements and political parties and long-term dependence on international aid. A ‘mother’ organisation – a political party, a social movement, Church or INGO may act as an ‘anchor’ (Staggenborg 1988) or ‘docking point’ (Craig et al 2004) to help to maintain community movements when resources are constrained or when the political or social climate is unfavourable (see also Taylor 2003). Houtzager (2000) identifies ‘institutional hosts’ supporting smaller community organisations and movements in Brazil. But when this ‘mother’ organisation is the ruling political party, it can overwhelm and coopt autonomous civic action.

If such dependencies are the norm, then perhaps the question of autonomy needs to be reframed. Instead of seeking independence, autonomy could be about relations of mutual respect and democratic practice that cut across political party divisions as well as the state/non-governmental divide. While it is common within Nicaraguan society to find relations between organisations based in subordination (especially state-CSO relations), we can also find other more horizontal and democratic relations, for example the Alliance, and some civil society networks, which respect the autonomy of member organisations while sharing some common principles, founded on citizenship rights, which create the basis for collaboration (Serra, 2008). In the case of the Alliance, this had led to a more inclusive understanding of local democracy;

*Despite the fact that the Alliance was made up of democratic organisations close to a political party, party work did not prevail as a priority; there was no conflict over this and that’s how JCOP entered* (workshop with community leaders, District III).

This is a remarkable achievement in a culture of deep polarization between two political parties combined with clientelist practices that fuel the conviction that ‘either you’re with me, or you’re against me’. Organisations of the state are accustomed to relating to civil society through clientelist networks, and not as autonomous co-participants in governance, as illustrated by the following observation by a community leader: ‘*there is no political school either for officials or for us to try to make links or articulations without each one losing its own nature’*. The political school was, for a brief period, beginning to take form within these CSO networks and alliances, and continues on a national scale within the Civil Coordinator. The networks and organisations members of the Civil Coordinator developed a national Development Plan to present to presidential candidates in 2006. ‘The Nicaragua we Wish For 2007-2011’ argues for an inclusive approach to human development with redistribution of wealth and policies in place to protect the most vulnerable sectors. This proposal also calls for

The democratisation of power, which means opening up spaces and effective mechanisms for guaranteeing the informed participation of the citizenry, and of civil society organisations, in the definition, execution, auditing and evaluation of public policies, laws and budgets (Coordinadora Civil, 2006)

The Civil Coordinator maintains its critical stance and researches and publishes proposals to improve governance and combat poverty in Nicaragua. However, at the local level in Managua at least, the Alliance has become dormant with the migration of its predominantly Sandinista community leaders into the Citizens Power Committee. The fledgling democratic and collaborative space – for autonomous collaboration and a critical relationship with government at the local level – has been lost. There is evidence however that, in some municipalities, the CPCs are viewed simply as FSLN mechanisms, and the Comités de Desarrollo Municipal continue to be the key space for citizen participation in local policy processes (Prado 2008).

**Conclusion**

This article set out to explore two questions. First, how governance spaces have emerged and changed in Nicaragua over the last decade. And second, the terms on which CSOs engage in this spaces and whether they are able to maintain their autonomy. We have highlighted how the Citizens Power Committees (CPCs) introduced in 2007 have transformed the governance spaces available to community organisations. On one hand, they offer a huge opportunity for grassroots organisations to link into mechanisms that in theory, will take their voices straight to decision-makers in central government, and much needed resources are flowing to the grassroots. On the other hand, the work of the municipal development committees and the municipalisation movement prior to 2007 had strengthened capacity for dialogue and advocacy in both state and non-state actors. This experience was seen as an important advance in changing Nicaragua’s political culture from one of clientelism, contentious politics and political polarisation, towards a culture of greater pluralism, tolerance and collaboration across sectoral and party divides. It would appear that while they distribute urgently needed resources to poor communities, the CPCs are also undoing some democratic advances, and turning the clock back to polarisation and clientelism (Clarke, 2007).

The continued sway of clientelism in Nicaraguan political culture renders unrealistic the claim of ‘governance spaces’ to be sites of collaboration, where citizens engage in the politics of localities and co-produce solutions to local issues. During the Bolaños era, the democratic potential of these spaces was limited by technocratic and exclusionary procedures, and by the limited capacity of state partners to see leaders of community organisations as ‘competent and autonomous actors’ who could inform policy, rather than simply as gatekeepers to accessing free *mano de obra* (labour) in the community. In the current Ortega era, the local spaces for citizen engagement in governance make rhetorical claims of direct democracy, but in practice appear to be a powerful system for the distribution of patronage, in which the gatekeepers are FSLN cadre.

The governance spaces of the Bolaños era – some of which have been maintained by municipalities around the country, do offer potential for democratic engagement, where the basis for participation is that of citizenship, and not ‘client-ship’ (Taylor 2006). It was in many cases a long struggle for CSOs to be recognised on these terms, but resulted in greater legitimacy for the space and for the actors themselves, as grassroots activists had to learn to deliberate, to identify common issues across ideological divides, and to find areas of potential collaboration with authorities that despised them for ideological reasons. In the case of the Alliance in Managua, activists learnt how to ‘hammer out agreement’, and debate rules of engagement in the popular space they created. The legitimacy of the CPCs is in question. They are experienced as partisan mechanisms which are cynically exploited by some, valued as recognising the party faithful by others, and boycotted by others. The fact that they have been so strongly criticised by many CSOs, and that the pre-existing Municipal Development Committees continue to function in some parts of the country, suggests that Nicaraguans are not prepared to give up their hard-won citizenship and return to patronage politics wholesale.

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2. This was the term, following Cornwall (2004) and Gaventa (2004) that we used to describe partnerships and other forums for collaboration between government and NGOs. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This national network of community organisations, cooperatives, NGOs and networks was set up in 1998 as the Civil Coordinator for Emergency and Reconstruction (Coordinadora Civil para la Emergencia y Reconstrucción) to respond to the crisis caused by Hurricane Mitch. It later changed its name to Civil Coordinator. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. The FSLN succeeded in eliminating this political opponent in 2008 when it removed its legal status on the grounds that it did not have sufficient national presence. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)