PROMOTORAS IN NICARAGUA: COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT, WOMEN, PARTICIPATION AND EMPOWERMENT

by

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Bachelor of Arts, Simon Fraser University 1997

THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Abstract

This thesis examines the impact of women promotoras on community development in Nicaragua. Promotoras have become crucial catalysts and mediators of local development by enhancing community outreach, broadening participation, enabling individual/collective empowerment, and finding creative ways to collaborate with community members. Their work expands women’s leadership roles, while contributing to overall project sustainability. Key to the promotoras’ success is their own process of personal transformation through community work based on popular education and capacity building. However, organizational, cultural and economic limitations present challenges to the promotoras’ approach; for instance, traditional machista attitudes question women’s ability to occupy leadership positions, while economic constraints force promotoras to leave their voluntary positions in favour of better-remunerated work. The contributions and limitations of promotoras’ work are relevant for policy-makers, practitioners and funders of community development, especially that oriented towards poor women.
Promotoras

Blooming flowers, falling leaves,
dreaming, chanting, and dancing to the beat.
Darker hours test our sorrows,
hand-to-hand like a web
standing strong to the triumph.
Women, men, children and seniors
building pathways to the sky.
Singing to our heaven
for some more little light.
Peace and hope
shines our rainbow
for tomorrow’s freedom brings
to our hearts,
to our homes,
and in our lives forever stay.
Acknowledgements

To my parents, Ernesto and Daysi, for giving me the gift of learning from an early age. To my parents-in-law, Donald and Margaret, for their ongoing support and encouragement, it has not gone unnoticed. To my husband, Paul, for his understanding and love through this journey. To my sons, Pablo, Gerónimo and Miguel, for their love and kindness, and their smiles and sweet words of motivation. To my sisters and brothers in God whose prayers have always been with me. To my sister, Amelia, and her fervent belief in me.

To the promotoras who shared their time, stories and histories to enrich this thesis and my life; without their expertise, it would not been possible. And lastly, but most importantly, to my thesis supervisors, John Brohman and Monica Escudero, I would like to recognize their support, expertise and assistance in the completion of this thesis.

To all I would like to express my deepest gratitude. Mil gracias.
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<th>Term</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>CANTERA</td>
<td><em>Centro de Comunicaciones y Educación Popular CANTERA</em> (Communications and Popular Education Centre CANTERA)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAPRI</td>
<td><em>Centro de Promoción y Apoyo CAPRI</em> (Promotion and Support Centre CAPRI)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CBOs</td>
<td>Community-based organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>CD</td>
<td>Community development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDC</td>
<td><em>Comités de Defensa Civil</em> (Civil Defense Committees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CDS</td>
<td><em>Comités de Defensa Sandinista</em> (Sandinista Defense Committees)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEPs</td>
<td><em>Colectivos de Educación Popular</em> (Popular Education Collectives)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FSLN</td>
<td><em>Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional</em> (Sandinista National Liberation Front)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GIs</td>
<td>Government institutions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Bank</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MCN</td>
<td><em>Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense</em> (Nicaraguan Community Movement)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Non-government organizations</td>
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<tr>
<td>NLC</td>
<td>National Literacy Crusade</td>
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<td>PAR</td>
<td>Participatory Action Research</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAPs</td>
<td>Structural adjustment policies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UNO</td>
<td><em>Unión Nacional Opositora</em> (National Opposition Union)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>US</td>
<td>United States</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Research Interview Participants

Promotoras and representatives from Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense:

Promotora 1, Rosa Castro
Promotora 2, Carmen Sánchez
Promotora 3, Sonia Castillo
Promotora 4, Lidia Pérez
Promotora 5, Josefa Díaz
Promotora 6, Maria Solís
Representative 1, Roberto Flores, León’s departmental leader
Representative 2, Rigoberto López, León’s municipal leader
Representative 3, Carlos Rodríguez, Nicaragua national leader

Promotoras and representatives from CANTERA:

Promotora 1, Lula Rodríguez
Promotora 2, Claudia Martí
Promotora 3, Elena Flores
Promotora 4, Marta López
Promotora 5, Nidia Chávez
Promotora 6, Sofía Domínguez
Representative, Azucena Casas, executive director and founder member

* The following are pseudonyms used for the participants in this research.
Chapter 1:
Introduction

Since the late-1980s individuals and organizations involved in community
development (CD) work in Latin America have begun to recognize promotoras’
contributions to development programs in the region. Promotoras are community
women who work voluntarily or semi-voluntarily in CD programs and projects. These
women live in the communities in which they work, and typically have a more family-
based and community-centred approach to promoting CD programs than professionals or
technicians, such as social workers or agronomists.

The promotoras’ approach is characterized by its flexibility, particularly to
accommodate family demands, and also by the focus given to the specific needs of the
community. In the context of CD programs and projects, promotoras act as ‘cultural
brokers’ between the ‘Western based’ dominant values promoted through many
development organizations and the existing local knowledge in the communities in which
the women live and work. The promotoras become the facilitators and mediators, in
other words, which make the work of development organizations more accessible for
local people to accept and adopt if desired. Promotoras’ role in, and approach to, CD is
designed to encourage and increase community participation in programs and projects,

---

2 This study focuses on women who are promotoras only, even though male promotores are common too. It was observed that in Nicaragua’s urban settings the majority of people involved in promotoría are women, while in the rural areas men predominate in this kind of work.
which in turn should facilitate the processes of empowerment for individuals and communities.

This thesis explores the role of women *promotoras* in Nicaragua, and their participation in CD programs within development organizations. It discusses how the *promotoras* approach to CD programs impacts CD goals and objectives within local and national development organizations. In this context, community participation and empowerment are central aspects of CD practice. Participation and empowerment may improve the quality of life of women and families, not only by accomplishing specific objectives, but also by giving people a general sense that they are in control of their lives. This thesis demonstrates that *promotoras* become crucial mediators and catalysts in CD programs and projects. In Nicaraguan CD work, many non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs), and a few government institutions (GIs) promoting CD programs, have been part of the increasingly common practice of incorporating *promotoras* in CD work. There are more than 400 (national and international) NGOs working in development in Nicaragua, and more than 2,000 civil associations, such as local non-profits and religious organizations, which provide social programs and services (*Centro de Promoción y Apoyo* CAPRI 1997: XV). CD programs involving *promotoras* include areas such as community and reproductive health, family education, family violence, and environmental protection and education.

*Promotoras*, like many other Nicaraguan women (Babb 2001: 24), have played an important role in the social and political struggles in the country, particularly since the late-1970s. Nicaraguan women have been getting out of their homes to take part in envisioning, creating and sustaining alternative ways of survival in the midst of war,
massive poverty, and increasing family violence (Babb 2001: 24-27). As well, many Nicaraguan women, like many other women around the globe, have been negatively affected by modernization projects and, in the last three decades, economic globalization with its concomitant imposition of neo-liberal policies (Vargas 1998: 30-32, 158-161). Neo-liberal policies have heavily impacted marginal communities by increasing poverty and limiting government-funded public services such as health and education; these shortages of services have led to devastating results for an already impoverished population (Vargas 1998). This thesis explores the roles and challenges faced by promotoras in the field by focusing on their narratives and personal histories, which will allow us to better understand their impact on CD work.

This thesis will argue that, first, the promotoras provide a unique approach for community outreaching. For instance, these women live in the communities where they work and tend to be more attuned to the interests and needs of the people in the communities. Often, promotoras are selected in a community meeting rather than by development organizations, so they are seen by local people as local leaders and representatives of the interests of the community receiving the programs. For development organizations, promotoras’ roles and activities in the community facilitate outreaching toward local people, and pave the way for community participation in projects and programs, which are very important overall goals of CD. Second, promotoras provide a more reliable approach for supporting, or collaborating with individuals and communities. Incorporating a team of local volunteer women allows organizations to develop or build on the local human potential and capabilities embodied in promotoras, and other community members, thereby developing local resources and
sustainability. At the same time, development organizations can reduce the cost of paid professional and technical support, as well as incorporating local women to do most of the promotion, service, or facilitation between the CD organization and community people. The *promotoras'* approach seem to be reliable and steady because development organizations can more easily put their trust in local women's abilities and skills to promote CD programs and projects by supporting the development of local leadership and human resources as personified in the *promotoría* model. This study will prove that these two aspects, appropriateness and reliability, have lead to the increasing adoption of the *promotoría* model by development organizations; they are key elements for creating collective approaches to participatory and sustainable alternatives of current CD theory and practice.

The study will also consider the serious challenges encountered by implementation in the field. For example, development organizations that sponsor *promotoras'* community work are not neutral entities. Development organizations exist within a particular cultural, social, political and economic framework, which influences and, at times, may determine their actions. The resultant ideas, values and beliefs of a particular organization are reflected in its history, mission, goals, and objectives, as well as in its specific CD program initiatives. Most importantly, organizational beliefs and values may be embodied in the everyday actions and interactions of its staff and leadership, including those with *promotoras* and with community members. A literature review on participation, women and CD suggests that real dialogue and negotiation among development agencies (such as NGOs, CBOs, and GIs), *promotoras* and communities are key to create a space for growth, learning, and social transformation,
and this space should be based on local people's needs, conditions and realities (CESA 1986; Brohman 1996; Fisher 1997; Goetz 1997; Macdonald 1997, 2001; Los Niños 1998a, 1998b; Kane 2001). Ideally, CD organizations, in conjunction with promotoras and communities, need to negotiate manageable and respectfully acceptable activities founded on an open 'dialogue' among all those involved (Freire 1989, 2004). The possibility of 'dialogue' requires the "legitimacy and acceptance of different positions with respect to the world be clear," which becomes particularly important for the process of mediating the various interests that exist in CD programming (Freire 2004: 14). This latter approach, based in 'dialogue,' captures the most effective and reliable representation of promotoras' work in CD. However, over the past 30 years, many studies have confirmed that many times culturally- and historically-bound paternalistic organizational practices block community participation and the decision-making power of the poor (Carroll 1992; Vivian 1994; Fisher 1997; Ewig 1999). Thus, a people-centred, participatory CD dialogue involving community-promotora-development organizations opens the opportunity for a liberating experience for people, while an approach based on paternalism and gender-biases suggests the preservation of current power structures and/or chronic organizational blindness.

Another challenge for development organizations and the promotoras' approach to CD is related to the meaning of community participation. For example, in CD theory and practice there is an ongoing debate over the meaning and value of participation. A major problem with the discourse on and practice of community participation seems to lie in the multidimensional meaning and use of participation as a term (Brohman 1996; Macdonald 1997; Miraftab 2003). In the context of our study, promotoras and CD
organizations in Nicaragua will clarify the meaning of participation through questions such as who participates, what is their scope of participation, how do they participate, what is the impact of their participation, and who benefits from it. The exploration of these questions from the perspective of the promotoras’ everyday lives will be invaluable to learn how to best support local community work so communities can grow and create sustainable alternatives, while empowering themselves for further social change.

Guiding Questions

The following main research question will guide this study. From a promotoras’ standpoint, what is the impact of the promotoras in CD in Nicaragua? To answer this major question it is necessary to respond to a series of sub-questions: What are community promotoras? What are the major goals of CD initiatives that involve promotoras? In what major ways does the promotoría model attempt to advance CD goals? What have been the major successes and shortcomings of the promotoras’ approach to CD goals? How have the promotoras affected participation and empowerment in CD practice? How do the participation and empowerment of both the promotoras and other community people (especially women) affect CD goals? What changes to the promotoría model to CD might further advance such goals? What are the main challenges limiting the potential of the promotoras’ role in CD practice?

Conceptualizing the Role of Promotoras through Institutional Ethnography

Because of the complexity in conceptualizing promotoras’ everyday world, my research draws from the principles of Dorothy E. Smith’s (1986) institutional ethnography and standpoint approach. My thesis explores, from the standpoint of
promotoras, how their approach to CD benefits and challenges some of the broader goals of CD within two development organizations in Nicaragua. Institutional ethnography facilitates the examination of a specific issue (i.e., the promotoras’ approach to CD); it is based on the premise that looking at the particular does not exclude generalizing about broader social relations (Smith 1986: 7). This approach also allows for the examination and analysis of the social relationships among development organizations, promotoras, and communities within the context of participation.

This study claims that in order to conceptualize promotoras’ experience within CD in Nicaragua, their role and approach must be also understood within a broader set of social relations (e.g., international and national organizations, government agencies). The location of promotoras in the broader international context, particularly in the context of Nicaraguan CD, is important, because Nicaraguan development organizations (governmental and non-governmental) are highly dependent on international funding and aid for survival. According to Dorothy E. Smith, institutional ethnography allows for the exploration of promotoras’ everyday experiences, or concrete actions, as a “point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject(s) [e.g., promotoras] into a larger social and economic process” (1986: 6). Thus, promotoras’ points of view and experiences in CD work in Nicaragua enable us to observe how promotoras’ everyday actions speak not only about the local settings, but also about larger social, economic, political and cultural issues. This thesis, therefore, rests on the premise that promotoras’ brand of participation is “determined by the social relations of an immensely complex division of labour knitting local lives and local settings to national and international social, economic, and political processes” (ibid.: 7).
Ethnographic Methodology of Personal and Collective Histories

Since 1996, I have been involved personally and professionally with community promotoras in Mexico (Tijuana) and Nicaragua (León and Managua). After meeting and talking with promotoras over the years, individually as well as at meetings and forums, after listening to their stories, I became more aware of the significance of promotoras within development programs in terms of their social, political, and economic potential for promoting social change (for individuals, organizations, and communities). Most importantly, I was impressed by how this kind of community approach to CD projects impacted women, particularly the promotoras themselves. With this in mind, in January and August, 1999 during short visits to Nicaragua, I met on different occasions with six promotoras and representatives from two development organizations (Movimiento Comunal Nicaraguense and CANTERA) in León and Managua to discuss the possibility of developing a thesis project. The promotoras with whom I met seemed motivated, willing and enthusiastic about sharing their experiences in CD; most importantly, the research was seen as a way to explore, from the standpoint of the promotoras' experience itself, what their work meant to the theory and practice of CD. As the result of these meetings, and based on their feedback, I decided to concentrate this study on the promotoras' approach and impact on CD goals within development organizations in order to better identify some of the concrete ways promotoras advance CD goals in local communities, and also some of the obstacles they

3 I have been involved in a participatory oral history project with promotoras in Tijuana since 1997; later in a more informal and personal way I became aware of the promotoria work in Nicaragua. My decision to focus the study in Nicaragua, rather than Mexico, was intended to increase awareness and opportunities for the promotoras' projects and educational training to be extended further south.
face that prevent their activities from being more successful. My personal experience with promotoras has indeed shaped my thesis and its methodology.

This study relies on contemporary ethnographic fieldwork, such as participant observation, institutional document analysis, and semi-structured interviews (see appendix); this allowed me to accompany, participate, share with, and observe promotoras in their everyday activities (Reinharz 1992; Couillard 1995). Participant observation, in particular, became appropriate to examine complex social, cultural, and political relationships that develop through the promotoras work within Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense and CANTERA. For example, participant observation was especially appropriate in order to be part of promotoras’ interactions with representatives from organizations, community women and leaders and families, particularly at public meetings and educational workshops. Institutional document analysis and academic literature review provide the historical and socio-economic context to understand the advantages and limitations of CD practice over time and space. Moreover, institutional documentation provided by promotoras and development organizations contributes to understanding the practical perspectives of CD work, and the mission, values and goals of development organizations promoting CD initiatives in Nicaragua.

In the course of the fieldwork, personal interviews provided the main source of primary evidence for clarifying the main questions raised by this thesis. Although I met and spoke with at least 50 promotoras, the main sources of information are based on individual semi-structured, two-hour long, recorded interviews with 12 promotoras and 4 local representatives from the two development organizations involved in this study. The promotoras interviewed worked mainly with the two development organizations: Centro
de Comunicación y Educación Popular or CANTERA (Center of Communication and Popular Education, CANTERA), a Nicaraguan NGO based in Managua, and Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (Nicaraguan Community Movement), a national grassroots organization. Both of these organizations have a long history of using the promotora model in the promotion, service, and facilitation of CD programs and projects in many marginal (urban and rural) communities in the country.

Finally, the study includes my own experience and reflections. Originally from León, Nicaragua, I have lived in Canada for 17 years and travel often to Nicaragua. As a researcher, my position as a Nicaraguan-Canadian woman placed me as both an insider and outsider. Being an insider allowed me to freely move within the promotoras’ communities, and facilitated communication across a cultural, ethnic, and gender gap. In order words, my fluency in both Nicaraguan idiomatic and cultural idiosyncrasies, as well as common roots in shared political-social events, facilitated empathy and identification between the promotoras (as informants) and my role (as researcher). Furthermore, my role as mother, manifested by my children’s presence during the fieldwork, made promotoras’ family issues, such as childcare and family dynamics, more real to me and strengthened the empathy and identification between us. At the same time, my position as an outsider, a woman who had not lived in Nicaragua for many years, allowed women to speak freely (as a form of teaching me or informing me) of the social-cultural, political and economic crisis affecting Nicaraguans (personally and collectively). Given my position as an immigrant in Canada, I was not part of their immediate community, nor was I perceived as part of the organizational staff or a neighbour. My inquiries,
therefore, were not seen as a threat, but rather as recognition of their community work and as an opportunity for them to voice their opinions on CD practice and policy.

Some Limitations of the Study

Ethnographic fieldwork methods such as participant-observation and semi-structured interviews were restricted to promotoras, development organizations’ representatives, and community members available within the time frame of the study. The number of people interviewed from each program is relatively small, in comparison to the total number of promotoras and development organizations working in CD in Nicaragua. The study, therefore, does not aim to be comprehensive, but rather exploratory and to generate understanding of promotoras’ voices and points of view in the context of their everyday lives, and to recognize the value of the position of voluntary and local women to the larger, macro level of CD. The original desired research approach sought to include promotoras’ feedback, but logistic limitations (e.g., time, funding) made this last step impossible. However, I still am committed to the idea of sharing at least a summary of this thesis with promotoras, particularly the ones who contributed significantly with their time and histories to this study.

Conclusion

To summarize, the exploration of promotoras’ role in, and approach to, CD in Nicaragua can be of great significance to better understand the social relations among development organizations, promotoras, and local communities in the context of participation and empowerment. At the same time, the examination and analysis of promotoras’ community work sheds light on how international development policies affect women’s everyday lives. This study is of relevance for CD practitioners,
academics and policy makers at all levels (local, national, and international) to better assess the impact of women's voluntary work in CD programs. Particularly, it is suggested that *promotoras'* contribution to CD can provide ideas as to how to better support local communities if the goal of development organizations (such as NGOs, CBOs, and other social change agents) is to create processes of empowerment for local people and communities, rather than just pay lip service to these ideals. It is necessary to learn under what conditions the goals of CD can be best nurtured in order to transform and expand communities' social and economic support networks, while emphasizing issues of social justice and social change, which are fundamental components of CD practice. This thesis also argues that processes of social change and social justice (in which CD organizations, *promotoras* and communities are engaged) are often interdependent and self-nurturing events, involving the collaborative configuration and reconfiguration of current values, beliefs and ideas. The intersection between processes of CD, *promotoras* and organizations creates a space for exchanging ideas, values and cosmovisions\(^4\) in a process of making and unmaking CD practice in the everyday world. It is expected that this study, at least through the sharing of concrete representations of *promotoras'* experiences, will provide greater clarity to what CD represents, and how participation and empowerment are constructed within local communities through the actions of the *promotoras* and CD organizations in a country like Nicaragua.

\(^4\) Cosmovision is a word often used in anthropological studies as synonymous with world view, or the views of the world as understood by a particular cultural or societal group ([http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=cosmovision](http://dictionary.reference.com/search?q=cosmovision), retrieved 10/25/05). The word itself, particularly, it is commonly used in the context of Mesoamerican studies of indigenous groups in southern Mexico and Central America.
Structure of the Thesis

Chapter 2 provides the historical, socio-political and cultural context for the growth of the promotoría model in CD. It reviews the pertinent literature on participatory development and empowerment within CD theory and practice. It points to some of the key issues within community development, in terms of its effect on current notions of participation and empowerment, especially for women in poor or marginal communities throughout Latin America.

