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Autonomy and Development Projects: Why do we care?

(Alternative title: Towards an autonomy-focused assessment of development projects)

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Abstract

If human development is about the expansion of human capabilities and about leading fulfilled and worthy lives, then individuals must have certain capacity to choose these lives according to their own values and goals. Moreover, this capacity must be *effective*. Options from which to choose have to be achievable: structural contexts must be taken into account. This capacity, instrumental to enhance human development and well-being, is defined as autonomy.

This paper presents a conceptual framework of autonomy that emphasises effective over internal capacities by giving relevance to the inter-relations of individuals and groups in specific contexts that define entitlements. Then, it assesses autonomy in a specific micro-level context: *a development project*. Individuals' experiences of autonomy evolve in their *interaction* with project staff, non-government organisations, donors, etc. and *how the project* came into being and was implemented.

The study draws on four development projects financed by Luxembourg in Nicaragua and El Salvador, related to infrastructure building. Data include project documents, public national reports, external statistics, key stakeholder interviews, focus group discussions and a questionnaire survey. The analysis is primarily qualitative.

The analysis suggests that studying multi-level contexts is necessary to understand experiences of autonomy, and that individuals value to be able to help themselves. *Assumptions* about what is best for people (top-down project design), which channels work best (formal vs. informal counterpart), what is participation (working hard or sharing in decision-making) or what is community (whether there is *one* community) can affect individual autonomy and the capacity of groups to pursue common goals.

Projects can provide people the opportunities to *exercise* autonomy so that they are better prepared to make initiatives and face challenges (in light of power imbalances). Identifying autonomy as an explicit development objective can help people to be able to *promote significant change and defend and increase well-being in their lives*.

Key words: Autonomy, projects, structural contexts, empowerment

1. Introduction

Human development has been related to the expansion of human capabilities (Sen, 1999) and to lead fulfilled and worthy lives. If individuals are to choose their lives, to promote their wellbeing – what they are, what they do, what they can become, what they feel, in which relationships they engage and so on – or to pursue their goals, according to their own values, there is a basic requirement. Alternative lives or options have to be achievable and agents must have certain capacity to choose. If there were not options, this (hypothesised) capacity would be useless and vice versa: without capacity there would not be options because people would be and do whoever and whatever they managed to, considering the structural contexts in which they live.

Development projects usually focus on expanding access to basic services and productive assets or on promoting market-related activities. Some fail to take into account what people truly value. This could happen because the project design was designed externally; power imbalances limited participation of some groups; or among others, because participants had a limited (assumed or real) 'capacity to make reasoned choices'.

This paper states that in order to fuel a truly human development an effective capacity to choose, defined here as autonomy, has to be explicitly promoted. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to present findings on *how* development projects targeting poor villages do and can influence individual autonomy. In this manner, this paper aims to contribute to the design of development projects that promote human autonomy and respectfully help people to be able to *promote significant change and defend and increase well-being in their lives*.

The study draws on four development projects financed by Luxembourg in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in the sectors of reconstruction (after disasters) and water and sanitation. The modality is *bilateral grant aid* that formally works with two parties: the ministries of foreign affairs of the donor (Luxembourg) and of the recipient country. In the case of water projects, the formal counterpart is the public water company (in both countries the main water provider is public) while in the case of reconstruction projects, the counterparts are municipal governments. Since 1993, Luxembourg's cooperation has focused on water projects in Latin America. In contrast, the two reconstruction projects studied are the only ones in which Luxembourg has participated.

The aid chain works with an executing agency (Lux-Development S.A.) that sets up a project implementation unit (PIU) in the field, which coordinates actions of local private constructors, supervisors, and NGOs subcontracted to execute different components of the projects. In water projects, the public water companies are supervising and executing entities at the same time.

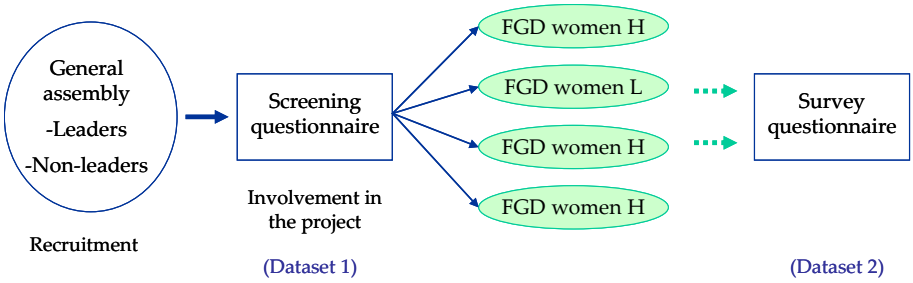
This study is framed in the *interpretative* tradition. The objective is to understand changes in the lives of project participants, based on their understandings of the facts and practices. The research is designed as a *collective case study*, where communities[1] are the cases of study with an embedded unit of analysis: individuals that took part in the project.

Data used in this study included project documents, public national reports, external statistics, stakeholders' interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs) and a questionnaire survey. The fieldwork study was carried out in 2005. Non-leaders and leaders (those with representation in the community either

[1] The term 'community' in this paper refers to *individuals* that live in the same territory and that 'at least form part of a network of interaction' (Gasper, 2004, p. 206). Hence, 'community' is regarded as an *organisation* in which membership is defined by residence status or by former residency with strong family ties (in the case of migrants). Members of a community may share some values and have others that are conflicting (Johnston et al. (Eds.), 1988); they may belong to several groups in determined situations and for different reasons (direct or extended family, school group, development committee, church committee, gangs, landowners, etc.). In the case of small villages, it is possible to identify a social structure that evolves over time. In fact, perceptions about what a community is (in a broader sense) were expressed by participants in focus group discussions, but are not discussed in this paper.

as member of the communal organisation, school teacher, priest, etc.) were contacted separately. With *non-leader participants*, the recruiting strategy was sequential, as depicted in Figure 1.

Figure 1 – Data collection strategy with non-leader participants



L refers to 'low' and H to 'high' involvement.

There are two quantitative datasets: Dataset 1 for a pre-FGD survey and dataset 2 for a post-FGD survey. Dataset (n=231) gathers socio-demographic information and self-reported scores to five elements of project implementation related to the level of involvement of respondents in the project. These elements are available information, giving opinions, awareness of own skills, opportunities for decision-making, and exercised decision-making. These elements aggregated into an 'involvement index' were used to divide participants in groups of high and low-involvement by sex. Box 1 provides details.

Box 1 – Index of individual involvement in the project

This index was a simple average of ratings assigned to five questions related to the project and the individual. The intensity scale for each question ranged from zero to three, where zero was equivalent to "no", one to "rarely", two to "sometimes", and three to "usually". The questions were:

1. Did you use your abilities or practical knowledge during the project? (*Awareness*)
2. Did you give your opinions about the project to your community? (i.e., in meetings or workshops) (*Opinions*)
3. Did you receive the relevant information (the one you needed) about the project? (formally or informally) (*Information*)
4. Did you have the opportunity to share in decisions related to the project? (*Opportunities*)
5. How frequently did you share in decisions regarding the project? (individually or as member of a group) (*Decisions*)

Dataset 2 (n=172) has more information about respondents and their households, about project activities during its life cycle and about community (social capital, organisation, and decision making).

In focus group discussions, four topics were discussed: (i) individual participation and learning during the project, (ii) changes in wellbeing, (iii) changes in four elements related to autonomy (information about community, self-confidence, life opportunities, and relevant decision-making) that were assessed via an individual scoring exercise, and (iv) community effects and lessons. FGDs were analysed from both an inductive and deductive perspective. The first perspective was used to identify values and power structures, project and social practices; while the second one to test theoretical hypotheses.

Some descriptive and associational quantitative methods were used in order to identify possible relationships and generate alternative explanations. But overall, this is a qualitative comparative analysis. Hence, causality was assessed qualitatively.

The paper is divided into five parts. Section 2 summarises the conceptual model. Section 3 presents the four cases in Nicaragua and El Salvador with a focus on characteristics of geographical communities. Section 4 identifies the project factors (their main features and practices) and investigates their impacts on individual autonomy. Section 5 explores possible effects on communities and their roles to promote or restrict individual autonomy. Finally, section 6 presents some reflections and comments on needs for further research.

2. *Conceptual model*

The study of autonomy has been pursued in different fields such as political philosophy, education, health, psychology and development studies. In some cases, the individual character of autonomy has been emphasised which has led to some confusion among practitioners that have understood autonomy as independence, attached to specific personality traits. Nevertheless, autonomy is related to connectedness (Deci & Ryan, 2000), and both aspects are related to psychological wellbeing; this implies that individuals care about others and that their commitments with others are evidence of autonomy, not of dependence (cf. Christman, 1998).

In development studies, autonomy is a human basic need that requires the fulfilment of intermediate needs (Doyal & Gough, 1991) or minimum living conditions so that people can make their own decisions (Ellerman, 2001). These needs are universal and constant although their satisfaction requires local, time- and cultural-specific satisfiers. Then, it is possible to enhance autonomy by expanding the access to satisfiers: making resources accessible. In this sense, development projects providing social infrastructure are contributing towards human autonomy. On the other hand, needs are considered not only lacks but also potentials for further development (Max-Neef, 1991). In this sense, autonomy can be exerted to develop these potentials or increase wellbeing.

A way forward is to combine these conceptions and then to study autonomy as a combined capability focusing on individuals, their contexts, and their interrelations in defining entitlements and options. This challenge is taken up in this paper and furthermore, individual autonomy is assessed in a specific micro-level context: *a development project*.

2.1 A proposed conception of autonomy

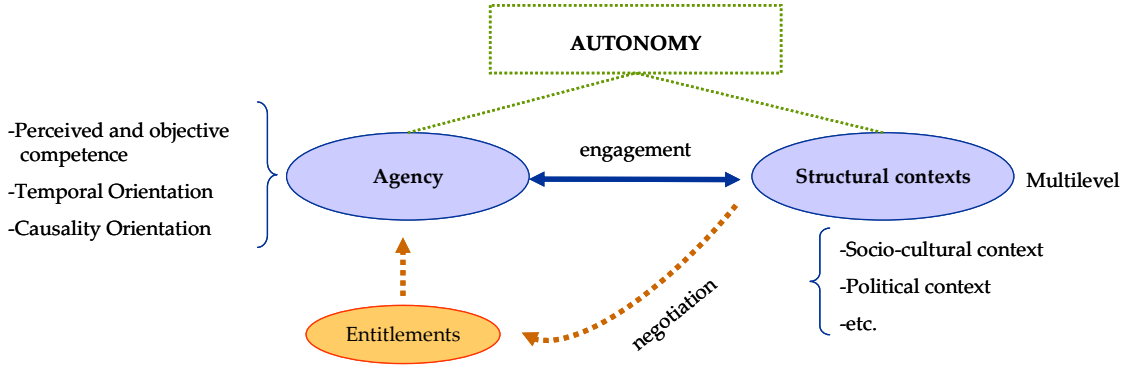
The conceptual definition of autonomy used in this paper is: *Autonomy is the effective capacity of agents to choose in coherence with their inner structure of values and personality when they face specific situations, by applying their agency capacities in structural contexts that may promote or restrict purpose action.*

Operationally, it is defined as a *combined capability* (Nussbaum, 2000) to choose in pursuing one's goals. It is combined because it depends on:

- *Agency* or the internal capacity to make informed choices, and
- *How* this capacity *can be* applied in structural contexts that may promote or restrict purposive action.

In this sense, autonomy becomes an *effective* capacity because it is real, not latent, as it considers the interaction between agents and the structural contexts in which they live. Figure 2 presents the main components of this conceptual model.

Figure 2 – A conceptual model of autonomy



Based on Emirbayer & Mische (1995), Deci & Ryan (1985, 2000), Alsop & Heinsohn (2005), Holland & Brook (2004), and others.

Entitlements are relevant for assessing agency because they represent which resources – economic, social, cultural, natural, political, informational – people can actually command, either because they

own the assets or can get them from market or non-market channels (e.g. public goods, social transfers, relationships). Entitlements are in turn negotiated in the contexts in which people live.

Objective competence refers to physical, emotional and intellectual capacities of individuals. Perceived competence is influenced by contexts and stimulates purposive action. Personality features relevant for agency, filtered by socio-cultural context and history, are temporal and causality orientation. *Temporal orientation* refers to whether individuals consider past, present or future events when they analyse situations, that is, if they act by habits, evaluate current conditions, or apply a projective criterion (Emirbayer & Mische, 1995)[2]. The latter element is close to the idea of 'capacity to aspire' (Appadurai, 2004) that when expressed in voice and participation fuels development.

Causality orientation with respect to events and contexts refers to whether people consider that they are originators of events, that they behave as they should, or that whatever happens is independent of their intentions (Deci & Ryan, 1985; 2000). An orientation of the first type is called autonomy orientation and implies more than being in control of events or contexts.

Following Nussbaum (2000) and Doyal and Gough (1991), autonomy has two levels: a *basic* level, to assure successful participation in the chosen way of life – that is related to practical reason or being able to make choices in valuable matters – and a *critical* level, to compare different lifestyles, evaluate them and if required, to promote significant social change. In the case of participants in these projects with multiple deprivations, the promotion of social change requires collective action. However, the individual capacity to reflect on the need for this can be hopefully enhanced through active involvement in the project. If this is the case, the empirical analysis will tell.

2.2 Assessment of projects in light of the conceptual model

Experiences of autonomy of individuals evolve in their *interaction* with project staff, water companies' staff, non-government organisations, donors, and so on, and *how the project* comes into being and is implemented. During the project cycle, the involvement of individuals, political authorities and communal organisations can be different or inexistent. Hence, it is relevant to characterise the different ways how this involvement can be and its different impacts.

Projects can affect each element of autonomy although at different degrees. For instance, the most direct effect would be on *entitlements* at individual and group level because these are infrastructure projects. Projects could also enhance *agency capacities* by offering training, improving health (via water projects), supporting self-confidence through an autonomy-supportive context that promotes choice – instead of a controlling context that manages behaviours with rewards and punishments (Deci & Ryan, 1987). Effects on temporal and causality orientations take longer but are also possible. Furthermore, projects could also affect structural contexts, for instance, power relations as a result of redistribution of resources and decision-making.

