

# Promoters of agroecology and poster girls for participation: divergence in leadership training with a Bolivian NGO<sup>1</sup>

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**Abstract** This article examines rural Bolivian youth within farm households engaged in participatory agroecology development with an NGO. A central component of this work involves ‘leadership’ training. Despite certain politicized aspects, it tends to operate in neoliberal and technical ways, resulting in greatly diverging experiences for participants along gendered and generational lines. The *buzzword* nature of the term raises questions of how it is used and what is glossed over. These issues are examined through vignettes, with particular attention to one teenaged girl who attended workshops to become a leader in organic production and became a symbol of the NGO’s success with youth and women’s ‘empowerment.’ Her motives to participate involved familial pressure, a desire to network toward relocation, and finally, some interest in the sustainability of her household’s farm and community.

**KEYWORDS:** rural youth; leadership training; agroecology; *jóvenes rurales*; Bolivia; *promotores*; *genero*.

## Introduction

When I first saw sixteen-year-old Ramona<sup>2</sup> she was standing with her parents in the vegetable garden next to their adobe home, proudly displaying their large cabbages and carrots. Staff from a Bolivian development NGO, ODEP, and the visiting members of its Canadian partner NGO, CANGO, were busy snapping pictures. The second eldest of several siblings, Ramona appeared

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<sup>2</sup> Pseudonyms have been provided for people, the community and the organizations.

to be the only one actively involved with her parents in participating with ODEP's agroecology efforts. She was shy but sociable with the visiting foreigners and we learned that she aspired to go to school to become an agronomist. Much attention was paid to this teenage girl as a shining example of ODEP encouraging women and youth in its projects.

I had accompanied CANGO on its annual field visit to meet with ODEP and travel to various participating communities, and in this case it was my introduction to one of the communities in which I would conduct my fieldwork. Back at ODEP's office in the city later that week, I noticed pictures of Ramona in various pamphlets and posters. There were other farmers and youth featured, but as a young woman from an actively involved household it was clear that she had become a 'poster girl' for ODEP.

Ramona, it turned out, had recently moved to the nearby town where she worked as a domestic labourer and went to high school in the evenings. She continued to attend ODEP's five monthly 'Promoters' workshops and as a result was invited to a farmer-experience 'exchange' in Cochabamba with the rest of the participants. This was the final requirement in completing the training to be a farmer-leader in her community, but Ramona had other plans. Once in the city, Ramona did not return.

No one seemed particularly surprised; many of the parents of teenagers were accepting of the idea that their children had, or would soon move. There was an almost uniform dream amongst parents for their children to go to university and become "professionals." Even if they returned to the countryside, training in agronomy might provide opportunities for an easier life. However, the sentiments were bittersweet. Don Hector, a father of ten, with his eldest three already relocated to urban centres (one in university), described the future of the community as "just sad." "They don't want to live here! They want to go to Cochabamba, La Paz, Santa Cruz [...] they want to sell everything when we die."

The director of ODEP, Juan Luis, described it pragmatically:

The reality for youth [...] is that the economic situation in the communities – there are no real opportunities for them [...]. It isn't possible to make money in the communities so the youth must immigrate. [...] In the case of Ramona, she went on the exchange and she liked the city and she has some contacts there, so she stayed.

Nonetheless, when Ramona returned five months later to celebrate Carnival in her home community, her parents insisted she remain until she was eighteen. She obeyed, but told me she had no intention of participating in, or being any kind of promoter of ODEP's work while she waited for her next birthday to arrive.

Ramona's case exemplifies an important dilemma faced by agroecology efforts to appeal to youth, with implications for sustainability cross-generationally. Closer examination illuminates issues of representation in ODEP's relations with its Northern funders, always concerned with the participation and empowerment of women. Interviews and conversations with members of her household and oth-

ers shed light on household decision-making processes to participate, or not, with the NGO and how youth come to be involved. Finally, Ramona's participation with ODEP as a community promoter-in-training contributed to a clearer picture of the *leadership* components of ODEP's work. Discrepancies in the notion of leadership, in the priority placed on it in relation to farming, and the role of representation in displaying success all contribute to the recognition of 'leadership' as another development buzzword (see Leal, 2010).

The high mountain valley from which Ramona hails is home to farmers who rely heavily on their corn production for both household consumption and income. The challenges faced by communities here in the exodus of youth are not unique; they are challenges experienced by dwindling rural populations. Likewise, the fragile growing conditions of mountain agriculture and the insecurities of the global market encourage a rising number of families to relocate permanently. The non-governmental organization, which I refer to as ODEP (*Organización de Desarrollo Ecológico de Potosí*) has more than a decade of experience working with farming communities and associations in Norte de Potosí. At the time of my research, the NGO had been working in Tomacoyo for approximately three years. Initially there had been only a few interested households (Ramona's being among the first), but that number had grown to about twenty (of the forty comprising the community). CANGO has been supporting ODEP's efforts since that time.

