



# Youth participation in El Alto, Bolivia

Caspar Merkle

Caspar Merkle is currently working in the Design, Monitoring and Evaluation section of the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) at the ILO in Geneva. He is a geographer specializing in development issues, with extensive applied research experience, in particular on children and youth in Latin America.

Address: Caspar Merkle,  
ILO – International  
Programme on the  
Elimination of Child  
Labour, 4 route des  
Morillons, CH-1211,  
Geneva 22; e-mail:  
merkle@ilo.org

1. Rudolph, H H (2000),  
"Jugend im aufschwung",  
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(editor), *Jugend im  
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aus Lateinamerika, Maghreb  
und Nahost*, Eschborn, page  
9.

2. See, for example,  
Bundesministerium fuer  
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(1997), "Strategiepapier  
jugendfoerderung und  
ueberwindung von  
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Entwicklungspolitik BMZ  
Aktuell 86, Bonn, page 8.

3. Interview carried out by  
the author with  
representatives from youth  
groups in El Alto, Bolivia.

**SUMMARY:** This paper explores a paradox in the participation of disadvantaged youth in El Alto, Bolivia, in local processes and activities: although they are highly organized and active in social and cultural groups, they fail to involve themselves in the local political system. These young people, most of them the children of indigenous Aymara migrants from rural areas, are marginalized within mainstream society (as exemplified by more affluent nearby La Paz), not only by their poverty but also by their cultural identity. They actively organize themselves in a wide range of groups, some of them focused on the arts, some recreational, and some in response to particular issues and campaigns. Many of these groups and activities are characterized by a critical stance, an articulation of young people's discontent with "the system". However, despite their legal right to vote and to be elected from the age of 18, they avoid involvement in the political process and the local neighbourhood organizations through which change, in theory, can be effected. This paper identifies the many constraints that contribute to this lack of involvement – including the corruption of local officials, the low level of political education and awareness, and the various regulations that make prosperity a prerequisite for real participation.

## I. INTRODUCTION

"THE PARTICIPATION OF youth is indispensable for a societal change and for deepening democracy. They are the leaders of tomorrow. They are not a problem to be solved, but problem solvers themselves."<sup>(1)</sup>

Statements such as this one express a conviction that is common in popular discourse. Political leaders, the media, national and international organizations encourage the public to view youth as "investments in tomorrow" or "active agents of social change".<sup>(2)</sup> Their participation and incorporation into decision-making processes is seen as a key step to engaging them as active members and citizens of their local environment, and thus towards strengthening of democracy. This perspective is widespread amongst youth as well: "If we do not act, this society will never change. This is our vision of a better society."<sup>(3)</sup>

The perception of young people as key players in the social process is reinforced by a characteristic that is particularly associated with youth: the capacity to organize themselves and the ability for joint mobilization. Many examples from around the world document the will, energy, dynamism and optimism of young people who engage in social and political initiatives.<sup>(4)</sup>

However, the energy and capacity of youth does not always turn into a constructive contribution to the political system. Obstacles to young people's engagement arise in many forms. They include cultural norms that still favour hierarchical relationships between old and young,<sup>(5)</sup> economic circumstances that prevent youth from participating in other than income-generating activities, or judgemental attitudes between generations based on age.<sup>(6)</sup>

This paper explores this issue as it is expressed amongst marginalized young people in El Alto, Bolivia. El Alto, neighbouring town to the capital city La Paz, embodies most of the problems and symptoms of the political, social and economic crisis that Bolivia is confronted with today. It is a symbol of urban poverty, social inequity and exclusion.

The discussion begins with an outline of the urban setting of El Alto, a description of the living conditions facing young people, and an account of the multiple ways in which they are disadvantaged and marginalized, especially as children of indigenous Aymara migrants.

