

# **NGOs: The Better Path to Democracy?**

**by Carly Kinzler**

## **Abstract**

This is a study of how official and unofficial non-governmental organizations (NGOs) work to supplement, replace, or undermine public services and government activities in Guadalajara and the surrounding region through identifying the narratives of success within these organizations that enable them to supersede government-provided services. The observational and survey research for this study took place during Drake University's 2014 January Term in Guadalajara, Mexico. Through this research, I found that while NGOs often supply services that could be provided by the government, NGOs are able to more effectively serve the people because they can more efficiently transcend barriers faced by the government.

## **NGOs in a Global and National Context**

NGOs provide services to individuals that the public and private sectors do not adequately supply. These services are needed when governmental organizations are not transparent, trusted, or affluent enough to offer the services themselves. Without the goal of producing a profit or the burden of governmental constraints, NGOs have certain advantages when serving their clientele.

While the work of NGOs is often very beneficial to the communities and individuals they assist, a question is raised as to whether the work of NGOs discourages the involvement of the government or if NGOs fill a void that the government is unwilling or incapable of filling. NGOs allow for issues ignored by the government to be addressed, especially in cases of the human rights of the underprivileged and undocumented. However, without these organizations, would government officials feel pressured to step in to protect basic human rights?

Many NGOs focus funds in a certain areas to work to improve conditions for a specific group of people. This allows funds to make a greater impact. The government often has to "evenly" allocate its resources, which causes the funds to be thinly spread across a large area and unable to make an impact.

NGOs in Mexico often struggle to become officially recognized by the government. Becoming an official NGO is a challenging process that seems to be more trouble than it is worth. For example, FM4 has been trying to become an official nonprofit for two years and still has not been able to complete the process due to “red tape” (FM4, 2014). Lewis and Kanji, social policy researchers, propose that NGOs fall into three categories; they typically supplement, replace or undermine the government (2009). In Mexico, the relationship NGOs have with the government plays a critical role in the way they are viewed, as well as how they address pressing issues. However, Lewis and Kanji raise another question (2009). Are governments ‘let off the hook’ due to the presence of NGOs and, therefore, feel less obligated to serve the people? This is the question I address in my research.

## **Methods**

Fieldwork for this study was completed during Drake University’s 2014 January Term, in the course “Contemporary Urban Mexico,” led by Dr. Darcie Vandegrift. I studied in Mexico from January 4, 2014 to January 22, 2014. I stayed and went to lectures at Tecnológico de Monterrey, Guadalajara, on Consumer Economic Issues in Mexico and Contemporary Urban Poverty.

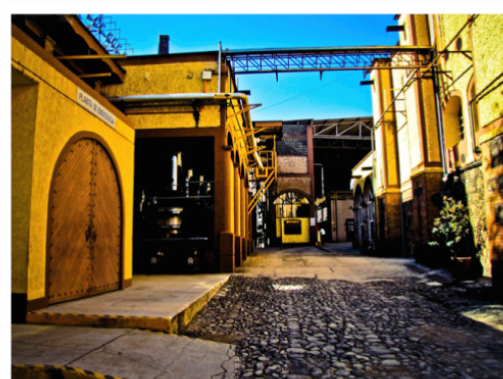
I completed observational and survey research in the city of Guadalajara and the surrounding areas, including observational research of the community center and informational interviews with youth leaders at Mesa Colorada and Valles del Sol, observational research on the facilities and an informational interview with the director of FM4, and observational research and informational interviews with tour guides at Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila and Guachimontones.

## **Supplementing Public Services**

NGOs that supplement public services work to enhance the efforts of the government in a particular way. They do not necessarily support everything the government does. Instead, these NGOs recognize the services the government provides and supply additional services to reinforce the existing public services.

