

**Transnational Anti-Imperialism:**  
A case study of Witness for Peace and their relationship with  
El Regadío, Estelí  
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## Introduction

Nicaraguan economics have been shaped by neoliberalism, an economic ideology which places all power in the hands of markets, with minimized government intervention and involvement, for nearly twenty years.<sup>1</sup> Neoliberal policies like free trade agreements, International Monetary Fund (IMF) Structural Adjustment Policies (SAPs), relaxing labor protection laws, privatization, and more, some of the hallmarks of international development in modern processes of globalization, have been the source of much global economic strife.<sup>2</sup> Such development is funded and enforced in the Global South by global financial institutions and treaties negotiated by the Global North.<sup>3</sup> David Held offers a useful definition of globalization:

*A process (or set of processes) which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions – assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact – generating transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power.*<sup>4</sup>

This transnational exercise of power has re-formed imperial North-South power dynamics in a supposedly post-colonial context, creating neocolonialism based in both *de facto* and

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<sup>1</sup> Narváez, Patty, untitled lecture on debt and trade in Nicaragua, Centro Kairos, Managua, 7 November 2008

<sup>2</sup> For some well documented examples of this strife, see Joseph Stiglitz' *Globalization and its Discontents* or myriad other texts by authors like Naomi Klein, Saskia Sassen, Jeffrey Sachs, and others.

<sup>3</sup> The terms "Global North" and "Global South" (shortened to "North" and "South") reference to designations used in the Brandt Report by The Independent Commission on International Development Issues. A fully updated version of that report can be found at <http://www.brandt21forum.info/BrandtEquation-19Sept04.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Held, David, & Anthony McGrew, David Goldblatt & Jonathan Perraton, *Global Transformations: Politics, Economics, and Culture* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 16.

*de jure* political and economic control.<sup>5</sup> Neoliberal policies have been a primary method of exercising this control through both governmental and private means.

Three effects of this neocolonialism seem particularly difficult to fight. There is a strong concentration of power in the hands of a plutocratic few in the North such as Northern heads of state, heads of financial institutions, and Northern multi-national corporations. Coupling this with the simultaneous national and international deregulation, another hallmark of neoliberal ideology, of the policies that supposedly held these power holders accountable, there have also been fewer means of recourse for those in the South who are affected by these policies. Laws such as corporate protection in international free trade agreements and stripped labor policies are examples of this deregulation. The third effect is the increased distance between the effects of wealth inequality and the exploitation of labor and resources in the South and the benefits from this inequality in the North. This distance is physical, but also cultural and social, dehumanizing the effects of exploitation of the global poor in the eyes of the North.

While a temptation in looking at such huge systems is to simply succumb to a sense of overwhelmed helplessness, looking at what people are currently doing to change these systems can provide not only hope, but insight into in what ways change may or may not occur. There are many models of action that people are engaged in at local, national, and international levels combating systems of oppression,<sup>6</sup> and Witness for Peace, a U.S. American non-governmental organization (NGO) with an office in Managua, Nicaragua,

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<sup>5</sup> Chomsky, Noam and Edward S. Herman, *The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights: Volume I*, (Boston: South End Press, 1979), 42.

<sup>6</sup> For an overview of some movements that have occurred in resistance of neoliberalism, see *No Logo* by Naomi Klein.

provides an example of one of these models. They focus on changing the neoliberal policies that have so adversely affected Nicaragua by demanding changes in U.S. policy.

Witness for Peace (WFP. The organization's Spanish name is *Acción Permanente por la Paz*, or *APP*) started in 1983 with groups of faith-based U.S. American activists visiting Nicaragua to observe, document, and send information back to the states about the role of U.S. funding to the counterrevolutionary forces during the Contra War.<sup>7</sup> With the end of the war in 1990, WFP began to shift their focus to broader U.S. foreign policy and how it contributes to "cycles of military and economic violence,"<sup>8</sup> both in Nicaragua and other parts of Latin America. They now operate in solidarity with the people of Latin America who are affected by U.S. policy and organize activists in the United States to change policies like the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA) and IMF SAPs (now known as Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility Programs). They work in collaboration with people on the ground in Latin American countries and in partnership with other U.S. American NGOs focused on justice issues in Latin America, like the School of Americas Watch, which works to close down the U.S.-run Latin American military school, and Jubilee USA, which works to relieve international debt.<sup>9</sup>

Part of the work of WFP is bringing delegations of U.S. Americans to Nicaragua and Nicaraguan speakers on speaker tours to the U.S. which focus on various aspects of WFP Nicaragua's three main issues: trade, debt, and labor. During delegations, delegates spend several days in rural Nicaraguan communities, learning about them and staying with families. The speakers who go on the speakers tours come from these communities, too.

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<sup>7</sup> For a detailed account of U.S. involvement in the Contra War, see *Comandos: The CIA and Nicaragua's Contra Rebels* by Sam Dillon

<sup>8</sup> Hostetler, Sharon, Witness for Peace Mesoamerican Regional Director, Interview, November 12, 2008, Witness for Peace office, Managua. Telephone: 265-1774

WFP works with several rural communities on these projects. El Regadío, Estelí is one of these communities. They have hosted delegations for over 10 years and three people from the community have traveled to the U.S. on speaker tours with WFP.

The transnational nature of the efforts of WFP and their collaborators in the U.S. and Nicaragua raise questions about how people can jointly organize for change across barriers of social, cultural, economic, and political difference and distance. Paulo Freire says that a “dialogical bond” must be formed in a true cooperation of all subjects acting for social change, so as to make people “co-authors” of their own liberation rather than disempowered, passive objects and recipients of a “gift” of false liberation.<sup>10</sup> This further complicates the process of organizing for change transnationally, as the challenges of relating across differences and creating humanizing partnerships are complex barriers to the process of liberation.<sup>11</sup>

These concepts of organizing to transform macro-scale institutions across difference in a way that is both qualitatively and quantitatively liberatory made me curious about how WFP works with their Nicaraguan contacts. This in turn provoked my research question: How does the partnership between the U.S. American organization Witness for Peace and the Nicaraguan community of El Regadío, Estelí function? To find the answer to this question I looked at how their joint projects are carried out, what the effects of the projects are on the community and the organization and how people felt about the projects and the relationship.

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<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> Freire, Paulo *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos, 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Edition (New York: Continuum, 2000), 168.

<sup>11</sup> Ahluwalia, Pal, “Fanon’s Nausea: The Hegemony of the White Nation,” *Social Identities* Vol. 9, No 3, 2003 (342)

In this paper, I will explain what I observed and learned from participant observation and interviews with both WFP and El Regadío. This includes the organizational structure, function, and culture of WFP, the community history, structure, and current struggles, of El Regadío, and procedural and qualitative descriptions of the joint work of WFP and El Regadío. I'll also explore how WFP and El Regadío felt about their partnership and their work together. After describing the findings of my research, I'll provide some analysis of my findings through a theoretical framework dealing with imperialism and resistance. I will look at how social power affects the relationship, how material need is dealt with, the focus on humanization in the relationship and how cultural, information, and communication barriers played a role in the relationship and the research.

## **Methodology**

Since my question is one rooted in theory, my methodology was comprised of a practical work plan to gather information to be examined through a specific theoretical framework.

### *Practical Work Plan*

I began by contacting WFP and requesting to do the study. They, in turn, connected me to the community leaders of El Regadío, one of the Nicaraguan Communities they partner with. I spent 8 days doing participant-observation and semi-formal interviews with the WFP International Team (IT) and the Mesoamerica Regional Director at their Managua

office. The IT is made up of three U.S. Americans who are living and working in Nicaragua, typically for a two year period. The interviews focused on what the work was that they did, how they did it, how they felt about it, and the role of their personal relationships in the work. I did not have scripted questions but asked about similar concepts every time. I wanted my research participants to tell me about what they thought was important, and for this reason the interviews became more fluid and focused on whatever the participant thought was important. These interviews normally lasted between an hour and an hour and a half.

I then traveled with the IT to El Regadío, Estelí, where we spent three days living with family of the mayor of the community and speaking with various members of the community. When the IT returned to Managua, I spent four more days in the community on my own conducting additional semi-formal interviews with the same people I had spoken to with the IT. These interviews included questions about who the people were, what they did, and how they participated in delegations, and how they felt about it. Similar to the interviews with WFP, they were more fluid without scripted questions and became largely directed by the participants as they went on. These interviews lasted anywhere from twenty minutes to an hour and a half, depending on how comfortable the research participant felt and how open they were.

