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The Incompatibility of Dependence and Development: A Critical Analysis of International Development Efforts in the Nicaraguan Context

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The Incompatibility of Dependence and Development:

A critical analysis of international development efforts in the Nicaraguan context

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Introduction

“Development develops inequality: in April 1969 Richard Nixon told the Organization of American states (OAS) that by the end of the twentieth century the United States’ per capita income would be fifteen times higher than Latin America’s. The strength of the imperialist system as a whole rests on the necessary inequality of its parts, and this inequality assumes ever more dramatic dimensions. The oppressor countries get steadily richer in absolute terms—and much more so in relative terms—through the dynamic of growing disparity.”

The above quote is vivid evidence of Eduardo Galeano’s intention in his book *The Open Veins of Latin America* to unveil our historically problematic system and the inequalities it breeds. The work, originally penned in 1971 in the wake of the groundbreaking theories of dependence introduced by Raúl Prebisch and the United Nations’ Commission for Latin America (ECLAC, more commonly by the Spanish acronym CEPAL), is an eye-opening look at global capitalist development in the context of Latin America. It is no coincidence that while Richard Nixon was publicly acknowledging the United States’ economic hegemony in the region others began to ask *why*. Dependency theory arose as a way to explain the Latin American condition, but can also be used to vindicate the existence of our two worlds: the “developed” and the “still developing”, the wealthy and the impoverished.

It is within this context that I traveled to Nicaragua to study and, once there, chose to research the state of its development. How could a country, or a region for that matter, with such natural resource wealth still remain in economic shambles? Why couldn’t the people make use of this wealth for their own wellbeing? Regrettably, I felt the answer was self-evident: Nicaraguans are not allowed to capitalize on their abundant natural resources because these same resources have already been allocated for someone else. The country is yet another product of a system that maintains itself through the creation and subsequent exploitation of a marginalized “periphery” in order to service the financially dominant “center.” It is a system that is hard to evade. Even in
Nicaragua, where a revolution founded upon the anti-imperial ideals of Augusto C. Sandino succeeded in gaining political control and popular support, the country has “never really escaped dependence on the North’s capitalist powers. They are now fully under the thumb of international financial institutions.”

Countries in the Global South (the less-developed world also known as the “developing” or “third world”) receive billions of dollars annually in humanitarian and development aid in the name of poverty alleviation. Yet they remain poor, marginalized, and on the periphery in spite of such a massive influx of money. It is clear when you see endless billboards advertising development projects while driving around Nicaragua, a place still considered to be “the second poorest country in the hemisphere,” that there is a discrepancy between the aid being provided and results desired. Many would even argue that this aid is in fact working to maintain the economic hierarchies responsible for the poverty in the Global South. It is hard to disagree with this assertion when one considers the fact that Nicaragua is still struggling to pay back the enormous amount of money given to the Somoza dictatorship through the World Bank, even though it is common knowledge that the Somozas squandered the majority of this money on their dynasty in lieu of investing it in the country.

In 1968, a man named Ivan Illich discussed that “the road to hell is paved with good intentions,” during a speech he gave in rural Mexico to a group of volunteers from the United States. He was referring to the paternalism inherent in any “service” projects, the sociocultural ramifications of and self-serving motivations behind such projects. Illich goes on to denounce all altruism abroad as destructive due to the hegemonic position of the volunteers. However, due to the staggering amount of bright people all in this world who genuinely want to make it a better place, I just refuse to believe that something as beneficent as international development aid must
to succumb to the traditional power dynamics that define international relations. Nonetheless, all of these good intentions will continue to be a proverbial Band-Aid for the internal hemorrhaging of the developing world until the systems of dependency are dismantled from the ground up.

**The Global South: A Historical Context**

Spain’s initial conquest of the New World provided a necessary influx of capital into the then war-torn Europe. Primitive accumulation of capital via the plundering of mineral wealth and the exploitation of the Indian population provided the necessary monetary lifeline to keep the Old World afloat. The Spanish Crown at the time enjoyed spending its money on luxury goods produced in other parts of the world, consequently sharing the wealth they had obtained from their colonies with their trade partners and introducing unprecedented levels of capitalist economic development. Soon enough, these trade partners realized the economic opportunity that came with having your very own colony and the international battle of the imperials was born. Every “wild,” “exotic,” or “savage” place on the map was gobbled up by an array of industrializing nations; the indigenous populations of Latin America, Africa, and parts of the Middle East and Asia were subject to the “white man’s burden” while their ancestral lands were brutishly colonized. In the 20th century, when colonialism was no longer *en vogue* but economic exploitation of these territories still was, the reigns of imperialism were handed over to free market forces. For example, instead of being forced by a monarchy to mine silver in the Andes, workers are now forced to choose this career (and accept similar slave-wages from a foreign corporation) due to a lack of economic opportunity in the region. Even though countries in what is now the Global South are independent on paper, most if not all of them are still slave to

* A Marxist description of the origin of the capitalist system through the private expropriation of formerly communal property.
foreign economic interests. This servitude has fostered their relentless *dependency* on the more industrialized nations of the Global North.⁷

**Theoretical Framework**

Dependency theory rose to prominence in the 60’s and 70’s and was in reaction to other theories of international development popular at the time. Challenging commonly held notions that progress was linear in nature and that underdeveloped regions like Latin America were simply “behind” countries like the United States, dependency theorists shed light on the fact that the impoverished and incapacitated countries of the developing world were this way *due to* their continued economic subordination by the North.⁸ Based on this model, it no longer made sense to implement market-based development solutions (popular amongst the Bretton Woods institutions) in countries that in reality needed to distance themselves from the global market. Pursuing *appropriate* development paths would have allowed them to begin to recover their wealth and sovereignty free of the economic forces responsible for their condition. Unfortunately, dependency theory as a theory of development failed due to the difficulty of cultivating the necessary consciousness in areas that needed it most. This failure gave clout to the capitalist, quantitative, and technical development models that conveniently work to promote the political-economic interests of the developed world abroad.⁹