The paper then analyzes the role and effect of the political reforms that were implemented in Bolivia in 1994, through the law of Popular Participation and Decentralization. It outlines the constraints to political participation of youth at the society level, the community level and the individual level,<sup>(7)</sup> and then describes alternative, non-political areas of youth participation. It finally assesses the potential of and constraints to the creation of a youth movement, with particular respect to the role of NGOs and possibilities for networking and cooperation within this process.

The research is based on secondary sources as well as a three-month period of primary research in El Alto and La Paz, Bolivia, between October and December 2000. The latter consisted mainly of semi-structured interviews with representatives from youth groups, the local government, neighbourhood organizations and NGOs. Secondary sources were drawn from academic articles and project reports prepared by NGOs in El Alto.

## II. LIVING CONDITIONS AND GOVERNANCE IN EL ALTO

THE CITY OF El Alto is characterized by extreme urban poverty. It lacks adequate infrastructure, particularly in northern areas and in the periphery of the city. Piped water, sanitation, drainage and paved roads are scarce. Demographic pressure and extensive and rapid expansion add to the difficult living conditions. The average income per capita per year in El Alto is about US\$ 650, compared to a national average of US\$ 890.<sup>(8)</sup> It is estimated that 50 to 70 per cent of this income is generated in the informal sector.<sup>(9)</sup>

Education infrastructure is problematic as well. Public schools lack basic materials and equipment such as drawing boards and books. Compared with other urban areas, the illiteracy rate (ca. 12 per cent) is the highest in Bolivia.<sup>(10)</sup> The insufficiencies in the public education system are partly compensated for through alternative education, mainly provided by NGOs, the private sector and the churches. However, there is little or no cooperation amongst these alternative initiatives.<sup>(11)</sup>

The government of El Alto is barely capable of providing feasible solutions to these problems, the reasons for which are manifold. First, and

4. See, for example, Guerra, E (2002), "Citizenship knows no age: children's participation and municipal budget of Barra Mansa, Brazil", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, pages 71–84.

5. As described in Kruger, J S (2002), "We know something someone doesn't know: children speak out on local conditions in Johannesburg", *Environment and Urbanization* Vol 14, No 2, pages 85–96.

6. Golombek, S (2002) (editor), *What Works in Youth Participation: Case Studies from Around the World*, International Youth Foundation, Baltimore, page 9.

7. In this article, the age classification for youth that is used corresponds to the one used by the Bolivian Ministry of Families. This encompasses the age group 19 to 24 years old, which is less broad than the UN categorization, which considers youth as being aged between 15 and 24.

8. Calderón, F and A Szumukler (2000), *La Política en las Calles. Política, Urbanización y Desarrollo*, La Paz, page 238.

9. Pérez de Castaños, M I (1999), *Derechos Humanos y Ciudadanos en El Alto*, Defensor del Pueblo, La Paz, page 28.

10. Ströbele-Gregor, J (1996), "Bildungsreform und indianische bewegung in Bolivien", Institut für Iberoamerika-Kunde (editor), *Bolivien – Traumland der Reformen?* Hamburg, pages 62–73.

11. Rossell, P (1999), *Diagnóstico Socioeconómico de El Alto: Distritos 5 y 6*, Centro de Estudios para el Desarrollo Laboral y Agrario CEDLA, La Paz, page 13.

12. See reference 11, page 15.

13. Gille, M, W Krüger, J de Rijke and H Willems (1997), "Politische orientierungen, werthaltungen und die partizipation jugendlicher: veränderungen und trends in den 90er jahren", Palentien, C and K Hurrelmann (editors), *Jugend und Politik. Ein Handbuch für Forschung, Lehre und Praxis*, Neuwied, Kriftel, Berlin, pages 148–177.

14. Braslavsky, C (1992), "Migraciones y socialización dual", Liebel, M (editor), *Mala Onda. La Juventud Popular en América Latina*, Managua, pages 112–113.

15. For instance, the traditional surname *Quispe* is transformed into the Spanish *Quisbert*.

16. Guaygua, G, A Riveros and M Quisbert (2000), *Ser Joven en El Alto. Rupturas y Continuidades en la Tradición Cultural*, Programa de Investigación Estrategia en Bolivia PIEB, La Paz, page 121.