Back in Managua, I spent another day conducting follow up interviews with the IT and the Regional Director at WFP. I also analyzed organizational documents and policies at the WFP office. My participation when I was with WFP was limited, and mostly included giving limited assistance to research or educational projects. The majority of the time I spent with them that was not interviews was observing meetings and interactions.

My interactions with WFP were largely in English, and my interactions with community members of El Regadío were in Spanish.

Since much of my theoretical framework has to do with patterns of behavior and ideology, the substantial part of my research focused on the actions of the research participants and how they thought and felt about their projects and the relationships they had with others involved in projects. My observations focused on logistics and behavior and my interviews consisted of descriptions of WFP, the community of El Regadío, what projects they did both separately and together, and how they all felt about the process and outcomes of their joint projects.

The joint projects of WFP and El Regadío are delegations and speaker tours. Delegations are when the IT facilitates one to three week trips for groups of around 20 U.S. Americans to see Nicaragua, get to know some of its history and culture and see how it is affected by U.S. foreign policy. Three to five days of this is home-stays and programs in a *campo* (rural) community<sup>12</sup> which is jointly coordinated by the IT and community leaders. WFP works with several different *campo* communities around Nicaragua and El Regadío is one of these communities. Speaker tours are when one of the community leaders from the *campo* communities travels to the United States with an International Team member (ITer) to speak about their life at churches, schools, and community centers. I was not able to see a speaker tour or a delegation, but I spoke to all of the speakers from El Regadío who had been on tours and saw all the locations and people in El Regadío who take part in the delegations.

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<sup>12</sup> Narváez, Patty, Witness for Peace International Team, Nicaragua, Interview, October 11, 2008, Casa de Café, Managua. Telephone: 265-1774

## *Theoretical Framework*

Instead of doing a deep and narrow analysis of one single theory in the field, I chose to try and create a more holistic picture of the qualitative social issues involved in this particular experience; a mosaic of observations and ruminations on a set of intersecting themes dealing with imperialism and resistance. These are meant to serve as starting points for more developed conversations and are not intended to be definitive. I viewed imperialism beyond simply the unilateral exploitation and exercise of power over otherwise sovereign bodies and used Linda Tuhiwai Smith's multi-layered definition of the term:

*(1) imperialism as economic expansion; (2) imperialism as the subjugation of 'others'; (3) imperialism as an idea or spirit with many forms of realization; and (4) imperialism as a discursive field of knowledge.*<sup>13</sup>

Using this definition, imperialism is a function of economic, social, cultural and political power and has both explicit and implicit manifestations.

WFP and El Regadío are parts of a social movement focused on changing political and economic power structures like the IMF, CAFTA, the World Bank, and other transnational institutions. The resistance of subjugation and oppression caused by imperial processes becomes another aspect of this resistance struggle. This is not a concrete process and instead occurs in the formation of society and culture. Resistance of social hegemony, a concept offered by McKinnon for understanding resistance in development processes as a more diffuse "power [which] operates to form our everyday understanding of social

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<sup>13</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, Linda *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (London: Zed Books, 1999), 21.

relations,”<sup>14</sup> is subversion of social and cultural forces which are fluid and ambient.. This occurs through relationships and articulation of ideas that go against dominant power relations, in this case creating social processes in resistance of oppression. The resistance to social and cultural imperialism is just as important to observe and evaluate as the resistance to the economic and political imperialism.

Post-development theory, which is “a critical engagement with development and what it has achieved,” contextualizes imperialist power in situations of outsider-controlled development like the one that is the focus of my study.<sup>15</sup> A common pitfall of post-development frameworks is that they rely too heavily on Marxist theories of imperialism and Foucauldian theories of governmentality and social control, leaving little room for agency of individual actors. Using concepts of social hegemony and power as an ambient set of beliefs that shape our understanding of social relations to examine research results yields a much richer framework for interpretation of interplay between subject and system. It facilitates an analysis of how and why subjects resist and reproduce various aspects of dominant power relations.<sup>16</sup> With this useful adaptation, progressive post-development theory helps to demonstrate the causes behind issues in contexts of development.

I examined how my research participants dealt with these systems in their own lives as well as on a macro scale. I found that it was useful to look at explicit and implicit patterns of speaking, voice, and relationship when they discussed their lives. These not only provided a means of analysis, but also served as useful windows into larger concepts

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<sup>14</sup> McKinnon, Katharine, “Taking post-development theory to the field: Issues in development research, Northern Thailand,” *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, Vol. 49, No. 3, December 2008 (289)

<sup>15</sup> McKinnon, 281

<sup>16</sup> McKinnon, 289

that were not available through explicit interviews, like social identity and world view.<sup>17</sup> Speech is a form of subject creation, an articulation of understanding of self and society that influence others' understandings and affects one's social location. There are complex manifestations of power in speech that tie directly into larger systems and categories of analysis. This creates an interesting relationship between the implicit insinuations of speech with the explicit analysis of power systems discussed in the interviews.<sup>18</sup>

The access and analysis of information from observation and oral interviews, and in the case of WFP, review of organizational documents, newsletters and policies, also raised questions about the meaning of forms of communication. Concepts of authority and what Foucault calls "regimes of truth" demonstrate the politics of communication between subjects and embody a politics of knowledge that affects the lens with which the problems of development are viewed.<sup>19</sup> Since information and communication are important forms of empowerment, this is also a unit of analysis in both inter- and intra-movement communication.

### *Limitations*

The scope of my study was a primary limitation. I was researching issues in transnational activism while located in one country with a month to conduct and complete the study. I was not able to observe either a delegation or a speaker tour and I did not have direct access to the rest of WFP, located in the United States and other Latin American countries. I only had time to do research with one of the communities WFP works with. I

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<sup>17</sup> McQueen, Rob, "'Speaking and listening to words is how we know who we are': An Introduction to 'Law's Empire,'" *Social Identities* Vol. 13, No. 6, November 2007 (685)

<sup>18</sup> Alcoff, Linda, "The Problem of Speaking for Others," *Cultural Critique* No. 20, Winter 1991-1992, (15)

<sup>19</sup> McKinnon, 283

was not able to stay in El Regadío for enough time to create a rapport with my research partners or get better acquainted with the community. Nicaragua is also not the main focus of WFP's organizational strategic plan at this moment because of the prevalence of new, recent and more immediate policies like military aid currently affecting other countries in Latin America. This truncated focus and small time frame forced me to complete the project in a different manner than would have been ideal.

My lack of Spanish fluency was another limiting factor. I accounted for this by checking in with all of my research participants in El Regadío during interviews, rearticulating what I had understood to be their main points for the sake of accuracy and clarity. This most likely limited not only what information I gleaned from the interviews, but also what types of information were offered to me and what my rapport was with community members.

My social position as a leftist, white, U.S. American male conducting a research project as a part of my college education played a strong role in my research. Besides shaping my focus and analysis, it also influenced what types of information I was granted access to or barred from accessing. It had a different effect in my two research sites. At WFP, where my political beliefs and lens of interpretation was similar to my research participants, it was often difficult to achieve the "mental and social distance that gives space for reflection."<sup>20</sup> I had difficulty gaining perspective on the issues I observed outside of the analysis which was provided to me by the ITers, often times because it was reasonably close to conclusions I may have drawn myself using a similar analysis. Trying to achieve an outsider's perspective in order to gain a different insight was difficult.

While I was in El Regadío, my social position combined with the fact that I was being introduced to the community by WFP shaped how I was treated and what I was told. It was important to clarify that I wasn't a part of WFP, especially since I was traveling with the IT and the main purpose of their visit was to introduce one of their new members to the community. I was also similar to a delegate in that I was there for a short time to learn about the community and visited all of the places that a delegate did. I was treated similarly to the way they treated the ITers and sometimes in the ways they spoke of treating delegates. I received generous hospitality and was encouraged to share in a cultural exchange with the community.

## **Witness for Peace**

### *History and Background*

Witness for Peace is a U.S. organization based in Washington D.C. with international offices in Mexico, Columbia, and Nicaragua. Their mission statement is:

*Witness for Peace (WFP) is a politically independent, nationwide grassroots organization of people committed to nonviolence and led by faith and conscience. WFP's mission is to support peace, justice and sustainable economies in the Americas by changing U.S. policies and corporate*

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<sup>20</sup> Lichterman, Paul, "Seeing Structure Happen: Theory Driven Participant Observation," in *Methods of Social Movement Research*, ed. Bert Klandermans and Suzanne Staggenborg (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 125.