Chapter 3 offers an overview of the Nicaraguan context from the 1970s onwards, particularly with reference to development policies, the role of promotoras, and CD organizations. It introduces, as well, the organizational context of Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense and the Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular CANTERA, which are the two development organizations supporting the work of the promotoras interviewed for this study. In order to achieve the latter, this chapter complements institutional documentation with primary research centred on interviews of the three representatives (one from CANTERA and two from the MCN) involved in the study.

Chapter 4 presents the primary research based on interviews of the promotoras from the two organizations. The analysis of the development work of these organizations will concentrate especially on the promotoras' participation in CD as defined by the women themselves. The chapter is divided into sections that focus on the role and impact of promotoras' work in CD, especially on individual and community participation and empowerment.

The conclusions are presented in Chapter 5. It demonstrates how this study contributes to appreciating the promotoría approach to CD, its role in development
practice, and its impact on individual and community participation and empowerment. The promotoría model in Nicaragua, and other parts of Latin America, has become crucial for enhancing community outreach, broadening participation, enabling individual/collective empowerment, and finding creative ways to deal with CD challenges. The promotoría approach expands women’s leadership roles, while contributing to overall project sustainability; as the cases from Nicaragua reveal, key for the promotoras’ success is their own process of personal transformation through community work based on popular education and capacity building. However, organizational, cultural and economic limitations present challenges to the promotoras’ approach. Traditional machista attitudes question women’s ability to occupy leadership positions, while economic constraints force promotoras to leave their voluntary positions in favour of better-remunerated work. The contributions and limitations of promotoras’ work are relevant for policy-makers, practitioners and funders of community development, particularly when oriented towards poor women.
Chapter 2: 
Promotoras, Community Development and Participation in Latin America

Since the mid-1980s, it has become common practice for NGOs, CBOs, and even GIs in Latin America to carry out CD projects based on the activities of volunteer community women, better known as promotoras. Although these women play a fundamental role in the success of CD work by different development organizations, there has been little, if any, comprehensive documentation of the promotoras’ role, approach and overall significance to CD. This chapter attempts to fill that void by reviewing the literature available on how promotoras and CD have developed historically in Latin America. Particular attention will be given to the impact of the promotoras’ work on CD goals such as community participation and empowerment. In this study, it is argued that the challenge for CD directed toward local empowerment lies in the nature and politics of development organizations’ structures, in which prescribed social, political and economic conditions often determine levels of local people’s participation.

In order to fully understand the role of the promotoras, it is necessary to provide working definitions of two main concepts tied to community development: participation and empowerment. A brief historical appraisal of development policies in Latin America

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5 There have also been a few state governments and NGOs in the US, that have incorporated promotoras, or community health advisors, in health care and social services delivery programs in the last 10 years (for examples see web sites: www.hud.gov/local/tx/groups and www.4children.org/news/102prom.htm).
will throw light on the changing meanings of these two concepts and their relation to the "promotoras'" approach to CD.

During the 1940s and 1950s it was thought that the key to solve Latin America's economic problems was found in modernization (Streeten 1995: 45-46; Brohman 1996: 10-22). This involved, among other matters, the creation of infrastructure, industrialization, and integration of indigenous and non-indigenous populations within a national discourse. This model was already in crisis by the late-1950s when it became evident that the gap between the haves and the have-nots was increasing steadily (Batten 1965; Streeten 1995; Ward 1997). The rising discontent of the majority was further fuelled by the success of the Cuban revolution in 1959, which showed the possibility of an alternative road to the prevailing model of 'maldevelopment' (Brohman 1996: 202). These pressures, amidst the climate of the Cold War led, in 1961, to the implementation of the Alliance for Progress program by the United States (Perloff 1969: XIII). This international funding agreement was different from previous ones in that it made provisions for Latin American countries to include social development programs in their national development plans (ibid). An ever-increasing number of professionals began planning, observing, and monitoring CD programs, arguing that the model would eventually modernize Latin America and raise the standard of living for the majority (Du Sautoy 1964; Batten 1965; Streeten 1995; Ward 1997). Many local programs and projects were channelled to local communities, targeting mostly rural and displaced populations affected by land concentrations and macro-economic projects such as dams, logging, and mining (Brohman 1996: 202). A smaller number of programs were also targeted at urban centres, especially in emerging neighbourhoods that lacked basic
infrastructure to support human development (e.g., water, electricity, sanitation) (Moser 1986). The failure of this top-down, government driven model was evident by the late-1960s and early-1970s (Sunkel 1995: 358-359). Once massively implemented, most CD programs and projects became paternalistic and bureaucratic in their provision of services, fostering dependencies at various scales rather than local self-reliance and socio-economic sustainability.

During the 1970s there was also growing awareness that minority groups had been left out of the modernization paradigm, especially poor women and indigenous groups. For example, during the 1960s women were left out of CD efforts because of dominant gender-based cultural values that limited women’s activities to their familial and maternal roles; other groups such as indigenous groups and the poor were left out due to racial and/or class discrimination. As a result, many development models then virtually excluded women from their development plans (Brohman 1996: 277-282). 

Thus, CD programs were not significantly impacting the lives of women and other minority groups in critical areas such as access to education, employment options, political and social representation, participation and overall welfare. In response to this situation, new development models that claimed to be people-centered and ‘participatory’ began to emerge in the 1970s. In this context, the need to incorporate participatory approaches in CD was championed by development NGOs (Brohman 1996: 253-257). Academic research from the 1970s onwards indicates that this approach to development work increased the participation of people commonly excluded from the social and economic mainstream due to issues of gender, ethnicity, and social and economic status (ibid.). By the late-1980s and 1990s, NGOs were increasingly seen as the best alternative
for building on democratic and participatory programs and projects, rather than
government agencies. From the late-1990s to the present, participatory models and non-
profit organizations have been perceived as important vehicles to facilitate development
processes, and play a major role in international development efforts (Clark 1991, 1997;
Fisher 1997; Carroll 1992; Gudynas 1997; World Bank 1997a, 1997b, 1994; United
Nations 1996; Ritchie 1997; Hulme and Edwards 1997; Macdonald 1997). There are,
however, clear limitations to the bottom-up CD work of NGOs, particularly in regards to
cultural and organizational attitudes and practices (Brohman 1996: 270-271; Fisher 1997:
6-7). For example, the idea of women working outside their homes has still not been
accepted in many countries, particularly if a woman is married with children. In the case
of our study, promotoras may be limited to what kind of work they can do in the
community. Also, the organizational structure of some NGOs can be as bureaucratic as
government organizations, thus determining the type of relationship that develops
between staff and program participants. This latter issue, especially, is directly related to
the levels and type of participation that NGOs can achieve.

Much of the change from government funding to non-profit funding in the late-
1980s and 1990s coincided with the widespread implementation of the neo-liberal
economic model in Latin America. Part of neo-liberal economic policies has involved
the decentralization of social programs away from government agencies and into the
private non-profit sector. The general rationale is that by shifting funding for social
welfare provisions from government to the NGO and non-profit sector, more effective
and appropriate ways to approach and interact with communities will emerge. However,
some academics (e.g. Fisher 1997: 3-4; Macdonald 1997: 4; Nyamugasira 1998: 297)
warn about problems in perceiving NGOs' role as a non-political agent in development policy-making and CD work as a whole. They suggest that neo-liberal proponents downplay the NGOs' "potential for moral and political influence," and obscure the power relations between governments, donors and NGOs (Fisher 1997: 6; Macdonald 1997: 4). They see state and international agencies, in other words, support for NGOs' work to encourage community participation and democratic processes only insofar as it does not threaten their broader political and economic interest (Nef 1995: 91; Nyamugasira 1998: 297).

Also in the 1970s, and tied to the emerging role of NGOs, the inclusion of a 'women's agenda' in development policy became a growing concern. For example, the publication of Rose Boserup's *Women's Role in Economic Development* (1970)\(^6\) and the First United Nations World Conference on Women in Mexico City in 1975, were pivotal events in questioning the impact of international and national development policies on local women (Goetz 1997: 3; Brohman 1996: 282; Parpart et al. 1995:13; Chowdhry 1995: 31). These events led to the formulation of the Women in Development (WID) and Women and Development (WAD) approaches, and most recently, Gender and Development (GAD) in the last 30 years, as an effort to better integrate women in development processes (Marchand et al. 1995:13-15). The earlier women's policy initiatives of WID and WAD are considered policies of access because they are designed mainly to give women the right to use social services, but it has not necessarily dealt with gender inequality issues (Goetz 1997: 3). In other words, participation was restricted to

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\(^6\) This book addressed the impact of development policies on local women, especially in Asian and African countries. It addressed economic discrimination against women in local development programs, which eventually contributed to the incorporation of the Women in Development (WID) agenda into mainstream development policy.
women's access to resources and information in local development programs and projects, but did not include changes in areas such as women's political representation or equal pay for equal jobs. The emphasis was on the integration of women to solve immediate needs rather than on broader strategic goals (Molineux 1985: 233; Brohman 1996: 298-299). In the 1990s, and in response to the strategic limitations of WID and WAD, a new women’s development approach emerged in the CD scene, GAD, which was designed to more aggressively pursue greater social and political representation of women in decision-making at all spheres (Goetz 1997: 3).

Participation, however, remains a contested concept. Following 1995 in particular, many academics and practitioners of CD have increasingly questioned the role of participation and participatory approaches and practices to building sustainable communities (Blanchet 2001; Miraftab 2003). Studies on CD and participation suggest that local participation is more the exception than the rule in current CD practice (Carroll 1992; Najam 1996; Fisher 1997; Ewig 1999; Vivian 1999; Miraftab 2003). For instance, in his book *Participatory Development*, J. Brohman suggests that, although participation has gained recognition as an absolute requirement not only within alternative models but also within mainstream development models in the Third World, “it has remained an elusive concept” (1996: 251).

The literature on participation clearly shows that the term ‘participation’ has many meanings within the development community, which can be summarized in two broad schools of thought (Veltmeyer 2001). One views participation as a *tool, instrument* or a *means* for more efficient implementation of development projects. Under this definition, the role of community members is limited to the work and benefits at the
implementation stage; they do not have any control over the design and evaluation of the programs (Macdonald 1997: 24-26; Brohman 1996: 252). Decision-making in terms of project planning and objectives commonly depends on individuals from outside the community (such as state officials, political party members, or NGO staff), rather than on project beneficiaries or community members. This type of approach may be reflected in those institutions that typically do not provide workshops on self-esteem, public speaking, or other areas outside the main skill-oriented training that is the focus of those organizations.

The second school of thought sees participation as an *end in itself* or, in other words, as a *process leading to participants' empowerment to promote further social change* (Brohman 1996:252-253). Within this latter context, participants and communities have greater control in decision-making stages of the project(s) being developed for their benefit (ibid.). Of course, the level of involvement in decision-making and the collaborative process of a project vary according to time, interest, and the commitment of all partners involved in the process: funders, NGOs, and community members. And, as can be expected, the degree of collaboration usually requires significant voluntary investment as well as higher levels of funding than projects which do not employ such an approach. Problems arise, however, when funding and time constraints do not allow for these processes of collaboration, and project managers (e.g., hired leaders) take a short cut by making decisions themselves for the community.

A key component of the second school of thought is the idea of 'empowerment,' a concept with as many meanings as participation. For the purpose of this study we use the definition provided in the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action adopted at the
1995 Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, held in Beijing. The Platform was identified as an “agenda for women’s empowerment,” and describes empowerment as:

...a process, whereby women, individually and collectively, develop awareness of the existing discrimination and inequality between women and men, and how it affects their lives; understand how power structures, processes and relationships produce and reinforce this discrimination and inequality; and gain the self confidence, capacities and resources required to challenge gender inequalities (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women, 2005: W1).

This notion of women’s empowerment resulted in an increasing awareness in CD work that unless the roots of gender inequality are properly addressed, the participation of women will be limited to the delivery of services and ‘practical’ needs of women without any change in the broader organizational and social structures that limit the role of women at many decision-making levels (ibid.). Also, the perspective of women’s participation as a process of empowerment implies a clear commitment for women and development organizations to be actively involved, to create access to resources and to establish accountability procedures, all of which are essential components of participatory approaches.

Promotoras and Community Development in Latin America

This section examines the growth and popularity of the promotoras’ model by illustrating the historical development of CD practice among government institutions and non-profit organizations in Latin America. For this purpose I will borrow from four

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7 The Platform pointed to 12 aspects of concern to the development of women: poverty, education, health, economy, decision-making, human rights, violence against women, armed conflict, environment and media, the situation of girl children and the organizational means to encourage gender equality and empowerment of women.
examples in Peru, Venezuela, Ecuador and Mexico, to demonstrate the changing character and importance of the role of *promotoría* in CD work.

A review of the literature on *promotoría* and CD work shows a direct correlation between the role of *promotoría* and types of CD policies. For example, the *promotoría* model first appears in the context of the modernization project in the late-1950s, and is imbued with its inherent limitations. In its early stage, the model was designed mostly by anthropologists and sociologists, working for the United Nations, whose agenda was to support Southern national governments’ efforts to create local leadership enclaves in order to attain more effective outreaching, community support and sustainability of CD initiatives (Venezuelan Government 1961; Batten 1965; United Nations 1966). In the late-1970s and 1980s, however, governmental institutions and their role in the promotion of CD programs became increasingly unpopular. Programs were not seen to reach those who really needed them. As a result, non-profit organizations began to emerge and with them the development of an alternative paradigm of CD work. From the 1990s to the present, non-profit organizations have grown exponentially, with international and national funding organizations increasingly stressing local people’s participation, empowerment, human development and sustainability as a measurement of success of CD projects.

In Latin America, the earliest mention of the *promotoría* model is intrinsically connected with the development of the ideology and methodology of CD in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Practitioners of CD concluded that the best method of facilitating social change in small communities was through the development of community programs and projects that would emphasize local leadership, needs assessment at the
local level, and voluntary participation from the community (Batten 1965; United Nations 1966). The first generation of CD work in Latin America was associated with the efforts of national governments at nation-building, colonization of indigenous land and land reform politics (Du Sautoy 1964; Batten 1965). The notion of nation-building was based on principles of social and economic modernization of government institutions, administrative structures and services, and was commonly accompanied by massive educational campaigns designed to bring technological advances to mainly rural small-scale agricultural sectors. Within this context, CD programs and the promotoría approach were treated as a marginal practice encouraged mostly by progressive national governments in Latin America, and was considered as an experimental approach funded or endorsed by intergovernmental and international organizations (e.g., United Nations’ Committee for Technical Assistance) (see Du Sautoy 1964; Batten 1965). The role of promotoras began to change in the 1970s, particularly after the incorporation of Paulo Freire’s popular education methods into CD practices. This led to a vision of the promotora not just as a receiver/deliverer of information, but as an agent of change, able to reflect on her own reality.

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8 The ideology and methodology of CD and its potential for nation building owed much to the work of T. R. Batten, a British academic that published in 1957 his first edition of Communities and their Development: An Introductory Study with Special Reference to the Tropics. The author draws from a huge empirical data collection, and attempts the first systematic comparative analyses of the “differences in aim, method, and organization” in CD practice; T. R. Batten had worked in the field of community education in Africa from 1929 to 1949, and since then at the University of London, Institute of Education (1965: V, VI). The study relies on individual and group consultations and discussions with nearly 150 officers that over the years had attended the Institute to learn CD and adult education techniques (ibid.).
The Use of the *Promotoría* Model to Implement Integrationist Policies: The Case of Peru

The National Plan for the Integration of the Indigenous Population (*Plan Nacional de Integración de la Población Indígena*) in Peru provides insight into the early use of the *promotoría* model to help implement the modernization agenda. A 1965 study by H. Martinez, published in an article, *Los Promotores Sociales en los Programas de Integración* (Social Promotors in Programs of Integration), states that the main goal of the Plan was “to integrate them [indigenous people] into the process of social and economic development of the nation” (245). The study identifies two main issues blocking the process of integration of the indigenous population. One was the “status of the technocratic personnel,” predominantly mestizos who, in the context of Peru, were distrusted by the indigenous people because they were seen to represent the dominant, repressive class (Martinez 1965: 248). This perception led to a lack of motivation for indigenous people to participate in services available to them through government institutions. The second issue affecting integration, and closely tied to the first, was the small number of local indigenous technocratic personnel available (e.g., from Quechuas, Aymaras). Most indigenous peoples had little, if any, local leadership knowledgeable of the kind of services available through the state, and how to access them. According to Martinez, to mitigate such community outreaching and local leadership-building problems, an international team of anthropologists, working within the Peruvian government on behalf of the United Nations (*Acción Andina de las Naciones Unidas*), proposed the adoption of the *promotoría* model to CD work:
Anthropologists recommended the utilization of the most acculturated cholos\textsuperscript{9} elements of those communities... starting then the organizing of the ‘First Experimental Course on the Formation of Social Promoters’ (Martinez 1965: 248).

The Plan began its first experimental course in 1957 (Martinez 1965). According to the author, between 1957 and 1963, 629 promotores were trained through 18 seminars where future promotores went through an internship period of 10 to 25 days each (ibid.). This training was imparted predominantly to men, since cultural and social norms were not yet receptive to women advancing into leadership positions.

The Plan and CD practices involved in it were to facilitate a “process of acculturation” deemed necessary for the country to “modernize” (247-248)\textsuperscript{10}. Following the training, promotores were to act as ‘cultural brokers’ between government CD organizations and local community members. Martinez defines what social promoters are, what they do, and how the model works in the following quote:

A social promoter is the element [person] selected by his community to receive a training course on the general activities of promotion and that later contributes to linking the indigenous world and the mestizo, within the regional or micro-regional intercultural situation...; his objective is to serve as a catalyst in processes of natural, or induced acculturation; it is an element [person] that does not belong to the Program, but to his community, since he does not receive any remuneration that makes him serve their objectives; he is a leader of his community and as such he is interested in the development of it. Now with a greater capacity to recognize its problems, aware of his human and natural capacity to resolve these, he also knows the objectives and mechanisms of the existing organizations in the region, of those amenable to use for the benefit of his own community (Martinez 1965: 249).

\textsuperscript{9} Cholo refers to indigenous people who have by choice adopted some of the mestizo cultural values. Cholos were considered a more appropriate group for bridging together the indigenous and the mestizo world (Martinez 1965: 248).

\textsuperscript{10} The author suggests promotores were regarded as essential to bridge the gap in the lack of services by indigenous people and their lack of trust of government incentives, because in the past indigenous and government relations over funding sources had been non-existent; so there was a degree of mistrust toward government (Martinez 1965).
The *promotor* was perceived as the most "acculturated" community person that, because of his mixed-heritage (*cholo*), could mediate between indigenous cultural values and those of the *mestizo* world, and accelerate processes of cultural change through his interest in new technological knowledge and his ability to motivate local people to participate. This approach worked with the premise that in order to facilitate processes of cultural change, the development of trust was fundamental for outreaching to indigenous communities and building on local leadership. The history of cultural mistrust between *mestizos* and indigenous cultures limited the ability of technicians to bring local CD programs and resources into indigenous communities, so the selection of an acculturated individual from the community, picked by the community itself, not paid by the Program, but with sufficient knowledge and skills to lead, came to be seen as critical for CD work to function successfully.

*Promotores*, then, became the main facilitators and organizers in the promotion of community participation and local leadership in CD programs; also, the *promotores'* training courses contributed to the development of their knowledge in community organizing and about the various organizational resources available to the community, making them a rich source of information and an example to other community members. These two characteristics of the *promotores* in the integrationist agenda were fundamental from the perspective of the Peruvian government. The *promotores* encouraged local participation and created local leadership to manage, or access natural and human resources required to extend the national agenda into indigenous areas. This type of community participation, however, remains quite limited since the Peruvian government’s primary goal, as Martinez (1965) suggests in his article, was not the
welfare of its population as an end, it was simply as a means to extend the control of the central state over the indigenous population by assimilating communities under one nation-state (see Brohman 1996: 20-23). It can be argued, therefore, that the integrationist agenda may have limited the type of participation that CD programs allowed in the community, and in effect acted to co-op local leadership (Brohman 1996: 202, 223).

