

# **SOCIAL NETWORKS, SOCIAL CAPITAL, POPULAR ORGANIZATIONS, AND URBAN POVERTY: A RESEARCH NOTE<sup>1</sup>**

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## ***Introduction***

Focusing on networks, social capital, and popular organizations represents a positive view of people's capacity to overcome the debilitating constraints of urban poverty. Poverty may be rooted in market-generated inequalities, but the poor have the potential to mitigate these inequalities by individual strategies of self-help (networking), by using their social relationships to make up for their lack of human or material capital (the social capital approach), and by collective organization. We will review the research that explores this potential, but, first, we should note two possible limits to this community-centered perspective on alleviating urban poverty. One is the question of the extent to which the self-help and organization of the poor can mitigate economic inequality effectively without accompanying changes in market structure and economic policy, such, for example, as employment policy. While this issue is beyond the scope of this research note, it will be a necessary part of the discussion in the workshop.

The second objection, which we do address in this note, is the extent that the cultural, social, and economic isolation of the poor from the urban mainstream inhibit their self-help, thus requiring the intervention of outside agencies, whether the state, political parties, or non-governmental organizations. The presumed isolation of the urban poor was the focus of the early studies of urban poverty in Latin America. For some commentators of the 1950s and 1960s the rapid urbanization of Latin America resulted in breakdowns in political stability, in family and community integration, and in the mental health of migrants. Oscar Lewis argued against the breakdown thesis, but substituted for it that of the culture of poverty, which stressed the fatalism of the urban poor surviving on the margins of the economy and without links to labor or other solidary organizations (Lewis, 1952, 1968). The marginality of the urban poor became an important element in the analysis and programs of the Latin American Christian Democrat parties of the 1960s, which advocated the remedy of popular promotion through various forms of cooperative organization. The disorganization, hopelessness, and needs of the poor made them, according to this analysis, potential supporters of populist and authoritarian politics, hindering democratic development (Vekemans and Giusti, 1969/70). These marginality perspectives, which continue to influence perceptions of urban poverty and its solutions, provide a reference point for surveying the research on networks, social capital, and popular organizations. In a recent review, Luis Beccaria, Laura Golbert, Gabriel Kessler, and Fernando Filgueira (1998) contrast

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marginality perspectives with those that stress the potential that the poor have to escape poverty through strategic use of their assets, combined with support from civil society organizations and from the state through welfare policies. Likewise, Ruben Katzman has been directing research that considers both the assets and potential of the poor and the institutional factors that exclude them, at times permanently, from an adequate standard of life (cf. CEPAL, 1996). Caroline Moser has also conducted research along these lines in a study of four urban communities. Moser's work focuses on the poor's ability to manage their assets (including both tangible and intangible resources) and explores how such asset management impacts household vulnerability (cf. 1996, 1998). Our focus in this research note will be similar to theirs.

In our survey, we pay close attention to the empirical evidence for the marginality thesis on three dimensions: (a) the degree and type of integration that the urban poor have with the wider urban society; (b) current changes in the relationship between the economic conditions of the urban poor and the type and extent of social support upon which they can count; and (c) the relationship between popular organization and external promotion.

### ***Social Networks***

The social network approach to urban research is an old one in the development literature. Reacting to the classical sociological emphasis on the heterogeneity and impersonality of urban life, urban researchers in African cities in the 1950s and 1960s emphasized the way in which migrants to the cities created their own urban order. Migrants did so informally through social networks and network-based activities (Mitchell, 1956, 1969; See also Boissevain, 1974). Social network analysis has since become a refined tool for understanding the workings of organizations and communities (See Powell and Smith-Doerr, 1994, for a review of this literature). What usually distinguishes a network approach to urban poverty from a social capital or popular organization approach is that network analysis generally begins by focusing on the individual or the individual household, not the community. Two basic and interrelated ways of analyzing these individual-centered networks are through their degree of connectedness (the extent to which the members other than the originator are interconnected) and whether they are based on multiplex or simplex ties (Gluckman, 1955). Networks based on multiplex ties are those in which the individual or the household relate to others through sharing several dimensions of activity – work, religion, kinship or common origin, recreation. In contrast, in a network based on simplex ties, the individual or the household relates to others on one dimension of activity so that, for example, an individual knows different people at work than in the neighborhood or in church.