This methodology has come to define most “development projects” of today. Many believe that the last nail in the coffin was the political-economic environment of the United States of the 1980’s. Against a background of the triumph of liberal economic theory in international development, Ronald Reagan was elected president by running on a campaign of small government and his neoliberal “Reaganomics.” The former corporate spokesman and his cabinet spent eight years slashing national and international governmental regulation of the
market, “letting the bull loose,”*¹⁰ and severely widening the gap between the rich and the poor worldwide. Although these policies had devastating affects on the world’s working classes, gross domestic products (GDP) skyrocketed. This new wealth was then concentrated in already powerful hands, and these neoliberal policies became the new global economic order. Citizens and politicians everywhere were told that the free market was the new panacea to their problems. This economic trend contributed greatly to a revamped theory of development known today as “modernization theory.”¹¹

Modernization theory, also known as westernization or the globalization of capitalism, coupled with the newly diminished role of the state in the economy, paved the way for US institutions like the World Bank Group to become the new agents of international development.¹² Organizations like these were established with benevolence to help increase the standard of living in the third world, or help them develop as nations, through the use of large multilateral loans. Interestingly enough, this business of development turned out to be quite profitable when in 1970 the World Bank took in more money earned off of the interest of these loans than it gave out for the first time.¹³ After a few countries defaulted on their loans in the early 1980’s (amidst the neoliberal economic climate of the Reagan administration) these international financial institutions (IFIs) decided they needed to attach certain provisions to their loans to guarantee the ability of the receiving countries to pay them back.¹⁴ Development had become a free market endeavor, something that had become quite popular at the time, and with that its ability to make a profit had to be preserved. The combination of the United States antagonism to any shred of a socialist alternative in the Global South and the fall of the Iron Curtain again gave these neoliberal institutions serious clout.¹⁵

* The actual quote, “We’re going to let the bull loose!” comes straight out of a speech given by Ronald Reagan on Wall Street in 1985. It is a clear and direct reference to the president’s cooption by the most powerful investment-banking group of the time, Merrill Lynch.
The ability of neoliberal reforms, such as the now infamous Structural Adjustment Programs, to drastically increase a country’s GDP seemingly overnight through the wholesale privatization of their industries (even though they simultaneously lead to exponential increases in inflation and a destruction of the social welfare state)\textsuperscript{16} was advertised as the answer to impoverished countries. The fact that the economic doctrine of the decade involved an almost non-involvement of the state in economic development coupled with developing countries’ governmental “tendencies towards corruption”\textsuperscript{*} reinforced the need for external aid, and later on for ‘nongovernmental agencies.’ A half-century of economic imperialism had created unstable monoculture economies (obvious in the coffee oligarchies and sugar cane empires of Latin America) and as their vulnerabilities to the global market led to a decline in their Terms of Trade, countries in the third world were literally forced to accept external loans offered to them by IFIs or projects offered by nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Unfortunately, these loans and projects often work to create new forms of dependency for developing countries by reinforcing the monocultures at the root of their marginalization.\textsuperscript{17} With an analytical eye, one can see that this technical and capitalist approach to development is unsustainable but it has come to be the status quo for efforts around the world.

In the last 30 years, there has been an international explosion of non-profits and NGOs with the mission of changing the world by helping its poor. They are responding to the developing world’s need for capital generated by its economic subordination and to the current international development schema established by the Bretton Woods institutions and other IFIs. Working for these kinds of organizations has become a lucrative career choice for millions of people bursting with good intentions, but a critical analysis of this field today shows that much

\textsuperscript{*} In reality this is due to their extreme institutional inadequacies caused by their history of dependency.
more than good intentions are necessary to make true, positive, and sustainable change. To start, these organizations more often than not depend on governmental funding despite their status as *nongovernmental organizations*; organizations and their projects can subsequently become extensions of the lending countries’ foreign policies, which range from constructive to completely exploitative. However, this quasi-nongovernmental condition is still better than the bilateral loans offered by IFIs due to the fact that the latter contain certain stipulations that work to service capitalist interests and threaten national sovereignty. Recently, many collaborative criticisms of the international development “industry” have come to fruition, and for good reason. It truly has become a free market industry. A new field in anthropology, taking the name ‘Development Anthropology,’ is beginning to criticize certain aspects of this industry such as its bureaucratic self-serving tendencies and contrived political neutrality. These criticisms have generally been applied to international organizations as opposed to regional grassroots efforts, due to the latter’s better understanding of the local situation and autonomy. However, there is still a major disconnect between these criticisms of development aid and dependency theory when in reality, they are inextricably linked. Until organizations and projects begin to challenge the problem of the economic dependency of the Global South, legitimate *development* will not exist.

**Primary Claim**

It is in the opinion of the author of this paper that nongovernmental development agencies are wholly necessary for several reasons, but that an institutional restructuring of the international development industry is also necessary to tackle the reality of dependency. The biggest reason for the demand for IFIs and international NGOs is the resources they can offer; these international institutions and organizations are based out of wealthy developed nations
whose principal position in the global market has enabled their growth. Since the Global North achieved their level of economic development at the expense of the third world, it seems apparent that they should be the ones stepping up to take on the task of “developing” the underdeveloped. Also, since many governments in the Global South are internally corrupt, incapacitated, and broken, it makes sense that an external nongovernmental actor would come in to offer assistance. However, IFI loans to developing nations can be tainted with political goals and restrictions that usually impede development rather than offer assistance. Therefore, the answer must lie in international NGOs, as these organizations play an integral role in infrastructure construction and in providing financial and institutional support to local organizations, which often promote the best and most sustainable forms of development. Local organizations are generally more respectful of cultural diversities and intricacies and have a higher level of political autonomy than international groups. It is unfortunate there exists such an established chain of middlemen in development aid, but has become necessary to funnel the resources into proper channels. The current structure of the international development industry is inherently problematic at various levels and more often than not, projects either fail to achieve their specific objectives or end up creating more problems. Due to the intimate and vital nature of development efforts, serious methodical changes need to be made in order to make the industry more affective and culturally appropriate. Doing this would actually begin to change the world and solve “global poverty.”

