



Autonomy and aid projects: Why do we care?

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All comments and errors are my own responsibility

Autonomy and aid projects: Why do we care?

Abstract

This paper is based on a conceptual framework that defines autonomy as the capacity to choose and achieve the life that one values. It is a combined capability that requires a personal ability and also favourable conditions in the structural contexts. The paper focuses on a specific micro-level context: an aid project. Individuals' experiences of autonomy evolve in their interaction with project staff, non-government organisations or donors. This means that *practices* and *relationships*, not only activities, are important to understand the exercise of autonomy during the project cycle.

This paper explores some features of four bilateral projects financed by Luxembourg in Nicaragua and El Salvador, in order to understand the *mechanisms* how projects could influence individual autonomy. The analysis suggests that *assumptions* about what is best for people, which channels work best, what is participation, or what is a community can affect individual autonomy and the capacity of groups to pursue common goals.

Appropriately designed and managed projects can provide people the opportunities to exercise their autonomy so that they are better prepared to take initiatives and face future challenges. Identifying autonomy as an explicit development objective can help people to be able *to promote significant change and increase well-being in their lives*.

Keywords: autonomy, capabilities, project evaluation

1 Introduction

Human development refers to expanding human capabilities (Sen, 1999) and leading fulfilled and worthy lives. If individuals aim to promote their well-being – what they are, what they do, what they can become, what they feel, in which relationships they engage and so on – or pursue their goals, according to their own values, there is a basic requirement: they have to be able to choose and to *achieve* meaningful options.

Aid projects usually focus on expanding the access to basic services and productive assets or on promoting market-related activities. This means that the mechanism to foster human development is the access to resources, which are the project *outputs* (tangible operating results). Nevertheless, it also matters the *process*: how projects are formulated, implemented or evaluated. This process has influence on the lives of real people who value to help themselves and on their experiences of individual autonomy.

Why do we care? If we are project designers, managers or evaluators who aim at promoting well-being in line with the millennium development goals, we should realise that potential beneficiaries want *to lead their* development process and see us as potential allies to support their own efforts (cf., Chambers, 2004). As a man explained to a (project) social promoter, during a reconstruction project: ‘I do not want to be dragged by you nor by any leader; but rather I hope you can give me a hand in order for me to find work; a help for me to be able to go ahead’.

The resources provided are means how they want to achieve better and worthier lives. We should not override their current strategies or even try to re-create their world (cf., Ellerman, 2006). Individuals ‘devise ways of coping with life, even under the most extreme forms of coercion.’ (Giddens, 1984, cited in Long, 1992b, p. 23)

However, despite our noble aims, do we still take the helm of their development? In many occasions, we do. Beneficiaries may end up behaving as we expected, but only for a short time. Ex-post project evaluations might show unexpected results; why does it happen? Probably, we did not understand their motivations to take part in specific projects, in the first place. Moreover, our assumptions about the lives, the needs and the values of potential beneficiaries might be wrong. Would not be easier to work *with* them and help them to define what they really need according to their values and culture?

This paper explores some of the *influences* that assumptions and the derived practices, developed during a project cycle, can have on the individual autonomy of project participants. The findings are based on a comparative analysis of four bilateral projects financed by Luxembourg in Nicaragua and El Salvador. The analysis presented is part of an autonomy-focused assessment, not an evaluation of these particular projects.

Because we do care, it is necessary to identify factors that enable or promote autonomy and factors that restrict it. These factors are important in interaction with other variables: group dynamics, which affect the individual involvement in a project; personal factors, such as the degree of internalisation of conditions and perceptions about community; and entitlements, defined by interactions. By identifying some factors, this paper aims to contribute to the design of projects that promote human autonomy and respectfully help people to be able to *promote significant change and to defend and increase well-being in their lives*.

The paper is organised as follows. Section 2 summarises the conceptual model and section 3 describes the main research methods. Section 4 presents the four cases in Nicaragua and El Salvador. Chapter 5 discusses the type of participation of residents across

projects. Section 6 identifies some core project practices and explores their impacts on individual autonomy. Section 7 presents some conclusions.

2 The conceptual framework and its application

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. Some practitioners have understood autonomy as independence, attached to specific personality traits. Nevertheless, autonomy is related to connectedness, and both aspects are related to psychological well-being (Deci & Ryan, 2000). This implies that individuals care about others and that their commitments with others are evidence of autonomy, not of dependence (cf. Christman, 1998).

In social policy analysis, 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, 2006). These needs are universal, although their satisfaction requires local, (time and cultural) specific satisfiers. One way to promote autonomy is expanding the access to satisfiers and making resources accessible. In this sense, aid projects providing social infrastructure are contributing to human autonomy. In another perspective, needs are considered not only lacks but also potentials for further development (Max-Neef et al., 1991). In this sense, individual autonomy can expand these potentials or increase well-being.

The capabilities approach has implicitly referred to autonomy as freedom and agency. On one hand, a capability reflects freedom because it represents the opportunity to achieve a combination of functionings out of several available ones. Functionings are valuable because they are result of an individual's choice. On the other hand, agency is defined as 'the ability of people to help themselves and to influence the world' (Sen, 1999, p. 18). To assess agency is necessary to understand 'aims, objectives, allegiances, obligations, and – in a broad sense – the person's conception of the good' (Sen, 1985b, p. 203). The situation of individuals can be evaluated in regard to their agency of well-being. In the first case, individuals are seen as doers and judges; while, in the second case, they are seen as beneficiaries whose interests and advantages must be considered (ibid, p. 208). This first perspective is used in this study; however, the definition of agency used here differs from Sen's definition.

This paper considers autonomy a capability intrinsically and instrumentally important to human development. Studying autonomy as a combined capability leads to focus on individuals, their contexts, and their interrelations when they define their entitlements and options.

2.1 The proposed conception of autonomy

This paper is based on the following definition¹: Autonomy is the combined capability of social actors to make choices in significant matters and act authentically motivated, in coherence with their values and personality, by applying their agency in structural contexts that may promote or restrict purposive action.

Autonomy is defined as a *combined capability* (Nussbaum, 2000) to distinguish between two determining factors: (a) *agency* or the internal capability to make reasoned

¹ This definition has been developed on the course of my PhD research project. The purpose of this paper is to explore certain influences of the projects on autonomy; the discussion on the concept itself is not possible here due to space constraints.

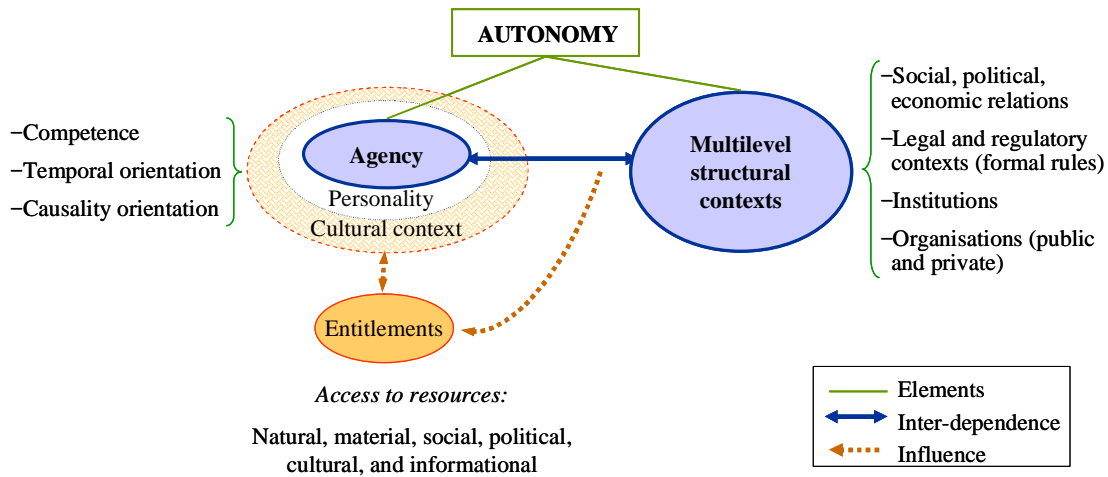
choices and act accordingly, and (b) *the structural contexts* that may promote or restrict purposive action and, hence, the development and exercise of autonomy.

In this sense, autonomy becomes an *effective* capacity because it considers the interaction between social actors and the structural contexts in which they live. Moreover, it is a *qualified* capacity because autonomy refers to significant aspects of life (Taylor, 1979; Doyal & Gough, 1991; Kabeer, 1999), valuable to people for specific reasons. The projects studied can be considered as valuable for many project participants.