*practices which contribute to poverty and oppression in Latin America and the Caribbean.*<sup>21</sup>

Their Nicaraguan office is located in Managua. Their work in Nicaragua has shifted focus several times since the organization began.

WFP was started by faith-based U.S. American activists in 1983 who were working to end the U.S. role in the Contra War in Nicaragua. The U.S. government was providing millions of dollars of military aid to the Contras, armed insurgent forces in Nicaragua who were battling the Sandinista-controlled revolutionary government. WFP brought thousands of U.S. activists on delegations to Nicaragua during the 1980s to see the effects of the war and organized events for activists in the U.S. to fight the anti-Nicaraguan policies of both the U.S. congress and the Reagan administration. The efforts of WFP activists received international attention, had substantial impact on official U.S. policy and played a major role in ending official congressional funding to the Contra.

When the war ended in 1990, WFP became involved in other struggles in Latin America and the Caribbean. They played a role in the repatriation of Guatemalan refugees, brought an international presence to Haiti during the political unrest of the early 90s, and initiated protests against the School of Americas and the World Bank. As the 90s progressed, WFP helped workers in Free Trade Zones (FTZs) in Nicaragua secure union contracts, helped with reconstruction after Hurricane Mitch in Nicaragua in 1998, focused on the effects of debt in Nicaragua, and began delegations to Cuba. In 2000, WFP opened an office in Columbia and began their work there, focusing on the effects of military

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<sup>21</sup> *Mission & History*, Witness for Peace, 2008. Online. Available: <http://www.witnessforpeace.org/article.php?list=type&type=89> November 28, 2008

funding and drug fumigation.<sup>22</sup> WFP fought against CAFTA before it was passed by congress in 2004 and has continued to fight against its implementation. It had its license to visit Cuba revoked in 2005 as part of a broader State Department crack down, and has since started delegations to Venezuela and Bolivia.

Currently, the two main focuses of WFP are addressing military violence and economic violence against Latin America. Their focus of military violence is on “U.S. military aid and training of Latin American militaries” and on “U.S. military presence in Latin America.”<sup>23</sup> This work mainly focuses on U.S. aid to the Columbian military and aerial fumigations in Columbia, but also looks at closing the School of Americas, a U.S. run military school that trains Latin American military personnel and police which is often cited as the source of methods of human rights violations.<sup>24</sup> In focusing on economic violence, WFP works to fight the neoliberal trade model because of its many, well-documented failures in Latin America, and to promote alternative models. This includes fighting the Columbia Free Trade Agreement and fighting for the renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA). Some other issues that WFP also works on are ending the U.S. embargo on Cuba and challenging U.S. political interference in Latin America.

### *Organizational Structure*

WFP has a national office in Washington D.C., eight regional offices around the United States, and three international offices in Managua, Nicaragua, Bogotá, Colombia,

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<sup>22</sup> *ibid*

<sup>23</sup> Organizational Structure document, Witness for Peace Internal Documents Binder, Unpublished

<sup>24</sup> *A brief history of the SOA Watch Movement*, School of Americas Watch, Available: [http://www.soaw.org/docs/OP\\_history\\_of\\_soa\\_watch.pdf](http://www.soaw.org/docs/OP_history_of_soa_watch.pdf) December 3, 2008

and Oaxaca, Mexico. The U.S.-based work of WFP includes coordinating education campaigns, speaker tours, direct action protests, delegations, fund-raising, and membership. This work is done by the Executive Director, National Delegations Organizer, and Finance and Operations Manager in the national office and the six Regional Organizers (ROs) at all but two of the regional offices. International Teams, which are supervised by two Regional Directors in the Andean region and the Mesoamerica region, are made up of long-term volunteers (ITers) who look at the international effects of U.S. policies, coordinate with international contacts, and lead delegations and speaker tours. There are three ITers in Nicaragua, five in Columbia, and six in Mexico. There is also a Board of Directors based in the United States who helps to shape organizational direction and policy.

The overall work of the organization follows the work plans developed at the annual Organizational Planning Meeting by staff and volunteers from all levels of the organization. The flow of the work plan follows the strategic plan, which was last revised in 2007. The strategic plan is developed in a similar fashion to the work plan, but with input from the Board of Directors.<sup>25</sup>

#### *Focus of Witness for Peace in Nicaragua*

The three main issues that WFP Nicaragua focuses on are trade, debt, and labor.<sup>26</sup> They focus on how these three issues are affected by U.S. policies, some of which are CAFTA, the policy of the International Monetary Fund, and public and private U.S. corporate policy. IMF policy is considered U.S. policy by WFP<sup>27</sup> because the U.S. is the

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<sup>25</sup> Organizational Structure Document

<sup>26</sup> Narváez, 10/11/08

<sup>27</sup> *ibid*

only country with veto power.<sup>28</sup> Some other global institutions that WFP looks at because the U.S. plays a role in that affect these issues are the World Bank, the World Trade Organization (WTO), and the Inter-American Development Bank.

Trade, debt and labor are also a part of what WFP calls the “roots of migration.” An estimated 1.5 million Nicaraguans live abroad and many send remittances back to Nicaragua to support their families.<sup>29</sup> High unemployment and low wages are some of the causes of this exodus, which can be traced back to larger processes like CAFTA and privatization of land, utilities, banks, and more. WFP works to document the ways these policies effect situations in Nicaragua at the community and national level and to inform the people of the United States how they can change policy to better the situation.

Though much of WFP’s work focuses on anti-oppressive critiques of development structures, it is not anti-development or anti-globalization. Their viewpoints are similar to those of progressive post-development theorists in that they view development as a necessary part of alleviating global inequities, but find it problematic and ineffective in its current form.<sup>30</sup> By facilitating transnational relationships and “bringing people closer together,”<sup>31</sup> they hope to facilitate a more equitable form of globalization. While they deal with critiques of development structures, WFP is not a development organization and do not involve themselves with material aid. They engage in political solidarity only, which is understood by WFP staff, Nicaraguan contacts, and delegates.

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<sup>28</sup> Stiglitz, Joseph, *Globalization and its Discontents*, (New York: Norton, 2002), 12.

<sup>29</sup> Narváez, 11/7/08

<sup>30</sup> McKinnon, 281

<sup>31</sup> Narváez, Patty, Interview, November 4, 2008, Witness for Peace Office, Managua

## *Organizational Culture*

WFP is a politically independent leftist organization. When it was founded, it was explicitly a Christian organization. It remains faith-based, but now is more open to all understandings of spirituality and faith.<sup>32</sup> Reflection is woven in to every activity and “consciousness must be involved” in daily work.<sup>33</sup> There is a heavy emphasis on self care for everyone involved with WFP, including regular check-ins with other staff members or directors and breaks and vacations from work. This is written into the policies of the organization, but also shows through in daily activities and the relationships of the staff. There is also an emphasis on connectedness at all levels of social interaction that provides a spiritual motive for action.<sup>34</sup>

The organizational motto is “Transforming People, Transforming Policy” and it embodies the focus of WFP well. The main philosophy behind the work of the IT is that the “transformative experience of delegations” incites new forms of analysis and action in the U.S.<sup>35</sup> The focus of relationship building and social networks as a means of social change also relates to how they document problems in Nicaragua. There is a deliberate effort to link the micro to the macro, the local to the global and that politics should be people centered.

When conducting meetings or business, WFP uses consensus decision making at all levels.<sup>36</sup> There are explicit and implicit notions that every voice matters in every situation. There is also an acknowledgement of comfort level with decisions and work focus and a general integration of social concerns into the work. For instance, I sat in on a Regional

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<sup>32</sup> Baynes, Galen, Witness for Peace International Team, Nicaragua, Interview, November 6, 2008, Witness for Peace office, Managua. Telephone: 265-1774

<sup>33</sup> *ibid*

<sup>34</sup> *ibid*

Organizers conference call, and the standing first agenda item is a personal check in with all of the members. Facilitation and note taking rotate amongst all the staff and there was careful acknowledgement of all opinions as a way to make decisions. This level of intention about social interaction was present in all activities I participated in with WFP.

