

**ROSA DE LOS VIENTOS:  
Rural Political Action, Popular Movements and National Development**

by Gloria Rudolf

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**Introduction**

Panamanian history stands at a decisive crossroads as the 1999 deadline approaches for the United States to relinquish to Panama the Canal, \$30 billion of associated property, and all of its military operations. This will provide Panama with a vast array of newly available resources and responsibilities at the same time that the majority of Panamanians are experiencing increased poverty and inequality, in no small part due to national policies of globalization. The way these Canal assets are used and distributed will define Panama's future path of national development. Will it be only elites who garner returns, or will the nation's majority of poor rural and urban dwellers reap some degree of socio-economic improvement and mobility?

In part, this will depend on the actions of Panama's popular sectors. If groups with such diverse interests as small farmers, women, indigenous peoples, laborers and environmentalists can form strong coalitions, they may influence how elites and global powers distribute resources in the new global economy. To do so they will need to gather sufficient numbers and force by reaching out effectively to masses of Panamanians. The rural population will be a key sector in these mobilizing efforts, not only because it encompasses 45% of Panamanians<sup>1</sup>--most of whom are poor campesina/os-- but also because most rural dwellers have migrant children and other kin living in urban areas who also represent a significant proportion of the urban poor.

What is the nature of the political dynamics among Panama's rural poor, and what, if any, is the potential for effective mobilizations for social justice? These are people often depicted as passive victims of history, insignificant historical actors "...to whom history has been denied," as anthropologist Eric Wolf (1982:23) described this view. Many observers of rural social life in Panama seem to agree. They stress the infrequency and failures of large-scale political mobilizations among popular sectors, and suggest that in rural areas this is related to an historical absence of enduring social or political groups.<sup>2</sup> Some posit further that this absence atomizes political life and encourages cultural ideas, such as "individualism" and "egoism," that feed peasant conservatism and therefore resistance to political organizing at local or wider levels.<sup>3</sup>

In this paper I argue that the politics and political potential of the rural poor in Panama are more complex and dynamic than these assessments suggest. Underlying visible political failure, for example, is an ongoing, less visible and cumulative historical process by which the effects of actions taken at one point in time--even those that apparently failed--rest below the surface of political life, like genetic mutations influencing subsequent possible actions and outcomes.<sup>4</sup> To grasp the political potential of the rural poor we must understand this process as well as those more easily studied.

Social scientists in the 1990s have been grappling with ways to capture and understand this subtle motor of social change. In part, this has been in response to studies since the 1980s of the dramatic and widespread political mobilizations referred to as "new social movements." Early research into these large-scale collective actions exuded an optimism about their potential to help transform consciousness and society in fundamental and democratic ways.<sup>5</sup> By the 1990s, however, it was clear that such rosy prognoses often had been premature. Many of these

organized protests had remained localized, ephemeral, or had been repressed or coopted by the state or other outsiders rather than bringing about societal transformation.<sup>6</sup> "We now know," concluded Alvarez and Escobar (1992:325) in their important book on social movements, that these movements "...are unlikely to radically transform large structures of domination or dramatically expand elite democracies, certainly not in the short run."

Did this mean that these organized political struggles had had no historical impact? Historian Florencia Mallon (1995:14) provides one of the few systematic studies to address this question.<sup>7</sup> Mallon shows that peasant actions in nineteenth century Mexico and Peru--and elite responses to them--opened or closed particular options for each sector thereafter, and therefore conditioned what could and would later become of each of these states in the twentieth century.

This suggests that expressions of agency be conceived and studied, not as momentary events, but as part of ongoing social processes that emerge and develop in the context of people's everyday lives. Social protest, say Fox and Starn (1997:6) "should be understood as a process of becoming rather than an already achieved state..."<sup>8</sup> Although local actions may not pose an immediate challenge to the structures of power imposed by global or local agencies, they sometimes plant seeds--often unintentionally--with the potential to blossom later in ways that do promote historical change (Smith 1984). In trying to understand these seeds, it becomes possible to uncover subtle effects not otherwise visible. For example, in the course of participation in a religious movement or a neighborhood soup kitchen,<sup>9</sup> people may develop political skills (like public speaking or financial accounting) or political understandings and feelings (such as group identity and cooperation; self-respect and optimism), or networks of relationships and alliances that over time can open new possibilities for forms of protest and change (Edelman 1990; Slater 1994b:4-5). We now have a few studies that discuss how such developments in the long run can contribute to people's ability to undermine, confront, or negotiate with the state (Norget 1995; Scott 1985,1990) or hinder the spread of a radical movement (Starn (1991, cited in Slater 1994a:28). The ruling order is vulnerable from many angles, say Kaplan and Kelly (1994:127).

This recent body of work shifts the focus of analysis about long-term historical change from large-scale mobilizations to the undramatic rhythm of people's ongoing daily lives, and requires a research gaze that examines events and their consequences over a relatively long time. I take up this challenge through analysis of the historical experience of the people of one small, poor farming community, called Loma Bonita, in the rugged mountains of central Panama where I have been conducting anthropological research for 25 years.<sup>10</sup> In this still relatively inaccessible community people have been engaged throughout their history in small-scale, collective social actions. Although these have not succeeded in building enduring political organizations or reversing poverty, they sometimes have planted seeds of political will, ideas, skills, and relationships with potential to contribute to significant social change in the future. I illustrate this perspective by examining the connecting threads between seeds planted in the course of actions taken in Loma Bonita during the Torrijos reforms of the 1970s, the Catholic church's Delegates of the Word movement in the 80s, and NGO projects today. The latter, I propose, are planting new kinds of seeds that increase the chances of rural mobilizations that could strengthen popular movements at the national level.

Panamanian songwriter, Ramulo Castro, captured the importance of this largely invisible historical process in a song called Rose of the Winds, the name given to Panama by Spanish conquerors to describe the Isthmus' strength:

I come from where the Rose of the Winds is born;  
it has been whipped by many strong winds,  
but still grows from within.

Yo vengo de donde nace la Rosa de los Vientos;  
ha sido azotada por muchos vendavales  
pero aun crece por dentro.