Relationships within urban communities can be analyzed in terms of the relative predominance of these network types. Research in different countries has shown that networks are important elements in community cohesion, in the quality of household relationships, and in the range of information available to

households and individuals (Hannerz, 1980). However, there is no simple correlation between type of network and effective promotion of community action or of self-reliance because each network type has different strengths and weaknesses. An implication of multiplex ties is that an individual's network is highly interconnected since its members are likely to share many activities in common. Multiplex ties thus tend to result in high degrees of integration and social support within the network, but to exclude non-members. The connectedness and multiplexity of networks within communities can provide strong support for marital stability, but equally they can also lead to sharp role segregation between men and women (Bott, 1971).

Communities based on individuals and households with simplex tie networks will be less integrated, but they are also likely to be more open to the outside since individual networks will contain varied and dispersed relationships. This openness is what Granovetter (1973) referred to as 'the strength of weak ties'. In his research on job search, he pointed to a major advantage of networks based on simplex ties – that they reach out beyond the immediate community of fellow-workers or neighbors, where information about jobs rapidly becomes redundant, to people and places that provide new information and help in finding work. Strong ties, in contrast, confine the jobs search, but through brokers and word-of-mouth recruitment enable the poor and unskilled to secure work by colonizing jobs in small enterprises that are seeking inexpensive, but reliable labor. These processes are documented for cities that are widely different in economic structure and urban organization such as Waldinger's (1997) studies of the success of poor Hispanic immigrants in securing jobs in Los Angeles or Lomnitz's (1977) earlier studies of migrants in a poor neighborhood of Mexico City. Espinoza's (1995, 1998) careful analysis of networking among the urban poor in Santiago shows the importance of these networks to the survival of the poor. Based mainly on small groups of neighbors, they have, however, a limited capacity to negotiate for state services or to generate collective action.

A network approach to urban poverty thus needs to balance the advantages accruing to the strong social support of interdependent networks against the restricted information about accessible resources that such networks are likely to entail. Urban poverty research in Latin America has been less concerned with these analytic distinctions than with documenting the extent and limits of networking among the urban poor. Various accounts show that social networks have been a major means by which the Latin American poor have coped with urban life, providing the support and expertise to build a house, find work, or get help in financial or medical emergencies (Roberts, 1978). The poor have been shown to be adept at networking, particularly with kin (Peattie, 1968; Leeds, 1969, 1971; Machado da Silva, 1971; Lomnitz, 1977; González de la Rocha, 1986). In her study of the organization of a poor neighborhood in Caracas, Peattie warns that such networks can be costly to maintain over distance and in face of the residential segregation of the modern city. The empirical charting of the networks of the poor shows, however, that they are not always isolated from other social classes or from formal urban organizations (Leeds, 1974; Roberts, 1973). Indeed, for some commentators, the Latin

American urban poor have been 'overintegrated' into urban life through patron-client relations with economic superiors, political parties, and government organizations, inhibiting their collective organization (Cornelius, 1975; Roberts, 1970)

The relative 'success story' of networking among the urban poor in Latin America occurred at a period when various factors favored the development of social networks on a variety of bases --- kinship, neighborhood, work, and religion. Substantial rural-urban migration and the carry-over of rural-based relationships to the city were some of these factors (Altamirano and Hirayabashi, 1996). This type of network solidarity is still evident among international migrants to US cities from villages and small towns in Mexico (Massey et. al. 1994, Smith, 1998). The process of informal settlement by which the Latin American city was built also contributed to the strengthening of social networks as initial settlers cooperated in self-defense against eviction, to install basic urban infrastructure, and to build community facilities (Leeds, 1969). Also, the workings of the urban informal economy, a major source of employment for the urban poor, fostered social networks since these were key elements in accessing markets, supplies, or a workforce (Arias, 1988; Benería and Roldán, 1987; Bromley, 1979; Escobar, 1986). Urban growth challenged churches to provide for the new urbanites. Protestant groups in many Latin American cities provide accessible communities for those without other strong sources of social support, but so, too, do Catholic base communities and devotional groups (De la Peña and De la Torre, 1990). One of the attractions of Protestant sects for poor women in Guatemala City in the 1960s was that it provided 'substitute' networks for those without strong kinship ties and a means of bringing male behavior under community control (Roberts, 1968).

