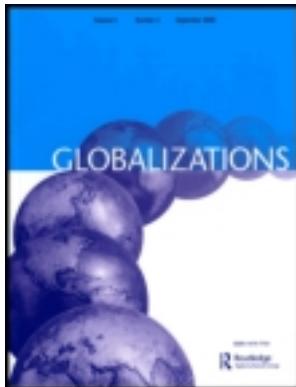


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Publisher: Routledge

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## Globalizations

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/rglo20>

### Labor and Community Organizations in Alliance? Alternative Development Visions in the Caribbean Regions of Colombia

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To cite this article: Patricia M. Rodriguez (2012): Labor and Community Organizations in Alliance? Alternative Development Visions in the Caribbean Regions of Colombia, *Globalizations*, 9:6, 835-850

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/14747731.2012.739344>

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## Labor and Community Organizations in Alliance? Alternative Development Visions in the Caribbean Regions of Colombia

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**ABSTRACT** *In the past few decades in Colombia, neoliberal development approaches centered on top-down good governance policies containing discourse about consultative processes and social protection. This way to tackle poverty and inequality has meant little in practice to disempowered rural communities. Instead, these communities are seeing their means of livelihood disappear with the dominance of transnational corporations (TNCs) in mining and agricultural sectors; still, they are fighting to have their alternative visions of development, participation, and social justice heard and incorporated in policy-making. Borrowing insights from the social movement governance and network advocacy literatures, this article analyzes the obstacles and prospects of community and labor organizations' attempts to make a bottom-up impact on governance in the Caribbean Magdalena and Cesar regions of Colombia. I argue that the ability of grassroots organizations to influence the state and corporations to (at least) live up to their 'good governance' commitments depends heavily on their organizational network strategies and the long-term focus of their joint efforts. The building of strong alliances among local organizations involves substantial internal and external challenges that are not easy to overcome, but that can carry some weight within a politicized arena occupied by powerful political and economic elite actors.*

**Keywords:** social movement networks, labor, community organizations, alternative development policies, governance, Colombia

### State, Corporations, and Communities in Contention

For decades, Colombians have witnessed intense struggles over control of the state, land distribution, the growth of the illegal drug business and US-sponsored war on drugs, and violence between guerrilla, military, and paramilitary groups. Recent economic policies have centered

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on the rapid privatization of services and the capturing of foreign direct investment. Transnational companies like US-based Chiquita Brands (formerly United Fruit Company), Dole, Drummond Coal, Swiss-based Glencore, and others began to arrive in the Caribbean Magdalena and Cesar regions of Colombia in the 1990s in large part due to state incentives to invest.

Though the Colombian government receives royalties from the companies, and the companies admittedly provide jobs for a substantial portion of the local population, a large part of the funds that should be allocated to community development is never transferred to the most impoverished and environmentally affected communities. Rural poverty has increased by 12% since neo-liberal economic policies first were enacted in the 1980s, and 87% of the rural population in Colombia is below the poverty level (Brittain, 2007, p. 419). The municipalities of Magdalena and Cesar that bear the brunt of foreign corporate presence are known to receive extremely low levels of infrastructural and public service assistance from all levels of government. Though the Colombian government has emphasized policies to enhance the state's institutional capacity and transparency, these efforts have meant little in practice to largely disempowered communities; instead, communities' means of livelihood are rapidly disappearing with the dominance of TNCs in mining and agricultural sectors. Nearly four million Colombians have been displaced from their original communities, and the complex dynamics of interaction between state and paramilitary forces, guerrillas, and corporations make it difficult to specify which group is more at fault.

Confronted with displacement and corporate power, local communities are fighting to have their alternative visions of development, participation, social justice, and protection heard both by the corporations and within the state institutional realm. At times working together, community organizations and labor unions have voiced their concerns, even when outside forces have used violence and coercion to create divisions within these groups. When working in alliance, these groups have achieved small victories, such as the signing of the Collective Labor Agreement (2010–2013) between SINTRAMINERGETICA (National Union of Industry and Energy Workers) union and Drummond Coal company. This agreement details the manner in which the relationship between the labor union, the community, and the company should play out in the coming years. However, at other moments, community members and workers become divided, with communities bearing the brunt of violence, firings, injuries, poverty, and environmental contamination. What explains these alliances and break of alliances, and what effects do the internal relations between labor and community organizations have on their actual and potential 'space' within larger social and political context?

This article analyzes the prospects and obstacles of community and labor organizations' attempts to make a bottom-up impact on governance in the context of these regions of Caribbean Colombia. How and why are state-designed 'participatory' policies helping and/or failing these communities? What do grassroots-based alternative development proposals indicate as far as desired changes, and how united are they in going about it? In answering these questions, I argue that the ability of grassroots organizations to influence the state and corporations to (at least) live up to their 'good governance' commitments depends heavily on their organizational network strategies and the long-term focus of their joint efforts. The article explores this argument in the next three sections. In the second section of this article, I turn to recent literatures on social movement unionism, solidarity networks, and strategic interactions, and call attention to how this literature contrasts with good governance's emphasis on the integration of institutional capacity and citizen participation in development planning, and with corporate 'attention' to integrated social engagement within communities. The third section discusses elements of the dominant neoliberal development approach implemented by state and corporate actors in Magdalena and Cesar, while the fourth section contrasts that approach with the socially and

environmentally just development vision espoused by community and labor leaders. Using evidence based on primary research and interviews with leaders of labor and community organizations in the municipalities of Ciénaga (Magdalena) and La Jagua de Ibirico (Cesar) in 2010 and 2011, I examine the dynamics of internal and external interactions among labor and community organization leaders, and draw attention to grassroots organizational network strategies that seem to yield some momentum for policy influence. The concluding section assesses the efficacy of alternative visions and the potential impact of bottom-up grassroots governance strategies on issues related to poverty and marginalization.