The concept of solidarity with the people of Nicaragua that the WFP has as a part of its model is one of political support, accompaniment, witness, and physical presence.<sup>37</sup> They have relationships with the people of Nicaragua and a sustained presence in their “reality,” a word that was used many times by ITers and community members in El Regadío. There is a commitment by both actors, a mutual solidarity that is based in a social familiarity with the issues that are important in each others’ lives. The solidarity model is consistent with the type of interpersonal concern that is present within the organization.

WFP is very conscious of the role they play in Nicaraguan communities. Their goal is to build “mutual solidarity,”<sup>38</sup> a shared commitment to each others’ political struggles that is expressed by and for both WFP and Nicaraguan communities. There is also an effort to “leave as little a footprint as possible” and not affect the community politics.<sup>39</sup> In fact, it is WFP policy not to take any political stances within Latin American countries themselves, only on policies of the U.S. that affect the countries.<sup>40</sup> They feel it would be hypocritical, considering that they are fighting against U.S. intervention in Nicaraguan policies for the sake of greater sovereignty and autonomy.<sup>41</sup> Another way WFP is very careful with their community involvement is with their gift giving policy where they “distance [them]selves

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<sup>35</sup> Hostetler, 11/12/08

<sup>36</sup> Hostetler, Sharon, Interview, November 5, 2008, Witness for Peace Office, Managua

<sup>37</sup> Hostetler, 11/12/08.

<sup>38</sup> *ibid*

<sup>39</sup> Baynes, 11/6/08

<sup>40</sup> Hostetler, 11/12/08

<sup>41</sup> Narváez, Patty, Interview, November 6, 2008, Witness for Peace Office, Managua

from direct giving.”<sup>42</sup> The reasoning behind the gift giving policy is more nuanced than a simple rejection of the use of material aid. The goal is to avoid a “business relationship” with partner communities or re-creating a dichotomous First World/Third World relationship.<sup>43</sup> By ensuring that money is not an incentive for the relationship, they are seeking to make the relationship more even and balanced, open and honest.

Popular education is another important part of WFP’s work. The entire delegation curriculum uses a popular education model and the philosophy of Paulo Friere has a strong influence on the organization.<sup>44</sup> The ITers are very aware of the power of language and words, as I witnessed on multiple occasions, and are never there to “make” people understand.<sup>45</sup> They are also insistent that they simply present a model for understanding the issues present in Nicaragua that the delegates and others should be critical of and speak back to as they acquire the knowledge.<sup>46</sup> They encourage cycles of reflection and action, a constant process of knowing and evaluating and being that is the methodology of their “transformative experience.” Again, the notion of intrinsic value of everyone’s experience and opinion, the general interpersonal concern is present here as with most other areas of the organization.

#### *Work of the Witness for Peace International Team*

Most of the work that the IT does is educational. They find information, make contacts, and maintain and build partnerships in Nicaragua to inform and facilitate the work being done in the U.S. The research is for information on Nicaragua and U.S. foreign

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<sup>42</sup> Strategic Planning Document, WFP Internal Document

<sup>43</sup> Hostetler, 11/12/08

<sup>44</sup> Baynes, 11/6/08

<sup>45</sup> Narváez, 11/4/08

policy in newspapers, academic journals, web resources, other civil society organizations and contacts amongst the Nicaraguan people.<sup>47</sup> The research is compiled into articles, position papers, and delegation curriculum. The ITers also make contacts with various members of local civil society organizations, academics, Nicaraguan politicians and economists, community leaders, and others. These contacts can become speakers on delegations, point people in new communities to visit, policy analysts who may advise WFP on the effects of U.S. foreign policy and much more. The ITers also build relationships with new and existing contacts, making sure there is a cultivated relationship and mutual exchange.<sup>48</sup>

On delegations, the ITers are translators, group facilitators, coordinators and teachers all at once. The ITers organize the Nicaraguan side of the delegation logistics before the groups arrive, while the local Regional Organizer and a volunteer delegation coordinator take care of logistics in the States. ITers accompany the delegations throughout their time in Nicaragua, translating all interactions and providing structure to their time. They also give three lectures at roughly two hours a piece on the basics of trade, debt, and labor in Nicaragua and how it is affected by U.S. policy. Throughout the time, they visit communities, civil society organizations, industry, landmarks, and more. Dispersed throughout are reflections and debriefs, also led by the ITers. The ITers may provide support for delegates once they have returned to the United States by providing information or coordination.

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<sup>46</sup> *ibid*

<sup>47</sup> Anderson, Rachel, Interview, November 25, 2008, Witness for Peace office, Managua. Telephone: 265-1774

<sup>48</sup> *ibid*

The ITers also recruit local speakers for speaker tours and accompany the speakers as translators. The speakers are usually existing contacts from Nicaraguan communities that host the delegations who talk about their life stories and how they have been affected by U.S. foreign policy. The tours are normally about 3 weeks around a region of the U.S. The logistics are arranged by an RO. The tours go to schools, churches, and community centers to share the stories of the Nicaraguan people. The speaker and I Ter are then hosted by home-stays in each city. The I Ter also partners with the RO to recruit for WFP activists in the US and for delegations to Nicaragua.

Finally, the ITers also run the office in Managua, although the Mesoamerican Regional Director also works out of the office, as well.

### **El Regadío, Estelí**

#### *Community history*

El Regadío is a small, mostly rural town in the municipality of Estelí in the northwest of Nicaragua. The city of Estelí, which is about an hour from El Regadío, was one of the most war-torn battlegrounds during the Nicaraguan Revolution in the late 1970s. The city was bombed from the air by the Somoza military dictatorship, and the city was rendered nearly uninhabitable by the destruction. After Somoza was defeated, all the major roads, the water system, and most of the stores had been destroyed by the war. Many of the residents of El Regadío whom I spoke with were former residents of Estelí who moved out to the *campo* after the insurrection.

When the Revolutionary Government initiated agrarian land reform, El Regadío became a cooperative of the *Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional* (Sandinista Front of

National Liberation, FSLN).<sup>49</sup> The FSLN was the revolutionary army who overthrew the Somoza dictatorship in 1979 and subsequently ran the government as a political party until losing democratic elections in 1990. When the town began to build its infrastructure with the profits from the co-op, the Contra War broke out. The mountainous region of Estelí where El Regadío is located was one of the front lines of the war, and the town suffered many deaths. The co-op continued to run successfully despite the war. The community ran women's organizations<sup>50</sup>, adult education programs<sup>51</sup>, and environmental programs that were in addition to the literacy and health programs and other social services provided by the government.

When Violeta Chamorro was elected President in 1990, the co-op in El Regadío was broken up and privatized and nearly all funding for social services was cut off.<sup>52</sup> The schools struggled, electricity and water projects stagnated, the basic cost of living went up and unemployment in the community burgeoned.<sup>53</sup> Throughout the 90s, the community struggled with heavy emigration and poverty.<sup>54</sup> Many businesses closed because they couldn't compete with the goods introduced to the region by free trade, unemployment worsened, and emigration became even more prevalent.<sup>55</sup>

In the past few years, there have been many community development projects through the mayor's office of El Regadío, many funded by international NGOs.<sup>56</sup> A high school was recently built, gutters were recently put on the roads that stemmed flooding, and

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<sup>49</sup> Castillo Obregón, Augusto, Interview, November 14, 2008, In his home in El Regadío, Estelí

<sup>50</sup> Andino Lopez, Gloria Alba, Interview, November 16, 2008, In her home in El Regadío, Estelí

<sup>51</sup> Olivas, Miriam, Interview, November 16, 2008, In her home in El Regadío, Estelí

<sup>52</sup> Andino, 11/16/08

<sup>53</sup> Olivas, 11/16/08

<sup>54</sup> Andino 11/16/08

<sup>55</sup> ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Castillo Obregón, Augusto, Interview, November 19, 2008, In his home in El Regadío, Estelí

health and education were both made public again by the government in 2006.<sup>57</sup> A tobacco factory was also built in the community in 2006 which provided many jobs to the community, helping to fight unemployment. There is also a cattle ranch that is owned by the same man who owns the tobacco factory.