United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), a specialized division of the United Nations, works with the Mexican government to build intercultural understanding by protecting heritage and culture in Mexico. Through this program, UNESCO established 32 properties as World Heritage sites throughout Mexico, including the Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila and Hospicio Cabañas that we visited in Jalisco. Below are three photos taken within the Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila site, including a museum at Guachimontones, a view of Guachimontones, and a renovated tequila distillery. By protecting these sites, UNESCO assists the government with funding for and protection of the properties that add cultural value to the region. Guachimontones is located within the Agave Landscape and Ancient Industrial Facilities of Tequila region (UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 2014).

This protection activity drew the attention of another NGO, the World Monument Fund. This NGO placed Guachimontones on their “World Monuments Watch List” in 2008 due to heavy looting of the site. Being named to this list built community support for the preservation of Guachimontones and drew in financial support for its protection. This site is no longer on the endangered list. However, over 30 Mexican heritage sites remain on the list and continue to receive restoration and protection funding from the World Monument Fund (World Monument Fund, 2014).



Top Left: Museum at Guachimontones (Kinzler, 2014)

Top Right: Modern Tequila Distillery near Agave Landscape (Kinzler, 2014)



Bottom: Guachimontones (Kinzler, 2014)

These organizations work to provide funding over and above what the Mexican government is able to finance. While protecting these properties “protects heritage and fosters cultural diversity,” I also witnessed the significant impact the protection of these properties has on tourism and local economies. Driving through the town near Guachimontones, called Teuchitlán, one can witness the effects tourism has had on the town. Instead of resembling a small farming village built for sheer practicality, like many of the towns that can be seen around the outskirts of Guadalajara’s metropolitan region, Teuchitlán has a newly renovated town square with bright white cast iron benches and a freshly painted gazebo in the center. The roads are paved with matching stone, as opposed to dirt or uneven stones. Although the original goal of these organizations was to preserve the history of endangered cultural areas, the stimulation of the economy through tourism is a notable achievement that has allowed these NGOs to supplement the public and private sectors of the region (Guachimontones, 2014).

Academic institutions are another form of NGO that work for the betterment of Mexican society. Many universities in Guadalajara, such as Universidad Panamericana, Universidad del Valle de México, and Tecnológico de Monterrey, provide academic assistance and tutoring to supplement public school educations. Universidad Panamericana students worked through the Catholic Church in Mesa Colorada to provide an educational before and after school program where they teach children in an underprivileged community character lessons. They also teach students English, a privilege usually only given to students whose parents can afford to send them to private school (Mesa Colorada, 2014).

In Valles del Sol, Tecnológico de Monterrey collaborated with community members and worked with them to petition for services from the government. For example, students from Tecnológico de Monterrey are currently working with young community leaders to request that improvements be made to the community through the patronage system, such as fixing the flooding of a sewage filled river during heavy rains. Though petitioning requests to the government is a slow and often unrewarding process, I observed that the collaborative structure of this program lead to the empowerment of young leaders in the community (Valles del Sol, 2014).



Street in Valles del Sol (Stuart, 2014)

Tecnológico de Monterrey also supplements public services through in-kind donations. The university supported a public primary school by donating computers for the children to use. This is an example of how NGOs work to improve existing public services. However, many NGOs also support a community when it is not recognized by the government or lacks public services.

### **Replacing Public Services**

NGOs, which “replace” government services where government services are not available or where the services do not meet the needs of the community, are essential to many communities in Mexico. These NGOs reach people who may not have a birth certificate or be acknowledged by their government. They serve individuals who would otherwise receive little to no institutional support.

Food Bank of Mexico (BAMX in Spanish) is a food bank that reaches all over the nation (Rairez 2014). There are national and state government food service programs; however, they are not able to serve everyone in need (Barquera *et al.*, 2001). BAMX is an NGO that works with private companies and the government to minimize food waste in

Mexico and provide food to those in need. Due to the structural model it developed that incorporated the support of private companies, BAMX is able to provide food more effectively than current government models that are not able to garner support and trust from the private sector (Rairez 2014).

