

## **Collective action as an example of the strength of an environmental civil society organization**

Norha Carrasco Rincón, Student, Universidad de Los Andes

[n.carrasco10@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:n.carrasco10@uniandes.edu.co)

57-300-223-24-44

Cra. 17 No. 145 A – 38, Bogotá, Colombia.

Master in Development and Practice – MDP, Master's Candidate

### **Abstract**

"The Friends of the Mountain" began its work as a civil society and environmental collective in 2006, with the aim of promoting the protection and responsible use of the eastern hills of Bogotá, a forest reserve under threat of development. Eventually this work led to the creation of an NGO formally established in 2013.

The NGO faces the challenge of achieving its objectives while ensuring its financial sustainability in the long term. Its work depends on volunteers and their increasing participation in formal spaces with district authorities on issues affecting the reserve. Although the organization would require a formal structure and salaried people to realize its goals, such decisions might weaken its main strength: the unconditional support of volunteers who have important social networks and professional skills required to advance the organization's aims.

The aim of this study is to identify the key elements that generate active participation from the people linked to Friends of the Mountain. The results of this exercise will serve as input for the organization to establish strategies to increase the number of active participants, define more precise objectives for this participation, and increase its effectiveness.

To this end, a qualitative approach was used, based on a semi-structured interview to explore these key elements with nine volunteers, aged between 22 and 60 year-old. The information was analyzed by the content analysis technique. From results of the analysis three categories were identified to better comprehend people's motivations, goals and feelings about their work for the reserve: interest in the reserve, reasons for engagement and emotional aspects.

The analysis of the interviews shows a symbiosis of the three relevant issues and narratives in which volunteers are building life paths through the mountains. They are motivated for a deep feeling of defense of the public space as a place for identity formation and construction of civil life. They also fear that their actions might fail or be undermined by a deterioration of the security of the area. Based on this analysis I propose to orient the NGO's strategies in three issues: strengthen the community relationships and its identity based in the responsible use of the Eastern hills of Bogotá; to form alliances with schools and universities to promote an education program based in the Eastern hills of Bogotá as an environmental classroom; and assume an intermediary and integrator role between the different actors that have interest in the forest reserve.

## Introduction

In 1976, the “Eastern Hills of Bogotá” (COB) became a forest reserve of Bogotá city<sup>1</sup>. However, the expansion of Bogotá as the main city of Colombia continuously threatens the reserve, demanding specific actions for its protection by public authorities, as well as by business and community actors.

The increasing environmental problems, evidenced in the changing of the global environmental indicators (Steffen, et al 2015), has also highlighted the role of community and non-profit organizations as actors in maintaining attention to protect and preserve the ecosystems, promoting social change and building of environmental governance (Thaler 2008)<sup>2</sup>. Colombia is no stranger to this trend. The Constitution establishes that the Government must facilitate the participation of the citizens in decisions that affect them, including those related to the right to enjoy a healthy environment (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente 1991)<sup>3</sup>. In the Capital District of Bogotá, this subject is reaffirmed through citizen participation exercises in a set of spaces created for dialogue, development consensus building and control of public administration (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D. C. 2011)<sup>4</sup>.

In this context, "The Friends of the Mountain" (LAM for its acronym in Spanish) arose in 2006 as a collective of civil society with interest in the protection and responsible use of the COB. Given its work, in 2013 the group was formalized through the creation of an NGO aimed at promoting the activities of care, conservation, restoration, enhancement and appropriation of the Eastern Hills of Bogotá (Asociación Amigos de la Montaña 2013). The

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<sup>1</sup> This is the original text of the Colombian legislation about the declaration of Eastern hills of Bogotá as a protection zone: “Artículo 1: Declarar como Área de Reserva Forestal Protectora a la zona denominada Bosque Oriental de Bogotá, ubicada en jurisdicción del Distrito Especial de Bogotá” (Junta Directiva del Instituto Nacional de los Recursos Naturales Renovables Y Del Ambiente –INDERENA–, 1976). A year later, the President of the Colombian Republic supported this initiative (Presidencia de la República, 1977).

<sup>2</sup> Overall, the organization decisions affect the decisions of other agents (individuals, organizations, state) and therefore their behavior (Thaler, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> These are some of the original texts of the Colombian legislation about the civil participation, first as a State aim and second as a human right: “Artículo 2: Son fines esenciales del Estado... facilitar la participación de todos en las decisiones que los afectan y en la vida económica, política, administrativa y cultural de la Nación...” (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1991); “Artículo 79. Todas las personas tienen derecho a gozar de un ambiente sano. La ley garantizará la participación de la comunidad en las decisiones que puedan afectarlo. Es deber del Estado proteger la diversidad e integridad del ambiente, conservar las áreas de especial importancia ecológica y fomentar la educación para el logro de estos fines” (Asamblea Nacional Constituyente, 1991).