Figure 1 presents the main components of this conceptual framework. Three determining factors are highlighted: entitlements, agency and the multilevel structural factors.

Entitlements represent the access to resources; people are entitled to use certain resources to promote their goals when they own or can get these resources from market or non-market channels (e.g. public goods, social transfers, relationships). Entitlements are in turn formed or negotiated in the contexts in which people live.

Figure 1: A conceptual framework of autonomy



Competence is the capacity to perform well, to be able to use personal abilities to reach goals. These abilities can be physical, intellectual or emotional. Self-confidence is essential for autonomy because how individuals regard themselves and their efficacy will partially influence their objectives, aspirations, and perceptions about the opportunities and risks in the external environment (Bandura, 2000). Perceived competence is influenced by contexts and stimulates purposive action.

The framework includes two internal contexts (Alexander, 1992): personality and cultural context. Figure 1 presents them as concentric circles around agency to indicate that these contexts influence agency. The cultural context (larger circle) is filtered by the personality of each individual that gives meaning to the cultural and external contexts.

Two internal processes are relevant: temporal orientation (Emirbayer & Mische, 1995) and causality orientation (Deci & Ryan, 1985b; 2000). Table 1 presents the variants of each type of orientation.

Table 1: Types of internal processes of agency

Temporal orientation	Causality orientation
Iterative (past)	Control (external reasons)
Projective (future)	Autonomy (internal reasons)
Practical-evaluative (present)	Impersonal (no reasons)

Source: Emirbayer and Mische (1995); Deci and Ryan (1985b; 2000)

Temporal orientation is the tendency of individuals to give more weight to the past, future or present when they analyse possible actions, that is, if they act by habits, evaluate current conditions, or apply a projective criterion². 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 refers to what are the reasons to act in a certain way, as the agent perceives them. Individuals can consider that: (i) they are originators of events, (ii) they behave as they should (due to external reasons), or (iii) whatever happens is independent of their intentions. An orientation of the first type is called autonomy orientation and implies more than being in control of events or contexts.

The structural contexts are the external environments in which individuals negotiate their roles, meanings systems (Alexander, 1993) and entitlements. These contexts can be analysed at household, group, community, local, national or international level. These contexts comprise all sets of social relations (economic, political and associational) coordinated with stable or sporadic, formal or informal rules. Institutions or systems of social rules that structure social interactions (Hodgson, 2006) and organisations are elements of these contexts.

Following Nussbaum (2000) and Doyal and Gough (1991), autonomy has two levels: a basic and a critical level. Basic autonomy requires a certain level of competence and satisfaction of human needs so that individuals can expand their potentials in valuable aspects of their lives. Critical autonomy requires a higher level of competence in addition to intercultural knowledge and political freedom. Individuals with critical autonomy can compare cultural rules, reflect upon the rules of their own culture, work with others to change them, or move to another culture if everything else fails (Doyal & Gough, 1991, p. 67, 187-8). This individual can look for and reach a significant change in his or her life and the lives of other people.

For participants of these projects, with multiple deprivations, the promotion of social change requires collective action. However, the individual capacity to reflect on the need for this action could hopefully be enhanced through their active involvement in the project. If this is the case, the empirical analysis will tell.

2.2 *The assessment of projects in light of the conceptual framework*

Projects can influence each element of autonomy, although to different degrees. The most direct effect would be on *entitlements* at individual and group level because these are infrastructure projects. Projects could also enhance *agency* by offering training, improving health via the access to water, or 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, by changing power relations as result of redistribution of resources and decision-making.

A first 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

² Individuals use the three kinds of orientation to different extents, but one orientation prevails. It may vary with the area of life to which the decision (action) refers.

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 theory (Rossi et al., 2004) and its potential effects, and comparing these effects with the actual situation. The project logic is explicit in the logical framework (see Eggers, 1998), but this tool is usually ‘locked’ during the project life and unsatisfactory to incorporate other valuable aspects and non-linear causality chains (Gasper, 2000). Hence, practices should be the focus. In this study, practices were investigated via key informant interviews, focus group discussions, project progress reports, and so on. Table 2 shows a proposed assessment matrix.

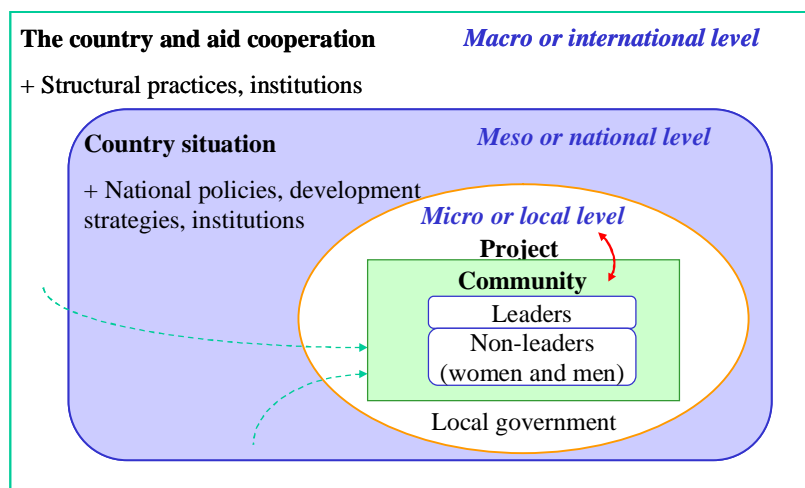
Table 2: The project and its links with individual autonomy (Assessment matrix)

Determinants of autonomy	PROJECT LOGIC		ACTUAL EFFECTS	
	Hypotheses on effects	Expected conditions	Actual situation	Assessment of effect
-Entitlements -Agency (inc. self-confidence) -Structural contexts (e.g., communal organisation, social capital)	Intended and unintended, expected impacts based on project ‘logic’ (logical framework and project practices).	Assumptions and outputs that are explicit and implicit in project logic.	Actual conditions or change in conditions (in contrast to expected conditions) related or not to the project.	-Yes/no, partial -Short or long-term -Sustainable, at risk (vs. hypotheses)

The analysis evidenced in such a matrix leads to conclude about *influences* of the project on the main determining factors of autonomy, not about one effect on autonomy. This analysis covers the internal and external conditions that could promote autonomy as a combined capability, not necessarily a functioning. Another kind of analysis can focus on how people exercised their autonomy during the project or the functioning of ‘being involved in the project’; if the project was important to them (see section 3 & 5).

As earlier expressed, structural contexts are multilevel and interrelated (see Figure 2). This study considers three levels: macro or international level, meso or country level and micro or local level. Macro-level contexts are defined by the structural aid practices that govern relationships between the country and aid financiers. The meso-level contexts are influenced by the national policies and strategies that delineate entitlements of population. Micro-level contexts can be divided in community and project context. The reality of a project is absorbed in the existing community context, where individuals have different roles of leadership and there is a formal political authority.

Figure 2: Locating the projects in micro-level contexts



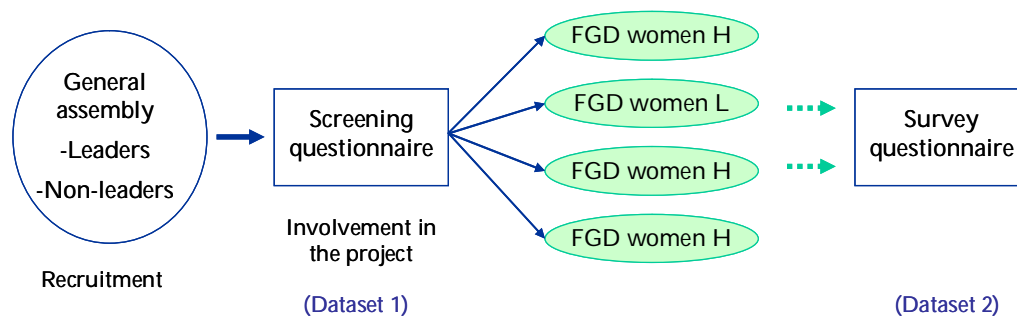
The analysis that follows focuses on the micro-level contexts. There are bidirectional influences between the project and the inhabitants of the project sites. Given that the sites are relatively small and mostly located in rural areas, it is assumed that the influences of the macro-level and meso-level contexts on projects, individuals in communities and their contexts are unidirectional.