To sum up, it is evident that the Plan Nacional de Integración coincided with the modernization agenda and as such it may have had some level of success regarding cultural integration but, most importantly for the purpose of this study, it contributed to a somewhat more sensitive approach towards building local leadership and participation. However, this early CD framework grew out of a Western-based methodological and ideological development perspective; and it took an additional 10-15 years to move CD toward a local development practice that would include local participation centered on local knowledge, beliefs and values, and that would target specific marginalized groups along gender, ethnic and racial lines.

The Use of the Promotoría Model for National Plans of Relocation of Dispersed Populations: The Case of Venezuela

The broad national goals that dominated the early phase of CD work with a focus on local participation can be further understood by examining the case of Venezuela. In 1961 the Venezuelan government published a national manual in which it laid down the goals, objectives and methods for the creation of the Division for Community Organization and Development (División de Organización y Desarrollo de la Comunidad) within the Ministry of Health and Social Assistance (Ministerio de Sanidad
Asistencia Social) (Venezuelan Government 1961: 3). The manual was aimed at the ministry’s employees, and provided a systematic guide for the government’s national plan of “Programs for Community Organization and Development, and the Relocation of Dispersed Populations” (Venezuelan Government 1961: 3). It borrowed directly from the United Nations’ definition of CD, particularly in two points: (1) it required the participation of local people to build on local leadership skills; and (2) it involved the monitoring and funding of governmental CD organizations.

Community development connotes [involves] the processes by which the efforts of the people themselves are united with those of governmental authorities to improve economic, social and cultural conditions of communities, to integrate these communities into the life of the nation, and to enable them to contribute fully to national progress. This process is made up of two essential elements: the participation of the people themselves in efforts to improve their standard of living, with as much reliance as possible on their own initiative, and the provision of technical and other services in ways which encourage local initiatives, self-help and mutual aid, and make these [CD programs and projects] more effective (Venezuelan Government 1961: 3).

For the Venezuelan government, the United Nations’ definition helped to legitimize and justify the need to develop an organizational structure for coordinating national and local development efforts. The United Nations’ CD definition was based on the basic role of government agencies in funding and policy making, which saw people’s participation and technocratic resources as significant components for CD programs’ success.

A retired promotora in Venezuela in 1961, comments that the implementation of the Program was fully dependent on government funding and resources, and recalls this

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11 This same quote it is also found on the books by T. R. Batten (1965: 2) and Du Sautoy (1964: 1, 121).

12 L. Lopez lives in Vancouver today and was informally interviewed about her involvement in the program, which mainly took place during the presidencies of Raul Leone and Rafael Caldera in the 1960s and early-1970s in Venezuela.
period as the early “golden era” of Venezuelan CD social programs (interview, retired
promotora, L. Lopez, Vancouver, July 7, 2003). At the local level, the promotion of CD
programs was dependent on the efforts of the promotoras, which were directly supervised
by the Ministry’s employees. Promotoría training consisted of seminar programs in
which future promotoras received information related to the social issues that were to be
dealt with in the community. In the case of the ex-promotora, her work was on
children’s protection and family reproductive-health education, focused on the poor
suburban areas in Maracaibo. According to her, the promotores were not from the poor
communities, but like her, were working middle-class individuals who had a vocation for
CD work. As part of their CD work, promotoras got full support from the Ministry to do
their work, and received a small honorarium. In this context, the participation of local
people was mainly limited to their presence in training sessions and educational meetings
and, in a few instances, community members would also work supporting promotoras’
activities.

According to Lopez, the promotoras eventually stopped working when
government funding to support the delivery of programs finished in the mid-1970s with a
change in political leadership and a deepening economic crisis. Although she suggests
that people benefited at the basic needs and health-education levels, the development of
local leadership and voluntary participation remained virtually absent. The promotoría
model implemented in Venezuela was similar to that of Perú, but it differed in that the
promotoras were not from the local communities, were not volunteers and worked
directly with Ministry staff personnel rather than with the local community in the
development of local leadership. The participation of people from the community was
only as beneficiaries of the services from the CD programs, while building local leadership or creating local human resources through concerted training was absent.

Programs encouraged participation based on a paternalistic model of social and economic relations, rather than trying to shift power relations based on class and gender values. Typifying CD in the 1960s, the Venezuelan case was top-down, charity-oriented and utilitarian, with no room for raising social, political and economic class awareness that would challenge the political role of the state (interview, L. Lopez, Vancouver, July 7, 2003; Brohman 1996: 202). Quite the contrary, in practice the services dispersed were due mainly to the will of elected politicians, rather than as a basic human and social right. Decision-making remained in the hands of national elitist groups and international economically-powerful leadership led by US corporations and their allies (Brohman 1996: 10-11). Instead of the development of small communities in terms of their social and economic infrastructure, Venezuela, as in many other Latin American nations, became further dependent on the role of national and international funding, contributing to the massive foreign-debt phenomenon that characterized the 1980s (Brohman 1996: 22-23, 202).

**Idealogical and Methodological Shifts in the Promotoría Approach: The Case of Ecuador**

The *promotoría* approach in Ecuador introduces some of the early ideological, methodological and ethical shifts towards a more people-centred participatory model for CD that characterized the period from the mid-1970s through to the 1980s. Widely recognized shortcomings of previous development models led to changes in policy, particularly in regards to people’s participation through CD practice. One important
component of this shift is the inclusion of formerly marginalized groups, such as poor women and indigenous populations.

For the case from Ecuador we rely on the Ecuadorian Centre for Agricultural Services (Central Ecuatoriana de Servicios Agrícolas) (CESA) which in 1986 funded a study entitled *Forms of Women’s Participation in Five Rural Areas of Ecuador*. This document gives a comprehensive account of an early participatory action research (PAR) project that included 14 *promotoras* as part of the research team (CESA 1986: 17). CESA’s general goal was to understand “the situation and forms of participation of women in the context of the implementation of development projects” (ibid.: 10). The research was concerned primarily with the role of women, “as social-economic actors,” in local projects, because women’s contribution to CD theory and practice had been, until then, virtually neglected (ibid.: 9). Moreover, there was an evident dissatisfaction by small- and medium-sized farmers with the failures of previous modernizations schemes, which gave an impetus to new approaches for community participation (ibid.: 24).

PAR strategy was intentionally devised to shake traditional perceptions of social power structures. PAR intertwines three main activities: research, education and action (Selener 1997: 17). PAR promotes the incorporation of the group, or community, in the various stages of research to encourage participants to take “transformative actions” as a result (ibid.: 18). So, PAR is an action-research methodology that facilitates the process of studying a specific social problem, seeking its sources and finding collective solutions to solve it. PAR’s methodology is deeply grounded in the methodology and ideology of popular education. In our case study in Ecuador, the methodology of popular education

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13 This project was funded by the Swedish International Cooperation Agency.
was extensively used for the training and education of all the promotoras involved. The objectives of the training program centered around three main points:

1. Increasing awareness of the role of promotoras in CD programs (this included addressing the issue of circumstances that led to lack of participation of women in CD work);
2. Teaching the PAR tools to the promotoras;
3. Building on local leadership development and raising awareness about the social, economic and political conditions of the communities.

The Ecuadorian case exemplifies a shift toward greater inclusion of women, and marginal sectors in general, in programs and decision-making that places them, rather than solely professionals, in positions of power by involving ‘participants’ in the processes of research development of programs that directly affect their lives (Shuftan 1999; Macdonald 2001). This change occurred within an international development agenda that began to encourage the development of alternative paradigms, especially in light of the perceived failures of previous local development efforts (Brohman 1996: 217). Although this shift took place over two decades ago, even today the poor largely continue to be mere recipients of development aid and services, and programs are seldom accountable to the communities in which they work.

The Ecuadorian case also illustrates the widespread adoption in the 1980s of Paulo Freire’s methodology and ideology of popular education. One important consideration for the incorporation of the methodology of popular education in CD work was its potential to promote participation, not just as mere tokenism, but as a process of empowerment (Kane 2001). The ideology of popular education, which goes beyond simply a methodology, facilitates a process of self-awareness and discovery by raising
the social, political and economic awareness of community members about the causes of their position in society. This pedagogical approach reinforces in the promotoras the ideas that paid, formally-trained professionals are not the only source of knowledge; they themselves, as community members, also have a wealth of knowledge. This recognition may positively impact levels of self-awareness and self-confidence of women in order to facilitate a process of personal empowerment. Popular education recognizes the creative potential of informal knowledge acquisition, particularly of local knowledge. From this perspective, popular education considers people as subjects of their history's past, present, and most importantly, future, giving people a sense of ownership and hope to build a better world for people on the margins.

Thus, this approach to training the 14 promotoras in the Ecuadorian study based on PAR and popular education provided a more flexible alternative for local participation in CD programs. This re-conceptualization of the role of local participation, by involving the most marginalized in research and decision-making processes about program development, permitted a reconfiguration of the meaning of participation, and of CD goals and objectives, particularly in regards to the production and transmission of knowledge, and the ability and power to shape a more sustainable, just society. In the models prior to the 1970s local development initiatives ignored local people as actors and protagonists of their own realities, and tended to give people only a passive role as receptors of CD programs' benefits. Alternative approaches to CD, aiming to be more participatory, came to challenge previously held views on the role and significance of local participation, recognizing the need for empowerment to create a respectful and sustainable model for local development.
Popular education and PAR starts with the notion of local participants as capable members of society who have the capacity and local knowledge to reflect upon its reality (like historical beings) from a holistic perspective, and act upon it. From this perspective CD programming becomes, ideally, a process\textsuperscript{14} of empowerment. The success of this latter process, however, continues to be tied to the broader economic and political values of the organizations managing the programs, and other social-cultural values that may impact the role of women in public life.

A Participatory Approach to Community Development: The Case of Mexico

*Fundación Los Niños* (referred to as *Los Niños*) is a bi-national NGO founded in 1980 and based in San Diego, United States. Most of its activities, however, are concentrated in Tijuana, Mexico. Since 1985 the organization has incorporated *promotoras* in local social-development programs. The organization is administered by a small (3-4 people) team of technocrats and a larger number (at least 70) of *promotoras* and other volunteers. Unlike the first three cases in which our sources are mainly traditional academic documents\textsuperscript{15}, this example’s sources rely mainly on two books that are joint efforts between the organization and the *promotoras*. One is an institutional *Manual for Community Promotoras* (*Los Niños* 1998b), developed by the NGO in consultation with the *promotoras*. The second is entitled *Experiences of a Community Promoter* (*Los Niños* 1998a), based on the *promotoras’* oral histories. The last book was

\textsuperscript{14} The methodology of popular education and ideology refers to a process because it is not a static state of being, but is a natural process of change and renewal based on practice and reflection over reality, and back to practice.

\textsuperscript{15} All the materials are academic documents, except for the interview material of L. Lopez (Vancouver, July 7, 2003) about the example from Venezuela.
almost fully elaborated\textsuperscript{16} by the \textit{promotoras} themselves, with external support limited to technical aspects involved in publishing and editing (ibid.).

The documents are a valuable source of information on what the \textit{promotoras} do within the organization, and in particular the oral histories provide an insight into how the \textit{promotoras} perceive themselves, and how their community work has impacted them, their families and the community.

The definition of a \textit{promotora} in \textit{Los Niños’ Manual for Community Promotoras} (1998b) stresses her role as an agent of change:

The \textit{promotora} is an agent of change that, based on her own example, has been transformed from a passive person into an active person for the betterment of her community. The \textit{promotora} is supervised by an institution which sponsors her work, providing a framework, and human and economic resources for her training and development of the program. It is a person that emerges from the community and has been taken and motivated for a special process of training, social and political awareness, and information on themes of interest for her personal improvement, as well as that of the family and community (1998b: 8).

\textit{Los Niños} emphasises its role as a provider of program content, technical and capital resources for women, and adequate training and preparation for the \textit{promotoras} to do community work. \textit{Los Niños} focuses on personal growth as a critical component of development and, in this sense, is closely related to issues of empowerment and human development policies championed by the United Nations since the 1990s. Empowerment, then, becomes inseparable from participation \textit{as an end}; instead of adopting the \textit{promотора} model of participation for achieving specific CD goals, there is a concerted effort for sustainability and continued involvement in the community.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Promotoras} who shared their histories were involved in the different processes of producing the book, such as transcribing, editing and printing. Thus, the intention was to contribute to \textit{promotoras’} personal reflection and skill-building through their own process of personal transformation.
The training for the *promotoras* at *Los Niños* involves a process of personal change and of questioning reality, stimulated through workshops and through their own experience in the field. The training of the *promotoras* is based on the methodology of popular education and, because of its length (one to two years), plays a significant role in facilitating a long-term, and continuous, process of personal and collective reflection and transformation.

The oral histories of 19 *promotoras* from *Los Niños*, published in 1998, provide a first-hand example of how their participation in local development programs with *Los Niños* has impacted them. Gaining personal self-esteem and confidence was clearly one of the main common threads in the histories, alongside a process of positive transformation as individuals, wives, mothers, and community leaders that took place as they became more engaged in their role as *promotoras* (*Los Niños* 1998a). As women feel more secure about themselves and their contribution to society, they are evermore willing to continue their personal journey of growth, as the following quote illustrates:

> This motivation that has been awakened in me has encouraged me to finish my elementary education, to continue with further studies and to help my children get ahead...I have gained self-esteem and self-confidence. I do not close doors anymore. I now look for alternatives and I am beginning to move forward (*Los Niños* 1998a: 35).

The community leadership ability of the *promotoras* allows them to act as facilitators by passing information to local people, informing them of social and political changes in the community so they can decide when and how to take action if necessary. In other words, they facilitate local leadership and encourage skill development. Also, by living in the communities in which they work, *promotoras* are more readily available to support local people in a variety of ways when needed.
While the stress on individual self-confidence and self-empowerment has unquestionable merits, it also has clear limitations regarding the scope of participation as a means. The most evident one is precisely its individualism, where it is assumed that it is up to each of the members of the community to solve their problems. In other words, any links with the global socio-economic and political context that produce inequalities are minimized, and the onus of development is passed onto local individuals. Another issue that limits the forms of participation is tied to practical concerns, particularly funding. The activities of Los Niños, for example, continue to be centered on nutrition because this goal is most likely to get funded. These restrictions have an impact on participation, not only by leaving many people out of the process, but also by limiting the scope of their activities.

In sum, the case of Los Niños shows how a participatory, people-centered model works, and what some of its advantages are, at the individual and community level. At the personal level, this approach facilitates a process of self-awareness, confidence building and the acquisition of local leadership skills for the promotoras. At the community level, it facilitates the development of local leadership that can introduce and mediate new information and tools for improving community life. At the same time, the process of participation as an end is endangered by its emphasis on individual rather than collective empowerment, thereby minimizing reference to needed structural changes. While it is true that the approach used by Los Niños confirms the possibilities of human potential, it also contributes to obscuring the real roots of inequalities by focusing only on individual success stories.
Conclusion

The purpose of this chapter was to give a general overview of the history of promotoría in Latin America, with particular emphasis on participation and empowerment. It shows how the promotoría model came to be a direct product of specific, historically-constituted social, political and economic conditions in Latin America. Initiated in the late-1950s within the context of the doctrine of modernization and the Cold War, it gained prominence in the 1960s with the implementation of the US-sponsored Alliance for Progress. The model, however, suffered from its heavily paternalistic, state-centred, top-down orientation that failed to meet the actual needs of poor communities. In the late-1960s and 1970s, particularly through the influence of the methodology of popular education, a reformulation of development practices towards more inclusive, people-oriented CD strategies took place.

The cases from Perú and Venezuela illustrate the first phase of the implementation of the promotoría model, characterized by the top-down approach, closely tied to directives of the United Nations. The cases from Ecuador and Mexico demonstrate how the vision of promotoras’ work as a means to fulfill particular CD goals slowly shifts over time to one in which promotoras’ participation becomes an end in itself, contributing not only to achieving local development goals, but also to individual and collective empowerment. Furthermore, the role of popular education and PAR facilitates a more appropriate and effective manner for long-term leadership building and program sustainability. The incorporation of popular education and PAR from the late-1970s onwards, represents not only a methodology to facilitate the integration of women in CD, but it also points to an ideological shift in the relationship between popular and
technocratic knowledge. The validation of other forms of knowledge has altered the relationship between *promotoras* and institutions by including more meaningful notions of inclusivity and democratic participation.

There are, however, some clear challenges that emerge even within the context of organizations employing participatory approaches such as popular education and PAR. The level of involvement, for example, of *promotoras* and other community members in decision-making, as well as the overall collaborative process of project development, varies according to time, interests and the commitment of all partners in the process: funders, non-profit or government organizations, the *promotoras* themselves and other community members. Furthermore, there are cultural, political and economic limitations to the participation of people in various programs, especially because such participation usually involves changes in cultural values and/or power relations. Any concerted effort to create spaces for community participation and empowerment, then, requires a 'true,' bottom-up organizational awareness of the cultural, political, economic and historical limitations that impinge on people's participation in programs, and also requires mechanisms for organizations to be accountable not only to funders but to the communities in which they work. Finally, there is the possibility for this type of *promotoría* approach to concentrate too much on the individual, losing scope of the broader structural causes of inequalities upon which lasting, strategic goals should be based.

An analysis of the development of CD organizations and the *promotoría* model in Latin America is helpful to understand the context of more specific CD initiatives in Nicaragua, which will be dealt with in the following chapter.
Chapter 3: Community Participation and the Growth of Community Development Organizations in Nicaragua

The following chapter considers the social, political and economic context of Nicaragua within which CD and promotoría eventually emerged. In the last hundred years Nicaragua has been through 43 years of dictatorship, 11 years under a revolutionary government and, since 1990, the implementation of a neo-liberal development agenda by three successive administrations. We will follow CD and the promotoría model in Nicaragua within this complex socio-political and economic environment, paying particular attention to two development organizations that have long utilized the model. Tied to the adoption of the promotoría model is the embracing of popular education in Nicaragua from the 1970s onwards. It will be argued that the inclusion of the methodology of popular education has been fundamental for increasing politico-economic awareness among the most impoverished sectors, and has also been key in motivating local action to improve living conditions. The examples of the Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (MCN) and Centro de Comunicacion y Educacion Popular CANTERA (CANTERA) illustrate the significant contribution popular education had in formulating national policy during the Revolutionary period (1979-1990), and the changes that have taken place since 1990, when CD work has become increasingly the domain of NGOs.
The Nicaraguan Context

Since 1912, Nicaragua’s governance has been limited by US occupation and the concomitant coercion of its political, economic and socio-cultural spheres17 (Babb 2001). Accumulated decades of politico-economic turmoil in Nicaragua have impacted types and levels of participation. In 1936 Anastasio Somoza Garcia18 removed his uncle, President Sacasa, from power and thus began the Somoza family19 dictatorship which would last until 1979. Under the Somoza regime, the benefits of the economic growth that took place in the post-World War II period were mainly concentrated in the hands of a few powerful families. The Somoza family itself grew enormously wealthy through corruption and violence, and at the expense of the country’s poor. In opposition to the regime, in July 1961 a group of university students in León, inspired by the struggle of César Augusto Sandino20, founded the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN) (Babb 2001: 6-7). The FSLN attracted increasing numbers of young revolutionaries, mainly students and peasants, who embraced a more radical stand than the traditional Nicaraguan liberal-left and fervently opposed the dictatorship (Randall 1994: IX). In its beginnings the FSLN was a “popular [social] movement of students, workers, and peasants” whose banner was to oppose the increasing poverty and violence affecting large sectors of the Nicaraguan population (Babb 2001: 7).

The emerging social and political crisis in Nicaragua of the 1970s was magnified on Christmas eve of 1972, when an earthquake hit Managua and destroyed most of the

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17 The US Marines’ intervention and occupation in 1912 lasted until 1933. During this period the US helped to establish the National Guard, the notorious police force of the Somoza dictatorship.
18 A graduate of West Point, at the time he was the leader of the National Guard.
19 Somoza Garcia was murdered in 1956 at a public celebration in León and was succeeded as president by his sons, Luis and Anastasio Somoza Debayle.
20 Sandino fought the US occupation and its Nicaraguan allies by leading a Nicaraguan guerrilla army; in 1934, he was murdered by Anastasio Somoza as the leader of the National Guard.
city. The earthquake’s destruction and the subsequent misdistribution (or appropriation) of international aid by the Somoza dictatorship brought into the open the extensive of the corruption of the regime (CAPRI 1997: IX). The lack of basic social services worsened considerably after the earthquake, and contributed to the increased growth of the non-profit/ non-governmental sector. By the late-1970s, according to CAPRI, which focuses on supporting NGOs in Nicaragua and has a directory of NGOs, the urgency of the period determined the goals of the non-governmental sector:

It was about accompanying in a more deliberate way the popular sectors in their confrontation with the repression and marginalization of Somocismo [the dictatorship]. By the end of the 1970s, the work performed by the majority of NGOs had succeeded in organically bring together their bases [communities] and the natural leaders of the community with better capabilities of analysis and an educational methodology of popular participation (1997: XI).