## **I. VICTIMIZATION AND FAILED SOCIAL ACTIONS 1970s-1990s**

### **The Community of Loma Bonita**

Loma Bonita did not look very different in 1995 than when I first set foot there in 1972. It was still usually a quiet place, where one was keenly aware of the sounds of birds, roosters, pounding rains, crying babies, a blaring radio's repetitive rhythms of decimo and tipico. The community's 300 residents still lived in small houses of earth or cement block scattered widely along steep, often muddy slopes. Although only 150 miles from Panama's capital city, the journey to Loma Bonita can still consume three-quarters of a day. After a bus ride to Cocle's highland town of El Cope, one faces an hour or two ascent by foot up steep, often muddy slopes or, in recent years, a hair-raising ride packed like a sardine into the back of a four-wheel drive vehicle. No paved road has yet reached the community, nor is there electricity, a sewage system, or health facility. The only obvious signs of "modernity" are an aquaduct reaching most, but not all households, and one small general store, church, and primary school.

Despite the appearance of an unchanging "traditional" reality, Loma Bonita has undergone a momentous transformation since World War II. Before that time, it was a community of poor but relatively independent slash-and-burn subsistence farmers who had little and infrequent contact with Panama's lowland centers of capitalist control. Since the War, Loma Bonita's campesina/os have incorporated themselves directly into the capitalist market economy; as cash crop farmers and low-paid urban and rural workers, they have become dependent for daily survival on decisions and resources controlled by powerful, distant outsiders. Globalization during the 90s is generating another transformation in their relationships with the world capitalist system, as its agents--from local to international levels--now arrive in Loma Bonita directly. They spawn a few new opportunities for a minority, but exacerbate ongoing problems of poverty and inequality for the majority.

### **Before the 1970s**

Up until the 1920s,<sup>11</sup> according to oral histories, Loma Bonita was a community of slash-and-burn subsistence farmers who supplemented agriculture with small-scale livestock raising and the household manufacture of goods like straw hats for trade or sale. Occasionally or seasonally, men and women also worked as agricultural day workers in exchange for labor, goods, or, by the end of the 19th century, wages. Although wealth differences between households did exist (based primarily on unequal cattle holdings), all households seem to have been able to provide members with adequate subsistence during this period. Land was abundant,<sup>12</sup> and bordered a vast, almost unpopulated highland region. This was an economy in which women and men were complementary partners in a struggle to eat and live under difficult conditions.<sup>13</sup> Being resource poor and difficult to reach from lowland centers of capitalist control, Loma Bonita was essentially left alone by outside economic, political and religious powerholders; no one at that time coveted the community's lands, production or labor.<sup>14</sup>

This political economy began to be undermined in the 1920s when developments outside Loma Bonita encouraged community members to grow coffee commercially.<sup>15</sup> What ensued is a tale familiar throughout rural Latin America and Panama.<sup>16</sup> Loma Bonita's farmers eagerly planted coffee to sell to outside merchants in the hope of improving their economic situations, but over time found themselves instead facing greater economic insecurity. At the heart of the new problems that commercial agriculture generated within Loma Bonita was a growing inequality between families, and between women and men, in their access to land, coffee, and, therefore, capital. These flames of inequality were further fed by government policies and population growth.

By World War II about 40% of Loma Bonita's households no longer had access to sufficient land for subsistence production. Land-poor families began to send young daughters to work as live-in servants in urban areas for short periods before marriage. Increased U.S. military activity in Panama during the war helped create these jobs and led the U.S. to complete construction of a lowland highway that enabled Loma Bonita's women to reach urban work in a matter of days rather than months.<sup>17</sup> Cash remittances from young female migrants to their families brought some economic relief to poorer households. Temporary migrants did not earn enough, however, to reverse the growing land and resource deficiencies. New types of migrant labor in urban and rural areas became possible after the mid-1960s when another paved road was completed to nearby Cope. This brought most of Panama's urban centers, including the capital, to within a day of travel.

### 1970s and Torrijos' Reforms

The 1970s opened with a promise of new possibilities from the military government of General Omar Torrijos. Torrijos inherited a booming economy and initiated a development strategy that elaborated on Panama's role as a center for international financial services and commerce. Simultaneously he launched an experiment in populist politics, implementing social reforms to try to gain wide popular support for his regime, and to improve conditions for the majority of Panamanians. Since these ambitious programs were financed by international loans, by 1976 the country had the highest per capita foreign debt in all of Latin America (NACLA 1979:14). Within a few years, however, Torrijos abandoned the populist part of his project. The western world economy had gone into recession, and the isthmus plunged into serious economic decline (Gjording 1991:30). By the end of the decade, Panama was a country of high unemployment, falling real wages, stagnated agricultural output (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:100), and the second highest rate of income inequality in Central America;<sup>18</sup> 40% of the rural population and 12% of those in urban areas did not even have sufficient food (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:122-127).

In Loma Bonita, this was a decade of heightened subsistence crisis; families experienced increasing land shortages, spiraling shortages of food and other essential goods, rising prices of basic necessities, and declining income from their major cash crops.<sup>19</sup> The majority of community members by the 1970s lived perched on a narrow economic ledge, constantly in danger of slipping off.

Families struggled against the odds to address these problems, capitalizing on the very few options open to them. They worked their lands harder than before, reducing fallow time. They worked themselves harder than before, enduring hardships and dangers to cross the continental divide where there were still unclaimed lands to plant food crops. And they drew more than ever on kin, comadres/compadres and friends for aid, borrowing land, exchanging labor for food, and

gifting food. Families also sent more of their members far away to work and settle permanently in cities and towns. In their new urban homes migrants created innovative types of social relationships to move aid and support back and forth between rural and urban spaces. As a result, most families managed to continue to meet minimal necessities and get economic relief.

Amidst these problems and struggles, a parade of representatives of Torrijos' government entered Loma Bonita's patios, the first time in history the national government had made its presence so directly felt.<sup>20</sup> Their goal, they assured people, was to organize economic development projects that would improve their conditions. This included a coffee cooperative, cattle project, consumer cooperative and outhouse construction project. With all of these projects underway, Loma Bonita was a beehive of political activity in the early 70s. Members of almost 25% of community households served consistently as leaders of committees and almost half of all households had members who were actively drawn into Torrijos' experiment.