After observing and investigating different development organizations working in Nicaragua, it has become quite clear to me what truly sustainable development can and should look like. Due to the shared historical, economic, and political characteristics between Central America, the region of Latin America, and the rest of the developing world, I feel that what I
learned during my time in Nicaragua can be applied to the Global South as a whole. Three major things must be present in a development project for it to be truly successful as opposed to potentially damaging: increased coordination with local private and public actors in order to augment local economic and political capacity, an organizational methodology that works to capacitate individual beneficiaries, and environmental sustainability. This first part is essential due to the fact that some development efforts actually take away local agency. By subcontracting with a North American construction company over a Nicaraguan company to build a road in Matagalpa, or providing citizens with a utility or service that the government should actually provide, projects (especially those implemented by an international group) can improve standard of living on a superficial level but work against long-term sustainable development. The second part of this proposition is more difficult to measure, but it is probably the most important aspect of international development. If beneficiaries of a development project are never treated as more than “beneficiaries,” whatever change is accomplished will not sustain itself down the line. Development aid has traditionally been paternalistic and clientelistic, and while this provides people and communities with resources it’s not providing them with the means to garner their own resources. These people need to be capacitated on a human level so that they will learn to become their own *agents of change.* The environmental aspect is straightforward: without taking into consideration the ecological effects of traditional “development” (such as countries’ reliance on toxic industries and the exploitation of the world’s natural resources in order to grow), how can one discuss *true* development? It is a sad but true reality that in the least developed countries around the world, the effects of global climate change are the most significant. We must change the traditional trajectory of development to benefit of these countries and the rest of the planet. When a project can combine these three aspects, there is harmony. This is true sustainable
development, and it has nothing to do with year-end reports, statistics, or any quantitatively measurable element for that matter.

The Necessity of Local Agency in Development

“Underdeveloped countries”, such as Nicaragua, are characterized by severe economic marginalization and weaknesses or instability in their political institutions. According to dependency theorists, both of these traits can be attributed to the continued economic and political subjugation coming from the ‘developed’ North in the form of historical colonialism and modern day neocolonialism. In order to combat this marginalization, it is clear that efforts must be made towards countries’ institutional, political, and economic development. Before one can begin to focus on a country’s problems at a micro level, such as the productivity or welfare of individual producers and citizens, there must be concern for the macro level to ensure that the state and the economy are fully functioning entities; without a competent sovereign state ‘development’ is cursory. In Nicaragua, both vigilance in reference to the municipal governments and a strengthening of the local economy are necessary due to the country’s tendencies towards political corruption and vulnerability to global market.

Private Sector Agency

Local economic development is incredibly important due to its ability to provide people with the capital they desperately need in order to survive in the free market. However, the current structure of the development industry lacks the trickle down effect necessary to actually increase standards of living for a majority of the people. In fact most IFIs, even though their loans are given under the guise of alleviating poverty in borrower countries, work to increase the wealth gap. The neoliberal response to poverty in the Global South revolves around an absolute liberalization of these countries’ economies in order to make them more favorable to foreign
direct investment, something that actually has had disastrous effects on individual consumers and small-scale producers in Nicaragua and around the globe. Neoliberalism in the third world frequently promotes monocultures and the production of cash crops for sale on the international market. This leads to developing nations becoming extremely vulnerable to market fluctuations while leaving them dependent on importing food as they no longer produce food for domestic consumption. At times this model can lead to a dependence on humanitarian relief in the form of food aid. True economic development would come in the form of domestic food security and economic stability, not a dependence on externally provided alimentation.

Moreover, that fact the some of the largest providers of aid to Nicaragua such as the World Bank and USAID subcontract to foreign companies for a vast majority of their projects means that these institutions are denying the Nicaraguan economy of badly needed income. The World Bank has virtually no contracts with any Nicaraguan entity besides individually contracted technicians. There are various arguments in favor of subcontracting for development projects, especially in non-industrialized countries such as Nicaragua that lack certain commercial sectors. Upon further investigation, however, of the country documents available on the World Bank’s website, I discovered that this institution had even subcontracted out for what they had labeled “Wood Sawing Services.” Not only is this a service that could easily be provided by a Nicaraguan timber company, but the largest contract had also been awarded to a timber company based of out Tennessee, USA. By literally forcing borrowing countries to open up their borders to exploitative transnational corporations and economic policies while executing projects with little to no inclusion of the local economies, IFIs are doing a better job at aiding international big business than stimulating the local economies of countries in the Global South.
After attending the Annual Congress on Rural Development at the National Autonomous University (UNAN) in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, I realized that many different Nicaraguan organizations were creating “public private partnerships”\textsuperscript{21} to promote local economic development. I was interested to see how many were actually implementing these partnerships effectively at the grassroots level and generating the true trickle down effect that remains absent from many projects carried out by international organizations and institutions. I was able to observe a presentation given by the Association for the Diversification and Communal Agricultural Development, or la Asociación para la Diversificación y el Desarrollo Agrícola Comunal (ADDAC), on their methodology of rural development through the use of cooperatives. I later had the opportunity to research first hand what initially seemed a very apt way of providing true economic empowerment to the disempowered people of the campo.\textsuperscript{*}

During my time with ADDAC, I learned about the ins and outs of their cooperative model. As an organization, ADDAC’s mission is to “provide assistance to producers in economically disadvantaged situations in the northern regions of the country.”\textsuperscript{22} Over a span of at least 5 years, ADDAC takes unorganized and exploited campesinos/as\textsuperscript{†} in different communities, and assists them in the process of building cooperatives through which to sell their products. The cooperative model provides these small producers a socioeconomically viable way to sell their product for a fair price and under fair conditions. The ADDAC model has 4 main phases, with a seemingly endless number of actions and indicators, but the overall goal of the model is to organize the people into an efficient and productive cooperative with profitable connections to local and international commerce. In the first phase, community organization is

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{*} Rural area, where a majority of the inhabitants are agricultural producers or workers.
\item \textsuperscript{†} Small-scale agricultural producer.
\end{itemize}
consolidated and strengthened and the socios/as* are assisted in diversifying their land so that they will have increased food security and a more nutritional diet. (Food security is one of the most essential elements in international development, as people will never be able to change their situations for the better on an empty stomach.) In the second phase, commercial groups are formed and capacitated through trainings and workshops, and a communal revolving fund (started with capital provided by ADDAC, over time becomes solely community generated funds) is established to provide the new cooperatives with the finances to begin operations. In the third phase, the “phase of maturation,” the cooperatives receive institutional, commercial, and political guidance while they create the physical infrastructure with which to process and sell their goods. The final phase, “the phase of independence,” is characterized by professionalism and transparency of the cooperative, with an equal inclusion of women, and communities that are in control of their own funds.23

Of their 8 cooperative projects, 7 of them are in the third phase. The final step towards total sustainability is difficult, but ADDAC is bringing sustainable new revenue to these communities while teaching them how to organize effectively. The cooperatives are run almost exclusively by the socios/as themselves, and have established strong contacts with commercial sectors from local vegetable markets to the international cacao† market in the form of a contract with the German chocolate company Ritter Sport. The cooperatives connect small producers to the market in non-exploitative ways, thus bringing about unprecedented economic development in the area. In a country where workers have an oppressively low level of organization, consciousness, or rights, this model is a much-needed change to the economic structure. I had the ability to visit Rancho Grande, a small community in a far northeastern corner of the country.

