elusive IDENTITY

LESSONS FROM AN NGO ON MEXICO'S NORTHERN BORDER

by

Emily M. Brott and Anne Browning-Aiken

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contents

abstract

Residents of the U.S.-Mexico border region face a plethora of environmental quality and health challenges. The formation of locally based citizens' groups, like the *Asociación Regional Ambiental Sonora-Arizona* (Sonora-Arizona Regional Environmental Association, or ARASA), is one way to collectively address such problems. However, like many grassroots efforts in their early years, ARASA has faced substantial threats to its basic survival and efficacy. The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to investigate potential methods for strengthening ARASA through interviews with participants, and (2) to serve as a case study for organizations that face similar issues. The authors employ qualitative methods and an interpretive paradigm while investigating Mexican civil society literature, social psychology, and group psychology for theoretical insight. ARASA interviewees gave suggestions for strengthening the group that were largely in line with theoretical recommendations for increasing the chances of group survival, adaptation, and effectiveness. Critical reflection on these suggestions and a focused, unified effort to implement them could therefore strengthen the group. Another compelling avenue for group strengthening would be reaching consensus on numerous aspects of group identity that are currently unclear (including most important goals, appropriate goal breadth, vision, appropriate actions, membership rules, and political role).

I. INTRODUCTION

Para mi estar trabajando en el medioambiente es tan importante como estar viendo a una persona con un infarto. Pues para mi es tan urgente...como una persona muriendo. (For me to be working on the environment is as important as seeing to a person with a heart attack. Well, for me it is just as urgent…like a person dying.)

—Interviewee speaking about
volunteering for ARASA

Few would dispute the urgency of the environmental problems that plague the U.S.-Mexico border region. Appropriate sewage and potable water infrastructure, though crucial to public health, are still lacking in many areas. Deteriorating soil, air, and water quality jeopardize the long-term economic and social vitality of communities, while exploding population and sprawling development threaten crucial ecological habitats and open spaces. Efficient mechanisms for confronting these binational problems remain elusive. One response is the formation of locally based citizens' groups that harness the resources

and energy of community members to address regional environmental health.

The *Asociación Regional Ambiental Sonora-Arizona* (Sonora-Arizona Regional Environmental Association, or ARASA) is one such organization. ARASA formed in Cananea, Sonora, Mexico, in 2001, and like many grassroots[1] efforts in their early years, has faced substantial threats to its basic survival and efficacy. The purpose of this research is twofold: (1) to investigate potential methods for strengthening[2] ARASA through interviews with participants, and (2) to serve as a case study for organizations that face similar issues.

This report opens with a brief historical and geographical background of ARASA, including a description of the role played in the group's development by the Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy at the University of Arizona, and information regarding specific local and regional environmental problems (Section II). The theoretical framework and methodology are subsequently discussed (Sections III and IV). Results are divided into three sections:

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[1] The discussion surrounding precise definitions of *grassroots groups/organizations* or *non-governmental organizations* (NGOs) is complex and beyond the scope of this research. For the purpose of the paper, NGOs are understood to be private organizations that "pursue public objectives outside of the formal apparatus of the State and that additionally are voluntary, do not pursue profit and depend on donations for the development of labor" (Méndez, 1998). Grassroots groups will refer to any association that is self-appointed, locally mobilized, accountable only to its members, and convened to realize a collective goal (Wittig, 1996; Tedesco, 1997). This definition does not restrict grassroots groups to being necessarily made up of poor people, as understood by Zabin (1997). Therefore ARASA is both an NGO and a grassroots group.

[2] *Strengthening* ARASA is defined according to interviewee responses to inquiries about strengthening the group. Elements of strengthening include: definition and unification of group understanding of ARASA's vision; consensus on appropriate goal breadth; realization of appropriate actions in the community; and improved organizational efficacy (See "Strategies for Strengthening ARASA," Results section).

interviewee perceptions of ARASA's most important goals, its gravest obstacles, and "strategies for strengthening" the organization (Section V). This portion of the research is intended to serve as a "mirror" of ARASA, providing base data on viewpoints and perspectives that could assist the group in its process of internal dialogue and critique.

The conclusions of the research (Section VI) suggest that a compelling avenue for strengthening ARASA would be the establishment of consensus on numerous aspects of group identity that are currently unclear (including most important goals, appropriate goal breadth, vision, appropriate actions, membership rules, and political role).

II. BACKGROUND

The Udall Center for Studies in Public Policy has been involved for many years in researching and providing policy recommendations for transboundary water management along the U.S.-Mexico border. The Center offered facilitation, coordination, and capacity-building support to a fledgling ARASA upon its inception in the spring of 2001. Today, the Center continues to assist ARASA in efforts to reach its goals, and more specifically, to forge a binational watershed coalition with its U.S. counterpart, the Upper San Pedro Partnership (See Browning-Aiken et al., 2002; Varady and Browning-Aiken, 2001). This research is intended to follow up on ARASA's efforts to establish and strengthen the group, drawing from the perspectives of its participants.

WHAT IS THE ASOCIACIÓN REGIONAL AMBIENTAL SONORA-ARIZONA?

History, Structure, and Funding

Several persons concerned about the effects of mining and industrial operations in the environment around Cananea, Sonora, Mexico, began organizing in the spring of 2001. The organization that resulted, ARASA, gained legal accreditation as a civic association in the state of Sonora, Mexico, in February 2002 (ARASA, 2002). The group describes itself as "a nongovernmental organization convened for the improvement and conservation of the regional ecosystem through education, investment and scientific research" (Varady and Browning-Aiken, 2001: 6).

ARASA has a nine-person steering committee that administers and coordinates the group, with the president, secretary, and treasurer being the positions of highest responsibility. Decision-making is based on a democratic vote of all official members. ARASA has a budget of approximately \$16,500 annually, with funders including Foundation Mascareñas (73%), Mexico Foundation for Conservation (18%), private donations (6%), and contributions from ARASA participants (3%) (Moreno et al., 2002).