### **Social Movements and Governance: Bottom-up vs Top-down Approaches**

Before engaging in specific analysis of the resistances presented by local communities to the violence, neglect, and displacement occurring in Magdalena and Cesar, it is important to understand the different perspectives about governance issues (and which groups should be involved in governance). Below, I bring attention to top-down and bottom-up perspectives to governance and how the involvement of active citizens in governance is perceived from each of these perspectives, using Colombia and other cases as examples.

Since the mid 1940s in many countries of the global South, elite domestic and foreign actors and international financial institutions have dominated the formulation of international and national development and governance policies. However, reducing poverty by designing programs and domestic policies that truly envision local ownership has not been at the core of these development formulas (de Haan, 2009). Beginning in the 1990s, in large part because of grassroots reactions across the globe to the lack of progress on addressing poverty and inequalities, international development initiatives became embedded with the language of efficient governance and public sector reforms as the way to improve developing nations' ability to address their problems. Government transparency and decentralized decision making became central to the post Washington Consensus 'good governance' approach, spurred by the idea that the universal principles of democracy and accountability would provide long-term answers to concerns about power and resource distribution (*ibid.*). These technical, quasi-magical reform solutions *appear* to include certain key mechanisms, namely the opening of debate around different development approaches and the inclusion of diverse actors in the mapping out of 'good governance' policies.

In Colombia, several programs were implemented that set the stage for a renewed 'integrated' approach to development in the 1990s, one that placed communal action as its core, at least in its discourse. By the early 1990s, a constitutional reform campaign that brought together civil society groups and opposition parties clamored for an end to state neglect and for increased societal participation in planning and development issues. In 1991, a new constitution was passed that codified what seemed like a collaborative commitment among political and societal actors to design mechanisms to improve the reach of the state, in spite of the context of social conflict. The decentralization and participatory initiatives that emerged out of the early 1990s' reform efforts seemed to signal the construction of efforts to making local governmental policy-making more transparent and participatory, following the integrated development precepts of good governance (Gow, 1997). For the most part, however, in Colombia the 'integrated' coordination nature of development planning has ultimately been decided and implemented in top-down fashion by government officials. Especially in areas concerning big investment projects involving natural resource exploitation or the building of ports and other infrastructure,

procedural policies contained *vague* mappings of the role of societal participation in decision making.

The 1997 Territorial Development Law (Law 388) provides a useful example of this dynamic. The law codifies a set of political-administrative and planning procedures to follow for the approval of local-level development projects. Central to these procedures are the Territorial Ordering Plans (*Planes de Ordenamiento Territorial*, POTs); they delineate the steps to be taken in the implementation of municipal development projects, with specific attention to environmental preservation and respect for local cultural and historical traditions. Accordingly, any development project that affects the agro-ecological balance of communities would necessarily entail an Environmental Assessment Report (EAR) specifying the potential environmental impact, and the report's socialization to communities for feedback before local officials can give the go-ahead. For communities, Law 388 was a significant achievement; according to an initial assessment by a community leader, 'the Municipal POT in Ciénaga [was] the most ambitious work, designed to protect territorial, socioeconomic, environmental and soil management interests of the community' (Gutierrez, 2010, p. 9).

Despite the effort to establish a legal framework for citizen consultation on development projects, in practice the communal action portion of the POTs is often easily overlooked, in favor of procedural fast-tracking that favor corporate interest. One example is the port expansion project in the coastal community of Ciénaga (in the Magdalena region). Since the early 1980s, several transnational and national corporations in the mining and banana sector (US-based Drummond Coal, Dole Food, Chiquita Brands International, Prodeco (a subsidiary of Swiss-based Glencore International), and others) dominated the commercial and port activity in the region. By 2006, the mining industry had expanded substantially, leading several corporations to seek the building of an expanded mega-port.<sup>1</sup> In accordance with POTs territorial regulations, upon receipt of the EAR for the mega-port from Prodeco and Drummond,<sup>2</sup> local and national officials were imbued with the task of presenting it to the community for approval. Local community groups publicly expressed their discontent, citing concerns about the non-inclusion of several socioeconomic and environmental effects of the mega-project on local agricultural and indigenous communities. The numerous protests in the streets and port of Ciénaga, and the letter writing campaigns to the press by several groups of concerned community leaders and citizens of Ciénaga and (nearby) Santa Marta proved fruitless (Gutierrez, 2010, p. 17). In December 2007, less than a year after the project was unveiled, the national Minister of Transportation made an official statement of the national government's decision to declare the area a 'public interest zone', as it was part and parcel of the larger national development plans of the government (Ibid., p. 19). In December 2009, one year after approving the beginning the construction phase of the mega-port, the local government in Ciénaga had not yet called for a public assembly to unveil the EAR that had been independently prepared by a group of independent scientists from the capital Bogotá, in response to requests by community organizations. In the end, 'the project began with the removal of huge amounts of soil, and from its inception [there was] no concern with the irrevocable destruction of the flora and fauna, in typical colonizer fashion' (Ibid., p. 21).