* Member, associate
† Raw chocolate
and learn about the success of the cacao cooperative there and their methodology as an organization. I witnessed a meeting between 6 junta directivas*, ADDAC, and a representative from SwissAid, the organization funding this specific project. They were discussing the current challenges and successes, as well as the status of the communal funds for each sector†. With the initial capital provided by SwissAid through ADDAC, the juntas were now granting loans to members of their own communities for things like repairs to their houses, agricultural production expenses, and micro-entrepreneurial ventures. Each community was at a different level in terms of their fund, however they were all well on their way to paying back the initial grant with payments made by members of their own communities. This project exemplifies two vital traits of sustainable development: through the cooperatives and the subsequent communal funds whole rural communities are finally being allowed to be competitive and advantageous, due to the fact that SwissAid channeled its large amount of resources through a Nicaraguan organization that understands the actual needs of the people in Rancho Grande.

Public Sector Agency

Serious problems can arise when international NGOs or IFIs supersede the role of the government in any country in the developing world. When domestic institutions weaken or fall apart in a developing country, such events can precipitate the arrival of external “technical assistance” which many form parallel governments spearheaded by IFIs and NGOs. As previously stated, these efforts might help provide services in the short term, but there is usually no accountability or local capacity for when these efforts end, and thus no sustainability. In reality, this lack of sustainability implies a dependence on foreign aid to gift the provision of certain services that frankly should be provided to the people by the state such as electricity or

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* Local community governing boards
† Term used by many development organizations in Nicaragua to describe small clusters of houses within the larger community
water. This notion contradicts the privatized systems we have in the United States, but for countries in the developing world in the absence of a large middle class it makes more sense for these services to be provided by an institution that has answerability to the people.

For example, in collaboration with Catholic Relief Services, Care International’s MICUENCA program has provided 1,200 families in 26 different communities with safe and clean new sources of potable water. It is undeniable that this is an amazing achievement and that the beneficiaries who have received a new water system are exponentially healthier and better off. It is also extremely environmentally sustainable: each new project has built-in sanitation and conservation elements to protect the 4 main watersheds they work with. However, there have been families and whole community sectors that have fallen through the cracks of the MICUENCA program, and for these people legitimate access to water will be slow to come.

I had the opportunity to accompany the Center for the Promotion and Consultancy in Research for the Agricultural Sector, or the Nicaraguan NGO el Centro de Promoción y Asesoría en Investigación para el Sector Agropecuario (PRODESSA), to a meeting with their participants in a community named Sal Sal. Sal Sal is located in the mountains of the municipality of San Dionisio, a municipality included in the MICUENCA program. Unfortunately, the new water system in Sal Sal is too expensive for some people to afford and is inaccessible to others because of infrastructure insufficiencies during the time of construction. This year, after a 20-year-long process of trying to get potable water to all sectors of the community, a new well was supposed to be constructed in Sal Sal so that the residents who were without easy or affordable access to the current system could stop drinking from the contaminated river nearby. Reportedly, the local water committee has issues being democratic and economically sustainable thus isn’t able to

* “My watershed” in English
bring about the changes in the water system necessary to provide better access. The burden of changing the system consequently falls on the residents. The well project was finally approved by the mayor’s office, but after the approval it was determined that the municipal government didn’t have enough money to realize the project. Regardless of the committee’s internal issues, it seemed as if the relationship between Care International and the water committee was minimal; the failures of Sal Sal’s water system could be demonstrative of the lack of sustainability created when local public actors are left out of the process. The people of Sal Sal are now focusing their efforts on trying to get a better main road constructed, switching gears while the water committees can hopefully come up with a strategy to alleviate their water problem. Meanwhile, Care International has moved on to another community (due to the fact that communities who have never had potable water projects are “better suited” for their help), and since the MICUENCA program has entered a new term, new regulations have been set in place that are making it even harder for the people in Sal Sal who are still without clean water to get it.27

After researching Nicaraguan rural development, and comparing it to the kind of aid provided by IFIs (and at times by organizations like Care International), I realized that the appropriate role of any development NGO is that of a bridge: connecting external resources to, the people through the means of local government and civil society. This piece was clearly lacking in the case of Sal Sal and the MICUENCA program, however PRODESSA as an organization is attempting to play this part on a micro scale. I was fortunate enough to have spent a good amount of time with this organization during my research process, and have come to realize that they embody sustainability. They were there to catch the residents of Sal Sal when they fell, but are by no means paternalistic in nature. As an organization, they don’t gift communities with anything and instead are currently helping the people of Sal Sal strategize and
implement solutions to their infrastructural problems. The individual capacitation that is fundamental to this process will be covered in the next section, but when discussing the importance of local public agency it is necessary to touch upon PRODESSA’s methodology for strengthening this vital aspect of development.