Techo is another NGO that works with communities unrecognized by the government and helps them meet their basic needs. One of Techo's most successful programs builds portable houses. They work with the families, and the families help pay for and build the houses. The Techo volunteer explained that they believe their system empowers the people to take pride in their houses and care for them. Techo also has many volunteers in the communities allowing them to gain an understanding of what these families need and who needs their help the most. The government typically doesn't have the luxury to be selective, which can cause funds to be spent in ways that aren't the most effective. For example, on the outskirts of Guadalajara, the government built low-income housing, but it sits empty. This housing was built where land was cheap. However, it was also built in an area with little access to water and limited transportation. Due to a lack of knowledge and/or poor planning, money was wasted and housing wasn't provided to those who need it (Techo, 2014). In this instance, Techo was able to recognize a better system for implementing housing and replace the government services.

A different type of NGO that provides services where the government services are lacking is Mexico Me Uno. Mexico Me Uno is a civil association that offers very affordable medication for the low-income population. They have locations around Guadalajara. We visited their location that collaborates with the community center at Mesa Colorada who offers a clinic to members of the community (Mesa Colorada, 2014). Although there is a government healthcare program provided by Institute of Insurance and Social Services for Government Workers (ISSTE in Spanish), it is only available to those employed by official businesses. This excludes the people who are unemployed and in the informal sector (Napolitano, 2002).

Education is a service typically offered by the government and supplements by NGOs. However, secondary education for adults who want to go back to school is not provided. Tecnológico de Monterrey developed an online program called Prep@net for individuals who have limited financial resources and are unable to complete their

secondary education in a traditional setting. This program allows people in various stages of their lives to complete their secondary education at their own pace. Prep@net has been beneficial for many individuals willing to work hard to complete their school. The photo below shows a computer lab donated to the Mesa Colorada community center by Tecnológico de Monterrey. This computer lab allows community members to utilize the computers to complete Prep@net courses. However, the majority of students who begin the program do not complete the program. Due to the online and independent nature of the program, it is difficult for many individuals to stay motivated in the classes, especially when surrounded by external stressors, such as trying to feed and take care of a family. While this program is not always successful in helping individuals complete their secondary education, it provides an opportunity for them to further their education at their own pace and on a flexible schedule, which is not an option that the public school system provides (Mesa Colorada, 2014).



Prep@net Computer Lab at Mesa Colorada (Adams, 2014)

### **Undermining Public Services**

While most NGOs work to supplement or replace government services, other NGOs undermine these services. Many NGOs in this division cite human rights as a justification to undermine the government. They often work to address basic needs instead of addressing the root of the problem. However, that does not make them less noble. These NGOs are responsible for caring for individuals who do not receive government support in the capacity that they need to survive.



The community center at Mesa Colorada undermines the government by encouraging an informal economy. At Mesa Colorada, many individuals are unemployed or unable to work due to injury or old age or women who stay at home to take care of the family. The community center teaches classes and holds workshops for baking, knitting, hair cutting, and other profitable skills (Mesa Colorada, 2014). Though it is possible that these individuals could turn these skills into a formal business, most do not have the resources to do so. However, learning these skills allows them to better provide for themselves and contribute to the economy, even if they are not paying taxes as a formal business would.

FM4 Paso Libre, an unofficial NGO in Guadalajara, Jalisco, serves as refuge for Central American migrants making the treacherous journey through Mexico to the United States. Many people think crossing the border to the United States is the most difficult part of the journey (FM4, 2014). In reality, the border between Mexico and the United States is actually quite permeable in some regions (Gilbert and Henderson, 2002). The true difficulty these migrants face is the voyage through Mexico. Although their migration is illegal, FM4 Paso Libre strives to provide services that will contribute to their well being during the journey. They provide blankets, fresh clothes, toiletries, food, and shower facilities to migrants who are making the journey by train. As seen in the film *Sin Nombre*, these migrants make the dangerous trip through Mexico by illegally riding on top of freight cars (2009). They jump off the train before the border patrol gets on near Guadalajara's metropolitan border. Migrants then make the one-day journey on foot through the streets of Guadalajara. The map in the photo is hanging in FM4 and illustrates the routes that migrants take to travel through Mexico on their way to the United States.