During my fieldwork, a male and female agronomist came and went from the district, with others, such as a civil engineer, participating in irrigation projects. The male agronomist assigned to the district, Adriano, worked 20 days per month spreading his time between six communities. The female agronomist, Rocío, spent ten days there and another ten days in a district closer to her young family. They worked on themes of organic production and adaptation to climate change, composting, agrobiodiversity, soil conservation, and micro-irrigation, among others. Their work was mostly practical, complemented by theoretical components in monthly workshops, which included demonstrations and planning sessions for future work or events such as ODEP's annual agrobiodiversity fair.

The data presented here is derived from interviews with ODEP staff, as well as one government employed agronomist, and is based on ethnographic research conducted over eight months in 2010 with 30 farm households in two communities in the Chayanta province of Norte de Potosí. Interview participants included twenty youth (14 females and six males) between the ages of 12 and 21. Most were still living with their parents, though two had moved to the nearby municipal town, and one 15 year old boy was living in Cochabamba, returning when his family needed assistance with farm labour. Three of the female youth were mothers themselves.

The household as a unit of study remains important as a corrective to the tendency to view people as individuals rather than recognizing them as actors who live

and make choices in larger familial and communal structures. Punch's (2002) study of rural Bolivian youth highlights the factors that go into their decisions to stay in their communities or leave for work, or secondary education. She demonstrates how rural youth negotiate their limited options within the context of household needs and familial expectations. While special attention is paid to youth involvement in ODEP's projects, adult community members are included in the discussion contextualizing youth participation with the NGO, within farm households and within the efforts of the NGO to enhance leadership skills.

Arguably, the long-term success of sustainable agriculture efforts depends on their appeal to the next generation of farming households. Yet farming communities are emptied of their youth as they migrate to urban centres (Punch, 2002). The impact of participatory farmer-agronomist strategies on youth requires research that places the dynamics of gender and generation at the centre of investigation into the larger question of the challenges of collaboration and the possibilities for merging distinct knowledges for the purposes of agricultural development. I analyze youth participation with ODEP through a particular aspect of the NGO's goals for training: the production of farmer-leaders. This concern has both technical and political components, and is examined below in light of Hickey and Mohan's (2004) argument for the transformative potential of participation when rooted in a broad and political interpretation of citizenship. ODEP's efforts to transcend technical capacity-building by promoting a political agenda in certain ways hold promise for building collaborations between the organization and farmers; for supporting a more political project of social justice. However, this article finds that 'leadership' training masks power imbalances that disadvantage women, and tends to operate in neoliberal ways.

This double-edge of leadership training, central to the analysis here, requires a brief theoretical discussion of neoliberalism. Andolina, Laurie and Radcliffe (2009) analyze what they see as a new neoliberal paradigm in Latin America. In an effort to overcome the shortcomings of earlier, or narrower neoliberal approaches, this paradigm expands notions of development's potential by placing terms like "*diversity, inclusion, sustainability, and stakeholders* alongside terms such as *efficiency, self-management, productivity and capacity*" (p. 10, emphasis in original). In this way, neoliberalism both opens new "political space and 'disciplines' those who occupy that space" (Hale, 2002, p. 490). Andolina *et al.* refer to this process as social neoliberalism. Their analysis is helpful for conceptualizing the sequenced transformations that neoliberalism has undertaken, as social neoliberalism recognizes the shift from earlier narrow versions of neoliberalism (also see Hale, 2002). While neoliberalism involves trade liberalization, privatization and the reduction of government to enable certain modes of economic development – concepts that Bolivian president Evo Morales and his MAS government have ostensibly resisted – analysis of the sometimes subtle workings of social neoliberalism sheds light on

ways in which participation in development is understood. In Bolivia, which arguably contends with a fragmented and hybrid neoliberalism (Haarstad & Anderson, 2009), the discursive change that came with later neoliberal reforms emphasized the development of human resources (such as human ‘capital’ and ‘capacity building’) through social inclusion and alleviation of rural poverty, as an imperative for sustainable economic growth (ibid.). Ong (2006) demonstrates how neoliberalism involves a philosophy of the relationship between the state, the market and the individual, as well as a relationship to knowledge. A new relationship between knowledge and responsibility emerges that places “onus on individuals and organizations to become self-regulating, responsible, and market-knowledgeable” (Phillips & Ilcan, 2004, p.397). Thus, participation in development is understood as rational and responsible, making local communities and individuals “partners” in the development process. In this way neoliberal governance is underpinned by a “knowledge economy of capacity-building,” (ibid.) reinforced by development training programs and knowledge-generation. The individual small farmer (in the case of those discussed here) is molded by a process of social neoliberalism through participation in NGO’s striving to build capacity through (leadership) training.

### Youth participation and ODEP

ODEP describes its farmer-training workshops as a methodology that aims to 1) restore the confidence of small farmers, and build capacity in knowledge, attitudes and skills for social participation and control of resources; 2) promote and encourage active participation and competitive management oriented toward sustainable productive economic ventures; and 3) develop knowledge and sustainable agricultural practices based on conservation of agrobiodiversity. The workshops are designed to encourage farmers to participate, exchange ideas, cooperate and work on themselves (through improving communication, management and marketing skills, as well as attitudes and self-esteem).

