

Organisation and development: a practice perspective

Monique Nuijten

Introduction

In this chapter it is argued that the study of organisation in the development debate should be on the agenda for rethinking. Long's work offers a good starting-point for a new approach given its emphasis on forms of organising that emerge 'from below', in other words, forms of organising that develop when individuals or social groups set out to deal with everyday problems or changing circumstances in their life-worlds. This chapter puts forward a practice approach to organisation that is based on the premises of the Wageningen actor-oriented perspective. It sets out to enrich this approach with insights from organisation theory. Before presenting this analytical framework, however, the flaws in the current debate on organisation and development are discussed.

Local organisation and the development debate

The image of the rural poor as 'victims' of exploitation who lack organisational capacities is pervasive in much development literature. The same applies to the high expectation that new collective forms of organisation can improve the situation of the poor. Literature such as this depicts poor villagers and peasants as 'traditional', 'unmotivated', 'apathetic' or, conversely, as 'victims' of the pervasive and 'corrupt' bureaucratic apparatus. At best they are viewed as 'opportunistic' and highly 'self-interested' people unable to align themselves with a wider socio-political project. The pursuit of this line of thought arrives at the argument that development workers can 'empower the poor' by helping them to develop better forms of organisation (Harris, 1988; Curtis, 1991, Uphoff, 1992, Uphoff, Esman and Krishna, 1998). Today local communities and local organisations are also given a special role in natural resource management. Many approaches to sustainable development formulate solutions in terms of returning responsibility for the management of natural resources to local communities (Ghai and Vivian, 1992, Berkes, 1995, Baland and Platteau, 1996, FAO/UNDP, 1998). This emphasis on organisation is accompanied by a stress on education, participation, and consciousness raising in order to make the poor understand their own problems and encourage them to work

on possible solutions (Pretty and Chambers 1993; Pretty *et al.*, 1995; World Bank, 1996).

Although these perspectives are based on a real concern for the position of the poor, naive ideas about the working of organisations and idealistic notions about the degree of co-operation possible in community ventures still prevail in a great part of the discussion (Shepherd, 1998: 13). The point is that in much development literature, organisations and institutions are treated as instruments of social change.¹ In fact, the idea that new forms of organising can make a dramatic difference to the lives of the poor is based on the notion of social and legal engineering: the belief that by changing rules or introducing new forms of organisation one can change society. Yet, processes of organisational reform by themselves have little chance to change existing power relations and bring more prosperity to the poor. This instrumental view on organisational reform, leads to a vicious circle within which ill-functioning institutions are made the scapegoat for the bad socio-economic conditions of the poor, and against which the propagating of new institutions are used as a magic charm (adaptation of von Benda Beckmann, 1993; 1994).

As most of the literature on organisation and institution-building for development is strongly normative and prescriptive, several conceptual flaws characterise the debate. Symptomatic is the use of a social systems perspective in which organisations are seen as 'social units directed to the achievement of collective goals or the fulfilment of institutional needs for the wider society or environment of which they are a constituent part' (Reed, 1992: 75, 76). Although the systems framework in organisational analysis was widely used in the 1970s and 1980s, many other perspectives have since been developed in organisational sociology which have been largely overlooked in the development literature. And although it is true that in formal terms most organisations are defined in terms of collective goals, the various members of an organisation often have different understandings of what the organisation is about. During the last decades several new theoretical perspectives have been developed. For example, organisations have been analysed as negotiated orders, which are created, sustained and transformed through social interaction. Other approaches pay more attention to organisations as structures of power and domination and show how these are related to wider configurations of domination. This is especially important for the development debate, in which a central weakness concerns a lack of problematisation of the relation between organising and power. The multi-dimensional patterns of differentiation among the poor or rural people themselves based on economic differences, gender, age and ethnic identities are often ignored (see critique by Brohman, 1996; Leach, *et al.*, 1997: 11). Other approaches in organisational theory show to which extent organisations reproduce the ideological and political constraints in which they are embedded. Finally, a whole body of literature exists which deals with organisations as cultural artefacts, documenting the complex ways in which organisational realities are constructed, sustained and changed through processes of cultural creation and enactment. In these studies,