The factors that enhanced networking among the urban poor are now changing and research needs to address these changes in circumstances. Vicente Espinoza's (1998) history of collective action among the urban poor in Santiago stresses the need to place the nature of these movements, their demands, and their cohesion within the context of the changing political and economic context. Throughout Latin America, there is a decline in the contribution of rural-urban migration to urban growth and thus of rural-origin social networks among the urban poor. As the cities mature in terms of their infrastructure, so, too, informal settlement becomes a normal part of the city (Gilbert and Ward, 1985). Renting becomes increasingly important even in squatter settlements (Gilbert and Varley, 1990). As these processes occur, community cohesion is likely to decline and there is some evidence that new settlers, who are often renters, have few supportive relationships within the settlement. Recent economic changes are also likely to undermine the basis for social networks among the urban poor. Competition from imported products threatens the viability of the small workshop, leading to a high turnover of businesses in this sector. The new export-oriented industry has few links with the small and medium-scale sectors, and jobs in the large-scale industrial sector exclude the poor as high educational qualifications become the norm for recruitment. More than in the past, the informal sector becomes a subsistence

sector with few economic linkages to the formal sector. The social networks of the urban poor today are thus less likely to access jobs than in the period of ISI.

Current social and demographic processes also make difficult the kind of networking that occurred in the past, whether of the strong or the weak type. The changes in urban organization noted above are likely to have different consequences for the networks of men and women, of the old and young. Female economic participation rates have increased substantially since the early 1980s, including amongst married women with children (De Oliveira and García, 1996). Women, who have to work for a living and still attend to domestic chores, have less time to invest in building or sustaining social networks (Chant, 1991; Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1986). They are also likely to have less time to give the voluntary labor needed to sustain community-based organization. As job opportunities depend less on formal and informal apprenticeship and kin recommendations, youths develop strong relationships with their peers and use these networks to find work or to migrate, as Hernández (1997) shows for youths in Monterrey, Mexico, who migrate 'a l'aventura' to the United States. Recent research in Mexico reports that the uncertainty of the urban economy leads adult children to migrate to other cities and to the US in search of work, abandoning their elderly parents in favor of individual mobility (Gonzalez de la Rocha, 1998).

Finally, there are the demographic changes to consider. Fertility decline means that there are increasingly fewer kin available with whom to build networks. When this is combined with inter and intra-generational mobility, it can lead to the situation described by Redondo (1990) for Buenos Aires. There, elderly Italian origin women are isolated in their communities since their few children have moved out to the suburbs, and they are surrounded by new immigrants from Bolivia and Paraguay with whom they feel they have little in common.

The tendencies that we identify as potentially weakening the supportive role of social networks, whether based on kinship, neighborhood, or work, will vary with city, depending on factors, such as the volatility of the urban labor market, the degree of residential mobility and interurban migration, and city size. However, these tendencies suggest that research and policy need to address the issue of possible substitutes for social networks either in terms of social support or in terms of information gathering. Information, for example, can potentially be accessed through neighborhood based information centers. These would need to be staffed by people skilled in management of computer-based information services, requiring perhaps NGO assistance, but also providing the possibility of training local people in their use. Local community action groups already use Internet. We have found cases of migrants in our current research on Mexican migration to the US, who do not have extensive social networks, using chat pages on the Internet to network with others about job possibilities in Mexico and the United States.