The community is strongly FSLN and is happy to be benefiting from government programs like *Hambre Cero* (Zero Hunger) and *Usura Cero* (Zero Usury) since Daniel Ortega of the FSLN was elected President of Nicaragua in 2006.<sup>58</sup> The schools are getting better, and in the last year the school received running water and graduated a record number of students to go to universities in Estelí.<sup>59</sup> The community is currently working on a project to bring clean running water to 266 homes and on paving the roads.<sup>60</sup> The unemployment rate is still relatively high and wages are stagnant. The community is currently still suffering from emigration problems and recently almost 300 people have left for Costa Rica, Spain and the United States.<sup>61</sup> There are few jobs that require training in the community and part of the migration rate comes from educated residents leaving to find work. The Tobacco factory also provides many jobs, especially for women, but the wages are low and the work is hard and with harsh chemicals. The factory is also a source of pollution for the community, worsening water contamination that was being stemmed by latrine projects and stripping the land of nutrients.<sup>62</sup> It is a point of contention in the community, made more complicated by the fact that it is part owned by a community leader, who is the brother of one of the community leaders who also coordinates with WFP and was one of my main research participants, Miriam.

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<sup>57</sup> Olivas, Miriam, Interview, November 19, 2008, In her home in El Regadío, Estelí

<sup>58</sup> Andino, 11/16/08

<sup>59</sup> Olivas, Miriam, Interview, November 15, 2008, In her home in El Regadío, Estelí

<sup>60</sup> *ibid.*

El Regadío has a relatively small population most estimate around 1500 and is located almost completely along a single road that meanders up a hill for several kilometers. People's houses are relatively close together and are located *más arriba* (more above) or *más abajo* (more below). There is electricity and some running water, which makes the community more developed than most rural communities in Nicaragua. It is the most suburban community I've ever encountered in Nicaragua, as pointed out to me by Miriam, since many of the adults have regular business in the city of Estelí and the kids seem to travel there often for fun and to participate in popular culture. The youth dress fashionably in the same style of clothing one might find in a California high school. At a youth festival I attended, U.S. and Latin American hip hop dominated the music selection and the dances. There is a distinct difference between the youth culture and the more traditional Nicaraguan culture the older generations belonged to. The adults played and listened to mostly traditional Nicaraguan music, *ranchero* and *cumbia*. With the exception of the lavish, mcmansion style home of the tobacco factory owner, the town was not extremely rich nor extremely poor compared to other *campo* communities I have observed in Nicaragua, with stone houses, zinc roofs, and small plots of land with some crops in the back.

### *Leadership*

While I was in El Regadío, my primary points of contact were the three community leaders who plan the delegations with WFP: Gloria Alba Andino Lopez, Augusto Castillo Obregón, and Miriam Olivas. Gloria is the founder and head of *La Unión*, the women's organization in El Regadío, Augusto is the mayor, and Miriam was the headmaster of the

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<sup>61</sup> Andino, 11/16/08

<sup>62</sup> *ibid.*

school for 42 years, but is now retired. They were the source of most of our information about El Regadío and I spoke only with the leaders and the people they recommended that I speak to. Gloria and Augusto are married, and I stayed at their house while I was in the community. Gloria gave the ITers and me a list of the eight main families and points of contact for the delegations and a summary of what they normally do when they are in El Regadío. The lens through which I saw El Regadío and their involvement with WFP was defined by these three people.

The three leaders had two distinct views of the community. Part of it had to do with their positions in the community and part of the difference was simply ideological. Miriam is the sister of one of the owners of the tobacco factory and I spoke with other members of her family who run the school, have a large series of farms in an adjacent community, and run the cattle farm. She was also recently elected to the municipal government to represent their region. Her view of the community is that it is getting better in almost every way, with the school excelling, development projects and businesses developing every day, and community members organizing for their own betterment. She is very focused on personal relationships and only speaks of connections of local issues to systems as an answer to a question that I posed, not as a part of her standard pattern of speech. Gloria and Augusto, by comparison, have a much more complex view of the community. They view the new jobs as unsustainable with low wages and poor conditions, though it is better than unemployment. They see more students graduating school each year who are unable to attend college because it is too expensive. They talk about the community projects as a work in progress, and the beginning of a long series of improvements the community needs. They frequently make connections between local, national, and international issues when they speak and do not change their analysis when answering questions.

### *Work with Witness for Peace*

El Regadío's work with Witness for Peace is mostly hosting delegations, though Miriam, Augusto, and Gloria have all been on speaker tours in the past five years, with Gloria going twice. The three of them also set up the delegations and decide which families will host delegates. The delegations are in El Regadío for three days and two nights. When they arrive, they meet with Augusto and Miriam for a community history and to talk about neoliberalism in the community. Over the course of their stay, they visit the school and spend time observing and speaking with the teachers and students; they visit the health center and speak with the staff there; they visit a farm and talk to the *campesinos* (people who work in the country) to learn about agrarian practices and life in the *campo*; and they visit the women's organization. During this time, they are also spending time with their host families, often mediated by ITers, who have to run from house to house to translate the interactions.

The people in the community with whom I spoke told me they enjoyed the delegations. When I asked them what they did and how they felt, without exception my research participants told me how happy the delegations made them and the community. Similar language was used in each family I talked to, and some common themes arose. There was a paramount importance in sharing; that there was a two way exchange of culture and a social relationship formed during the home stay. Many families remembered the names of their delegates and were eager to tell me about them and what they had done together and spoken about. Another point that was stressed was that the delegates needed to learn "*realidad nicaragüense*" (Nicaraguan reality). This phrase was probably the single most common in all of my conversations – it was clear that the people hosting the delegates

needed people to know how they lived and to see what it meant. Many people also connected this to personal and national poverty and would quickly follow their comments about Nicaraguan reality with a comment on how it was a poor country and a small country.

Some other things that were commonly brought up were how the language barrier made it hard to communicate but that they found non-verbal ways to relate and share. Some people expressed frustration with this dynamic and some amusement. The fact that the delegates always took pictures also seemed to be a remarkable trait. This was mentioned, especially by the children of the families. I experienced this expectation first hand when I was walking up the road after an interview one day and four pre-adolescent girls called me over and asked me to take pictures of them, even though I did not visibly possess a camera. The people in the community were clearly used to having foreigners present, visible in both the way they talked about the delegations and the way I was treated.

The questions I asked about the delegations and how my research participants felt about them were answered quickly and with little confusion, but when I asked more abstract questions like why the community hosted the delegations or what their purpose was, nearly everyone but Miriam, Augusto, and Gloria drew a blank. People could tell me little of what Witness for Peace was besides that they were a political organization. When one man said they were there to fight neoliberalism, he could not tell me how they did so or even what their focus was in this fight. That they did not know the answers to these questions didn't seem to bother them very much or temper their enthusiasm for the delegations in the slightest.

The speaker tours make up the other part of the work WFP does with El Regadío. Though they only involve Miriam, Augusto, and Gloria, the stories they tell are of the community, and the other people I spoke to seemed aware of these trips and that they were

related to the delegations. The speakers seemed proud to be chosen by WFP, though Miriam had the strongest reaction of thankfulness, even calling it “the greatest gift I’ve had in my life.”<sup>63</sup> She spoke of the opportunity in a manner I would imagine one would speak about winning the lottery. All the speakers told me that they spoke of their lives and various issues of interest like the role of women, the effects of neoliberalism, migration in their community, community organizations, and their experience during the Contra War and with the cooperative among other things. They did this interwoven with a narrative of their lives, all of it in first person. They all said that their tours were great experiences.

Each of the three speakers spoke about similar topics while on tour, but spoke about their trips very differently. Part of the difference was a function of how long ago they had been on tour: Augusto went in 2002, Miriam in 2004, and Gloria in both 2007 and 2008, having just returned from a speaker tour on November 3<sup>rd</sup>. Augusto spoke about his tour in summary, with general thoughts and feeling about the trip that didn’t have much detail. Miriam’s description was a bit more detailed and had a few specific experiences, but was mostly focused on general thoughts and feelings. Gloria’s descriptions of both her trips were quite detailed and included far more information than the other two accounts combined. Her overall thoughts and feelings were much more descriptive and nuanced and she attached specific stories to many of her more general observations.

Another major difference was the lens through which the speakers viewed their tours. Gloria and Augusto viewed their tours similarly but with different levels of memory and detail. They told me a lot about the various levels of consciousness and knowledge they encountered in audiences on the tours and spoke about how cultural differences affected their *charlas* (talks) and their experiences. They said that many people in the U.S.