In the communities ODEP involved youth in various aspects of its work, particularly the teenaged sons and daughters of the more active participants, by encouraging some of them to attend the *Promotores* workshops – five weekend-long workshops in the regional capital city of Llallagua and a farmer experience exchange in Cochabamba. Sometimes teenaged girls attended the *Comunal* workshops – one day per month, held in the communities – in lieu of their parents. Additionally, in projects that involved physical work such as the making of *bocashi* (a rapid form of compost), young men, or older boys would be enlisted to help even if they did not work directly with ODEP. Although youth were included in these ways, ODEP endeavored to be more involved with high school students.

ODEP's director, Juan Luis, highlighted a benefit of working with youth in that they were generally more interested in experimentation than their parents, and willing to try new things. His point was sometimes exemplified in my fieldwork. Doña Saturnina (who approved of ODEP, but was not interested in participating in workshops as she did not want "to go to school") laughed about her 13 year old daughter's enthusiastic effort to grow sunflowers from seeds she had acquired in a neighbouring community. "She thinks she's going to *grow* sunflowers – she wants to roast the seeds," Saturnina informed me, shaking her head dismissively.

Mario, a government-employed agronomist doing similar work to ODEP around Cochabamba, also supported Juan Luis's comment about the younger generation:

When we have worked with adults [...] we have failed, because people have listened, but then the knowledge didn't go anywhere. But the experience that we have had working with youth and children in school has been different. Sustainable agriculture has started to succeed. [...] In this strategy children teach their parents, we work with the kids upward.

Certain youth in the communities were interested in specific techniques tied to organic production. One 15 year old was excited to bring his new knowledge of compost making, learned at school, back to his parents' vegetable garden. Despite some interests in techniques or a general positive attitude toward the NGO, for various reasons, few youth wanted to work with ODEP now, or in the future, chiefly because they had no intention of staying in the countryside.

Mario explained the strategy underpinning teaching children, despite what he described as the "displacement of youth" to urban areas, due in part to an increasing student population:

In the countryside the only people who stay are women, children and seniors. We want to work with people who stay, then even though the youth leave the countryside, they go with knowledge! [...] If they succeed [in the city] then they will help their families [through remittances], or if they return later they will help their communities then. But it's not easy because agroecology is "*un trabajo de hormiga*."<sup>3</sup>

As a former high school teacher, Mario had led an agricultural production module in which he had focused on agroecology training.

[MARIO]: Many of the students were motivated to become agronomists because it was interesting. There are many who studied agronomy and have returned to their communities. [...] We know that agriculture is the profession of the future!

These examples highlight the potential for youth to integrate their local agricultural knowledge with professional agroecology. Various farmers echoed this sentiment, highlighting how the study of agronomy opens up possibilities for rural

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<sup>3</sup> This expression could be translated into English as work that keeps one "as busy as a bee."

youth to return to the countryside with an education and a profession that will benefit them. However, efforts to train rural youth through workshops face the challenge of requiring that farm households will value the training enough to allow their youth to finish despite pressing demands of farm work at home. The NGO's director highlighted the prevalence of this concern for youth 'promoters,' giving an example of a girl from another community who usually attended, but had missed one session. "The concern of youth promoters, like Marta for example, is that their parents may say to them one month, 'we need you to work at home, you can't go.'" Although completion of the *promotores* program required fulltime attendance at each module, the NGO found ways to be flexible so that if someone had to miss a module they might have the opportunity to attend during the session offered the following year.

The examination of youth motivations to participate and the effectiveness of youth programs shed more light when examined through a gendered lens. Participation in the '*promotores*' workshops is primarily male. Boys were not only greater in number, but also younger in age, some as young as twelve, whereas female youth were in their late teens. It is likely that one reason for this is that girls are given less freedom of mobility compared to their brothers. However, there was also a generational difference between the expectations of parents and youth in some Tomacoyo households regarding land inheritance that may influence parents' interest in girls participating as fully as their brothers in all that the NGO had to offer.

Don Hector had six fields, which will be divided between ten children. Of his children old enough to consider their futures in any serious way, one daughter, Beatriz – in marked contrast to her siblings and friends – intended to stay in Tomacoyo. She was less sure there would be any reason to work with an NGO like ODEP. Beatriz explained that rather than seeing the exodus of youth as problematic, I should recognize that others leaving is positive for those who stay. She knew that even if the fields belonged to her siblings, if she were there to work them, she would gain the most from these fields (also see Goodale, 2008). Beatriz and her older sisters also knew that they were entitled to the same percentage of land as their brothers in their father's inheritance. Two of Hector's older daughters, aged 16 and 17, told me confidently they would inherit some of their father's land. However, Hector himself was clear with me that he need only divide his six fields amongst his five sons, as his daughters would marry and use their husbands' fields. This reflects the recent changes in women's rights, which had yet to be adopted across all rural regions in practice, still perceived by many as unfair in that it essentially gives a family's fields to their in-laws when their daughters marry.

Daughters are expected to leave, and participation with ODEP was often explained as serving the purpose of receiving other benefits for the household, or community. For example, some households would send a member to the commu-

nal workshops, not because they felt the workshop held such valuable information, but rather they hoped ODEP would deliver on potential micro-irrigation projects. On occasion I was told, “We know how to farm, what we need is water!”<sup>4</sup> Thus, families that do not perceive sending a daughter for training as beneficial to the household may be less supportive of her participation.