PRODESSA is a development NGO, but their true purpose is to create social networks so that communities can share their struggles, show people how to organize around these problems, and educate them on how to implement their own devised solutions with the help of the proper governmental or non-governmental agency. In the case of Nicaragua, there is such a high level of corruption inside the national government that true social change can only come from the ground up. PRODESSA is giving people the incentive and the ability to come together through a newfound civil society, and resolve the things impeding their development such as lack of social services or substandard agricultural productivity. For example, I attended various PRODESSA meetings with small-scale cattle farmers in a community called Chacraseca. All of these previously unconnected farmers were having similar problems with their cattle, and it was seriously damaging their earnings. PRODESSA, after bringing the farmers together in meetings divided up by community sector, providing a place for them to dialogue and strategize, they put the farmers in touch with a local university professor of agriculture who had come to Chacraseca the day I was there. He answered questions and made recommendations for the farmers, and then arranged a date to have lab tests done with the farmers and with the PRODESSA staff. The residents of Chacraseca have now established strong relationships with this professor and other local professionals, and in the future they will be able to take advantage of these relationships and the resources they offer in order to better the community without having to be dependent on an NGO.
A week later, back in San Dionisio, I sat in on a meeting where the PRODESSA facilitator was going over the new law on *Los Comites de Agua Potable y Sanamiento* (CAPs, or Potable Water and Sanitation Committees), the same committee responsible for the water systems in Sal Sal. The purpose of the meeting was multifaceted: it was clear that most of the people present needed help in understanding the technical jargon of the law, but it was also clear that without a meeting the people would have never *known* about the law. Also, after hearing about the deficiencies in the committee in Sal Sal, I realized PRODESSA was playing a vital role in strengthening this institution. Patiently and leaving time for questions and discussion, the facilitator informed them of their right and duty to organize in this way, and what it meant for them and their community. Granted, these are small-scale projects, but they have great implications for the communities. Not only does the PRODESSA process provide people with a means to better their situations (the general purpose of most development organizations) but they also do so by teaching them how to make use of the local resources available to them through creating their own civil society. They have established relationships between the people of Chacraseca and the Nicaraguan Ministries of Education and Health, large-scale development projects taking place in the region, and local university students. This last element was beneficial to both parties involved; Nicaraguan university students from the nearby city of León majoring in agro ecology can participate in a six month long internship with PRODESSA during their last year. The students receive credit and valuable hands-on experience with rural development before graduating, while the people in the communities establish meaningful relations with budding development professionals. These kinds of connections are critical to rural communities, since permanent change will only happen if their community groups have institutional support along the way. PRODESSA is capacitating rural civil society by introducing
effective means of organization, while strengthening local agency by augmenting the accountability of the municipal governments though creating a sense of civil vigilance and educating people on their rights.

**The Necessity of Individual Capacitation in Development**

Even though “institutional capacity building” is a relatively new term in the international development industry, it seems quite clear that it is an essential process in a nation’s development. Since most countries in the Global South have serious inadequacies when it comes to their own self-sufficiency (i.e. capacity) due to a variety of factors, the idea behind these types of projects seem quite obvious. However, when I arrived in Nicaragua and began to spend serious time in a developing country with a massive national and international NGO presence, I realized that no one person could easily define what capacity building looks like. Through my research process, and after seeing first hand what works and what doesn’t in rural community development, I feel that I am now finally able to articulate what *true capacitation* looks like: it has to be empowerment on an individual level; participants of the process must be given the tools to realize their own self worth and use this realization to express their unique voice, so that they can become their own agents of sustainable change. In order for this to happen, they need to be respected and valued as humans instead of “beneficiaries” in need of help.

The fault lies in the structure of the organizations responsible for developing and for the methodologies in the projects they set forth. The field of international development really has evolved over time into an *industry*, complete with private actors, competition for resources, technicians, consultants, marketing schemes, and financial self-preservation. Established by the original international ‘developers,’ the Bretton Woods Institutions, this quantitative and technical approach has become the conventional paradigm for most development efforts.31 It may have
enabled the field’s immense growth and international scope but it has also led to a loss of the *human element* that in reality should be at the center of this industry.  

Care International and the role it played in Sal Sal are exemplary of how an organization’s own expansion can quite often lead to a loss of this element. The organization has become so large that it helps hundreds of thousands of people a year all over the world, however in order to grow to this size it has been forced to operate as a business, to place measurable gains and losses over comprehensive concern for every last beneficiary. A lack of humanism leads to the creation of hierarchal power relations, which in turn drive the paternalistic and clientelistic projects that characterize international development efforts. Paternalism negates true empowerment because it is based on gifting people monetary or in-kind handouts rather than showing them how to achieve these things on their own. The handouts they give usually come from a project whose proposal was drafted with minimal contribution from the beneficiary community. This clientelistic interaction will never be sustainable and only strengthens existing webs of dependency. As communities become dependent on external sources of aid, and as development institutions become dependent on these communities for income, the organizations can lose the incentive to break this dependency as it guarantees them a job down the line. In my opinion, and in the opinion of many working in the field, it is specifically paternalism in development that contributes to the substantial amount of failed projects across the developing world.

In Nicaragua, I learned of many failed development projects. Virtually all could be traced back to this paternalism at the individual level. The best example I came across was during my time in a community called Chacraseca with the organization PRODESSA. The first official meeting of theirs that I witnessed was with a small group of representatives from a cooperative association. Two years ago, a Nicaraguan rural development organization by the name of Centro
para la Promoción, la Investigación y el Desarrollo Rural y Social (CIPRES), or The Center for Promotion, Investigation, and Rural and Social Development, finished a large scale project aimed at increasing agricultural production. They had organized people from all over the community into 29 different cooperatives, and then into a large association (a “cooperative center”) aimed at providing each cooperative with support. They constructed chicken coops in each sector they were working, built infrastructure to aid in the distribution of the crops being cultivated, etc. CIPRES left Chacraseca with this new cooperative infrastructure in place, but before they had done much else for the people. A year and a half ago, the cooperative center failed, and each of the 29 member cooperatives failed along with it. The chicken coops were left abandoned, and the cooperative socios/as either went back to being individual producers or are currently out of work. One of the biggest reasons for the project’s failure was a built in microcredit system set up by CIPRES. The community members running the program had simply accepted all of the proposals they received, as they clearly had no training in the bookkeeping skills necessary to properly manage the funds. What they were accustomed to was a “projectist” methodology of looking for resources, writing proposals, and getting granted funds, as opposed to organizing themselves and letting the solution come from within that organization. The representatives of the cooperative association I met that day were coming to PRODESSA to ask for help. They had a desire to work, and wanted to restart the cooperatives in order to do so. After explaining to the representatives his opinions on why they had failed (the fact that they had just been donated a cooperative without the institutional support necessary to run one), Alfredo Díaz, the executive director of PRODESSA who I accompanied on this visit to Chacraseca, expressed his desire to help them. But he made one thing very clear, “Its better if it’s
inclusive. This organization [PRODESSA] is based in trust, and this trust means responsibility.∗

After the first day I spent with PRODESSA, I could already tell that their model was unlike anything I had ever seen or learned about before. Their process, at every step of the way from start to finish, works to capacitate people on a human level. It is a slow process, and at times it isn’t neat or pretty, but it is genuinely sustainable due to its roots in the people themselves. The people PRODESSA work with are the foundation of the process; it is in meetings with them that the problems are identified, shared, debated, and then resolved with solutions drafted and implemented using this same participative system. Each step of the process carried out with the counsel of a PRODESSA técnico∗ that is assigned to their sector. The role of the técnico is key to the PRODESSA approach to development, as they walk a fine line between guiding and telling the participants how to go about solving an issue. During my observations of many different meetings with a few different técnicos, I took note of the fact that all had their own unique style, but all managed to achieve the same goal: stimulating the discussion to spur the emergence of new ideas.