A preliminary step to assess project effects is to identify *practices* which are classified into four types: selection and design decisions (e.g. selection criteria, formal and informal counterpart, and kind of participation), conditionality (e.g. implicit or explicit commitments, co-payments, and rewards), coordination (internal and external depending on the scale and sector of the project), and accountability (concerning project effectiveness, quality and utility, and sustainability of effects).

An assessment of effects in elements of autonomy can be carried out by identifying different assumptions in the project's underlying logic and its potential effects, and comparing these effects with the actual situation. The project logic is explicit in the logical framework. But because this tool is usually 'locked' during the project life and unsatisfactory to incorporate other valuable aspects and non-linear causality chains (Gasper, 2000), practices are investigated via key informant interviews, focus group discussions, project progress reports, and so on. Table 1 shows the process for each project.

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[2] Individuals use the three kinds at some extent but one orientation prevails. It may vary according to the area of life to which the decision (action) refers. Clearly, these elements require a certain level of competence.

Table 1 – The project and its links with individual autonomy: Assessment matrix

Elements of autonomy	Tentative hypotheses	Assumptions	Actual situation	Effect
-Entitlements -Agency (inc. self-confidence) -Structural contexts (e.g. communal organisation, gender, social capital)	Intended and unintended, expected impacts based on project 'logic' (logical framework and project practices).	Conditions allowed by the project or outputs that are explicit and implicit in project logic.	Actual conditions or change in conditions (in contrast to assumptions) related or not to the project.	-Yes/no, partial -Short or long-term -Sustainable, at risk (vs. tentative hypotheses)

But changes are not always positive. Elites may concentrate all resources and undermine self-confidence of people and trust in the project itself; with even deeper impact on causality orientation ('events are external, out of one's control'). To a large extent, how the project is designed, implemented, monitored and evaluated will affect behaviours. Then, project practices (whether they are perceived as external or internal events for local people), and the specific environment it produces (whether it expands opportunities or threats people) are important. A sensitive issue is building partnerships with local people in presence of power imbalances. It is not the case that project staff come to change everything (to introduce a 'reform' in the community) but *to facilitate* participation of otherwise excluded people with *already a motivation* to improve their lives (Ellerman, 2001; 2004).

2.3 Individual autonomy and community

In this conceptual model, empowerment is considered *an expansion of autonomy evidenced in the degree of effectiveness of intentional actions*. This definition is related to two concepts defined by Sen (1985): *procedural control*, that implies that the person has control over the process of choice, and *effective power*, that means that the intended outcomes were achieved. However, individual effectiveness in important decisions in many cases is hard for people living in poverty and hence, effectiveness is better explored at community level.

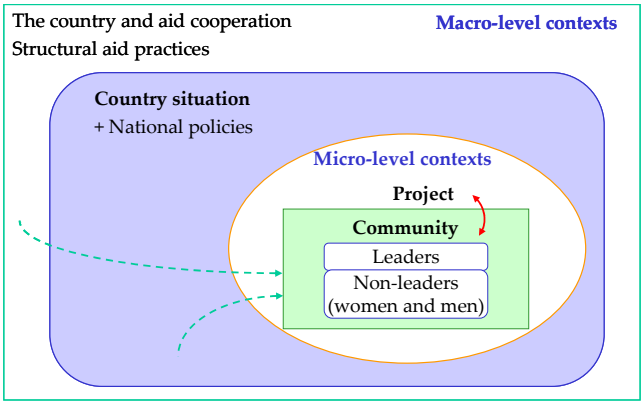
This paper does not present findings regarding community empowerment, but it can introduce some individual practical effects that are related to community dynamics. These practical effects that can be directly explored and are related to autonomy would be:

a) Realisation of current capacities or awareness that one can make things to happen (already implies an expansion of capabilities that endure only when exercised),
b) Changes in individual's participation in community decisions, possibly related to contexts that either promotes trust and self-confidence – autonomy-supportive—or restrict exchange of ideas –controlling contexts,
c) Change in information sharing within the community (and other entitlements),
d) Opening of spaces for discussion on community issues (opportunity for social significant activities),
e) Actual exercise of decision-making (procedural control)

Before presenting the projects, it is necessary to stress that structural contexts are multilevel and interrelated. Hence, the analysis of projects has to incorporate this complexity as possible. Figure 3 shows macro and micro-level contexts. Macro-level contexts are defined by (i) the structural aid practices that govern relationships between the country and aid financiers and (ii) the country situation that incorporates the national policies and strategies that delineate entitlements of population.

Micro-level contexts are divided in community and project context. The reality of a project is absorbed in the community context of individuals which have different roles of leadership. The arrows indicate that the project and the inhabitants in project sites are in constant relationship so that there are bidirectional influences. On the other hand, because this study focuses on projects that target specific (relatively small) rural areas, it is assumed that the influences of the macro-level contexts on projects, individuals in communities and their contexts are unidirectional.

Figure 3 – Locating the projects in micro-level contexts



3. *Projects and communities*

The projects targeted poor populations with infrastructure deficits in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in the sectors of reconstruction and water and sanitation. Table 2 shows basic data about the four project sites. There are differences in terms of type of locality, residence area and extreme poverty levels. These and other characteristics will be discussed at the end of this section.

Table 2 - Comparison of project sites: Basic data

	Reconstruction projects		Water projects	
	Santa Maria	**San Agustin**	**San Fernando**	**Agua Fria**
Period	May.1999 – Oct.2001	Oct.2001 – Mar.2005	Sep.2002 – Jan.2005	Oct. 2001 – Jan.2004
Country	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Nicaragua	El Salvador
Municipality	Posoltega	San Agustin	San Fernando	San Alejo
Type of locality	Colony	Municipal centre + two cantons	Municipal centre	Canton centre+ two villages
Urban / rural	Rural	Urban / rural	Urban	Urban / rural
Extreme poverty(1)	30%* (72%)	47%	30%	11%* (18%)
Households(2)	350	438	516	424

(1) Extreme poverty as % of households, reported by official statistics offices. Data as of 2001 (Nicaragua) and 2004 (El Salvador) / * Rates for the municipality, not for the specific locality. Own calculations for Santa Maria and Agua Fria (based on dataset 2) using national poverty lines appear between parentheses.
(2) Number of households served by the projects in those areas

In the case of Santa Maria and San Agustin, infrastructure deficits were produced by disasters. Inhabitants of Santa Maria had lived previously at the slopes of the Casitas volcano and with a landslide fuelled by Hurricane Mitch, their towns disappeared. Many of their relatives and friends died and also the life as they knew it. They were relocated to the Santa Maria finca (large farm) bought by several donors. For inhabitants of San Agustin, the earthquake caused the loss of their houses and social infrastructure. Both cases were symbolic and stirred up public attention because the disaster of Casitas caused many deaths (2,513 people or 83% of total casualties in Nicaragua due to Mitch) and, on the other hand, San Agustin was one of the poorest municipalities of El Salvador.

Infrastructure deficits in the case of San Fernando and Agua Fria were related to water service. In the first case, Hurricane Mitch badly damaged the water system. In the second case, safe drinking water had not been available and the earthquakes caused only minor damages to some houses.

There are some similarities in relation to projects and communities:

1. Projects had a component of self-construction with two modalities:
   - In reconstruction projects, one member of each household worked in small teams (between 5 and 6 people) during two or three months as assistant of bricklayers to construct their houses; and

- In water projects, each household built its autonomous sanitation system[3], assembled their latrines with the guidance of bricklayers and performed other works. Participants attended training sessions in group (between 25 and 40 people) and worked in teams for other activities.

2. Communal organisations participated during the implementation of the projects although at different degrees.
3. Most households in the project sites depend on agriculture activity despite the urban layout of some villages and seasonal migration (55% of survey respondents considered they were farmers).

The first two features indicate that formulators considered valuable that the projects had a participatory component although the kind of participation was not explicit in all cases. Hence, this paper will address this issue.

Regarding the last feature, households plan their activities in relation to agriculture: resources are invested to support agriculture activities (e.g., communal solidary work, children's work, remittances savings) and alternative activities are envisaged to overcome shortage periods related to agriculture seasonality (e.g., seasonal migration, housemaid work, petty trade activities).

Below, some aspects are detailed further: the antecedents of the communities, some features of the projects and general characteristics of households after the project (at the moment of the fieldwork).

3.1 Antecedents of the communities

The communities included in this study are located in two Central American countries that have faced several difficulties in the last decades and whose democratisation processes still face many challenges. Box 2 contains some characteristics that will make easier the understanding of the background of the countries[4].

Box 2 – Some characteristics of the countries

- Both countries faced bloody *armed conflicts* during the eighties. In Nicaragua, the FSLN overthrew a dictator, governed the country (1979-1990) during the conflict – against a paramilitary group called 'contra', financed by the US – and handed out the power after 1990 elections. During that period, the state bankrupted. In El Salvador, the civil war (1980-1992) was product of decades of military ruling with support of economic elites that kept the peasantry in deprivation (i.e. landless, without right to association, coerced by the army). The guerrilla controlled parts of Salvadoran territory and at the end, negotiated the peace accords as an equal with the government. Economic aid from the US financed macro-economic gaps.
- There were agrarian reforms in both countries but their nature had different impacts on the *agency* of individuals. While Nicaraguan farmers participated in the process, selected the farms, took them and organised their cooperative; the agrarian reform in El Salvador was implemented by armed forces that told peasants to organise their cooperatives but in reality coerced them the whole time (Spence, 2004). The *motivations* of these reforms were also different. While in Nicaragua, the agrarian reform was result of the triumph of the Sandinista movement over the Somoza' dictatorship; in El Salvador, it was a strategy to impede social explosion considering the large numbers of landless farmers.
- After a series of liberal reforms during the nineties, both countries are now highly integrated to world economy. The main export source is maquila industry fuelled by trade preferences granted by the US that is their main trade partner[5]. Coffee production is important but low international prices have affected their value. Despite its higher trade openness[6], Nicaragua depends more on primary sectors (especially agriculture) than El Salvador. Primary sectors represented 21.1% of GDP in Nicaragua and 12.2% of GDP in El Salvador in 2005[7]. Remittances of emigrants working in the US account for more than 12% of GDP in both countries.

[3] This is a system to dispose of grey waters (coming from lavatories, bathrooms, and kitchens) for which these are infiltrated into the soil. The most used modality in these projects was the soakaway pit (a hole dug in the ground filled with gravel and stones) although in a few cases there were infiltration trenches or reedbeds. Usually, there is one system per house.

[4] An introductory review for each country is subject of study in my thesis in order to investigate the link between macro and micro contexts. However, that analysis would exceed the purpose of this paper which is to explore the *effects of the projects* in interaction with community contexts on individual autonomy. However, when the effects of macro-level contexts are evident, this is remarked.

[5] Maquilas are offshore assembly industries. Most of them produce textile and apparel products for the US.

[6] 'Trade openness' measures the importance of foreign trade in the economy (Exports plus Imports divided by GDP). This indicator was 95% for Nicaragua and 60% for El Salvador in 2005.

[7] Primary sectors are agriculture, cattle raising, forestry, fishing and mining.

- Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Central America with a nominal per capita GDP of USD890. El Salvador is considered a medium-income country with a nominal per capita GDP of USD2.469 (in 2005). Poverty levels are high in both countries. In Nicaragua, in 2001, 45.8% of total inhabitants and 67.8% of those in rural areas lived in poverty (rural extreme poor inhabitants were 27.4%). In El Salvador, in 2004, 34.6% of total households and 43.7% of households in rural areas lived in poverty (rural extreme poor households were 19.3%). In both countries, income inequality is very high and also unequal is the access to education and health services.

Table 3 shows a summary of special features of the communities before the implementation of the projects that would make a difference in the perception of inhabitants about the project, in the degree of involvement of leaders and in project practices.

Table 3 – Communities before the project implementation

Reconstruction projects	
Santa Maria:	• Survivors of the Casitas disaster came from two different towns. Most of them were grieving without adequate psychological support, much uncertainty and material lacks. • New self-nominated leaders emerged and led all efforts, including attempts to invade private lands to establish a new town.
San Agustin:	• There was a clear leadership of community leaders in the reconstruction efforts, organised in a municipal committee (CRDM) that united different local committees with the support of a local NGO. • There were several projects taking place at the same time in the whole municipality and the CRDM was coordinating all of them.
Water projects	
San Fernando:	• Inhabitants had had access to safe drinking water prior to Hurricane Mitch. By design the public water company – not a communal management committee – would be in charge of water facilities. • There was no previous formal organisation and hence, inhabitants had not searched for alternatives to solve the lack of water service.
Agua Fria:	• The community organisation was developed and there were already committees managing two gravity (untreated) water systems that covered a small part of the population. • Leaders had being actively searching for water alternatives, before different institutions (the municipality government and the public water company).

In the case of *Santa Maria* there was not a sense of community; people were too hurt. Nevertheless, they could take extreme measures led by desperation of having nothing, even not government emergency aid (but offers from many donors). In the case of San Agustin, people were in their same town (not relocated as in Santa Maria's case) and had developed a representative communal organisation, integrated by former guerrilla fighters, former soldiers, and cooperative leaders, which was already active. While for people in Santa Maria the disaster was a 'tragedy', for inhabitants of San Agustin the disaster was an 'opportunity' to improve their lives because aid cooperation arrived promptly and they (leaders) felt ready for it.

Inhabitants of Casitas had taken the land where they lived during the agrarian reform (1979, at the beginning of the Sandinista government) and were known as *combatants* and proud people that used collective action to pursue their goals; while, inhabitants of San Agustin had suffered the worst of the civil war in El Salvador. Their municipality was field of battle (and revenge) and many had emigrated, staying only the poorest in an environment of fear and mistrust. But recent water projects in the area had attracted people.

In the case of *San Fernando*, inhabitants have special characteristics. They are 'cheles' (or white people) explained by their Spanish (from colonial times) and US heritage (product of the occupation by US troops between 1927 and 1931). There is a clear class division. Most families are Catholic and led by men. Many people supported the contra guerrillas during the Sandinista government – something unusual for inhabitants of the north-central Nicaragua – and since then, strong political divisions have

emerged. Participants perceived that they were considered *different*, wealthier and then were abandoned by central government[8]. Hence, this project had a symbolic value for them.