17. Balboa, A and J Córdova (1993), "La juventud alteña: entre la integración e identificación socio-cultural Aymara y Occidental y sus formas de relación social", Ruiz, H D et al. (editors), *Reunión Anual de Etnología 1992*, La Paz, pages 75–84.

above all, is the lack of resources. The implementation of the urban development plan (*Plan de Desarrollo Municipal*), for instance, is expected to involve costs of US\$ 120 million. Additional obstacles to effective urban planning and management are bureaucracy, administrative inefficiency and widespread corruption.<sup>(12)</sup> The government of El Alto lacks credibility and legitimacy amongst the population. The fact that political representatives often originate from the neighbouring capital city of La Paz adds to the mistrust, since they are perceived to have a very limited understanding and knowledge of the local context of El Alto. People believe that their politicians have a limited capacity to respond to their needs, and that they primarily operate through patronage and clientelism instead.

### III. GROWING UP IN EL ALTO

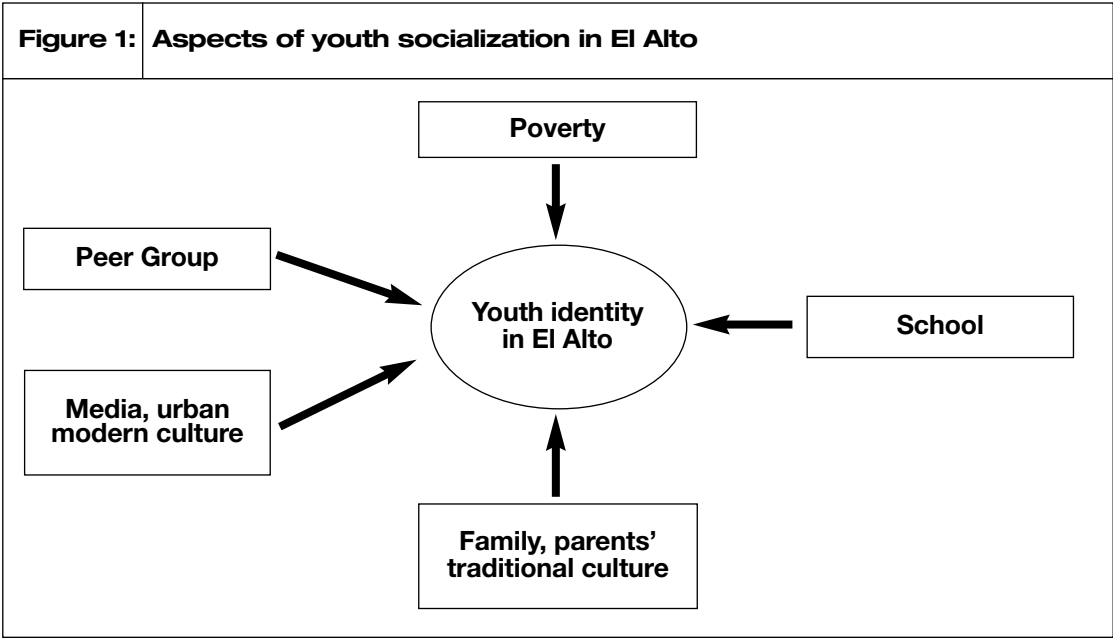
THE FOLLOWING SECTION outlines the main factors that influence and determine how children and youth grow up in El Alto. First, poverty plays a major role; most children start working at an early age,<sup>(13)</sup> and the money they earn contributes to the family income or to their own living expenses.

Another factor is the particular cultural setting of El Alto. Most of the inhabitants are Aymara migrants from rural areas. Their children grow up in a city where they are exposed to urban, western and "modern" lifestyles, particularly through the wealthy neighbour city of La Paz. The term "dual socialization"<sup>(14)</sup> captures the particular experience of growing up in such a situation, and its consequences for children and parents.