Participants are able to share their ideas with ease due to the fact that PRODESSA identifies the locations of its meetings by investigating then mapping the different social networks that exist within community sectors. After the participant community has been determined, this network mapping process is carried out in order to break the sectors into 3-5 casilleros‡; the micro-scale of these meetings works to fortify existing relationships, while creating and strengthening new ones. After a problem has been identified at the casillero level, it is then brought to the community level in order to allow the community as a whole to brainstorm

∗ Translates to “technician,” but used to refer to the PRODESSA staff that work in the communities
‡ Small group of houses/families
possible solutions to said problem. Once a solution is chosen, the técnicos work with the casilleros to implement it on a house-by-house basis. After an implementation strategy has been decided upon and set in motion, the casillero groups start the process over again, with the aim of tackling or identifying a new problem. As discussed previously, PRODESSA strategies make use of local government agencies and other resources available. The people are put in contact with these institutions and organizations in such a way that they are educated on where to turn for help on a similar issue in the future. This method of identification and implementation of development strategies at the grassroots level is ideal due its intrinsic ability to empower the people. It gives people an incentive to organize and create stronger bonds within their communities, as the PRODESSA process provides people with the means to achieve their critical development goals while capacitating them along the way.

After spending a few days in Chacraseca with PRODESSA, I returned to Matagalpa city in time for the Congress on Rural Development. While there, I saw many organizations utilizing “capacitation” jargon, but my faith in the definition I had come to believe in as a result of my time with PRODESSA was solidified during the presentations given by PRODESSA staff. Their methodology is starkly different from what anyone else, who was present at the Congress, is doing in the region and it seemed as if because of that, they were making a plea for the necessity of the grassroots empowerment process. After learning about other development organizations doing similar work in the area, I understand the urgency of their desire to spread these ideas. Many Nicaraguan organizations are still relying on the technical “projectist” approach, and are applying market-based solutions to social problems, taking a page out of the books of the IFIs and international NGOs. These kinds of solutions are individualistic in nature and can actually generate unhealthy competition for credit, loans, leadership positions, and more between
beneficiaries when these people should be focusing on organizing as communities, increasing their confidence in one another and in themselves. I saw this kind of focus happening at the meetings I attended with PRODESSA. People would come from incredibly far away, at times literally climbing mountains, to discuss how to get potable water to their communities, not to just receive a handout. When I started wondering where their incentive to come to the meetings came from (especially in light of the fact that for most of them to leave their work or the house unattended was a challenge), I found my answer in what they were saying. They began to tell me that they felt dignified in this process, and that it served their interests to be able to come up with solutions that benefited the community as a whole. People really enjoyed the meetings, as it brought them together in a way “that [they] never did before PRODESSA.” I found more answers in what the people that work for PRODESSA were saying. The ways in which they talked to and talked about their participants, was “that of family.” The técnicos meet often in the various PRODESSA offices or satellite offices, to discuss what their different groups were concluding in their meetings. They try and find recurring problems or other connections between previously unconnected sectors and communities in order to not only serve them better, but to also provide these people with a reason to get together and begin to organize. In the same interview, Saúl Ginoco, one of the PRODESSA técnicos I accompanied to a few meetings, told me that “there has to be an expansion of resources not in remuneration” but that he felt “very fulfilled as a professional.” This level of compassion for his job, in spite of PRODESSA’s smaller pool of resources when compared to the World Bank or Care International, is indicative of the caliber of development this organization is offering their participants. For PRODESSA, it has yet to become an industry and for this reason I believe they are offering the people of Nicaragua the best means of achieving actual and necessary human development.
The Necessity of Environmental Sustainability in Development

In the last 20 or so years, global climate change has not only grown exponentially worse, but has finally been accepted by a majority of academics, politicians, and citizens as a legitimate phenomenon caused by human activity. It continues to be a controversial theory due to the fact that the proposed solutions require drastic and quick action in the form of changes in production and consumption patterns around the world. The environmental crisis is especially relevant to the Global South for a number of reasons, and therefore needs to be included in any development proposal for the region. The devastating effects of global warming are much more extreme in the small nations and delicate ecosystems that comprise most of the developing world, and drastic changes in annual climate patterns have already taken their toll in countries like Nicaragua. This year due to the abnormally high rains in Central America, a vast majority of the region’s bean crops were lost. Not only is this a staple source of nutrition for every household, but it is also a major source of income for millions of people. Cases like this currently plague the rest of Latin America, as its rich terrains and incredible biodiversity are perishing under severe climate change. The irony lies in the fact that even though the mega-industrialized countries and super consumers to the North are the ones who have truly disrupted the delicate balance of the planet, the burden to do something about international carbon emissions have fallen on developing nations. Due to the recent “cap and trade system” underdeveloped nations cut what little production they have for a quick trade profit, while the developed nations of the world get to continue pollute the earth that we all live in.43

Unfortunately, yet again, the international development system can fail to take central elements of the local reality into account, and the results can be ruinous. Environmental sustainability is generally disregarded by IFIs and even some international NGOs in the name of
greater aid distribution or profit maximization for the host country. However, in reality it is periodically disregarded in the name of profit maximization for the development industry and its allies. Sadly, many projects in the name of development work to undermine actual sustainable growth on account of the damage they cause to the environment. For example, the “green revolution,” or the use of industrialized and genetically modified (GM) agriculture originally promoted by USAID in the late 1960’s as a way to solve global hunger through “high yield” farming methods, has recently garnered intense criticism from both the developed and underdeveloped worlds. Many argue that is simply a ploy to create new markets for GM seed and the subsequently necessary toxic pesticides and fertilizers that are almost all produced in the United States. Although this may seem like an extreme condemnation, it cannot be ignored that GM crops have not only failed to deliver the widespread food security originally promised, but that they also have devastating environmental effects on the land and thus work to actually hurt large portions of rural areas in the developing countries they are supposedly helping. While Nicaragua, and other countries across the Global South, becomes hooked on genetically modified seed to produce a majority of their crops, the wealth generated from agricultural production is concentrated in even fewer hands due to the fact that poor campesinos/as normally can’t afford the expensive GM inputs. Despite the fact that little to no research has been done into the potential health risks to humans posed by GM foods, international aid and development organizations continue to push them as a solution and positive results continue to be fleeting. These efforts have gone as far as sending undisclosed GM food aid to countries that have