The problematic implementation of 'good governance' consultative processes at the local level in Colombia is not unusual in much of the global South. Yet, in contrast to top-down good governance approaches, recent literature on globalization and its impact on labor and other societal organizations has highlighted the turn toward alternative bottom-up approaches to development and governance issues. As one author notes, new notions of governance have appeared in which 'dealing with public matters and satisfying social demands is no longer

controlled by governments because policy-making is increasingly the result of the interaction of a wide variety of state and non-state actors' (Marti i Puig, 2010, p. 76). These grassroots approaches to social movement governance and social movement unionism suggest a different set of mechanisms to attempt to ensure civil society's influence on policies and programs.

The concept of social movement unionism builds on the transformations in strategy within trade unions in face of their losses under globalization and state and corporate labor flexibilization policies (Lier, 2007). In an effort to retain bargaining potentials and 'counter the changing nature of the working class', labor unions have begun to establish mutual exchange ties with each other and with other organized groups (the unemployed, indigenous groups, student groups, neighborhood associations, etc.) so as to enhance mobilization capacity (*Ibid.*, p. 36). In turn, social movement gain greater economic leverage and resources for their own struggles, and build common identity among movements with similar demands (Lier, 2007; Lier and Stokke, 2006). The main focuses of this literature are the internal processes of strategic decision making within and among the different social organizations now doing sustained joint mobilization, and the overcoming of historical tendencies to prioritize only sectoral interests and rights (Novelli, 2011).

As much of the current literature on local, national, and transnational networks points out, alliances are not easy to build and maintain. Collaborations depend heavily on how groups perceive each other and their goals. For instance, community organizers may perceive labor unions as exclusionary and too focused on defending narrow purposes, while labor leaders may see community organizers as excessively radical and not rooted on solid membership (Nissen, 2009). Alternatively, some groups may have a territorial-local intent to protect local natural resources (local wetlands), while others may have a broader focus on issues (protecting wetlands in general), all of which make dialogue within groups particularly complicated (Ansell, 2003).

Though the building of trust requires careful and sustained interchanges, the impact can be tremendous. For one, joint work serves to integrate previously dispersed groups (including informal sector workers), as they engage with each other in varied outreach and coordination efforts to propose all-encompassing solutions. Novelli (2011) notes in the case of a 36-day occupation of an energy corporation by labor *and* community leaders in Cali (in 2001–2002) that time-intensive educational campaigns, collective mobilizing, sustained human rights work, and alternative management options were all a part of the success of alliance-building at the local, national, and international level.

None of this [alliance-building] . . . happens overnight, and [it] requires radical and fresh thinking, a new openness to engage beyond 'bread and butter' and mechanical solidarity, a willingness to take militant action, and a desire to rekindle once again the utopian dreams of international solidarity. (*Ibid.*, p. 160)

Local activist groups acting together with each other can begin to envision different local realities and creative alternatives, and engage in different ways with national and international political actors. Transnational links to human rights, labor and solidarity organizations abroad form an intricate part of alliance-building. On the one hand, formulating and implementing joint decisions about local matters with international groups contribute to local activists' sense of belonging to a broader community of sympathetic groups, and it has reciprocal effects on international solidarity actors. In addition, transnational exchanges can bring about substantive pressure on local political actors to adjust their policies to avoid broad criticism, as 'local government [becomes] aware that actions of social movements are made known beyond national borders' (Lindell, 2010, p. 84). In that sense, the building of transnational linkages represents

an added resource in the local struggles of grassroots groups, particularly if local actors are successful at communicating and strategizing the ‘entrance’ of national and international solidarity efforts into local problems. Novelli’s (2011) analysis of the elaborate efforts by labor and community leaders in the Cali mobilizations first to learn human rights language and processes, and then to ‘hook’ local, national, and international solidarity actors into these legal and mobilization processes suggests that bottom-up mobilizing can yield lasting benefits. It is indeed the case that we should pay attention to the discourse and programmatic strategies of grassroots movements so as to illuminate the process in which their leaders build social and political connections at the local, national, and international levels.

In addition, social movement networks can constructively mobilize their resources to block or facilitate specific policies they oppose or favor (Hochstetler and Keck, 2007). Inter-organizational efforts among civil society groups are often the culprit of the ability to generate positive responses from state officials. As a result of social movements’ increasing presence in the institutional realm as allies but also challengers of the state, some scholarly attention has turned to social movement governance or multilevel governance, or the notion that sustained mobilization and coordinated activism can result in the constitution of institutional influence for grassroots groups. The careful crafting of collaborations between civil society groups and state agents can transform the capacity of the state to defend the public interest, especially where state agencies are weak, as in the case of water management policies in Brazil (Abers and Keck, 2008). Collaborative governance can bring about important changes, and citizen activism can play a key role in generating the impetus for state action and policy change.

On the other hand, these collaborations can be impeded by policymakers who often call for citizen participation but then resist any kind of substantive change to their dominant policy vision. As Anner (2011) points out, the pre-established political identities of particular labor organizations may make them more open to engaging with state or corporate actors than with other labor or grassroots groups. This may generate significant problems in alliance-building, especially if it opens opportunities for co-optation into mainstream development solutions posed by ‘outsider’ NGOs, international actors, and the state. Moreover, the spread of the capacity for a variety of different actors to get involved in the public policy sphere may well provoke a ‘loss of institutional capacity’ rather than its strengthening (Martí i Puig, 2010).