¹ In the literature the terms institution and organisation are often used interchangeably. At the same time, sub-disciplines, such as organisation sociology and new institutional economics, use the concepts in very specific and different ways. In general, most works that try to distinguish organisations from institutions stress the normative aspects of institutions and the structural aspects of organisations.

much attention is paid to the ways in which values are created and ideologies, rituals and ceremonies are expressed and how this may lead to senses of participation, trust and control (see Reed, 1992 and 2001). All these approaches have been largely neglected in the development debate.

The use of a systems perspective also implies that little attention is paid to the fact that people often work in loose personal networks instead of collective projects, or operate in continuously changing constellations instead of in more enduring groups. Conventional approaches to organisations in the development debate do not aim at gaining proper understanding of existing forms of organising that don't follow ideal-typical organisational models. These forms of organisation, if they are noticed at all in the first place, are simply labelled as 'backwards', 'disorganised' and 'corrupt'. The very use of language such as 'traditional' versus 'modern' or 'corrupt' versus 'democratic' throughout these works informs the reader that they are proceeding from the baseline of a scale which serves as the unspoken framework into which other phenomena must be fitted (adaptation of Wastell, 2001: 189). The presupposition of modern formal bureaucracy as being the basis of western development allows for any number of prejudices regarding the purity and viability of other forms of organising. Alternative organising forms are measured against Western ideological constructs of organisation. Another tendency that is quite common, but equally flawed, is placing the blame for the ill functioning of organisations on the abuse of power. As the presence of powerful bosses often plays a role in the way organisations have developed, there is a strong inclination to viewing organisational failures as the result of fraudulent leadership. Although it is true that organisational processes are always related to power relations, our understanding of these processes does not increase by simply 'blaming the leaders'. The labelling of these practices in a functionalist way as disorganised or corrupt or simply accusing them of bossism and dishonest leadership withholds us from finding new ways of analysis.

Given the fact that the theme of organisation is so central to the development debate, it is important to develop a theoretical approach that is less normative and prescriptive than conventional approaches. Organisations should no longer be treated as instruments of capacity building and social change, but as complex social phenomena. To that end, I present a practice approach to organisation. As will be explained, this means first of all, that organisation is studied as a verb, as a process. The concept of organising practices refers to the analysis of different forms of organising in relation to the life-worlds of social actors and the broader socio-political context in which they operate. So, the focus shifts from the organisation as an entity towards the various ways in which matters are organised within wider fields of influence. The practice approach is especially useful for the analysis of forms of organisation that do not seem to work according to the official rules: forms of organisation regarded as operating in line with clientelistic or political logics and where bribery is common. Situations, in other words, in which one knows that much is settled 'behind the scenes'. Instead of labelling these practices in normative ways, this approach provides a framework for their analysis.

Examples are used from the La Canoa *ejido*, in the valley of Autlán in Western Mexico.² The *ejido* is a form of peasant community, which was introduced after the Mexican Revolution at the beginning of this century. The La Canoa *ejido* was established in 1938 and owns approximately 450 hectares of arable land and 1800 hectares of land in the mountains. The arable land is divided into individual plots, while the mountainous common lands are used for the herding of cattle.³ The *ejido* system in Mexico has been heavily criticised for high incidences of corruption and disorganisation. For example, although agrarian law has prohibited the selling of *ejido* plots, this has nevertheless become a common practice throughout Mexico. Another common phenomenon is that decisions are not arrived at during the monthly *ejido* meetings. Instead, the head of the executive committee (the *ejido* commissioner) takes decisions on his own, without rendering accounts to the *ejido* assembly (the highest authority at the local level). It is common to hear government officials complain about disorganisation within the *ejido*, adding that the *ejidatarios* should be educated in their tasks as community members and have to be made conscious of their tasks as a group with collective resources and interests. It is claimed that *ejidatarios* lack certain skills and should be helped to organise themselves better. For this reason, several government programs were introduced in the nineties directed at the improvement of the local *ejido* management.⁴ In this chapter, it is argued that the organising practices approach provides a totally different vision of the working of the *ejido*. It also sheds a completely different light on central themes in the organisation debate, such as accountability, legal security, leadership and management.