One effect is that parents are inclined to educate their children to be as "modern" as possible, for instance through the use of Spanish instead of Aymara, or through the use of Spanish-sounding names.<sup>(15)</sup> This is in order to protect children from discrimination. On the other hand, most people try to maintain a sense of pride in their own roots, which creates a constant struggle with the felt need to conceal their own identity. Today, most of the youth in El Alto still understand their parents' language, but they speak Spanish exclusively amongst themselves. However, they maintain links with their parents' culture to a varying extent,<sup>(16)</sup> and examples can be found in everyday street life, during home visits to their parents' villages in the rural areas and especially during various traditional festivals in El Alto.

The educational system further promotes the cultural alienation of children and youth. However, nowadays this is much less the case than in former years. In the past, formal education in Bolivia was characterized by a systematic disdain for indigenous culture and tradition. Today, there is evidence of a movement towards recollection, expressed, for example, through the increasing number of autochthonous music and dancing groups that are active in schools in El Alto.

The media, such as radio and TV, also have a decisive influence on children and youth, by supporting the propagation of western lifestyles and attitudes. Generally speaking, it can be said that the role of the traditional Aymara family in the socialization and formation process of youth is decreasing, whereas the importance of peer groups is increasing.<sup>(17)</sup> The question of cultural origin and identity thus becomes the central theme for many youth. It is key to understanding the numerous youth movements, initiatives and groups that are active in El Alto. Figure 1 illustrates the different aspects of youth socialization in El Alto.



IV. ASPECTS OF MARGINALIZATION

YOUTH IN EL Alto are deprived and marginalized in different ways. Their exclusion is multidimensional and derives from economic, cultural and social factors. Amongst the economic factors is poverty, for which they are stigmatized and discriminated against, for instance at the Universidad de San Andres in the neighbour town of La Paz.

Another factor is sex. Young women are particularly disadvantaged amongst youth, as they grow up in a traditional and patriarchal society. Parents, for instance, discourage their daughters from attending school. They are supposed to do house chores instead, which explains why the illiteracy rate is four times higher amongst women than amongst men. As a result, young women face comparatively more difficulties in finding a job, and they earn less.<sup>(18)</sup>

Another psychological dimension of vulnerability is the lack of self-esteem amongst youth. It stems from the question of cultural identity and is reinforced through fractious family and community ties. This is a facet of social vulnerability that must not be neglected.<sup>(19)</sup> Again, it becomes apparent how important issues such as individuality, self-determination and cultural identity are for youth in El Alto. And it helps to explain why so many of them engage in a range of initiatives and youth movements.

Some of these movements lead to violence, for example through youth gangs (*pandillas*). Such violence, on the one hand, stems from high degrees of resentment and frustration at the individual level. On the other hand, it is a response to inequities in society and a certain lack of consideration towards youth on the part of adults.<sup>(20)</sup> Public opinion on youth gangs is mostly negative: they are viewed as trouble makers and drug takers. However, there is an important aspect of the *pandillas* that is often neglected: it is within these groups that youth experience comradeship, allegiance and trust, which they might lack elsewhere. The multidimensionality of youth marginalization is illustrated in Figure 2.

18. There is a certain paradox in the fact that, in many cases, women provide a main contribution to the family income, whereas the man is officially still considered the breadwinner and head of the family.

19. Bendit, R (2000), "Exclusion of adolescents from political participation", GTZ Department 43 (editor), *Youth between Political Participation, Exclusion and Instrumentalization*, Eschborn, pages 14–17.

20. Balderas, J C (1999), "Sich selbst erfüllende prophezeiung. Jugendliche und bandenkriminalität in El Alto", *Informationsstelle Lateinamerika* Ila No 227, pages 16–17.