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* GM seed regularly fuels dependency it in the form of self-perpetuating vicious cycles. Once a country begins the process of importing the GM seed, native plants begin to become extinct, and they are eventually forced to purchase GM seed, as it becomes their only option. Also, GM crops require special chemical based pesticides, and as spraying increases year after year more pesticide is necessary to sustain crops. Ultimately, chemical fertilizers become necessary as well to extract any remaining life out of the soil. Both the pesticides and fertilizers are produced and sold exclusively by a handful of multinational corporations based out of the North (Weinberg).
domestic bans on GM products, as was the case between the United Nations’ World Food Programme and Nicaragua in 2002.\textsuperscript{46}

An even more extreme example of the international development industry’s inattention to the environment can be seen in the unhealthy relationship between the World Bank and the mining industry. The World Bank has been friendly towards mining since the middle of the last century claiming the industry’s potential for aiding national development. Mining can be incredibly profitable, but the vast majority of the profits go to the transnational corporations that pay campesinos/as to move off of their land in order to open a new mine, exploit the region at every level imaginable, and drain it of resources and would-be sovereign profit. Mining seriously harms the environment of whatever region is unfortunate enough to have overt mineral wealth; it depletes the surrounding area of water due to the incredible amount of water used at every step of the process, contaminates whatever water is left behind with deadly toxic waste, erodes and/or contaminates the top and subterranean soil past the point of future use, etc.\textsuperscript{47} Not only does the World Bank work to convince developing countries of the level of “economic development” they can achieve by tapping their mineral resources and by privatizing any national mines they might have, but it does so in order to provide lucrative loans and “risk insurance” to their “private sector partners,”\textsuperscript{48} i.e. large corporations based out of the developed countries to the North. In publicly available World Bank documents one can see that the IFI literally refers to this as the “World Bank Mining Business,” and it is being used a strategic way for the institution to make even more money.\textsuperscript{49}

At any rate, global climate change is a product of international capitalist development; devastating natural resource extraction and pollutive industry are the fundamentals of the system, and since alternative sources of energy have yet to catch on around the world, it forces us to
question the traditional definition of development. The trend of the third world being exploited and depleted of its incredible natural resource wealth in order to service the more developed countries’ industrial needs is so commonplace it has been labeled the “resource curse.” It is safe to say that even if the entire Global South were suddenly able to develop in the same way as the North, the planet would not be able to sustain any more life. For this reason, and for the conservation and protection of the already wounded developing world, it is certain that in any project in the name of a country’s development needs to incorporate environmental sustainability. Even though the paradigm set in place by IFIs and large international NGOs omits this essential element of development, small grassroots organizations like ADDAC are working towards environmental preservation.

In Rancho Grande, I was able to learn about many different aspects of ADDAC as an organization and of their projects. Founded in the midst of the Nicaraguan environmental movement (a movement born out of the destruction of the countryside caused by the Contra War), ADDAC’s efforts are supported by the “pillars” of organic agriculture, conversation of resources, reforestation, the promotion of biodiversity, and the creation of an environmental consciousness in rural communities. My first day with them, I accompanied one of their técnicos to the San Francisco sector of Rancho Grande, to visit different socios/as and learn about the different projects they were involved in. Our first stop was at the house of Nubia Lopez Perez, where we visited her newly reforested finca.* In Nicaragua, there is a new ‘get rich quick scheme’ plaguing the country that is having terrible effects on the campo: poor people trying to make more money will burn a large section of land to quickly create cattle pasture. Because of the extensive cattle ranching that afflicts Rancho Grande, much of the land in the region has been

* Piece of land and used for agricultural production.
torched and then left empty when the cattle farmer is unsuccessful. IFIs and many international organizations promote this activity without a true understanding of its repercussions due to its capability to provide farmers with a quick and easy profit. The land behind Nubia’s house had been previously infertile and desolate due to one of these instances of burning, however since becoming a *socia* with ADDAC, she is now the proud owner of productive, rehabilitated and diversified land.

From a rural development standpoint, ADDAC uses a comprehensive approach to environmental sustainability in their projects. First, in order to counteract the destructive cattle pastures or other unsustainable activities, they want to reforest the land; they do so by using soil that has been worked over by hundreds of worms and has been made incredibly rich as the fertilizer with which to rehabilitate the existing topsoil. This worm operation is its own project within a project, as there are *socios/as* who get help from ADDAC to make this organic fertilizer to share with other members of their community or cooperative. Then, once the land has been restored, the goal is to diversify the crops planted in order to provide food security to the families living on the land while simultaneously protecting them from the vulnerabilities created by monoculture farming practices. From there, it is a wholly organic process that has two objectives as well: to provide the family with healthy alternatives to chemically grown crops, while protecting their water sources and topsoil from the damaging chemicals used in pesticides and non-organic fertilizers. Nubia grows *cacao*, in addition to many other fruits and vegetables, and is now a member of the cooperative nearby. Even though she is still trying to work on her house and better her situation for herself and her family, she is now educated on how to be a self-sufficient and environmentally sound producer.\(^5\)
Through these kinds of activities, and through the use of workshops on the importance of things like organic farming, ADDAC is instilling a sense of environmental consciousness in the communities they work in. I saw this first hand at the second home we visited that day, owned by a man named Boarerhe Molina Molina. He told me about how much his life had changed for the better since ADDAC had come to Rancho Grande. His land was healthier and more productive, he was doing better at the market, his home looked better than ever, and his family was happy and comfortable. He attributed all of this to how he now “works his land with lots of love, compared to before he had little.”51 This awareness of the intricacies of the earth and connection to the land are things that used to define the lives of people in rural Latin America, but that were lost over time with the introduction of individualistic and capitalist modes of production. It is an unfortunate occurrence, as it seems that with the loss of this connection environmental degradation has now come to define their lives instead in the form of contaminated water sources and wide-scale deforestation.