<sup>4</sup> This is the original text of the definition of civil participation for Bogotá in the Colombian legislation: “Artículo 2º. Definición de Participación Ciudadana. Entiéndase la participación ciudadana como el derecho al ejercicio pleno del poder de las personas que en condición de sujetos sociales y políticos, y de manera individual o colectiva transforman e inciden en la esfera pública en función del bien general y el cumplimiento de los derechos civiles, políticos, sociales, económicos, ambientales y culturales, mediante procesos de diálogo, deliberación y concertación entre actores sociales e institucionales, para materializar las políticas públicas, bajo los principios de dignidad humana, equidad, diversidad, incidencia. La participación se realizará sin discriminación por situación de discapacidad, ciclo vital, sexual, política, económica, étnica, cultural, o de cualquier otra índole” (Alcaldía Mayor de Bogotá D. C., 2011). In the country level there is a law from 2015 with this aim (Ley Estatutaria 1757 de 2015 “por la cual se dictan disposiciones en materia de promoción y protección del derecho a la participación democrática”). The two above are example of governance construction in Colombia.

main challenge of this NGO is to become a strong company with administrative and financial sustainability in the long term, without losing its added value as an organization of civil society and space for building social fabric.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to identify the key elements that generate an active participation of people linked to LAM as community organization to analyze this input and to recommend to LAM strategies to increase the number of active participants, which will strengthen the NGO. As a result of this exercise LAM should guide its strategies into three subjects: i) strengthening relations between the neighboring community to the COB and its identity around its responsible use; ii) assume the role of mediator and integrator among different actors interested in the forest reserve; and iii) forming partnerships with colleges, universities and compensation funds to promote education programs based on the COB as an environmental classroom.

To this end, first there is a summary of the process of strength of the community and the formation of the NGO, with the aim of having the necessary context to understand the dilemma. Secondly, there is a brief explanation of the theoretical reasons behind the creation of an organization and the constituent elements of social capital, from the theory of Ostrom. Then, the explanation of the methodology used for the collection and analysis of information needed to address the above dilemma, aimed to compare these results in light of the organizational and social capital theories. Finally, as a result of this analysis, the corresponding recommendations to the NGO are presented.

### **The beginnings of The Friends of the Mountain (LAM)**

The Friends of the Mountain as a group has its origins in the early 2000s, as a result of sharing the Cerros Orientales as a space for recreation and physical activity by a group of people who identified themselves as "friends for climbing the mountain" (Plazas, 2015)<sup>5</sup>. Achieving this goal requires having the right conditions in the hills and in their area, to enjoy long-term environmental services; however, the main reason that promoted the transformation and formalization of this group of people was the insecurity in the COB in 2004, when the group had to request the intervention of the Bogotá's police to secure this area of the city, and to self-organize to contribute constructively to this intervention (Plazas, 2015).

This first stage meant an achievement for LAM. But also they began identifying issues of social and economic character of the inhabitants of the neighborhoods in the COB border zone that negatively affected the goal set (Plazas 2015)<sup>6</sup>, generating new concerns and challenges for LAM, who began to have a more active participation in the meetings spaces as citizens. As a result thereof, in 2009 the Local Development Plan of Chapinero included the project "comprehensive creeks recovery" (Secretaría Distrital de Ambiente, Alcaldía Local de Chapinero y Conservación Internacional Colombia 2014)<sup>7</sup>. Finally, to meet the

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<sup>5</sup> Andrés Plazas is the president of LAM.

<sup>6</sup> With this analysis LAM identified problems such as violence, the existence of gangs and lack of income of the population, among other social and economic difficulties present in some neighborhoods, causing security problems. They found also the existence of large builders interested in the edge region for expansion of the city, and the irresponsible use of the Eastern hills by some citizens. (Plazas, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Chapinero is a territorial zone for planification in Bogotá.

needs required by the changing context, the group was formalized through the creation of the Association of Friends of the Mountain as an NGO in November 2013 (Asociación Amigos de la Montaña 2013).

The greatest strength of LAM is the community volunteering for the protection and responsible use of the forest reserve and its increasing participation in formal spaces for interaction with district authorities on issues affecting the COB, contributing to build environmental governance through citizen mobilization in the form of collective action, citizen participation with an impact on decision making and the defense of this area of protection of the city.