In the 1960s, the first two NGOs started in Nicaragua21 and defined their work as private, non-profit developmental activities, marked by a non-partisan approach and inspired by Christian ideals22 (CAPRI 1997: XI). But by the mid-1970s a newer form of NGO was emerging that provided alternatives for resisting the increasing social injustices and repression of the Somoza dictatorship; there was increasing impoverishment and socio-economic polarization, accompanied by greater migration from rural to urban cities as rural displacement and military repression increased (Macdonald 1997: 99).

21 NGOs in Nicaragua, unlike other Latin American countries, did not follow the gradual evolutionary pattern evidenced elsewhere of movement from charity and relief to development to political involvement (Macdonald 1997: 8-13, 99). In other Latin American countries, it was largely the “Catholic Church’s fear of social unrest” that led to the “formation and linking of international and national NGOs” from the 1960s (ibid.: 9, 99).

22 These early NGOs did mostly social work. Most of the organizations were related to religious institutions and aid oriented. The work focus in the provision of services, and the role of local people was primarily as receptors with little emphasis on raising social-political awareness.
Two of these new organizations with a central role in providing socio-economic alternatives and raising awareness, particular in rural areas were the *Escuelas Radiofónicas de Nicaragua* (Radio Schools of Nicaragua), and the *Instituto de Promoción Humana* (Institute of Human Promotion) (CAPRI 1997: IX). CAPRI asserts that these organizations increased 'participation' among the most popular social sectors of Nicaragua:

These organizations managed to present an alternative to the social injustices and to the deteriorating standard of living of the poorest sectors (CAPRI 1997: XI).

In order to carry out some of their community work, these organizations held radio-classes for four different levels of basic popular education by renting air-time for daily classes to community groups from 1966 to 1979 (CAPRI: 168). This was one of the first initiatives in Nicaragua using the ideology and methodology of popular education.

By the late-1970s the work of NGOs had managed, at least in some cases, to strengthen local community leadership and voluntarism; also, the FSLN's leadership had inspired international sympathy and was effectively organizing the popular sectors. In this period, the FSLN’s leadership successfully organized large sectors of the middle and upper classes to join the struggle to end the Somoza dictatorship. Much of the social and political organizing was done by mobilizing specific sectors such as workers, peasants, women and students behind a common plan for action (Randall 1994: 19). After more

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23 There were themes such as mathematics, health, agriculture and CD, as well as other workshops on raising social, political and economic awareness. Both organizations still exist in Nicaragua’s NGO sector, although their community development themes have changed over time. They continue to make use of the methodology and ideology of popular education (CAPRI 1997: 168, 263).
than a decade of intermittent war and much bloodshed, the FSLN was able to lead a final offensive which overthrew the Somoza regime on July 19, 1979.

Among the priorities of the revolutionary government was the implementation of universal healthcare, free access to education (from pre-school to university levels), and a massive agrarian reform. In order to manage this ambitious agenda, the FSLN crucially relied on various mass organizations for the implementation of social, economic and political policies at the local level. Many of the mass organizations coordinated the efforts of various popular sectors that had emerged during the insurrection, e.g. students, women, peasants, workers, neighbourhood groups. Among those mass organizations was the Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense; it was first informally made up of Civil Defense Committees (Comités de Defensa Civil, CDC) in the mid- to late-1970s, but once the Revolutionary Government was in power it transformed into the Sandinista Defense Committees (Comité de Defensa Sandinista, CDS). Nonetheless, the FSLN's egalitarian and participatory approach to CD, despite popular expectations, remained largely a top-down and centralized approach of state-led local development, and by the mid-1980s increasing criticism from within the party and mass organizations began to emerge (Randall 1994: 7).

In terms of national security issues, the FSLN government was opposed vigorously by the US, which viewed the revolution as anti-US and a communist threat to the region. The US imposed an economic blockade on Nicaragua and secretly funded a counterrevolutionary army (Contras), resulting in almost a decade of a 'low-intensity' warfare. The war and economic crisis greatly debilitated the country, and people's growing disillusion with the FSLN and its failure to end the war was reflected in
declining levels of local participation. In 1990 the FSLN held national elections and a pro-US coalition, the *Unión Nacional Opositora* (National Opposition Union or UNO), was triumphant. The UNO was led by Violeta Chamorro, the first female president in Nicaragua’s history.

For the purpose of this thesis it is relevant to mention here that women voted overwhelmingly in favour of Chamorro. Many academics, like F. Babb now indicate:

A gender gap in the vote, with more women favouring Chamorro, suggested that the revolutionary leadership had paid too little attention to the disproportionate effects of economic hardship and political turmoil on women (2001: 9).

In the period leading up to the elections, the national crisis and international pressures, such as US support of the Contra war, put extraordinary pressures on families, many of which had grown increasingly dependent on women, as men were being sent to the war zones, killed, or leaving the country to avoid the military draft. The war further intensified in 1988, accompanied by runaway inflation, which peaked at 14,000% annually (United Nations Population Fund 2003). These economic, political, and military events had a direct effect on the lives of women and contributed to their support for Chamorro, whose election they saw as an opportunity to bring about peace and economic stability (Babb 2001: 31). It impacted as well the role of women and participation in CD work. For instance, the mothers of war victims and heroes had played a strong role in the practical and ideological efforts of the Sandinistas; the post-1990s period allowed feminists within the party to gradually open up for non-partisan debate and improved the delivery of CD initiatives (ibid.).
The UNO government embraced a neo-liberal economic agenda, introducing structural adjustment policies (SAPs), which succeeded in cutting the deficit and lowering inflation, but resulted in a loss of jobs and rising prices, leading to crippling strikes throughout the country (Babb 2001: 9). For the social sector, the new policies required increased privatization, contributing to a further increase in the number of NGOs. In addition, mass organizations previously tied to the FSLN had to decentralize and assume a non-partisan, non-profit legal status in order to survive the post-revolutionary climate of the 1990s. Among the mass organizations that rapidly decentralized away from the state were the Comités de Defensa Sandinista (renamed Asociación Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense), and the Nicaraguan Women’s Association “Luisa Amanda Espinosa” (AMNLAE).

Since 1990 Nicaragua has continued to be dominated by a US-led neo-liberal agenda in concert with a succession of structural adjustment policies (SAPs) required by the international financial institutions. The FSLN has not been able to regain national political power but does remain the largest single party in the country. As well, the popular organizations have managed to gain much autonomy from the state and any single political party, but an indirect and loose affinity with the FSLN’s democratic and participatory ideals stills remains for many members and leaders of different mass organizations.

In terms of international aid provisions to the state, they have been mainly in the form of debt reduction and buy-backs, which in 2000, for example, resulted in a 70%
reduction of the total arrears of the national debt. The cost of reducing the debt, via the implementation of SAPs and other neo-liberal measures, however, has been devastating. For example, in the early-1990s privatization of many public services contributed to record under/unemployment of some 70%, with steeply increasing levels of poverty and decreasing access to basic healthcare and education, especially impacting on women and children (Babb 2001: 10). By 2000, although the general economic situation improved somewhat, Nicaragua still had an unemployment rate of 20%, with additional high levels of underemployment particularly affecting poor women and children (United Nations Population Fund 2003).

Despite the prolonged hardships caused by decades of national and local crisis in Nicaragua, many of the lessons learned from such challenges have provided mechanisms for people to resist repression and impoverishment and improve their conditions in the communities. The ideology and methodology of popular education, in particular, which was aggressively pursued during the revolutionary years, has had a permanent impact on the ability of mass organizations and the non-profit sector to transform and adapt their work to the changing conditions of present-day Nicaragua. Once the Sandinistas lost the election in 1990, many of the newly formed NGOs continued to rely on popular-education approaches to encourage processes of both individual and collective transformation and increased awareness, which have been essential to empower communities so they can better control their lives.

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24 In 2000 the GDP of Nicaragua was $2.36 billion and per capita GDP was estimated at $466 (second lowest in the Western hemisphere) a year, while the national foreign debt was more than $6 billion, the country had the highest per capita indebtedness in the world (United Nations Population Fund 2003).
Popular Education in Revolutionary Nicaragua

Popular education had a significant impact in the development of CD and local organizing in Nicaragua. In the pre-revolutionary era (1966-1979) it was introduced through radio programs that helped to increase the social-political awareness of many different social sectors. Accordingly, by the 1970s popular education had been already critical for creating endogenous alternatives to local development practice. The tradition of popular education facilitated the ability of organizations to adapt to changing local and national social, political and economic policies, and it also encouraged the building of local leadership, popular participation and education in Nicaragua.

Later, during the revolutionary period in the 1980s, popular education became national policy. The state’s community organizing approach was centered on the values and beliefs of popular-education ideology and methodology. Popular education aimed at linking social, political and historical realities to create a social-class awareness and solidarity, perceived as crucially important to efforts to overcome centuries of foreign occupation in Nicaragua. Popular education also implied the exploration of the complexities of concrete everyday experiences of people, leading to a transformative process of social-political change. Popular education, as applied in Nicaragua, provided a series of mechanisms (e.g., skills, knowledge, and understanding of the world) that facilitated long-term processes of personal and collective growth from the perspective of social-political justice and change.

A good example of the revolutionary mandate regarding educational and political goals was the implementation of the Cruzada Nacional de Alfabetización (National Literacy Crusade, NLC) in 1980 (Kane 2001: 193). The NLC involved the massive
participation of youth from all sectors of society. This effort was rooted in the ideology and methodology of popular education, and had a tremendous impact on both rural and urban people, not only because of the obvious benefit of learning to read and write, but also in the development of analytical tools needed to transform people’s values, beliefs and worldviews in a revolutionary manner.

In five months, and after mobilizing 95,580 volunteer educators (an incredible popular effort by any standards), the NLC reduced levels of illiteracy in Nicaragua from 50% to 13%: 406,056 Nicaraguans learned to read and write (Guajardo 1992: 321; Kane 2001: 194). Over 15,000 Colectivos de Educación Popular (Popular Education Collectives, CEPs) were established via participation of national mass organizations, most of which had been created just before or at the beginnings of the revolutionary period (Núñez 1992: 6; Kane 2001: 194). The Comités de Defensa Sandinista (CDS), because of their ubiquity in Nicaragua, were a key organizing body for the NLC. Many CEPs were based in the same locations as the CDS, and it was there that the student volunteers (who were called Brigadistas de Alfabetización –Literacy Brigades) coordinated their work with local coordinadores de base25, community leaders and other volunteers. At this early stage, the term promotor or promotora, was not yet part of the CD language in Nicaragua; brigadistas (e.g., of health, literacy), community leaders, and volunteers were the closest group to the current promotoras.

The social and political goals of the literacy campaign, besides reducing illiteracy, were designed to create class awareness and solidarity among the different social sectors and geographical areas of Nicaragua, particularly among youth and students. For

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25 These local neighbourhood coordinators were the predecessors of the community promotoras.
example, I personally took part in the national literacy campaign when I was 13 years old, as an urban-raised youngster. This early experience contributed to raising my own awareness about, and solidarity towards, people who at first glance did not have much in common with me, except for the will to reduce the social and economic inequalities that separated us (me being from a working-middle class Nicaraguan family, and the 'student' being from a small young family in the rural outskirts of León). Although I remember little about the actual literacy plan that I had to implement, the time I spent with this family, and the sense of solidarity, trust and appreciation that we shared, are still with me²⁶. Most importantly, (and impacting my current interest in local-development) there was an emphasis on our individual roles as contributors to building a more socially and economically just society, and the underlying understanding that the social, economic and political circumstances that created oppression could only be challenged collectively to create an independent Nicaragua with equal opportunities for all.

It can be argued that the holistic approach of popular education in the context of the NLC gave people participating in CD activities the tools to question and analyse their reality, and with them the potential for personal and collective transformation. Moreover, some of the skills and abilities people acquired via the works of the mass organizations have impacted the way many Nicaraguans have come to reflect upon their world to make it a better place and continue to struggle despite the difficulties they face.

At the same time that the NLC was unfolding, there was as well, a revolution happening in other aspects of Nicaraguan life and leadership. For example, shortly after coming to power the FSLN recognized the importance of (national, international and

²⁶ I have continued, and will continue to visit this family over the years. They insist in calling me hija (daughter) and the spirit of solidarity and trust still persists between us.
local) NGOs for rebuilding the war-torn country. It became rapidly evident to Nicaraguans the transcending impact of their participation in improving their lives and in finding hope. The next section explores how national and international interest and support have impacted levels of participation at the local level, and in the growth of the NGO sector in Nicaragua; particular attention is given to the periods during and after the FSLN government.

**National and International NGOs in Nicaragua during the Revolutionary Government and Beyond**

Already in 1980 the party established mechanisms for coordinating development efforts, such as the *Fundación Augusto Cesar Sandino* (FACS) (Macdonald 1997: 101, 103; CAPRI 1997: 12). The mandate of the FACS was to provide technical and professional support to smaller NGOs and grassroots organizations (GROs) in order to access development funding and resources. Thus, during the early stages of the FSLN government, national NGOs acted mostly as intermediaries, channelling international funding to the Nicaraguan people, represented by mass organizations created and supported by the revolutionary government (Macdonald 1997: 102). At the same time, the social and political development agenda of the revolutionary government attracted many international NGOs and other solidarity groups, which donated an estimated $50 million per year (Macdonald 1997: 100-102).

The FSLN’s political and economic agenda supported the coordination of the activities of the State, CBOs and NGOs at the local, national, and international levels. Such coordination was unprecedented in Latin America (Macdonald 1997; Ewig 1999). However, even though most international NGOs supported the revolutionary agenda, by
1986 the war and its concomitant negative effects on the economy made coordination difficult. For example, after 1986 international workers in war zones were removed because many development projects were deliberate targets of Contra military attacks (Macdonald 1997: 102). The economic crisis was further fuelled by the US embargo, resulting in extremely high inflation rates, increasing indebtedness and fiscal insolvency (104-105).

By 1987, as the war and the economic crisis intensified, grassroots mass organizations became increasingly unable to provide solutions to pressing community problems. Many Nicaraguans became discouraged from participating in mass organizations and, as a consequence, popular participation began to decrease. Those who were committed continued their activities in CD, working mainly to transform mass organizations into more pluralistic bodies, concentrating on local issues and needs, rather than being primarily accountable to a political party or centralized government (Walker 1997: 187). The social, political, military and economic pressures on the revolutionary government also led to increasing levels of bureaucratization that eventually caused international NGOs to shift their support to local “NGOs and mass organizations, or to regional and municipal authorities” rather than through state institutions (Macdonald 1997: 106). Many international NGOs concluded that funding directly to mass organizations rather than channelling resources through the state would increase autonomy and would allow for better popular participation and decentralization (ibid.: 107).

Although the process of decentralization was set in motion in the last two years of the FSLN government, it was the UNO government that promoted this agenda more
strongly. The UNO, led by Violeta Chamorro, fully implemented SAPs whose adoption was a condition of the World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to engage in debt adjustments, international loans and encourage foreign investment (Macdonald 1997: 107-108). The adoption of the neo-liberal agenda brought about a reduction in public-sector investment, leaving thousands of middle-class professionals unemployed as a result of government cutbacks (Ewig 1999: 78; Macdonald 1997: 52, 107). As a result, many of the governmental organizations and NGOs, which had been formed during the FSLN government, had to be reconstituted to gain autonomy from the Party in order to survive the shift accompanying the new governmental agenda. Also, many new NGOs emerged in response to the process of decentralization and privatization of public services. For example, one of the newer NGOs emerging at the time was CANTERA in Managua. These newly formed NGOs, provided employment to large numbers of recently unemployed middle-class professionals displaced by governmental cuts, filled the gap left by the demise of previously state-provided services such as health and education, and finally the new NGOs gained broader international support within the framework of neo-liberal international development policies, which resulted in increased development funding.

As a result of shifts in the provision of social services and human rights, especially from the government to the non-government sector, by 1997 there were some 400 (national and international) NGOs with offices in Nicaragua working in the development field, channelling about 70% of international development aid (CAPRI 1997: XV). One of the main characteristics cited by CAPRI as significant for the success of NGOs was their ability to implement development programs to the satisfaction of both
beneficiaries and donors (ibid.: XVI). Development NGOs were believed to be more
effective in supporting and incorporating the popular sectors, who are the direct
beneficiaries of the many projects oriented to alleviating poverty. There is, however, a
growing body of literature among development academics suggesting that the praise for
NGOs' potential is based more in generalities than on specific studies of their
performance in areas such as welfare services and participatory development projects
(e.g. Ewig 1999; Nyamugasira 1998; Fisher 1997; Vivian 1194; Carroll 1992).

In summary, since the 1970s governmental and non-governmental organizations
in Nicaragua have relied heavily on international donors to fund local, regional and
national 'development' efforts. Moreover, development organizations at the local level
have increasingly become dependent on volunteers to carry out their activities. Popular
education has facilitated the process of increasing local awareness and furthering the
educational goals of the masses in Nicaragua, positively impacting levels of voluntarism
and solidarity in the country. The following section will trace the history and activities of
two organizations that, while very different in terms of structure and community
development goals, have made use of the promotoría model to carry out their local
agendas.

**The Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (MCN)**

The history of the *Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense* (MCN) is closely tied to
the activities of the FSLN. The early phase of the movement was characterized by the
incorporation of popular participation in the struggle against the repression and social injustices prevalent during the Somoza. The FSLN, as the vanguard opposition, was aware of the need to organize a strong popular resistance movement in order to overthrow the Somoza regime. To that effect, the FSLN began organizing underground committees, called Comités de Defensa Civil (CDC), which were led by local leaders and whose main objective was to protect the civilian population actively involved in the struggle and to coordinate the various local communities' efforts in the resistance movement. In other words, the realities of oppression and military repression in Nicaragua in the mid-to late-1970s determined the priorities of community-based organizing at that time. Among the most affected by the repression were students and youth from the popular sectors, who were among the most actively involved in the armed resistance, so that the first activities of the CDC were directed to solve some of their needs, such as facilitating underground health posts for those injured, or participation in hunger strikes to resist armed conflicts.

After the 1979 Sandinista triumph, a period of rebuilding the country began, involving enormous efforts at coordination at all levels. It required addressing immediate needs such as the creation of basic health units, food and medicine distribution, popular education, neighbourhoods' security watch, among other social, economic and political tasks. To help accomplish all of these within the revolutionary plan of the Sandinistas, the CDCs were transformed into Comités de Defensa Sandinista (CDS), which came to act as the executive body of the FSLN at the community level (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001). The CDS grew to become the largest mass

27 In the period just before and during the revolutionary period the term 'popular participation' was more commonly used to refer to the participation of community members in virtually any local activity or project. A term more commonly used today in Nicaragua is 'community participation' rather than 'popular participation.'
organization in Nicaragua and coordinated community work aimed at benefiting the most impoverished communities. For example, the revolutionary government established programs of universal health, education and childcare, even though the country did not have the technocratic, professional, or economic resources to fully implement such a major commitment. There was much emphasis on raising political awareness and on instilling principles of human solidarity and cooperation, particularly among youth and families, in order to facilitate and coordinate community work. In the urban centers most of the basic coordination at the local level was fully dependent on the work of coordinadores de base (grassroots coordinators), brigadistas de salud (health brigades), and community leaders and other volunteers; the term promotor or promotoras had not yet been integrated into Nicaraguan CD language (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 14, 2001). All these voluntary efforts were coordinated mainly through the local CDS; thereby, the CDS represented and managed much of the local-level participation of community people in the various national and local development projects.