Alliance-building among social movements does not occur in isolation from the actions of other groups, particularly if state, corporate, and international actors are engaging in their own ‘power’ efforts to build policy that reflects their economic and political interests and visions, while still incorporating and/or co-opting some of the demands made by local grassroots groups. The recent focus on strategic interactions (between social movement leaders and state/non-state actors) in social movement theorizing brings attention to the notion that social movements face a tradeoff between ‘the direct pursuit of goals within arenas using *existing* rules and resources and their pursuit of indirect objectives meant to *change* arenas and the distribution of resources’ (Jasper, 2012, p. 20; my emphasis). It urges us then to pay attention to the context in which institutional and non-institutional actors come together to interact, to understand the full implications of open political ‘windows of opportunity’ and internal decision-making choices among Colombian labor unions and community organizations. The analysis of social movement–labor–state–corporate interactions within the contexts violence, corporate dominance, and contentious relations between the state and civil society groups in Colombia is an interesting chance to further understand the complexity of the different development visions of each of these actors.

Oslender (2007) has already noted that the state's development strategy has exactly been to displace people so that corporate dominance over lands set aside for African palm oil production can expand. I will demonstrate in the next section that coercion and co-optation are deeply embedded in state and corporate-led development projects in Magdalena and Cesar.

### **Development, Corporate Dominance, and Violence in Magdalena and Cesar**

Below, I lay out the general characteristics of state–corporate–paramilitary political-economic dominance in the agrarian and mining sectors in Magdalena and Cesar, and describe the impact of this dominance on communities and labor organizations. The broad context of institutional and violent methods of governance needs to be understood because they have significant deterrent effects on solidarity efforts within and outside communities.

In Magdalena department, the historically strong presence of large landholdings owes much to its geographic location at the bottom of the valley of the Sierra Nevada Mountains with access to the Caribbean ocean. The 'banana era' from 1890s to 1960s was marked by the dominance of foreign companies such as the Colombian Land Company, Boston Fruit Company, and finally the United Fruit Company (UFCO), which by the 1920s controlled 80% of exports from the region, including banana, sugar, and cacao (Roca, 2005, p. 189).<sup>3</sup> The construction of railroad tracks linking the Banana Zone to the Santa Marta port by the early 1900s facilitated the huge economic boom in the region, but also led to intense confrontations due to labor conditions and wages between UFCO and banana workers unions in the late 1920s. Although UFCO eventually left the region in the 1960s due to labor unrest, pests, and economic crises, the local economy continued to be sustained since then by large banana and fruit plantations, although with great vulnerability to world economic conditions and prices (*Ibid.*, p. 198). By the 2000s, 66.6% of arable land in Magdalena was dedicated to cattle, fruits, and more recently palm oil production (Ortiz, 2009, p. 2).

By the late 1960s, armed actors were already noticeably present in the region. Local landowners in Magdalena had begun to pay a 'security fee' to rebel guerrilla groups like the National Liberation Army (ELN) and the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) that operated in and around the largely uninhabited Sierra Nevada. Noticing the potential for exclusive control of land and/or lucrative contracts with local large-scale banana growers, Chiquita Brands and Dole officials negotiated their (re)entrance into the Banana Zone. To guarantee their investments, they made trade deals with these local landowners and security deals with the guerrillas. As their profits rose, the companies sought to further ensure their unrestricted access to highways and railroads leading to the coastal ports by negotiating exclusive access to portions of this infrastructure with the state. By the 1990s, small private security gangs had begun to challenge guerrilla groups for control of the territory and the substantial security payments from landowners and multinational companies. By the late 1990s, the companies shifted their payments to these private gangs instead of the weakened guerrilla forces. Soon, these groups connected with structured paramilitary organizations that were dominant in other regions, and built their own blocs in Magdalena. One such bloc was the North Bloc of the United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia, AUC, under the command of Rodrigo Tovar, alias Jorge 40. To date, the AUC and other paramilitary groups have built solid ties to drug lords as well as to military and high-level state authorities, and corporations.<sup>4</sup>

To garner control of the region from the cornered but still heavily armed guerrilla groups, particularly the FARC, the AUC carried out social 'cleansings' of local communities leaders in Magdalena, aimed at blocking any popular support for the ELN or the FARC. Labor leaders,

workers, and teachers were the targets of brutal slayings aimed at societal demobilization. From 1997 to 2007, Magdalena registered 329 deaths due to armed conflict (with the heaviest number of deaths in 1999–2002, at which time the guerrilla forces largely disappeared from the region) and 6,379 homicides (Ortiz, 2009, p. 7). In 2002, the last year of the heavy armed conflict period 39,000 people were displaced and 177 had been kidnapped; Magdalena (and particularly Ciénaga and Santa Marta) boasted higher and more brutal levels of violence than overall national figures (*Ibid.*, p. 22). In Ciénaga, three community activists were killed in the period of 2004–2006 because they had been working with coastal communities that had been displaced allegedly because the AUC's future plans to build a port in the territory it controlled (Guerrero, 2009, p. 75). The AUC also aimed at consolidating political power away from the hands of traditional parties, the Liberal and Conservative Parties (*Ibid.*, p. 36). In 2000, for instance, AUC (and its local branch the Peasant Self-defenses of Magdalena) began to infiltrate communities with the formation of communal action councils (*juntas de acción comunal*) and communal workshops centered on gathering input from communities about their problems (*Ibid.*; Ortiz, 2009, p. 4).