## **Social Capital**

The concept of social capital is used to explain how relationships between individuals can provide access to resources that benefit both individuals and groups. Applying the concept to the poor, some writers imply that building social capital may mitigate inequalities resulting from a lack of material or human capital. While economist Glenn Loury is often attributed with introducing the term, it has been more fully developed analytically by sociologists Pierre Bourdieu, James Coleman, and Alejandro Portes. In Bourdieu's (1992: 119) view, "social capital is the sum of the resources, actual or virtual, that accrue to an individual or a group by virtue of possessing a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition." Coleman (1988: 98) defines social capital by its function. "It is not a single entity but a variety of different entities, with two elements in common: they consist of some aspect of social structures, and they facilitate certain actions of actors - whether persons or corporate actors - within the structure." Thus for both authors, social capital can be accessed either by individuals or by groups, and it is generated by the interactions among actors. While obligations, expectations, trustworthiness of structures, information, norms, and effective sanctions represent important forms of social capital, the social structures that facilitate social capital include the closure of networks and appropriable social organization (Coleman, 1988). Thus, social capital is a product of embeddedness (Portes, 1995). The closure of networks is important because it encourages consensus about norms, and allows people to develop the trust necessary for the transference of social capital. Appropriable social organization refers to organizations that exist for specific purposes that later provide other resources to the individuals involved. Coleman (1988: 108) provides the example of a neighborhood group organized to demand sidewalks and plumbing. The relationships built in this group later provide other benefits to residents, including an available pool of baby-sitters.

In this way, social capital usually emerges as a by-product of other activities. Importantly, social capital can be destroyed if social relationships are not maintained, and is likely to erode if there is a lack of closure and stability, or an overriding ideology of individual self-sufficiency (Coleman, 1990). Portes (1995) adds to the analytic concept by noting that social capital is the "capacity of individuals to command scarce resources by virtue of membership in networks or broader social structures." That is, the resources acquired through social relationships do not themselves constitute social capital. Rather, social capital pertains to the capacity of individuals to access those resources on demand. Portes (1995) goes on to describe four sources of social capital, which can be used to assess the existence and strength of social capital in different types of community: values, bounded solidarity, reciprocity, and enforceable trust. The motivation behind the first two sources is altruistic, while the second two are instrumental in nature. Each source of social capital results in the transference of resources on a distinct level. Resources transferred from a value source are rooted in moral imperatives, as those provided to children by their parents. Those based on bounded solidarity might involve gifts to someone with whom the provider shares a common identity. Resources rooted in reciprocity involve the expectation of comparable returns, as exemplified by information or favors

granted to business associates. Finally, resources rooted in relations of enforceable trust are supported by group sanctions, and involve the expectation of higher status as well as comparable returns (Portes, 1995: Figure 1.3).

The presence of social capital has often been shown to be a practical asset to individuals and groups. Espinosa and Massey (1998) quantify the importance of social capital accessed through transnational networks for potential migrants to the United States. Bebbington (1997) documents the ways that social capital inherent in the relationships among members of agricultural cooperatives and grassroots organizations, and between those organizations and non-local institutions and networks have improved the standard of living of the members.

While social capital as described by Portes involves individual-level benefits, Coleman (1988) also discusses a 'public good' aspect of social capital, whereby it benefits everyone in a particular social structure, not just the persons whose effort made it effective. It is this 'public good' aspect that Robert Putnam emphasizes. In Putnam's (1993) view, social capital "refers to features of social organization, such as networks, norms, and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit." In an analysis reminiscent of Alexis de Toqueville's account of democracy in early nineteenth century United States, Putnam argues that the civic tradition of Northern Italy has resulted in a successful and vibrant economy and society. This civic tradition is rooted in ancient guilds, religious fraternities, and tower societies, and has evolved into the cooperatives, mutual aid societies, neighborhood associations, and choral societies of today. It engenders trust and reciprocity, facilitates coordination and communication, and provides successful models for future collaboration, elements missing in the economically backward Southern regions of Italy, which are his points of contrast (1993). For Putnam, establishing civic engagement (and thus, social capital) is vital to economic development. Thus, he advocates the nourishment of grassroots organizations as a part of development efforts. Putnam's work on social capital leads to policy-level recommendations that involve popular organizations: to improve the lot of the poor, we should invest in activities that get them involved in civic associations or grassroots movements.