By 1987, however, the conflict with the Contras had worsened and military security became the main priority of the government, which resulted in the CDS shifting its focus towards paramilitary work rather than addressing the needs of local communities, which were under increasing economic duress. CDS leaders were in charge of recruiting thousands of young people for the military draft. The paramilitary activities of the CDS affected women's lives in particular because they had to let go of

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28 As relations between the FSLN and the MCN evolved, it was not until 1990 that the national leadership of the latter organization was elected locally, before then only local-level leadership was elected, while at the national and regional level the FSLN party appointed leadership positions. This latter change in the Party-MCN relationship was the direct result of international and national pressures to decentralize from the FSLN in order to access funding and respond to local disappointment with the FSLN's alliance and to meet community people's immediate needs (i.e., access to drinking water, electricity, basic education, and employment).
their sons, brothers, husbands and friends to defend the revolutionary government against
the US sponsored Contra-war.

The war and the economic crisis deeply affected people’s participation in the
CDS, and many Nicaraguans began to switch to a less partisan approach to community-
based organizing. It was generally accepted by community leaders that they were
basically working without any governmental support in both rural and urban
communities. In 1987 a national consultation with local communities and local leaders,
coupled with increasing international NGO pressure, led to the transformation of the CDS
into a non-partisan, non-profit organization with a renewed vision and mission for
organizing and increasing local participation. In 1988 the CDS renamed itself Asociación
Movimiento Comunal Nicaragüense (MCN), but it was not until 1990, after the FSLN
lost the national elections, that the MCN fully worked towards their community-
organizing vision centered on people’s needs (as defined by them) and not guided by a
Party political and military agenda. This is how the MCN became an organization open
to everyone in the communities, their particular political partisan sympathies
notwithstanding. This early step to decentralization of the revolutionary government was
perceived, from an international perspective, as a step towards organizational autonomy,
increased community participation, and a decrease in the mounting bureaucratic and
discriminatory practices that were taking hold of the CDS by the mid- to late-1980s.

Since the 1990s onwards, the MCN has focused its activities on local social and
economic concerns, such as basic housing, community health care and education

\[29\] Although the organization works under MCN, at the community level, small organizing groups are called
Committees for Community Development (Comités de Desarrollo Comunal or CDC) in the urban areas
and Committees for Rural Development (Comités de Desarrollo Rural or CDR) in countryside.
(interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001; interview, MCN representative 2, León, April 27, 2001). In practice, however, this focus on local social and economic work has not yet completely divorced itself from political life, as one of the informants commented on his continued support of the MCN:

In 1990 power was lost because a revolutionary government was practically taken over by a neo-liberal government, but this also motivated me to continue the struggle of the pueblo [people], to not let the rights that the pueblo had at the time be taken away, and I continued then the work with the community organizations (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, April 23, 2001).

So while it is evident that the MCN is not a partisan organization any longer, many of its members still continue to identify themselves with the struggle not only for the basic needs of the people, but also for their human rights and socio-political freedoms at a broader and deeper level.

At the local leadership level, the MCN organizational structure is represented by community promotoras (es), community-elected leaders, and community members at large. In some instances, the women may act as both promotoras and community-elected leaders for certain amounts of time in their communities. The gender distribution of the volunteer force within MCN is dominated by women, with some 85% women and only 15% men (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001). At the municipal and departmental levels, the MCN representatives are elected every three years at a national assembly composed of more than 600 community leaders and promotoras. The National Directorate is elected every six years in the same assembly. There are three committees

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30 According to one of the MCN's leaders, there was no need for neighbourhood defense once the revolutionary government lost the elections in 1990, since war was over (see Chapter 3).
(national, departmental and municipal) that act as executive bodies, with a few hired professionals (when specific projects require such roles) who mediate between the local community's needs/interests and outside sources of funding for specific projects. In these three levels of leadership, the committees are by promotoras (es) and community leaders. As a result, any mediation between national and international agencies is carried out by municipal, departmental or national-level leaders, while local-level representation relies exclusively on the participation of the promotoras, community leaders and local members. Until 2001, in León the national, regional and municipal leadership levels of the organization had only been held by men, despite the high percentage of women involved in the organization of the working committees and in community development work in general.

A very important aspect of the MCN is its self-definition as a transformative movement, a feature of the organization that was clearly described by its departmental representative during a personal interview:

We call an organization transformative when it offers and gives tools to the population through their promotor, or promotora, and gives knowledge to the population, so they can confront the problems that they have in their communities, identify the causes of their problems, and if necessary, denounce whoever needs to be denounced. The idea is for people to be able to identify their problems, their causes, to know how they can resolve these problems, and that people see it as inhumane not to do something about it, and on the contrary, that those same problems serve as a medium for people to empower themselves and struggle to be different (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001).

The transformative element that guides the MCN is reflected in its mission, which is to “contribute to the community to be the main link of participation and neighbourhood
organizing for women and men, girls, boys and teenagers, youth and seniors, in demand of, and protected by human rights and democracy, in the struggle against poverty, inequality, and the construction of social development, and with it, the search for a humane and sustainable development model” (MCN Statutes 1998:1). This mission encourages and challenges community members to be protagonists in the process of community participation and organization. It motivates people to take direct action in the struggle against human injustices, poverty, and inequalities in order to move on with the construction of a social development agenda that fosters human responsibility and sustainability.

There are three central aspects to the mission that are most relevant to the practice of the MCN:

1. Focusing on local people as the main participants in and motivators for CD work.
2. Raising awareness of social, economic and political issues.
3. An ongoing process of empowerment.

As a result, all projects should involve a high level of local participation, which not only would have an immediate impact on people’s lives at a practical level, but could also bring about a process of empowerment based on the awareness of their reality and their capabilities to confront and change it. In this context, promotoras become role models for others to follow and, as such, are seen as key facilitators in an ongoing process that contributes to raising local people’s awareness of themselves as active members of society.
Consistently, the MCN sees the *promotora* as a member of the community and a key person to promoting participation in CD programs, both in the decision-making process and the implementation of specific projects. In the following quote from an MCN representative, he clarifies the role of the *promotora* in community development:

> The process of organization and empowerment of people can be facilitated through the development of projects by the *promotoras* (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001).

The *promotoras* are seen as facilitators, mediators and main agents of change that make it possible for the MCN to transform local life via CD programs and projects. This view suggests that the organization sees its role as supportive to the *promotoras’* endeavours in the community, which will contribute to increasing local awareness, motivating people to take action, and improving their individual well-being, as well as that of their communities.

From the perspective of the MCN’s representatives, empowerment involves a process of collective transformation at all levels: socio-economic by addressing immediate needs, and political by participating in actions leading to broader sustainable changes. The MCN seeks to generate this process of empowerment by: first, including *promotoras* in CD programs, thus enhancing local leadership; second, by supporting the *promotoras’* work in raising the community’s awareness about specific programs and motivating people to get involved in decision-making processes; and third, by inviting local people to see their own participation as a continuous process in which direct action becomes key to improving their situation.
An important factor that encourages the adoption of the promotoría model is the voluntary nature of promotoras' work which, according to the MCN's representatives interviewed, allows for CD programs to be practical, cost-effective and sustainable in the long term. Furthermore, voluntary work is tied to a process of social consciousness raising, which contributes to the sustainability not only of the projects, but of the organization itself:

"The strength of the organization is the voluntary contribution, is the wealth of the organization; in other organizations once the wage salary ends, the organization also comes to an end (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001)."

"I believe in the voluntary model... I believe it to be most effective. Because a voluntary promotor develops consciencia [social, political and economic awareness] and many times if there isn't that level of consciencia and there aren't resources to pay people, to a promotor, and sometimes when there aren't resources to maintain a paid promotor then many times the objectives are not achieved. ...a paid promotor usually is seasonal, but when there is possibility to pay them, then they get paid; on the other hand a voluntary promotor is more permanent, because they are there for their own consciencia, playing that role (interview, MCN representative 2, León, April 27, 2001)."

This comment suggests that the promotoras' approach requires a process of self-awareness (consciencia) that results in a sense of solidarity, commitment and an overall desire to do this type of CD work. It is hoped that the promotora will become a role model who will motivate other community members to participate in CD programming. The training of the promotoras provided by the MCN is key in developing the profile needed for the model to be successful in practice.
According to one of the MCN representatives, popular-education methodology and ideology provides an effective way for training the promotoras. He added that promotoras are not born community organizers, but must go through a process of "learning through practice, of learning while doing" (interview, MCN representative 2, León, April 27, 2001). Popular-education methodology encourages the growth of processes of critical thinking in the promotoras which later influences their CD work. Popular education allows the promotoras to learn from their experience, and by reflecting on it, to heighten awareness of the social, economic, and cultural conditions that surround them. At the same time, the promotoras themselves become educators to other community members, acting as role models and mediators of the process of change for individuals and the communities as a whole. The ability of promotoras to be role models for other women is also key to maintaining continuity as they prepare others to become community organizers.

The promotoras, however, are not the only volunteers involved in the MCN. There are other groups of volunteers, such as brigadistas, and educadoras, who dedicate significant time to CD work. The term brigadistas refers to volunteers that do practical work such as community surveying, vaccination check-ups, and neighbourhood-cleaning campaigns. Many of the promotoras' early experiences with CD work began as brigadistas. The second term, educadoras, refers to volunteers specifically working in community preschool teaching. The younger promotoras interviewed for this study started as educadoras, and continue to work as both educadoras and promotoras in their respective communities. Normally both brigadistas and educadoras work under the
supervision of a *promotora*, who tends to be more committed in terms of the responsibilities she has, and the volunteer time she gives to the organization.

From the perspective of the MCN representatives, the *promotoras* have a more holistic approach to CD work relative to other community leaders, *educadoras* or *brigadistas*, which makes them much more valuable to the organization (interview, MCN representative 1, León, May 4, 2001).

In sum, the MCN has over 30 years of experience in CD work during which it has been able to build a solid team of *promotoras* into their organizational structure. This history is valuable for an analysis of the growth and long-term impact of the *promotoras'* approach to participation, empowerment and CD goals in Nicaragua.

**The Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular CANTERA**

The development of the *Centro de Comunicación y Educación Popular* CANTERA is representative of the growth of NGOs in post-revolutionary Nicaragua. CANTERA is a national NGO created in 1988 and legally instituted in 1990. Its mission is to encourage individuals (and society as a whole) to become protagonists of their destinies, building together a more humane, egalitarian, and sustainable society. To achieve this purpose, the institution relies on a methodology that incorporates popular education, gender theory, spirituality and a holistic conception of development. The organization also seeks to provide more sensitive and participatory alternatives aimed at empowering the popular sectors in both rural and urban areas (personal communications, CANTERA, A. Torrez, September 30, 1999).
At the time of its foundation, CANTERA had a methodology that allowed the active participation of people in programs and projects implemented by the revolutionary government. In 1990, however, following the changes introduced by the UNO government, CANTERA adjusted to a less political CD agenda, and began to develop projects designed to “facilitate and generate capacity building in the population in rural and urban areas” (personal communications, CANTERA, A. Torrez, September 30, 1999). The methodological framework utilized by CANTERA “promotes constant analysis and critical reflection upon reality in order to enable people to find solutions to their own problems and set in motion concrete actions for the transformation of that reality” (personal communications, A. Torrez, CANTERA 1999). Thus, like the MCN, CANTERA’s goals foster local peoples’ socio-political and economic awareness to improve individual and community life. The enhancement of local leadership and participation is a key aspect of CANTERA’s organizational mandate in CD programs as well.

CANTERA, similar to the MCN, relies on the promotoría model to carry on its agenda. The promotoras represent the first link in the societal transformation the organization seeks to develop. The promotoras are supported in the process of their individual transformation and empowerment, so that they can become mediators for community transformation. As the director of CANTERA states:

Our proposal is to support processes, because we have to take into account the people who live in the community, so they will be the internal promoters of the development process. The key of our program is to promote processes more than simply developing local activities. The people in their own community are the ones more aware of what are the needs of the community, what are the idiosyncrasies of the rest of the population, so it is much easier that these
persons [promotoras] will have a more direct influence in promoting internal changes (interview, CANTERA representative, Managua, July 18, 2001).

The importance of the individual, the promotora, is further illustrated in the following quote:

Our goal as CANTERA, specifically, with the promotora is to see development as a process that starts from personal development, of the emotions, of self esteem, of self identity; so we place a lot of emphasis in a local process in which the initial point is the person, and later the person in their family, the person in their community, and from that perspective, to generate processes of CD, but the person comes to be a very important subject in the process of development (interview, CANTERA representative, Managua, July 18, 2001).

From this comment it can be inferred that, unlike the MCN, which stresses the idea of the collective as the agent for social change, CANTERA places its focus on individual transformation as a more effective and permanent way to create sustainable changes. This comment also suggests that the leap from personal to collective awareness and transformation will take place rather naturally, global influences and structural socio-economic realities notwithstanding. Or, using another image, change will occur as a ripple effect, with the promotora (or individual change agent) at the center.

At present CANTERA is a national training and popular-education organization, but it also acts as a local CD organization supporting community initiatives in ten different communities located in three different municipalities and departments in Nicaragua: Ciudad Sandino in Managua, Mateare in León, and Belén in Rivas (see Figure 1, pg. 81). The central office is in Managua where the technical and institutional team is located. Small technical teams of two to three people travel weekly to monitor
CD programs in the various municipalities. This traveling technical team acts mostly as a support group for managing funding and training on organizational or technical issues related to local CD programs (personal communications, A. Torrez, CANTERA 1999).

CANTERA has a different approach to involvement in the community in Ciudad Sandino and Mateare than in Belén. In Ciudad Sandino and Mateare, CANTERA has initiatives in the community centre that provide recreational and educational services (e.g. dancing and sports classes, preschool education, local-development workshops) mainly to local youth and young families with children. There is a small organizational team on site, typically made up of a group of paid (honoraria) and voluntary promotoras and other committed volunteers. In Ciudad Sandino, there is also a 3-4 person team that provides administrative and technical support, and who have more organizational responsibility (e.g. administrative, coordination and reporting tasks) than the promotoras or volunteers who work directly at the centre. In Mateare, CANTERA has a library for children and youth, where meetings and recreational activities take place. CANTERA has been very effective in coordinating work with local governments and other NGOs to share resources and coordinate CD programs through promotoras as well (interview, CANTERA representative, Managua, July 18, 2001). In Belen, CANTERA’s work chiefly supports local-development and leadership, much like in the early 1990s. At the time of this study, for example, there was a collective orchard program in Cantimplora (one of the comarcas or townships of Belén) which was made up of 16 women sponsored by CANTERA. Support was mainly in the form of technical information, and to a lesser extent, basic funding to cover expenses related to the maintenance of the orchard (e.g. for the group to get fencing material to protect the orchard from domestic animals).
Besides the various programs carried out by CANTERA in the aforementioned geographical locations, one key activity (and one by which the organization is widely recognized in Nicaragua) is the organization of national workshops attended mostly by *promotoras* and other volunteers and community members. These workshops are held four times a year and their format is very much like an internship-seminar, usually lasting about four days. These courses provide ongoing and systematic training and support to the CD work of the *promotoras*, volunteers and staff according to the goals of CANTERA. These national workshops are open to anyone who is interested, such as staff, volunteers, and *promotoras* from other organizations, common citizens, and foreigners. While the workshops are free for CANTERA workers, outside participants are required to pay a fee, although sometimes bursaries are available.

The national workshops have had a very important role in the process of educating volunteers and *promotoras*, as well as in the endorsement of the *promotoría* model of CD work within CANTERA, and in Nicaragua in general. For instance, one of the requirements for people attending the courses is that at the time of completion, attendees have to commit to replicate the workshop to another group(s) in the community. CANTERA facilitates this process by publishing a “memoir” of the seminar that participants can use as a tool to replicate the course in their own community. In that community the workshops are imparted in 8-10 meetings of three hours each, and CANTERA provides volunteers and *promotoras* with the basic costs of materials, transportation and refreshments for the meetings.

One important feature of the popular education workshops is the inclusion of a gender perspective. This is at least partly due to the prevailing international CD agenda,
in which gender issues have been frequently stressed over the last couple of decades.

CANTERA adopted this mandate and has played an important role in resisting discrimination against women at the local level:

We have a political commitment to build a new identity of culture and machismo as it is lived by men and women, to find mechanisms that can transform relations of subordination and promote the empowerment of those who are now subordinates (personal communications, A. Torrez, CANTERA 1999).

The workshops contribute to a process of reflection about the participants’ perception and understanding of unequal gender relations, and how these influence not only family dynamics, but also the community at large, including its CD programs. The inclusion of a gender perspective, therefore, becomes an important factor in the redefinition of CD programs and practices.

The director and many of the technical positions at CANTERA are held by women, which influences the broader women’s agenda of the organization. My personal observations suggest that CANTERA encourages cultural values that foster a balance of power and gender equality. The popular-education methodological approach employed by the organization encourages people to take a stand that challenges the deeply entrenched gender inequalities that are so dominant in Nicaraguan culture. The workshops are for community women (or men), and their purpose is to improve the participants’ understanding of situations of inequality and discrimination, helping them to reflect on their realities and to find solutions based on respect and cooperation.

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31 Dealing with machismo values is an important aspect in the context of a male-dominant society that still affects the lives of women and girls in Nicaragua.
To sum up, both the MCN and CANTERA have similarities and differences that shape their experiences in terms of the promotoras' work in the community. The similarities are: first, both organizational missions center on the transformation and empowerment of people through their participation in CD work. Second, both institutions share the view that local people's ability to identify their own needs and take a protagonistic role to solve them is necessary for CD programs to succeed. Third, both institutions see promotoras as significant members of the community, whose work is key to facilitate and motivate community participation in both specific activities and overall decision-making processes. Finally, both institutions adopt a popular-education methodology and ideology in their practice. This educational approach, according to both organizations, has been critical in the process of training and preparing promotoras for community work.

Regarding the differences between the two organizations, they are mostly related to the philosophy behind the services they provide to the community, as well as their organizational structures, including gender balance. The MCN, despite the changes it has undergone historically, still has a much clearer political agenda, in the sense that the organization sees collective political action as required to create significant, sustainable changes in the social and economic fabric of society. It is also political, in the sense that it encourages community members to get directly involved in all spheres of their lives by collectively approaching private or governmental institutions to solve their needs (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, April 23, 2001). The type of projects that the MCN supports are the direct result of their historic connection with the revolutionary government of the 1980s, and may or may not be gender specific, despite the fact that
the organization is aware of the importance of *promotoras* to carry out its activities.

CANTERA, on the other hand, claims to be apolitical (e.g. it does not want to reflect any particular political alliance). Their work has a well-defined gender agenda which calls for social change through individual transformation rather than collective action.

Regarding their organizational structures, the MCN relies exclusively on unpaid volunteers, except for technical staff or *promotoras* involved in very specific projects. The MCN is also characterized by a more bottom-up organizational approach, involving greater local autonomy. Unlike the MCN, CANTERA has a more traditional, top-down organizational structure with a central office that tightly monitors activities in other centres and locations. There exists a degree of bottom-up dialogue, however, within CANTERA that relies on a strong (salaried) technical team, which works to support local needs and mediates between the local people and the national directorate. The voluntary, local participants are predominantly referred as *promotoras* or volunteers. As in the MCN, CANTERA has both voluntary *promotoras* and paid *promotoras* associated with specific programs and projects.

**Conclusion**

Both international and domestic socio-economic and political structures have influenced Nicaragua's development in the last 40 years. Although there are similarities in the growth of the 'development' sector in Nicaragua with other Latin American countries, as well as in the non-governmental sector, there are characteristics unique to the Nicaraguan experience. Particularly, in Nicaragua the eleven years of a revolutionary government, especially its emphasis on policies for social justice and humanitarian campaigns, are unprecedented and can only be compared, to a degree, to the experience
in Cuba. Voluntary initiatives and popular mobilization in the period before, during and after the revolution have had a profound impact on many people's sense of solidarity and socio-political self-awareness, as well as the capacity of organizations for analysis and social action. Moreover, popular education, in widespread use since the 1970s, has gradually permeated into various stages of CD ideas and methods in the country.