ARASA's Geographic Context

Cananea is located in the northeastern part of the state of Sonora and lies approximately 100 km from the U.S.-Mexico border (See Figure 1). Its
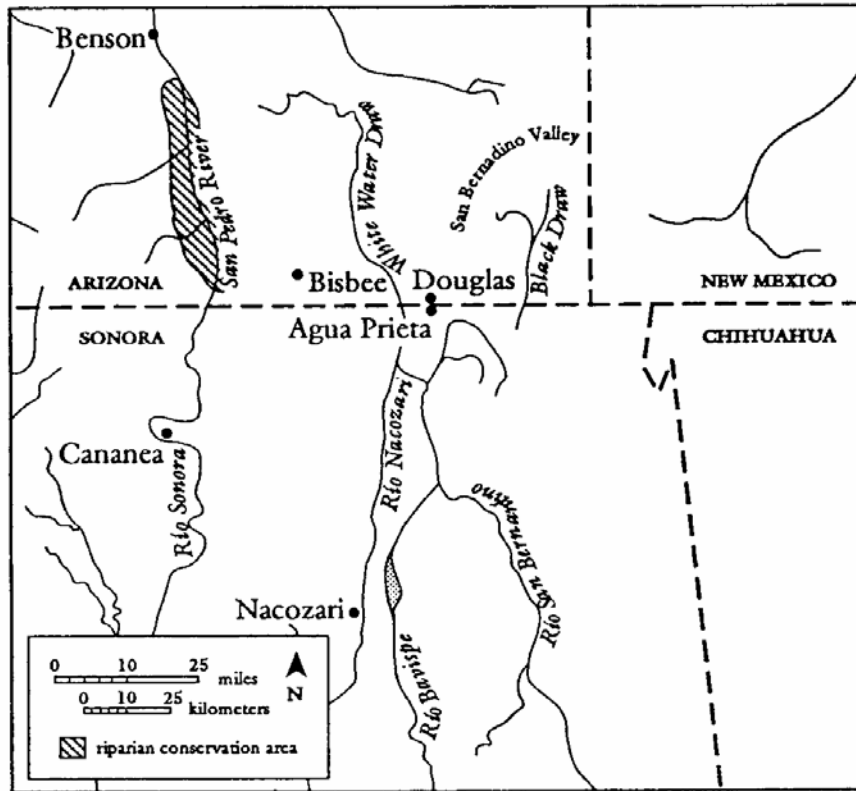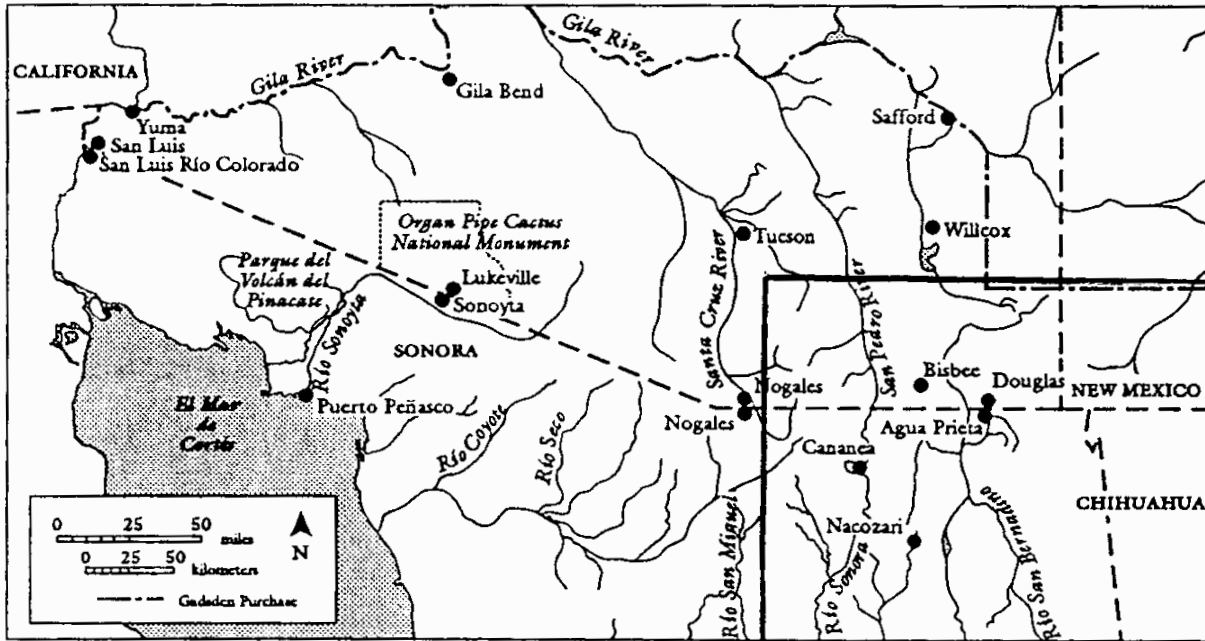
Figure 1. Cananea, Sonora, Mexico and the surrounding area

(Source: Varady et al., 1995)

population is around 35,000, and the level of education is high relative to other areas in Mexico. Copper mines are the primary employers in Cananea, dating back to 1899 when U.S. entrepreneur William Green established the "Cananea Consolidated Copper Company" (Flores Molina, 1998); many claim that the Mexican Revolution began in Cananea with a 1906 strike against Greene's operation. Greene owned a vast area of land in Sonora, and was interested at one time in annexing these properties to the United States (Varady and Browning-Aiken, 2001). His property passed into Mexican hands as late as 1959, when it was divided into seven *ejidos*[3] (Flores Molina, 1998). The memory of U.S. ownership of Mexican land keeps the fear of U.S. colonialism strong in the minds of many community members.

The greater regional interests of ARASA include four watersheds and a "collar" of mountain ranges that surrounds them.[4] The high altitude and temperate climate at the tops of the mountains (approximately 2,500 m) allow for an ecosystem gradation from pine forests above to semi-desert pastures below (SANPES, 1994). Additionally, the San Pedro watershed, which extends north into southern Arizona, is internationally recognized for its importance to transcontinental bird migration and for its exceptional ecological diversity. The San Pedro riparian area provides habitat for over 350 bird species, and 18,200 hectares in the United States are designated as a National Conservation Area (Varady and Browning-Aiken, 2001). Mexican and U.S. environmental groups (including ARASA) have been pushing to establish a similar federally protected nature reserve on Mexico's side of the San Pedro to support a transboundary biological corridor. Resistance by Mexican *ejidatarios*[5] and mining companies, however, has caused the delay and potential cancellation of the project.