### Leadership: “We empower people *for something!*”

Leadership training is a key concept in the *Promotores* workshops, even occupying the overall theme of the fourth module. In the *Comunal* meetings leadership was less of a focal point, but arose intermittently within other themes in technician-led discussions. The most obvious example involved finding community members willing to attend the *Promotores* workshops. Emphasis was placed on people learning skills with which they could return to the communities, rather than identifying the most ‘natural’ leader – an effort workshop facilitators discussed more openly with me.

The initiative to find and label farmer ‘leaders’ within a community or district extended beyond ODEP’s vision. Living in the town with the municipal mayor’s office – where NGO’s and governmental organizations congregated regularly, and where I attended community economic development meetings – quickly revealed ‘leadership’ to be a local development buzzword. “Leader” showed up on posters in stores and restaurants, and on clothing: a farmer from a nearby community wore a vest from another Bolivian NGO ‘*Líder 2009*’. Healy (2001) found the creation of local promoters of development work to be common in his case studies in Bolivia. In his thorough investigation of several development projects, Healy argues that those projects with the greatest success integrate several actions of popular participation which includes training local people, as well as selecting certain people to receive more directed training – not just as local ‘promoters,’ but also to become professionals.

ODEP staff pointed out that the *Promotores* workshops centered on training a few select farmers so that they could, in turn, transmit the skills to their communities through their actions. As these farmers built terraces on their steep hillside fields, or utilized types of organic fertilizers not common in their communities, they would (theoretically) become leaders in ODEP’s agroecology practices, encouraging other community members to follow suit as they witnessed the benefits of these practices. Specific leaders, such as Ramona and others mentioned below, were named to me and proudly displayed to CANGO representatives when they came to visit. CANGO’s

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<sup>4</sup> The reasons and degree to which farm households valued training programs varied. This quote signals tensions between ‘local’ and ‘expert’ knowledges discussed by Cockburn (2015).

community visits served to fortify this work as well, as active participants would present the benefits of what they had done so far, while the community gathered round.

There were a few male farmers who highlighted the importance of having leadership qualities, but in my many conversations and interviews with women and youth, the word *líder* never came up unless I asked about it. I asked about the word's use in the community; for examples of leadership qualities; whom they considered to have these qualities; and whether and how the term was used by community members *themselves*, or by ODEP and other organizations. I also asked ODEP staff about the thought-process behind developing and supporting local 'leaders.' César, the program coordinator, described the underpinnings of the term 'leadership' in this way:

The idea of leadership comes from the logic of the community, because we have seen in the communities there is always a leader, [...] a person whose abilities are innate. And what we would like to see is natural leaders obtaining the teachings of the organization [ODEP].

Community members focused on *líderes* as political authorities, and when asked about leadership qualities, repeatedly emphasized good communication skills. It was less clear that they – particularly women – would choose such a label for people with especially honed skills in agriculture, or specific knowledge in one area or another. They attributed the "institutions" (e.g., ODEP) with the use of the term. By contrast, the NGO staff, sharing César's sentiments above, clearly saw this term as arising from the 'logic of the community' and thus it had been an appropriate term to adopt for labeling someone trained in agroecology who could spread this knowledge within their community. The technicians were to find 'natural' leaders within the community and encourage them to attend the *Promotores* workshops. In practice however, other demands had to be met in terms of representation of women and different age groups, evident in the example below of Ramona's sister Laura.

The food security governmental organization implementing agroecology in other parts of Bolivia echoed the need to create promoters, or leaders at the local level. Mario described leadership in terms of sustainability, "we are creating promoters – leaders – because we are temporary people. Our job is to 'plant the seed' in the communities."

[JC]: What is involved in being a leader?

[MARIO]: In general a leader is someone implicated in politics, but for us a leader is more than that – a leader is someone who is engaged with the social, with the community and also with politics – so all the social sphere [...] To be a leader you don't need to have studied at the best universities. What you need [is] *life experience*, [...] a leader is born from experiences, from one's own values and from one's will. What we look for is the experiences of the communities, the experiences of the technicians – this approach is more holistic, more integrated, more horizontal, rather than conventional agriculture which is more vertical – from top, down.

In my talks with don Adelmo, a father of seven whose oldest teenaged son had already left, it was clear that for him, advancing the community through good leadership was a priority. The *quality* of leadership was the key difference between life in the community before and after development NGO intervention.

[JC]: You told me there were no leaders here before. Why not?

[ADELMO]: Well there were leaders, but they were bad. They did not cooperate. We want to cooperate so we can move forward together [...] that is why we work with ODEP.

[JC]: What qualities are necessary to be a good leader?

[ADELMO]: Well, camaraderie of course! But also [someone who] is *active* in the issues. If [he/she] is not active – no! [...] I want more training about the environment. A good leader needs training.

