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Negotiating collective identities towards inclusive social action and change in Argentina



In this post, Navé Wald presents the model of social development employed by grassroots peasant and indigenous organisations in Argentina. These organisations are working to revalidate peasant/indigenous ways of life and identity by challenging the political, economic and social marginalisation of the communities they work with. In this context, Wald discusses, the negotiation of collective identities within and outside the organisations is of paramount importance to maintain unity amongst their members.

Over the last few decades, indigenous identity has become a pivotal feature in the emergence of numerous social movements across Latin America (CONAIE in Ecuador, EZLN in Mexico and CIDOB in Bolivia to name but a few examples). This phenomenon has been especially notable in rural areas because of the association between smallholder peasant agriculture producers (*minifundistas*; *campesinos*) and indigeneity.

Another important reason has been the association between peasant-indigenous communities and economic and social marginalisation. In this process, the 'peasant' identity, which has historically been linked to a class-based framework, emphasising the producers' social identity, has been de-emphasised in favour of an indigenous identity, which stresses ethno-cultural aspects and a rights-based framework.

Argentina is perhaps not the most obvious Latin American country for examining the relations between peasant and indigenous collective identities within social mobilisation. With only about 2 per cent of its population being indigenous, Argentina is a country often associated with capitalised family farmers and not with peasant producers. What is less known, however, is that there is a peasant sector in Argentina, especially in the north of the country, and that this sector is vibrant and combative.



Jujuy

Interesting examples of such peasant-indigenous organisations in Argentina are the **Peasant Movement of Santiago del Estero – Vía Campesina** (MOCASE-VC) and the **Puna and Quebrada Network** (known as Red Puna). These organisations, from the north-western provinces of Santiago del Estero and Jujuy, respectively, are regional peasant-indigenous organisations in two of Argentina's poorest and least urbanised provinces. Both organisations are members of the **National Peasant Indigenous Movement** (MNCI) and of the **international peasant movement La Vía Campesina**. Formed in 1990 and 1995, these organisations addressed threats on livelihoods and the marginalisation of peasant communities in the midst of the neoliberal restructuring of the Argentinean economy. Both

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organisations are fighting to secure communal land-tenure and improve wellbeing for their member communities, and provide insightful and rich experiences of an integral grassroots model of development.

The starting point of this model is a critical analysis of ‘underdevelopment’ and the political, economic and social marginalisation of individuals and communities. This model then seeks to simultaneously address the multiplicity of challenges individuals and communities face and to improve wellbeing by creating non-capitalist economic spaces and non-hierarchical social spaces. In the former spaces preference is given to agro-ecological production, fair trade, more equal distribution of wealth and autonomy of producers and consumers, and in the latter spaces radical democracy and horizontal organisational structures serve as guiding principles.

Another important aspect of this model is the revalidation of peasant/indigenous ways of life and identities, challenging associated derogative social and economic notions of ‘backwardness’ and ‘inefficiency’. In other words, it is a politicised model of grassroots development that aims to generate an encompassing change by means of direct democracy and more equitable, cooperative and sustainable modes of production. The latter focuses on both individual family production and on collective or communal production and commercialisation. Examples of such collective economic ventures include cheese making, meat processing, artisan weaving and preparing *dulce de leche* (caramelised milk) and other sweets. These operations are democratically managed by those who partake in the production.



“Goat milk dulce de leche: Products for food sovereignty; produced by campesinos Santiagueños”

While working with these two organisations, it became evident that whereas both made reference to socio-cultural identities in framing their demands and objectives, there was a point of difference in the articulation of indigenous vis-à-vis peasant identities. The composition of rural communities in Santiago del Estero is more ethnically diverse than in the highlands of Jujuy. Therefore, while in the former province some peasant communities self-identify as indigenous and some do not, in the latter province virtually all rural communities self-identify as indigenous. The word *campesino* (peasant) was rarely mentioned in Jujuy, unlike in Santiago del Estero where it was frequently used. This is important because it may pose some political and organisational challenges for consolidating and maintaining an effective social movement. Within such movements (for example, MNCI in Argentina and La Vía Campesina globally) identity and class politics need to be negotiated in order to preserve and preferably enhance unity.

The role of collective identity within social organisations and movements is of even greater magnitude for MOCASE-VC and Red Puna since both also have a number of members who are neither peasants nor indigenous. NGOs were involved in the mobilisation and formation of both organisations and in subsequent years had dissolved into the grassroots organisation, with some of their members becoming integral members of MOCASE-VC and Red Puna. This partnership, where predominantly non-indigenous, middle-class, urban and university educated individuals became part of grassroots peasant-indigenous organisations, is a little explored phenomenon within development studies, but one that has bearings for identity politics as an enabling political tool. First, there is a class, or socioeconomic, divide separating the peasants and the predominantly middle-class militant activists. Second, the importance these grassroots organisations give to indigenous identity highlights an ethnic divide in relation to the often non-indigenous activists. To overcome these differences individuals and groups need to bridge both class and ethnic categorisations.

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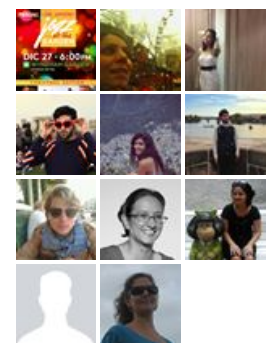
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Artisan weaving, Red Puna

In this partnership, the 'expert' activists bring their diverse personal and professional knowledge and skills that act to increase the autonomy of the organisations and allow them to better direct resources and manage development projects. However, some members of other peasant-indigenous organisations have criticised the involvement of these 'foreign' activists, arguing that they manage MOCASE-VC and Red Puna, a claim that was unanimously rejected by members

of the latter. In Santiago del Estero, the role of these activists also caused some tension when one of the Federal State's development agencies demanded that its experts accompany development projects, whereas MOCASE-VC maintained that it has the required expertise and therefore there is no need for external experts.

Thus, these grassroots rural organisations need to negotiate not only peasant and indigenous collective identities but also, albeit at a different level, the involvement of non-peasant and non-indigenous activists. The main challenge of this ostensible 'problem' is not within these organisations but with external people and institutions, where issues of representation, legitimacy and authenticity are being questioned. MOCASE-VC and Red Puna are aware of these issues, but for them working towards bridging these identity divides and being inclusive in their struggles is valuable as a means and as a goal.

For more on these and other issues see:

Wald, N. (2013). *Politicising development in northwest Argentina: Peasant initiatives for integral change*. Ph.D. dissertation, Department of Geography, University of Otago.
 Wald, N. (2013). *Bridging identity divides in current rural social mobilisation*. *Identities*, 20(5): 598-615.

All photos courtesy of Navé Wald.

Navé Wald has recently completed his PhD at the Department of Geography, University of Otago, New Zealand. His work focuses on issues of rural development and grassroots organisation. His research examines the struggle of marginalised peasant and indigenous organisations in Northwest Argentina for generating a comprehensive social, economic and environmental change.

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