Towards a practice approach of organisation

Long has made important contributions to the approach of organising practices. One of his starting points is that individuals and groups do not operate in clearly defined institutional frameworks: instead, they tend to construct fields of action which often crosscut organisation boundaries (Long, 1989: 252). This means that emergent forms of organisation develop that are made up of formal and informal elements and which are not in the control of one agency. According to Long, using the notion of practices allows one to focus on these emergent forms of organisation and on the interaction, procedures, practical strategies and types of discourses present in specific contexts (Long, 1990: 16). This strongly resembles Wolf's position that we should get away from viewing organisation as a product or outcome, and move towards an understanding of organisation as a process. Wolf suggests that we could make a start by looking at the 'flow of action', to ask what is going on, why it is going on, who engages in it, with whom, when, and how often (Wolf, 1990: 591).

As mentioned before, when using the term organising practices, I refer to the manifold forms of organising and their rationale in specific socio-political contexts. In many situations, organising practices become structured or patterned

² Research was conducted in different periods from 1991 to 1995. For the sake of anonymity, the name of the *ejido* has been changed.

³ Half of the arable *ejido* land has been placed under irrigation since the 1960s. Today the village of La Canoa has 837 inhabitants and the La Canoa *ejido* has 97 members.

⁴ For a study of the implementation of this program see Nuijten, (2002).

in unexpected and often invisible ways. This means that organising practices can also be distinguished in the apparently 'disordered' and 'corrupt'. For example, the fact that people know what language and arguments they have to use in encounters with state officials and how much they will have to pay for certain services, is an indication of a certain patterning within the practice of bribing. Following Bourdieu (1992), we can argue that organising practices develop in a field with its own logic, rules and regularities. These actions are not explicit and this makes such organising practices resemble the playing of games.

However, finding the action, regularities and 'rules of the game', is not a straightforward endeavour. If we decide to study the 'fields of action that people construct' (Long 1989), or to follow 'the flow of action' (Wolf, 1990), the question becomes one of where to focus on. For example, where does one start the research of a co-operative when the meetings are seldom held, minutes not taken, attendance is poor and where hardly any matters are discussed on such occasions anyway? In these situations we often do not know where to start or what to look for. We might even begin to wonder whether the co-operative is of any importance for the people involved or worth studying at all. It can be quite complicated to come to grips with the central issues at stake when interests are involved that have nothing to do with the formal objectives of the organisation. This can cause the researcher to have the feeling of being a detective who tries to find out what is going on but without knowing exactly what it is that one is trying to discover. The fact that important information circulates in small undefined circles and that there is a lot of organising taking place in unclear and changing settings can give the researcher the anxiety of trying to be in the right place at the right time, and the feeling that wherever one happens to be, the action is not (Law, 1994a: 45- 46). It is clear that this approach asks for special methodological instruments. Here Long's work offers valuable contributions, showing that instead of starting from the formal objectives or organisational model, we are better off studying the organising processes around specific projects, areas of contestation, and critical events' One should choose projects that throw the most light on the themes one is interested in. Specific case studies (Mitchell, 1983, Walton, 1992) and situational analyses (van Velsen, 1967, Long, 1968) can then be elaborated.