### *Promotoras and warmis líderes*

Late in my research I asked Adriano about the root of the term ‘leadership’ as it was used in development, since I rarely encountered it outside the political realm in my farm-household interviews. Surprised, Adriano responded quickly that farmers “*know* about leadership!” He directed the discussion toward the participation of women and ODEP’s role in empowering them with leadership qualities:

As you have seen the women are in the workshops – they participate more. We want women to participate because they have been so quiet because here *machismo* has been predominant. Now, with institutions that are coming in, we have empowered women and what we want is for men and women to be equal. This is the idea behind how to handle leadership. [...] The previous promoters are leaders in the community - just Ramona has left. For example the projects that we are working on with these leaders are already in place. They already know what to do.

To unpack this assertion, it is valuable to examine a few cases of female promoters – Edelmira, Magdalena and Ramona (and her very shy sister Laura), who were considered to be leaders and promoters, or to have such potential. These cases demonstrate the contrast in how this label is experienced, both with ODEP and in relation to the community.

### *Doña Edelmira*

Edelmira was one of few women who were attributed with having natural leadership qualities. She had received more training than most and could lead a workshop

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<sup>5</sup> The Quechua word for woman.

on *bocashi* with Rocío facilitating. In interviews and conversations it was apparent that, from her perspective, being positioned to promote certain techniques paled in comparison to the projects she felt ODEP should be undertaking. Despite the work she has done with ODEP and her general positive attitude toward their projects, she was critical of the NGO's expansion into other communities in the district. There were not enough technicians to take on such an endeavor and she perceived few improvements over the past year as a result.

Doña Edelmira was an obvious choice for *promotora* in the community because of her interest in the work, ability to retain the information and teach others, as well as the respect she already enjoyed in the community. Importantly, like Ramona, she was also positioned by the NGO to *represent* the active participation of women. Edelmira certainly exhibited the type of leadership qualities ODEP was looking for, but her background differed from most women in the community. Living in a city for almost three decades had likely given her an edge in terms of communication and business skills over many of the local women. She had moved herself and her children to this rural environment to take over the workload for her aging father-in-law two years ago. Her husband returned from the city during periods of intense farm labour.

In a field report by a visiting CANGO employee the year prior to my fieldwork, Edelmira (among others) was described erroneously as having lived in the community all her life and could now finally grow vegetables thanks to the training and the well she had received from ODEP. Reading the unfamiliar accounts of very familiar people it occurred to me that the CANGO staff member might have created composite characters – consciously or unconsciously (she would have tried to retain a great deal of information within a few-hour visit). But having witnessed two years of community visits; I also noticed that certain women were strategically positioned. Ramona, the teenage '*promotora*' gave a positive impression of a *female youth* who wanted a future in agronomy and cared to continue participating with the NGO. Yet this picture is in sharp contrast to the account of her and her sister, described below. In another example, doña Berta gave a presentation to CANGO staff during their visit to another cluster of communities in the same district. The information she presented would have reflected similar experiences in both communities with respect to the environment and NGO's work, but the technicians' choice to bring her there suggested that they did not have a suitable woman to showcase in the location of the visit.

It may be that women like Edelmira have been coached by ODEP to describe themselves in certain terms for the visiting Northerners as it suggests success, which will secure funding. Or in the case of Edelmira (and others) it may be that she simply misled the Canadian NGO visitor, as she was not invested in the relationship. Early fieldwork included several moments in which people made statements

that I came to realize did not reflect their situation – typically it related to great improvements that had come with ODEP, for example “we had to buy all our vegetables before ODEP came and taught us how to grow.” Later I might learn that the same person had grown all or most of the same vegetables all her life. It took sustained fieldwork to build rapport and gain clarity.

### *Doña Magdalena*

One day between the second and third *Promotores* modules, I asked doña Magdalena, a *promotora*-in-training about the theme of leadership, and the significance of being a leader. Awkwardly, she began to talk about community and district mayors.

“Yes,” I agreed, “but I hear the institutions talk about leadership too, like ODEP, right? What do they mean when they talk about leaders in the community?”

She thought about this and shrugged. Just two days prior Magdalena, herself using this very word, had dismissively responded to representatives from a joint health project between a municipal governmental organization and an international NGO. They had attended a community meeting looking for local “leaders” to promote their project. With little effort they had found a man willing to participate, but the women stayed quiet. “We need a *warmi líder*” they persisted “women, women, we are looking for a woman leader!” The man from the NGO looked at Magdalena, “What about you, señora? Can we sign you up to be a leader on this project?”

“No,” Magdalena replied firmly, “I’m already a *leader* for ODEP.”

With this in mind I attempted to develop the idea further: what does it mean to be a “leader for ODEP”? But Magdalena sounded uneasy in her response; listing the ways she participated with the NGO. She had taken an opportunity to use the label to excuse her from being incorporated into another community development project, but she would not readily engage in deconstructing this label with me. I pressed further, asking if the *Promotores* workshop was supposed to make her into a leader once she graduates and becomes a ‘promoter.’

“I don’t know,” she said. The single, middle-aged woman was quiet for a moment and then laughed, “Well, I’m the leader of my own house!”

I visited with Magdalena during my return trip to Bolivia a few months following the completion of the workshops. She told me she could not remember much of what she had learned, though she adamantly expressed a sense that she had gained leadership skills. Sounding discouraged she explained the problem of implementation as she saw it:

“The women here don’t want to hear about what I know. [...] They say they have no time; they have to take care of their animals, pasture their sheep. They aren’t interested.”