Furthermore, in Nicaragua, like many other Latin American countries, CD has slowly shifted from being a marginal practice to becoming the accepted approach for local development. Moreover, a shift has taken place from government agencies to NGOs, albeit a decade behind most other Latin America countries. While in the 1970s CD practice in Nicaragua was mainly a reflection of local resistance to military repression, in the 1980s it became fully institutionalized through policies of the FSLN's revolutionary government. In the 1990s and beyond, the adoption of a neo-liberal economic model by successive governments has stressed the process of decentralization, resulting in an unprecedented growth of development NGOs that largely assumed the local development agenda.

Rather timid efforts at CD in the years prior to the revolutionary triumph were quickly transformed into strong social movements and organizations in the 1980s and 1990s, giving such organizations a political spirit. The histories and descriptions of two well known, albeit quite different, NGOs in Nicaragua, illustrate this phenomenon and demonstrate how local volunteers have become more intrinsically linked to the promotoría model, which has become fundamental to these organizations' development agendas. Furthermore, both of the organizations claim as their central goal increased participation and empowerment of individuals and communities. In the process of
empowering communities, the organizations perceive the role of *promotoras* as essential to accomplishing this goal; local peoples’ participation is regarded as key for CD success, and the methodology and ideology of popular education as an appropriate educational medium. In regard to their differences, they stem mostly from the ideological and historical realities behind the services they provide and their organizational structures, especially gender focus. On the one hand, MCN’s approach as a whole is more open to the community in general and challenges the national political system as a whole; on the other hand, CANTERA’s approach places the onus on the individual or a more gender-specific target group.

The following chapter will analyse the role of *promotoras* based on their own views of their impact in CD, especially their perceptions on the meaning of participation and empowerment. In addition, the successes and challenges of the *promotoría* model, as viewed by the *promotoras*, will be analysed.
Chapter 4:  
*Promotoras* in Two Community Development  
Organizations in Nicaragua

Most of the social, political and economic programs involving *promotoras* are related to meeting basic needs, in particular community health education and small-scale agricultural projects usually tied to development organizations. My central argument is that, while following the development organization’s central goals, as in the case of the two organizations in this study, community development (CD) programs also encourage human development by building on the *promotoras’* local leadership skills and their ability to enhance local participation in these programs.

An examination of the relationship between the *promotoras* and CD organizations (as described by the *promotoras*) suggests its reciprocal character; the *promotoras* have an impact on CD programs, but they are also impacted by the work of CD organizations, especially in their roles within their families and their communities. The *promotoras* provide a unique, appropriate and reliable approach to CD programs, mainly because they belong to the community and their work is voluntary, as opposed to paid technicians and professional staff. The *promotoras*, because they belong to the communities in which they work, have a first-hand knowledge of local needs and values, which allows them to act as mediators and/or catalysts between CD organizations’ representatives and community members. Moreover, the volunteer nature of the *promotoría* model allows CD organizations to implement programs at a much lower cost, making them more...
sustainable in the long term. Also, the promotoras’ role in CD encourages the involvement of other women in the community. Through their involvement in CD work, the promotoras become positive role models not only within their own families, but also within their communities, which may result in increased participation at the local level.

This chapter focuses on the analysis of a series of semi-structured interviews of twelve promotoras from two CD organizations in Nicaragua (the MCN and CANTERA) in order to understand the promotoras’ role, approach and impact on the goals of CD and local participation. The analysis will concentrate on the promotoras’ approach to CD work as they perceive it, particularly paying attention to issues of community and individual participation, and empowerment. Through interviews and my personal observations, I intend to demonstrate the significant role the promotoras have had in strengthening and supporting poor communities and families in a wide range of rural and urban locations in Nicaragua. I will also argue that for participation to be effective and permanent, it has to involve a process of empowerment for local people and communities. In order for the latter to develop, the social relationship among the different players in CD programs requires a flexible framework that allows for CD organizations, the promotoras, and community members to nurture each other, and communicate in and about CD programs, while cooperating in the production of CD programs and projects.

There are, however, challenges for local people to participate and for the building of personal or communal empowerment by way of the promotoras’ approach. For example, there are organizational structural limitations in the social, cultural, political and economic milieu in which CD programs are developed. An example of a cultural
limitation is the machismo\textsuperscript{32} that continues to permeate social relations in the context of CD work in Nicaragua; for instance, women's ability to be in leadership positions continues to be questioned by men, who still argue that women do not have the capacity to assume regional leadership roles. Another ever-present challenge to the promotoras' empowerment are economic limitations; particularly in the last 15 years when both structural adjustment policies (SAPs) and natural disasters (e.g., Hurricane Mitch in 1998) have had negative economic and social impacts for most Nicaraguans. In addition, economic limitations of the promotoras themselves often force them to stop working with CD programs and take other jobs out of extreme necessity, even if they are underemployed and underpaid. At the same time, because of limited funding, non-profit organizations often cannot continue to offer honoraria, scholarships or even pay for the basic cost of running CD programs, all of which has a direct impact on the work of the promotoras' in these programs and projects. Thus, both cultural and economic limitations to the promotoría model limit the development of processes of empowerment and participation of women.

The following pages introduce the 12 promotoras interviewed for this study, while keeping the women's personal identities private. Although the two organizational contexts vary greatly (as introduced in Chapter 3), analysis of the twelve interviews focuses on the promotoras' perspectives of themselves and their work, and the meaning of both community participation and empowerment in the context of their CD work. Particularly, the promotoras' role in development programs will be discussed within the

\textsuperscript{32} Machismo is the "cultural of virility" that place value "on aggressive and intransigent behaviour in male-to-male interpersonal relationships and on arrogance and sexual aggression in male-to-female relationships" (Stevens 1974: 210). Moreover, it makes it acceptable for the use of violence (e.g., physical, emotional, and social) to assert one's interest (ibid.: 299).
context of a participatory development model, promoting a process of empowerment for
promotoras. Attention is given to what they see as the major successes of the promotoría
model, as well as what do they attribute that success to. Finally, some of the challenges
and/or limitations faced by the promotoría model itself, from the promotoras’
perspective, are introduced to observe how overarching cultural, economic and
organizational structures affect meaningful participation and empowerment at the
individual and collective levels.

The Promotoras’ Profile

For this study I interviewed 12 promotoras associated with the two Nicaraguan
development organizations described in the previous chapter (MCN and CANTERA).
Six of the promotoras were from the MCN and worked in Sutiava and Guadalupe; two
marginal neighbourhoods in the city of León (see Figure 1, pg. 81). The other six
promotoras were associated with CANTERA; two worked in Ciudad Sandino
(Managua), two in Mateare (León) and two in Belén (Rivas) (see Figure 1, pg. 81). The
promotoras from the MCN were introduced to me by one of the most experienced
promotoras in the MCN, a woman33 who has been involved in community work since the
late-1970s, and who is seen as a local leader in her area. The promotoras from
CANTERA were suggested by administrative staff34 of the organization in Managua,
Mateare and Belén.

33 I met the promotora in January 1999 during a personal visit to Nicaragua. I was introduced to her by a
common acquaintance that worked with this promotora in a CD project partnered with the University.
34 I met the Director of CANTERA in Vancouver in Fall 1997, during a popular education and
systematization workshop that she gave on behalf of the former NGO, Tools for Peace.
In terms of their age, experience in CD work, and education, the interviewees made for a very heterogeneous group. Such diversity was mainly the result of their availability and willingness to participate rather than a specific methodological approach.

The *promotoras* from the MCN generally had more experience in CD work than those from CANTERA. At the time of the interviews, three of the six interviewees from the MCN had been involved in CD work since the late-1970s and early-1980s, while the other three had less than 10 years of experience in *promotoría* work, resulting in a group average of 15.6 years. In the CANTERA group, on the other hand, only two of the six *promotoras* had been involved in CD work since the early-1980s, and four had less than 7 years of experience, yielding a group average of 9.5 years. Also, the *promotoras* from CANTERA were younger than those from the MCN. Regarding educational levels, only one of the women from the MCN had a university degree, three had secondary education and two only had elementary level. The *promotoras* from CANTERA had an overall higher level of education; two had university degrees, one had completed her first-year university program, one had completed a technical program and two had elementary education (the case of the two *promotoras* from Belén).

Almost all the 12 *promotoras* interviewed were involved in voluntary work, with the exception of five *promotoras* who, besides their involvement in volunteer work, also received remuneration for specific *promotoría* work. Of the five *promotoras* with a salary, three were from the MCN and two from CANTERA. In the case of the MCN, the *promotoras* worked in three different programs. For instance, one of the *promotoras* worked in the promotion of a micro-credit initiative for women, called PROCREMIS in Sutiava, a program that was managed by a local indigenous’ non-profit organization.
called Foundation Casa de la Mujer Indígena Xochilt-Acalt (a.k.a. Casa Quemada)\textsuperscript{35}. Another of the promotoras worked with a program called Edad de Oro which provided services and support to families and school-age children, and was co-managed by the MCN's (hired) staff and an international non-profit organization. The third promotora from the MCN worked for the City of León to support and coordinate CD efforts in some of León's poorest neighbourhoods. In the case of CANTERA, the two promotoras remunerated were from Mateare. One of the promotoras was the coordinator of a library program for children supported by CANTERA. The second promotora was the main facilitator and coordinator of an association to support children with disabilities and special needs. In this latter organization, the programs were directly managed by CANTERA.

Among the 12 promotoras interviewed, seven were married, three were single and two were divorced. Ten of the promotoras were mothers, with one to four children. For two promotoras from the MCN, the income from promotoría work represented their main source of family income. For the other three promotoras who received a salary (one from the MCN and two from CANTERA), their income contributed to the over-all family income; one of the women was married and the other two were young adults still living at home. Regarding the seven promotoras that were solely voluntary, they were either working part-time, looking for jobs, or, in two instances, dependent on their husbands' income. These women worked in various jobs such as selling fruit and vegetables in the market and teaching in community pre-school programs; at the same time, they performed primary housekeeping and provided general family support.

\textsuperscript{35} The Foundation received seed money for the program in 1995 from an international non-profit donor agency, forming a partnership between the MCN and the Foundation.
Figure 1: Map of Nicaragua situating the departmental capital cities of Managua, León and Rivas. Ciudad Sandino is an urban municipality just west of the city of Managua. Mateare is an urban municipality of León on the border with the department of Managua. Belén is a rural municipality of Rivas. Somoto is in the department of Madriz in northern Nicaragua.
The Promotoras' Self-definition and Role

The promotoras from the MCN and CANTERA provided a comprehensive definition of their role, and personal approach to CD work. In order to facilitate the analysis of the promotoras' self-definition, I concentrated in four main areas suggested by the 12 promotoras. First, the promotoras defined themselves as community organizers because their work required them to be facilitators, coordinators, mediators and the main agents of change within CD programming. Second, the promotoras placed emphasis on their role as local volunteers, which gave them self-identity and helped them empathize with local people due to their greater understanding of local social, economic, political and cultural issues. Third, the promotoras identified themselves as local leaders that have the skills and knowledge to best support local people, and also have the community’s trust. Fourth, the promotoras defined themselves as educators, emphasizing their ability to share skills, knowledge and experience of CD work with other less experienced women. As a community educator, the promotoras are key in the dissemination of the promotoría approach, and in increasing community participation and empowerment. Overall, it was observed that the promotoras’ self-prescribed definition of their role is closely connected to their overall impact on CD work and local participation.

The promotoras defined themselves as facilitators, coordinators, mediators and as the main agents of change within CD programming. One of the most experienced promotoras from the MCN explains their role in facilitating local participation:

The role of the promotora is, therefore, to be a facilitator, to serve as facilitator so that the community will participate, but with voice and vote, a true right. To see it from the standpoint of gender so men and women can
participate with equal rights, for children to participate, to facilitate the work of the community so they will know that they are an active transformative subject (interview, MCN promotoras 1, León, April 23, 2001).

Another promotoras’s comment also confirms their role as facilitators:

The promotoras is a facilitator that facilitates on call. If you say, hey look: I have this and this problem...; at that moment you are facilitating just by listening because the person is giving you a message that he/she has a need and you have to listen to it (interview, MCN promotoras 2, León, April 24, 2001).

These quotes indicate that women perceive their role as facilitators of individual and community participation not only in particular activities aimed at directly improving the community’s conditions, but also in more general matters such as voicing the needs of community members, political decision-making, and public consultations with outside political leaders. The first quote, in particular, points to the promotoras’ role in encouraging community people to participate because it is their right.

Similarly, the promotoras from CANTERA consider the primary role of the promotoras to be a facilitator and to support local women. The following quotes from two promotoras from Mateare, express this role clearly:

A promotoras is a person in charge of everything; her function is to facilitate the work of the people she works with in the community. It can be a promotoras working on gender so then she works with women, or with men. If she has a group of women, then it is a program for women.

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36 This promotoras worked directly with the municipal program at the City of León, and part of her work was to motivate people to take part in both specific activities and in the different local government assemblies. One thing to consider in the context of the MCN in León is that León is a city with strong ties to the FSLN party. The municipality of León has been run by the FSLN since 1979, unlike the central government in Nicaragua that has continued to be held by a Conservative and right-wing neo-liberal faction since 1991. Thus, León’s local government supports the work of the MCN and has close ties to government officials; the local government tends to encourage coordinated CD efforts in the communities among the various (national, international and local) NGOs and government institutions.
She facilitates the work of these women. It is a supportive role more than anything else, and of companionship so that these women follow up with their activities (interview, CANTERA promotora 1, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

The *promotora* is the person who facilitates processes, such as when they have to do with organizing or educational transformation in the community. That is what I think she is [the *promotora*], she facilitates, let’s say she is a facilitator (interview, CANTERA promotora 2, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

The last quote in particular asserts the *promotoras’* role as facilitators of both community organizing and “educational transformation” in the community. The *promotoras* from both organizations perceive their role as facilitators of CD work. There is a difference, however, in what constitutes community participation among the various organizations. This difference is not apparent in the quotes above, but it was clear during my participant observation. For the *promotoras* from the MCN, the community encompasses a geographic area that includes a number of “sub-communities” such as seniors, adult men and women, and children, and their work is, therefore, more inclusive in the sense that it is targeted to all these “sub-communities.” The *promotoras* from CANTERA, on the other hand, usually defined community as a more specific target group (women or children, for example). These different definitions of community suggest that for the MCN’s *promotora*, her contribution is to facilitate the collective efforts of the community; whereas, the CANTERA’s *promotora* perceives her role as facilitating mainly individual women’s personal processes of development.

A second aspect of the *promotoras’* self-definition is their emphasis on their role as local volunteers, which places importance on the *promotoras* empathy and ability to have a clearer understanding of the social, economic, political and cultural realities at the
local level because they are part of them. The *promotoras* from both organizations stressed their roles as local volunteers, which they considered to be a key attribute:

The *promotora* sprouts from the community; because she is from the community she is not new to the community’s problems, she has been working with the people from the community (interview, MCN *promotora* 1, León, April 23, 2001).

The *promotora* is chosen from the community and because of this she is part of it and knows it well. Therefore, she is not alien to it, but she is from there, she is a volunteer and part of the community (interview, CANTERA *promotora* 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).

In the case of the MCN, all the *promotoras* start as volunteers, such as *brigadistas*37. By the time a woman is identified as a prospective *promotora*, local people already have some familiarity with her and her work. Like the MCN, CANTERA’s *promotoras* also start as local volunteers in the different programs and services that the organization runs at the community level. Later on, the volunteers are invited by a staff member, or a paid *promotora*, to complete one of the national workshop training programs. By the time the women complete the training, they are asked to replicate the workshop in their community, by forming their own group(s) or by facilitating the workshop with a pre-existing community group.

A third important point in the *promotoras* self-definition is their ability to act as community leaders. Through their involvement in CD work, they become more aware of the social, economic and political realities faced by the people in the community, which is their own reality as well. Over time, the *promotoras* gain greater local awareness and

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37 They usually start when they are young adolescents (13-15 years old); by the time a woman is identified as a *promotora*, they have gained a few years of experience in the work and people’s skills involved in CD programs.
local people’s trust; both aspects contribute to the promotoras’ self-definition as local leaders. The self-identification as a local leader was readily mentioned by the promotoras from the MCN (in five instances), whereas this aspect appeared to be less important for the promotoras from CANTERA (in one instance only). From the MCN, the following quote speaks to the promotoras’ self-perception as a leader in the community:

The promotora has leadership within the community, that is to say, people know that if they search for her, they will be heard. She is recognized by the community as a whole (interview, MCN promotora 3, León, May 8, 2001).

This MCN promotora links her ability to lead with the social prestige she gains, over time, once local people become acquainted with her work and develop some mutual trust. In contrast, the only promotora from CANTERA that referred to her role as a leader saw it as mainly connected with a particular project:

A promotora is … a leader, leader of an activity, of a project, is a leader who performs a mostly volunteer work, who works with the communities. I relate lots the word ‘promotora’ with the community, one who does volunteer work in the community, works with it (interview, CANTERA promotora 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).

The hesitation of the promotoras from CANTERA to self-identify as community leaders may be related to the process by which they become promotoras. Contrary to the MCN’s promotoras, who are usually selected by other members of the community, the promotoras from CANTERA select themselves as volunteers, and are later invited by the staff to become promotoras (after completing one of the national workshop courses); it is a faster process mostly because the broader community members are not involved.
A final important aspect of the promotoras self-definition is their role as educators, which is tied to their capacity to become role models to other women in the communities. Promotoras from both the MCN and CANTERA seem to agree on this point:

I understand that a promotora is a person that builds capacity. It is someone who already has leadership, a person who has knowledge and will share these capacities with the whole community, or her brigadistas (interview, MCN promotora 4, León, May 5, 2001).

Yes, I was given training, however, I was mostly a workshop facilitator, but I later became the one who helped build capacity (interview, CANTERA promotora 1, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

Although women from both organizations see themselves as educators, through my participant observation it became apparent that the promotoras from CANTERA differentiate between their role as facilitators of a workshop and that of trainers. As facilitators the promotoras' self-definition is limited to coordinating, assisting, supporting and informally teaching other women some of the skills they've learn and experienced through different CD programs. As trainers the promotoras' self-define themselves more like 'formal' educators that take part in a wider range of activities (such as in the planning, implementation and evaluation of the workshops) in order to facilitate CANTERA’s workshops in the community. In the context of the MCN, on the other hand, the promotora sees herself as a trainer because of her ability to share her knowledge, skills and experience in specific programs, or in community organizing, which is facilitated through her own example, as revealed through her life and experience in CD work. The MCN’s promotoras are not directly involved in the replication of
workshops, but their roles as trainers remain mainly at the informal level. The promotoras' position as 'informal' educators, then, has a significant role in the propagation of the promotoría model, and in motivating community participation, which provides a broader, albeit less structured, range of educational and social-political awareness.

Among the main factors that promotoras considered key for their self-definition, another should be added: a myriad of personal characteristics that they considered necessary to be successful in CD work, particularly in regards to enhancing community relations and outreaching. The promotoras suggested the need to be responsible, respectful of differences, honest, empathetic to other people’s needs, possessing people skills, and having the capacity to educate and share skills. It is important to note that the adjectives used to define the personal characteristics of a successful promotora were shared by the 12 promotoras, as the following examples attest:

The characteristics that a promotora must have in order to be a good one, is to be nice, and sometimes to be understanding with people too. I think that they need to be a bit humanist as well. They shouldn’t be arrogant because there are some people who really are so (interview, MCN promotora 4, León, May 5, 2001).

For me, a promotora has to know a bit of everything, she has to be sensitive first and foremost, has to be a person with a heart too, because there are people who do not care about the hardships of others (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).
In the first instance she must be very dynamic, have an ample vision of what the community is, must have a good, respectful relationship with others because it is fundamental that I, as a promotora, have respect because I get involved, let's say, with everybody in the community (interview, CANTERA promotora 2, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

First and foremost she must be democratic, respect the opinions of others, of everybody, and should not discriminate against anybody (interview, CANTERA promotora 1, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

To sum up, the promotoras describe themselves as unselfish leaders, committed to the overall improvement of their communities. As such they become facilitators, mediators and educators at the community level. The exploration of the promotoras' self-definition indicates the significant role they have carved out for themselves within CD programs and projects promoted by both the MCN and CANTERA. Driven by their enthusiasm, knowledge and experience, the promotoras have become essential for CD work. Moreover, the promotoras are local volunteers and catalysts in the process of community participation and empowerment, as we shall see in the next section.