In the case of *Agua Fria*, communal organisations had long history. Most people respected their leaders and felt supported by them. However, there was insecurity for the presence of youth gangs in the canton centre. There were no apparent political conflicts[9] but the social context previous to the project had been difficult due to the scarcity of water sources (i.e. competition for water had originated confrontations) and because only around 10% of households had access to the gravity water systems.

Inhabitants of San Fernando regarded themselves as 'water customers' that would pay for an adequate service as they used to do before. In contrast, inhabitants of Agua Fria would prefer a role of 'water suppliers' because they could invest their efforts and small surpluses (from remittances) to operate their water system; but leaders were experiencing difficulties to manage the current gravity systems. However, they did not care about the modality; they just wanted to have safe drinking water. In both cases, the image of the public water companies was negative.

3.2 Brief description of the projects

Reconstruction projects were complex (see Table 4a). They influenced many aspects that are important to people: physical security, education, health, relatedness, and recreation, among others. However, they faced differently the issue of *legalisation of property titles*. In Santa Maria's case this process was delegated to the municipal government but not concretised which means that people did not feel secure. In contrast, in San Agustin the project required that people owned their lands and financed all the legal procedures to make sure that titles would be registered (before and after the construction).

Table 4a - Comparison of project activities: Santa Maria (SM) and San Agustin (SA)

	Houses	School	Water	Communal centre	Other infrastructure	Property titles	Productive project	Development plan
SM	Yes	Yes	Yes(1)	Yes	Yes(2)	No	Yes(1)	No
SA	Yes	Yes(1)	Yes(3)	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes

(1) Financed by other donor, (2) other donors financed small infrastructure in Santa Maria but not comparable in number and quality to the infrastructure built in San Agustin, (3) only for a new colony (there was a previous project in the municipality)

Regarding *productive initiatives*, only in Santa Maria there was an agricultural project implemented in communal land but it did not succeed (affected by a severe drought in 2001/2002)[10]. In San Agustin there were not actions regarding productive projects but during the elaboration of the development plan, inhabitants identified several projects that would require financing.

Both water projects provided domiciliary water connections, required an autonomous sanitation system for each household and offered training sessions for the construction of small infrastructure and for promoting hygiene habits and good sanitation practices. In this sense, the approach was integrated (Nicol, 2000). From a financial perspective, it was demand-based (in contrast to supply-based) which means that water provision depends on the willingness (and capacity) to pay of consumers whose water bills must assure the sustainability of the aquifer (Kleemeier, 2000).

In addition, project staff in Agua Fria carried out many activities (see Table 4b) because the project aimed to provide many benefits: to improve health and living conditions (incl. environmental), to strengthen community organisation, and to improve agricultural practices. Nevertheless, it failed to provide a *regular* water service (FGD participants referred that households in some areas did not have

[8] There are some large coffee producers in the municipality and this is the reason why San Fernando was considered wealthier among neighbouring municipalities. However, in the 2001's national poverty map (GON, 2001), San Fernando is considered a municipality of high poverty (the categories are: severe, high, medium and low) because most of its households are poor.

[9] Neither leaders nor non-leaders expressed any political preference.

[10] According to WFP (2002), more than 2.6 million people live in a *drought corridor* in Nicaragua and 1.3 million in El Salvador. Areas in the drought corridor receive considerably less rain than others in normal conditions, drought is locally recurring (especially with El Niño phenomenon) and people face severe food insecurity.

24-hour service and that pipes had exploded seven times in the last two years). Based on censuses and surveys to estimate household revenues, around 20% of inhabitants got subsidised tariffs.

Table 4b - Comparison of project activities: San Fernando (SF) and Agua Fria (AF)

	Water service	Sanitation systems	Latrines	Reforesta-tion	Soil protec-tion	Solid wastes mgmt.	Reservoir	Eco-wood stoves
SF	Yes	Yes	Yes (-)	Yes	No	Yes	No	No
AF	Yes (-)	Yes (-)	Yes	Yes (+)	Yes	No	Yes	Yes

(-) means that the project had a worse performance or lower coverage, (+) means that activities were much more in quantity and coverage

3.3 Situation of the communities after the projects

The different geographical location of the sites and type of locality make a difference in regards to the social infrastructure available and connections with other communities. Inhabitants of San Fernando and San Agustin (after reconstruction) – that are municipal centres – have more access to health, education (three levels) and recreational infrastructure than inhabitants of the other sites. They are also more connected to the economic system, as shown in Table 5.

Table 5 – Degree of integration with other communities

Component	Santa Maria	San Agustin	San Fernando	Agua Fria
A- Market linkages	0	1	1	1
B- Transportation	1	2	2	1
C- Communication (telephone)	2	2	2	3
D- Political linkages	1	1	1	0
E- Linkages with aid agencies and donors	2	3	1	0

Scale from 0 to 3 where 0=none, 1=low, 2=medium, and 3=high integration
Adapted from Pollnac and Crawford (2000)
Elaborated by fieldwork assistant and by me.

Santa Maria does not have market linkages with outer communities in terms of products to sell, as result of its geographical remoteness and lack of surpluses. The main concern is survival. In contrast, manual work is traded at unfair conditions (without contracts and then, without security) with middlemen that collect workers for large-sized farming industries. There is small trade of agriculture and handcraft products in the other sites.

Public transportation is more accessible in San Fernando and San Agustin, the municipal centres. There are several bus lines that connect residents with department capitals and other villages, at several times of the day. The frequency of bus rides is lower in Agua Fria but the main problem is the difficult access to the canton during rainy season because the roads are not paved and are crossed by small rivers. Santa Maria has similar problems but it would still be possible to walk some hours to reach the highway, crossing a private land.

Regarding telephone service, all sites are more or less connected. At least some households or local authorities have telephones that can be used in emergency cases. Agua Fria has the largest telephone network because most people have relatives abroad who finance long-distance calls using mobile phones. The case of Santa Maria is special because although there is no fixed telephone service in the town, most leaders have a mobile phone.

Regarding political linkages, Agua Fria is the extreme case because there was a problem between leaders and the mayor (not present in the canton but in the municipal centre: San Alejo). San Fernando and San Agustin count with the presence of the local political authority but connections of leaders at other government levels were relatively low. This situation might have changed with recent political elections. Santa Maria has the advantage that the mayor of Posoltega (2005-2007) was also a survivor of the Casitas' disaster and that he has links with communal leaders.

Considering linkages with cooperation institutions, leaders in the sites that benefited from reconstruction projects have more connections given the multiplicity of efforts that took place. At the moment of

the fieldwork, the project in San Agustin had just finished and then, these connections were live and valuable assets together with the sister cities agreement with Preizerdaul (a commune of Luxembourg) that assures long-term financing for more projects. In Santa Maria, the communal organisation (ASCA) was still managing some projects financed by Spanish donors. In San Fernando, the water project was the first relevant project in the town but through the municipality government, there were perspectives of future projects. The situation in Agua Fria was dramatically different: after the water project no other had been formulated, while leaders did not have contacts with either local NGOs or donors abroad. However, they did have relatives abroad who could provide assistance at household not community level (via remittances).

Although livelihoods of most households are around agricultural activities, there are different degrees of dependence on agriculture that determine their consumption capacity. The incidence and depth of poverty would differ in function to the existence of *alternative and reliable sources of income*. Periodically-sent remittances support household income in Agua Fria (relatively, the least poor among all sites) but seasonal migrant work cannot assure a living for Santa Maria's residents (relatively, the poorest). Remittances are less frequent in San Fernando and San Agustin.

Some household heads who declared to be farmers were independent (owning or renting a plot) while other were dependent farmers (with or without formal contracts). Regarding land ownership, across the cases studied, Santa Maria and Agua Fria were the extreme cases: households in Santa Maria are landless (they lost their lands in the Casitas) while around 50% of survey respondents declared to own land in Agua Fria. Land ownership was close to 33% and 38% in San Fernando and San Agustin, respectively.

Most households in Santa Maria and San Agustin lived in extreme poverty using either national or international poverty lines and most households in all project sites lived in poverty (around 54% in Agua Fria)[11]. High rates of monetary poverty could be associated to low levels of satisfaction of basic needs, which would affect individual autonomy because of restricted physical, intellectual and emotional capacities.

Table 6 shows socio-demographic data. Regarding household composition, San Fernando is characterised by its traditional large-sized and male-headed households. Households in Santa Maria are the smallest among all sites, even including seasonal migrant workers (that are back in rainy season).

In both sites affected by disasters (Santa Maria and San Agustin) female-headed households accounted for around 40% of total households. Overall, most female household heads declared to work at home (on average 67% of female household heads and not less than 60% in each site). Furthermore, only 4% of female household heads who work at home said to receive remittances. This finding highlights the difficult situation of these women without alternative source of income.

Table 6 – Socio-demographic data by project site

	Santa Maria	San Agustin	San Fernando	Agua Fria	Total
Household					
Average household size	4.0	4.9	6.5	4.7	5.0
Female-headed, %	41	39	8	24	28
Receive remittances, %	14	8	11	48	23
Household head					
Average age	41	43	45	55	47
Literate, %	79	56	76	52	65
Number of observations	42	39	37	54	172

Based on dataset 2.

[11] The official extreme poverty rate of 47% for San Agustin municipality has estimation problems because the population projections were much lower than real: official estimates were 4,470 inhabitants for 2005 while the census prepared by the CRDM indicates that there were 7,385 people in 2004. Dataset 2 indicates that around 83% of survey respondents were extreme poor. Some might be underreporting remittances revenues.

Household heads were older in Agua Fria than in the other sites. This is related to the ongoing emigration of young people. On the other hand, household heads in the Salvadoran sites had lower literacy levels than those in the Nicaraguan sites (in contrast to national figures).

4. Project factors and influences on individual autonomy

This section analyses how project factors in interaction with contexts can influence individual autonomy. It is necessary to stress that although projects are agreed at bilateral level and executing agencies set details, *how the projects are implemented* depends on the interaction of project staff – its organisational structure (roles and responsibilities) and culture –, stakeholders at different levels (many in reconstruction projects due to national political importance), and multilevel structural contexts.

The topics in this section refer to organisational structure and coordination, selection criteria and targeting, quality of participation, internalisation of commitments, and the characterisation of the micro-context during the projects.

4.1 Organisational structure and coordination

All projects except the one in Santa Maria had a PIU for managing the resources and coordinating the activities. Coordination needs varied according to the organisation of the projects (see Table 7).

Table 7 – Project organisation and coordination needs

	Reconstruction		Water	
	Santa Maria	**San Agustin**	**San Fernando**	**Agua Fria**
Project management and design				
PIU	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Overall project geographic scale	Small	Small	Large (5 sites)	Small but disperse population
Visibility of the PIU[1]	n.a.	Yes (high)	Yes (low)	Yes (medium)
Complexity of project	Medium; several donors involved	High (construction, legalisation, participatory plan)	Medium (several components incl. technical coop.)	Low (but many components)
Counterpart and partners				
Executing counterpart	Community organisation	Community organisation	Public water company	Public water company
Municipal government	Present but busy (3 mayors during the project)	Present (1 mayor the whole period)	Present (2 mayors during the project)	Absent (1 mayor the whole period)
Partner NGOs[2]	1 international NGO with experience in the zone	3 local NGOs with mixed experience	1 international NGO without experience in the zone	1 local NGO without experience in the zone
Local staff[3]	No (leaders)	Pres. of CRDM (leaders)	1 social promoter + Committees	2 soc. Promoters + ADESCOs
Actual coordination needs				
- Internal coordination[4]	High	High	High	High
- External coordination	Medium	High	Low	Medium

[1] For non-leader inhabitants / [2] Experience in the zone refers to having worked in the specific municipality.
[3] In water projects, community organisation collaborated with project staff as if they were promoters.
[4] Water companies and local NGOs are considered part of the project and then, coordination with them is internal.

- ***Project management and design:***

Inhabitants of San Fernando only represented 7% of total beneficiaries of the project. The PIU had an office in the departmental capital (one hour by car) but the chief of project kept close relationship with officials of the water company (based in the capital city) to coordinate the construction of water infrastructure and technical cooperation. This is the only project that given its scale had a permanent technical assistant. In the other extreme, the project in San Agustin had the continuous presence of the chief of project who lived in the community and participated in all activities even inviting public institutions and private sector to collaborate with the reconstruction efforts (e.g. donations of lands).

In all cases, the projects included several activities but in the case of San Agustin, the legal component was extremely complicated because most people did not have the property title of their land and many did not have a national identification card. This was the cause of the delay of the project that exceeded in more than one year its planned period and covered only 80% of households. Meanwhile, a new national government took the power (in 2004) and, although from the same party, there were staff changes in ministries and public institutions that affected the external coordination.

- ***Counterparts and partners:***

Formal counterparts were defined by bilateral agreement (i.e. municipal governments and public water companies). Municipal governments in reconstruction projects had active participation at the beginning of the disaster. Nevertheless, they were limited by the lack of skilled staff and financial resources.

In contrast, *municipality governments were not so involved in water projects*. In the case of Agua Fria, there was an unsolved impasse with the mayor. In the case of San Fernando, the project design gave a secondary role to the municipality government (for indirectly managing the solid wastes collection and processing). It was not in the project logic to involve municipality governments. Hence, the design of the projects had implicit *risks* of confrontation with the mayors because it excluded them from the decision-making process and disturbed the political status quo in the sites (cf. Hirschman, 1967/1995)[12]. In addition, there was inconsistency between the *macro-level aid context and national institutional arrangements* that in both Nicaragua and El Salvador were promoting decentralisation so that, for example, the municipal governments could manage electricity and water projects. However, at the moment of the formulation there was *legal uncertainty* about the institutional context. In both countries there were legislative proposals to extent responsibilities of local governments and also to include organisational reforms in water companies.

Political factors are important especially in countries that have been polarised after armed conflicts. At the beginning of the project in Santa Maria the higher difficulty was the low support of national government towards the municipal government (led by the opposition party) to coordinate emergency relief assistance and reconstruction efforts. Grunewald et al. (2001) explain:

> The Nicaraguan government, by delaying the declaration of the State of Emergency, by attempting to limit the flow of aid through the civil society and by directing aid to its favourite electoral zones illustrated all the risks. NGOs did not necessarily react in a concerted manner (p. 165).