Organising practices in the ejido La Canoa

As mentioned before, the Mexican *ejido* is criticised for being a highly ineffective form of organisation. With this in mind, I decided to focus on the *ejido*'s central resource: its land. The fact that the official *ejido* rules are not followed and that meetings are not regularly held does not give us much information about what finally happened with the land. So, I decided to make a genealogy of land plots and an inventory of land transfers that had taken place since the beginning of the 1940s. This study of the distribution and transfer of *ejido* plots over the last fifty years, showed considerable ordering (Nuijten, 1998). In fact, land possession had turned into a form of private property with considerable legal security for the *ejidatarios*. Although most *ejidatarios* did not approve of land sales, they considered this the responsibility of the individual *ejidatario* and for that reason did not hinder illegal land sales. No accurate registration of *ejido* plots and land transactions existed at the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, but the *ejidatarios* nevertheless knew how plots were

divided among themselves and whom they should recognise as owners. These organising practices around land plots obviously went against the spirit and letter of the agrarian law that prohibited the individual ownership and sale of *ejido* plots. This situation also explains why *ejido* meetings are not held regularly and why hardly any decisions are taken at these public gatherings: much is arranged outside the formal channels. In summary then, we should not talk about a 'lack of organisation', or 'disorganisation' at the local level but rather about different forms of ordering with their own rationale. The official rules and procedures, however, continue to play a certain role. The following example illustrates how the formal structure can become important again in land conflicts.

Conflicts and procedures

Conflictual situations in the *ejido* may linger on for many years as the 'resolution' of conflicts tends to be accompanied by fights, family quarrels, and violence. A famous local struggle in La Canoa has been the conflict of '*las Malvinas*'. This concerned a tract of land within the urban zone of the *ejido*, near the commons. Since nobody had used this land in former times, the *ejido* once gave Elías Romero, one of the richest *ejidatarios*, permission to use it for the cultivation of maize. However, the land was lent to him on the condition that it would be returned to the community when more land was needed for the construction of houses. According to the *ejidatarios*, an agreement was drawn up which was guarded in the *ejido* archive. Elías used this land for many years. When he passed away, his wife Petra and their sons continued to use this land. However, the pressure of the population on the urban zone was growing and in the seventies the *ejido* decided to ask Petra for the land back.

Petra, however, maintained that the *ejido* had given this land to her husband and she refused to return it. Petra and her sons tried to keep the land by all possible means. The agreement, in which Elías declared that he would return the land when the *ejido* would ask him for it, had disappeared from the *ejido* archive. At that time, the war between England and Argentina over the Falkland Islands (*las Malvinas* in Spanish) was taking place, so the *ejidatarios* started referring to this part of the village as *las Malvinas*, a name it still retains today.

The conflict dragged on for many years and Petra refused to give in. Finally, Francisco Romero became *ejido* commissioner and decided to make a more determined effort to recover the land. Besides lodging an official complaint at the Ministry of Agrarian Reform, he hired a lawyer. The majority of *ejidatarios* supported Francisco. Francisco and several *ejidatarios* had to go on many trips to the offices of the Ministry of Agrarian Reform in Guadalajara and Mexico City. Petra and her sons also hired a lawyer and tried to get several *ejidatarios* on their side. However, apart from some close relatives of Petra, all the *ejidatarios* supported the commissioner in his efforts.

During this period, the *ejido* meetings were well attended. Although the majority of *ejidatarios* supported Francisco, this fight was not a pleasant one for him personally. He was threatened by Petra's brother and was once put in jail, accused of illegally invading Petra's terrain. The *ejidatarios* reacted immediately and got him out of prison on the same day. Rumours were heard that one of Petra's sons intended to kill Francisco. Finally, after many incidents and much tension in the village, the Ministry of Agrarian Reform reached a decision in

favour of the *ejido*. The conflict was formally won by the *ejido*, and the *ejidatarios* took the land back into their possession. The recovered land was immediately divided into *lotes* for the construction of houses. As the *ejido* had spent a lot of money on lawyers, trips to the cities and on officials, the people who received a *lote* had to pay an amount of money to cover these costs. Petra was offered two *lotes* for her sons, but she refused them on principle. Many villagers stopped ceased to Petra and her sons for years.