LOCAL AND REGIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Environmental issues in Cananea include contamination of surface and groundwater with heavy metals, sulfuric acid, and other reactive chemicals; industrial dust laden with copper, silver, and iron; deforestation; erosion of surface soil; and depletion of groundwater reserves (Flores Molina, 1998; Gómez-Alvarez et al., 2002). Cananea additionally lacks adequate potable water infrastructure, a wastewater treatment plant, and an adequate landfill. Raw municipal sewage and runoff from the copper mine, a neighboring town's turquoise mine, and several nearby *maquiladoras*[6] flow directly into the city's surface and groundwater systems. Garbage is piled into the city's dump, where it is either burned (causing further air pollution) or left accessible to wild and domestic animals. The

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[3] Ranching and agricultural cooperatives.

[4] Including the San Pedro, Sonoran, Cocóspera-Magdalena, and part of the Santa Cruz watersheds, and the Elenita, Mariquita, Huachuca, and San José mountain ranges.

[5] Members of ranching and agricultural cooperatives.

[6] Internationally owned factories set up in U.S.-Mexican border areas.

incidence of cancer and spontaneous abortion in the municipality of Cananea are well above what would be expected based on national rates and comparative studies (Flores Molina, 1998).

Within the greater regional scope of ARASA, including northern Sonora and southern Arizona, environmental problems like overgrazing and erosion, overextraction of groundwater, uncontrolled forest fires, and economic dependence on polluting industries challenge human health, quality of life, and biodiversity. ARASA has identified all of these local and regional environmental problems as areas for potential group work (see Appendix, "ARASA's Documented Work Activities"), and thus the breadth of group goals is expansive.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Understanding and assessing the capacity of citizens' organizations to establish their community identity and tackle complex local and regional issues requires a theoretical framework. The theoretical sources chosen for this research offer insight into how groups can increase their chances of survival, growth, effectiveness, and adaptation. These issues are particularly salient for ARASA because of the historically rapid incidence of profound change, reorganization, rupture, and recovery (or dismantling) of many environmental groups in Mexico (Pírez, 1998).

Although the number of environmental NGOs in Mexico is increasing in an absolute sense (Pírez, 1998), the short life spans of many groups may be partially attributed to the difficult political climate in which they must survive. Prior to 2000, Mexico was governed by an authoritarian regime that concealed its decision-making and functioning, restricted access to information, and had a history of co-opting environmental and social groups and skewing their agendas (Umlas, 1996; Pírez, 1998; Hernandez and Fox, 1995; Pérez-Yarahuán and García-Junco, 1998). In fact, the Mexican government controlled important aspects of most social organizations (e.g., membership, which was often obligatory, leadership, and agendas) until the 1980s (Hernandez and Fox, 1995; Pírez, 1998).

Ramírez Sáiz (2000) claims that the Mexican government is beginning to direct more attention towards maintaining a positive relationship with society by seeking to diminish abuse of power and increase transparency, responsibility, and access to information. Such improvements are often superficial, however, and may not result in true changes in practice (Ramírez Sáiz, 2000). Other sources are also uncertain of the trajectory that Mexican State-society relations will take in the wake of the recent regime change (Olvera, 2001; Valdés Olmedo, 2000).

In addition to the trappings of an authoritarian past, the Mexican government's focus on neoliberal economic policies further marginalizes social and environmental concerns, thus augmenting the need for civil society

responses (Olvera, 1999; Ávila, 1998; Chalmers and Piester, 1996; Price, 1994; Valdés Olmedo, 2000).[7] Indeed, Mexican environmental NGOs are successfully affecting national policy discourse and decision-making in recent years (Umlas, 1996; Price, 1994).[8] Many are also forging strong transnational alliances that shape environmental policy and action along the Mexico-U.S. border (Fox, 2002; Torres, 1997).[9]

Environmental NGOs thus continue their struggle for survival and growth within Mexico's political and economic paradigms. A theoretical framework that concentrates on survival, effectiveness, and adaptation factors for groups is particularly relevant in this context.

Sources for an interpretive paradigm were drawn from Mexican civil society literature, social psychology as it relates to grassroots organizing, and the psychology of small groups. These three disciplines offered recommendations based on studies of Mexican grassroots organizations and NGOs, U.S. grassroots organizations, and small groups (less than 20 members).

Barragán (1999) offers generalizations for the initiation, growth, and long-term survival of Mexican grassroots groups based on the experiences of three "urban popular" civic organizations that have survived for several decades in neighborhoods surrounding Mexico City. Zabin (1997) investigates twelve environmental NGOs along Mexico's northern border, illuminating trends and describing categories of functionality and purpose. Olvera (2001) offers suggestions for improving internal aspects of Mexican NGOs so that they might enhance their role in the "democratization of public life." Olvera's conclusions are based on five case studies that exemplify the complex and heterogeneous nature of Mexican civil society groups. Torres (1998) summarizes themes and categorizations of NGO activity from the developed world, bringing them into a Latin American context.

One of the most useful social psychology sources utilized is Bettencourt (1996), who summarizes recurring themes important to the initiation and maintenance of grassroots efforts. These themes are drawn from ten studies in social psychology, representing basic, applied, and training research,[10]

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[7] Tedesco (1999) cautions, however, that civil society organizations should avoid taking on State responsibilities and instead demand that the State effectively complete its duties. Civic organizations unwittingly legitimize the neoliberal paradigm by allowing the State to focus exclusively on economic liberalization and growth (Tedesco, 1999). A further concern regarding civil society organizations taking on State functions is that NGOs are private organizations not intended to be representative of the population, and unaccountable to anyone outside of their own constituencies (Price, 1994; Schteingart, 1998).
[8] As in 1992, when pressure from environmental groups resulted in suspension of the San Juan dam and repositioning of a proposed highway in the Chimalapas rainforest—See Umlas, 1996.
[9] For example, opening up new citizen participation mechanisms in environmental policy processes and blocking the expansion of an industrial salt works in Baja California—see Fox, 2002.
[10] *Basic research* attempts to advance knowledge regarding fundamental processes related to grassroots organizing. *Applied research* attempts to adapt knowledge developed in the basic research stage to specific problems grassroots groups face. *Training research* seeks to serve as a practical guide for training grassroots organizers (Wittig, 1996).

that cover aspects of social identity and group processes, community empowerment models, and strategies for mobilizing and sustaining participation (Bettencourt, 1996). Another social psychology source, Bettencourt et al. (1996), relates specifically to intragroup dynamics as they pertain to the maintenance and success of grassroots groups. A third source (Kahn, 1982) deals more specifically with training research for grassroots leaders and provides extensive suggestions for group issue (e.g., goal) definition.