This participation was motivated, in part, by the hope that cooperation with the government might bring them economic improvement. However, mistrust, sometimes fear of the government also lurked beneath the surface of almost everyone's participation. Mistrust and fear had deep historical roots in Loma Bonita, but was reinforced by a government development process that was top-down, authoritarian, and male controlled. Military representatives of the state who were sent to Loma Bonita to oversee Torrijos' projects used mild forms of coercion to get people's participation. The process deprived most community members of a voice in important decision making, kept them ill informed or misinformed about their roles, and was utterly disrespectful of their time and labor needs. It is no surprise, therefore, that the majority of participants in Loma Bonita actually involved themselves minimally--just enough to avoid government reprisals, but no more. As soon as it seemed possible, they withdrew.<sup>21</sup>

When Torrijos began to shift resources and attention away from social reforms in the mid-1970s, most community members left their projects without even looking back.<sup>22</sup> By the mid-1970s the credit cooperative had not materialized, and coffee and cattle projects had left more debts than benefits. The only enduring improvements were a few health services, like outhouses, and, later, potable water for some families. Only the few men in the inner circle of Torrijos' military representative in Loma Bonita had reaped benefits, and these were small. Everyone else was left with no more access to land, animals or markets for their products, no more or better jobs. Nor had they had opportunity to create any enduring independent organization of their own.<sup>23</sup>

### 1980s and Delegates of the Word

The 1980s, referred to as the lost decade throughout Latin America, was a harsh time of crisis on top of crisis in Panama. Austerity programs imposed by the IMF and World Bank,<sup>24</sup> contributed to a domestic economy that had stagnated by the mid-1980s and official unemployment that reached 12% (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:134). On top of this already severe economic situation, the U.S. government launched a war of sanctions and then invasion against Torrijos' less charismatic and more corrupt successor, General Antonio Noriega, that helped push Panama's economy from bad to worse to deep depression.<sup>25</sup> Under these pressures Noriega's regime increasingly took on an authoritarian character, occasionally resorting overtly to violence.<sup>26</sup>

Within Loma Bonita the struggle to put food on the table was a decade worse than before. By 1984, two-thirds of community households lacked adequate lands for subsistence production, with all that this implied about greater food shortages and a longer list of necessities to purchase

each month. At the same time, they now had to cope with the political tribulations of Noriega's authoritarian regime. By the end of the decade, everyone in Loma Bonita was afraid to discuss political issues in public.

Community families confronted these mounting problems creatively. Most managed to stay afloat by working harder under more exploitative conditions, by organizing to meet problems collectively, and by developing new ways to garner and share resources. A household would try to diversify the economic activities of its members, for example, and then widely share the benefits of this "little bit from everywhere" (as one community member described it) within their kin network. The U.S. war on Noriega tested the resourcefulness of Loma Bonita's families. As paid jobs evaporated and cash incomes plummeted in urban areas, children returned to live for awhile in Loma Bonita, sometimes for the first time in a decade or more. To survive, families tightened belts at mealtimes, shifted to less expensive foods, like yucca, skipped lunch and ate early dinners, made soups instead of dry meals. They also "ate-up" their own chickens and small cash savings.<sup>27</sup> Emphasizing subsistence strategies that did not depend on wage labor, they enlarged the pool of local people with whom they exchanged and shared or joined several new self-help economic groups.

Some of these groups were part of a religious movement introduced by the Catholic church.<sup>28</sup> This movement, referred to in Panama as Delegates of the Word, had been sweeping Latin America and other parts of Panama since the 1960s, seeking to revitalize the church and liberate the poor from their oppressed conditions. The church provided intensive, long-term training to local leaders, or delegates, who were chosen by their communities. Loma Bonita's delegates, all male as mandated by the church in the region, attended seminars in Penonome for four or five years to learn about Catholicism, the church's position on socio-economic issues, their duties as delegates, and methods for carrying out their work.<sup>29</sup> This was quite an educational opportunity in a community where adults, at best, completed only primary school.<sup>30</sup> Delegates were to put all of this formal learning into practice in their communities by organizing religious committees, prayer and reflection sessions, Bible circles, catechism classes and eventually economic development projects.

Loma Bonita families who became actively involved in Delegates of the Word--at its peak about one third of community households<sup>31</sup>--did so out of a deeply felt religious faith. The movement also had a political dimension, however. Delegates of the Word was the only ongoing group in the community that was not tightly controlled by the military government in the 1980s. Protected by the power of the Catholic church, it alone provided people a safe place to cope with the devastating conditions of the 1980s, to discuss their problems, and to work collectively to try to solve them. A collective agricultural labor group and a consumer cooperative were among two of these projects.

None of the church-sponsored development projects, however, lasted more than a few years. In large part, as in the case of Torrijos' projects, this was attributable to a development process that was imposed by the church from outside the community and managed in a top-down, undemocratic way that was sometimes ill informed about the complexities of highland social life. In the case of the consumer cooperative, for example, the church failed to provide several essential ingredients for success, including key technical and communication skills, and increasingly demanded more of members' scarce labor and resources.<sup>32</sup>

These demands were met with a flagging participation in movement activities in Loma Bonita. By mid-1993, delegates had had to cancel some prayer sessions because too few members were attending. Other religious groups were still meeting, but attendance was low. As church-sponsored groups dissolved and the Delegates of the Word movement itself weakened in the 1990s, it was clear that it had neither helped people improve their economic circumstances or build an enduring organization of their own that could establish independent political relationships with groups outside the community.