The foregoing example shows different aspects of organisation and practices of control in the *ejido*. It shows that the costs that are involved in the resolution of conflicts and in 're-taking control' over certain *ejido* matters may be very high in personal and social terms. Re-taking control often means quarrels, tensions and fights. This is precisely the reason why people are reluctant to interfere in *ejido* matters. At the same time, it illustrates that formalities become important again when conflicts are fought out. During conflicts, people attend the meetings, acts are drawn and the higher bureaucracy becomes involved. This does not mean that the official rules are strictly applied. Normally it is the playing of the 'official game' in combination with informal ways of exercising pressure that determines the final outcome in a conflict.

Hence a socio-historical study of the ways in which land has been distributed in the *ejido* and transferred between different persons over the years shows the ordering and patterning in practices that are generally labelled as 'disorganised' and 'illegal'. Studies of conflicts and areas of contestation are important as they reveal other dimensions of organising practices. They show how in certain situations matters are settled by the combination of formal procedures and informal personal-political networks.

How to make sense of official representations

We have just discussed the importance of studying 'the flow of action' and 'the flow of resources' as opposed to sticking to the formal organisation model. However, the official representations of organisations may also offer valuable information, though often not in ways we expect them to. Everybody acquainted with organisational issues in development contexts knows the frustrating or surprising experiences this can give rise to. Sometimes, organisations appear to exist only on paper. Many people who follow official organigrams are confronted with the fact that whole divisions do not exist, or that people within the organisation do not have a clue about the official structure. It is also quite common to hear people give totally different views on what the formal structure is.

Even in situations where official procedures seem to be completely disregarded, it can be important to study the formal part of organisations. Likewise, it can be interesting to study official letters, even though they give a biased presentation of what is going on. It can also be important to study the list of official members, even though half of the people that appear on the list are dead. Official meetings may be enlightening, even though decisions have already been taken in informal gatherings before the meeting. It is important that we refrain from analysing these phenomena in terms of a 'dysfunction' (messy organisation) or a 'lack of organisational capacities'. Instead, we should find

ways to analyse these phenomena in new non-functionalist ways. For instance, if no official list of organisation members exists, but the head of the organisation knows all the members by name, the amounts of money each member owes the organisation and the numbers of animals they possess, then surely this is an indication of strong forms of social ordering.

The various roles of meetings

In a similar way, official meetings may give very little insight into central negotiations and decision-making processes, but can be illuminating in other respects. By listening to the ironic remarks, and conversations and discussions at the back of the room, one might get an idea of what is happening 'backstage'. Meetings can also be analysed as dramas in which different actors play different roles. As such, the drama can also be used to explore the relationship between language and action that constitutes social life (Czarniawska, 1997: 31). These meetings can also show how informally arranged affairs are formally presented, challenged, and negotiated and in this way give an indication of the most powerful political discourses (Parkin, 1984). Hence, there are innumerable ways in which one can study formal parts of an organisation in a non-functionalist way. It only means postponing analytical closure and searching for other modes of interpretation and explanation.

In my own research in Mexico, I found that *ejido* meetings did not play a role in the public rendering of accounts or arriving at collective decisions but rather had become arenas of quarrelling and confrontation. Meetings were characterised by people talking and quarrelling at the same time. There was seldom a central discussion and when there was, it soon dissolved into side-discussions in which old fights were recalled and often the same people began criticising each other again. Minutes were hardly ever kept and acts were rarely drawn up during these meetings. Although they were held to discuss important matters, collective decisions were never taken and voting never took place. Different people expressed their opinion and that was it. When accounts of income and revenue were presented they were always quickly passed. Certainly, there were always people complaining about these accounts, but the commissioner was never obliged to give a public explanation. Numerous side remarks were made during the meetings e.g. things should be different, more people should attend the meetings, people should learn to listen to each other, the rules should be followed, and so on. When they thought they had heard enough, people would leave the meeting. Others would wander in and out of the building while the meeting was in progress and outside, small groups would be discussing what was going on inside. The only things that became clear during these gatherings were the critical areas of contestation. The same conflicts about land always came up and without exception, *ejidatarios* accused each other of the things that had gone wrong. However, these were loose accusations, in the sense that no central discussion would follow in which attempts were made to resolve these issues. At first, it was very difficult to make any sense of these meetings at all.