## Ramona and Laura

Don Macario was among the first people to work with ODEP when it arrived in Tomacoyo. He remained one of two men who regularly attended ODEP's workshops in the community. He and his wife, doña Faustina were considered to be very active participants. Ramona was their second eldest daughter. She had attended the first session of the *Promotores* workshop, which was concluding when I arrived in the field. During CANGO's visit, and in various posters and pamphlets, she became a 'poster girl' for ODEP's success in empowering women and prioritizing youth participation.

For the second session, Rocío and Adriano asked Macario and Faustina if they would allow their fifteen-year-old daughter, Laura (who was not in school), to attend the workshops. There were teenaged girls in the district who were outgoing and displayed characteristics that I would associate with strong leadership qualities, but this girl, who looked forlorn when her parents concurred and as she nodded timidly in agreement, was not one of these girls. When she did not show up for the first module, she exempted herself from participating (later admitting to me that she had only been interested in the free trip to Cochabamba, to join her sister). The facilitators accepted this, but one later told me he had noticed that she was "really lazy." However, interviews with her sisters raised questions about options for avoiding participation if one is too young (and not in school) to make use of the common phrase, "I have no time."

Her oldest sister, Elsa, who no longer lived in her parents' home, stressed to me that her father was the *only* member of her family who worked with the NGO. As his household was one of the most actively involved in the community I was surprised by her insistence that I should not consider her mother and sister, the would-be *promotora* to work with ODEP. Her father, she explained, liked participating and so his family members were obliged to as well.

When Ramona, returned months later, she told me that she had no interest in participating further with the NGO. She had a vague idea that she might like to study more, and was taking classes again. However, she would not have completed high school by her eighteenth birthday, when she planned to leave immediately for Argentina, where Elsa and her boyfriend were now agricultural labourers. Ramona reported having enjoyed some aspects of participating with ODEP; she liked Rocío a lot and had liked the other young women she had met at the *Promotores* workshops (three of them had conspired to remain in Cochabamba, she admitted), but it was because her father had told her she had to participate that she had done it. With these statements in mind, Laura's "laziness" appeared more strategic to avoid participating in something based on her father's interest, rather than her own.

## *Politicizing leadership*

Generally speaking, ODEP sat on the technical, rather than the political, end of the spectrum of NGO's. Staffed by agronomists and other engineers working on micro-irrigation projects and on various approaches within agroecology, the institution addressed problems of poverty and marginality in terms of problems of topography – poor soil, geographical isolation, climate change. A key component in the NGO's methodology was to find ways to further integrate farmers into regional and national markets. In these ways participation was still presented within the status quo of development schemes. ODEP did not raise questions about the validity of these approaches or problematize the underlying neoliberal logic of looking for market solutions to environmental problems. Yet, my interviews with the director, Juan Luis, and César, the program coordinator of ODEP, revealed a more political agenda for supporting 'leadership' in the communities. Both men, in positions that involved overseeing and developing projects, envisioned ODEP's role as facilitating certain farmers' political involvement at the municipal level of government. As the director described it, this effort was integral to making agroecology "truly sustainable" in these places.

[JUAN LUIS]: Some of the leaders that we trained are already showing what they have learned to the communities. Nestor is also now working with ODEP and we are supporting the leaders to engage with the municipality. The objective is that [they] go back to the communities, spread their knowledge and implement what they have learned. [...] The best of them [will] continue improving themselves – building capacity. That's why we would like to send them to Cochabamba [for an experience exchange], and at some point they could become political leaders in the municipality. This way we can promote sustainable agriculture with more commitment and more knowledge.

With the question of leadership then, agricultural promoters or leaders within the communities might be men who were too shy to talk in the workshop, while the politically out-spoken participants would serve to carry the message of the importance of agroecology into political arenas, building support and acquiring resources for these endeavors.

Like Juan Luis, César's description of the importance of leadership in sustainable agriculture transcends the technical work of the organization to the question of how to increase the political participation of rural people. His response highlights the 1994 'Law of Popular Participation,' which created the municipal system and a space for increased political participation of farmers:

We promote participation, we empower [people who are "natural"] leaders and we want these leaders working with the community, but also we have the idea that they can work with the municipality – so they start small, but they may go farther.

César provided the example of Guillermo, the district mayor (one of the municipal ‘*subalcaldes*’), with whom I was well acquainted. He had been very shy, but after being encouraged to step up to the position of *subcalde* had gained confidence in public speaking. César underlined how this local farmer has thereby been able to secure resources for his community and his district (something I had witnessed myself during fieldwork):

Now he uses resources, he makes decisions. He does business with us [ODEP], with the municipality, with [a European development organization] – so this is the idea behind leadership – we empower them for *something* – that supports the farmers!

César’s statement demonstrates that ODEP is concerned with clarifying *how* (certain) farmers can become ‘empowered’ – rather than using the term, emptied of any significance. He also addresses the potential for empowerment through increased political participation. Yet the language he uses to describe how Guillermo has been empowered depicts a neoliberal approach to leadership; as the shy farmer is transformed into an actor, who takes ownership, conducts business and ‘uses resources’ (examined further in the section below).