3 Research approach and methods

This study is framed in the *interpretive* 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 (just to start, individuals living in the same territory) are the cases of study with an embedded unit of analysis: individuals that took part in the project.

Data used in this study include 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 were contacted separately. Leaders are people with strong influence on their neighbours such as a member of a community association, a school teacher or a priest. With *non-leader participants*, the recruiting strategy was sequential, as depicted in Figure 3.

Figure 3: 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 1 (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 (or expressing 'voice'), awareness of own skills, opportunities for decision-making, and exercised decision-making. These elements were combined into an 'involvement index' and used to divide participants in groups of high and low-involvement by sex (see Box 1).

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? (*Opinions*)
3. Did you receive the relevant information about the project? (*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? (*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).

During the FGDs, four topics were discussed: (i) individual participation and learning during the project, (ii) changes in well-being, (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. However, overall, this is a qualitative comparative analysis; causality was assessed qualitatively.

4 The cases: 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. The aid modality is *bilateral grant*, whose terms are agreed upon by the ministries of foreign affairs of the donor (Luxembourg) and of the recipient countries. In the case of the water projects, the formal counterpart is the public water company; while, in the case of the reconstruction projects, the counterparts are the municipal governments. Since 1993, Luxembourg's aid has focused on water projects in Latin America. In contrast, the two reconstruction projects studied are the only ones in this sector 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 the actions of local private constructors, supervisors, and NGOs subcontracted to execute different components of the projects. In the case of the water projects, the public water companies are supervising and executing entities at the same time.

Table 3 shows basic data about the four project sites. They are relatively small in terms of number of residents, with between 350 and 500 households. However, San Agustín and San Fernando are municipal centres so that they are better connected to other villages than Santa María and Agua Fría. Most inhabitants of the four sites live in poverty, but their living standards are much different. Many households in Agua Fría receive family remittances so that those living in extreme poverty reach 17% of the total. In contrast, about 72% of households in Santa María live in extreme poverty.

Table 3: Comparison of project sites (basic data)

	Reconstruction projects		Water projects	
	Santa María	San Agustín	San Fernando	Agua Fría
Period	05/1999 – 10/2001	10/2001 – 03/2005	09/2002 – 01/2005	10/2001 – 01/2004
Country	Nicaragua	El Salvador	Nicaragua	El Salvador
Municipality	Posoltega	San Agustín	San Fernando	San Alejo
Type of locality	Colony	Municipal centre + two cantons	Municipal centre	Canton centre+ two villages
Layout	Rural	Urban / rural	Urban	Urban / rural
Extreme poverty*	30% (72% ⁺)	47%	30%	11% ⁺ (17% ⁺)

*The rates, as percentage of households, correspond to each municipality (GON, 2001; UNDP, 2005).

⁺ Rates for the specific sites based on dataset 2 and using national poverty lines.

In the cases of Santa María and San Agustín, the infrastructure deficits were produced by disasters. The inhabitants of Santa María were living at the slopes of the Casitas volcano, when a landslide fuelled by Hurricane Mitch wiped away their towns, killing many of their relatives and friends. They were relocated to the Santa María finca (a large farm) bought by several donors. For the inhabitants of San Agustín, the earthquake

brought material destruction; they lost their houses and social infrastructure. Both cases were symbolic and stirred up public attention. The disaster of Casitas caused many deaths (2,513 people), while, San Agustín was one of the poorest municipalities of El Salvador.

Figure 4: Location of the project sites in Nicaragua and El Salvador



In the cases of San Fernando and Agua Fría, the infrastructure deficits were of different nature. In the first case, Hurricane Mitch badly damaged the existing potable water system. In the second case, potable 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. The projects had a component of self-construction with two modalities:
 - For the 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
 - For the water projects, each household built its autonomous sanitation system³, 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. Community organisations participated during the implementation of all the projects, although to different degrees.
3. Most households in the project sites depend on agriculture activity despite the urban layout of some villages and the existence of seasonal migration; more than half of the survey respondents (dataset 2) regarded themselves as 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 (see section 5). Regarding the last feature, households plan their activities in relation to agriculture. In order to support this activity, they invest resources such as communal solidary work, children's work and remittances savings. Moreover, they partially overcome shortage periods related to the agriculture seasonality with seasonal migration, housemaid work or petty trade activities.

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 soak-away 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.

4.1 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.

Both countries faced *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 the 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 the 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 got peasants to organise their cooperatives, coercing them (Spence, 2004). The *motivations* of these reforms were also different. In Nicaragua, the agrarian reform was result of the triumph of the Sandinista movement over the Somoza dictatorship. In El Salvador, the reform was a government strategy to avoid social convulsion given the large numbers of landless farmers.

Table 4 shows a summary of special features of the communities before the implementation of the projects that would make a difference in the perception of the inhabitants about the project, the degree of involvement of leaders, and project practices.

Table 4: Communities before the project implementation

Reconstruction projects	
Santa María:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Survivors of the Casitas disaster came from two different towns. Most of them were grieving without adequate psychological support, there was 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 Agustín:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There was 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 CRDM was coordinating all of them.
Water projects	
San Fernando:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 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; hence, inhabitants had not searched for alternatives to solve the lack of water service.
Agua Fría:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The community organisation was developed; there were already committees managing two gravity (untreated) water systems that covered a small part of the population. Leaders had been actively searching for water alternatives with different institutions (i.e., the municipality government and the public water company).

In the Santa María case, there was no a sense of community; inhabitants felt too hurt by the mudslide. Nevertheless, they could take extreme measures led by desperation at having nothing, not even government emergency aid – although they received offers from many donors. In the San Agustín case, residents stayed in the same locality after the earthquake – they were not relocated as in the Santa María case – and as such, they had developed an active, broad-based communal organisation, integrated by former guerrilla fighters, former soldiers, and cooperative leaders. While for those in Santa María, the disaster was a ‘tragedy’, for the inhabitants of San Agustín, the disaster was an ‘opportunity’ because foreign aid arrived promptly and leaders felt ready to take the necessary measures.

The inhabitants of Casitas had taken the land where they lived during the agrarian reform (1979). They were known as combative and proud people that used collective action to pursue their goals. The inhabitants of San Agustín had suffered the worst of the civil war in El Salvador. Their municipality was a battlefield and many had emigrated; only the poorest were left to stay in an environment of fear and mistrust. Nevertheless, recent water projects in the area had attracted people again.

In the San Fernando case, many people had supported the contra guerrillas during the 1980s and, since then, strong political divisions had emerged. Participants expressed that they were considered different (i.e., ‘cheles’ or white people) and wealthier, for which they were abandoned by the state. The water project had a symbolic value for them because it was the first aid project that would cover everyone in the urban centre.

In the Agua Fría case, communal organisations had a long history; leaders were respected. However, there was a growing insecurity from the presence of youth gangs in the canton centre. The social context had been difficult due to the scarcity of water sources (the competition for water had started confrontations) and unequal access to the gravity water systems, which covered only around 10% of households.

The inhabitants of San Fernando regarded themselves as ‘water customers’ who would pay for an adequate service as they used to do before. In contrast, the inhabitants of Agua Fría would prefer a role of ‘water suppliers’; they could invest their efforts and small surpluses (from remittances) to operate their water system. However, leaders were experiencing difficulties to manage the current gravity water systems. In general, residents 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.

4.2 *Brief description of the projects*

The reconstruction projects were complex (see Table 5). They influenced many aspects that are important to people: physical security, education, health, relatedness, and recreation, among others. However, they addressed differently the issue of *the property titles*. In Santa María, the legalisation of the titles was delegated to the municipal government, but could not be concretised. Hence, people did not feel secure. In contrast, in San Agustín, the project financed all the legal procedures to get the property titles legally registered. This process even included the registration of undocumented citizens.

Regarding *productive initiatives*, only in Santa María was there an agricultural project implemented in communal land. However, it did not succeed due to a severe drought in 2001/2002 and management problems. In San Agustín, there were no actions regarding productive projects, although residents had identified several possible projects during the elaboration of the development plan.

Table 5: Comparison of activities of the projects in Santa María (SM) and San Agustín (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 María but not comparable, in number and quality, to the infrastructure built in San Agustín, ⁽³⁾ only for a new colony (there was a previous project in the municipality)

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

In addition, the project staff in Agua Fría carried out many activities (see Table 6) 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 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 6: Comparison of project activities: San Fernando (SF) and Agua Fría (AF)

	Water service	Sanitation systems	Latrines	Reforestation	Soil protection	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

5 Participation: intrinsic motivation and transformational effects?

Acknowledging the importance of processes during a project, this section discusses the issue of participation in comparison to ‘involvement’ or the functioning of exercising autonomy in a relevant matter such as a project.