There were over twenty donors undertaking projects in the municipality and there was no one single entity able to efficiently coordinate all the efforts. Then, each donor contacted survivors directly and offered whatever it (or facilitators) wished – qualities of constructions are diverse. Even national institutions were not well equipped to cope with the disaster effects. For instance, psychological support was not centralised by local health authorities and many NGOs intervened in the zone with a multiplicity of techniques, budges and for limited time – except for religious groups that have stayed in Santa Maria for years. On the other hand, there was not political will to solve the land problem to reallocate survivors. Market prices of private lands rocketed and donors had to negotiate individually with ambitious land owners. Finally, during the project life there were three mayors. Although from the same left-wing political party, this could complicate the administrative coordination at local level.

In all cases, project staff invited the community organisations as informal counterparts with different levels of involvement but in the case of reconstruction projects, *the community organisations became like 'formal' counterparts and took over the role of the municipality governments* in important aspects (more evident in San Agustin's case). An important explanatory factor would be their closeness to local population and their representativeness that however might have changed during the project life (as Santa Maria's case illustrates).

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[12] Especially in Agua Fria where the mayor wanted to establish a decentralised water system, managed by the municipality government. In contrast, the mayor of San Fernando is who initially presented the project proposal to the water company.

An important point was *the inclusion of local staff in the activities.* Both water projects mobilised inhabitants to work in the project with the support of communal organisations. In San Fernando, female social promoters took the task of initiating a communal organisation. They enrolled people in neighbourhood committees and in a communal water committee (CASA), in which most of the time committee members were women[13]. In addition, project staff included one female local promoter in San Fernando and two in Agua Fria. In Agua Fria, they were daughters of communal leaders and did their job in consideration to their community[14]. They used their influence to gain collaboration from their neighbours but finally some activities were taken over by leaders themselves, especially in the canton centre where youth gangs were a menace.

- ***Actual coordination needs:***

Internal coordination refers to the coordination between the PIU and its partners (NGOs, water companies). Hence, almost all projects required high coordination efforts because they involved either several partner NGOs (San Agustin), many components (Santa Maria, San Agustin), or several sites – with different consultants and construction companies – and new features (San Fernando).

Agua Fria would have required lower coordination but unfortunately, the water company in El Salvador entered into a crisis of management with high rotation of top and medium-level staff following accusations of corruption (Herrera, 2003; Henríquez, 2006). This situation seriously affected the work of the PIU considering that the water company was also an executing actor (LD, 2004). This also harmed the technical soundness[15] of the project because the design of water infrastructure has problems that affect water users and current management of the water company (high repair and maintenance costs).

External coordination refers to the coordination between the project (the PIU, its counterpart and partners) and other stakeholders such as line ministries, public organisms, judiciary institutions, military forces, other villagers, and so on. Among the projects, San Agustin demanded the highest effort from the PIU given the integral approach chosen (three components: construction, legalisation and participatory planning). In contrast, San Fernando required the lowest effort because project staff was very focused in providing water and sanitation services without including so many components (as Agua Fria that required to coordinate actions with the ministries of environment, education, health, an specialised fishing institute, etc.) or multiple donors (as Santa Maria).

Regarding management of the project, the experience of Santa Maria indicates that a sub-contracted NGO managing a multi-component project (construction, water and agriculture) and facing complex macro and micro-contexts was at risk of failure. Nevertheless, an independent PIU would not be the best solution. Even the support of a public counterpart as the water company could be partial and in case of failure of coordination mechanisms (e.g. Agua Fria) there would not be anyone to support an isolated PIU. Considering national trends of decentralisation of services and higher responsibilities in hands of municipal governments, it seems reasonable to make them – local political authorities – *partners* of the projects (cf. LD, 2006) and support their learning process in new matters. In this way, potential conflict would be managed and hopefully translated into productive discussion and informed decision-making with the parallel involvement of social community organisations. When projects integrate several sectors as reconstruction projects, this need is even higher. Coordination needs would increase but effectiveness and sustainability of valuable outcomes would be better assured.

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[13] Above 70% of leaders were women but this percentage would increase in some seasons according to agriculture calendar and short-term migration of men.

[14] One of them expressed that no one wanted to be social promoter, one woman resigned and she took her place worried that if no one would take it the project would be at risk (personal communication, August 21, 2005). The same feeling had women that formed the committees in San Fernando, as expressed by the vice-president of the CASA (personal communication, July 22, 2007).

[15] Technical soundness refers to the suitability of the technical solution and its correct implementation. The fact that pipes explode is signal that either one of two elements or both failed. I do not discuss technical details here.

In addition, *formal institutional support* at central government level is necessary to favour external coordination. The case of San Agustin illustrates the fact that strong commitment of the ministry of foreign affairs made a difference during the course of the project. However, this support should be *explicit,* since the beginning, not result of the leadership of particular persons.

If projects with high coordination needs did not have adequate institutional support, their effectiveness would be at risk. Hence, the provision of material outputs to project participants and chances for expanding their autonomy would be reduced.

4.2 Selection criteria and targeting

Defining selection criteria is a sensitive issue especially in poor localities where almost all are in need. In the case of reconstruction projects, all injured should have equal rights. Then, it is problematic to include criteria decided by an external entity or by an elite group that could have in agenda to favour certain groups (e.g. Santa Maria). It is also difficult to define co-payments in projects targeting the poor that aim to secure basic needs like water projects; because there are assumptions about capacity to pay that might be mistaken, for instance, assuming that because most inhabitants of Agua Fria receive remittances and that all can afford to build their soakway pit.

In the case of *reconstruction projects*, criteria were defined by a board composed by community representatives, the municipal government, and an external entity. In Santa Maria, new criteria were introduced during the implementation stage. The external entity was the local NGO with support of the coordinator of LD. In San Agustin, the criteria were fully defined during the formulation stage with the facilitation of an external consultant; although some conditions were relaxed by consensus of the working group of the project (e.g. special and 'social' cases)[16].

In Santa Maria, there was leakage. Although the project had targeted survivors of the mudslide (who lived in the two specific villages that disappeared), people who were not survivors were included to fill the places of those who opted to invade a nearby private land. Still in 2005, people were complaining about the newcomers who did not deserve to receive the same benefit that the survivors. A new selection criterion was introduced during the course of the project: people had to stay in their houses in order to keep them (with the lack of property titles, it was a credible threat). The assumption was that if there were no people, it was because they had another place where to live. But in most cases, the reality was that people had to migrate to work because the communal agricultural project failed, their houses were too small to sow subsistence crops in the backyards, and people could not finance seasonal investments. This was a direct attack against autonomy in a very significant aspect: where to work and how to sustain the households.

In San Agustin, there was under-coverage. The basic criterion of having suffered the earthquake was not enough. People also had to be poor (assessment made via a socio-economic census) and households had to present certain characteristics (with respect to household composition). Above all, people had to own the plot where the house would be built. This last point caused delays and some misunderstandings but also fuelled the creativity of the chief of project and leaders (including the parish priest) to promote changes in legal procedures, to find land donors and to offer tailored housing solutions (e.g. removable prefabricated houses). If guided by the legal criterion and the lack of registered property titles, the project would have ended on time but with less than one-third of houses built.

In the case of *water projects*, criteria were defined from outside by the public water company and the project formulators. In order to have sustained effects on health, it is a norm that rural households connected to water systems have an autonomous sanitation system[17]. In this way the grey waters are infiltrated into the soil and do not contaminate the environment. Then, each household had to build a soakaway pit (the most common) with their own funds (Agua Fria) or with project funds (San Fer-

[16] The 'working group' was the committee that made crucial decisions during the project. More later.
[17] Domiciliary sewage system is only provided for medium and large urban areas.

nando). Initial connection cost was covered by the project (Agua Fria) or by households with project's subsidy (San Fernando).

In Agua Fria, the construction of soakaway pits as condition could imply the exclusion of the poorest who do not receive remittances and then, could not afford to buy the materials or even attend the meetings to form the work squads[18]. Finally, 14% of resident households were not covered by the project. In San Fernando, all households were connected to the water system. However, there were problems with the allocation of latrines due to an inaccurate census that defined fewer people in need (due to initial scepticism of residents about the project) and to disagreement about who was poor enough to deserve receiving a latrine (given the scarcity of latrines).

These cases indicate that it is necessary that residents know the *process of definition of these criteria* because these directly define entitlements, which also depend on the *relationships between community leaders and non-leaders* that are marked by common history and culture. For instance, non-leaders might wish to delegate decision-making to leaders (e.g. San Agustin and Agua Fria) for historical reasons – linked to old patronage relations and organisational experience – or relationships might be based on informed trust for which leaders are accountable to non-leaders. In contrast, a small group might capture all benefits of its decisions made on behalf of the community if people are not aware of the importance of such decisions and blindly delegate decision-making power. In this context, deep *emotional* shock and uncertainty indeed harm this capacity of awareness (e.g. Santa Maria).

An additional point is relevant about entitlements and water projects: *water tariffs*. Despite subsidies, by July 2005 several people in San Fernando had got their service cut-off[19]. Beyond practical reasons associated to this situation (e.g. leakages in domiciliary pipes, bad consumption registration, actual waste of water), the main problem is the criterion of financial sustainability applied to a poor municipality. Although the criterion does not include investment recovery, only to reach a break-even point between revenues and maintenance and operation costs, still the economic situation of San Fernando cannot assure this. Evaluating the project as an independent system eliminates the chances for cross-subsidy that is one of the main benefits of nationwide providers. Besides a fairness criterion[20], people who cannot afford the water bills – assuming a reasonable demand – have three options: to pay the bills and starve, to control their consumption by collecting water from alternative unsafe sources, or to get the service disconnected. In all cases, health would be harmed and consequently, basic autonomy. At this respect, Mehta (2006) discusses that water is an 'impure public good' (non-excludable but rival in consumption) to which everyone should have access for equity reasons – to promote wellbeing – which however are in tension with efficiency reasons defended by market supporters that consider water as an 'economic good'. This paper does not offer a solution to this complicated topic – which would require taking into account the difficult financial situation of many public water companies in Latin America – but warns that a project that restricts the poorest from *safe* drinking water because *they cannot afford to pay for what they need* is in fact affecting their autonomy and their wellbeing.

4.3 Participation during the project

The focus of this section is on the processes during the project. If projects were effective and targeting fair (i.e. without introducing inequities in the social context), there would be an expansion of entitlements which would have a direct effect on agency. But, in addition, how the project came into being

[18] The project formulation report indicated that the project could employ local people to work in project-related activities (e.g. water infrastructure works, reforestation squads, construction of ecological wood stoves) with preference on the poorest households so that they would finance the materials for their soakaway pits (LD, 2001). I could not corroborate this because the chief of project was unreachable. Only two men (out of 25 contacted) during the fieldwork expressed to have worked a couple of days in digging the holes for the pipelines and other two said to have work longer in reforestation works and having been paid.

[19] Some months later, people decreased their consumption levels so that they could afford the water tariffs, according to the former technical assistant of the project (personal communication, March 30, 2006). Payments were renegotiated.

[20] Without an integral reform of the water sector in both countries, it is unfair that households in the capital cities pay much less than households in poor rural areas just because the latter were financed by aid cooperation and have water micro-metres at home.

has different important impacts on individuals and communities because it is related to the *procedural control* part of empowerment.

Participation of stakeholders – those that are affected directly or indirectly by the project—and especially beneficiaries, during the project cycle, is considered important for (i) *instrumental* or transitive effects in terms of achievement of goals of effectiveness, efficiency and sustainability; and for (ii) *intrinsic* effects related to enhancement of capacities, gained understanding of local values and priorities, and their incorporation in the project (Alkire, 2002; White and Pettit, 2004; Chambers, 1995).

Both kinds of effects were envisaged as result of individual and community participation. Instrumental effects related to *effectiveness* would be explained by individual and group participation in construction works. The causal link was that participation would assure the good quality of project outputs because beneficiaries themselves would work (with the interest that only an owner not a third-party has) and monitor on-site the construction process[21].

Instrumental effects related to *sustainability* would be explained by *personal* commitment to maintain, repair or improve infrastructures (e.g., houses or sanitation infrastructure) and by *community* participation in supervising good maintenance practices (e.g., cleaning of communal centre, correct use of soakaway pits). Furthermore, community organisations were considered crucial for sustainability. For instance, in San Fernando, the project 'required' the existence of a communal organisation and leaders were kept responsible for the monitoring of behavioural changes (hygiene practices and maintenance of sanitation systems).

There was no explicit link between participation and efficiency in any of the projects' logic. On contrary, the participation of residents as construction assistants could have caused delays (in San Agustin) and waste of material (in Santa Maria), not surprising because construction activities were new for almost all residents whose main economic activity was agriculture.

Regarding *intrinsic effects*, participation of residents as construction assistants was considered to improve skills other than farming skills which in turn would allow household to diversify their income sources. These learned skills were also necessary to guarantee the objective of effectiveness because otherwise, people could not control the quality of infrastructure. However, local supervision was not always good[22]. At community level, there were other effects – explicitly stated only in San Agustin's project documents –related to increased self-confidence for successful joint work and improved capacity to generate and to manage future development initiatives.

The effects of participation would vary in function to the *kind of participation*; some classifications include concepts as manipulation, consultation, partnership, and empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Guaraldo Choguill, 1996). Whether people were informed or consulted, made 'decisions' under a coercive context or that were not respected, or made informed decisions that were taken into account, make a big difference. It also matters the *relevance of decisions*; for instance, asking about everything all the time would give the impression of chaos and would certainly delay the operations (critical in the case of construction projects). Another consideration is the initial *capacity of participants to make decisions*. It could be that consensus was unreachable at early stages of the project because the community organisation was new but if people were not involved in the decision-making process since the beginning they could lose the chance to engage later in a significant manner (more than following indications from project staff to mobilise work squads or to recruit participants for training sessions).

There is clearly a short-term trade-off between efficiency goals (e.g. to finish in the planned time) and capacity building goals. However, in the long-term it makes sense to support the capacity of people to pursue their own development (being the first step to wake up the capacity to aspire, as in the case of

[21] This process is not necessarily valuable for project participants. The procedural control earlier is about the valuable processes and although the output (e.g. the house) was valuable, the construction itself could have not been valuable because people could have preferred to do something else such as sowing in their plot or working as temporal worker in Costa Rica.