The benefit of having farmers who work with ODEP in positions of relative power within the region’s municipal governments is evident. It raises the profile of agroecology in municipal government discussions, while ODEP assists in positioning potential allies for collaborations and funding for projects, and indirectly involving themselves in municipal government through farmers who work with the organization. In 2010 inroads with the municipal government had clearly been made by ODEP, thanks at least in part, to its relationship with the *subcalde*.

## Neoliberal participation and leadership

César’s (and Adriano’s) description of *the NGO empowering the farmers* may be interpreted along the lines of Leal’s (2010) critique that neoliberal empowerment has come to be seen as something that those with more power can *give* to those with less. Nonetheless, as Leal (p. 95) and others have argued, the emphasis on the *techniques* of participation, rather than on *meaning* of the participation, creates a situation in which empowerment is “presented as a de facto conclusion to the initiation of a participatory process.” César’s point also speaks to Hickey and Mohan’s (2004, p. 66) discussion of broadening ‘participation’ within the analysis of citizenship:

Relocating ‘participation’ within citizenship analysis situates it in a broader range of sociopolitical practices, or expressions of agency, through which people extend their status and rights as members of particular political communities, thereby increasing their control over socioeconomic resources. The question for participatory inter-

ventions becomes how they can enhance the ‘competency’ of participants to project their agency beyond specific interventions into broader arenas, thereby progressively altering [...] processes of inclusion and exclusion.

One of the implications of this statement, then, is that the kind of state in which this ‘relocation’ of participation is to occur becomes an important question. Bolivia holds promise as a state that will challenge the neoliberal characteristics of development and power relations, but falls short in practice, upholding neoliberal economic policies (Postero, 2013, also see Haarstad and Andersson, 2009). Neoliberal assumptions are contested in relation to food security versus food sovereignty, and related issues of supporting internal markets over free-market export approaches (see Cockburn, 2014). Yet other neoliberal assumptions about rational (indigenous) producers being trained to be responsible citizens remain intact as rights-based discourse overrides discourses of social change within the national context.

Arguably, César’s view complements Hickey and Mohan’s (2004) necessary components for truly transformative participation. However, unlike César’s view, Hickey and Mohan’s theory extends the discussion to address problems that distinctions (such as ‘public’ and ‘private’) raise for inclusiveness, especially along gender lines. César’s discussion suggests empowerment for *certain individuals*, while glossing over the community as a coherent entity. Moreover, his suggestion that the concern for developing leadership is derived directly from the ‘logic of the community’ not only masks the individualistic ways in which leadership is being rewarded in practice, but leaves intact the problematic gender dynamics of participation. Though women are encouraged to participate in ODEP’s projects, they are integrated in different and more limited ways than their male counterparts, which in turn has implications for how youth are integrated along gender lines. And though ODEP’s approach to creating leaders can be understood as enhancing ‘the competency of participants to project their agency into broader arenas’ (e.g. by fostering the movement of certain farmers into local government), *which* individuals are recognized as having this kind of ‘natural’ leadership is constrained by conventional power relations. Indeed it is an approach that reinforces these relations, certainly along gender lines, but also by economic consideration, so that most *promotores* and other active members with ODEP will be unlikely to ‘project their agency beyond specific interventions.’

Though both ODEP staff and individuals within the community highlighted outspokenness and clear communication skills as important leadership qualities, such as those possessed by doña Edelmira, ODEP technician/facilitators were inconsistent along gender lines. They credited the most outspoken women with leadership qualities in organic farming, etc., while with men this was only sometimes the case. It was pointed out to me how the most outspoken men were sometimes just the most politically minded, or men of status – accustomed to speaking in front of

their community or in more public forums. It was also pointed out that the most political men, for all their talk, were not likely to actually implement the technical knowledge they had acquired in the workshops, such as building terraced fields on the steep mountainsides, or making compost for vegetable gardens. Indeed, in talking about workshop participation, the director of ODEP was quick to note that some of the quieter farmers had done the most in their communities following the workshops (e.g. making *bocashi*, strategically planting trees and brush to protect soil erosion, etc.). In other words, they were some of the best promoter/leaders, while their vocal counterparts had in some cases done nothing (yet).

The NGO also emphasized improving and “restoring” self-confidence in small-scale producers, recognizing that shyness in certain contexts (especially public assemblies) did not mean that someone would not be instrumental in adapting their farming practices in ways that would influence those around them in their communities. Yet in daily practice, as described above, technicians sometimes interpreted the most timid people as lazy, supported by their argument that there were other examples of very shy people who actively participated with ODEP (and therefore were not lazy).