The participation of stakeholders – those directly or indirectly affected 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, with respect to the project’s objectives (UNDP, 2007; Narayan, 2002);
- (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); and
- (iii) Intrinsic effects related to personal satisfaction with participation.

In all the cases analysed, individual and community participation were expected to produce these instrumental and intrinsic effects. Instrumental effects related to *effectiveness* would be explained by individual and group participation in construction works. Indeed, people worked as construction assistants in work groups for getting their material outputs. 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.

Instrumental effects related to *sustainability* would be explained by a *personal* commitment to maintain, repair or improve infrastructures (e.g., houses or sanitation infrastructure) and by the *community* participation in supervising good maintenance practices such as the cleaning of a community centre or the correct use of soak-away pits. Furthermore, community organisations were considered crucial for sustainability. For instance, in San Fernando, leaders expressed in the last meeting with the project staff that ‘the finalisation of project activities meant the start of a new project’ for them who became responsible for the monitoring of behavioural changes (hygiene practices and maintenance of sanitation systems).

There was no clear link between participation and efficiency in the explicit logic of any of the projects. Although using local labour (i.e., residents as construction assistants) instead of contracted external workers brought immediate monetary savings, the work of inexperienced residents could have caused delays (in San Agustín) and waste of material (in Santa María) – expected because construction was a new activity for almost all residents, whose main economic activity is agriculture.

Regarding *intrinsic effects*, the participation of residents as construction assistants was considered to improve skills other than farming skills, which in turn would allow households to diversify their income sources. These learned skills were necessary to guarantee the objective of effectiveness because otherwise, people could not control the quality of infrastructure. However, local supervision was not always good (e.g., Santa María).

At the community level, there were other effects (explicitly envisaged only in the San Agustín project) related to increased self-confidence for successful joint work and improved capacity to generate and to manage future development initiatives.

5.1 *The kind of participation*

The effects of participation vary as a function of their quality. Classifications include concepts such as manipulation, consultation, partnership, and empowerment (Arnstein, 1969; Guaraldo Choguill, 1996). Whether people were informed or consulted, made ‘decisions’ under a coercive context or decisions that were not respected, or made informed decisions that were taken into account, makes a big difference. The *relevance of decisions* also matters. For instance, asking about everything all the time would give the impression of chaos and would certainly delay the operations; delays are critical in the case of reconstruction projects.

Another consideration is the initial *capacity of participants to make decisions*. It could be that consensus was unreachable at early stages of a project because, for instance, the community organisation was new. Although, 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 (i.e., 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 latter goals leading to support the capacity of people to pursue their own development (cf., Ellerman, 2006). The first step is to awaken the ‘capacity to aspire’ (Appadarai, 2001), as in the San Agustín case. Participation with such a role is called ‘transformative’ by Cornwall (2003). This mode of participation that builds political capabilities and awareness is in line with a concern for individual autonomy at a high or

critical level and is related to participation in political, community and social spheres (cf. Gaventa, 2004).

The contexts are complex and people are different across localities and within localities, existing different groups and hierarchies. However, the participatory design was uniform for non-leaders (self-construction) and more diverse for leaders. In this section, it is then relevant to understand how people participated in the projects. Was participation more than working hard on multiple tasks for a fixed period? Did people feel obliged to work? Did they work in order to show their gratefulness to the NGO, social promoter or donor for the help provided?

These questions are related to (i) the interaction between project staff and community members (during different stages of the project life), which could be qualitatively different for leaders and non-leaders, (ii) the role of community leaders in defining, opening or restricting spaces for non-leader community members, (iii) the role culturally assigned to community leaders concerning decision-making, and (iv) the representativeness and legitimacy of leaders as perceived by non-leaders. This means that there is a joint effect of project and community factors on the perceptions of non-leader individuals of what their entitlements were (regarding the projects) and what they were expected to do.

Some people would prefer to delegate important decisions and supervision tasks to leaders. This seems to be the case in San Agustín and Agua Fría; their community organisations had longer histories than those in San Fernando, without previous organisation, or Santa María, where survivors mistrusted the new self-nominated leaders.

5.2 Exercise of decision-making by leadership role

Table 7 contains a qualitative assessment of participation in decision-making by project and role of leadership. The identification of the moment in which participation was initiated is important to assess its quality and authenticity, especially when it is launched by outside change agents (Goulet, 1989, p. 167-8).

Table 7: Assessment of participation in decision-making during the project

	Formulation		Implementation		Evaluation	
	Leaders	Non-leaders	Leaders	Non-leaders	Leaders	Non-leaders
Reconstruction projects						
Santa María	Yes(+)	Yes(-)	Yes(++)	Yes(-)	No	No
San Agustín	Yes(++)	No	Yes(++)	Yes(+)	No	No
Water projects						
San Fernando	No	No	Yes(+)	No	Yes(*)	No
Agua Fría	Yes(*)	No	Yes(+)	No	Yes(*)	No

Legend: (-) means that the decisions were not respected, (*) means that people were informed or consulted, (+) means that the extent of decision-making was low, and (++) means that decision-making was high.

This table was constructed based on individual interviews, FGDs and project documents using iterative cross-checking.

Among the projects studied, only in San Agustín did community *leaders* have significant participation during the formulation stage, with respect to which infrastructure to build, the model design, materials of the houses, partner NGOs, and so on. Leaders of Santa María also had relevant participation, but after many discussions and a ‘parade’ of donors, design decisions were top-down. The most important decision, the division between a communal agriculture land and small individual plots, was imposed and apparently against the values of people who had suffered bad experiences with their cooperatives during the 1990s’ economic crisis and preferred to work in larger individual plots.

In contrast, leaders in Agua Fría were consulted only over their willingness to be included in the project. Nevertheless, this consultation was very *significant* for both leaders and non-leaders. During the FGDs, they proudly said that it was their decision to be part of the project. They reflect on the positive consequences of this decision, which are evident every time that they watch the living conditions of people in a nearby town that having the chance did not accept to take part in the project. In San Fernando, there were no formal leaders until the project started and the social promoters encouraged the formation of CASA and the neighbourhood committees.

During the implementation stage, leaders in the water projects collaborated with project staff, basically carrying out functions similar to those of social promoters⁴. In contrast, leaders in the reconstruction projects were more active. However, while in San Agustín their role was positive and constant; in Santa María, it became disruptive at some point due to political interests.

During the evaluation of the water projects, leaders were informed only about the results of the project even though they had issues which they wanted to discuss and to solve such as the problem of the pipes in Agua Fría and the high water tariffs in San Fernando. The evaluations for the reconstruction projects were of a traditional type, with key informant interviews, not with group discussions or workshops. This is especially disappointing in the case of San Agustín project because it had started with a novel (for recipients and donor) participatory formulation.

With respect to *non-leaders*, the participation was low in all cases and basically, instrumental. However, in the reconstruction projects, non-leaders were asked their opinions on several occasions during the construction stage as the projects concerned them directly: they were building their houses and their social infrastructure. The Santa María case is special because, according to the non-leaders, they were consulted over some *crucial* decisions but their decisions were later on not respected.

5.3 The quality of participation of non-leaders

In this study, an ‘involvement’ index was used to assign non-leader participants to each FGD, with the expectation that the experiences of individuals with high and low involvement in the project would be qualitatively different to each other (section 3). By definition this index would capture more than ‘hard’ work; it would identify individuals who were more likely to have expanded their capabilities as result of their participation in the project. Table 8 shows some descriptive statistics of the involvement index.

Table 8: Level of involvement of non-leader participants in each project

Project	Mean	Std. Dev.	Median	Min.	Max.	N
Reconstruction projects						
Santa María	1.26	0.66	1.4	0	2.8	84
San Agustín	1.17	0.57	1.1	0.2	2.4	36
Water projects						
San Fernando	1.11	0.65	1.0	0	3.0	76
Agua Fría	1.31	0.72	1.4	0	2.4	35
Total	1.20	0.65	1.2	0	3.0	231

Level of involvement is an index composed by five equally-weighted variables. Range of values is from 0 to 3.
Source: Dataset 1 (see section 3).

⁴ Among other benefits such as the fact that they would be familiar to intended beneficiaries, the project staff might have transferred some of its costs to participants (cf., Cooke & Kothari, 2004).