Finally, a small group psychology framework gives suggestions for increasing the effectiveness of "problem-solving groups" taken from over fifty studies. Shaw (1981) defines the problem-solving group as one that is formed for the "solution of some difficulty, or a decision about some issue or an appropriate course of action." By this definition, ARASA can be considered a "problem-solving group" because its goals involve taking appropriate action to ameliorate environmental problems.

first author traveled to Cananea, Sonora, approximately every two weeks and conducted three to four interviews per visit. Interviewees were selected either because the authors had met them at ARASA functions or because they were said to be particularly active within the organization.

The sample included five members on the steering committee, five members at large, and three nonmember participants. Two women and eleven men, and two U.S. citizens and eleven Mexican citizens were formally interviewed (most ARASA members are male, although the president is female, and most members are Mexican citizens).

Interviews were structured but were relatively informal. The authors wished to have interviewees give opinions about specific points, as articulated in the seven questions. The loosely structured format allowed interviewees to elaborate freely. Each interview was tape recorded with the respondent's consent.

IV. METHODOLOGY

The methodology of this report is qualitative analysis of interview data and observations from ARASA meetings. Interview questions address issues of goal and obstacle definition, group identity, and strategies for strengthening the organization (see Appendix, "Specific Interview Questions").

Formal interviews were conducted during the span of two months, August and September 2002. The

V. RESULTS

The interviews yielded rich data that reveal much about the nature and problems of the group. Interviewee ideas were gathered into categories that arose from the data, and were refined and adapted during the analysis. The four categories pertaining to the most important group goals are: environmental education, ecological preservation and restoration, group consolidation, and information gathering and dissemination. The three

categories of suggestions regarding the gravest group obstacles are: economic and legal issues, community misconceptions of ARASA, and conflicting interests. Finally, the four categories of interviewee strategies for strengthening ARASA are: vision, goal breadth, appropriate actions, and organizational efficacy.

MOST IMPORTANT GROUP GOALS

Shaw (1981) stresses that group members often have conflicting understandings of principal group goals. Unifying and clarifying group goals is essential for improving effectiveness (Shaw, 1981). To overcome contradictions in goals and direction, Barragán (1999) recommends that recognition and respect be given to the group's basis and origin, particularly regarding the convictions of group founders. At the same time, groups are advised to keep their "nucleus of orientation" (or principal focus) flexible, directing it towards unification of diverse interests (Barragán, 1999). Kahn (1982) argues that it is natural for the central priorities of organizations to change at times. He encourages groups to allow this to happen, provided that both the positive and negative implications of such change are thoroughly considered.

Environmental Education

Six interviewees claimed that environmental education is ARASA's most important goal. Two interviewees spoke of environmental education in the context of attempting to change community culture and increase community ownership for the environment. Five interviewees were concerned about pervasive apathy in the community regarding environmental issues. One interviewee stated that a principal goal of ARASA should be to increase public understanding of the biological and ecological richness of the area. Another suggested that ARASA should offer courses about environmental laws. This interviewee claimed that community ignorance about environmental laws results in the consistent and unconscious violation of them. Five of the interviewees stressed the importance of starting environmental education with children because adults often have well-established habits and prejudices that are difficult to change.

Ecological Preservation and Restoration

Five interviewees believed that preservation of the ecological integrity of the region is a principal goal of ARASA. Specific regional, ecosystem-based goals offered by interviewees included: promotion of holistic, sustainable management and use of natural resources; the halting or slowing of environmental deterioration in general; conservation and restoration of air, water, and land, including reforestation; channeling resources to environmental problem areas; and increasing the amount of Mexican land in federally designated protected areas (i.e., nature reserves). Several in the group hotly dispute this final point (see "Gravest Group Obstacles").

Group Consolidation

Two interviewees thought that group consolidation is a major goal for ARASA. One of these individuals claimed that the extremely varied passions and interests of ARASA members serve as both a rich resource and an obstacle. The other envisioned consolidation of a central group of "hard core" members as a principal goal. The concept of a "hard core" implies that membership should be kept small at first, emphasizing member capacity and professional development.

Information Gathering and Dissemination

Finally, two interviewees said that ARASA should concentrate on its role as an information gatherer and disseminator. One interviewee posited that some groups have enough money and resources to produce environmental data that validate their own interests. In this person's view, ARASA should monitor and research soil, air, and water contamination to be able to counter the false claims of powerful groups. Interviewees suggested many ways in which such information could be utilized: to pressure government and industry to address environmental problems; to educate community members and thus empower them to pressure government and industry; and to educate ARASA members and increase their professional capacity. ARASA could further augment member

capacity by encouraging members to keep up-to-date on environmentally relevant news, attend educational workshops and other ARASA events, and by promoting connections with academic and research institutions.

ARASA's "most important goals," as described by interviewees, cover five of Zabin's (1997) six principal activities of northern border environmental NGOs. These five activities are: (1) environmental education and training, (2) small-scale environmental enhancement and conservation projects, (3) binational and regional planning efforts, (4) binational monitoring of air, soil, and water quality, and (5) public information campaigns.[11] Although the spread of activity thus described is dauntingly expansive, it represents a substantial reduction from the twenty-two "work activities" listed in the group's official charter (see Appendix, "ARASA's Documented Work Activities").

GRAVEST GROUP OBSTACLES

Economic and Legal Issues

Two interviewees cited economic and legal issues as being major obstacles to group success. One person said that economic crises in northern Sonora, and in Cananea specifically (because of the low international price of copper), make people mistrustful of environmental groups that would restrict economic options for their lands.

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[11] Zabin's (1997) sixth activity, not relevant to ARASA, relates to promotion of participation and accountability in post-North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) institutions.