However, the extent to which civic involvement is a solution to the problems of the urban poor is questionable. Portes and Landolt (1996) argue that it is not merely a lack of social capital, but a lack of economic resources that is at the root of the problems of the urban poor. Moser (1996: 61) adds, "...when [households'] assets are depleted, they cease to support communities." Moreover, available sources of social capital are not universal. Rather, membership in a social network is often related to one's race, class, or gender, and members of subordinate groups are unlikely to have access to resources that will allow them to exit poverty (Fernandez-Kelly, 1994: 98). And in a study of four urban communities sponsored by the World Bank, Moser (1996) found that economic crisis had disparate effects on individuals' ability to access sources of social capital. She reports a more intensive use of reciprocity networks for activities like childcare, sharing food, water and cooking responsibilities, but

people also begin to lose trust in their neighbors as crime rises. Furthermore, economic necessity often requires women to work outside of the home. Since it is women who are more likely to participate in the day-to-day management of community-based organizations, the organizations suffer when women go to work.

Additionally, Portes and Landolt (1996) call attention to the constraints inherent in the social structures that provide access to social capital. First, while social capital benefits members of the group, it inevitably excludes others from participating. In this sense, it must be understood that social capital is most likely to have a substantial role in the context of bounded communities in which people share a strong sense of common identity. Secondly, obligations to family and friends can restrict individual freedom and entrepreneurship. Thirdly, in dense networks conformity to norms is imperative and the cost of individual initiative is great. A downward leveling effect can result. Moreover, the evidence cited in the previous section suggesting that networking may be more difficult now than in the past may diminish younger migrants' access to important sources of social capital. Finally, Rubio (1996a, 1996b) has identified what he calls "perverse social capital," among juvenile delinquents as well as the Mafia in Colombia. Attempts to build social capital among the poor thus needs to take account of not only of the social and economic structure of the community, but also the power structure within which the poor operate (Tendler, 1997).

In order to enhance our understanding of social capital, it is necessary to conduct studies of barrios and squatter settlements in which it is strong, as well as of urban community participation programs, such as those in health and housing construction in the state of Ceará in Brazil. Esteva's (1995) observations about Tepito, a barrio in Mexico City, may serve as an example. Barrio residents, in cooperation with various artists, architects, and intellectuals, have worked to revitalize the community in terms of infrastructure, crime control, as well as social solidarity, creating a situation that Esteva refers to as "direct community governance." It is important to note, though, that Tepito benefits from a relatively self-sufficient economy, akin to what Friedmann (1989) called a barrio economy. The extent to which a complex urban economy can be run through barrio economies is questionable. Future analyses must also be attentive to the limitations and possible perverse uses of social capital, as Portes and Rubio indicate.

On an operative level, efforts to build social capital must focus on creating the basis for the trust and stability necessary for social capital to evolve. Poverty and economic crisis lead to an unstable situation, where individuals do not have much to lose by breaking trust. Improving employment sources and granting housing titles may be two areas in which we could begin to build stability. Related recommendations may be found in the following section.

## **Popular Organizations**



In the context of the potential benefits and limitations of social capital, then, we examine popular organizations in Latin America. Squatter movements, documented by numerous authors, represent some of the first organized efforts on the part of urban residents. These movements claimed land, and eventually made demands of the state for land title, infrastructure and services. Other organizations, including neighborhood associations, community based organizations, and Christian Base Communities (CEBs), have sought to address inadequacies in housing and other infrastructure, food, health care, and child care by demanding of the state or by self-providing those resources. Women are often the main participants in these organizations, as is the case in the community kitchens documented by Blondet in Villa El Salvador in Lima (1991). Valdes and Weinstein (1993) provide a detailed account of neighborhood movements in Chile, where women were also the main protagonists, organizing to reduce the cost of food, improve their living situation, and acquire services including education.