The high levels of violence in turn enabled multinational corporations and local elites to increasingly control vast portions of territory. By 2002 Chiquita and Dole had made a deal to divvy up the 10,000 hectares under their possession (or sign subcontracting deals with medium-to-large local farmers), as well as share the use of the railroad. Small farmers in the area have had to sell their lands, forced by criminal and paramilitary gangs, which then turn around and extort and rob them of their money shortly after the sale. Others have simply never returned to the land that is legally theirs, due to fear after their violent displacement by paramilitary groups. Local politicians, often of wealthy landowning family backgrounds, have been connected to national level Congress members that have been found guilty of economic and political ties to paramilitary groups.<sup>5</sup>

To make matters worse, state programs to deal with displacement deliver poverty alleviation subsidies in clientelistic ways. According to a local community leader, Ciénaga families with low income or who have been displaced or are relatives of victims of the conflict are all lumped together into one category of recipients, and barely have access to Acción Social's \$40 bimonthly subsidy; most do not have enough of a connection to municipal authorizes to receive even this small benefit.<sup>6</sup> In addition, state funding destined for local communities is channeled to local companies that do subcontract production for Dole, like AUGURA (Association of Banana Workers of Colombia). With the funds, AUGURA organizes company-run cooperatives among its workers; an AUGURA representative himself noted in an interview that about 80% of expenditures on these cooperatives are state funded.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the state has resources set aside for poverty alleviation of local communities, but most of these are captured by the local companies that produce for multinational corporations (and therefore serve only workers already associated to the company) or are diverted otherwise.

The situation of neglect and top-down decision making in mining-dominated regions in Cesar department is similar, though perhaps exacerbated by the large magnitude of corporate dominance and the central importance this sector has obtained in the overall neoliberal economic approach in Colombia. The country, but especially Cesar and the department of La Guajira (but also involving the ports in Magdalena) has solidified its position as one of the world's biggest coal exporters.<sup>8</sup> Cesar is home to some of the biggest coal mines in Latin America, and multinational companies such as Drummond, Prodeco, and more recently Brazilian-owned Vale, have certainly capitalized on this by buying part of the national railroad company FENOCO. This guarantees them access to the nearly 300 miles of the railroad line that connects the Cesar mines to the port of Ciénaga. Upon completion, the mega-port will

allow Drummond and Glencore to ship an extra 30–60 million tons of coal per year to global markets, in addition to the nearly 69 million tons already exports (Gutierrez, 2010).

Since the late 1990s in Cesar, mining sector large-scale investments have resulted in similar stories of violence, social neglect, and also environmental impact as in Magdalena. A recent report notes that approximately US\$230 million in mining company royalties that should have gone to four municipalities in Cesar (including La Jagua de Ibirico) between 2008 and 2010 had been diverted by corrupt state officials (Ronderos, 2012). Today, 38 out of 1,000 babies born in La Jagua do not make it past their first year; the municipality has an infant mortality rate that is twice as high as the rate for Colombia as a whole (19.9%) (*ibid.*). As in Magdalena, the intense pace of industrial expansion has brought violence to communities around the mines. Similar strategies of ‘social cleansing’ by paramilitaries seeking to disperse guerrilla groups and control lands pervade in Cesar: in 1996–2003, 5,955 families (41,685 individuals) were displaced from their homes in Cesar (Castillo, 2004, p. 107). During the most intense years of the armed conflict between 1997 and 2000, 94 massacres (426 deaths) occurred in Cesar (*Ibid.*, p. 98).

For years the companies have been dumping millions of tons of coal in the communities where the railroad passes and into nearby coastal waters. This has led to severe health problems and environmental contamination. According to community members, the companies allege that coal dumping is accidental, but the coal is carried uncovered and carelessly dumped into ships’ containers. In communities immediately surrounding the coal mines, people struggle to be justly compensated by the company. Unionized coal workers have organized to demand enforcement of labor rights such as paid sick time off and adequate medical care to injured workers, and the right to strike. However, the company has often fired workers once these demands have been made. Such is the case of José, a former Drummond employee who belongs to SINTRAMINERGETICA (National Union of Industry and Energy Workers). He worked for 50 years as a welder (25 years at Drummond), and is now incapacitated due to severe spinal, respiratory, and heart conditions; he demands full health coverage and just compensation for his medical ailments.<sup>9</sup> The company has successfully resisted outside meddling in the labor court case, despite legal efforts by the union to enforce these rights and to obtain job security agreements; its representatives refuse to negotiate with third parties. Recently, the company even created its own union (SINTRADRUMMOND), and many workers feel forced to join it. The union has had five of its leaders killed since 2001, and several others now live in exile after being threatened by paramilitaries.

Mining operations also impacted fishermen communities in Ciénaga, as the companies have prevented them from accessing the waters near their port and ships. To makes matters worse, Drummond was recently given rights to control parts of the Toribio River, including the station that supplies clean water to local communities. According to several fishermen, Drummond uses river water to wet down the coal so that it does not ignite in the shipping containers as the coal is transported to global markets. The coal dust has severely contaminated the water and caused a variety of skin and respiratory ailments. A study ordered by the Human Rights Ombudsman office in Cesar found that the local water is toxically contaminated and that more than half the local population areas surrounding the Drummond, Prodeco, and Vale mines suffer from respiratory and skin disorders (Ronderos, 2012).