The levels of involvement in the project were relatively low in all projects and statistically behaved in similar ways⁵. At first sight, these low values seem strange because the four projects included self-construction activities. The explanation could be that the *manual work was not translated into high involvement*.

Indeed, in dataset 2, respondents of all sites, in average, considered that their participation was ‘fair’ (in an ordinal scale that included: low, fair and high). This result contrasts with the low involvement for all projects identified from dataset 1. It seems that participation was understood by respondents as workload during the project or to what extent they worked in all the activities organised by project staff⁶. Hence, workload was higher among the inhabitants of the reconstruction project sites in contrast to those of the water project sites: 41% and 27% of the survey respondents said that their participation was high, respectively.

Table 9 presents a rough qualitative assessment of workload and involvement in the project. For the reconstruction projects, the ranking is different from each perspective. For the water projects, the ranking is the same; Agua Fría is the project in which individuals worked more and were more involved.

Table 9: Comparing levels of participation (ranking by sector)

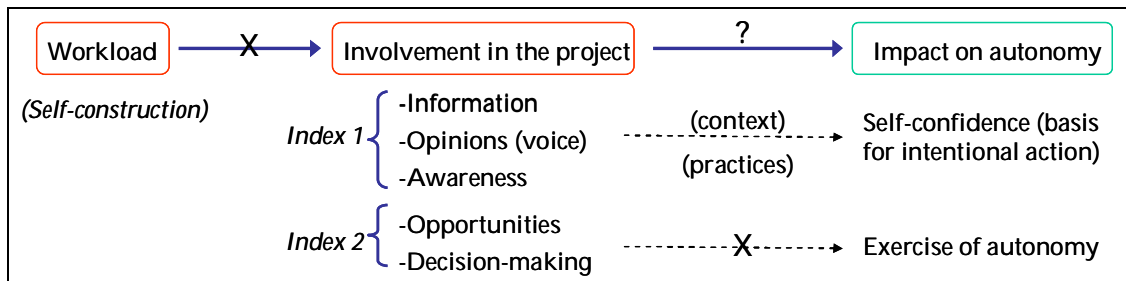
Ranking:	Reconstruction projects		Water projects	
	Workload	Involvement	Workload	Involvement
First	San Agustín	Santa María	Agua Fría	Agua Fría
Second	Santa María	San Agustín	San Fernando	San Fernando

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

The involvement index might be mixing two different aspects: (i) the extent to which the project context favoured the sharing of information and supported self-confidence (whether people gave opinions and felt that they had applied their own skills), and (ii) the extent to which people could exercise decision-making.

Figure 5 shows the expected link between workload and involvement in the project, and between involvement and individual autonomy (only with respect to subjective or personal effects). The analysis that follows suggests that high workload was not followed by high involvement in the project and that different levels of involvement were explained by different contexts and practices that, however, did not promote the exercise of individual autonomy.

Figure 5: Expected logic chain from participation to individual autonomy



⁵ The Kruskal-Wallis one-way analysis of variance by ranks indicates that data of four projects would show similar distribution ($p=0.249$, for Chi-squared with ties). See Siegel and Castellan (1988, p. 206-212).

⁶ Many considered that participation was necessary: if they fulfilled their duty, their participation was fair.

The five variables, previously used to form the involvement index, were re-grouped into two indexes so that Index 1 reflects factors related to the micro-context of the projects, while Index 2 reflects the exercise of decision-making (see Box 2).

Box 2 – Quantitative cross-case analysis: Two indexes of individual involvement in the project

Based on the five variables conceptually related to involvement in the project (in dataset 1), two indexes were calculated, as follows:

Index 1: Information \cup (Opinions \cap Awareness)

Index 2: Opportunities \cap Decisions

Where $a \cup b = \text{Max}(a, b)$ and $a \cap b = \text{Min}(a, b)$

The intersection operator \cap was used when the association between the variables was moderate or strong and the union operator \cup when it was weak.

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 for decision-making' and decision-making was not surprisingly strong: a Kendall's tau-b of **0.73** ($p < 0.01$). $N=231$.

In average, the values of these indexes are very different from each other. The mean value for Index 1 is 1.60 and the mean value for Index 2 is 0.88.

Values for Index 1 and Index 2 were significantly higher for individuals with high-involvement than for those with low-involvement. High-involvement respondents were around 49% of total respondents in Agua Fría, 38% in Santa María, 25% in San Agustín and 22% in San Fernando.

Looking at the different variables across cases, the causal relationship between the variables opinions and awareness was not spurious. The Somer's d statistic (for opinions to explain awareness) was 0.462, while the same statistic for information (to explain awareness) and decision-making (to explain awareness) were 0.388 and 0.386, respectively. This means that people who expressed their opinions during the project were very likely to feel that they had applied their personal skills. The effect of having made decisions was lower in the self-perception of personal capacities. In the same way, the extent of information had lower effect on awareness.

Although information was more or less evenly provided – considering how important these projects were for the lives of residents and how many people were mobilised—the extent to which the contexts of the projects promoted self-confidence (either allowing giving opinions or respecting them) differed. There might be links between workload and individual involvement in the projects, fuelled by common work (people in 'mutual help' groups built houses together during three months or attended training sessions for water-related infrastructure) and exchange of ideas within each work group and with close supervisors. In this sense, the Santa María and the San Agustín projects could have had the potential to generate higher levels of individual involvement. However, the *contexts* were more controlling than those of the water projects, especially in Santa María (with information problems as well). Looking at the water projects, Agua Fría would have higher effects if both contexts and workload were considered (see Table 9).

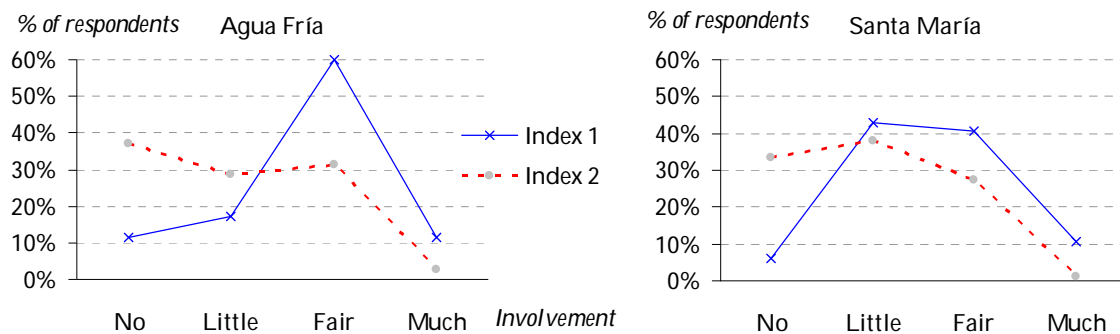
With respect to *Index 1*, the respondents in San Agustín reported scores very similar to those in Santa María, although people in Santa María reported to have given their opinions a little more frequently. The respondents in Agua Fría reported higher scores than those in San Fernando in every sub-element: information, opinions, and awareness of using their own skills during the project. The difference was larger in terms of information: 66% of the survey respondents in Agua Fría said to have received 'sometimes' or 'usually' the information they needed during the project versus a 47% of the respondents in San Fernando.

With respect to *Index 2*, the respondents in all projects reported very low levels of decision-making involvement (the mean value for Index 2 was 0.88 out of 3.00). However,

it was somewhat higher in Agua Fría and Santa María than in San Fernando and San Agustín, respectively. More than 40% of the respondents in the two latter projects reported not having made decisions during the project.

Figure 6 shows the two sub-indexes for the cases with the highest overall involvement level in each sector: Santa María and Agua Fría. Also in these cases, Index 2 was lower than Index 1. Besides, the micro-level context of the project in Agua Fría was more favourable for autonomy expansion than the context in Santa María.

Figure 6: Comparing Index 1 and Index 2 for the cases with the highest overall involvement



Index 1 aggregates the variables: information, opinions, and awareness.

Index 2 aggregates the variables: opportunities and decisions.

Source: Dataset 1.

Therefore, regarding the quality of participation of non-leaders:

- (i) High workload did not necessarily produce a high involvement in the project;
- (ii) Low values of involvement were related to low decision-making exercised by individuals during the projects; and,
- (iii) The *intrinsic effects of participation would be restricted for non-leaders* and, if present, these effects would be mainly related to the awareness of having used own practical skills during the project.