Caldeira (1990) reports on women's participation in CEBs and other neighborhood associations in peripheral settlements in Sao Paulo in the early 1980s. While the focus of these groups involved acquiring needed resources and services, women often explained the benefits of their participation in terms of making friends, learning new things, and gaining self esteem. Indeed, in some of the communities, women began to meet independently to discuss other issues, including sexuality and birth control. Though she does not frame it in these terms, Caldeira's study demonstrates how sources of social capital became available to women as a by-product of community participation. Likewise, women in Villa El Salvador often became involved in broader community planning processes as a result of their participation in the kitchens (Lind, 1997). Similarly, Degregori, et. al. (1986) show that while self-help organizations in San Martín de Porres in Lima eventually declined when the area was legally integrated into the city, associational activity including clubs, unions, and religious groups remained strong. Thus, the link between community participation and generating sources of social capital seems clear.

Nevertheless, popular organizations should not be idealized as the route to exiting poverty. Touraine (1987) notes that urban popular groups in Latin America are limited by their focus on short-term ameliorative issues and rarely give rise to lasting organization. While such groups necessarily must negotiate with the state, their ideals are often subordinated to the strategies of political parties, as Castells (1982) asserts was the case with squatter movements in Lima. Mainwaring (1987) notes that in Brazil, clientelism encumbers the efforts of popular movements. Ward and Chant (1987) assert that governments exert political control in dealing with the leaders of community groups. Finally, the social conditions that facilitate popular organization need to be present. For instance, when residents of urban neighborhoods are highly mobile and do not have much information about one another, the stable networks and trust necessary for the development of organization (and thus the establishment of

social capital) are unlikely to develop (Roberts, 1973). Finally, it is not clear that residents of poor neighborhoods always feel that it is necessary to maintain participation in community organizations. For instance, in a study of four neighborhoods in Santiago, Portes (1971) asserts that residents organized when they perceived a need, and preferred to engage in other activities when their needs were met.

The expanding role of NGOs in promoting grass-roots development has largely been aimed at strengthening the ability of popular organization to combat poverty on a long-term basis (Reilly, 1996). Recently, international agencies have increasingly turned to NGOs to implement development projects. Since they are less likely to be paralyzed by bureaucracy, NGOs can be innovative in resolving problems and flexible in meeting needs, particularly in places with limited resources and infrastructure that are often overlooked by governments (Korten, 1990). It is claimed that they are less likely to be corrupt than government, and they are often more trusted by local people (Charlton and May, 1995). They also operate on lower costs than government or aid agency programs. Perhaps most importantly, NGOs are said to be more able than governments to promote local participation, which is linked by some observers to project sustainability (Cernea, 1988). It is these strategic advantages to which international aid organizations refer when they encourage use of NGOs as an alternative to government agencies in the delivery and implementation of public sector services and other development projects.

NGOs throughout the world have followed a general evolutionary course. The first NGOs provided charity and relief, while NGOs that emerged later focused on community organizing and development, and eventually on lobbying and advocacy. Today, in Latin America and the rest of the world, all of these NGOs continue to coexist (MacDonald, 1995). In the 1960s and 1970s, many Latin American NGOs were created in response to the military dictatorships of that era. These NGOs tended toward a political interpretation of development and poverty. Working closely with grassroots groups, their objectives included defending human rights and strengthening popular organizations, particularly in fighting against dictatorship. "During the 1970s, NGOs were considered institutional spaces in which different social groups found a channel for political participation.... During this period, important efforts in popular organization and education were carried out by NGOs throughout Latin America" (Arellano-López and Petras, 1994: 556).