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<sup>63</sup> Olivas, 11/16/08

were uninterested in and/or completely ignorant about politics and that it made the discussions both interesting and difficult. They also said that few people knew anything at all about Nicaraguan or even Latin American politics or economics. They were very confident about what they spoke of and how they spoke about it, both communicating it was a trip to build solidarity and support for their community and their people. Miriam framed her story much differently and was much more concerned with how her tour had helped WFP. Miriam told me she was not exactly sure what she should speak of at first, but that it became clear after a few of the *charlas* on the tour, even though she was simply speaking about her own experiences.<sup>64</sup> She said that she was glad that she could help strengthen WFP and their work in the States and spoke a lot about her personal interactions with people on the tours.<sup>65</sup> Her focus was less systemic than Gloria or Augusto's and she spoke less about the purpose of sharing her story.

All three speakers told me how little the people they spoke to knew about Nicaragua, Latin America and poor countries in general. They said that they got similar questions on every leg of the tour and that everyone wanted to know what they thought about U.S. politics. At times, people would express disbelief at the speakers' *charlas* and try and counter their claims with other information or attempt to point out supposedly contradictory parts of their stories. Though they found these questions were obnoxious, they represented a small minority of the interactions the speakers had. Each speaker said that they received wonderful hospitality and were able to share with many people along the tour. Gloria and Augusto said that they felt great expressions of solidarity on most legs of the tour and that audiences were very attentive. Gloria said that many people appeared affected by the

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<sup>64</sup> *ibid*

<sup>65</sup> Olivas, 11/19/08

*charlas* but that youth audiences were most attentive, asked the best questions, and gave her the most hope for change.

Though I got very different stories from each speaker, they all told me of their fascination with the U.S. This had to do with everything from portion sizes in restaurants to tall buildings to foreign wild life. Beyond the standard culture shock, there was also a general disbelief with the overall level of wealth and they told me of things they saw as if they still were unable to believe it was there. Augusto said that the standard of living was “a thousand times” better than they had in Nicaragua and he would never forget it.<sup>66</sup> They all said that the language barrier was difficult. Gloria and Augusto said that they appreciated the translators, and Gloria commented about how she felt that her feelings and inflections were communicated with her words and she was grateful that it wasn’t mechanical.<sup>67</sup> Miriam said that the translation was difficult to deal with and it felt like a barrier between her and the people she spoke with.<sup>68</sup>

## **Imperialism and Resistance**

### *Power and Relationship*

As I have shown above, power goes beyond control of political and economic institutions and also has social implications. According to Perez Huber's systems of privilege and oppression, certain aspects of social identity are privileged over others, creating social power structures that shape everyday relations.<sup>69</sup> Such systems of privilege and oppression are no longer explicitly legislated rules in most parts of the world and

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<sup>66</sup> Castillo, 11/19/08

<sup>67</sup> Andino Lopez, Gloria Alba, Interview, November 17, 2008, In her home in El Regadío, Estelí.

<sup>68</sup> Olivas, 11/19/08

<sup>69</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, 45

instead are formed by diffuse systems of social and cultural beliefs.<sup>70</sup> This diffuse set of beliefs, or social hegemony, is how power reproduces itself in society, including re-legitimizing oppressive power structures that are upheld through social relations as well as structural function.<sup>71</sup> Since subjects form relationships in a milieu of hegemonic forces, these power dynamics have implications for how subjects relate to one another and how they interact with the systems that make up their social reality.<sup>72</sup>

While there are powerful social forces at play that create a power imbalance as the starting point for any relationship, we should not undercut the role of human agency in social processes.<sup>73</sup> Dominance is constantly subverted and interrupted by social actors, reshaping fluid social hegemony, many times through deliberate acts of resistance. Both WFP and members of the community of El Regadío expressed means of reshaping oppressive hegemony through bridging social difference and distance in conscious resistance of the norm. They demonstrated the social power and insurgent agency of resisting this social and cultural oppression by building alternative relationships in the process of resisting political and economic oppression by working to change U.S. policy. The purpose of social and political movements is to subvert dominant power arrangements, and the joint work of WFP and El Regadío challenges the multifaceted nature of these arrangements while consciously grappling with the placement of their work in an atmosphere of oppression.

Within WFP, there is focus on countering social oppression with the organization through the adaptation of non-hierarchical processes and anti-oppression training. The use

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<sup>70</sup> Perez Huber, Lindsay et al, "Getting beyond the 'symptom,' acknowledging the 'disease': theorizing racist nativism," *Contemporary Justice Review*, Vol. 11, No. 1, March 2008, 41

<sup>71</sup> McKinnon, 289

<sup>72</sup> McQueen, 686

of consensus decision-making is an example of steps WFP taken to address these dynamics. El Regadío uses cultural practices of sharing and they make sure their stories are heard in resistance to dominant social forces that do not traditionally allow voice for people in their social position. In joint projects, simply through the act of cooperation and collaboration they are defying social forces and creating alternative models for transnational relationships. Though it is impossible to transcend oppressive realities, WFP and El Regadío are in the process of articulating, evaluating, and reshaping patterns for social transformation to overcome these oppressive realities.

### *Levels of Resistance*

The more political and economic effects of imperialism like poverty, poor community health, and political disenfranchisement have distinct effects on social and cultural hegemony. Not only are the power-holders enacting hegemonic oppressive norms as means and justification to function in oppressive structures and processes, but these processes and structures also reproduce these ideologies. For instance, when the media privileges one group by showing them more often and in a consistently friendlier set of circumstances than other groups (if they show the other groups at all), the privileged group is granted a normative social status that implicitly pathologizes the other groups. When this trend is extrapolated to patterns of behavior normalized in legislation, government structure, art, language, economic thought, and all other aspects of social and historical reality, the link between structural function and social hegemony becomes clear. The link between resistance of political and economic power arrangements and of social and cultural hegemonic oppression is of paramount importance in quests for liberation.

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<sup>73</sup> McKinnon, 290

The very purpose of delegations is to facilitate acts of “speaking back,” acts of relationship that subvert the social and cultural effects of imperialism and tell stories that are alternatives to the dominant narratives. WFP calls the experience transformative for the U.S. American participants in a way that reveals systemic failings that must be changed. The transformation comes in the act of subversion, the defiance of hegemonic narratives in coming to know the people of Nicaragua and their reality. A similar transformation takes place for Nicaraguan participants, but they are deprived of the systemic agency provided by the political enfranchisement and economic power of the U.S. American delegates. This relationship where there is an imbalance of political and economic agency is flawed and problematic, but not immediately rectifiable and is one of the primary systems the delegations are meant to bring change to.

*Humanization: Relating across difference and distance*

The process of globalized neoliberal economics transforms imperialism by bridging international trade gaps between producer and consumer that allow consumer nations the ability to exercise economic and political control over producer nations with minimal social contact. Because social realities are located in specific physical contexts, physical distance is a factor of social difference, even without factors like nationality.<sup>74</sup> The physical difference is also a barrier to the humanizing effects of social interaction, without which there is little knowledge of the plight of the oppressed and equally little incentive to change it for consumer nations. This contributes to the imperialist dehumanization of oppressed subjects. Hegemonic imperialist narratives deprive the oppressed of full creative and

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<sup>74</sup> Perez Huber et al, 42

analytical faculties and grant the privileged control over knowledge and culture.<sup>75</sup> This underlying assumption propagates the culture of the North with little exchange with or acknowledgement of the south as a legitimate producer of culture. Without the counter-narratives to these social ideas, which can be provided by direct human interaction, the ideas remain intact.

While delegations and speakers' tours bridge the physical distance between the U.S. and Nicaragua, the process of countering dehumanization of the oppressed is still a large task. The one-way cultural exchange that leaves Nicaragua very familiar with U.S. culture and the U.S. with little to no knowledge of Nicaragua means that WFP and El Regadío have to expose delegates to what is likely unfamiliar information about Nicaraguan history, society and culture. The community members of El Regadío call this "Nicaraguan reality" and say that relating it to delegates is one of the most important parts of the trip. They also focus on "sharing" a two-way *intercambio* (exchange) of culture so that Nicaraguans can learn about U.S. American culture, too. This gives people a chance to not only construct counter-hegemonic relationships with each other, but also to tell counter-narratives about their respective cultures that challenge imperialist hegemony. This story telling as a form of subject creation is something I will explore in a later section.