Additionally, recent changes to the legal owner-ship and management of *ejidos* in Mexico (Revision of Article 27 to the Mexican Constitu-tion) affect the way that people can own land in *ejidos*, and alters the rules for who can own the land. One interviewee stated that the legal and economic changes encourage illegal use of *ejido* land (i.e., narcotics production or trafficking). This person said that people using land illegally are not interested in either sustainable manage-ment of resources or outside influence in such management (as in the establishment of nature reserves). According to this interviewee, the legal and economic changes further discourage *ejidatarios* from allowing environmental projects on their property because they fear that such projects might diminish profits.

Community Misconceptions of ARASA

Five interviewees thought that a grave obstacle for the group was community misconception of ARASA's intent. The controversy that ARASA interviewees were most concerned about related to the expansion of federally protected nature reserves in northern Sonora. The expansion of the reserves was envisioned to join and create a biological corridor with similarly protected lands on the U.S. side of the border. However, many community members are strongly against the expansion of the reserves because they result in restricted use of the land and greater govern-ment control. Others are concerned about potential U.S. neocolonial interest in the creation of the biological corridor.

In spite of the controversy, ARASA took a strong position early on in favor of reserve expansion. In addition, ARASA strongly promotes binational cooperation for ameliorating transboundary environmental problems, and has alliances with U.S.-based groups and government agencies. Therefore, two interviewees thought community members see ARASA either as a front for the Mexican government, or as a front for U.S. interests exerting control over Mexican lands. Two interviewees said that community trust is particularly important to organizations in a small town like Cananea, where rumors spread rapidly. One interviewee cautioned, "*Pueblo chico, mitote grande*" ("Small town, big gossip"). Several interviewees were concerned that if ARASA became active in promoting nature reserves again, they would alienate many people in the community and perpetuate mistrust in the group's intentions. Two people thought that expansion of the reserves would significantly impact *ejidatarios*, and therefore ARASA should make a greater effort to include them in group projects.

Conflicting Interests

At the same time that interviewees thought community trust was crucial to strengthening the organization, many expressed a deep mis-trust towards groups with conflicting interests. Groups with "conflicting interests" include: industrial groups not committed to reduction of resource use and contamination, political candidates interested in manipulation of ARASA to meet their own needs, and *ejidatarios* who

have formed alliances to fight expansion of federally designated nature reserves. Seven interviewees claimed that such groups represented the gravest obstacle to ARASA function and success.

Four interviewees thought, for example, that ARASA should be cautious in allowing membership to those potentially interested in sabotaging the group's goals. Metaphors used to describe this situation included instances where people would enter ARASA as "Trojan horses" or to "lay traps," causing the group to falter and fall apart. One of these interviewees thought that ARASA is still highly susceptible to such influences, and should be kept relatively small and closed until it has consolidated and gained enough strength to allow potentially dissenting voices to join.

Several people recognized, however, that if ARASA's fear of sabotage results in exclusivity in membership, community misconceptions of ARASA could intensify. Two interviewees said that exclusivity in organization and management is often associated with authoritarianism in Mexican culture. Five interviewees thought that ARASA needed more members in general, and should encourage all interested parties to join.

Two theoretical sources encourage socially-oriented NGOs to include diverse actors in their membership (Barragán, 1999; Olvera, 2001). Such inclusion can build organizations through the rich and complex associations thus formed, challenging socially constructed separations (i.e., between rural and urban people, intellectual and

manual workers, men and women, etc.; Barragán, 1999). Olvera (2001) claims that Mexican civic associations are most often models of incivility in that they are overwhelmingly non-transparent, non-democratic, and intolerant to diversity in their interior functioning. Such organizations fail to express the very qualities they demand of powerful groups or the government, thereby weakening their own cause (Olvera, 2001).
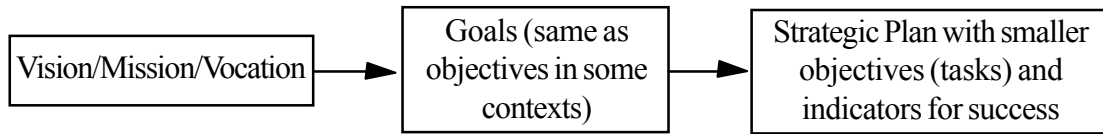
Strategies for Strengthening ARASA

Vision

A recurring theme offered by interviewees as crucial to ARASA's success was clarification of the group's vision. Interviewees couched the concept of a vision in several similar but subtly different terms. These included: *misión* (mission), *visión* (vision), *vocación* (vocation), *metas* (goals), *objetivos* (objectives), and *plan estratégico* (strategic plan).

The authors understand that when speaking of a *misión*, *visión*, or *vocación*, the interviewee is speaking of a relatively abstract conception of what ARASA means to the community of Cananea, the wider ecosystem, and the world as a whole. It is within this greater mission, vision, or vocation that *metas* (goals) are defined. Depending on the interviewee, *metas* were identified as being very broad or very narrow, concrete or abstract, and some interviewees responded that they were not sure what the group's goals were at all. Two interviewees used the terms *metas* and *objetivos* interchangeably. Other interviewees

| Vision/Mission/Vocation | → | Goals (same as objectives in some contexts) | → | Strategic Plan with smaller objectives (tasks) and indicators for success |

Figure 2. Inferred relationship between vision, goals, and strategic plan

used the term *objetivos* to imply small and specific actions taken within a *plan estratégico* (strategic plan) for reaching greater goals. Strategic plans were envisioned as being very ordered and specific, with indicators for success and clear points of arrival. One interviewee claimed that without indicators in place, "*nunca sabes cuando ganaste*" (you never know when you've won). Two interviewees stressed the need for both long-term and short-term strategic plans of action (see Figure 2: Arrows indicate that the vision/mission/ vocation should inform the group's principal goals, and that the goals of the group dictate how the strategic plan of action should be delineated).

One of the interviewees recognized the need for a strategic plan of action and a long-term vision, but did not seem concerned that ARASA's goals and vision were general. This person described ARASA as a group of citizens that had organized *por inquietudes* (because of worries or anxieties), as opposed to an organization unified around a specific academic topic or complaint. The interviewee claimed that groups that come together in this way often begin with goals that are quite general and vague, and that seem to be more of a declaration than a set of specific tasks.