Promotoras, Participation and Empowerment

The promotoras' definition of participation within CD work suggests that it is much broader than local participation as merely the utilization of people's skills and efforts in the implementation of CD programs and projects; instead, it seeks the active involvement of local people in all aspects of a project's development. To explore the meaning of participation in the context of the MCN and CANTERA, we will examine the promotoras' perspectives on participation and empowerment, within the framework of
the two working definitions of participation and empowerment introduced in Chapter 2 (p. 20-22), and through my own participant observation.

In Chapter 2, I introduced two wide definitions of local participation for CD programs and projects. Local participation can range from participation as a means for the implementation of CD programs to participation as an end in itself leading to a process of empowerment that promotes further social change. Regarding the idea of empowerment, this study adopts an “agenda for women’s empowerment” which suggests an “awareness of the existing discrimination and inequality of women and men, and how it affects their lives” (United Nations Division for the Advancement of Women 2005: W1).

It is important to note that this broad definition of empowerment may obscure women’s cultural and economic challenges that limit their participation and, consequently, their empowerment. This study will reflect on the limitations of defining participation either as a means, or as an end, by proposing a vision of participation as a gradual process of individual and collective change that, may lead to individual and community empowerment, with promotoras playing a key role. By building on the promotoras’ open communication with community members, participation begins a process of shifting from being a means to implement projects, to an end in itself in which local people take part in other important aspects of the management of programs and projects, such as decision-making. Promotoras’ efforts to encourage participation, then, can be seen as an end in itself, which can facilitate long-term processes of social change. This kind of participation is more difficult to assess since it is mainly a reflection of subjective notions on what represents CD work in general. The interviews show that the
definition of participation is mostly attached to concrete activities associated with specific community programs and projects, rather than abstract processes of decision-making over what represents local participation.

When defining participation, all the promotoras referred to specific activities, or events, that required the participation of people benefiting from CD programs or projects. Of the 12 promotoras interviewed only two provided a broader version of participation:

I'm going to tell you there is community participation when all the community participates in a specific project, one does one thing, another does another thing, and they are making decisions, because it is more effective when all the community participates (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, April 23, 2001).

That the community works for the community, that is to say participation more than anything could be that the community decides for the community as well, that they give their opinion, that they have their own opinions, and that they make their own decisions without anybody manipulating, giving orders or anything like that. It should be the work of the community for the community itself (interview, CANTERA promotora 1, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

These last two quotes (one from the MCN and the other from CANTERA) are particularly interesting in that they reflect on the significant role of participants in decision-making processes. Overall, the promotoras considered their role as significant for mobilizing and encouraging local people to participate, and saw local decision-making as important for development.

Moreover, the promotoras own participation can be seen as a gradual process of individual and collective change to improve themselves, their families, and their communities. This kind of participation, and the empowerment that results from it, are
more difficult to assess from the interviews since, as we mentioned before, there is a high level of subjectivity involved. Moreover, empowerment is a multidimensional concept with diverse meanings, which makes definite conclusions risky at best. Within these limitations, I will analyze the impact of the promotoría model in the lives of the promotoras as they perceive it. Then I will introduce some of the institutionally recognized advantages of promotoras’ participation in CD work within the MCN and CANTERA. Emphasis is given to the process of empowerment as reflected in the promotoras’ histories, followed by more general comments on the benefits gained by communities and institutions that adopt the promotoría model. Finally, I will deal with some of the limitations to empowerment, such as when the interests of the community are undermined by cultural and economic limitations.

The personal benefits that promotoras gain from their participation can be associated with their access to direct training, social prestige, and an increased awareness of some of the social, political and economic challenges facing them and their communities.

The provision of training workshops for promotoras is important to reinforce their confidence to become active participants in changing their social and economic conditions. Many promotoras related how the training programs, for example, contributed to improving their sense of self-confidence and self-awareness (a sense of who they are in the world, which is part of the process of building their own self-identity and confidence):
The gender workshops help us very much regarding our self-esteem, in knowing our rights which as women we should always be given our rightful place at home, that there is not only us, alone, who have to do all the work, but that it has to be shared. I like that a lot about the gender workshops, and it has also helped me because it allows me to help other women (interview, CANTERA promotora 2, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

In the workshops I have not only gained skills to apply in my community, but I have also used them with my children and I will use them the rest of my life, until I die, because I already learned and I am not going to forget. It has made me think about the importance of health, the importance of children, sons and daughters, my neighbours, my mother, my family, everybody (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

As in the previous quotes, all the *promotoras* from both organizations felt strongly that the training was an essential component of their ongoing commitment and it was perceived as an overall benefit. The training, according to the women, had a significant impact on their view of their world and in their renewed sense of personal awareness, confidence and identity. All these latter aspects are critical aspects for the *promotoras* personal process of transformation and dedication to social change and justice.

An important characteristic of the workshops for the *promotoras* is the emphasis on personal development (e.g. self-identity and public speaking) while providing the information necessary on a particular area of expertise (e.g., community health and education) through which the *promotora* supports the organizations' development work. Most workshops offered by both organizations are characterized by their emphasis on the methodology and ideology of popular education. Most of them, for example, are introduced through lively and practical group dynamic exercises. Moreover, some of the
promotoras recognize that training based on popular education models that promote participation is important for women from diverse educational backgrounds to feel comfortable with the process. The methodology employed is particularly significant because, although all promotoras must have basic reading and writing skills, not all have graduated from primary or secondary schools. At the same time, the accessibility of the process of learning and teaching makes the programs taught by promotoras easier to pass on to community members, who may in turn have even greater learning challenges. Furthermore, it is important to note that the popular education model used in promotoras' training sees education as a dialectical process in which the teacher is also learning from the students. This approach challenges paternalistic and traditional learning models that place the recipients of learning in a passive and non-questioning role.

However, one difference among the training programs available to the promotoras from the two organizations is that CANTERA, more so than the MCN, had an extensive, systematic, educational and personal development program for supporting the needs of the promotoras for their work in the field. For the MCN, the training programs were less available, irregular, and financially challenging due to limited and insecure funding. The promotoras from the MCN had to rely on both internal (to the MCN) training programs and/or programs available through partner organizations, or sponsored by the state, such as those available through the health or education ministries. Moreover, the promotoras from the MCN clearly articulated during informal meetings their frustrations with the lack of a regular training program, and saw the need to develop a systematic training program that could best support their work in the community and their own process of personal transformation.
Another benefit the *promotoras* have, it is argued, is the increased social prestige and self-awareness that they experience through their work, which is the result especially of the value placed by the community and the CD organizations on the *promotoras’* volunteer contributions to their communities (as demonstrated in Chapter 3). In Nicaragua, society’s recognition of the *promotoras’* contribution often goes further than the community level, a fact made evident by a campaign to celebrate the day of the *promotora* (and/or *brigadista*) in different regions of Nicaragua. For example, a group of health *promotoras* in León sent a letter to the Nicaraguan government in May 2002, in order to get April 28 designated as the National Day of the *promotor* (*La Prensa* 2002). Later, in the city of Somoto (see Figure 1, pg. 81) on November 10, 2003 a group of health community advocates publicly celebrated the day of the *promotora* (*Bolsa de Noticias* 2003). However, the oldest and most effective campaign to celebrate the work of *promotoras* in Nicaragua is associated with the National Day of the *Brigadista Popular de Salud*[^38] (Popular Health Brigade) on September 2nd[^38], which was initiated in the final years of the revolutionary government in the late-1980s. Most importantly, the various campaigns (local, regional and national) to commemorate CD volunteers in Nicaragua provide some evidence of the public validation of the *promotoras’* work (as volunteers), recognizing their personal pledge to transform the reality in their communities.

[^38]: The relationship between the *brigadista* and the *promotora* is covered in chapter 3; particularly in the context of the MCN, the role of *brigadistas* and *promotores* are intrinsically connected. According to one of the current informants from the MCN, prior to 1990 the term *promotor* was not yet part of the CD language, and the main community volunteers were called either community leaders, *brigadistas* of health, or just local leaders (telephone interview, MCN representative 3, Vancouver-Managua, July 15, 2005). However, I also question this rendition of events, because the various informants from both the MCN and CANTERA (2001) did not provide a single clear version of the origins of the term and when it was first used in Nicaragua.
Factors such as training, social prestige and an increased awareness of the social and political challenges facing them and their communities are very important in the process of individual empowerment for the promotoras. They all contribute to further develop the promotoras' self-confidence, self-esteem (Peredo, et al. 1994), personal-awareness and self-identity, which are all key elements for women to be able to transform their reality and empower themselves. Moreover, through various interactions with the promotoras, observing and listening to their histories, it became evident to me that increased self-confidence and self-esteem (two aspects that contribute to empowerment) are among the fundamental elements that lead these women to an ongoing commitment to participating in development programs. The following quotes speak for themselves about the process of women's transformation as individuals, wives, mothers, and community members, as they become more engaged in their work as promotoras:

Now I am more aware of what I am doing, of what I accomplish through my participation (interview, CANTERA promotora 2, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

It is nice to be organized, it is nice to work and to be organized because let's say that you are applying for something on your own, you will not be heard if you are alone, but if you go with your group, supported by somebody, then you will be listened to; there is a better response to our needs (interview, CANTERA promotora 4, Belén, May 22, 2001).

Mostly on gender issues, firstly, I had rights that perhaps were not being respected. So this has helped me to think and talk to my mother because I am a woman, and how I noticed that always my brother, yes, he could go to parties and be out late, but not me. So, more or less, I have been thinking about this and dialoguing with my mother (interview, CANTERA promotora 1, Mateare, May 2, 2001).
I feel strongly, I can go and face the challenges, if there is a situation that needs solving in a community and there is a lot of people; ... for example with a city mayor that may have problems or maybe does not want to understand what we are saying. No, I go and check it out, and that is where I have been [changing], why? [I ask myself] if we are all equal (interview, MCN promotora 2, León, April 24, 2001).

It is beautiful because it helps us. At least, one goes around attending capacity-building courses or workshops; it is nice because one learns, one learns to value oneself (interview, MCN promotora 4, León, May 5, 2001).

Now I feel much more self-assured, more important. Sometimes I had problems and felt that I was useless and wanted to die. Not anymore, I feel now that I have helped myself, I tell myself that I am important, I am who I am and I don’t care what the rest think. I am very important for the community and for myself (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

As these quotes articulate, from their early involvement in CD work (as participants) the promotoras embark on a gradual personal process of empowerment that in time impacts their relationships with their family and community, as it increases their sense of self-awareness and self-esteem. As women feel more secure about their contributions to society, and as they receive public and familial validation for their work, they are more willing to continue their personal journey of growth and transformation.

The success of the promotoría model also leads to other recognized advantages. It enhances the prestige of the MCN and CANTERA within the development community, via the incorporation of participatory and democratic processes in their projects. Moreover, the community itself may give more credibility to the development organizations, because of their adoption of a model that pays attention to the community’s concerns and needs, and offers direct support to local people whenever
possible. As a consequence, greater links are created between the individuals, communities, and institutions in the process of development. An improvement and increased openness in the relationships that develop in the process of CD programming, improves levels of accountability in CD programs and projects, not only to funders and to the organization’s leadership, but to the community people as well.

To summarize, it is clear that participation is articulated by the promotoras themselves more as a “means” rather than as “end in itself,” although the actual practice of the promotoras' work, as well as my observations, somewhat contradict this perception. The promotoras used words that reflect on concrete activities and events to define participation, rather than abstract ideas of what it represents. A similar statement could be made about empowerment. None of the promotoras used the term “empowerment;” although three of the promotoras claimed to have some vague familiarity with it once I asked if they were familiar with the word. Only one of the twelve promotoras interviewed was somewhat more specific on the subject:

A community can be empowered if it has knowledge, if it has leaders. Empowerment is also connected to economic factors. Of course, empowerment becomes more difficult in such a dire economic situation as that of Nicaragua. But even if you don’t have anything, if you feel empowered you can see things easier than what they appear to be, otherwise you will want to hang yourself out of depression (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

Although this promotora speaks of empowerment from the standpoint of the community, at first, she also points out its importance at the personal level, particularly within the context of Nicaragua’s economic difficulties. Depression amongst Nicaraguan youth is very real; in fact, three (two promotoras from CANTERA and one from the
MCN) of the younger promotoras interviewed related the importance of their early involvement in CD as a way to deal with their personal depression and sense of helplessness.

As mentioned before, with the exception of the last quote, none of the promotoras provided a clear definition of empowerment, but their histories reveal that there is a clear transformative process taking place through their promotoría work. For example, as explained in the section on empowerment, the process of personal transformation is reflected in increased personal awareness, self-esteem and self-confidence, which not only have a direct impact on the personal lives of the promotoras, but also strengthen their commitment to their families, communities and society as a whole.

The promotoras' process of transformation and change, therefore, seems to fit within the 1995 agenda for the empowerment of women (introduced in Chapter 2), where it is explained as a process by which women gain self-awareness, confidence, and self-esteem, together with the skills and capacity to challenge the social, economic and political factors that discriminate against women, and restrict their empowerment (Hanna 2005). Through the histories and perceptions of the promotoras, it is clear that a level of personal and collective empowerment can be achieved by the promotoras’ themselves due to their participation in CD programs and projects, and their involvement in the promotoría model in general.

The promotoras' perceptions of CD, however, also point to specific challenges that emerge, which will be explored in the following section. In particular, there are social-cultural and economic issues that limit the promotora's (individual and collective) participation and empowerment within CD work.
Challenges to Participation and Empowerment from the Promotoras' Perspective

In this section, I analyse the promotoras' perspective on the challenges they face in their work, and their impact on personal, community and institutional relations during CD programming. When first asked about challenges or limitations, most of the promotoras hesitated and stressed the fact that there weren't any problems, but just benefits in their work. With a little more prompting, however, even the most hesitant to acknowledge any problems with the model were confident enough to share some of the difficulties they have had with their work and the promotoría approach in general. In most instances, the promotoras related some of the ways in which they have dealt with such challenges and, in a few cases, felt powerless to change the status quo. The promotoras' views are categorized into socio-cultural and economic challenges affecting their role in CD.

Socio-cultural issues are reflected both at the organizational and personal level. For the first, two of the promotoras from the MCN, with many years of experience in the organization, openly expressed the difficulties they faced with the leadership’s structure of the organization. One of the promotoras spoke specifically about challenges to her role as regional leader:

I, within the Movimiento Comunal was elected to represent women..., but within the organization of the Movimiento Comunal the fact that there are women does not mean that gender issues are being developed, that is not true, because the leaders are the men and when they see a women, for example, that wants to grow, they stop her, impede her (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, May 14, 2001).

It is clear that despite the fact that the MCN seems to have included many programs for the advancement of women within the organization (e.g. micro-credit
ventures, education on women’s rights), the (male) leadership in fact limits women’s possibilities to assume leadership positions at the national, departmental, or municipal levels. Furthermore, the promotoras believe that the leadership does not fully appreciate the role and significance of women in CD work. One of the promotoras openly blamed cultural values of machismo for the resistance and discriminatory practices based on gender that they encounter when aspiring to leadership positions in the MCN:

It’s the women’s capabilities, because of the capabilities; they say this woman does not have skills, because the children do not allow her, because the woman must stay at home... so from that erroneous point of view then, because it is basically erroneous, the other issue is that it is trendy now the violence, the discrimination against women as leaders, so there is a need to develop women in this area (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, May 14, 2001).

While it is very clear that gender discrimination occurs within the MCN, it is also true that women are aware of it, and definitively willing to resist it. At the time of this study, an MCN’s women’s association was being created to deal directly with issues of inequality and gender discrimination within the organization by pushing for a more inclusive and democratic organizational structure.

Gender discrimination was harder to detect in the organizational structure of CANTERA, which is a very progressive and self-reflective organization guided by strong roots in the ideology and methodology of popular education. None of the promotoras from CANTERA seemed to identify gender discrimination issues within its main organizational structures. There was, however, mention of contradictions between the example the promotoras should set in their daily lives and their lived realities. A young promotora expressed her frustration at the contradiction she sees between what some
young leaders (*promotoras*) in the organization teach in the workshops to youth groups, and what they do in their private lives. She cited the example of one young, paid *promotora*, who is married to a young, paid (male) *promotor*, who is at a higher level of leadership at the centre. According to the informant, the young man’s conduct is entirely inappropriate not only towards his wife but to other women participants in the organization as well:

The husband of ... used to come and grab the young women and kiss them, touch them, and he used some jokes too vulgar.... This young woman [the wife], she is a heroine, a great gender *promotora*, but the life she has is all the contrary to what she says. I say, I have to first change my mind, first I have to open up, have trust in myself, love myself so that other people can love me. Because I say, what do I do with giving a gender workshop to the young women, my neighbours, to the young women from the community about something if I am living a different reality (interview, CANTERA *promotora* 5, Ciudad Sandino, May 14, 2001).

In other words, for the *promotora* interviewed, the role model aspect of the *promotoria* approach in CANTERA becomes problematic when the personal life of a *promotora*, for whatever reason, does not reflect the values and beliefs that she is supposed to share in the community workshops. Moreover, although this informant was working four years with the organization, she did not feel that there was a positive and constructive organizational mechanism in place in her center where she could safely communicate her frustrations. In this instance, therefore, the social relations within the organization were marked by the presence of *machista* attitudes that in turn jeopardized the *promotoras*’ work with other youths in the communities. In sum, the *promotoras*’ CD work within the organizational structures continues to be challenged by social-cultural pressures based on prescribed gender inequality.
Another issue commonly cited by the *promotoras* as a challenge to their development is the continuous economic pressure under which the *promotoría* model operates, which is normally reflected in work overload for the *promotoras*, particularly for those who are volunteers. One of the *promotoras* from CANTERA’s centre in Ciudad Sandino used fairly strong language when referring to this issue; she believes that in some instances the organization may be “exploiting” the *promotoras* rather than contributing to their well-being and that of the community:

> Here they support you lots but, I think, that at the level of a *promotora* also she does not have to be like very, very exploited, because sometimes this problem happens (interview, CANTERA *promotora* 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 14, 2001).

Although other *promotoras* from CANTERA’s centre in Ciudad Sandino and Mateare also commented on the extensive amount of work involved in the community, none talked about “exploitation.” At the other end of the spectrum, the *promotoras* from the rural area of Belén had little or no complaints about their CD role and work, but this could be explained by the fact that these women did not lead gender workshops; neither did they take part in CD work outside their own community. None of the *promotoras* from the MCN, on the other hand, saw themselves as being “exploited,” but several did acknowledge the amount of work and responsibilities to be overwhelming at times, because of limited resources (money and infrastructure) and few committed volunteers available.

All the *promotoras* interviewed stressed the logistical limitations they face in CD work, particularly regarding time and responsibilities:
Many times, it is like everything is given to us to do, so we have to find a way to make it happen because there isn’t another way (interview, MCN promotora 4, León, May 5, 2001).

It is a very hard job, it is not passive, but rather is very active. You are here and there; and if you are not attentive everything starts falling apart (interview, CANTERA promotora 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).

As a result of the excessive workload, the promotoras may (and do) end up wearing “too many hats,” as the following example of a young promotora from CANTERA illustrates, regarding her conflict over working as both an educadora (of the pre-school community program) and as a promotora (facilitating gender workshops for youth):

I like the job because I learn so much, but I am always there, so it is like I cannot do it. I feel that I cannot be in two things; I cannot be an educator and a facilitator.... Last year, I had to do it and I felt up to here [the neck], I felt overwhelmed and so it’s impossible, a person cannot be doing two things, one and the other. So it is not that the work is bad, but it is just that I cannot be in two places at once (interview, CANTERA promotora 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).

This promotora clearly identifies the conflict of trying to manage both her work as a educadora and a promotora. Another interviewee, a senior promotora from the MCN, expressed very clearly the multiple roles that women like her need to fulfill in Nicaraguan society:

The women we have problems because we have to play... up to five roles, because you have to be a worker in the company that employs you, where you work, of the society, of the community, of the bed and like a mother then. We play up to five roles we women; because the burden of the sons/daughters is ours, of taking care of our kids, let’s say
to take them to the doctor... (interview, MCN promotora 1, León, May 14, 2001).