[22] For instance, in Santa Maria, around 31% of survey respondents said that supervision was bad.

San Agustin). Participation with such a role is called 'transformative' by Cornwall (2003), in which people are involved 'to build political capabilities, critical consciousness and confidence; to enable to demand rights; to enhance accountability' (p. 1327). This is in line with a concern in individual autonomy at high (critical) level.

Therefore, it is relevant to understand how people participated in the projects. Was it more than working hard, in multiple tasks for a fixed period? Did people feel obliged to work or worked as a manner to show their gratefulness to the NGO, social promoter, or donor for the help provided? Below, two issues are analysed: the relevance of decisions or the extent of decision-making of inhabitants according to their leadership role, and the kind of participation of non-leaders.

Regarding *capacity to make decisions* roughly approximated to literacy, almost all leaders (98% of those contacted during the fieldwork) were literate. This result contrasts with literacy levels of non-leaders (in average 65%). However, leaders and other stakeholders in San Agustin again and again expressed that the *organisational skills* that they had gained during the civil war was useful to organise the reconstruction and development efforts and some of them had been guerrilla fighters while others, soldiers (i.e. former enemies). The former president of the CRDM explains[23]:

> Those who had fought in the conflict, planning military strategies, we have that capacity to organise and to lead and when it is necessary to speak loud: to speak loud!
>
> The municipality was much fanaticized, there were shots, wounded. Then the reconstruction process was taking us to sit down to those that had been stoned that had been insulted during the campaign. [There was] a process of internal reconciliation in the municipality, planning and all [things related]. Everyone [had] doubts about the process, but they would come [to discuss].

Some leaders in Santa Maria also had organisational experience as cooperative leaders but the political factor clouded their chances so that at the end of the project there were two communal organisations representing each one a different political party. It seems that these two have reached an agreement of coexistence for which they coordinate some efforts led by the mayor. The message is that besides intellectual capacities, in contexts so politicised, other kinds of abilities are also necessary, for instance, political awareness and tolerance. This also applies to project staff that will interact with leaders and non-leaders.

- **Exercise of decision-making by leadership role**

Table 8 contains a qualitative assessment of participation in decision-making by project and role of leadership. Among the projects studied, only in San Agustin had *leaders* significant participation during the formulation stage with respect to different decisions (which infrastructure to build, the model design and materials of the houses, partner NGOs, etc.). Leaders of Santa Maria also had relevant participation but after many discussions and 'parade' of donors, design decisions were top-down.

Table 8 – Assessment of participation in decision-making during the project

	Formulation		Implementation		Evaluation	
	Leaders	*Non-leaders*	*Leaders*	*Non-leaders*	*Leaders*	*Non-leaders*
Reconstruction projects						
Santa Maria	Yes*	Yes(-)	Yes	Yes(-)	No	No
San Agustin	Yes	No	Yes	Yes*	No	No
Water projects						
San Fernando	No	No	Yes*	No	Yes**	No
Agua Fria	Yes**	No	Yes*	No	Yes**	No

Legend: (-) means that the decisions were not respected, * means that the extent of decision-making was low, ** means that people were informed or consulted.
This table was constructed based on individual interviews, FGDs, and project documents using iterative cross-checking.

[23] Personal communication, February 4, 2005.

The most important decision was to divide the Santa Maria finca in which people would be relocated in two areas: one for communal agricultural activities and other to be split in small individual plots for houses. This decision was made by donors. Indeed agriculture activity was valuable but the common tenancy and management of agriculture production was a new feature for people in Santa Maria. They had cooperatives in the Casitas but households privately worked their plots. In addition, at early stages of the reconstruction project, working in the communal plot was condition for receiving food (food-for-work programme) which means that the motivation was extrinsic. The project gave returns during the first year but for climatological factors (droughts during 2001 and 2002) and management issues, it was not sustainable in the long run. Donors' idea that an ideal cooperativistic society was possible did not take into account that people were coming from two 'broken' communities and that their goals might have been restricted to short-term survival and, without adequate psychological support, not yet prepared for long-term communal cooperation.

In contrast, leaders of Agua Fria were only consulted about their willingness to be included in the project. But this consultation was very significant for both leaders and non-leaders. They proudly said that it was *their* decision to be part of the project[24]. They see the positive consequences of this decision when they watch the living conditions of other towns that were consulted, did not accept the project and 'they are now regretting'. In San Fernando, there were no formal leaders until the project started and promoted the formation of a water committee (CASA) and neighbourhood committees.

During the implementation, leaders in water projects collaborated with project staff, basically carrying out functions similar to those of social promoters (e.g. gathering people for training sessions, organising work squads, supervising progress of construction works). In contrast, leaders in reconstruction projects were more active but while in San Agustin their role was positive and constant, in Santa Maria it became disruptive at some point (i.e. for predominant political interests).

During the evaluation of water projects, leaders were only informed in workshops about the results of the projects despite that they had issues that they wanted to discuss and to solve (e.g., problems with pipes and high water tariffs). The evaluations for reconstruction projects were traditional (interviews, not group discussion or a workshop), not intended to be participatory.

These experiences show that indeed a more organised community like San Agustin was able to participate more actively in the project than communities in other project sites. However, a well-organised community in Agua Fria canton (not in a municipality centre as San Agustin) with a more open socio-cultural context (not with deep political polarisation and mistrust) and better economic situation (not extreme poor and remittances-recipient) in a water project had only an instrumental role. A main explanatory factor was the *composition of the project staff* and the *spaces* opened for community involvement. In San Agustin, the leadership of the PIU was clearly in hands of the chief of project although there were three NGOs working in the municipality. In Agua Fria, the PIU had low visibility, the presence of the counterpart (the water company) was strong but residents did not trust it and aspects related to water infrastructure were too technical to have the involvement of residents.

On the other hand, the chief of project in San Agustin worked in *partnership with the community organisation* (CRDM) and especially with its president. This relation was based in mutual trust and respect (cf. Hailey, 2001/2004) and improved the project's chances of success given the authority of this leader (former guerrilla commander) among the population and helped to overcome the shortage of project staff. The CRDM was part of the working group of the project (decision-maker) together with the chief of the project, representatives of the three partner NGOs, of the municipal government and other institutions involved at different stages of the project. In Agua Fria, during the project implementation the community organisation was slowly gaining their space as the decision of investing in the reservoir for upbringing tilapia indicates. But this investment failed. In addition, leaders in Agua Fria did not have the support of the mayor.

[24] Indeed this decision meant to discard the offer of the municipal mayor (of uncertain financing and results) and not to have his support for other development efforts.

Comparing San Agustin with Santa Maria, it is possible that *communal organisations* (as project counterparts) can improve the effectiveness of the projects when the local government lacks the capacity and resources given the multiplicity of demands. The potential for involving people is large given the needs (extreme in Santa Maria) and opportunities to multiple actions (in San Agustin) but *the relationships at community level* (not exclusion, like in Santa Maria) and the support of *committed project staff* are determinant (a devoted chief of project in San Agustin). Furthermore, the role of municipal governments has to be valued.

- **Quality of participation of non-leaders**

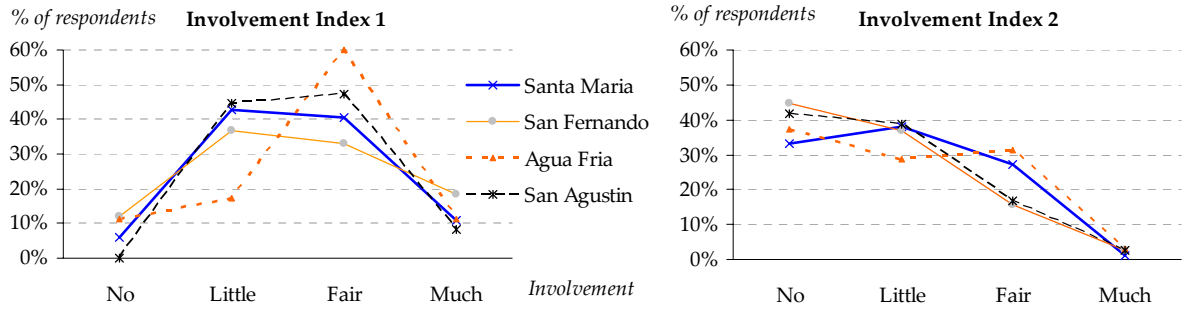
With respect to *non-leaders*, participation translated into workload was 'fair'[25]. However, high-level participation called 'involvement' during the project (that included information, opinions given, awareness of own skills, opportunities for and exercise of decision-making) was low in all cases[26]. Hence, this index was split into two: (i) the extent of available information and the contextual support to self-confidence (whether people gave opinions and felt that they applied their own skills – awareness) during the project, and (ii) the extent of decision-making. For aggregating the variables, the intersection operator ∩ was used when the association between the variables was moderate or strong and the union operator ∪ when it was weak[27]. The indexes were calculated as follows:

(i) Involvement Index 1: Information ∪ (Opinions ∩ Awareness)
(ii) Involvement Index 2: Opportunities ∩ Decisions

Where a ∪ b = Max (a, b) and a ∩ b = Min (a, b)

Figure 4 shows the distribution of values of Index 1 and Index 2 for all projects. Regarding Index 1, respondents in San Agustin reported scores very similar to those in Santa Maria, although they gave their opinions a little more frequently. Respondents in Agua Fria reported higher scores than those in San Fernando in every sub-element: information, opinions, and awareness of using own skills during the project. The difference was larger in terms of information: 66% of survey respondents in Agua Fria said to have received 'sometimes' or 'usually' the information they needed during the project versus a 47% of respondents in San Fernando.

Figure 4 – Levels of involvement by project



Based on dataset 1.

Regarding Index 2, respondents reported very low levels of decision-making in all projects. However, it was somewhat higher in Agua Fria and Santa Maria in comparison to San Fernando and San Agustin, respectively. More than 40% of respondents in the latter projects reported not having made decisions during the project.

[25] In a nominal scale that included responses of low, fair, and high, most surveyed participants considered their participation as 'fair' explaining that they did what was asked for.

[26] Mean values were between 1.31 and 1.11 in a scale from zero to three. These values were not significantly different across projects (Kruskal-Wallis test).

[27] In the case of Index 1, opinions and awareness had a Kendall's tau-b of **0.45** ($p<0.01$). The same statistic for opinions and information was 0.27 ($p<0.01$) and for information and awareness was 0.38 ($p<0.01$). In the case of Index 2, the association between the variable 'opportunities' and 'decisions' was not surprisingly strong: a Kendall's tau-b of **0.73** ($p<0.01$). N=231.

In reconstruction projects because the works concerned people more directly (it was about their houses, their social infrastructure, etc.), non-leaders were asked their opinions at several times during the construction stage. Santa Maria's case is special because according to non-leaders they were asked about some *crucial* decisions (e.g. house design and urban layout), which was not the case for non-leaders in San Agustin, but these decisions were later not respected.

With almost null effective decision-making exercised by non-leaders during the projects (Involvement Index 2), *intrinsic effects of participation would be restricted for non-leaders* and mainly related to the awareness of having used own practical skills during the project, which would be highest in the case of Agua Fria.

Table 9 presents a qualitative assessment for non-leaders related to workload and involvement in the project. In the case of reconstruction projects, there is a different ranking with respect to workload and individual involvement. In the case of water projects, the ranking is the same and Agua Fria is the project in which individuals worked more and were more involved.

Table 9 – Comparing levels of participation among non-leaders: Rankings by sector

Ranking:	Reconstruction projects		Water projects	
	Workload	Involvement	Workload	Involvement
First	San Agustin	Santa Maria	Agua Fria	Agua Fria
Second	Santa Maria	San Agustin	San Fernando	San Fernando

Note: Participation at a basic level maybe understood as workload in project activities. Involvement refers to high-quality participation because it includes shared information, awareness, and decision-making.

Intense workload might provide opportunities for information sharing and exchange of opinions. For instance, while working in the 'mutual help' groups – building houses together during three months or attending training sessions for water-related infrastructure—people receive at least minimum information required for their tasks and hopefully, the exchange of ideas with other persons in the work groups could promote fellowship and also proximity to supervisors to give opinions if needed. If it was the case – that the project context fuelled all these positive effects – residents of Santa Maria and San Agustin would have higher impacts on autonomy (due to the higher workload). Nevertheless, the context in which activities took place is relevant. It was much more controlling in Santa Maria's case (to be discussed in point below).

Therefore, quality of participation would depend on (i) the interaction between project staff and community members (during different stages of the project life), qualitatively different with leaders and non-leaders, and (ii) the relationship between community leaders and non-leaders in function to (a) how leaders define (open or restrict) spaces for non-leaders, (b) their cultural role concerning decision-making, and (c) their representativeness and legitimacy perceived by non-leaders. This means that there is a joint effect of project and community factors on the perceptions of non-leader individuals about what their entitlements were (regarding the projects) and what they were expected to do.

For instance, some people would prefer to delegate important decisions (as the one of project formulation) and supervision to leaders. It seems to be the case in San Agustin and Agua Fria where community organisations had longer history than in San Fernando (i.e. not previous organisation) or in Santa Maria (survivors lived in two different villages before the mudslide and they mistrusted the new self-nominated leaders).

4.4 Internalisation of work commitments and conditionality

In relation to the issue of participation previously discussed, it is possible that working in self-construction activities is interpreted as a *commitment* or as an obligation or restriction which would affect the impact of 'participation' on individual autonomy. There are several feasible interpretations:

1. Condition *imposed* by an external entity that has to be fulfilled ('we had to do it'; 'our opinions were not taken into account; they [leaders] decided for us')

2. The fulfilment of an agreement to achieve a valuable goal but they are *doing what they are supposed to do* ('it was our contribution'; 'I did everything that was asked for')
3. The fulfilment of such an agreement that brings happiness and proud because they are putting effort *to improve their own life* ('we did not leave the project to decay', 'San Agustin for San Agustin')
4. The fulfilment of such an agreement whose *process they are enjoying* because they are learning a new skill, engaging with people 'bigger than them', sharing experiences with neighbours or working together ('we were three communities that became like only one…').