### The 1990s, Globalization, And NGOs

The U.S. invasion of 1989 cleared the path for economic globalization in Panama by removing from power a military regime that the U.S. government deemed too uncontrollable. By 1995 the new civilian state had raised the country's already spectacular foreign debt to almost \$4 billion (Hernandez 12/9/95b). In compliance with escalating demands from the World Bank and IMF, the Perez Balladares government adopted a neoliberal economic and political agenda.<sup>33</sup> The result in Panama, as around the globe, has been economic growth for some sectors,<sup>34</sup> but little trickle down benefits for the vast majority of citizens. Instead, there has been a reinforcement of previous trends toward greater unemployment and underemployment, higher prices and therefore more poverty, inequality, crime and violence.<sup>35</sup>

In Loma Bonita these conditions have brought greater levels of economic insecurity as well as new forms and levels of crime, violence and drugs. They also have exacerbated previous economic and gender inequalities. Globalization has opened small new economic opportunities in the region, but only those few families--especially the men of those families--with access to a bit more resources and/or political contacts, have the wherewithal to capitalize on them. (Today, while Loma Bonita's few slightly better-off families struggle to access the scant possibilities opened by the globalizing economy, most others are fighting simply to make ends meet each and every day.)

The search for inventive approaches to survive under these conditions continues. Parents living in Loma Bonita, for example, also invent new ways to help their migrant children struggling far away in the city. To assist her son and daughter move forward in their work and school plans in the city, every Monday morning forty-five year old Seferina Moreno would leave her husband and one son in the countryside and commute to Panama City for four days. In the capital she rented a small room that she shared with another son, her daughter and a brother. This son had just finished high school and gotten his first job as a mechanic and her brother worked in construction. With the help of a scholarship, her daughter had recently enrolled at the university. Everyone but her daughter contributed to the rent. Seferina ironed clothes in people's homes--the hottest, hardest and most undesirable of domestic jobs, but one that paid a bit better than others. She also helped her own kin with the laundry, cooking and cleaning. When her son lost his job because he joined a labor strike in 1995, Seferina increased her time in the city by an extra day while he searched for new work.

Within Loma Bonita, some households were trying to get ahead in the early 90s by joining one of two newly forming economic self-help groups initiated and supported by outside non-governmental organizations (NGOs) with some funding from the U.S. Inter-American Foundation.<sup>36</sup> About 70% (11 of 16) of the people involved in the two groups were closely related kin from two families that were economically and/or politically better-connected than most others. The majority were men (11 of 16). Their projects were ongoing in the mid-90s, but

were not doing very well. NGO-sponsored income generating programs for the poor are notorious for their high failure rates everywhere (Ferguson 1991?:9; Williams 1981:16-17), and in Loma Bonita in 1997 only two of the four chicken and cattle projects of the association had gone well enough to pay back the original loans.<sup>37</sup>

## **II LONG-TERM POTENTIAL FRUITS OF SMALL-SCALE SOCIAL ACTION, 1970s-90s**

Not all things that finish, however, actually come to an end (Reyna et.al 1992:19. The experiences of community members with Torrijos' reforms and the church movement generally planted seeds that have affected subsequent political developments in Loma Bonita. NGO activities today continue to contribute to this subtle political process.

### Torrijos Reforms

In the course of Torrijos' reform programs, men and women who often had never before been involved in political organizing at the community level were introduced to many new political skills and ideas about social justice and collective action. Despite the ultimate failure of the projects themselves, many of those who had served on committees as leaders, later continued to apply what they had learned. Throughout the 1970s and 80s, they provided Loma Bonita with a core of activists who found small windows of opportunity for social action despite economic depression and the state's authoritarian control. Some got involved in community self-help projects, some in the Delegates of the Word, and a few helped mobilize political protest against the military government. To illustrate, of the six women who served on the women's committee during the Torrijos reform period, none had previously been involved in community-level political work. Four of the six, however, emerged as lifelong social activists, even in the face of scant political opportunities for women. One committee member, who had left Loma Bonita in the mid-1970s to live with her partner, later told me that she quickly had joined with other women in her new community to work on health and church projects. She saw a clear connection between her experience as part of the women's committee for the Torrijos reforms and her later activist work.

When I first got to my husband's community, I began right away to work with four other women... I had learned how to associate with people during my political work in Loma Bonita. I knew how to have conversations and form relationships--especially with other women. I had also learned how to make requests to (state) officials and how to make appointments and be there on time...I had learned that different people know a great deal and that from them I, too, learn more...

...The people in my husband's community were happy with me. One time, one of them said, 'Luisa is a very active person. She knows how to care about others so that others will care about her, too.' ...

All three of the other activist committee women remained in Loma Bonita throughout the 1980s, and played key roles in the Delegates of the Word movement. They were part of a small group of movement members who were consistently present at church religious and educational gatherings, and who helped make fundraisers and other movement activities successful. They also got as close as women could get to having leadership positions in the movement; two trained to be catechists, one became the only female member of the church-initiated consumer cooperative, and two struggled successfully to help their sons become delegates.<sup>38</sup>

Two of these women also participated in political protest that challenged the national power structure. They were among the community's few organizers of the campaign of Arnulfo Arias for president of Panama in 1984. Their work in open support of "Arnulfo," despite the military government's public disapproval, was a courageous political act that demonstrated their social commitment. It also contributed in the longer run to Noriega's downfall and, therefore, to a shift of national political power back to Panama's civilian oligarchy and to U.S. control. General Noriega had just assumed command of Panama's military in August of 1983, and had promised, among other things, to hold free elections in 1984 (Scranton 1991:69). But the entrance into the race of Arnulfo Arias, an outspoken critic of Noriega who had widespread popularity, forced the Noriega regime to show its authoritarian character earlier than it might have chosen. When it appeared as though Arnulfo might win, Noriega felt obliged to fraudulently declare victorious his own hand-picked candidate.<sup>39</sup> Popular protests were immediate.<sup>40</sup> While the U.S. government did not immediately withdraw its support of Noriega, and in fact supported the fraud he perpetrated in the 1984 election, its decision soon thereafter to eliminate the General was informed in part by this protest. Meanwhile, far away in the mountains of Coclé province, the efforts of two political activist women in Loma Bonita had helped make this happen. Their political experiences in Torrijos' development projects ten years before were still reverberating.

### Delegates of the Word

The Delegates of the Word got invisible nourishment from people's experiences during the Torrijos reforms. It also planted its own new political seeds. Some were in the form of the hope and optimism that the movement kept alive for perhaps as much as a third of Loma Bonita's families during the difficult decade of the 1980s.<sup>41</sup> With the economy in a tailspin and no political space in sight, the movement provided one small avenue to nourish not only members' spirits, but also their will for social activism, the will to keep constructing a way of life and dreaming of a better world, as Arturo Escobar and Sonia Alvarez (1992:11) so eloquently put it.