In this regard, the twelve promotoras talked about the challenges they face with their families and some people in the community. They all share personal conflicts that arise with family members (mostly husbands) because of the extended hours they spend doing promotoría work, and because of culturally-held beliefs that confine women to the home:

With the activities that there are, many times we kind of neglect our home; maybe on the weekends we are supposed to tend to the home and we do not do it. This is a disadvantage because it causes you problems at home, [the men say:] you are never here, always occupied on Saturdays and then, it causes personal problems (interview, CANTERA promotora 2, Mateare, May 2, 2001).

Let’s say that it has affected me because there are men that do not understand. There are men, like my husband is one of those men, that thinks that the woman has to be at home, does not need to go out, he gives the money... more than anything, yes, it has affected me, because I had many problems with [attending] the workshops, that so-and-so came home and then: well, I am going to help. He thinks that I am escaping from that house to go and help people somewhere else (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

My observations and some of the promotoras comments seem to indicate that most family conflicts involving a husband or parents (in the case of the younger promotoras) occur at the early stage of the promotoras’ involvement in CD work, when they are still consolidating their newfound self-esteem; but as their knowledge and skills improve, they become more assertive in dealing with personal conflicts. Over time some husbands’ attitudes become more accepting of promotoría work and the women’s involvement in the community:
More than anything I have been the one that has given all the workshops to him, so he will understand. And so now at this point, he does not prohibit me from attending the workshops (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

That [the family problems] can be resolved, I say so. Well, because there have been situations that by meeting, sharing the things that we do with them, the good things that we do and what we accomplish. Because an organized person is worth much and I am the one giving myself value (interview, CANTERA promotora 6, Belén, May 22, 2001).

Interestingly, as the examples above indicate, the women tend to employ their promoters’ skills and knowledge to improve their family relationships. They raise their husband’s awareness by patiently and consistently keeping open communication lines with their partners, by sharing with them what they’ve learned through the workshops and other activities.

Another social-cultural issue mentioned by all the women interviewed is the community’s perception of the promotora as a loose woman:

There are people in the same community that offend us because we are in this [work], they say that we are bums, but they do not know that our time spent outside the home is to search for ways to help them. This is how problems start sometimes (interview, MCN promotora 5, León, May 14, 2001).

From outside [the organization] they see a promotora like if she is a bum, is the one that has nothing to do, is the man seeker, is the tramp; they are a bunch of attributes that are given to a promotora, more so when she is a voluntary promotora (interview, CANTERA promotora 5, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).
The belief that a woman's place is in the home is firmly challenged by the work of the promotoras themselves, which is clearly on the outside. This contradiction not only causes tensions within the family, but within the community as well. Particularly criticized are the women who do promotora as volunteers. As one of the promotoras from CANTERA clarified, if the promotora is getting paid for her work, at least she is perceived as contributing to the family income.

Another challenge mentioned by some of the promotoras is their culturally-prescribed responsibility for childrearing. This affects mainly women with small children without a close relative (e.g., mother, grandma, other sister) to help them out. In some instances, this obstacle prevents the continued participation of some promotoras in CD work:

When I had my last child, I left [the group], because I saw that I could not do it; I had a small child and maybe there were little problems that the work required, that sometimes I could not attend to, so there were problems until I left [the group] (interview, CANTERA promotora 6, Belén, May 22, 2001).

As with the comment of the promotora from CANTERA, a promotora from the MCN mentioned some of the limitations she confronted once she tried to take her only child to some activities. Despite open resistance from some of the community members, she continued to take her child, while ignoring the negative comments. Her case, however, is rather unusual; many women feel the pressure to choose between childrearing and CD work, and the former normally takes precedence.

Another challenge to the promotoría model, particularly for the promotoras from Ciudad Sandino, is the difficulty in finding participants (people to attend the workshops)
The **promotoras** claimed that community participation was low, and there was a general disillusionment in the communities:

> It is hard to work with the community especially because right now, people are like they do not want to know about the work in the community, the work in a group; so when there is a person that wants to work in the community, it is hard (interview, CANTERA **promotora** 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).

Moreover, during the interview the informant related how she had to distribute at least 100 flyers to get less than 30 people to participate, and how on another occasion the only attendees to a gender workshop for parents were two families who were immediate relatives of one of the facilitators. The other **promotoras** from CANTERA and the MCN did not comment on the difficulties in motivating local people to participate, but they all agreed that the role of the **promotora** was significant in increasing local participation, and otherwise participation was rare.

While the volunteer aspect of **promotora** work may contribute to the success of the model, it can also present a challenge. One interviewee from the Ciudad Sandino centre of CANTERA intimated that the lack of a salary could have an impact in the quality of the work and the ability of the **promotora** to stay and complete the tasks or goals of a particular project:

> A disadvantage could be, let’s say, a salary, it could be a person that may not want to really work with the community and because she feels that her work is not remunerated then, it could be that she will not do a good job, or will leave the job and the goals are not achieved (interview, CANTERA **promotora** 3, Ciudad Sandino, May 23, 2001).
Although none of the other promotoras mentioned this concern, it is clear that this may be an issue for other women as well. Many of the promotoras live under significant economic duress, and for them getting a paid job is often a matter of survival.

In sum, it seems clear that there are many factors that limit the promotoras ability to promote local participation and empowerment. It is also evident that these factors are related to cultural attitudes that do not easily accept women’s participation outside the domestic sphere, and when they do, the women encounter resistance within the organizations’ hierarchies (the “glass-ceiling”). There are also economic limitations preventing organizations from providing financial support for the women doing CD work. Finally, for most promotoras, CD work is so varied and necessary that, despite finding themselves pressed between their commitment and solidarity for improving community life and the impact of their work on their family and community relationships, they still consider the promotoría model to be mostly beneficial for themselves and the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the promotoras are self-defined as facilitators, mediators, leaders, and primarily, as local community members acting as social activists on behalf of their communities. At the same time, they perceive themselves as participants in the process of development, and as members of the local communities.

Although this study does not provide an exhaustive account of the promotoras’ work in CD, it sheds light on how these women approach CD. Especially through the accounts of the promotoras themselves, the chapter points to some of the main characteristics, roles, and potential of the promotoría model in challenging development
paradigms that place community members as passive recipients of development aid. As their histories and reflections suggest, the promotoras have become, through a gradual process of change leading to their personal empowerment, active participants and partners in CD work. The promotoría model, as evidenced by the MCN and CANTERA, provides some concrete examples of how participatory approaches can be incorporated into development projects. Moreover, the study suggests that the common dichotomy in conceptualizing participation as either a means or an end for achieving local empowerment is not entirely useful. It is suggested, instead, that participation, at least within the context of the MCN and CANTERA, can better be seen as a gradual process of change and transformation that best takes place when an organization provides the appropriate support and space for it to occur. Particular attention, therefore, should be given to nurture the relationships among all the players involved in CD programming, including making room for local input for evaluation and accountability.

This chapter also addresses some of the challenges to the promotoría model, as identified by the promotoras themselves. It becomes clear that there are socio-cultural and economic limitations with which development organizations must come to terms in order to fully appreciate and understand the problems faced by women, both in the communities at large and within the organization itself. It became evident by looking at the challenges of the interviewees, there is a need to create mechanisms of communication by which the views of the promotoras, as well as other community members in general, can be heard and understood in order to assess the successes and challenges of the development organizations and their CD work. In synthesis, the case study of the MCN and CANTERA provides valuable insight into processes of adaptation,
growth and transformation, at the personal, organizational and community levels under ever-changing socio-cultural, economic, and political circumstances. The stories and histories of these women are a rich source of knowledge on the impact of their work at all of these levels.
Chapter 5:  
Promotoras, Participation and Empowerment in Community Development in Nicaragua

Through the perspective of promotoras from two development organizations in Nicaragua and my own observations, some generalizations can be advanced about the impact of the promotoría model in CD practice: these concerns how it benefits, challenges and feeds into the organizations’ goals. Based on the findings of the study, some recommendations will be suggested, in the hope that they may contribute to an improvement of the model and its implementation. Most importantly, the promotoras’ perspectives provide new insights into the theory/practice of community participation and empowerment.

The promotoras and the organizations’ representatives in Nicaragua speak on the central goals of CD practice in Nicaragua, and how the promotoría approach to community development contributes to their advancement (as illustrated in Chapters 3 and 4). In particular, the histories of the twelve promotoras provide a self-definition of their role and impact in community participation and empowerment, which are central issues of concern for current CD discourse in local, national and international spheres. The twelve promotoras gave evidence of the limitations of defining participation as simply either a means or an end, for enhancing individual and community empowerment. Instead, the promotoras’ histories and my participant observations reflect a more complex and dynamic perception of local and individual participation as a gradual
process of social change and transformation. In the latter context, especially, the *promotoras* themselves become the main agents of change, both by becoming empowered themselves and by acting as role models for other women in the community via their participation as *promotoras* and as general members of the community.

This study also examines the overall history of the *promotoría* approach by briefly reviewing some case studies from Latin America (see Chapter 2). The examples not only provide an insight into the development of CD and participation, but also explain the growth of the *promotoría* model in the 1960s and early-1970s when a nationalist Keynesian development orientation directed these initiatives. In the early stages of the *promotoría* model, it was much easier to discern the limitations of this approach which, although it aimed to be 'participatory,' lacked an adequate methodology and ideology that could facilitate real social change. The largest challenge was its dominant paternalistic, top-down approach; the main goals of this early *promotoría* era were oriented toward building on local leadership enclaves to facilitate national expansion and exert political control through cultural 'assimilation,' rather than creating lasting, sustainable socio-economic changes in the lives of people at the margins of society. In the late-1970s and 1980s the ideology and methodology of popular education began to purposely challenge the structures of power and knowledge building in Latin America. However, as is shown in Chapter 2, there are still many elements of the current discourse of CD that continue to foster paternalism and cultural assimilation.

Following the methods and values of popular education, this study attempts to understand the complexity involved in conceptualizing the *promotoras' role and approach to CD by drawing from the ideologies of institutional ethnography and a
feminist standpoint perspective to illustrate and analyze the women’s views and ideas (Smith 1986; Reinharz 1992). The study also reaffirms the significant knowledge and potential for progressive practice that exists in local communities independently of people’s educational background and experiences.

**Institutional Ethnography and the Promotoras Perspectives**

The main premise of institutional ethnography is that the analysis of a particular issue or subject (in this case, the promotoria model) does not preclude a complementary analysis about broader social relations, which may sometimes yield generalizations. According to Dorothy Smith, the work of the promotoras and their larger socio-economic and political impact is a “property of social organization” (Smith 1986: 7). For the purposes of this study, therefore, institutional ethnography facilitates the examination of social relationships between development organizations and promotoras. As revealed in Chapters 3 and 4, the promotoria approach within CD practice in Nicaragua has a strong reciprocal nature. In the case of the two development organizations involved in this study, the representatives stressed the significance of local participation, and the promotoras’ role in enhancing this, to further empowerment and the sustainability of projects and programs. The promotoras defined themselves as key mediators, facilitators and agents of change within CD work, while emphasizing their role in motivating local participation and empowerment. As a result, the promotoras are impacted by CD work and, at the same time, they have an impact on the efforts of local development organizations.
This study also presupposes that in order to conceptualize the *promotoras'*
experience within CD in Nicaragua, their role and approach must also be understood
within a broader set of social relations (e.g., involving international and national
organizations, and the state). Although only briefly examined in this thesis, the
conceptualization of the *promotoras* within the broader international context is a very
important factor in Nicaraguan CD practices. Nicaraguan (governmental and non-
governmental) development organizations are highly dependent on international funding
and aid for survival. For example, the actions of many NGOs in the pre- and post-
revolutionary periods, as well as during the revolutionary era of the 1980s, illustrates the
close connections between international political economy and local life (CAPRI 1986;
Babb 2001). The proliferation of NGOs, for instance, is closely related to the global
economic, political and social forces at play during a particular historical period (see
Chapter 2 and 3).

Institutional ethnography allowed for the exploration of the *promotoras'* CD
experiences, as a “point of entry, the locus of an experiencing subject(s) [e.g.,
*promotoras*, community members] into a larger social and economic process” (Smith
1986: 6). The *promotoras*’ standpoint and experiences in CD work in Nicaragua enable
us to observe how the everyday activities of these women articulate issues of concern not
only to the local community, but also involving issues important to the larger
national/international context. From this perspective, this thesis has shown that current
notions of CD, participation and empowerment are interdependent, meaningful concepts
that impact on the “immensely complex division of labour knitting local lives and local
settings to national and international social, economic, and political processes” (ibid.: 7).
As a result, the decisions made at national or international scales have clear implications for the work and efforts of local women, and vice versa. Although this was an issue difficult to assess from the standpoint of the promotoras, the types of programs and services actually available to women and communities at any one time are intrinsically related to the programs being promoted and sponsored by the international development community.

The exploration of the promotoras role in, and approach to, CD in Nicaragua help us better understand social relations among development organizations, promotoras, and local communities, and how these impact CD goals and objectives. In this context, individual and community participation and empowerment are central aspects of CD practice. Participation and empowerment improve the quality of life of the women, particularly from the perspective of their emotional well-being, by giving them a sense of belonging, improving their self-confidence, raising their personal and collective socio-political and economic awareness, and providing them with a feeling that they have greater control over their lives.

The main advantages of the promotoria model in CD can be listed as follows:

1. **Promotoras** help to adapt development programs to a community’s needs and interests by creating more appropriate methods to interact with communities. Thus, the promotoras increase levels of participation, and adjust types of participation, which can be promoted in CD programs, by acting as mediators, facilitators and agents of change within CD programs and projects.

2. The promotoras approach has a multiplier effect in the community. The promotoras draw from their own experiences, as local volunteers and community
members, to encourage other people’s participation; their performance in, and attitudes towards, CD programs and projects allow them to become role models to other people in the community. As a result, other community members are potential promotoras.

3. The promotoras act as a cultural brokers and mediators. They facilitate better communication and understanding among and within communities, and, most importantly, between the community and development organizations. They clarify to the broader community, for example, the goals and practices of a project (e.g., identifying issues of concern in the communities, evaluation methods) by using language clearly understood by community members. They are also able to convey to the organization the importance of following more culturally-acceptable practices. The promotoras, therefore, facilitate greater involvement of local people in CD activities, such as community consultations, feedback, and planning, thereby fostering processes of individual and collective empowerment.

4. The promotoras contribute to CD organizations’ sustainability. The participation of the promotoras reduces the cost of paid technicians and builds on local human leadership and resources by supporting the educational development of the promotoras and other community women.

5. The promotoras contribute to CD organizations’ credibility in the communities. Promotoras are examples to the communities of the kind of work the community development organizations are promoting, especially in their capacity as role models.

6. The promotoras’ approach, within the framework of the development organizations’ specific missions and objectives, can encourage types of individual and community participation that may further local empowerment. Thus, participation within
the community goes beyond mere tokenism, by creating a gradual process of transformation for participants in CD programs and projects.

As the study shows, however, there are areas where the *promotoría model* is confronted by challenges that jeopardize its potential for becoming an effective tool for social change. These, accompanied by some recommendations, can be summarized as follows:

1. There are clearly macro-economic limitations that impact the ability of development organizations to provide adequate support (e.g. educational programs) to *promotoras* and other community people. As a consequence development organizations cannot, for example, always provide optimal and appropriate training, although ongoing training is fundamental for the *promotoras*’ personal and technical growth. This is particularly important, if a principal goal of the development organization is to go beyond mere participation as a means, and enter the realm of individual and collective empowerment.

2. There are personal and organizational challenges that place the *promotoras* in positions in which they find themselves overworked and their concerns are not adequately heard. These challenges are, as well, the result of economic limitations in the ability of organizations to adequately compensate *promotoras* for their work, or provide monetary incentives to encourage other women to become *promotoras* and lessen the burden on a few volunteers. *Promotoras* must be given ongoing validation and support for their community work in order to avoid feelings of exhaustion and isolation within the organization.
3. The social and cultural context in which the promotoras work is rooted in paternalistic attitudes, gender biases, and bureaucratic organizational systems that continue to discriminate against women's role in leadership positions or in public life in general. Development organizations should build more effective communication channels among the different CD players (e.g. community members, promotoras, and staff) to improve accountability, not only to funders, but to the local community as well.

4. There are limitations to the educational training promoted by development organizations that tend to orient the use of popular education toward merely a methodology to hasten adult learning, rather than as a tool for personal and collective transformation. This tendency often leads to notions of local participation as a means for implementing cost-effective programs and projects with a focus on short-term project development, rather than long-term processes for structural change. Ideally, development organization's educational approaches should be embedded in an ideology (i.e., popular education) where working with a community and training women as promotoras are seen within the broader context of strategies for structural societal change.

**Conclusion**

In summary, this thesis provides a broader understanding of women, promotoras and their perspectives on CD work in Nicaragua. It provides a window through which one can get a glimpse of the significant roles of voluntary, community-based women in the promotion and delivery of services. A history of various CD programs and projects sponsored by development organizations (national, local and international) over the last 40 years in Latin America illustrates the differential impact of such development work on the lives of local people. Particularly, it demonstrates the divergent consequences of
different meanings attached to notions of individual and community participation and empowerment.

The *promotoría* approach has over time evolved as it has adapted to the various socio-political and economic changes emerging at different levels, especially to accommodate and try to lessen the impact of 'modernist' development initiatives promoted for many decades by national governments and since the mid-1980s, by an increasing number of NGOs. This shift state agencies government to the non-profit sector has been heavily influenced and supported by international organizations and donors as they try to formulate innovative solutions to the political and economic crises affecting Latin America, and particularly poorer countries like Nicaragua.

Via the example of two CD organizations that utilize the *promotoría* model in Nicaragua, this study suggests that processes promoting progressive social change and social justice, in which CD organizations, *promotoras* and communities are engaged, are often interdependent and self-nurturing; these processes involve the collaborative configuration and reconfiguration of social and cultural values. In CD practice, the *promotoras* and organizations interact, creating a space for exchanging ideas, values, and visions of the world, in a dialectical process that involves the making and remaking of CD within the context of ever-changing realities. The histories shared by the *promotoras* clarify what CD represents, and how participation and empowerment are continually constructed and reconstructed through the actions of the *promotoras* and CD organizations in Nicaragua. Furthermore, the study suggests that the main cultural, economic and political challenges faced by the *promotoría* model can be better
approached by creating organizational mechanisms to make programs and projects accountable not only upwards to funders, but also downwards to the community.

Finally, the exploration of *promotora* community work provides an insight on how international development policies affect women’s lives in general. Thus, this study is of relevance to CD practitioners, academics, and policy makers at various levels (local, national, and international), particularly for assessing the impact of women’s voluntary work in CD programs and projects, and how the *promotoría* model can contribute to processes of transformative empowerment for people in their local communities.
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Appendix

Guiding questions used for the one-on-one semi-structured interviews with promotoras involved in this study:

- When did you use or hear the term promotora for the first time, in which historical or social context?
- What does being a promotora mean to you in the context of community development work today?
- Could you tell me some of the personal characteristics of promotoras?
- Could you elaborate on how the promotora, or the promotor, contributes to community participation? Do you think the role of the promotora in community development is part of community participation as well? Elaborate please.
- What do you think are the advantages, or disadvantages, in using promotoras for community development organizations? Give some examples?
- What do you think of the promotoria model overall? Is it effective for creating social change or not?
- Do you have some suggestions on how to improve promotoras' participation and/or other community member's participation? What about the participation of women in the communities?
- Do you feel more in control of your life, or less, since you are a promotora?
- What kinds of training have you received from the community organizations sponsoring your work?
- Do you think that the organization listens to you? Do you feel part of the decision-making process of the organization in terms of your work? Give some examples?

Guiding questions used for the one-to-one semi-structured interviews with representatives of the development organizations involved in this study:

- As a representative of the organization, what are some of the reasons and motivations of the organization for using the promotoras’ approach in your community development programs?
- What is the significance of the work that the promotoras do for the organization or community?
- How does the organization support (e.g. training, remuneration) the promotoras work? Please elaborate?
- Do you notice any changes in the women promotoras from when they started community development work either in their personal, professional or in any other aspects of their lives? What are some of those changes?