6 How could some practices influence individual autonomy?

This section analyses some project features that, in combination with contextual factors, influenced individual autonomy. It is necessary to stress that, although projects are agreed at the bilateral macro-level and executing agencies set details, the *actual implementation* of the projects depends on the interaction of project staff with stakeholders at different levels, multilevel structural contexts and the organisational structure (roles and responsibilities) and culture emerging from the project practices.

Despite their uniqueness in regard to location, institutional context or community dynamics, the four cases have important similarities that enhance the understanding of different experiences of autonomy and different impacts perceived by inhabitants of these localities. An early finding of this study is that people perceive the strategies of other actors, project practices and contexts in different ways. Furthermore, these perceptions do not solely depend on demographic or socio-economic characteristics.

Practices evolve over the project cycle and are interrelated; for instance, the organisational structure designed at the start of the project could determine the quality of the coordination between actors over time. However, the informal structure could be differ-

ent from the formal one. This section identifies some core practices on coordination, selection decisions, conditionality, and accountability with respect to processes.

6.1 *Coordination practices depend on the organisational structures and project aims*

The projects had different coordination needs in relation to (i) their organisational structures, entities involved, reporting chains, and responsibilities, and (ii) their goals, which differed in number, complexity, and coverage of population and territory. Table 10 shows the basic features of each project's organisation and my assessment.

In three out of four cases, a project implementation unit (PIU) was in charge of management. It was led by a project chief, a foreign professional (engineer) with relevant experience in the region, who worked as a coordinator for several executing actors (NGOs, public water companies and construction companies), external supervisors and consultants (for specific project components). Local NGOs were selected prior to the arrival of the project chief who, most likely, was unaware of the decisions made during the formulation stage until his or her arrival.

The project in Santa María was the exception. The project was managed by a locally-based arm of an international NGO whose staff lacked the capacity and institutional support to carry out a political sensitive project with high coordination needs. This situation had serious consequences on the project processes.

- *Counterparts and partners:*

National institutional arrangements were changing. There were legislative proposals to extend the responsibilities of local governments – including the management of small infrastructure projects and posterior operation of systems – and also to include organisational reforms in the water companies. This means that, at the moment of the formulation of the water projects, there was *legal uncertainty* about the meso-level context. However, in most cases, *bilateral aid practices prevailed over national institutional arrangements* and the water projects since the formulation stage were linked to the public water companies that would act as counterparts, supervisory and execution entities.

As a consequence of this design, *municipality governments* were not as much involved in the water projects as they were in the reconstruction projects. In Agua Fría, there was an unsolved impasse with the mayor. In San Fernando, the project design gave a secondary role to the municipality government, only for managing the solid waste collection and processing. Indeed, the design of the water 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).

During the implementation stage, in all cases, project staff integrated the community organisations as informal counterparts at different levels of involvement (see section 5.2), but, in the case of the reconstruction projects, *the community organisations became like 'formal' counterparts and took over the role of the municipality governments* in important aspects. This pattern was most evident in San Agustín. An explanatory factor would be their closeness to local population and their representativeness that, however, might have changed during the project life (as in the Santa María case).

Table 10: Project organisation and coordination needs

	Reconstruction		Water	
	Santa María	San Agustín	San Fernando	Agua Fría
Project management and design				
PIU	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Overall project geographic scale	Small	Medium	Large (5 sites)	Medium but disperse population
Visibility of the PIU ⁽¹⁾	Non applicable	High	Low	Medium
Complexity of project	Medium (several donors involved)	High (construction, legalisation, participatory plan)	Medium (several components incl. technical coop.)	Medium (many components)
Counterpart and partners				
Executing counterpart	Community organisation	Community organisation	Public water company	Public water company
Municipal government	Present (3 mayors during the project)	Present (1 mayor during the period)	Present (2 mayors during the project)	Absent (1 mayor during the project)
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)	President of CRDM (leaders)	1 social promoter + Committees	2 social 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 the 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.

- *Actual coordination needs considering the contexts:*

Coordination needs are divided in two types. *Internal coordination* refers to the coordination between the project management team and its partners, that is, NGOs or water companies. All projects required high coordination efforts because they either involved several partner NGOs (San Agustín), many components (Santa María, San Agustín), or several sites, with different consultants and construction companies, and new features (San Fernando).

Agua Fría 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 and harmed the technical soundness of the project because the infrastructure design and supervision failed⁷.

An important point is *the inclusion of local staff as a strategy to carry out projects with high internal coordination needs*. Both water projects mobilised inhabitants to work in the project with the support of existing or new community organisations. In addition, the project staff included one female local promoter in San Fernando and two in Agua Fría. In Agua Fría, they were relatives of communal leaders. This decision helped to build trust in leaders and in the population in general. On the other hand, the project chief in San Agustín worked in partnership with the community organisation and especially with the president of CRDM. This relation was based on mutual trust and respect (cf., Hailey, 2001/2004). It improved the project's chances of success given the authority of this leader among the population and helped to overcome the shortage of project staff.

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 Agustín demanded the highest effort from the PIU given the integral approach chosen with three components (construction, legalisation and participatory planning) and the change of hands in the national government (new presidential term in 2004).

In Santa María, the *interaction of actors in meso-level and micro-level contexts* was problematic. The political confrontation between the liberal national government and the Sandinista municipal government caused delays and scarcity of aid resources (Grunewald et al., 2001). Even national institutions were not well equipped to cope with the disaster effects. This situation did not change much during the project implementation. In addition, *macro-level aid practices* were not well-defined and hence, there were over twenty donors undertaking projects in the municipality and there was no single entity able to coordinate all the efforts efficiently⁸.

In contrast, San Fernando required the lowest effort because the project staff was much focused on providing water and sanitation services without including so many components (in contrast to Agua Fría) or multiple donors (in contrast to Santa María). In addition, there was political stability in the municipality. Leaders did not express any complaint about the municipal government, but said that it was a little distant.

⁷ Technical soundness refers to the suitability of the technical solution and its correct implementation. The fact that pipes explode is a signal that either one of two elements or both failed. I do not discuss technical details in this thesis.

⁸ Each donor contacted survivors directly and offered whatever it wished. The qualities of constructions are diverse. In Santa María, the municipality government could not fulfil its supervisory role.

Regarding project management, the experience of Santa María suggests that a sub-contracted NGO managing a multi-component project (construction, water and agriculture) and facing complex multilevel structural contexts is at high risk of failure. Nevertheless, an independent PIU would not be the best solution, even though it had a formal counterpart, because the *reliability* of the counterpart (i.e., the water company) could be limited and there would not be anyone to support an isolated PIU (e.g., in Agua Fría). This is a macro-level institutional problem that is difficult to solve⁹.

In the case of Agua Fría, in addition to the institutional problem with the public water company and the multiplicity of activities, there was confrontation at the micro-level between project staff and the mayor, since the project formulation.

Considering national trends toward decentralisation of services and greater responsibilities in the hands of municipal governments, it seems reasonable to make the municipal governments *partners* of the projects 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 main social actors (e.g., community organisations). When projects integrate several sectors as the reconstruction projects, this need is even higher.

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

A first observation is that *the reconstruction projects were complex, required high negotiation skills from project staff and also creativity and flexibility to deal with multiple uncertainties coming from macro-level contexts*. In these cases, the role of communal organisations would be crucial. These organisations behaved differently and the projects had different degrees of effectiveness, although, in both cases, the houses were built.

6.2 Selection criteria and targeting

Defining the selection criteria is a sensitive issue especially in poor localities where almost all people are in need. In the case of the reconstruction projects, all injured should have *equal rights*. It is problematic to include criteria decided by an external entity or elite that could have an agenda to favour certain groups (e.g., in Santa María). It is also difficult to define co-payments in projects targeting the poor that aim to secure *basic needs* such as leading a healthy life promoted by the access to safe drinking water. There are *assumptions* about capacity to pay that might be mistaken. For instance, the fact that most inhabitants of Agua Fría received remittances did not necessarily mean that all could afford to build a soak-way pit.

- *The definition of selection criteria and implications for targeting:*

In the case of *the reconstruction projects*, criteria were defined by a board composed by community representatives, the municipal government, and an external entity. In Santa María, new criteria were introduced during the implementation stage. The external entity was the local NGO with support of the coordinator of LD. In San Agustín, the criteria were fully defined during the formulation stage with the facilitation of an external

⁹ Specific analysis of institutional issues is outside the scope of this thesis which is more focused on individual elements and micro-level contexts.

consultant although some conditions were relaxed by consensus of the working group of the project (the decision-maker), for instance, in consideration for special cases.