In this person's view, ARASA just needs a bit more time to find its own *vocación,* and this will come on its own.

The theory investigated supports interviewee suggestions for strengthening the group through the definition of a clear, long-term vision or mission that conveys what the organization stands for, and what they would like to see changed in the future. Short-term tasks can be defined and addressed under this vision or mission (Kahn, 1982). Grassroots organizations are also encouraged to define early on what "victory" means to them. Groups should delineate a strategy with specific, short-term tasks that can be pursued and viewed as smaller "victories," or steps, in the group's progression (Kahn, 1982; Bettencourt et al., 1996). Such a process should ensure that motivation remains high throughout the endeavor, as group members get positive feedback from accomplishing the smaller tasks (Kahn, 1982).

Goal Breadth

Several interviewees commented on the current breadth of ARASA's goals. Those critical of ARASA's expansive goal breadth voiced uncer-
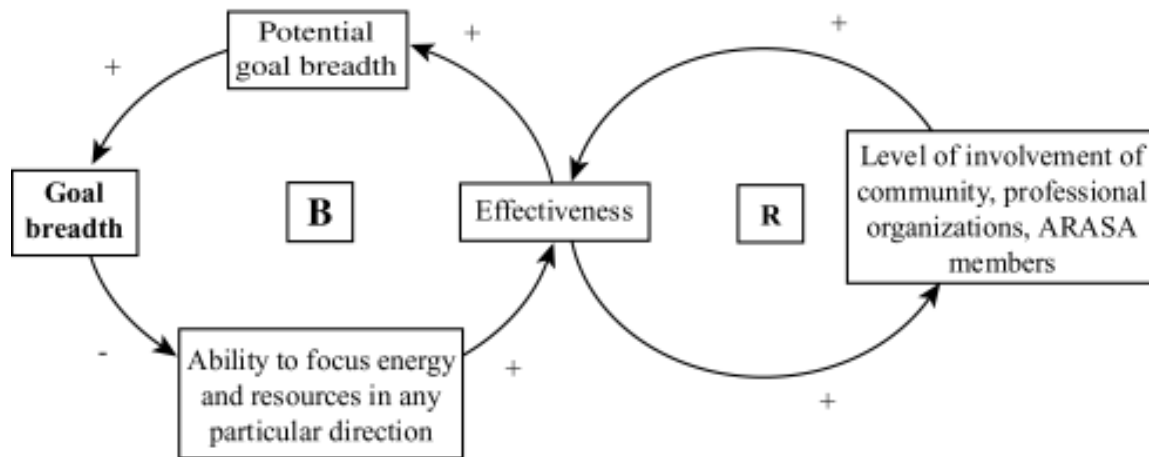
Figure 3. Inferred relationship between goal breadth and effectiveness

tainty regarding the group's direction and purpose. Two interviewees expressed concern that a broad goal base decreased ARASA's ability to address its stated goals (in other words, its effectiveness) because resources and energy were too widely dispersed. Two interviewees, however, commented on benefits enjoyed precisely due to ARASA's goal breadth. The first said that if the goals are quite broad, ARASA will enjoy a larger support base within the community because more members of the community will identify with the cause. This increased interest and potential involvement of community members in ARASA's work should benefit the group. Another interviewee claimed that a broad set of goals allows members to become active in their personal areas of expertise, and diversifies professional connections. Both of these aspects should help ARASA's ability to achieve its goals (e.g., its effectiveness) (see Figure 3).

Figure 3 shows that an expansive goal breadth may decrease group effectiveness because energy and resources are diffused. However, if low effectiveness causes the group to rethink potential goal breadth, and thus reduce the number of goals pursued, effectiveness should increase, creating a balancing force (loop "B"). The second loop works in a reinforcing fashion (loop "R") and attempts to include interviewee suggestions that increased involvement by the community, professional organizations, and ARASA members should enhance effectiveness. The authors hypothesize in this case that these people will not want to become involved in the first place if the group is not effective, and that effectiveness is more directly tied to appropriate goal breadth than it is to such involvement (emphasis on the balancing loop is demonstrated by placing "B" in bold).

Kahn (1982) offers insight consistent with interviewee concerns that a broad goal base can be detrimental, even destructive, to groups that

lack the resources to address their goals. At the same time, it is important for organizations to address the specific needs of their members. Kahn (1982) also supports interviewee claims that a wider goal base can increase community interest and membership in the organization. To optimize the chances of having the appropriate goal breadth, organizations are advised to compare the resources available to the resources that each separate goal requires (ibid).

Appropriate Actions

The appropriate actions category specifies the kind of actions most suitable for achieving ARASA's goals. One interviewee stressed the importance of pursuing actions relevant to community needs. This person claimed that ARASA must understand the region's problems as well as possible to enable it to cultivate effective working relationships with community members. By developing close personal ties with people in the community, ARASA members would also better understand which environmental issues were most controversial. This interviewee and three others expressed extreme caution towards and even disapproval of ARASA's concentration on sensitive or controversial topics early in its existence.

Another qualification for ARASA's actions is that they be achievable. Five interviewees expressed concern that ARASA places undue emphasis on large and unwieldy tasks not matched to its current capacity, or on tasks that cannot be solved in the short term. Several thought that short-term

accomplishments serve as active propaganda promoting ARASA's visibility and the community's subsequent knowledge of and trust in the group. Five interviewees suggested that ARASA should proactively reach out to community members and encourage them to participate in all kinds of ARASA-sponsored projects and campaigns. Two expressed the view that such involvement could serve to solidify bonds and reinforce feelings of trust. One interviewee argued that a commitment to transparency in action is the most vital factor for building community trust and confidence.

Theory supports these suggestions in every major aspect. Kahn (1982) claims that grassroots groups should concentrate their energies on issues that are strongly felt and that affect a lot of people (i.e., that are relevant to people). Groups are encouraged to spend time listening to community members to find out which issues they care most about, and then to involve community members in finding solutions to those issues (ibid). Alternatively, groups can work to convince people of the relevance of goals already established, promoting a critical awareness about issues (Bettencourt, 1996).