Whether individuals agree with one of the previous interpretations depends on how they internalise their commitments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). Despite personality factors that affect how people interpret or perceive actions, the contexts during the project and the roles of leadership in the community are important.

Project practices in specific community contexts can cause that an initially internalised commitment like working in construction activities be felt as external imposition. For instance, controlling practices in Santa Maria and San Agustin were perceived differently because in the latter case, people considered that their leaders were representative and that the agreements were fair; they also knew what the output would be (e.g. design of their houses, social infrastructure). In contrast, individuals in Santa Maria did not feel support from the executing NGO (the donor was distant), organisation problems during the project introduced *uncertainty* about important features, and many did not know how their house would be when they started the construction. This for people who had lost so much in their lives was another tragedy. Furthermore, in San Agustin there was a charismatic and committed chief of project while in Santa Maria the project was managed by a sub-contracted NGO.

Internalisation of commitments depends also on *how non-leaders perceive the role of communal organisation in originating crucial features of the project* (or the project itself). This does not mean that the perception is trustworthy. Because of different community dynamics, people can ignore how decision-making takes place. For instance, people correctly would perceive that leaders in San Fernando had a less important role than leaders in San Agustin (e.g. because leaders in San Agustin would meet frequently the chief of project). However, as information did not flow so evenly in San Agustin and the chief of project had such an advocacy work, some people considered that project staff made the relevant decisions and then, they fulfilled commitments as a sign of gratefulness.

Motivated people will be interested in higher involvement in those aspects that they value. In the cases of Santa Maria and Agua Fria, people considered that they had *right* to be benefited by the project: Inhabitants of Santa Maria considered that they were the most hit by disaster and that their experience fuelled aid flows to the country (they were visited by the US president) while inhabitants of Agua Fria considered that their leaders (and others from neighbouring cantons) had fought long to get safe drinking water. Therefore, if the project staff or community context did not open spaces for participation, people would put pressure to speak up, to be informed about commitments or to be taken into account. Furthermore, they had made a *choice*: in Santa Maria's case they chose between either staying in an invaded private land or accepting the offer in Santa Maria; in Agua Fria's case they chose between this project and the option offered by the mayor. The projects were not acts of charity to be accepted as they came, there was a responsibility from national governments and donors.

The resulting higher *involvement* on non-leaders in Santa Maria and Agua Fria (than in San Agustin and San Fernando) would be *result not only of the willingness of project staff but also of their motivated agency applied to those contexts*. The potential to enhance autonomy in these two cases could be larger than in the other cases because the motivation existed, it was not supplied by the donor (Ellerman, 2004); however, other factors (e.g. politics, not success of productive projects) put obstacles to this empowering process.

Internalised conditions have direct impact on project effectiveness and indirectly on autonomy. For instance, the degree of acceptation of soakaway pits, knowing why they were important, would impact on health achievements because people would maintain them adequately. Therefore, it is important to

explain people about the reasons why certain fixed features of projects are necessary but also *to incorporate the local knowledge* to promote a sense of self-worth and also to achieve results (e.g. welcoming comments about the soil quality and consequences for sanitation systems). This exchange of knowledge can be facilitated since the formulation stage. In the case of water projects, a pseudo participatory formulation that does not analyse the problems of the community but channels the discussion towards the project goals shows disrespect and can originate rejection to similar exercises (maybe it is better to say that the investment decision is taken in that sector and listen opinions instead of raising wrong expectations). Scepticism plays against any educational campaign and then, against behavioural change. Hence, in sectors with expected technical and bureaucratic delays (as water sector in Nicaragua and El Salvador), the management of the project starts since the financing decision is made not only since the first stone is laid or the first hole is dug.

Box 3 presents some considerations about the meanings of the self-construction activities in the case of reconstruction projects.

Box 3 – The role of self-construction activities in post-disaster projects

Either for decision of donors or leaders, both projects incorporated beneficiaries as assistants of bricklayers in construction activities. But individuals of Santa Maria and San Agustin valued to be farmers and work in their plots. Then self-construction activities in a harsh situation (with food aid only at early stages) were perceived as strong condition to get a house (depending on the individuals). People spent time, put at risk their subsistence, and exhausted their energies in these activities when in other projects in the same municipalities other donors were financing projects constructed by private constructors.

The argument of *ownership* was raised in formulation reports but as CAMIRE (2005) asserts when comparing the project in San Agustin with other project in the zone, ownership could be present without self-construction. Besides, looking at these projects, ownership of the communal centre by inhabitants of Santa Maria was high despite it was constructed by a private contractor in contrast to San Agustin – in which project staff called for collaboration from inhabitants (that in most cases were too tired to 'help' anyway) but these had to be replaced by inhabitants other cantons, not served by the project.

In these contexts, *they did not have opportunity to expand the capacity to choose* according to their goals because they were doing the most they could do given the situation. Furthermore, participation in social life or even being informed about decisions made by leaders was difficult because they were too busy. If above all this, the contexts were controlling, the situation was worse in terms of a minimum level of autonomy. Instead of having all households working in the construction, residents who already were bricklayers could have worked and also monitored the construction works then, autonomy and effectiveness would have been promoted.

One expected effect of self-construction activities was that people would acquire an *alternative skill* that would reduce their economic vulnerability. But a crucial point is whether there were *real opportunities to apply* this new skill in nearby areas. Some men – those who learned – could get jobs in the same project (e.g. construction of social infrastructure after the houses were built) and also work in nearby construction projects. However, when the disaster-related reconstruction in the area ended, most of them could not find a job as bricklayers again. Therefore, many returned to work in agriculture activities and other migrated to find alternative jobs. They live in poor areas and there is little construction activity there.

Therefore, becoming bricklayers brought a short-term economic benefit for some men. But the overall negative effect on the rest was larger: they could not work in what they needed for their subsistence (agriculture), were not helped with agriculture projects later on, and most importantly, they could not work in what really mattered: the development of their communities through effective participation in community decisions. This participation would have fuelled critical autonomy.

4.5 Characterisation of micro-context during the project

The self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 1987; 2000) characterises factors that explain intentional behaviour in two: contextual and personal factors. *Contextual factors* refer to external events and interpersonal (in contrast to intra-personal) or social environment; both are interrelated. *Personal factors* refer to internal motivations that depend on personality and to causality orientations. In this section, the focus is on contextual factors that are more accessible for an external observer and more dynamic, in contrast to personal factors that are more likely to be constant during the years (unless traumatic experiences like the one in Santa Maria's case that required coping mechanisms).

Looking at the cases studied, a project itself and its practices – especially those about selection and conditionality – can be categorised as *external events* by non-leader participants. For instance, getting the house or the water connection can be perceived as a big reward that justifies any effort. From the point of view of leaders, an organisational process (e.g. the conformation of the CASA in San Fer-

nando) can be perceived as a controlling event if the only reason to act was to keep the project or as an autonomy-supportive event if leaders received positive feedback from the social promoter – an element of the *context* – that fuels their perceived competence (i.e. their effort is recognised without any pre-defined standard) and hence, their self-confidence.

From the point of view of non-leaders, the workload can be highly controlling if they are mistreated and their progress is evaluated with respect to fixed standards that they cannot affect (e.g. delays due to allocation of materials). In these contexts, if supervisors are pressured to make them to perform as planned, supervisors themselves become more controlling (Deci & Ryan, 1987). This seems to be the case in Santa Maria where workdays were even deleted from records (according to FGD participants). In contrast, a potentially enjoyable activity such as a cleaning activity, in which different institutions and the whole population participated to make their town beautiful, could be perceived as controlling if people were motivated with rewards after completion or if they did this to show their 'good' behaviour to the donor in an official visit (more like a ritual; cf. Mosse, 2005)[28]. Therefore, repetitions of such activities after the project (without the reward) would be not very probable (in addition to coordination problems with institutions).

As seen earlier, the perception of external events is influenced by the contexts in which these events take place. Furthermore, self-confidence is supported by contexts that promote choice (autonomy—supportive) and is undermined by contexts that control behaviour (controlling). In this sense, the analysis that follows focuses on characterising the contexts in the project sites because they would have an impact on *self-perceived competence*.

Table 10 shows a characterisation of contexts (or factors) related to the micro-context during the project and the context at the time of the assessment. These factors might have positive or negative effects on self-confidence and also in autonomy.

Table 10 – Comparing micro-level contexts: Factors

	Project factors		**Community factors**	
	Involvement *Enabling*	**Conditions(*)** **-** *restrictive*	**Opportunities** *Enabling*	**Socio-cultural** **+** *inclusive*
Variables	-Information -Opinions -Awareness *(Involvement Index 1)*	-Clarity of entitlements and definition -Workload -Respectful treatment -Extent of choice vs. specific conditions	-Economic situation -Success of previous collective actions -Expectations of new projects -Physical security	-Community satisfaction -Values and norms -Gender equity -Intra-community relationships
Affected by	*Interaction between project staff, leaders and non-leaders*	*Degree of internalisation of conditions; interactions*	*Individual agency; personal entitlements, relative position in community*	

(*) Conditions characterise autonomy-supportive or controlling contexts.

The first column shows the concept of involvement introduced in previous sections, which is result of the intra-personal relations during the project that define to what extent information is shared, people express their opinions and become aware of their skills. The second column ('conditions') refers to the project practices that might restrict free choice and are internalised differently by project participants. Conditions determine whether the contexts are more autonomy-supportive or more controlling. Respectful treatment – and the general motivation and commitment of project staff towards participants (Riddell et al., 1995) – promotes perceived competence.

Power relations built during the project are also important. For instance, a man non-leader in Agua Fria explained: 'We learned that we have to be humble because the engineers know more than us'. Although it is evident that project participants know less than engineers in technical aspects, it is also

[28] About rewards, Deci and Ryan (1987, p. 1026) discuss the concepts of task-contingent and performance-contingent rewards. The latter are less controlling because they have a positive feedback component (reward efforts). An example could be the prize offered to the winners of the 'garbage carnival' in San Fernando; but the effect was counterproductive because the reward was not given.

true that their local knowledge is important for certain activities and that different abilities can be complementary (e.g. to improve effectiveness of soakaway pits and reforestation works). However, participants could develop a *strategy of doing everything as ordered* without complaints in order to secure benefits, without undermining their self-confidence in first place. In this context, self-confidence would be related to good performance. Statements of men non-leaders in reconstruction projects like 'everything that they asked me to do, I could do' and 'I succeed in everything I did' would show this.

Table 10 also contains two community factors related to the *perceptions that people have about their life opportunities and the community dynamics* or how inclusive it is towards non-leader members. Life opportunities depend on the economic situation of the village, its links with outside towns, the common entitlements to which people have access (result of successful collective action) or might have access (depending on expectations of future projects), and general life conditions (e.g. level of physical security). Perceptions about life opportunities and community dynamics are filtered by personal characteristics. For instance, a literate person who is relative of leaders and receive remittances will perceive higher opportunities than another who is a poor agriculture worker without family or a single mother. Regarding social values and norms, it is possible that norms that exploit some groups in society (e.g. the poorest landless farmers whose labour is traded as commodity without formal contract) are internalised by the excluded groups and then, their self-confidence would not be harmed (adaptation) but their objective competence would be affected (cf. Kabeer, 1999).

Table 11 shows rankings for projects in each sector according to the four factors and the assessment on self-confidence made by FGD participants (via scoring exercise). That assessment would capture something similar to psychological or internal empowerment (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2005) because self-confidence was defined in the FGDs as 'the capacity to express their ideas to others and defend them' and was considered the first step to autonomous action[29].

Table 11 – Comparing micro-level contexts: Rankings by sector

	Project factors		Community factors		Perceived change(*) in self-confidence
Ranking	**Involvement** *Enabling*	**Conditions** *- restrictive*	**Opportunities(*)** *Enabling*	**Socio-cultural** *+ inclusive*	
Reconstruction					
First	Santa Maria	San Agustin	San Agustin	San Agustin	*San Agustin*
Second	San Agustin	Santa Maria	Santa Maria	Santa Maria	*Santa Maria*
Water					
First	Agua Fria	San Fernando	San Fernando	Agua Fria	*San Fernando*
Second	San Fernando	Agua Fria	Agua Fria	San Fernando	*Agua Fria*

(*) Based on scoring exercise made by FGD participants.

The contrast between San Agustin and Santa Maria is clear: in San Agustin people had higher chances to improve their self-confidence considering different factors. Individual heterogeneities would determine different effects. Leaders considered that people had more aspirations, 'they talk of development' and that 'this new vision is captured in the development "master" plan'. Nevertheless, restrictions of everyday life affect perceptions of non-leaders about possibilities to improve their wellbeing. In any case, the situation is less dramatic than in Santa Maria where deprivation is moving.

The situation with Agua Fria and San Fernando was less predictable. Despite the relative higher involvement of people in Agua Fria, the design of the project with the condition of self-financed soakaway pit and so many parallel activities had a negative effect on self-confidence. In addition, high scores for San Fernando are influenced by the optimism about new opportunities for the town with the support of the municipal government and a new communal organisation[30]. This perception is com-

[29] Indeed, the figure used during the FGDs showed a big person going forward with long steps thus reflecting the idea that someone with self-confidence (plus other preconditions) can advance.

[30] The mean value for the change in self-confidence was **3.5** for San Fernando, significantly higher than 2.0 of Agua Fria, 1.6 of Santa Maria, and 1.5 of San Agustin. The reported pre-project levels were the lowest for participants in San Fernando which would explain the higher impact. 81% of participants in San Fernando were women versus 65% in the other cases.

plemented by a woman leader: 'We are going to work in any project because we had the experience with Luxembourg and we got used [to work in projects]'.

Two more comments are necessary. Participants in *Santa Maria*, despite their difficult living conditions, reported a positive change in self-confidence. The reason would be a process of personal change because as several participants said Christian faith brought them self-confidence and helped them to carry on with their lives (in absence of stable psychological support). In terms of the concept of 'response shift' (Sprangers & Schwartz, 1999), in addition to this re-conceptualisation of a valuable life, there would be a change in standards (adjustment of preferences due to long term deprivation) for some people.