### **Alternative Development: Community and Labor Struggles**

In this section, I turn to alternative visions of development and the potential of grassroots organizational networks. Community and labor groups in Magdalena and Cesar have tried to work

collaboratively to address specific problems in their communities, and propose solutions that are collectively discussed. The building of intra-community alliances involves a difficult process of negotiating spaces and agendas; perceptions of each others' strategies and goals are at play, and affect the long-term viability of the alliances. On the one hand, it makes perfect sense for labor union leaders from SINTRAMINERGETICA to work with community organizations, since union workers are also residents in the communities that surround the mines. Communities affected by the violence and the social and environmental neglect of foreign corporations are working towards similar goals as labor union leaders: to change the behavior of corporations and the state's willingness and capacity to deal with corporate infractions. On the other hand, the more specific goals of each organizations, the diverse mobilizational and political weight each organization holds, and the external 'interventions' by foreign companies and state officials strongly divert attention away from sustained alliance-building. Below, I describe push-and-pull between labor and community groups in Ciénaga and La Jagua in the midst of the construction of alternative development proposals.

The joint work of civil society organizations in both localities has occurred at specific moments, and is based on shared experiences, identities, and goals among the organizations. In Ciénaga, the port expansion project that begun in 2006 brought three different locally based organizations together to demand that the mega-project be halted and that the mining companies respect the state's commitment to environmental conservation, community development, and labor standards. One of the organizations, the December 6 Foundation, is a community/human rights organization that borrows its name from the date of a government-sponsored massacre of banana plantation workers in 1928. The organization's purpose in the alliance is to get corporations to effectively channel royalty funds and corporate social investment to improvements in the community and to indemnify victims and relatives of victims of violence. The second organization, the Foundation for Risk Reduction (FRR), has as its main concern the protection of displaced and environmentally affected communities along the coastal areas near the port. The third organization is the labor union SINTRAMINERGETICA, which seeks to redress wrongful firings and other labor violations. It works to uphold labor, health and environmental contracts, and laws for mine and port workers in Cesar and Magdalena.<sup>10</sup>

The process of alliance-building emerged in organic form, from the series of community forums that centered around complaints about the process of approval of environmental assessment detailed above. As the organizations met in these community forums, and shared information, the groups began to understand more about how the coal residuals were dumped into the ocean. They then mobilized to get scientists from the Universidad Nacional in Bogotá to test specimens and run tests to measure environmental damage. Though some studies were undertaken by these scientists, these were never presented to the organizations, or to the community. According to Francisco, an expert economist and environmental planner from FRR, the minimum response they should get from the state, and one that would indicate some measure of justice for the coastal communities of Ciénaga, is 'to bring in a health brigade trained in lung issues to assist the people who live by the coal-contaminated areas near the railroad'.<sup>11</sup>

Although neither the state nor the companies (Drummond, Vale, Prodeco) have yielded much to pressures to address the legal, environmental, and social displacement implications of mega-port construction and banana enclaves, local groups did not demobilize. Despite the decision by the national government in December 2007 to declare the public interest zone that gave the mega-port project the green light, the aforementioned organizations (December 6, FRR, and SINTRAMINERGETICA) continued to call attention to social and environmental

injustices and to attempt to implement the local citizen consultation mechanisms outlined in the 1997 Territorial Ordering Plan. Through sustained pressure on municipal authorities, the coalition of organizations that had initially come together in joint protests against the mega-port in 2006–2007 founded the Municipal Council for Territorial Planning (*Consejo Territorial de Planeación Municipal*, CTPM) in 2009.

The CTPM is a land-use and socio-environmental development consultative body that meets every two months and is composed of representatives from several Ciénaga-based civil society organizations. Using the same ‘good governance’ legislation (the 1997 Territorial Development Plan) that had been ignored by the national government’s public interest zone dictate that approved the construction of the mega-project in 2007, the original coalition of organizations was able to integrate a wider array of community-based organizations to deliberate on current and proposed municipal development projects and legislation, and offer feedback. The CTPM is composed of representatives from 17 civil society sectors: displaced people, women as head of households, women as entrepreneurs, peasants, student in private and public sectors, cultural/art groups, handicapped, rural and urban cooperatives, indigenous, Afro-descendant, formal and informal workers’ unions, environmental, youth, teachers, and urban professionals.

In February 2011, the CTPM began discussion of a project presented by Ciénaga mayor Luis Gastelbondo to establish land-use regulations based on a larger set of coal-related national legislation, and not on current agriculture-related legislation. In other words, the mayor wanted to change the official designation of Ciénaga as an agricultural-based economy to a mining-based economy. Elected in 2008 under the platform of independent green party (*Opción Verde*), the mayor’s relationship with the community had soured by early 2011, due to several issues with mismanagement of funds and with non-compliance with judicial orders (Iguarán, 2011). (In November 2011, he was removed from office by the regional Attorney General.) In a document presented to municipal authorities in March 2011, the CTPM asserted their own vision of socially oriented land-use regulations that respect the *diverse* basis of the economy of Ciénaga and made several recommendations about specific procedures to bring mining companies in line with environmental, labor, and health legal standards. The community groups’ goal is to return to the original intention of the Territorial Ordering Plan (POT) as understood by civil society groups (the document strongly emphasizes protecting Ciénaga as an environmental and historical-cultural hub in the Caribbean).