Although Bailey (1969) describes a very different situation in the village of Bisipara, India, there are some similarities in the meetings he gives accounts of. Bailey nicely depicts how in the village council, people would publicly accuse each other of failing to contribute to common tasks, of embezzling village funds,

and other matters. This always led to heated debates but decisions were never reached on these issues, and after these open confrontations the affair would slip back to the more covert competition of gossip and backbiting. 'Then sooner or later, there would be another confrontation of just the same kind, followed by another period of gossip and slander' (Bailey, 1969: 89). The interesting similarity is that in Bailey's study, as in La Canoa, public meetings have become an arena of 'bickering and indecisive confrontation' and not of decision-making and resolution (*ibid.*: 90). In La Canoa, the meetings give *ejidatarios* the opportunity of expressing their opinions and feelings, and stressing the differences and tensions within the *ejido*.

This dynamic is well illustrated by the following example. In La Canoa a great part of the commons has been distributed over the years among *ejidatarios* and the sons of *ejidatarios*. Although officially, the *ejido* assembly should take these decisions, the custom is that people ask permission from the *ejido* commissioner who then decides alone. Once in an *ejido* meeting, however, the son of an *ejidatario* wanted to ask formal permission of the assembly to take a plot of land in the commons. The man, a lawyer who no longer lives in the village, wanted to follow what according to him were correct formal procedures. He had already come to several other *ejido* meetings but these had all been cancelled because of low attendance. This time the *ejido* meeting had not been cancelled and the man could finally present his formal request to the *ejido* assembly. This proved to be a rather awkward situation. The *ejidatarios* are not used to being formally asked permission to use a part of the commons during *ejido* meetings. Now that the lawyer had defied custom by formally asking for permission to take a plot, many of the *ejidatarios* used it as an opportunity to complain about the fact that everybody had taken land in the commons, that there was no land available anymore, and that the land administration was a total mess and should be regulated. In the end, no decision was taken during the meeting and the man did not obtain the formal permission he was after. However, it was not prohibited either. The lawyer was annoyed by the whole affair and remarked that he would be better off just taking the land without asking permission from anybody.

These examples show that formal parts of the organisation may acquire roles that are different from their official functions. As Barth puts it, 'I am in no way arguing that formal organisation is irrelevant to what is happening - only that formal organisation is not *what* is happening' (Barth., 1993: 157). This does not automatically mean that meetings, minutes, official documents etc. are insignificant, but only that they may acquire meanings that have little to do with their official role. Thus, the study of the formal aspects of organisations can be interesting, fruitful and important, and can show us many things, once we realise that they do not necessarily stand for their official function.

Reflective talk and organisational discourses

Continuous critical reflections by human agents, their theorising, and their storytelling can reveal much about the dynamics of organising practices. In several organisation theories it is argued that the creation and re-creation of stories are a way of ordering the world around us and are central to the organising process (Reed, 1992, Czarniawska, 1997). Law (1994a, 1994b) talks in this respect about the many

organisational narratives that can be found in every organisation. He shows how participants in an organisation may present very different and contradictory narratives about what the organisation is about and/or should be about. These narratives can be contrasting and inconsistent as they deal in different ways with conceptions of agency, self-interest, opportunism, and performance. According to Law, these manifold narratives of organisation show the decentered nature of organisations, since no narrative can completely capture the dynamic of the organising processes. All narratives are true and incomplete at the same time. In this approach, the forms of discourse available to and used by social actors in assessing their organisational situation are a central object of study.