Agua Fria would be the only case in which project staff that was open to receive opinions from participants would have promoted awareness of individual skills and supported self-confidence. This is not coincidence because social promoters were inhabitants of the same canton and held more horizontal relationships with their neighbours than promoters regarded as outsiders in other project sites. Relationships with project staff in general were valuable, as a man non-leader explains:

> Meetings filled us with happiness. We have met many people. There has not been another project like this one. The person who led the project was very dynamic, made [us] to feel big, to develop, and gave [us] strength, support…[31]

In addition – and in contrast to San Fernando that prior to Hurricane Mitch had access to safe drinking water – FGD participants explained the big impact that water had on their lives to 'look better' and 'feel better'. This effect could have overcome the negative effects of the conditionality practices. The age profile of participants could limit a little the expansion in self-confidence with respect to other cases in the sense that in other sites some young people explained that their self-confidence grew as they became older[32].

On the other hand, taking into account the main *outputs* of the projects, the impact on self-confidence is reasonable. The project in San Agustin produced nicer houses and supported a more inclusive communal organisation than in Santa Maria. The project in San Fernando offered a more reliable water service. However, the impact of successes or failures on causality orientation is related to the involvement that people had in the processes: if results were not favourable and participants felt that they could not affect the results, the harm would be lower. This seems to be the case in Agua Fria with respect to water service and the reservoir (the latter, for non-leaders because leaders who promoted the initiative did have causality orientation), in contrast to Santa Maria where people referred that 'they failed' with the sowings in the communal plot.

Self-confidence fuels intentional action therefore before talking of causality orientation and critical autonomy, being able to imagine scenarios in which one's actions are valuable (self-esteem) or successful (self-efficacy) is the first step. Poor and especially the chronically poor have very low levels of self-confidence explained by their situation of deprivation and isolation. Hence, project staff that promote participation via self-construction in poor communities have to be aware of *how they are treating people* – as worthy of respect as any one in the world.

5. *Communities and conditions for individual autonomy*

This section complements the investigation about relationships between individuals and their context to define possibilities of expansion of individual autonomy. Because data used correspond only to year 2005, it is difficult to assess the change but it is possible to say whether the actual situation was similar or not to the expected following the project logic. Furthermore, the role of communities to promote or constrain the conditions for individual autonomy is also explored.

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[31] I do not know to whom he referred (the chief of project or the coordinator of the NGO or one technician).

[32] Around 62% of FGD participants were older than 45 years in Agua Fria, while this percentage was around 29% in the other sites.

5.1 Living in community: How did it change?

Considering that all projects had the component of mutual help and that people worked together. It is important to know the level of *communal participation* (participation in community organisations) in the communities studied after the projects were completed.

The lowest level of communal participation was found in San Agustin where only 18% said to be affiliated or to participate in an association of any character (economic, religious, sportive, social, etc.), in contrast to the 47% of respondents (in average) of the other sites. Although people reported as one important benefit of the project the political reconciliation among inhabitants, there are still not incentives to participate at a more organised level, in contrast to spontaneous participation fuelled by emergency situations (as the earthquake that brought all to work together)[33]. This finding coincides with the statements of leaders that complained that they were always the same and only people who worked for the wellbeing of their community.

The second lowest percentage was for San Fernando (38%) that is related to the personality of people who expressed again and again that they preferred to keep their lives private. However, this percentage is not lower because some people would be reporting their level of *identification* with committees, not necessarily their actual participation; for instance, some committees were not active during the fieldwork and then some women were talking about re-organising the committees. After San Fernando, Santa Maria (44%) and Agua Fria (57%) follows. In Santa Maria there are still many things to improve (living conditions are very harsh) and collective action is the only solution feasible for them. Associations are basically linked to religious groups and NGOs that have been intermittently in contact with inhabitants since the aftermath of Casitas. In Agua Fria, people have a culture of organisation and even before the project, communal organisation was present.

Regarding this point, it seems plausible to say that *the projects did not influence communal participation*[34]. On contrary, it is the history and culture of people in the sites that mark their participation.

Social capital can be an important asset for individuals in order to secure entitlements. It includes aspects as networks, norms and trust. Despite differences in communal participation, survey respondents in all project sites showed similar opinions with respect of solidarity and trust. Around 74% said that in case of emergency, their neighbours would help but around 90% had fears about people who could take advantage of them. However, statements from FGDs and on-site observation signal that solidarity would be still weaker in Santa Maria and San Fernando than in the other towns. In Santa Maria, *survivors* are more likely to participate in associations and to help each other but other groups in the town (newcomers) are not. In San Fernando, the project favoured organisation to achieve the common goal that was water access but still there were differences among people.

On the other hand, in average, 78% of survey respondents said that they expected more cooperation from smaller groups than from the whole community, but this percentage was lower in the case of Agua Fria and San Agustin which means that in these two Salvadoran towns, people would value a little more the role of community. However, this finding does not have relation with the low levels of communal participation in San Agustin – where people would rather delegate to leaders. Only Agua Fria has high levels of communal participation and relatively more community trust. Ideas of solidarity are high (values in contrast to practices in some sites) despite even higher levels of perceived insecurity.

Another topic discussed by FGD participants was the level of relevant *information* they had about their community (programmes, events, plans, etc.) before and after the project, as prerequisite for communal participation. Independently of the levels of communal participation, having access to relevant

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[33] ECLAC (2007a, p. 91) classifies participation in three types: formal (i.e. elections), spontaneous (i.e. triggered by emergency situations) and organised (i.e. formal associations).

[34] In addition, there is no statistical association between self-reported level of participation in the projects (overall participation) and communal participation (networks).

information would tell about the community dynamics (inclusion vs. exclusion) and the role of leaders, at least in sharing information (versus controlling the information channels).

Table 12 shows the scores for change of information about community and for information after the project. First, in Santa Maria there are clear differences in information. Around 50% of FGD participants said that they had less information than before the project and some cases are critical (falls of several points!). This is a confirmation that the community context restricts opportunities even at a basic level. Second, participants in San Fernando reported the highest change (almost all said that information increased) which is explained – in comparison with projects in El Salvador – for the low levels of information before the project, related to their low communal participation prior to the water project, especially for women who are the ones (in contrast to men) who worked during the project.

Table 12 – Self-perceived assessment of information about community

	Change in Information				Mean change by sex		Information after project		n	% women
	Mean	Median	Min.	Max.	Women	Men	Mean	Median		
Reconstruction										
Santa Maria	-0.1	0	-7	7	-0.4	0.5	5.5	5	35	66%
San Agustin	2.2	2	-1	7	2.3	2.0	8.5	9	30	69%
Water										
San Fernando	4.1	4	0	10	4.6	2.2	7.5	8	26	81%
Agua Fria	2.5	2	-2	6	2.5	2.4	8.4	8	43	62%

Based on focus group discussions.

Third, scores for Agua Fria and San Agustin were more similar which is explained for the high levels of information that people had before the project. In the case of San Agustin, a change process was already taking place when the project started (one year after the earthquakes), people were organised. In Agua Fria, community organisations existed and inhabitants had relatively high levels of communal participation (in comparison with other project sites).

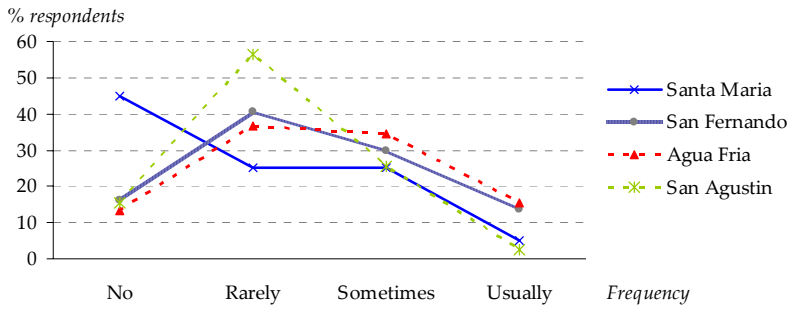
In relation to previous analysis, information received during the project was also lower in Santa Maria than in other cases. Given the years passed, it is difficult to say whether the projects had influence on intra-community relationships but it is possible to say that the project gave *a great deal of freedom to leaders when selected them as counterpart in a context where project management had low effectiveness*. In relation to San Fernando, the impact of the project was high in terms of information and community organisation that previously did not exist. With Agua Fria and San Agustin, the situation is different. These towns were already organised and non-leaders had the information they considered necessary.

As a way to explore the level of *satisfaction* with their community, people responded about 'how frequently they felt that their community expanded their life opportunities'. In average, participants in all project sites were not so satisfied with their communities. Only 39% of survey respondents said that 'usually' and 'sometimes' did. Figure 7 shows the distribution of responses. The extreme cases are Santa Maria, with the worst perception, and Agua Fria, with the best perception about community[35].

Despite the low community satisfaction in Santa Maria, communal organisation is relatively higher there than in San Agustin and San Fernando which means that there are other factors that determine communal participation. For instance, there is a self-help group that is emerging because some people feel that leaders cannot help them so they have to *help themselves*.

[35] The Kruskal-Wallis test indicates that community satisfaction was statistically different among projects. Mean ranks for Santa Maria and Agua Fria would be different at 5% significance level.

Figure 5 – Assessment of community satisfaction by project



Question: 'How frequently do you feel that your community expands your life opportunities?'
Based on dataset 2.

Only in the case of Agua Fria, communal participation was associated to community satisfaction: around 60% of those who participate in communal organisations felt 'usually' and 'sometimes' community expanded their opportunities. Furthermore, perceptions about control on personal and family decisions only in Agua Fria were influenced by the assessment of community satisfaction[36].

5.2 Communal organisations: Do they matter?

Table 13 lists some characteristics of community organisations in the project sites studied which reflect the strength and dynamism of these organisations.

The strength of the communal organisation is not determined by the fact that the village is a municipal centre. However, it does put a ceiling to the influence that the project could have in the long term. For instance, the impact could be stronger in San Fernando than in Agua Fria although communal organisation did not exist in San Fernando before the project. The political factor also plays a role. A small canton of a municipality has less influence on political decisions than the municipal centre because it is less attractive in electoral terms. The latter would get more support from local government (unless particular reasons as in Santa Maria: identification of mayor with the community).

Table 13 – Comparative assessment of community organisations

	Santa Maria		San Fernando	Agua Fria	San Agustin
	ASCA	*CCD*	*CASA*	*ADESCO*	*CRDM*
Representativeness	1	0	2	2	3
Frequency of meetings	2	1	2	1	3
Length of existence	3	2	1	3	2
Organisational experience during the project	2	1	2	1	3
Support of municipal government	2	1	2	0	1
Available funds	2	1	0	1	2

Scale from 0 to 3 where 0=none, 1=low, 2=medium, and 3=high
Elaborated by fieldwork assistant and by me.

In addition, the degree of involvement in the project and the previous experience of the communal organisation have importance. Hence, what the CRDM in San Agustin has reached is more relevant that what the CASA can reach in San Fernando because leaders in San Agustin have coordinated several projects in the municipality since 2001 and carried out functions that normally correspond to the municipality government and many of them had organisational experience during the civil war. On the other hand, the ASCA of Santa Maria has directly managed diverse small-scale projects since 1999 even though Santa Maria is a new colony. But its legitimacy has been questioned by residents. *Therefore, organisational experience of the community organisation (and its strength) is not necessarily positive for the autonomy of non-leaders.*

[36] Somer's d for community satisfaction to explain control on personal decisions was **0.38** ($p<0.01$) and to explain control on family decisions was **0.45** ($p<0.01$). N=52 (Agua Fria).

Reconstruction projects are complex because concerns all actions conductive to restart a live (houses, schools, hospital, farming activities, roads, etc.). Then, their potential to strengthen communal organisation is higher than in other projects if it is involved in decision-making and is not only a collaborator. But there is a risk that the communal organisation makes decisions without involving non-leader members of the community and becomes an entity with a rigid structure that excludes large parts of the population (cf. Eklund, 1999). This seems to be the case of Santa Maria. Participation of *communal organisations is not synonymous with local participation*, especially if trust in leaders is not honoured, there are marginalised groups and leaders are not accountable for all this. In these situations, individual autonomy of community members is not promoted (only that one of the leaders).

Having available funds determines whether the communal organisation will continue existing or not after a project is completed (and when donor-funded activities do not take place). This is the largest risk that the CASA had because it did not have legal status and hence, it could not channel funds. Among the other organisations, the CCD of Santa Maria and the ADESCO managed water systems, while the ASCA and the CRDM managed development projects funded by donors[37]. For the two latter that receive funds from abroad, accountability has to improve (a great deal in ASCA's case).

In general, most survey respondents said that their *community was better organised as result of the project*. However, to the question of whether their leaders were more effective in addressing their needs in 2005 with respect to 1999, there was a clear contrast between Santa Maria and the other sites. In Santa Maria, only 26% of respondents said that leaders were more effective while this percentage was in average 88% in the other sites. This means that despite the ASCA has managed small projects over the time, people do not consider that they are delivering those things that are more necessary. The list of projects financed includes productive and health projects that indeed are basic but the mistrust towards leaders is huge in Santa Maria. Hence, they consider that 'the only ones who have improved are the leaders' (a woman non-leader).

With respect to the community organisations in the other sites, several stakeholders agreed in that information sharing and solidarity improved, especially during the projects[38]. Representativeness was considered high, but effective control of non-leaders over common resources and surveillance were considered still low. This observation is applicable to organisations that manage common resources but most importantly, to San Agustin that is receiving multi-year aid flows from Preizerdaul. But, there is a sister cities committee formed by representatives of three different institutions that approves the use of these funds.

5.3 Conditions for individual autonomy: the role of community

Previous sections have discussed the structural contexts in which people lived during the projects. From macro to micro level, including project and community factors, inhabitants of Santa Maria, San Fernando, Agua Fria and San Agustin received different influences, motivations, conditions, and resources that affected their lives.

Some elements in the community context are most relevant to enhance individual autonomy. The list in Box 4 has been produced based on the experience of people themselves and in some cases, re-expressing their words. For instance, trust and solidarity are lacking in Santa Maria and this situation harms any intent of new organisations; physical insecurity seriously affects possibilities of inhabitants of Agua Fria; differences among population groups in San Fernando are still evident; lack of alternative productive activities and economic resources in general affects autonomy of individuals in San Agustin than otherwise would have great hopes given that the town has a sister city in Luxembourg.