However, as a nascent formally constituted organization, the Association faces challenges, within which are: finding its financial stability; having enough staff to meet the participation in discussion spaces about the Eastern Hills of Bogotá; expanding the coverage of their community actions; maintaining the interest of the members and the group of volunteers who contribute time and work to LAM; and maintaining the reputation they have built in more than ten years of growing and consolidation (Plazas 2015). This is an obvious concern of the partner, since organizational dynamics requires a transition towards formalizing its structure and forms of linkage, through hiring third parties outside the process to account for the activities of the association, but this can jeopardize the essence of LAM.

### **Reference theories**

Group and organizational development theories are based on the assumption that individuals are associated or form groups given the functions that these groups can perform, and which are not achievable by each individual separately (Olson 1992). Additionally, from the point of view of management as a discipline (science and art) the purpose is looking for a group performance based on three elements: common goals, common values, and an appropriate structure, which together with the appropriate training, allow organizational development necessary to perform and respond to change (Drucker 1989).

All these four elements are based in the common interests and an expected benefit that the members of the group will perceive, regardless of their interests and individual contributions, which shows the difficulty of the relationships between the group and the behavior of the person who is part of it, as each member can assign a different value to the collective good that the group wants, affecting the effectiveness in achieving group goals (Olson 1992)<sup>8</sup>. This implies a consensual creation of such goals and values of the group, or its voluntary acceptance of new members when deciding on participation in the group, and a need to clarify responsibilities, actions to achieve the goals and how to carry out their monitoring and tracking.

At this point, scenarios for collective action materialize. These are characterized by the existence of a group of individuals, a common interest among them and a potential conflict

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<sup>8</sup> Olson explains that the benefits offered by groups and organizations to their members are public goods, because nobody can restrict the access to such benefits, although the access to a share of profit implies that other members cannot access the same part.

between the common interest and the interest of each individual, and building social capital has shown to be a way to solve these tensions (Ostrom y Ahn 2003).

From the expansionist vision, social capital means a family of factors that improve the individual's ability to solve problems of collective action, through the definition of ways to create expectations and confidence among group participants, mutually reinforcing to overcome the evil temptations of short-term that individuals face off (Ostrom y Ahn 2003). These factors are realized through the combination of three sets of elements:

a. Trust and norms of reciprocity: refers to the way in which an individual expected that another one is going to act, given an action performed by the first one. If the second individual responds as expected, it is understood that there is reciprocity, and that confidence is enhanced by the behavior of both individuals (Ostrom y Ahn 2003).

b. Networks / civil participation: addresses the formation of informally or formally self-organized groups, whose strength is the active participation and exchange of information that promotes the identification of socially desired behaviors, and creating incentives for its promotion (Ostrom y Ahn 2003)<sup>9</sup>.

c. Rules or formal and informal institutions: focuses on the formal and informal rules, which reinforce the behaviors accepted by the group, and define the consequences of not respecting these behaviors (Ostrom y Ahn 2003).

### **The Friends of the Mountain: an example of collective action**

In order to contrast the above-mentioned theoretical elements with the current situation of LAM, a descriptive study with qualitative approach was used, based on a semi-structured interview, to actively explore the key elements that led people to participate through volunteering in the NGO. The interview was applied in nine people aged between 22 and 60 years who had had the experience of participating in community organizations voluntarily (People with experience in volunteering, 2016). In this process the ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence and confidentiality were respected. The information was analyzed using the technique of content analysis and classification (see Table 1) as reference the following three suggested topics to address the motivations for collective action were taken: interests (what I win / what I lose), reasons for engagement (what argument based / what argument rejects) and emotional aspects (positive / negative) (Mockus 2008), about their work for the reserve.

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<sup>9</sup> In this group, citizen participation becomes a strategic partner to identify prospects for individual development and the common aspects of these life projects to ensure the necessary synergies for definition of a common vision of development (Boisier, 2007).

TABLE 1 RATING INFORMATION OF INTERVIEWS		
INTERESTS	REASONS	EMOTIONS
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Access to water.</li> <li>• Recreational space.</li> <li>• Work option.</li> <li>• Leadership.</li> <li>• Teamwork.</li> <li>• Protection space.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defense of public space.</li> <li>• Community work for the appropriation of land.</li> <li>• The mountain as socio-ecosystem.</li> <li>• Learn to care.</li> <li>• Civic culture.</li> <li>• Complexity of the territory.</li> <li>• Another NGO as references.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The mountain as a home.</li> <li>• The mountain as a childhood stage.</li> <li>• Anxiety for failure.</li> <li>• Fear to insecurity.</li> </ul>

The analysis of the interviews shows a symbiosis of the three relevant issues and narratives in which volunteers are building life paths through the mountains, are motivated for a deep feeling of defense of the public space as a place for identity formation and construction of civil life, and fear that their actions might fail or be undermined by a deterioration of the security of the area.