Another of Kahn's (1982) recommendations is for grassroots groups to focus on issues that unify members and the community. Kahn argues that grassroots groups should avoid divisive issues because they can destroy the organization. This recommendation is in keeping with interviewee suggestions regarding pursuit of non-controversial actions. Kahn also argues that good issues are

"winnable" (compare to achievable) for the organization. Newer groups are encouraged to address easier issues first because early successful efforts build skills and self-confidence, increasing the capacity of the organization and therefore its ability to tackle larger problems later (ibid). Finally, Barragán (1999) advocates transparency both internally and in community relations, particularly in Mexico with its history of authoritarianism and corruption.[12]

Organizational Efficacy

Four interviewees felt that ARASA's organizational efficacy is not currently being optimized because responsibility is not adequately distributed among its members. There was a widespread feeling that people who over-committed would eventually burn out. Three interviewees offered the suggestion that instead of working to address problems as a large unit, ARASA could break into smaller working groups that address tasks within their particular area of expertise. Two interviewees believed that making meetings and projects fun and valuable to members should increase their personal sense of satisfaction and strengthen social ties, thereby increasing member dedication to the group. One interviewee claimed that maintaining a strong and dedicated work ethic in its members was the most important factor for increasing ARASA's ability to effectively carry out actions.

Once again, interviewee suggestions strongly match theoretical recommendations. Delegation of responsibility, the formation of smaller working groups, and the use of member skills are aspects related to group coordination (Bettencourt et al., 1996). Shared leadership, decision-making, and planning enhance members' sense of ownership regarding group decisions and plans, increasing their dedication to implementation of measures and therefore to group effectiveness (Shaw, 1981; Kahn, 1982). Individual skills and capacities are also developed in this fashion, further building the organization (Kahn, 1982; Barragán, 1999). Actively encouraging participation in decision-making and group function also allows for the voicing of minority opinions, which may otherwise not be heard (Shaw, 1981; Bettencourt, 1996; Barragán, 1999). Such diversity in perspectives should enhance group effectiveness because it promotes adequate consideration of all relevant aspects of a problem (Shaw, 1981; Bettencourt et al., 1996).

Motivation is a second aspect essential to group effectiveness. Bettencourt (1996) supports interviewee perceptions that developing and utilizing the skills of members should increase group effectiveness, the sense of efficacy in individuals, and finally, the motivation to stay involved. Members should be encouraged to consider their own time and energy limitations and not to overcommit, so as to avoid burnout.

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[12] In a national survey undertaken by independent Mexican media, one in three respondents thought the Mexican government was "very corrupt." Only three percent responded that the government was "not corrupt" (Giugale et al., 2001).

Other aspects identified by Bettencourt as being important to motivation in grassroots groups include: placing emphasis on the successes of the group and on the successes of similar groups, planning certain strategies with the purpose of strengthening morale (especially during times of limited success), reiterating the overarching mission of the group, and focusing on the fact that group members will surely differ in what motivates them (and that this can change). Effective groups try to ensure that individual members' needs are met (Bettencourt, 1996; Bettencourt et al., 1996).

The final category that relates to group effectiveness is group identity. Bettencourt et al. (1996) describe group identity as the condition in which members associate themselves with the group to the extent that they consider their membership to form part of their individual identity. This source postulates that strong group identity among members should enhance motivation and coordination elements in group function, and thus, effectiveness. One recommendation for increasing group identity is to plan some projects that have as their principal objective the building of social ties and social support (Bettencourt et al., 1996).

ARASA interviewee ideas regarding organizational efficacy are supported by theory in many different ways, but one essential area that the group might try to concentrate on is clarification of its identity. Although the theoretical sources characterize group identity as being largely dependent on and defined by the forces of social and personal relations between members,

Barragán (1999) indicates that the formation of cultural identity is also a significant factor in maintaining organizations. The cultural identity of the group is established through "the unity of the group, its successes, new customs and aspirations" (Barragán, 1999). Perhaps the "unity of the group" and thus its cultural identity could be enhanced through deeper reflection and consensus on the many "identity" aspects already mentioned (e.g., membership, vision, goal breadth, principal goals, and appropriate actions). Another identity aspect that has not yet been touched upon relates to ARASA's political role.

ARASA interviewees expressed mixed feelings about the potential for group activity in the political arena. Three interviewees thought that ARASA should not get involved with political candidates, while one person thought that ARASA should support good candidates but not become too politicized. Two interviewees thought that ARASA should encourage governmental officials to attend meetings, while one person stated the opposite. Three people said ARASA should offer positive, proactive environmental proposals to the Sonoran Congress, while another said that such proposals were a waste of time.

Olvera (2001) claims that the political involvement of civic associations is vital for strengthening civil society because it provides a vehicle for citizens to participate in a more democratic form of governance than that which is currently offered by the State. Much of the literature devoted to Mexican NGOs focuses on such a role in "strengthening civil society" (Zabin, 1997).

Torres (1998) identifies a continuum of four "generations" of NGOs, distinguished according to their level of community and political engagement. The first generation comprises groups that concentrate on the provision of basic services to families and others dependent on the NGO for resources. Second-generation NGOs seek to empower communities and augment community capacity to solve problems, while third-generation NGOs seek to interact with political and private institutions to increase sustainability in the locality or the region. Fourth-generation NGOs have an even wider scope, challenging the very system of environmental laws and questioning dominant development paradigms. The evolution of NGO focus from the first to the fourth generation is labeled a "scaling up" in terms of political involvement and activity (Torres, 1998).

Zabin (1997) similarly characterizes the political activities of environmental NGOs according to the purpose and strategy of the groups, but does not imply that a given level of political engagement might necessarily "scale up" as the NGO evolves and develops. In the case of ARASA, an appropriate level of political engagement might become clear as the group solidifies its central purpose and strategy.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

A MIRROR FOR POTENTIAL SELF-CRITIQUE AND EVALUATION

The ARASA participants interviewed gave suggestions for "strengthening" the group that were largely in line with theoretical recommendations for increasing the chances of group survival, adaptation, and effectiveness. Therefore, perhaps the most important way that ARASA can begin to strengthen itself is to look to the suggestions of participants as presented in this report under the categories *Vision, Goal Breadth, Appropriate Actions,* and *Organizational Efficacy.* These suggestions have value distinct from purely theoretical recommendations or the authors' critique because they reflect viewpoints steeped in local, contextual knowledge about group challenges.