Map of the Migrant Routes  
(Stuart, 2014)



Due to their attire, bags, and facial characteristics, the migrants are frequently identified and ostracized by Mexicans as they travel. Migrants are seen by many as troublemakers or dangerous due to their filthy appearance caused by traveling, as well as their illegal status in the country. However, along the train tracks near the site where they will re-board the train, FM4 reach out a hand that not only strives to help them with their basic survival needs, but also acts as a symbol of hope.

When the director of FM4 was asked why he chose to serve these migrants through this organization, he responded with his story of being a migrant in the United States. He had his masters in education, but due to his illegal status, he was unable to work as a teacher and, therefore, provide for himself. The people he crossed paths with were unwilling to help him, even though he was an educated man. It was the homeless who finally welcomed him and helped him find food at a local soup kitchen. Though he valued their assistance in finding what he needed for basic survival, he was truly moved by the kind hand on his shoulder and the encouraging words they offered. He told us, "The basic principle of humanity is, 'How open are your arms?'" Though he makes a very small income in his position at FM4, he declared, without any hesitation in his voice, "If one immigrant exists, I will stay here" (FM4, 2014). From my observations of individuals' interactions with the director of FM4, I believe he is a symbol of hope to these immigrants in a country where their status is illegal, and their presence appears unwanted.

FM4 undermines the border patrol, but I believe it can be justified on the grounds that it fulfills an ethical responsibility people have to the welfare of others in need. This is a well-debated topic when discussing the pros and cons of NGOs that undermine the government. On one side of the debate, by undermining the government, NGOs, such as FM4, spend resources counteracting governmental action. These resources could be better allocated to advocating for different policies that would discourage these conditions for migrants. On the other side, supporters of these organizations argue that while advocating to the government, NGOs face too much red tape and that government officials tend to support the well-being of their voters over all of humanity. Therefore, advocates argue that NGOs are the best suited to protect the rights of the overlooked and underprivileged, and they present a better democratic system that truly serves the all of the population's needs.

From my analysis, a combination of these organizations is ideal. However, that brings up another issue of whether or not NGOs function more effectively when focused on a specific service or NGOs with broad purposes tackle issues more successfully. This often comes down to a question of how efficient and sustainable an NGO is and to what size they can grow and remain effective.

### **Sustainability of NGOs in Mexico**

In Mexico, there is a lack of formal philanthropic culture when compared to the United States. Affluent individuals in Mexico are much more likely to give money or donate items directly to less prosperous family members or neighbors than to a formal organization (Valenzuela 2014). Therefore, the majority of Mexican NGOs can't rely on funding from donations. Yet, NGOs still form an integral part of society by developing different strategies to fund the services they provide. For example, BAMX created a sustainable program that works with government officials to enact policies that encourage food donations from the private sector. The food is then distributed in small community structures where individuals from the community are charged with distributing the food and collecting a small fee of no more than 10% of the goods' original value. These minimal fees are enough to sustain the overhead costs of the organization, including storage space and employee salary (Rairez 2014).

Other organizations, such as Techo, look outside of Mexico for funding. Techo has a United States office in Miami, Florida whose main purpose is to collect donations in the United States to be used in Latin America (Techo, 2014). Another route of receiving funding is through the Catholic Church. The community center at Mesa Colorada is supported through both academic universities and Mexico Me Uno. However, the majority of the funding for the building itself, as well as new initiatives, is through the Catholic Church. Padre Francisco Escalante is the father who started this center. Due to his status as a priest and the level of respect his congregation has for him, he was able to solicit many donations of materials, funds, and volunteer time from his church's affluent congregation (Mesa Colorada, 2014). However, the support of the Catholic Church contributes to the sustainability of Mesa Colorada in more ways than funding.