Yet, I would take this position a step further. In my view, different views or images of the organising process do not only show different sides of the same organisation, they also reflect areas of tension and conflict. As Tsing argues, 'shifting, multi-stranded conversations in which there never is full agreement' may show important areas of contestation and struggle (1993: 8). She points out that we should situate commentaries within wider spheres of negotiation of meaning and power, recognising at the same time the local stakes and specificities (*ibid.*: 9). Hence, the study of organisational stories and discourses and the manifold contrasting views we may find, should be used for the analysis of organising practices in relation to the broader setting.

Local reflections on organising practices

In La Canoa the *ejidatarios* often reflect on the organisational characteristics of their *ejido* and struggle with the contradictory nature of their own reflections. Discussions of this kind, about the organisational characteristics of the *ejido* occur at the *ejido* meetings but also in private circles. To a certain extent outsiders induce this dialogue. Officials always say to the *ejidatarios* that they should accept their responsibilities, follow the formal rules, and organise themselves better. This places the *ejidatarios* in a dialogue between their 'practical knowledge' and a 'modernist organisation discourse'. For example, many *ejidatarios* say that they know that it is their duty to attend the *ejido* meetings but at the same time they can explain to you why they often prefer not to go. They argue that important decisions are not taken at the meetings anyway. This illustrates that they are in a critical, reflective dialogue with the world in which they live, with themselves and with government officials (see Pigg, 1996).

Since the *ejidatarios* themselves are struggling with ideas about how the *ejido* should work, we find contrasting discourses at the local level. To begin with, we find the 'accountability discourse', which presents the way in which the *ejido* should function as a modern bureaucratic organisation. According to this discursive model, every *ejidatario* should assume a position in the executive committee and take responsibilities if he or she is asked to do so. The executive committee should organise meetings and the *ejidatarios* should all attend these meetings. At the meetings, decisions should be taken about the important affairs in the *ejido* and the implementation of decisions should be open to inspection. The executive committee should render accounts of their actions at the *ejido* assembly and defend the interests of the entire *ejido* at the different institutions. *Ejidatarios* who do not follow the official rules should be punished, fined, or even deprived of certain rights. This accountability discourse is especially used

by the *ejidatarios* when things are happening in the *ejido* that they do not agree with. In situations like this, some *ejidatarios* would prefer the *ejido* to re-take control. However, most of the time the *ejidatarios* do not mind the lack of management and control. Nor do they care that outsiders view their *ejido* as 'disorganised'. The fact that the *ejido* does not function according to the official model gives them a lot of freedom in their operations and means that nobody interferes with their illegal land transactions. Furthermore, they have considerable security of land tenure. So, most of the time there is no reason for the *ejidatarios* to want the *ejido* administration to work differently or in a so-called modern, democratic, accountable way.

Another discourse, which is very strong in the *ejido*, could be called the 'personal politics discourse' of organisation. According to this discourse, people in official functions always use their position to favour themselves and friends. It is argued that there is always a lot of *favoritismo* (favouritism) and politics in the organisation and that in the end, everything is determined by money and relations. The people with the most money or with the most influential relations will always come out on top. Within this dialogue, it is said that personal enrichment is the main reason for people to take an official post. This discourse is an illustration of the fact that politics and organisation are seen as intricately related. The 'personal politics discourse' of organisation is above all used when people want to express their frustration about the outcome of specific conflicts. It is also used as a general critique about how things work in the *ejido*, the government bureaucracy and society at large. It is also often used as a justification for not taking initiatives to change situations or for not assuming formal responsibilities. The *ejidatarios* have a double attitude towards this image of organisations as being determined by personal politics. They may complain about favouritism in the *ejido* management but at the same time will acknowledge that they themselves make use of these mechanisms when they need their own affairs to be settled. They may explain that this is a weakness in themselves, and say: 'as Mexicans, we ourselves are to blame for it' or 'it is hard to change these things as they form part of our life, of the way we are'. At the same time they are proud of the fact that they as Mexicans know how to support friends and relatives when necessary.