Labor union representation was noticeably absent when the CTPM document was written. SINTRAMINERGETICA was an ally with other community groups in 2006–2007 when community organizations initially mobilized, but it was absent in 2011. Per Pedro, a CTPM council member, this has been a source of frustration for the other community organizations:

We don’t understand why SINTRAMINERGETICA refused to join the CTPM [meetings] in 2011, and elaborate this document with us. They did not say a word about it, nor denounce anything. It could be powerful, because of their international reach; everything works better with international pressure. We’ve had national level organizations come to hear us, like Fundación Nuevo Arco-Iris [from Bogotá], but they just operate in the [national] political realm, where hardly anything favors us. Everyone just defends their own interests.<sup>12</sup>

SINTRAMINERGETICA officials claim that they have certainly worked with community organizations, and point to the Collective Labor Agreement (2010–2013) that they laboriously negotiated with Drummond as evidence of their community focus. Article 23 of the Agreement states: ‘the company agrees to facilitate the hiring of those people born in Cesar department for jobs in the mines, and of those born in Magdalena for jobs in the port’ (CLA, 2010). In addition,

upon the death of a worker, the company specifically committed to hire a relative of the victim. This agreement was signed by the union and company representatives after an intense series of community-backed labor strikes, not without serious consequences for the workers. Several workers were indeed fired. SINTRAMINERGETICA representatives insist that working with communities is an important part of their activism, and that bringing transnational attention to such issues is imperative.

Although solidifying transnational alliances with labor organizations in the US and elsewhere is a strong part of SINTRAMINERGETICA's activism, the focus of its interaction with transnational allies seems to be based mainly on internal labor related issues and not so much on local community issues, at least according to several leaders of community organizations. For instance, one of the December 6 Foundation's central campaigns is to get the state to officially acknowledge and indemnify victims of violence by military and paramilitary forces in Ciénaga with a strong compensation package. However, justice and reparation issues represent drastic challenges to entrenched political actors, and the numerous killings of (and anonymous threats to) community members and labor leaders have had a silencing effect. Eduardo, a representative of December 6 Foundation, has seen at least six other community leaders be killed in the past three years, and his own life threatened four times. He states: 'many times we feel that the union [SINTRAMINERGETICA] is too closed off; they come to Ciénaga with their own goals, but we don't feel a real preoccupation with the community beyond which it could help them.'<sup>13</sup> Eduardo's words indicate a gap in the collective strategizing about local linkages and networking among civil society organizations, and especially a disconnect with the *full* potential of transnational solidarity, such as perceived by Lindell (2010) and Novelli (2011) in the context of their particular case studies (discussed in the section on 'Social Movements and Governance' above).

The presence of foreign corporations and the complicity of state institutions are significant obstacles, as these strongly exacerbate the cleavages and distrust already existing within communities. For one, companies prefer to deal on a one-on-one basis with community residents, most notably in the mining zones of Cesar. In Mechoacan (a village within the municipality of La Jagua de Ibirico in Cesar), Drummond bought lands from a total of 133 families in the early 2000s, but offered them different prices for their land. Though some in the community (15 families) formed an alliance/cooperative and organized joint protests with SINTRAMINERGETICA in 2001 to ensure that the state's INCODER (Institute for Rural Cooperation and Development) would oversee the fairness and validity of the land sales and abide by environmental and labor standards, INCODER instead exacerbated divisions within affected families by instead questioning the validity of several families' original land titles.

We have tried to resist, and to continue to build unity. With the money that we got we decided to build the cooperative so that we could buy another lands and a few trucks collectively, among all fifteen families. We invested a total of CP\$19 million, but our leader, Freddy, who was negotiating a trucking service contract with Drummond kept telling us that [company officials] said we don't have enough skills. He met several times with the manager at Drummond, and they promised to help us and Mechoacan as well by giving jobs to at least two people per family. In the end, Freddy took all the money to himself, and disappeared. Since then, we have tried to get the company to offer the youth from Mechoacan closed courses that teach them the technical skills, and tried to get SINTRAMINERGETICA to press the issue. Instead, [Drummond officials] put out an open-to-public job announcement and 600 people showed up to compete for 25 positions within the company . . . in the end, no one from Mechoacan got hired.<sup>14</sup>

The presence of Drummond in La Jagua de Ibirico (it is estimated that the company directly employs around 10,000 workers from the area, and that it generates indirectly another 15,000 jobs) (Ronderos, 2012) undeniably generates positive economic impact, but also significantly harmful social and economic side effects to local communities. Besides the environmental contamination and displacement detailed above, it is also the case that mine-workers that work directly for Drummond earn salaries as much as six times higher than community folks that make a living as day laborers in large-scale banana plantations, exacerbating income inequality in the region (*Ibid.*). One of the results of this has been increased levels of spending on drinking and prostitution (*Ibid.*).