Community support is also crucial to an NGO's sustainability in Mexico. By receiving support from the Catholic Church, official and unofficial NGOs gain a level of respect immediately upon entering a community due the large influence the Catholic Church still has within society. The Catholic Church, as a religious entity, is viewed as trustworthy institution within Mexico, according to one of the youth leaders at Mesa Colorada. In a society where there is a significant lack of faith in the government and other large institutions, trust is key for building a successful relationship between an NGO and a community. In fact, Rairez of BAMX expressed that trust is often just as valuable to NGOs as having accessible funds.

Another key aspect of being a sustainable NGO is an NGO's willingness to adapt to the specific needs of the communities it serves. One of the most impressive aspects of Mesa Colorada is not the beautiful building or wealth of donations, but the willingness of the NGO to adapt their strategy when an aspect of their implementation was unsuccessful.

There are a number of programs at the Mesa Colorada community center that failed in the beginning. For example, the community center used to give away donated clothes to the community's residents. However, community members would take everything they could carry, if they needed it or not. Many of the clothes would then be found discarded on the side of the road or in the trash. To fix this, they began to charge a small fee for the clothing items. Also, now the clothes, as you can see in the photo below, are organized in a system similar to what one would find in a for profit clothing store. This caused people to only purchase what they need. The youth leader at Mesa Colorada (2014) stressed that this also empowered community members because they were providing for themselves, not just receiving handouts (Mesa Colorada, 2014). This follows a model similar to BAMX, where recipients of the food are asked to pay a small fee (Rairez 2014).



Secondhand Clothing  
Store at Mesa Colorada  
(Adams, 2014)

NGOs are able to create a more specific, strategic structure than governmental organizations. Since NGOs are able to be a direct link between communities and services, they are able to adapt their strategies to fit the individual situation and community, whereas governmental organizations typically must equally address the needs of all their constituents in a methodical format. As mentioned above, Mesa Colorada was particularly successful in adapting their service model to fit the community's needs, such as by selling clothes instead of giving them away (Mesa Colorada, 2014). BAMX also originally began its program by giving away food for free. However, Rairez (2014) explained that employees saw families let food go to waste, and they also appeared to be losing their pride. If NGOs are observant and open to change, they are better able to serve the communities they work in and adapt more quickly than government programs.

Empowering individuals is a very important aspect of successful NGOs in Mexico. By asking individuals to contribute and actively participate in the services they receive, they are able to maintain pride in themselves and their ability to continually work to improve their own lives. The young community leaders that I met from Valles Del Sol were very passionate about this. They talked about a motto they had for their community: "If you are doing something for us, without us, you are against us" (Valles Del Sol, 2014). They are aware that they live in less than ideal conditions and are working hard to build up their community. However, they do not want NGOs coming in and trying to "fix" their community without understanding their values and considering their input. Low-income areas often create a unique sense of community in Mexico (Napolitano, 2002). It is important that NGOs not only respect that, but also work to empower it.

While NGOs do provide crucial services that are often provided by the government in other areas, I do not believe the NGOs I encountered in Jalisco, Mexico let the government "off the hook." The NGOs discussed in this paper served individuals that would not otherwise be served. For example, FM4 provides services to illegal immigrants traveling through Mexico. Due to these immigrants' illegal status, the government would most likely not provide them services. This shows how NGOs are often able to serve more democratically than democratic governments themselves, because they are not constrained by their constituents or governmental borders.

By looking at NGOs through this lens, I believe that people can gain a better understanding of the importance of supporting NGOs and the value of donating to NGOs, whether that is through time, talent, or donations. NGOs in Mexico may supplement, replace, and undermine the government because the government is not meeting people's needs. However, due to the environment they are in, I believe these NGOs are able to better serve people than the government is able to currently. I witnessed NGOs providing more reliable services that focused on meeting citizens' needs while maintaining the individuals' dignities. Nevertheless, people are, and should, continue working to improve the government's support of communities, as well as the government's support of the NGOs that serve them. It is through these collaborations, such as the collaborations with BAMX, where we see the most success.

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