The example above, of Ramona and Laura, sheds light on questions of power and agency in participation with the NGO and gendered power dynamics *within* households. As Cleaver (2004, p. 272) argues, decision-making processes and the exercise of agency within them “may be contradictory in their social effects; respectful attitudes, conflict avoidance and consensus decision-making can all serve to reinforce inequality despite securing functional outcomes.” The findings in this article support the argument that even politicized citizenship is not necessarily sufficient to allow participation to be transformative, as envisioned by Hickey and Mohan. The effort to heighten the political nature of participation may be transformative in some ways, such as toward the promotion of agroecology, which addresses power dynamics on a local-global level, particularly in relation to conventional agriculture and global agribusiness. Yet heightened political participation may still leave silent power dynamics in other realms - particularly in terms of gender and youth, which are intrinsic in the lived experience of farm families. When the agency of individuals in this context is taken into account, participation in ODEP’s work on leadership has the potential to be transformative for some – through knowledge sharing, negotiating power relations, and political activism – while for others the leadership label remains far from transformative. Cooke and Kothari’s (2001, p. 13) strong warning must be heeded that these same concepts may be drawn upon in describing participation in ways that actually result in concealing and reinforcing oppressive power relations in their various manifestations.

While the position taken here leans toward the arguments of Hickey and Mohan (2004), that participation has been understood too narrowly and that there

is potential for participation to be empowering, ODEP's efforts cannot be neatly placed on one side or the other of this debate. The NGO's 'participatory methodologies' (such as those encompassed by the workshops) are vague enough to blur the lines of differing motivations for participation, so that participation as a means to a more politically radical end are conflated with participation for the sake of integrating training. Arguably this makes sense from the NGO's point of view. Even when training is primarily technical, it can build self-confidence and, when it draws on a bigger picture of long-term sustainability (implicating the NGO in strengthening notions of culture and ethnicity), it can encourage some people to become more political. ODEP positions itself as a technical NGO, subtler in its political approach, a position which is the least problematic for Northern funding partners and changing national governments, as well as locally – given the possibility of changing municipal governments. Moreover, it allows for the quotidian work of the NGO to be carried out by workers, such as Adriano, who do not appear to concern themselves with – and may even be suspicious of, more political motivations. In this sense, all of ODEP's participatory methodologies fall within this same spectrum: moments of politicized discourse intersect with predominantly technical participatory training, revealing a complex orientation toward sustainable agricultural development that is underscored by (gendered and generational) contradictions and tensions, even as it shows the promise of collaboration toward common environmental and social justice goals.

Leadership as a development buzzword conceals potentially vast variations in what being a leader means and whether one has access to such a position. Like buzzwords such as 'participation,' or 'empowerment' it glosses over tensions, legitimates development work, and impinges upon the degree to which collaborations of knowledge can transcend (gendered and generational) power imbalances. ODEP holds potential to foster a politicized development, in which participants take part in shaping a more radical version of citizenship through such participation, but the neoliberal framing of leadership undermines this potential, and suggests that participatory methodologies fall short of anything but teaching tools, modeling producers into an ideal within status quo power dynamics.

## Conclusion

The challenge to transparency in women's participation and household motivations can be applied in certain important ways to (especially female) youth. An irony that threatens efforts to increase the participation of women in development processes involves burdening them with increased workloads in the name of equal access and full participation. Rocío and other female professionals' roles in development work

made clear one answer to increasing women's participation is to ensure the presence of a woman agronomist. However, without contextualizing women's participation within larger contexts of gender dynamics in household decision-making, this in itself does not answer the question of whether participation will 'empower' women. Having female technicians and participatory methodologies (as opposed to top-down approaches) is important, but it does not matter how well techniques are applied, the degree to which women can benefit from these will be greatly hampered by households' ulterior motives in sending them to participate. De Schutter (2013) points out that while women contribute in important ways to household and community food security, efforts to support women in agriculture risk reifying existing gender roles and do little to expand women's choices, or foster the economic independence of women (also see Deere, 2005).

The discussion above of youth participation also suggests that ODEP presents opportunities for youth who participate in *Promotores* to get out of their communities, at least temporarily. However, I would argue that if the power dynamics within households, along with the power dynamics of farmers and professionals, are not scrutinized, women and youth who truly *enjoy* participating may appear to be natural leaders with skills to foster, while women and youth who feel coerced to participate (perhaps by both the NGO and their households) may be misunderstood. Ramona and Laura's experience of participating at the insistence of their father reflects these dilemmas for (gendered) youth involvement.

Ramona's case exemplifies an important quandary faced by agroecology efforts to appeal to youth, with implications for the sustainability of these approaches cross-generationally. Yet, an intriguing approach emerges in the interviews with agronomist development workers: the notion of children teaching their parents and its implications for local knowledge and power relations. What potential is there for dialogue around agricultural knowledge between parents and children? Could it produce a hybridized local knowledge that is less laden with power imbalances than exists between the status enjoy by 'professionals' versus that of the farmers? The answer to this remains open.

When examined in relation to other male and female *Promotores*, Ramona's participation with ODEP as a community promoter-in-training contributes to a clearer picture of the emphasis on leadership in ODEP's work. Where leadership training is more politically motivated it shows potential for participation that, in theory, is more transformative (cf. Hickey and Mohan, 2004). However, in practice, skill and leadership training reveals choices connected to representations of empowered gendered youth and contradictions in the expectations placed on participating men and women in farm households and communities. Without further scrutiny of leadership as a buzzword, youth will face the same contradictory standards found along gender lines.

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