In Santa María, there was leakage. Although the project had targeted survivors who prior to the mudslide lived in two specific villages that disappeared, some people – who were not survivors of the mudslide – were included in the project to fill the places of those who opted to take a nearby private land. Furthermore, conflict arose around the legitimacy of claims or who deserved to receive a house in terms of *the harm suffered*.

In San Agustín, there was under-coverage. In addition to having experienced the earthquake, people had to be poor according to a monetary threshold; households had to show certain characteristics, and above all, they had to own the plot where the house would be built. This last point caused delays and some misunderstandings. However, it also fuelled the creativity of the project chief and leaders (including the Catholic priest) to promote changes in legal procedures, to find land donors and to offer tailored housing solutions (e.g., removable prefabricated houses). Nevertheless, not all legal cases were solved and finally only 80% of houses originally budgeted were constructed.

In addition, there were issues regarding *who was poor enough* to deserve a house. Households whose monthly income exceeded the ceiling set (but still below the official poverty line) would not get the house, but would still be unable to afford a permanent house comparable in quality to the one financed by Luxembourg.

In the case of *the water projects*, criteria were defined externally 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. In this way, the grey waters are infiltrated to the soil and do not contaminate the environment. Then, each household had to build a soak-away pit (the most common) with their own funds (Agua Fría) or with project funds (San Fernando). The initial connection cost was covered by the project (Agua Fría) or by households with a subsidy from the project (San Fernando).

In Agua Fría, the construction of soak-away pits as condition could imply the exclusion of the poorest, who did not receive remittances and then could not afford to buy the materials or even attend the meetings to form the work squads. 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 and to disagreement about *who was poor enough* to deserve receiving a latrine (given the scarcity of latrines).

- *Implications of the selection criteria for individual autonomy:*

The effects of selection criteria on individual autonomy are related to the *entitlements that are defined by selection criteria*. 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. The need to involve non-leaders in the process depends on cultural features that influence what is important for them. Some people in San Agustín would delegate to leaders (on which old patronage roles seem to rely), but people in Santa María would not.

In the Santa María case, everyone was in the same situation: without land on which to build new houses. Then, the selection of potential beneficiaries was more politically sensitive than it was in San Agustín because new property would be allocated. In these circumstances, there were opportunistic behaviours. However, most people were experi-

encing deep emotional shock and uncertainty, which harmed their capacity of awareness about how entitlements were being defined and negotiated.

On one hand, survivors of the Casitas *did not understand why* others who had suffered less (and then, deserved less from their point of view) had the same or more benefits. Furthermore, they felt imprisoned in their own house because if they left their houses, they would not keep them. This was a direct attack against their autonomy because (i) they were forced to stay at home, and autonomy requires lack of coercion, and (ii) they could not look for job opportunities in other municipalities, which means that they could not make a significant choice that is where to work in order to make a living (considering that several people did not expect much from the common agricultural production). In addition, the clash between the communal leaders and the project staff in regard to the definition of beneficiaries suggests that selection criteria were not respected. This situation, in practice, meant that non-leaders were not sure about what they were supposed to do in order to keep their houses. Hence, they would do everything requested to keep the houses, develop nepotistic behaviours, or denounce the leaders publicly (to the media or the donor), while still being under the pressure of continuous uncertainty. All these lived circumstances have consequences on the intra-community relations. The inhabitants of Santa María contacted during the fieldwork did not consider that they belonged to one whole community.

On the other hand, in San Agustín, the selection criteria were clear at the implementation stage. However, the lack of knowledge about *how the selection criteria were decided* caused some confusion among non-leaders. Some focus group discussion (FGD) participants related ‘obtaining their houses’ to ‘good luck’. Although communal organisation had the support of an experienced local NGO that promoted participatory planning, it seems that information did not flow so evenly, which is explained by the micro-level context and the relationships between CRDM, development committees, and non-leaders (which project staff tried to respect). If people had better understood the project requirements and their origin, they would have been ‘less likely to portray themselves as passive recipients’ (Harvey & Lind, 2005, p. 22).

Regarding *the water projects*, the issue is how people perceived the requirement that each house had to have a soak-away pit. Several people did not internalise this condition (see section 6.3). Apparently the situation was worse in Agua Fría than in San Fernando because households had to finance the materials for something that they did not consider useful. In San Fernando, initial delays and scepticism affected the pace of the project so that workshops were more focused on how to build the sanitation infrastructure than on *why to have them in the first place*. Less than one year after the completion of the project—when the fieldwork took place—many people (excepting leaders) did not give adequate maintenance to sanitation infrastructure.

There is one recurrent criteria topic in all cases: *who was poor enough* to receive the benefit. The emphasis on this feature has potential negative effects on autonomy because people could link benefiting from projects to the existence of a visible material lack of well-being. Considering that the projects had already targeted poor communities (i.e., geographic targeting) in which all households had *the same need* (i.e., social infrastructure) or had been hit by disasters, it was not necessary to further differentiate between poor enough and not poor enough households. Even worse, in Agua Fría, the targeting could have been against the poorest because residents had to finance their own soak-away pits.

On the other hand, if people were already categorised as not poor enough, there was not much that they could do to become eligible, even if they could promote activities related to the project. For instance, a not poor enough household would not receive a latrine in San Fernando despite the fact that the housewife attended training sessions to build latrines. The definition of a *consensual* poverty threshold (if any in the case of the water projects) was problematic and, considering the relative high value of the expected benefit, people would lie about their revenues to become eligible (e.g., in the economic census of San Agustín), although within certain limits depending on the knowledge that leaders (involved in the project) had about the economic situation of their neighbours. By the same token, in the short-run, there were no incentives for people to improve their economic situation because then they would become ineligible. This kind of aid that erodes the incentives for self-help is called ‘unhelpful help’ by Ellerman (2006).

6.3 *Internalisation of work commitments and conditionality*

In relation to the issue of participation earlier discussed, it is possible that working in self-construction activities is interpreted as a *commitment* that would influence individual autonomy in different ways. In fact, project participants could interpret this work as:

1. A condition imposed by an external entity that has to be fulfilled, independently of one’s opinion (e.g., ‘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 (e.g., ‘it was our contribution’; ‘I did everything that was asked for’);
3. The fulfilment of such an agreement that brings happiness and pride because they are putting effort to improve their own life (e.g., ‘we did not leave the project to decay’; ‘San Agustín for San Agustín’);
4. The fulfilment of such an agreement whose process (the work) they are enjoying because they are learning a new skill, engaging with people ‘bigger than them’, sharing experiences with neighbours or working together (e.g., ‘we were three communities that became like only one’).

The extent to which individuals agree with any of the previous interpretations depends on how they internalise their commitments (Deci & Ryan, 2000). In the first case, there is not internalisation; people perceive their tasks as obligations because they did not share in the decisions to do them or although they did, the contexts in which they worked were so controlling, restrictive and adverse that they felt that they were working for someone else, not for themselves. Hence, their manual work became a commodity that had to be provided uniformly (without consideration to special circumstances) but for which they did not get a ‘fair’ compensation. This interpretation was more common among project participants in *Santa María*, who told about excessive control and mistreatments during the construction and compared their situation with that of beneficiaries of other projects who did not participate in self-construction works. Furthermore, having frequently expressed their opinions did not help much to reach a fairer deal.

In the second case, people know that an agreement (in which they participated, directly or through their leaders) was reached because the final goal was valuable. However, the components of this agreement later became obligations. For instance, they do not understand why they had to build a soak-away pit – if the soil does not infiltrate, there is not enough space in the garden, or they could throw the grey waters to the river instead – but they did it because it was agreed in order to get the water connection. This is the case for most people in *Agua Fría*.

In the third case, people are fulfilling a commitment but they ‘have in sight’ the final outcome. This brings them happiness and pride because they feel that there is something in reach that they can do to help themselves and their community. They are intrinsically motivated (Ellerman, 2006, p. 37). This is the case for most people (mainly group coordinators) in *San Agustín*, despite the suffering for lack of food and long work periods especially in the new colonies. It would also be the case for some people in Santa María and work squads in Agua Fría while constructing the reservoir. The latter case is related to the concept of causality orientation (section 2.1). People feel that the final outcome is going to be the result of their actions; they are taking part in the process but they are also causing the valuable outcome. For instance, if successful, the trade of fish raised in the reservoir would have been the result of *their* effort.