The eventual advent of democracy meant that many NGOs lost their political urgency. This, in combination with structural adjustment policies of the 1980s and the attendant acute poverty, led to the development of another kind of NGOs (and to a shift in the focus of pre-existing NGOs). These NGOs developed programs that focused on improving the living conditions and survival of the poor. This meant augmenting education and organization programs with the delivery of health and credit services. It often resulted in a changing

orientation for NGOs from providing support and training to the grassroots to implementing specific programs set up by the government or aid agencies. In smaller and poorer countries, this change has, at times, made NGOs as important as the state in the delivery of certain services, such as health (Jelin, 1996, Richards, 1998). In this way, many NGOs have become part of decentralization and privatization efforts. In general, then, the NGO sector that once focused on community development and was effectively divorced from the state, now often works on implementation, mediating between the state and aid agencies on the one hand, and local needs and demands on the other.

The ramifications of the presence of NGOs for popular organizations are ambiguous. On the one hand, the relationship with the state and donors holds promise for collaboration, as is the case with the “consultas” set up by the InterAmerican Development Bank between representatives of the bank, the state, and civil society (see Valencia and Winder, 1997). It may also improve coordination between the actors as well as the institutional solidity of NGOs. Moreover, Moser (1996) suggests that they may partially compensate for the erosion of social capital that occurs when communities are faced with crisis. On the other hand, the effects of working with the state and donors could fail to strengthen civil society or enhance civic participation. As MacDonald (1995) notes, many NGOs emerging out of the economic restructuring of the 1980s onwards focus on individual solutions to social problems. Various researchers point out that most NGOs are not actually membership organizations where people are working together or take an active role in decision-making (Bebbington and Farrington, 1993; Jelin, 1996; Nelson, 1996; Vivian, 1994). While the resources these NGOs provide are often critical to people’s survival, they may create dependency instead of social capital when projects do not involve the participation of local people, or resentment when the main beneficiaries of NGO projects are community elites. In an analysis of NGOs in Zimbabwe, Vivian (1994) found that working through community elites also meant that the poorest of the poor often remained untouched by NGO efforts. This situation is exacerbated when NGOs projects reliant on outside funding fall apart after the funding is removed. Such situations can result in even greater distrust among community members. Elizabeth Jelin cautions that aid agencies’ new emphasis on sustainability of NGOs “should be viewed with preoccupation, as a prelude to the restriction of support funds and as a stimulus for organizations to change their orientation toward projects where the return and efficacy can be more easily measured” (1996: 103-104, our translation).

Despite the limitations of popular organizations and NGOs, they retain potential for assisting in the alleviation of urban poverty. As noted above, popular organizations often suffer during economically difficult times, partially because women need to support their families by working outside the home and lack the time to participate. It is clear that their waning participation does not signify waning need. Access to adequate nutrition, health care, infrastructure, safety, and childcare endures as major concerns for the urban poor. Since the types of communities where women can afford not to work outside the home are unlikely to be resurrected, some state or other outside provision of these services

is necessary. NGOs are likely to continue to be relied upon in this way. However, this is not to say that the work of NGOs should be limited to service delivery or project implementation. Political space must be made for those NGOs that exhibit the ability to support grassroots organizing efforts and demand making on the part of popular groups. If the rhetoric of donors and states calling for the strengthening of civil society is sincere, then they must respect, and indeed fund, those NGOs and popular groups that are critical of the status quo. Furthermore, they must acknowledge that the results of successful efforts to strengthen civil society may not have tangible or countable results. In other words, civil society must be given the space to grow and make demands on its own terms.

### **Conclusion**

The focus on networks, social capital and popular organization is opportune at a time when social policy is being re-evaluated in Latin America. Thus, The Social Division of CEPAL (1995) has recently argued for the need to move from a state-centered approach to the delivery of social services to one that makes greater use of the market, community, and non-governmental organizations. The de-centralization and targeting policies that are advocated have the merit of making use of the capacity of the urban poor to cope with their difficult economic situation. Our research review indicates, however, that such policies need to be implemented with considerable care. Policies must not assume that families and communities have the necessary solidarity or access to information that would facilitate their participation in de-centralization initiatives. NGOs can be useful intermediaries in promoting popular organization and in the delivery of services, but there are risks associated with their non-representative nature and insecure financial basis. These risks are mainly those of becoming part of a top-down administrative hierarchy and losing touch with their promotional and critical role in civil society.

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