#### *Material Need in a Post-Development Framework*

Neither WFP nor community members of El Regadío told me they believed in post-development theory, but many of their comments fit within the framework. It may be useful to preface their feelings with what post-development paradigms pose as problems of the "epistemology and ontology of the modernist development project: (i) its assumption of

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<sup>75</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, 25

universalism; (ii) its focus on the concept of *progress* and the privileging of an economic essentialism within that; and (iii) the problematisation of a condition labeled underdevelopment and the suggestion of remedies.”<sup>76</sup> This does not mean that people can not use projects for clean water in their community or that the cultural place of economic projects is in question, for those arguments are of another kind of essentialism, a reduction of being that defies progression or agency. What it does mean is that the model and vision of development is predicated on imperialist imposition of cultural values. The long-term goals of development are that of imitation of the systems of imperialist nations of the North. Any indigenous vision of economic development or prosperity is automatically overshadowed and overpowered.

While political solidarity and fighting social and cultural oppression are important projects to undertake in the process of liberation, satisfying immediate material needs is also an exigency in this process. Both WFP and El Regadío are critical of traditional models of development, but recognize the horrific conditions that are a part of Nicaraguan poverty must be addressed or the people will die before they can see freedom. El Regadío, though in a better material situation than many other rural Nicaraguan communities, is in sore need of infrastructure and material goods. While I was there, people spoke excitedly about the new computers that were coming to the school<sup>77</sup> and the potable water project that was underway for the pueblo.<sup>78</sup> The material improvements and developments in the town were related to me excitedly when I asked people to tell me about their community, and there was some ambivalence about the gift giving policy of WFP.

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<sup>76</sup> McKinnon, 289

<sup>77</sup> Olivas, 11/15/08

<sup>78</sup> Castillo, 11/19/08

While eager to improve the material conditions of El Regadío, both community members and WFP have complex reasoning behind their criticisms of traditional development. Augusto was the community member who voiced the community concerns the most directly.<sup>79</sup> The purpose of the political struggle against the neoliberal model of development is partly one of sovereignty. The reason that the country is in the state of under-development and material need is because of a history of foreign imperialist exploitation and interference, especially in the past century by the United States.<sup>80</sup> Requirements and restrictions are also conditions for aid at both a national level, like SAPs, and at a local level with many NGOs. In other words, the people of Nicaragua had no control over the whims of military and economic powers that tore their country to shreds, and now the same countries that were responsible are offering limited material aid for their recovery, but only if they conduct their affairs in a way that they deem appropriate. Augusto spoke often of the disastrous effects of privatization and drastically reduced social spending that were the conditions of the IMF loans. He was indignant that the same people who funded the war that killed many members of his family and community had then given limited funds with restrictions that had harmed the country further. Not only was their sovereignty violated, but the conditions on the aid made things worse for El Regadío. The model didn't work.

Concern was also expressed about the model that development is predicated on. Gloria talked about how the “neoliberal capitalist” model provides low paying, dangerous jobs that are limited in their ability to alleviate poverty.<sup>81</sup> Because the developments are part of an economic essentialism based in development of a market economy, the

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<sup>79</sup> Castillo, 11/14/08

<sup>80</sup> Narváez, 11/7/08

community does not get to dictate a social focus to so-called sustainable development projects like new businesses. This was the main critique of the tobacco factory: though it provided technical economic growth, it actually produced its own set of social ills that were arguably comparable with the unemployment it was meant to alleviate.

The people of El Regadío are excited for the development projects that are now directed through the mayor's office.<sup>82</sup> It means that they are in charge of building it, they know how it works, how to fix it and how to maintain it. They also decide the priority and order of the projects. Some people are excited for material aid, as well. The computers that were donated to the school are an example of this.<sup>83</sup> Another example is the dictionaries that were donated to the school by a former delegate.<sup>84</sup> Miriam as well as many other community members I spoke to mentioned these.

WFP shares Augusto's critique of international development as undermining sovereignty. WFP realizes that they have no place passing judgment on validity of development in Nicaragua and that only the people of Nicaragua should tell how they feel about development. Instead of passing judgment on development, WFP fights against the imposition of development and advocates for agency of the Nicaraguan people in the process. There are also other critiques in place. WFP realizes that Nicaragua, especially its poor, is to a large extent dependent on foreign aid for survival. Besides undermining economic sovereignty, this makes for an unstable and unsustainable economic model that must be changed for the long-term betterment of the country. WFP is in no financial situation to give in a sustainable way and finds that its resources are better focused on its

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<sup>81</sup> Andino, 11/16/08

<sup>82</sup> Castillo, 11/19/08

<sup>83</sup> Olivas, 11/15/08

<sup>84</sup> *ibid.*

mission and long-term goals, which are to change the conditions that necessitate aid. If people associated with WFP feel the need to give aid, there is a list of recommended aid organizations that they can donate to who have more sustainable aid projects.

WFP also has practical concerns for their gift giving policy. If one section of a community benefits materially from the relationship with WFP while others do not, it could sow discord within the community and harm the relationship. Also, by making sure that the incentive for the relationship is not material, WFP can better leave themselves open to constructive criticism from the communities because there is no fear of withdrawal of aid or any other backlash.

The people in El Regadío did not explicitly disprove of the gift giving policy, but it was an aspect of the relationship with WFP that was mentioned in nearly every interview. The people understand that the purpose of the organization is to provide political support, and explicitly expressed approval of this goal, but nearly always brought it up out of their own accord, as if it was something that was important to reiterate to me. There was also consistent mention of instances where delegates violated the gift giving policy voiced with unanimous approval. The occasion where a former delegate gave a set of dictionaries to the library was mentioned by nearly every person as connected to WFP. Everyone expressed approval, and some even insisted to me that it was not against the policy and was a wonderful thing that happened. Some expressed hope that something similar would occur in the future. These contradictions exhibited the ambivalence of the people about the policy, and Gloria, one of the main critics of outside economic influence, even suggested that WFP run social programs in the community.<sup>85</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Andino, 11/17/08

The WFP gift giving policy was created by the organization for many complex reasons that have to do with their relationship to the Nicaraguan people. The staff of WFP expressed a similar ambivalence about the policy, saying that there are some cases when material need clearly is so urgent in many parts of Nicaragua it is difficult to stay focused on the longer-term goals and not provide immediate assistance. This ambivalence represents a genuine reflection on the part of the organization on the issues at hand, and despite the problematic nature of the policy, it has been deemed the best solution to an extremely complex problem.

#### *Cultural barriers in Political Struggle*

The nature of the political project of WFP is complex. The ITers often have a hard time explaining their work in either English or Spanish.<sup>86</sup> Because the organization takes no stances on Nicaraguan policy but focuses on Nicaraguan politics and economics, it can be difficult for people to understand. To a certain extent, drawing an artificial line in political engagement is a negation of the interconnected nature of politics and the underlying ideologies that inform all political actions. Since policies are located in and informed by a context of social hegemony, separating policies from ideologies disconnects the two and assumes an ideologically neutral position, which is impossible.<sup>87</sup> In this case, WFP's distance from Nicaraguan politics is out of concerns about imperialist political influence, and they effectively avoid explicit political positions in that political scene, which in and of itself has an ideological location. Again, this is one possible answer to the incredibly complex problem of reducing local political foot-prints that does less harm than

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<sup>86</sup> Anderson, 11/25/08

<sup>87</sup> Alcott, 11

other options weighed. Their solidarity model is to provide support by changing U.S. public and corporate policy, situating their politics around the international implications of U.S. politics as separate from Nicaraguan politics.

Solidarity without domestic political advocacy was sometimes confusing to community members in El Regadío. The use of the term neoliberal led some people to believe that WFP was explicitly against the policies of the *Partido Liberal Constitucionalista* (Liberal Constitutionalist Party or PLC), the right wing Nicaraguan political party that has served as the Nicaraguan face of neoliberalism. This is an example of the contextual meaning and specific socio-historical location of politics that further complicates transnational projects. There are more complicated political questions that are raised by interrogation of this phenomenon. What does political solidarity mean? How familiar and involved do actors have to be with each others political situations to be involved in solidarity? How does one communicate these situations in alternative contexts? There are certainly other important questions that are raised that warrant further attention, but for the purpose of this project, I will look at issues of information and communication that arose during the course of my research.