Above all, Delegates of the Word continued to plant seeds of social activism. Delegates, especially, will always carry with them the new leadership skills and political ideas they learned through work in the movement. They bring hundreds of hours of practice in reading, writing, public speaking, listening, notetaking, studying, traveling. They have heard about, reflected on, and sometimes tried to put into practice ideas about the disadvantaged place of the poor in the social order and how to improve this situation through local actions that are collective and democratic. This has left some delegates with what they describe as an ongoing commitment to collective efforts to build a better world for everyone.<sup>42</sup> Said one in 1993, "It's true that I want to do better in life for me and my family, but I think the best insurance for that is to all work together for each other--the whole community."

At the time of my field visit in 1993, this spirit of social activism among Loma Bonita's delegates and ex-delegates was evident. Five of the six men who had trained as delegates between 1977 and 1990 were still living in the community,<sup>43</sup> and were active in new secular types of community social action projects. One delegate was about to launch a political career as a legislative candidate in the national elections slated for 1994. Another was becoming a potential leader-activist of a different sort, having almost finished his studies for the priesthood.<sup>44</sup> The other three delegates had joined one or both of the two new economic development projects--one to raise cows, the other chickens--sponsored by outside non-governmental organizations (NGOs); one of these delegates, along with Loma Bonita's teacher, had been instrumental in the formation of these groups.

Members as well as leaders of Delegates of the Word and its coop accounted for the majority of those working in these two new self-help groups. Manfredo Mendoso, one such man, gave room for optimism about the project's future. He explained how what he had learned from the failure of the coop would help him do things better this time:

Last time we suffered from bad management and giving too much credit. People didn't know how to be responsible to each other or how to discuss what was on their minds. This project is better. We keep careful track of everything in our books... We also present our ideas and opinions to each other at meetings. We're now trying to develop a code of rules about how to work together....

In 1993 Manfredo's project had already experienced a few conflicts among members, some related, as in the past, to divisive socio-economic differences within Loma Bonita. Moreover, women were members in their own right in only one of the two new groups. Nevertheless, there seemed to be a clear consciousness about the need to set up structures for accountability, communication and conflict resolution. The project's books, which I was invited to examine, represented a vast improvement over those of the failed coop. Time will tell whether seeds sown in the past will bring more successful outcomes this time. At least one member of the new chicken cooperative was optimistic in 1993 about this future. "Lo mas estudio, lo mas aprendo," she said. (The more I get the opportunity to experience and study, the more I learn.)

#### NGO-sponsored Self Help Groups

People's involvements in the NGO-sponsored self help groups of the 1990s has put their participants into contact with various agents of the global economy and allowed them to establish links with outside campesina/o groups and national popular movements, stimulating interesting new political dynamics in the community.

The two NGO-sponsored groups were originally established as two small independent units with separate funding and membership. Soon, however, they decided to unite and form an association. According to Mauricio Nunez, who had been instrumental in the formation of the chicken raising group, a principle motive of the merger was to gain access to more capital from national and international sources by forging a new relationship with the state.

One of our concerns as we developed was that the group not be only 11 members, but a larger group, open to the participation of others... The idea was that if we united strongly, different groups ...to fight to acquire free legal status (personeria juridica) as producers through the Ministry of Agricultural Development (MIDA), that this would give us the opportunity to progress and solicit aid, as donation or loans, and that this would permit us to be able to develop more activities.

To strengthen their application to MIDA for legal status, these two groups invited two other NGO-sponsored groups from two nearby communities to join their association; one had its own small consumer store, and the other cultivated and sold vegetables. Thus, their new association was comprised of four separate groups and about 25 members.

By 1997, the association had reached out beyond the local vicinity. Through their NGO contacts they learned about and were able to ally with a provincial-level association of small-scale producers that had a branch in a community in Loma Bonita's highland region, although some

distance away. An important motive for pursuing this link was again financial, but association members now specifically sought to connect with U.S. funding sources. Juan Amado, one member, articulated this clearly in 1997:

The advantage for us is that this provincial-level association is better known than us at the national and international level because they already have worked with the Inter-American Foundation (IAF)--a U.S.funding source. They've worked with them for years and administered funds from the IAF. We, on the other hand, have not yet administered IAF money. We have worked with a loan from a Church-affiliated NGO which gets its money from IAF, but they, not us, administered the loan and charged us interest.

In discussing the future of their organization in 1997 several of Loma Bonita's association members expressed the desire to continue to form linkages with other groups of poor campesina/os in order to become part of a movement with national political clout. As one man put it:

What is happening here in Panama is that many other groups are forming organizations. Some of these associations are becoming powerful. For example ANAGAN (National Association of Cattlemen) is an organization at the national level, but it started with individual owners who formed groups and then associations, like we're doing. Now ANAGAN here in Panama has a very large association and it has force and a voice nationally. When there's a price problem, an increase in the price of cattle or meat, they are the first to organize around this. They are a force at the national level.

There's also an association of small and medium business people, but they aren't the group for us to join (en la linea de nosotras) since most are small business owners. We are in the category of producers, small producers, poor producers. This is why we allied with the provincial association because they are also campesinos like all of us, poor people who must struggle, small producers...They, in turn, can make links to more groups, even in the capital.

These comments suggest that emerging relationships with NGOs that have global links are enabling participants to plant new political seeds in Loma Bonita. Among these, are, first, a deepened consciousness of the existence of national popular movements and their potentially important role in class-based struggles for improved socio-economic conditions; second, an explicit interest in joining a campesina/o movement with connections that would give them voice at the national level; and, third, new avenues to access some of these groups. This combination of seeds has no precedent in Loma Bonita where, as noted, consciousness of and connections to national level politics historically have been minimal and in recent years dominated by the state and the Catholic church.