In the fourth case, people are also enjoying the process of working together. It was basically women who expressed this in *San Fernando* and *Agua Fría* because they shared time in training sessions, learned to organise themselves for project and social activities (e.g., the garbage carnival in San Fernando), told other people about their experience (e.g., field trips in the Agua Fría case), and so on. It was less common in the reconstruction projects (although some did say so) where work conditions were harder.

What does it mean in terms of individual autonomy? In terms of the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2000), it means that in addition to personality factors that affect how people interpret or perceive actions, the particular *practices* (events that initiate or regulate behaviour) and *interpersonal contexts during the project* are important.

Project contexts can make an initially internalised commitment feel like an external imposition, depending on the community context. For instance, the effects on autonomy of controlling practices (i.e., long workdays) were quite different in Santa María and San Agustín. In the latter case, people considered that their leaders were representative and that the agreement was fair. Despite the long waiting time (because of legal procedures) individuals in San Agustín trusted that the final output would be achievable and furthermore, *they knew what the output would be* (e.g., the design of their houses, social infrastructure). In contrast, individuals in Santa María did not feel supported by the executing NGO (the donor was distant); organisation problems during the project introduced *uncertainty* about important features, and many people did not know how their house would look when starting the construction. For people who had lost so much in their lives, this uncertainty was another tragedy. Furthermore, in San Agustín, there was a charismatic and committed project chief; while, in Santa María the project was managed by a sub-contracted NGO. The interpersonal context mitigated the negative effect of the controlling practices on the intrinsic motivation.

Transforming project features that are considered externally imposed into internalised commitments via project activities is more difficult. This is the case for Agua Fría where the local NGO found it hard to change the perception that soak-away pits, latrines and ecological woodstoves were part of the same bundle and a requisite to get the water connection. Apparently, people were influenced by the bad experience of neighbours in cantons served by another NGO that forced people to take up all these components of the project and they were not convinced about the *utility* of such outputs.

The 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 more or less accurate. 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 impor-

tant role than leaders in San Agustín, because leaders in San Agustín would meet frequently the project chief. However, as information did not disperse evenly in San Agustín and the project chief had such an active role, some people considered that only project staff (without the concurrence of communal leaders) made the relevant decisions and, as such, they fulfilled commitments as a sign of gratefulness. Furthermore, the fact that the president of CRDM was hired as an assistant of the project meant to several people that he (the president) had become an employee of the project, which in their eyes, was the supreme institution.

Authentically motivated people look for more involvement in those aspects that they value. Participants in the reconstruction projects wanted to be involved in the selection of the house design. In San Agustín, based on the basic models selected by leaders, some people introduced small changes in coordination with the bricklayers that would fit better the shape of their plot and their customs (e.g., whether looking at the street or at the garden). The involvement was much lower for the construction of social infrastructure so that, for instance, the lodge-hospice has not been used. In this respect, it seems that some social infrastructure was designed based on ideas of the donor (e.g., non-leaders did not like the design of the main square park) about necessities and entitlements and the interest of some leaders to use the available resources, thus developing some small money-seeking instead of genuine own-motivated projects (Ellerman, 2007, p. 567).

People who perceive that they have the *right to be benefited* also look for more involvement, although the relative degree of involvement may differ. The inhabitants of Santa María considered that they were the most hit by disaster and that their experience had fuelled aid flows to the country (e.g., they were visited by the US president). Similarly, the inhabitants of Agua Fría considered that their leaders, together with other leaders from neighbouring cantons, had fought long to get safe drinking water. Therefore, if the project staff or the 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 María, they chose between staying in an invaded private land and accepting the offer of the donor. In Agua Fría, they chose between this project and the option offered by the mayor. Furthermore, the arrival of the project was a result of their insistence (i.e., internal locus of causality). Then, projects were not acts of charity to be accepted as they came, there was a *responsibility* from national institutions and donors.

The resulting higher *involvement* of non-leaders in Santa María and Agua Fría in comparison to the other two cases would be the result not only of *the willingness of project staff*, but also of the exercise of *autonomy* by local population in those contexts. The potential to enhance autonomy in these two cases was larger than in the others because the motivation existed; it was not supplied by the donor (Ellerman, 2004; 2006; 2007). As such, it can be said then that this kind of participation (i.e., exercising voice) had a moral or nonmaterial incentive ‘as a promise of future negotiation power’ (Goulet, 1989, p. 175) that induced people to negotiate material incentives to improve their well-being such as the productive projects. Unfortunately, other factors such as political opposition and the failure of these productive projects put obstacles to this empowering process.

In relation to the initial discussion about instrumental effects of participation, the extent to which work commitments are internalised directly affects the achievement of project outputs and, indirectly, affects autonomy. For instance, the degree of acceptance of soak-away pits, and knowing why they were important, would have an impact on health

achievements because people would use and maintain them adequately. Therefore, it is important to explain to people the reasons why certain fixed features of projects are necessary and *to incorporate the local knowledge* to promote a sense of self-worth. Concomitantly, this also helps to achieve results. For instance, listening to comments about the soil quality could lead to adapt the sanitation systems so that people would see them as useful. Then, the sustainability of the project outputs and, most importantly, the expected effect on health, physical capacity and autonomy would be improved.

6.4 *The lack of accountability on processes also harms individual autonomy*

Either for decision of donors or leaders, both projects incorporated beneficiaries as assistants of bricklayers in construction activities, although the individuals of Santa María and San Agustín 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. In contrast, other projects in the same municipalities offered houses built by private constructors.

In these contexts, *participants 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. Moreover, 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 actually building houses, residents who already were bricklayers could have worked and monitored the construction works so that both autonomy and effectiveness were promoted.

One expected effect of self-construction activities was that people would acquire an *alternative skill* that would reduce their economic vulnerability. However, a crucial point is whether there were *real opportunities to apply* this new skill in nearby areas. Some men could get jobs in the same project, build the social infrastructure, and also 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. Many returned to work in agriculture activities and other migrated to find alternative jobs as they live in poor areas and there is little construction activity there.

Therefore, becoming bricklayers brought a short-term economic benefit for some men. Nevertheless, 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.

7 **Implications**

This paper has discussed some practices of four aid projects, 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.

1. *Macro-level aid practices* are important. The Santa María case showed the difficulties to coordinate efforts with a multiplicity of donors. Both reconstruction projects were affected by early cut-off of food aid. At the meso-level context, institutional aspects related to public water companies and political decentralisation is also im-

portant. The water projects had potential risks of confrontation because the formal counterparts were water companies and local political authorities were not involved.

2. Enrolling communal leaders in the project and even hiring local promoters connected to them was a strategy *to assure project effectiveness* in the water projects. There, communal organisations had a more instrumental role than in the reconstruction projects. In the latter case, leaders were involved at different stages, but more formally and constructively in the case of San Agustín than in Santa María (where an initial alliance ended in confrontation between leaders and project staff).
3. The projects had different *meanings*. For inhabitants of San Agustín, the project was an opportunity, while those in Santa María could not overcome their tragedy easily. For residents of Agua Fría, they had fought hard to get the water access and were willing to work in everything requested to reach their goal, while those in San Fernando had a more passive role. In relation to these meanings, the participation of leaders was more significant in San Agustín. However, local intention is not the only factor: leaders in Agua Fría found an already framed project hard to influence.
4. Regarding the *participation of non-leaders*, a common feature is that residents of the four sites worked in self-construction activities. In most cases, the objective was instrumental and was translated into high workload (not always informed) with very low exercise of decision-making. However, 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.
5. The *selection criteria* define entitlements, which also depend on the *relationships* between community leaders and non-leaders that are marked by *common history and culture*. The selection criteria and their formation processes must be at least 'known' by everyone before the implementation of the project. The need for involving non-leaders in the process depends on their cultural features.
6. The involvement in the project does not only result from the willingness of project staff and/or community leaders, but also from the motivated behaviours of actors even in controlling contexts (e.g. Santa María and Agua Fría). *Power relations* between project staff and participants, not only those among community members must be analysed.
7. 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 formulators assume in their logical frameworks and affect the *lives of real people who have values, needs, commitments and dreams*. Consequently, assumptions have to be explicit, values have to be identified together with local people and actions have to be carefully assessed.
8. Given the instrumental importance of autonomy to promote human development and well-being, a new criterion of *efficacy* could be explicitly included in projects, so that the expansion of autonomy is assessed. This proposal deserves higher elaboration.

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