### *Information, Communication, and Regimes of Truth*

Since the WFP model is predicated on relationship and communication, it's important to analyze the complex dynamics of power that affect their work with El Regadío as well as their work as a whole. One of the underlying assumptions of the model of facilitating direct social interaction across difference rather than only documenting and distributing the stories of Nicaraguans is that there is an epistemic saliency of social position, an importance to how knowledge is formed and communicated, and the location

from which one speaks “affects the meaning and truth of what one says.”<sup>88</sup> A concept that helps examine this phenomenon is that of “rituals of speaking” which are “discursive practices of speaking or writing that involve not only the text or utterance but their position within a social space including the persons involved in, acting upon, and/or affected by the words.”<sup>89</sup> This shows discourse to be “an *event*, which includes speaker, words, hearer, location, language, and so on.”<sup>90</sup> Analyzing the context of discourse as having an effect on the content (but never *determining* the content) reveals the role of social hegemony as both an influence on the speaker and as creating the normative standards by which the statement is evaluated in context. Since the standards by which the discourse is evaluated is contextual, analyzing discourse as an event rather than just content is a more meaningful mode of analysis.

Discourse is a form of subject creation<sup>91</sup> that is inherently political. It affects how people come to know their world and each other by creating bodies of knowledge. These bodies of knowledge form the basis for the way the world functions socially, politically, economically, etc. Different bodies of knowledge are privileged over others in social hegemony creating “regimes of truth” which are the basis for broader social functions. Theories of governmentality say that these regimes of truth can be known through socio-historical genealogies of discourse and are used as tools of regulatory control by the state.<sup>92</sup> I argue that in the context of social hegemony, regimes of truth can also be used to demystify more diffuse structures of power through similar contextual genealogies that help to analyze rituals of speaking. The scope of my project precluded me from constructing a

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<sup>88</sup> Alcoff, 6

<sup>89</sup> Alcoff, 12

<sup>90</sup> Alcoff, 24

<sup>91</sup> McKinnon, 290

detailed genealogy of the regimes of truth at play in the context of my research, but an outline of such a genealogy can be inferred from what I have discussed about U.S. imperialism in Nicaragua<sup>93</sup> and social hegemony as influenced by imperial power.

When the delegations travel to El Regadío and when speakers travel to the U.S., the rituals of speaking change and new social meanings are created through the modified discourse amidst imperialist regimes of truth. Hegemonic ways of knowing are contested, resisting the inference that certain forms of acquiring knowledge are illegitimate.<sup>94</sup> When the community leaders were telling me about their speaker tours, they said that people would challenge their stories because they were from a personal standpoint. This is an instance where a culturally appropriate form of knowledge in Nicaragua, interpretation of first hand experience, was contested as illegitimate because it was not culturally appropriate in the imperialist culture. I heard no such stories of challenges when delegations were in El Regadío, which could be a function of location or of the type of people inclined to attend speaker tours compared to delegations.

Amidst this web of interlocking power structures, who holds the power over knowledge and discourse is clearly a problem that must be addressed. WFP and El Regadío address this by privileging speakers and locations that are normally subordinated. They also face the challenge of addressing social dynamics that privilege certain types of knowledge and speech. For instance, WFP is a formal organization that communicates through email, documents its meetings, compiles official research, and engages in other communicative practices typical of people in their social position. El Regadío, on the other

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<sup>92</sup> McKinnon, 283

<sup>93</sup> For a more detailed account of the history of U.S. involvement in Nicaragua, see *Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle* by Thomas W. Walker.

<sup>94</sup> Tuhiwai Smith, 59

hand, communicates almost entirely through social networks, lacking internet access, computers, and, as far as I could tell, daily newspapers. There are normative judgments about forms of collecting information that privilege “official” forms of communication and documentation and learning from “official” sources which must be addressed.

The way people tell stories also has an effect on how they are understood. An ITeer told me that delegates often have a difficult time tracking the speech organization of Nicaraguans, that locals often “talk in a circular, more poetic” way that people from the U.S. are likely to find repetitive and hard to follow.<sup>95</sup> Delegates and community members familiarizing themselves with cultural difference through sharing hopefully begin to de-privilege different styles of communication through sustained social interaction. This appeared to be so from the accounts of delegates.

The language barrier and translation process also becomes a site of struggle in this process. WFP’s practice of direct, first person, consecutive translation is as faithful to the original ritual of speaking as possible while still bridging the language gap. This is important and minimizes the effect of the language barrier by allowing subjects to communicate in ways they would normally express themselves through a medium where they would normally not be understood. Short of everyone being bilingual, this is the closest and most politically, culturally, and socially sensitive solution to problems which arise from translation.

### *Other Themes*

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<sup>95</sup> Anderson, 11/25/08

There are many questions that arose over the course of my research that I was unable to address. There were two of main questions that I regret not being able to pursue, but warrant study at a latter time, either by myself or future researchers.

What sorts of political understandings predicate solidarity relationships? This question arose when there were several people in the El Regadío who participated in delegations but couldn't tell me their purpose or anything about WFP. They still spoke about relationships, and telling stories about migration and the effects of neoliberalism and all of the other themes that those expressly working within WFP's solidarity model spoke about, but they weren't consciously a part of that process. What does that mean for the process? Do they have to be able to express awareness by others' standards to "truly" be a conscious part of the work?

The other question which I grappled with was about the fact that so much of the relationship with local communities depended on WFP. All of the projects were conceptualized by WFP, most of the rules were theirs, they brought the delegations and arranged the speaker tours and they were the ones who conceptualized and facilitated the action in the U.S. that resulted from the relationship. WFP staff members also made a living from their work while the community members were unpaid for their work. Most of these dynamics are necessities of social and material conditions outside of WFP's immediate control, but it makes equity<sup>96</sup> within the relationship and reciprocity very complicated. The Regional Director of WFP voiced similar concerns, and neither she nor I were able to find any possible alternatives to this model. I was not able to analyze the

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<sup>96</sup> I use the term "equity" here rather than "equality" because "equality" implies sameness, where as "equity" means fair treatment, empowerment for all, and justice which recognizes and celebrates diversity. In the words of Vernon A. Wall, "Equality is when everyone has shoes. Equity is when everyone has shoes that fit."

complex relationship and its function in anti-imperialist struggle, but it certainly warrants further thought and study.

## **Conclusion**

My initial question was simply about how the relationship between WFP and El Regadío worked. I wanted to know what it meant to broader anti-imperialist struggles for liberation and what some of the polemic issues in the relationship were. Through the use of a framework of modified progressive post-development theory that included aspects of post-structural discourse theory, post-colonial theory and emergent theories of social hegemony, I was able to observe and analyze a portion of the multifaceted projects that the groups have undertaken in the struggle against oppression.

The work of WFP and El Regadío demonstrates the complex and interwoven social, cultural, economic, and political effects of imperialism and one model for resisting these forms of oppression. Both communities expressed forms of overcoming social and cultural barriers to humanization that are exacerbated by neoliberal processes and explored new ways to reshape social hegemony to allow for more equitable social relations. Post-development theory also demonstrates the connection between social and political resistance that makes the WFP model all the more important. Viewing the joint projects through a lens of social hegemony highlighted the agency and opportunities for rearticulating social relations that are provided. This agency must be explored to elucidate further opportunities for transformation.

Of paramount importance throughout the entire process was the open and trusting relationship that I observed between WFP and the community leaders in El Regadío. WFP holds a lot of power in the relationship, but continues to be self critical and accountable,

allowing for development of the relationship and the completion of a project like this one. This process of accountability is an integral part in the continuing fight against imperial structures, especially in partnerships between people with drastically difference social positions.<sup>97</sup>

Unfortunately, one of the things that discourse theory shows us, along with notions of accountability, is that universal accessibility is of paramount importance. By writing in a dense academic style in a medium that will most likely not be seen by more than the people in my university and those who are close to me, I have made my work decidedly inaccessible. This makes it so that many of the subjects of my research will not only not be able to respond, but may not even be able to read it. As a part of anti-imperialist projects of bridging social distance, we also need to create information and communication that is available and accessible to all. This can be done through the use of popular education methodology and materials and non-hierarchical relationship building, some examples of which can be found with WFP. I hope that this paper has successfully initiated several conversations on anti-imperialist theory and practice. In the future, it will be important for us to find new mediums with which to pose questions and start conversations.

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<sup>97</sup> Alcoff, 22

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