### **CONCLUSIONS: POLITICAL SEEDS AND POLITICAL CHANGE**

Seeds, however, do not always take root and blossom. We know from numerous studies that the journey from involvement in small-scale NGO-led projects in rural communities like Loma Bonita to participation in national level popular movements is long and convoluted. NGO projects are notorious for their failures, and themselves often include only small numbers of the poor; in Loma Bonita only a minority of adults are involved in NGO projects, and members of better-off families and men predominate. An enormous welter of other factors outside rural

communities--shaped by agents like international NGO funders, national and provincial peasant organizers, state and church representatives--could also discourage the rural poor from mobilizing to join the ranks of a national peasant movement.

Given the immense complexity of such contingent factors, we simply cannot predict how things will unfold in Loma Bonita and in hosts of other rural Panamanian communities where economic globalization is creating similar new political dynamics and difficulties. Nevertheless, the very existence of these seeds of new political ideas, identities, relationships, and experiences throughout the countryside does alter the political landscape of possibilities. It may also shape the ground of the possible next transformation, as Gar Alperovitz (1994:6) has put it. This now may include strengthening of a national coalition of campesina/os and other popular groups. Past failures of state and church projects within Loma Bonita suggest that outside organizers today could be more successful in campesina/o communities, if they learn about community social life in all its complexities, respect the needs of all sectors within a community to define and decide what is in their own interests, and assist with necessary skills, resources and education. If they can do this, they even may be able gather sufficient support throughout the interior to wrest concessions from Panamanian elites and global powers as they divide up the resources from the first century of the magnificent Panama Canal.

## ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Although the contribution of the agricultural sector to national production dropped from 19% in the late 60s to only 10% in 1993, agriculture and cattle ranching still provided employment to 26% of working Panamanians (Barry and Lindsay-Poland 1995: xiv, 74).

<sup>2</sup> **NOTE:** For some this, in turn, is seen as a product of an economy of subsistence farming that historically did not require a large, permanent or highly organized labor force. For campesina/o groups, see (Gudeman 1976,1978; Schwartz et.al. 1985:3). For Emberá see (Kane 1990:169-70; Wali 1989:137). For Ngöbe-Buglé see (Gjording 1991:74, 252; Young and Bort 1979:79). In a recent article Turner (1995:102) reinforces this point in the reverse. He says that Kayapo social and political organization in Brazil is well-suited to collective mobilization for political action specifically because it involves extended family household units that are overlain by a series of associations.

<sup>3</sup> **NOTE:** For example, (Gudeman (1976); Leis (1995 CK). Wali (1989:137) says that collective enterprise was a foreign idea to the Emberá. The notion that Panama's popular sectors, in general, are incapable of successful protest, is also common. One recent study ( CEASPA 1997:6) notes that popular sectors have the capacity to protest, but that their ability to generate alternatives is very limited, which greatly reduces their possibilities to enter and maintain negotiations and to get results in their favor. Another (Herrera 1996:63), says that different sectors are so ensnared in economic, social and moral crises that it has impaired their capacity for analysis and understanding of the problems affecting the country.

<sup>4</sup> Mallon (1995:xix) envisions this historical process as "an ongoing unending chain in which the outcomes of previous struggles and dynamics are constantly affecting present and future conflicts and contingencies." In such a process, says anthropologist James Howe (1991:43), each action taken changes the range of possibilities available for the next action. This view of change is like the concept of dialogical change associated in linguistic analysis with Mikhail Bakhtin (Bakhtin 1981, cited in Kaplan and Kelly 1994:129). Bakhtin's ideas are being applied by some anthropologists as a means to understand larger social processes. See, for example, Kaplan and Kelly's (1994:145) use of dialogic analysis to understand how power was appropriated, contested and consolidated in colonial Fiji. A decade ago Carol Smith (1984) also explored how local level changes can affect national or global developments in the long term.

<sup>5</sup> See (Assies 1994:96; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Foweraker 1995; Hellman 1997; Slater 1994a,1994b).

<sup>6</sup> Recent studies that have discussed the failure of social movements to transform society, include: Schneider (1992) and Salman (1994) for Chile; Hellman (1992,1994,1997) for Mexico; Assies (1994) for Brazil, cited in Hellman (1994:134;1997). Peterson (1989), cited in Slater (1994a:29) concludes that these movements have

sometimes actually oiled rather than subverted the existing societal order. For women's participation, see review by Stephen (1993:83-85).

<sup>7</sup> Other researcher also deny the conclusion but rarely provide systematic documentation. Smith (1984:225-226), for example, pointed out long ago that classes form and struggle long before any ultimate polarization takes place. See also (Assies 1994; Burgos-Debray 1983; Edelman 1990,1996; Escobar and Alvarez 1992:4; Lind 1992; Mariz 1994; Rothstein 1992a; Schild 1994; Tula 1994)

<sup>8</sup> For Panama, Ropp (1993:194) suggests a similar point when he says that groups can gain "new strength through processes of internal change and emerging patterns of alliance."

<sup>9</sup> Jelin (1990) posits that the nuts and bolts operations of organizations such as collective kitchens can result in complex transformative movements. Stephen (1993:83) sees room for less optimism.

<sup>10</sup> I lived in Loma Bonita doing research for my doctoral dissertation for about a year and a half in 1972 and 1973. Since then I have returned to the community eight times for short field visits of one to five months, including 1979, 1981, 1984, 1988, 1990, 1993, 1995, 1997.

<sup>11</sup> For details on this period, see Rudolf (1997b:Chapter 2).

<sup>12</sup> I have calculated this land requirement to have been about 27 hectares for an average size household of six to seven members. This is based on a reported ideal fallow time of about 15 years after two years of cropping, and the reported need to cultivate about three hectares annually. Community members treated lands as though they were owners--freely buying, selling, lending and passing it on through inheritance--but all community land actually was owned by the government. The historical roots of this land tenure system were in colonial times: because the Spanish colonists in Panama were merchants and adventurers rather than farmers, the Spanish Crown had taken ownership of all lands on the isthmus. It granted some large tracts to favored subjects and continued the communal tradition of Panama's indigenous peoples by selling some lands to villages to be owned collectively. Most lands, however, remained untitled (*tierras baldias*), and the Crown recognized the right of small farmers to use, but not own, as much as they needed. When Panama became an independent republic in 1903, all its land reverted back to the state until owners revalidated their claims. Since the cost of doing so was prohibitive for the vast majority of small farmers, the government continued to retain most of the country's surface; as late as 1970, this amounted to 88% to 90%. See (Barry and Lindsay-Polland 1995; Biesanz 1955:123, 124-125; Hooper 1946; Sahota 1990:34; Weil 1972:273).