The model of organisation, which is presented in the personal politics discourse, is more an imagery of power and politics than an accurate representation of organising practices. Although organising processes in the *ejido* are definitely influenced by power relations, these are not the only or even the most important factors. For example, although the *ejido* commissioner takes many decisions on his own, he has very little room to operate in. Little scope exists for abrupt changes of established routines. He can decide on minor issues without informing the assembly and he may take some advantage of his position, but he cannot decide to evict somebody from an individual *ejido* plot. *Ejidatarios* have several ways to fight abuses and effective forms of accountability exist outside the formal channels. If a commissioner goes too far in his abuses or damages the interests of certain people, they will let him know and if necessary he will be stopped. He is not stopped so much by people speaking up at a meeting, but by their talking to him in private, their use of regional political networks, gossip and the exclusion of his relatives from other village activities. The politics of honour also plays an important role in the room commissioners create for themselves and in the

way others judge them. In fact, the 'accountability discourse', as well as the 'personal politics discourse' of organisation present images of organising which do not exist in reality. Yet, they do express different, partial dimensions of the same organisation and are used in conflicts and struggles in the *ejido*.

Conclusion: re-thinking organisation

In the development debate, a widespread belief exists in the capacities of 'modern' and 'accountable' forms of organisation to improve the situation of the poor. The propagation of organisations as a magic potion for progress is accompanied by the proliferation of manuals for building local organisations, participating in learning approaches and training for consciousness raising. In this chapter, it was argued that within this debate organisations are mainly seen as instruments of social change. Most of the time, an implicit social systems approach of organisation is employed in which organisations are defined as units directed to the realisation of collective goals. Interesting forms of organisational analysis in the social sciences that have been developed in recent decades are completely ignored in the development debate. This has several detrimental effects. First of all, existing forms of organising in development contexts, which do not correspond to the mythical model of the 'modern', 'accountable', 'democratic' organisation are not taken into account. Secondly, what we see happening is the tendency to replace political discussion with a 'neutral' focus on organisations that are supposed to bring development, depoliticising relationships that are in fact fraught with conflict (see Strathern 2000 and Pels 2000 for similar arguments, Ferguson, 1990).

In this chapter, an organising practices approach was presented that draws on recent insights from organisation theory. Within this approach, one studies the ways in which people organise themselves around certain resources, projects, events, or conflicts. The ordering or patterning of these practices is analysed in relation to the wider socio-political field. This approach was illustrated with examples from the Mexican *ejido*. In Mexico, *ejidatario* smallholders are depicted by government officials as uneducated, uncooperative, backwards and disorganised. Programs for the *ejido* sector draw heavily on discourses that stress the need for consciousness raising, education and local organisation. Here, it was shown that this view overlooks existing organising practices in the *ejido* and the ways in which these have become firmly established and ordered over the years. These regularities are reflected in the manifold implicit 'rules of the game' in everyday forms of organising. Although the official rules are not applied in the *ejido*, accurate registration does not exist and meetings seem a chaotic mess, mechanisms have developed over the years that give individual *ejidatarios* considerable security in land tenure. In addition, effective forms of accountability exist outside of the official arena. In this context, I stressed the importance of reflective talk and discourse for organisational analysis. In the 'field', it is common to come across different, contrasting and seemingly inconsistent images of the same organisation. On the one hand, these contrasting stories capture different dimensions of the same organisation or, in other words, the 'multiple realities' of the actors involved (Long, 1992). On the other hand, these contrasting and multi-stranded views reflect areas of contestation and struggle and are an

indication of the configuration of forces in the wider socio-political field. Only by taking distance from the systems perspective of organisation, and by taking existing forms of organising seriously, can we have meaningful discussions on the role of organisation in development.

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