### **Conclusion**

This article's focus on internal and external factors in the making and breaking of labor–community organization alliances in the Magdalena and Cesar regions of Colombia yields several insights about the significance of grassroots efforts to enter arenas of potential influence in development and poverty alleviation policy-making. First, the identity and solidarity-building nature of alliances, when based more on situational information-sharing and less on well-thought out strategy and resource-sharing, represents a weak base for sustained collaboration. It is difficult to get through the nitty-gritty aspects of alliance-building and establish successful alliances when there is an unwillingness to suspend preconceived perceptions and interests. The failure to overcome these hurdles to alliance-building is illustrated in the lack of union support for CTPM's challenge to Ciénaga mayor's attempt to change land-use regulations and in the failed attempt to achieve concerted pressure to obtain Drummond's commitment to local hiring in Mechoacan. Long-term commitments have to be in place for alliances to act in unison to either generate impact within existing rules and contexts (Jasper's 'arenas') or to bring about broader change in the arenas themselves.

Second, on the question of whether social movements aim to work within existing rules and/or attempt to generate systemic change in various arenas and in the distribution of resources, the case of social movement activism in Magdalena and Cesar reflects an attempt at *de facto implementation* (as opposed to the overlooking) of existing rules. Corporate-state dominance in large-scale development approaches makes the possibility of generating broader change unlikely. Nevertheless, opportunities to enter arenas of political influence were indeed opened with state policies that emphasized participatory/consultative mechanisms in the late 1990s (as weakly intentioned as I argue they were, in the case of Colombia), but grassroots movements have not yet been able to take full advantage of the possibilities of becoming actual players in the political arena. In the political contexts of violence and dominance by conservative political and business elite, the labor–social movement nexus needs to be grounded on collaborative local, national and international strategies to react and counteract top-down policy decisions. Although the demand for voice in defending alternative development visions is what brings grassroots organizations together, the building of strong alliances among local domestic organizations involves substantial internal and external challenges that are not easy to overcome.

Yet, as the formation of the CTPM in Ciénaga suggests, the work of embedding into local networks that can carry *some* weight within a politicized arena largely occupied by powerful political and economic elite actors has only just begun. In a self-reflection about the utility of the joint effort to challenge the mayor's proposed Territorial Ordering Plan (POT) changes, the CTPM offers insights into its potential to resonate among a broader local audience, a collectivity of people interested in defending social, economic, and cultural prerogatives:

The writing of this document [the CPMF's response to the mayor's proposal] has required tenacity and persistence on the part of council and community members; and like the Myth of Sisyphus, although we have pushed the rock up the hill and it insists on rolling back into the valley, this has not resulted in our despondence, but rather we have enthusiastically engaged in the construction of current and future proposals that are most important to the collectivity. (CTPM, 2011, p. 5)

By finding ways to carve their own entrance into closed political arenas, societal actors may begin to broaden the chances to engage in the necessary work of alliance-building and strengthening. Trust and willingness to transform goals and focus action is at the core of the type of networking action needed to break obstacles to unity. At other times, however, it is evident that the entrance into the governance arena is a minefield, one in which appealing to other state and non-state actors can result in significant internal obstacles to further activism, as the failed cooperative organization in Mechoacan (La Jagua) has shown. Yet, external obstacles need not completely block the search for indirect impact on political arenas. The call from within community organizations for transnational linkages can represent a source from which to address substantial change in the 'rules' of these political arenas, but only to the extent that local substantive issues of development and human rights can take precedence over sectoral interests.

Lastly, the case suggests that top-down development policies have not been effective at poverty alleviation in 'affected' communities in Magdalena and Cesar. Instead, the collaboration between grassroots movements seems to yield alternative solutions that are in tune with local economic, social, cultural, and environmental communal needs, and are more politically participatory and inclusive, as the CTPM land-use proposal (2011) and the Collective Labor Agreement (2010) indicate. Community leaders and members understand and have ideas about how to solve problems.

## Notes

- 1 The port installations currently in place encompass 4 kilometers of coastal land, with another 2 kilometers to be taken over by the mega-project. In total, the ports will cover half of the coast line of the Magdalena department.
- 2 Brazilian company Vale also currently makes use of the mega-port facilities.
- 3 UFCO had direct control of vast amounts of lands, but also benefited from contracts with local large landowners who supplied their banana productions to the company.
- 4 In 2007, Chiquita Brands admitted in federal court that it paid nearly US\$2 million to paramilitary death squads over a period of seven years.
- 5 In Ciénaga, recent mayors (2000–2006) have had political and personal links to at least two national level politicians who have been forced to resign to their office since the mid-2000s. See Guerrero (2009).
- 6 Interview with Eduardo, 12 August 2010. Ciénaga, Colombia.
- 7 Interview with AUGURA company representative, 10 August 2010. Santa Marta, Colombia.
- 8 Colombia has seen its foreign investment in mining and oil increase fivefold since 2002, and the government wants to double the output of coal over the next nine years (Colombia Reports, 2010). The recent intensification of (US-backed) government efforts to dissipate the FARC in the region and elsewhere is no coincidence.
- 9 Interview with Jose, former SINTRAMINERGETICA worker, 9 August 2010. Ciénaga, Colombia.
- 10 Though membership is more difficult to specify for the first two organizations, the labor union membership is approximately 3,000 workers of Drummond and Glencore.
- 11 Interview with Francisco, 8 August 2010. Ciénaga, Colombia.
- 12 Interview with Pedro, 22 June 2011. Ciénaga, Colombia.
- 13 Interview with Eduardo, 12 August 2010. Ciénaga, Colombia.
- 14 Interview with Alberto, leader of a cooperative in Mechoacan, 14 August 2010. Valledupar, Colombia.

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