<sup>13</sup> For details see Rudolf (1997b:Chapter 2).

<sup>14</sup> **NOTE:** The national government did have one means to influence some land (and other) decisions in Loma Bonita by way of its appointment of a *regidor*, a local, unpaid official. There is no indication, however, that any state official at that time saw it in the state's interest to become involved in Loma Bonita's internal community affairs. The state did not even seem interested in keeping systematic count of the highland population. As Lionel Amado described it, "In those times we didn't have to report births to anyone, so when a child was born the parents would just say they were born the day of the big rain or the day father killed a cow." In actuality, in the late nineteenth century, the Colombian state was embroiled in a civil war that kept it otherwise preoccupied, and the new Panamanian government after 1903 was in a state of massive transition.

The Catholic church exhibited the same disinterest. It had neither clerics nor churches located near Loma Bonita. To my knowledge, the only time during this period that the Church reached out to highlanders was in 1915 when it sent a mission to El Cope to perform a mass, gratuitous wedding ceremony for willing couples; at least two from Loma Bonita married that day. {To my knowledge, the only other such church-sponsored marriage ceremony in Cope took place in 1959} Community members, therefore, practiced their faith in community-led rituals and prayer meetings in their homes. They descended the mountains to go to lowland centers of Church control only a few times a year for major religious and saints' day celebrations. They also went sometimes to make *mandas*, that is, to ask favors from a particular saint in return for pledges to give something back if the favor were granted.

<sup>15</sup> For details see Rudolf (1983; 1997b:Chapter 3).

<sup>16</sup> Ethnographic studies that have documented some adverse effects of capitalist development in rural areas of Latin America include: (Arizpe and Aranda 1981; Babb 1989; Bartlett 1982; Bossen 1984; Buechler 1986; Cancian 1989; Cook 1984; Deere and de Janvry 1981; Deere and Leon de Leal 1987, Harvey 1994; Kutsche 1994; Mitchell 1991; Nash 1990; Pace 1992; Roseberry 1983, 1989; Rothstein 1982, 1986; Smith 1984; Wasserstrom 1983). For interesting exceptions that document cases in which a large part of the community is said to have benefited from capitalist development, see (Ehlers 1989; Stephen 1991a; Tice 1995).

Ethnographic studies of other rural areas in Panama also indicate that increased participation of *campesina/os* in the market economy since World War II has left the majority facing problems of less food security, a greater dependence on powerful outsiders for economic survival, and greater economic inequalities within their own ranks. For aspects of this argument, in the central provinces, see (Gudeman 1976, 1978; Heckadon Moreno 1979, 1984a, 1984b). For Ngobe, see (Bort 1976, 1983; Bourgois 1988, 1989; Cabarrus 1979; Gjording 1981, 1991;

Sarsaneda 1978; Young 1971, Young and Bort 1979). For Kuna see (Herrera 1972; Howe 1986,1990, 1991; Torres de Arauz 1974; Wali 1989). Tice (1995), as mentioned above, argues in exception that a large sector of Kuna have benefited from capitalist development. Joly (1983) describes creative strategies used by indigenous groups on the Caribbean coast to overcome some of these problems in the 1970s.

<sup>17</sup> For details on labor migration from Loma Bonita, see (Rudolf Frazier 1976, 1979; Rudolf 1983, 1992a, 1997a, 1997b:Chapter 4,7).

<sup>18</sup> After El Salvador (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:122-127).

<sup>19</sup> Gudeman (1978:28-30) describes an almost identical scenario in Los Boquerones, Veragua in the 1960s where farmers shifted rapidly from subsistence production to cultivation of sugar cane for the market.

<sup>20</sup> In addition, the government set up two new army posts within a couple of hours walking distance of Loma Bonita.

<sup>21</sup> James Scott (1990: ) calls these tactics of passive resistance the "public transcript," meaning the ways by which subordinate classes publicly work the system and articulate a flattering image of elites in order to maximize their own rewards and safety. But, he says, when out of sight and sound of those in power, a different "hidden transcript" emerges whereby people say and do what they really think and feel and wish.

<sup>22</sup> All that remained were the few political positions established by Torrijos' constitution which were essentially controlled by Garcia and Sr. Carlos, including the traditionally appointed regidor and the new local community board (junta local).

<sup>23</sup> Gjording (1991:36-37) also makes this point. He notes that Torrijos did nothing to foster the development of an organized populace that could analyse its own reality and look for ways to solve its own problems; actually he saw any attempt to form truly representative popular organizations as a threat to his own power.

<sup>24</sup> **NOTE:** In 1979, 1982-1983, and 1985-1986, the Panamanian government negotiated new loans and a rescheduling of its debt in exchange for agreement to reduce public spending on social services, physical infrastructure, public enterprises and investments, and public sector employment. In the agricultural sector, it was mandated to promote investment in nontraditional exports and to eliminate economic protections to farmers by replacing import quotas and price controls with relatively low tariffs (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:129). Zimbalist and Weeks (1991:130-131) point out the contradictions and problems of some World Bank policies. For example, the mandate to produce non-traditional products for export was undermined by the Bank's other mandate to drastically reduce public investments; this led to cuts in maintenance and modernization of ports, railroads, and roads, and brought very high transportation costs. Another reason for the lack of investment in export agriculture was the U.S. government's drastic curtailment of sugar imports which decreased (from the Caribbean Basin) by more than 84% between 1981 and 1987 (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:132).

Nontraditional exports did increase modestly between 1980 and 1985, but their level of production was diminutive relative to Panama's foreign debt; in 1987 their value represented only 10% of debt-service payments (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:131).

<sup>25</sup> Two years of severe sanctions against Panama, ending in the invasion, left the country with an unemployment rate of at least 20% in the late 80s. By one estimate half the labor force was actually without work (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:149-150,198). By one estimate, the effects of the economic sanctions and invasion cost Panama between \$3 and \$10 billion (Zimbalist and Weeks 1991:165).