FOUR RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON THE AUTHORS' ANALYSIS

In addition to the research effort's potential value as a mirror, four conclusions that build on interviewee suggestions are presented below:

1. ARASA should clarify the definitions of and relationships between subtle words like "vision," "mission," "vocation," "goals," "objectives," and "strategic plan." Some terms were used interchangeably or in different ways by the various interviewees. The group would probably have an easier time defining what its vision, goals, and strategic plan are if it first reached consensus on what those terms mean.

2. As interviewee suggestions were contradictory regarding appropriate goal breadth, and as not everyone agreed on ARASA's most important goals, clarification of these aspects could be vital for group strengthening. One way that ARASA could achieve suitable goal

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breadth would be to analyze effectiveness in advancing towards stated goals: if effectiveness is high, then goal breadth can expand or at least be maintained, but if the reverse is true, reduction is warranted.

3. ARASA should work towards reaching a consensus on membership rules. Reflection and dialogue on this issue could help ARASA develop a level of inclusivity appropriate to its context and purpose.

4. ARASA needs a more specific, unified identity (i.e., consensus on vision, goal breadth, goals, appropriate actions, membership rules, political role). Establishing consensus on all these aspects should promote individuals' sense of place and belonging, and therefore their motivation and ARASA's subsequent effectiveness.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The most helpful studies for the research question presented in this report would have been comparative investigations of survival, adaptation, and effectiveness issues for Mexican environmental grassroots groups, or individual case studies of groups similar to ARASA. No such sources were located. Torres (1998) claims that comparative studies of the experiences of Mexican and Central American civil society organizations are practically nonexistent. Zabin (1997) asserts that case studies of Mexican NGOs are rare, and that northern border NGOs have been particularly neglected when compared to their central and southern counterparts. These, then, would be fruitful areas for further research.

FUTURE OF ARASA

The results of this study were presented to ARASA in January 2003. During the summer of 2003, ARASA procured partial funding from the *Fondo Mexicano para la Conservación de la Naturaleza* and the Sierra Club for environmental education and information gathering projects. The group also received a grant from the *Fondo Mexicano* to support a formal auto-evaluation process undertaken by the Mexican Apprenticeship Initiative for Conservation (*Iniciativa Mexicana de Aprendizaje para la Conservación,* or IMAC). The evaluation found that ARASA's major problems include: (i) a lack of clarity and consensus regarding priorities, strategies, and long-term mission, (ii) a scarcity of financial resources, and (iii) limited participation potentially due to busy schedules, a paucity of paid members, and the lack of well-defined activities for members.

The evaluation recommended that ARASA increase active outreach for upcoming meetings, with a focus on:

- re-establishing the overarching mission of the organization,
- reaffirming the level of member commitment,
- restructuring the steering committee to reflect changing commitments, and
- developing a strategic plan of action.

Concurrently, ARASA should work to increase its financial capacity, for example via participation in regional fiscal sustainability and procurement workshops.

A recent survey conducted at the 2003 Meeting on the Border Environment in Tijuana, Mexico, examined organizational strategies and practices that contribute to the success of Mexican and U.S. environmental NGOs active in the border region (Browning-Aiken et al., 2003). Mexican groups surveyed attributed equal importance to "establishing a clear understanding of mission" and "finishing projects" as mechanisms for maintaining member cohesion. The most common response from Mexican groups to a question about advice for new border NGOs was to "seek funding as soon as the mission is established." These responses support recommendations from this research as well as the more recent evaluation conducted by IMAC.

November 6, 2003, marked the first assembly of a potential binational task force to address regional water quality and quantity concerns in the Upper San Pedro watershed. The mayor of Cananea also proposed establishing a municipal water council (*consejo*) at this meeting. Those attending included: ARASA, the Upper San Pedro Partnership (a U.S.-based NGO devoted to water quality and quantity issues), local *ejidatarios,* the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, the *Comisión Nacional del Agua* (CNA), the *Comisión de Agua Potable y Alcantarillado del Estado de Sonora* (COAPAES), the University of Arizona, and the municipalities of Naco and Cananea, Sonora, and Bisbee and Sierra Vista, Arizona. Discussion on future steps for both the binational task force and municipal water *consejo* will continue in subsequent meetings. Though it is currently unclear what the future holds for ARASA, members of the group are developing the capacity to fill a critical role in addressing

concerns specific to Cananea and collaborating in cross-border action, dialogue, and information exchange.

VII. BIBLIOGRAPHY

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VIII. APPENDIX

ARASA's Documented Work Activities (from the group's official charter)

1. Study of water recharge and depletion in watersheds of Sonora, San Pedro, Magdalena, and Santa Cruz Rivers

2. Contamination of the San Pedro, Sonoran, and Magdalena Rivers

3. Contamination of watersheds

4. Permanent monitoring of drinking water and its sources

5. Monitoring of industrial dust

6. Contamination by carbon monoxide

7. Detection of eroded areas

8. Detection of overgrazing

9. Natural protected areas (Ajos-Bavispe; Project La Mariquita; La Elenita; San José and San Pedro Rivers)

10. Hunting ranches

11. Ecotourism

12. Recreational hunting

13. Forest fires

14. Temporary regional hunting seasons

15. Environmental education: (a) in schools, (b) for citizen awareness

16. Reforestation

17. Policy (federal, state, and municipal)

18. Landfill for Cananea

19. Sewage treatment for Cananea

20. Mining effects on the environment (industrial runoff, deforestation, and industrial dust)

21. Industrial diversification

Source: ARASA, 2002

SPECIFIC INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. What are ARASA's most important goals, in your opinion?

2. What are the greatest obstacles that ARASA faces or has already faced?

3. What are the most important successes of ARASA?

4. Do you have any concrete suggestions for how ARASA can strengthen itself and increase its impact in the community?

5. What should the members of ARASA be like? Should ARASA be representative of all the interests in the community?

6. What should the relationship between ARASA and the community be like?

Midway through the interview process, the authors realized from an investigation of civil society literature that the political identity of grassroots groups is extremely important for their overall identity, power, and impact within communities (Olvera, 2001; Méndez, 1998; Canto, 1998). Therefore, an additional question was solicited from the last seven people interviewed:

7. What should its political role be?