Identity formation goes back naturally to pleasant experiences of childhood and youth in the COB, and focuses on the appropriation of territory for personal and professional development, and finally as a home. Meanwhile, construction of civil life is based on the vision of the mountain as a socio-ecological system (Chapin, Kofinas y Folke 2009)<sup>10</sup>, generating community leadership, knowledge and learning, indicating an environmental and social awareness shared between LAM volunteers. In this sense, the volunteers' common functions, goals and values about the forest reserve are evident. Additionally, there is awareness of the need to work together and to build networks to achieve their mission, reinforcing trust, consensus and dialogue among "The Friends of the Mountain.

In this regard, LAM is the result of a process of collective action on the protection and responsible use of COB, which is still under construction, and requires strategies to strengthen and consolidate itself.

### Recommendations to LAM

Based on this analysis I propose to focus LAM's strategies in three issues with the aim of increasing the number of stakeholders and volunteers who actively participate in promoting conservation activities and appropriation of the Eastern Hills of Bogotá and, thus ensuring the administrative and financial sustainability of the NGO:

- i) Strengthen the community relationships and its identity based on the responsible use of the Eastern Hills of Bogotá. LAM took more than ten years to be reinforced through the organization of volunteering. The strategy of "count on me" that exists can be expanded as a tool for coordination and consolidation of actions aimed at strengthening relations with the surrounding community to the COB and to reach it more interested in the

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<sup>10</sup> Conceiving the territory as a socio-ecological system requires a holistic view thereof, in which the ecological and social properties are articulated based on the understanding of ecosystem services provided by the environment and their relationship with people in the long run (Chapin, Kofinas, & Folke, 2009).

protection and responsible forest reserve use and obtain voluntary donations in monetary terms.

- ii) Assume an intermediary and integrator role between the different actors that have interest in the forest reserve, since its strength in dialogue, consultation and work on existing staff, as embodied in its reputation (good will). This role will strengthen the identity of the Association counteract the weaknesses generated by the flexibility of its organizational structure, and strengthen public confidence in the organization.
- iii) Form alliances with schools and universities to promote an education program based in the Eastern hills of Bogotá as an environmental classroom. It was evident that the formation of identity is based on the experiences of childhood and youth, so this strategy would have two concrete benefits: in the short term it will facilitate obtaining resources to support volunteer work through the sale of services as an environmental classroom; in the long term, it will generate in students a link to the mountain, bring to the construction of networks, active participation, exchange of information and, therefore, of social capital.

For the operationalization of the strategies the NGO should consider the following:

- a. The construction of identity is forged over a territory with experiences that occur in it, for a period of time. This requires patience and continuous work, so it will require volunteers to generate the required networks.
- b. Regardless of the degree of volunteerism and organizational formalization of LAM, the two elements must coexist to ensure sustainability. This implies a risk of loss of volunteerism given the strength of the formal organization.
- c. After beginning the strategies implementation, these can generate the resources needed to recognize any economic support to volunteers, without linking people outside the community process of LAM. These resources would have two main sources: grants and payment received by the Environmental Classroom management.

It is expected that the development of these strategies articulated in the long term promote the strengthening of social capital around the COB, which will facilitate their preservation and conservation and sustainable use of public space as part of the city. In this sense, LAM will fulfill its goals, and will be an example of community-based as a key player for the conservation of the environment adaptation.

## **Conclusions**

The construction of identity around the environment is one of the key elements to the consolidation and strengthening of civil society groups and, therefore environmental governance. This construction is based on finding a balance between the interests, reasons and emotions generated in future group participants that address the issue of environmental protection.

In this sense, access to individual, familiar and group experiences associated with the responsible use of ecosystem services and its relationship with the human being should be made available to children and young people. They must become the center of strategies of

environmental NGOs, which will have long-term implications for the achievement of objectives of conservation, protection and responsible use of the environment, through concrete acts incorporated into the people's habits.

Similarly, maintaining that identity through building civil life could strengthen the recognition of common goals and values, promoting active participation, and building social fabric.

These kinds of strategies, though long term, can strengthen environmental governance to deal with the threats identified by global environmental change at the local level.

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