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[37] The ASCA is the main community organisation that was legalised as an NGO and represented survivors of Casitas during most of project implementation. The CCD is the parallel committee that forms part of the municipality development committee and is formed by several sectoral committees (one of these manages the water system).

[38] Stakeholders include project staff and NGO staff in San Fernando; NGO staff in Agua Fria; project staff, representatives of partners NGOs and other actors in San Agustin.

Box 4 – Elements of community that promote individual autonomy

- Trust and solidarity among community members
- Shared *core* values among members; sense of community
- Physical and legal security (to make possible any autonomous decision)
- Minimum social and economic infrastructure (schools, health centres, roads, etc.)
- Existence of alternative productive activities in the town
- Sharing of relevant information among community members (first step to community integration)
- Respect for different groups of population regardless their appearance, gender, age, health status, economic situation, occupation, and so on.
- Clarity in definition of common entitlements and roles; flexibility to accommodate to emerging needs
- Existence of community organisation:
  - √ With stable financing flows
  - √ Inclusive in its relationship with non-leaders (alternation in power)
  - √ Effective to reach goals (capacity and functional structure)
  - √ Accountable to community members (sensible to surveillance by non-leaders)
- Participation of population in informed decision-making for relevant processes (e.g. projects)
- Political support from municipal governments to community initiatives; open discussion
- Municipal government with financial resources and capacity to effectively support local initiatives
- Financial support from government entities or aid cooperation agencies

There are certain elements that are related to the macro level structure. For instance, public infrastructure, legal security (individual identification and property registration), productive activities that would depend on development banking, municipal laws, and so on are not so easily influenced by community initiatives. In this case, development projects have a subsidiary role.

Other elements belong to the socio-cultural context and cannot be changed at once. However, project practices that respect local values (project staff first needs to identify them with participants) can promote inclusive participation in relevant decision-making. For this, it is crucial the selection of the counterpart and partner NGOs that have to be representative (the former) and respectful of local people (both).

Because any project redistributes resources, it is necessary to *understand local politics* and be aware of the role that project staff plays in stakeholders' perceptions. A project born in confrontation (e.g. Agua Fria) undermines individual autonomy in the long run because affects effectiveness of collective action, causality orientation and self-confidence of community members. *Municipal governments* who are responsible for the development of their municipality if involved in the project can facilitate collaboration from national institutions and most importantly, provide the means to assure effectiveness. Therefore, it is necessary to hire *staff with negotiation skills and knowledge of national politics and idiosyncrasy* since the formulation stage, *especially in countries that had faced long armed conflicts due to political (not ethnic or religious) reasons*.

Community organisations are particularly important to achieve common goals in the case of poor people whose individual actions are likely to be ineffective. In this sense, it is important to prevent capture elite (e.g. Santa Maria) by helping people to create the means to held leaders *accountable*, especially when leaders are managing common resources. In this way, training sessions about leadership, local government, associations, human rights, and so on (as tried to do in San Agustin), offered in parallel of project activities is advisable but making sure that selection is not only restricted to leaders and their near circle of friends. In this way, individuals would not only be able to watch over their leaders but most importantly, could develop their critical autonomy.

Table 11.14 presents a simplified picture of community context for the four cases studied. The socio-cultural context is classified as more inclusive or exclusive depending on how non-leader members are able to participate in their community; it includes then aspects related to information, social capital and community organisational structure.

The local political context basically refers to the relationship between individuals and the local government and its consequences. It is more open if there is cooperation and support and close if there is confrontation, competition or abandonment.

Table 14 – Characterisation of community context

		Socio-cultural context	
		More inclusive	*More exclusive*
Local political context	*More open*	San Agustin[1]	San Fernando, San Agustin[0] Santa Maria[1]
	More closed	Agua Fria[1]	Agua Fria[0] Santa Maria[0]

[0] refers to situation before the project and [1] to situation at the moment of fieldwork.
Note: In reality, there are graduations between each criterion and in no case contexts have reached the maximum level of inclusiveness or openness.

Table 14 also shows the transition from one state to other. This analysis is relevant because individual empowerment has relation to the change in socio-cultural contexts, which influence entitlements and self-perception of agency capacities that individuals can use to pursue their goals.

For all cases except San Fernando, there was a significant change. In San Fernando, there was a little improvement towards a more inclusive socio-cultural context but it was more emphatically expressed by leaders and project staff than by non-leaders[39]. Problems of allocation of latrines and differences apparently made by leaders did not help. The situations of Agua Fria and Santa Maria were the less promising because both local political and socio-cultural contexts were constraining.

Nevertheless, two events not related to the project favoured the openness of the *local political context* in Santa Maria: leaders of the two communal organisations that were in political opposition reached a coexistence agreement (became partners) and later, a new municipal mayor (2005-2007) who was a survivor of Casitas himself took office. In the case of Agua Fria, the improvement was in the *socio-cultural context*, direct consequence of the project *outcomes*. The lack of water had caused many problems among neighbours for collecting a very scarce resource and besides only a few of them (connected to leaders) had access to gravity water systems. Once water was accessible, people could live in peace with each other. Water brought many other changes to their lives but the decision of participating in the project – during the project identification stage, despite the opposition of the mayor – fuelled a sense of joint achievement that brought unity (in addition to many common activities in which people participated). But this unity could not be formalised in an NGO for political reasons.

San Agustin had a favourable political context despite the ideological differences between the mayor and the communal organisation and within the communal organisation itself. When the project started, collaboration was already taking place and the transition towards a more inclusive socio-cultural context as well. However, the design of the project with the mutual help modality proposed by leaders themselves *reinforced the process* because people had to work together for their own development. The motto 'San Agustin for San Agustin' became the sign of this motivation and unity.

This last point is important because on one hand, self-construction activities harmed autonomy due to the harsh conditions that some people lived (especially single mothers who were working in new colonies more than one year without food aid and surviving eating fruits) that put at risk their agency capacities and intrinsic motivation; but on the other hand, working together did bring some unity. And this was the objective of leaders when they proposed the self-construction modality during the formulation mission. The conclusion is that management is essential to define limits and re-allocate resources when some activities take longer than expected (average working period was 3 months but the colonies were a special case).

This analysis is useful to understand community factors and has to be integrated with project elements (involvement in the project and conditions) as presented previously. In fact, there are many factors to take into account and a bi-dimensional table does not fit the analysis needs.

[39] Indeed, the context among leaders might have improved a great deal (for their new relative position in the community) but for non-leaders things were like usual in their community after the project was completed.

6. *Implications*

This paper has analysed four development projects in Nicaragua and El Salvador in light of a conceptual framework for individual autonomy. The focus was on identifying relationships between project participants, community and project contexts that could have explained different impacts on autonomy. In addition, multilevel contexts were identified. Some impacts (not all) were stressed in relation to project practices or factors: coordination, selection, participation, and internalisation of commitments. Then, an assessment matrix characterising contexts was presented. The impacts of the elements of the matrix on self-perceived competence (approximated by self-confidence) were explored.

At macro-level context, *politics* plays an important role considering the recent history of both countries with armed conflicts during the eighties that have left a mark in current political polarisation (evident also at local level). This has important implications on project coordination, especially for reconstruction projects, with regards to political affiliations of national versus local government level (e.g. Santa Maria), change of governments (e.g. San Agustin) and political influence in public institutions (in general).

Macro-level aid practices are also important. The case of Santa Maria showed the difficulties with multiplicity of donors enrolled and lack of coordination entities. Both reconstruction projects evidenced the different patterns that food aid had in each case and its early cut-off.

Institutional aspects related to public water companies and political decentralisation was also important and overall, the uncertainty that bilateral aid faces regarding institutional layout in some countries. Hence, water projects had potential risks of confrontation because the formal counterparts were water companies but the local political authorities were not involved. The lesson for sustainability and effectiveness is to integrate local authorities because not doing that can mean the failure of a project without expansion of any element of autonomy.

How projects are implemented depends on the interaction of project staff – that brings an organisational structure (roles and responsibilities) and culture – stakeholders at different levels, and multilevel structural contexts.

Enrolling communal leaders in the project and even hiring local promoters connected to them was used as strategy *to assure project effectiveness* in the case of the water projects. There, communal organisations had a more instrumental role than in the case of reconstruction projects. In the latter case, leaders were involved at different stages, but more formally and constructively in the case of San Agustin than in Santa Maria (where an initial alliance ended in confrontation between leaders and project staff).

The cases of reconstruction projects signal that of *communal organisations* can improve the effectiveness of the projects when the local government lacks the capacity and resources given the multiplicity of demands. Nevertheless, the relationships at community level (inclusiveness of socio-cultural context) and the support of committed project staff are determinant (as San Agustin's case shows).

The level of involvement of a relatively strong communal organisation (i.e. the one in Agua Fria) was lower than in the case of San Agustin, despite several positive factors (e.g. better socio-cultural context, more economic resources). The explanation could be higher technical sophistication of water projects, the openness of project staff and their interaction with leaders themselves. In San Agustin, the relationship between project staff and community organisation was one of *partnership* and the main leader of the community was member of the working group of the project together with NGOs and municipal government. This was possible because leaders in San Agustin had already initiated the process of reconstruction before project implementation and furthermore, because since the formulation, they had decided crucial aspects of the project.

Regarding *participation of non-leaders*, a common feature of all projects is that residents participated in self-construction activities. In most cases, the objective of this intensive participation was instrumental

and meant high workload for non-leaders (not always informed about leaders' decisions) with very low exercise of decision-making. This situation would restrict the potential for intrinsic effects. But there were differences in how project staff and leaders shared information, enabled people to exchange their ideas and opinions and how non-leaders were aware of their own skills.

Selection criteria define entitlements that can be used by agents. These entitlements depend on the *relationships* between community leaders and non-leaders that are marked by *common history and culture*. It is important that selection criteria and the process by which they came into being are known by everyone before the implementation of the project (if the person did not shared in decisions about it). The need to involve non-leaders in the process depends on their cultural features (some people in San Agustin would delegate to leaders but people in Santa Maria would not) that influence what is important for them. For instance, non-leaders in San Fernando needed an allocation criterion for the latrines; otherwise, mistrust in leaders for ad-hoc allocations would be (and was) huge.

The role of *self-confidence* to fuel intentional action must be stressed when projects rely on intensive workload of inhabitants of the project sites. Hence, how people are treated, which opportunities they have to express their ideas, and how much influence these have – that in turn increases awareness of own capacities –are important. However, the perception of opportunities does not only depend on project staff: the whole micro-context around the project (product of several interactions within the community) and the *value of project outputs* are determinant. An ex-post self-assessment of change in self-confidence is influenced by current living situation which might or not be consequence of project actions.

The analysis presented in this paper helps to analyse separately the factors related to the project itself and to the community features. In both cases, there are factors enabling or promoting self-perceived competence and factors restricting it. However, these factors matter in interaction with group dynamics (that affect involvement during the project), personal factors (degree of internalisation of conditions, perceptions about community), and entitlements (defined by previous interactions).

An important point is that involvement during the project is not only result of the willingness of the project staff (or community leaders) but also of the motivated behaviour of agents even in controlling contexts (e.g. Santa Maria and Agua Fria). Then, *power relations* between project staff and participants not only those among community members must be analysed.

Regarding community impacts, the analysis indicates that the projects did not influence communal participation. On contrary, it is the history and culture of people in the sites that mark their participation. Hence, looking at the two Salvadoran villages in which inhabitants regard positively their leaders and communal organisation, only Agua Fria has a high level of communal participation which could be explained because the civil war left deep marks in inhabitants of San Agustin, that would still prefer to stay away of public life.

Understanding the socio-cultural contexts (in which community organisations are included) and local–political contexts (that are linked to the macro-level contexts) is necessary before sending any mistaken signal to (direct and indirect) stakeholders. Any project that distributes resources at some extent affects status quo and then, power relations. Hence, project staff sensible to local situation and with knowledge of national idiosyncrasies is needed.

Community organisations have a role in promoting individual autonomy. An intense organisational experience during the project is not necessarily positive for the autonomy of non-leaders (e.g. Santa Maria) when leaders are neither representative nor accountable. This situation, based on the cases studied, is more likely when social ties have been broken and people do not have (emotional) capacity to raise their voice; although they would struggle to do it. In contrast, a partnership relationship between project staff and a representative, respected and motivated community organisation can assure long-term effects. Even in this case, the local government is the main responsible for the development of its municipality and has to be involved.

Community organisations are particularly important to achieve common goals in the case of poor people whose individual actions are likely to be ineffective. In this sense, it is important to prevent the appropriation of benefits by elite (e.g. Santa Maria in other projects after reconstruction) by helping people to create the means to held leaders *accountable*, especially when leaders are managing common resources. Then individuals would not only be able to watch over their leaders but most importantly, could develop their critical autonomy. In any case, close attention to livelihoods is necessary because too many activities – either envisaged as transformative or not – could harm the capacity of people to assure basic entitlements for their subsistence.

This paper has shown how interrelated the effects of projects can be and that many factors from project and community contexts are important to assess expansion of individual autonomy or empowerment. Then it follows that once the financing decision for a project has been made, every step of the project (formulation, announcement of the project, formation of work groups, etc.) produces meanings in stakeholders which must be careful managed (not controlled).

Project staff has to be aware of the meanings of its actions and potential effects especially because things are going to change as result of the project. This is why we care. Impacts go beyond what agencies assume in their logical frameworks and affect the *lives of real people who have values, needs, commitments and dreams*. Then, assumptions have to be explicit, values have to be identified together with local people and actions have to be carefully assessed. Considering the instrumental importance of individual autonomy to promote human development and wellbeing, a criterion of *social efficiency* could be explicitly included in projects so that 'the expansion of autonomy, evidenced in the degree of effectiveness of intentional actions' (where communities have an important role) is assessed.

This paper has introduced one form of analysis that needs to be improved to assess more formally the links between individual and community empowerment. Other forms of analysis can be introduced to assess changes taking into account the *engagement of people in multilevel structural contexts*. This calls for the use of a combination of methods. The use of qualitative methods together with some participatory tools is useful but it is advisable *to monitor effects on individual autonomy at different stages* not only to facilitate the identification of changes in a retrospective exercise. In this way, opportune changes could be introduced especially if we respect and aim to enhance the capacity of people to affect their own lives.

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