In the face of global capitalization, efforts like those being made by ADDAC are hugely important. They are helping communities in rural Nicaragua develop, but they are also helping combat the negative toll capitalist development has already taken in their country. This generation of consciousness is necessary if countries like Nicaragua are to ever be sustainably and healthily independent from their exploitative relationships to the North. While with ADDAC I also attended a forum in Waslala, Nicaragua on the dangers of mining. This forum was put on by an environmental group based out of Managua trying to protect the northern regions of the country from a multinational corporation who has been exploring for gold, and was attended by ADDAC socios/as and their friends and family. The group, Centro Humboldt (Humboldt Center)
reached out to the communities in danger of being dismantled economically, socially, and environmentally by a new gold mine in their district.

They used graphic images from the effects other mines in the country have had on the terrain and on human health, explained why the campesinos/as in Waslala have many incentives to avoid working for the mines, and gave them advice on what to do in case of emergencies with toxic waste or with the illnesses caused by contact with the chemicals used in the mining processes. Representatives from the mining company currently in Waslala have already offered families in the region lump sums for the rights to explore their land, and for these families the amount offered might be more than what they make in a year. The economic pressures generated by mining are what make this kind of forum and the awareness it generates so important: for a poor campesino/a with limited access to education and political organization, efforts like these are the only thing standing in between them and an unconscious exploitation by foreign investors.

In light of the aforementioned examples of how main players in the international development industry disregard environmental concerns when working in the Global South, the work of organizations like ADDAC becomes even more important. Without actual environmental sustainability in Nicaraguan development, and throughout the rest of the Global South, the future is a bleak picture painted with these nations’ dependency on external aid that is in fact detrimental as opposed to helpful.

Conclusion

“All the texts on ‘development’ are unanimous in concluding that the gap between North and South (but also between rich and poor in each) is continually widening. The blindness that strikes thinking on the subject makes it possible to act as if this gap were a ‘given’ whose only connection with the ensuing discourse were to provide it with legitimacy. In fact ‘development’ itself, far for bridging the ritually deplored gap, continues to widen it. If this mechanism of cumulative causation passes unnoticed, this is
not only because it cannot be integrated into the belief, but also because the spectacular enrichment of the well-off fuels hopes of a possible redistribution among those left out in the cold.  

In the last few pages of his book, the *History of Development*, Gilbert Rist makes this case against the traditional definition of global capitalist development. By underlining the ever-increasing North-South gap, Rist is forcing us to question what development really means in today’s world. The existence of this gap creates an aspiration among poor countries to achieve a level of economic development that in reality will never be attainable due to the forces that perpetuate this inequality. The Global South’s dependency on the North is highlighted as we are told there is currently no structure set in place to allow for equitable international development. Taking this fact into consideration, the necessity of addressing dependency in any effort claiming to be in the name of ‘development’ becomes even more significant.

Nonetheless, as I discovered first hand in Nicaragua and in my research for this project, the current model of the international development industry does not work to break these chains of dependency. Although development projects and programs are executed in the name of a country’s progress, there are many that end up advancing their own internal interests in place of fighting dependency in the developing world. IFIs and NGOs have a vested interest in the *underdevelopment* of the countries they work with; paternalistic relationships service these organizations because they guarantee a demand for funding down the line. In free market theory, without a demand there ceases to be a supply. Many dominant actors in the international development industry simply represent the interests of the same imperial forces that have conventionally held the power. Nevertheless, these actors spend an enormous amount of resources to appear as international altruists.
“There seems every reason to believe, then, that solidarity is possible and that common interests will win through in the end – even if official ‘development assistance’ re-enters the economic circuit of donor countries ... The essential thing is to keep the belief going. Every religion requires sacrifice.”

Rist touches upon the purported goodwill of the development industry and suggests that it is powerful opiate among the privileged and underprivileged alike. He is drawing attention to the world’s blind faith in the propaganda of the neoliberal system, and to the subsequent ‘benevolent’ development industry this faith has produced. Since this industry is effectively married to the neoliberal economy, development institutions have the tendency to put themselves first, as they will be continually rewarded by the market for doing so. Consequently, it becomes imperative to evaluate efficacy of these efforts, analyze the presence of exploitative power relations, and be willing to restructure international paradigms of development all in order to actually contribute to real development.

In addition to an amazing and eye opening experience, Nicaragua has provided me with what I have come to see as a viable proposal for truly sustainable development. It is a country riddled with contradictions, both beautiful and tragic, and its national development is not exempt from this claim. But, out of these contradictions, solutions have been born. Out of failed projects claiming to aid in economic development or individual and institutional capacitation, organizations like ADDAC and PRODESSA have been founded with the mission of succeeding where these efforts fell short. They have been able to provide people of Nicaragua with a better, more dignified life, while working to be as autonomous as they can from political or economic agendas.

Out of their successes, large and small, I was able to categorize my observations of what had worked into three functional categories: the preservation and support of local agency, human capacitation, and projects with an environmental awareness. The combination of these three
things is working to combat the principal socioeconomic problems afflicting the campo of the Matagalpa region today, while also fighting Nicaraguan dependency on the Global North through increased equitable access to the market and the construction of a conscious civil society with the ability to organize effectively. Nicaragua exemplifies dependency in many ways, from its history to its current economic structure, and so if these kinds of development projects can take root and succeed here, they must either occur or already be occurring in other countries in the developing world. With any luck, the sustainability of the kinds of projects implemented by organizations like ADDAC or PRODESSA will continue to gain international notice and have a serious effect on the international development industry currently pioneered by IFIs and for-profit international NGOs.

Neoliberal capitalism has permeated most aspects of life on earth. “Coca-Cola-ization” has even brought it to the farthest corners of rural Nicaragua. This economic system seems immutable; it has a built in self-preservation strategy though its propaganda that promotes the “benefits” of things like hyper-consumerism and comparative advantage. In light of the apparent permanence of a system that literally depends on dependency, it is even more crucial that development efforts in the Global South actually work to hinder dependency from the grassroots level. If the developing world could achieve economic and political empowerment, taking control of its natural resource wealth and international labor force which are fueling the global economy, it would not only mean an end to dependency in the South, but also a new, more equitable, world order.

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* Term used to describe the United States’ pop culture hegemony promoted throughout the world by globalization and the country’s own economic hegemony
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