<sup>26</sup> Such as in 1985 when Hugo Spadafora, a well known lawyer who opposed Noriega, was kidnapped and found mutilated and murdered. In 1993 a jury acquitted 7 of the 10 soldiers who had been accused of this crime. Only Noriega and two high level officers were found guilty (Barry and Lindsay-Poland 1995). This type of violent repression was much rarer in Panama than other Central American countries during this period (??See Central America Newspak December 1993 for comparative statistics of state violence)

<sup>27</sup> Some families sold cattle or even lands.

<sup>28</sup> For details, see Rudolf (1988, 1997:Chapter 8).

<sup>29</sup> Formal training to become a delegate required attending a total of 25 sessions; even after graduating delegates still had to go to several sessions annually. This was in addition to the many other municipality and special meetings on their agendas.

<sup>30</sup> Five of the six Loma Bonita men who trained as delegates between 1977 and 1990 began their training with only a primary school education (three men) or less (two men). One of these men has since been able to go as high as university level by studying for the priesthood. Ordained in 1995, he was the first Loma Bonita resident with parents still living in the community to attain such a high educational level.

<sup>31</sup> **NOTE:** Missing entirely from their ranks were the poorest families who could not spare the time or resources to join. And, although women participated in equal numbers with men, they had virtually no opportunity to assume leadership roles. For a detailed discussion of movement membership in the mid-1980s, see Rudolf (1988: 233-235). This relatively low participation rate was apparently common. Berryman (1987:72) pointed out that in any given

country only about 10% of the parishes had adopted this model of pastoral work and, even where base communities flourished, only a minority of people became active participants. In Brazil, where these communities were most developed, less than 2% of the country participated actively; in Nicaragua, less than 1%. See also (Burdick 1992:172; Cleary 1990; Drogus 1992, Hewitt 1991; Mariz 1994:15) for confirmation of the relatively small numbers actually attracted to the movement.

<sup>32</sup> **NOTE:** During a single week in August 1990, for example, the church asked coop and other movement members to give money to its annual national fundraiser, contribute labor to help build the windows and door of their new church, donate items for a church fair in Loma Bonita, and, then, of course, attend the fair and make some purchases.

<sup>33</sup> This involved policies to privatize public enterprises, such as telecommunications, electric and drinking water companies, freeze the number of employees on the state payroll, eliminate price controls on basic articles as well as tariffs and other barriers to trade, and make "reforms" in the labor, banking and social security systems (Hernandez 12/30/95).

<sup>34</sup> By 1995, however, economic growth levels were falling. In the wake of the invasion, between 1990 and 1993, the economy grew at rates above 5% (Priestley 1994:14). Hernandez (7/14/96:11) puts it higher at 7%. Much of this boom in productive activity, however, seems to have been related to the construction of luxury high rise apartment buildings which were largely unoccupied and often paid for in cash, strongly supporting the accusations that they were being paid for by laundered money (Guillermoprieta (1992:64). By 1994, Panama's GDP was slowing down; by one estimate it was 3.7% in 1994 and 1.9% in 1995 (Hernandez 7/14/96:11).

<sup>35</sup> By the mid-90s unemployment and underemployment stood officially at 14% and 19%. One study by an NGO claimed a higher 19% and 25% respectively. Since passage of the labor reforms, many workers who do have jobs fear they will lose them because of fewer protections against dismissals (Hernandez 12/30/95:10).

Poverty encompassed at least half the population (Hernandez (9/24/1995)--up from about a third in the mid-80s (Elton 1988:28; Priestley 1994:14; Sahota 1990:120). Some sources put the numbers as high as two-thirds (Leis 1995:?.; Martinez and Cordoba 1992:?.; Resource Center Bulletin 1994:11; ). 40% of Panama's children were undernourished according to Marcus (1993:20A).

Crime related to drug trafficking increased more than 350% between 1989 and 1995 (Hernandez 10/30/95:11). For reports of the alleged corruption and drug links of officials, see(Garvin 6/26/96:9A; Hernandez 1/15/96:11).

<sup>36</sup> During the 1980s, while NGOs were proliferating throughout Latin America, few had been established in Panama because of opposition from the military government. In the wake of the U.S. invasion, however, they began to mushroom. For example, at the end of 1989 there were about 30 NGOs in Panama working on issues related to the environment; by 1994 there were 131 (Herrera 1996:57)

<sup>37</sup> For analysis of why these and other collective efforts have not succeeded in Loma Bonita, see Rudolf (1997a; 1997b:Chapter 6,8).

<sup>38</sup> Men political leaders as well as women, of course, were affected by the experience of participating in political work during the Torrijos reform years. One such man became a delegate himself and three others later helped sons become delegates. Thus, four of the six men who trained as delegates between 1977 and 1990 could trace their activist spirit back at least a generation to one or both of their parents.

<sup>39</sup> When the National Electoral Tribunal finally announced the election results ten days after the election, and in the midst of a flood of challenges, one of the three members had abstained. Three years later, Noriega's then second in command confessed that he had been ordered to steal the election away from Arnulfo (Scranton 1991:76).

<sup>40</sup> On the day after the election, two demonstrators were killed and forty injured. A few weeks later riot police closed Arnulfo's headquarters in Panama City and arrested 100 of his supporters (Scranton 1991:76). During 1985, not a week went by without some protest (Scranton 1991:85).

<sup>41</sup> The political importance of hope is discussed in the U.S. popular media by Daniel Goleman (1991). Slater's study (1994:11) is among those that mention its key role in social change. Movements of protest, he says, engender a sense of hope which feeds optimism of the will in a time of disenchantment. Berryman (1994:232) ends his book with examples of "hope in action" from El Salvador and Guatemala.

<sup>42</sup> **NOTE:** Salman (1994:16,18) says people's motives often are to get out of the category of rural poor, not to promote social change in general for the group. Therefore, they work for better living conditions, such as housing and jobs.

<sup>43</sup> The sixth delegate has lived in the city for many years, and I have not learned about his social activism.

<sup>44</sup> The political candidate lost in 1994. The priest was ordained in 1995.

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