**Figure 2: Aspects and effects of youth marginalization in El Alto**

| Aspect | <p>Cultural origin<br/>Aymara</p> <p>↕</p> <p>Mestice/White</p>                                        | <p>Socioeconomic status<br/>Poor</p> <p>↕</p> <p>Wealthy</p>               | <p>Age<br/>Youth</p> <p>↕</p> <p>Adult</p>       | <p>Sex<br/>Women</p> <p>↕</p> <p>Man</p>                                   |
|--------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Effect | <p>Discrimination<br/>(<i>Indios de mierda</i>)</p> <p>Cultural alienation</p> <p>Loss of identity</p> | <p>Discrimination</p> <p>Inequality in education and job opportunities</p> | <p>Social stigmatization<br/>("Youth gangs")</p> | <p>Discrimination</p> <p>Inequality in education and job opportunities</p> |

## V. POLITICAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

THE LEGISLATIVE FRAMEWORK for the political participation of youth in Bolivia is provided through the constitution. It entitles them to vote and to be elected from the age of 18. The main entry point for political action, apart from political parties, is through local neighbourhood organizations (*Organizaciones Territoriales de Base*, OTBs). Since the implementation of the Law of Popular Participation in 1994, these neighbourhood organizations have the right and responsibility to formulate proposals for local infrastructure projects (for example, schools and health centres). The proposals then feed into the municipal development plan (*Plan de Desarrollo Municipal*), which constitutes the four-year framework for municipal urban planning and development.

Today, political participation of youth takes place on a sporadic and selective basis. This becomes particularly apparent during election periods. On these occasions, young people show up as young candidates, or parties use them for marketing and campaigning purposes. Generally speaking, participation in local neighbourhood organizations (OTBs) remains marginal, and has not increased since the 1994 reforms.<sup>(21)</sup> The reasons for this can be found at different levels: at the society level, the community level and the individual level.

First of all, society in Bolivia – as in many parts of Latin America – has lost confidence in politicians, parties and state institutions. They face serious problems in terms of legitimacy and credibility. A main reason is the disappointment on the part of the population, due to false promises in the past. Politicians are primarily perceived as being corrupt, with a very limited capability to speak on behalf of the most deprived sectors of the population.

Neighbourhood organizations are confronted with similar problems. Leaders of the OTBs are frequently suspected of misusing the organization for their own benefit. They are frequently the only ones who are familiar with the amount of resources available for the community within the framework of the Law of Popular Participation. Members of the OTBs complain that their leaders are politically influenced either by the government or by parties. Corruption is widespread, and the degree of information sharing and transparency is often extremely limited.

21. Merkle, C (2001), "Participación juvenil en El Alto", *Terre des Hommes*, Oficina Regional Andina (editor), *Dialogando*, Cochabamba, pages 49–56.

A further reason is the fact that Bolivian society, in the course of its history, has had very little experience of practising democracy. This can be explained partly by the fact that from the time of colonialism the country was ruled by a small power élite. These leaders only marginally represented the diversity and size of the ethnic groups in Bolivia. The reform process has as yet had very little impact on the existing power distribution in the country.<sup>(22)</sup> In many areas, there is still a big gap between implementing and practising the Law of Popular Participation.

The low level of "territorial identity" of inhabitants of El Alto constitutes another factor. The background to this is the history of El Alto. Being a city of migrants, it was never meant to be a place of permanent residence. Instead, it was considered an outpost to the much more prosperous La Paz. Today, this perception has changed. Since 1988, El Alto has been officially considered an independent municipality.

In addition to the points outlined above, there are additional factors that make it difficult for youth, specifically, to engage in politics. To begin with, hierarchies are strong within the neighbourhood organizations. Young people, in some cases, are welcome to join the assemblies, but their voice is barely taken into account. The paternalistic structures are also reflected in the regulatory framework of the neighbourhood organizations. According to the statutes, a candidate for a chief post must fulfil the following conditions: he must have completed his military service, he must have been resident in El Alto for three years, and he must own real estate in El Alto. Prosperity thus becomes a precondition for political action. This is a criterion that youth in El Alto hardly ever meet.

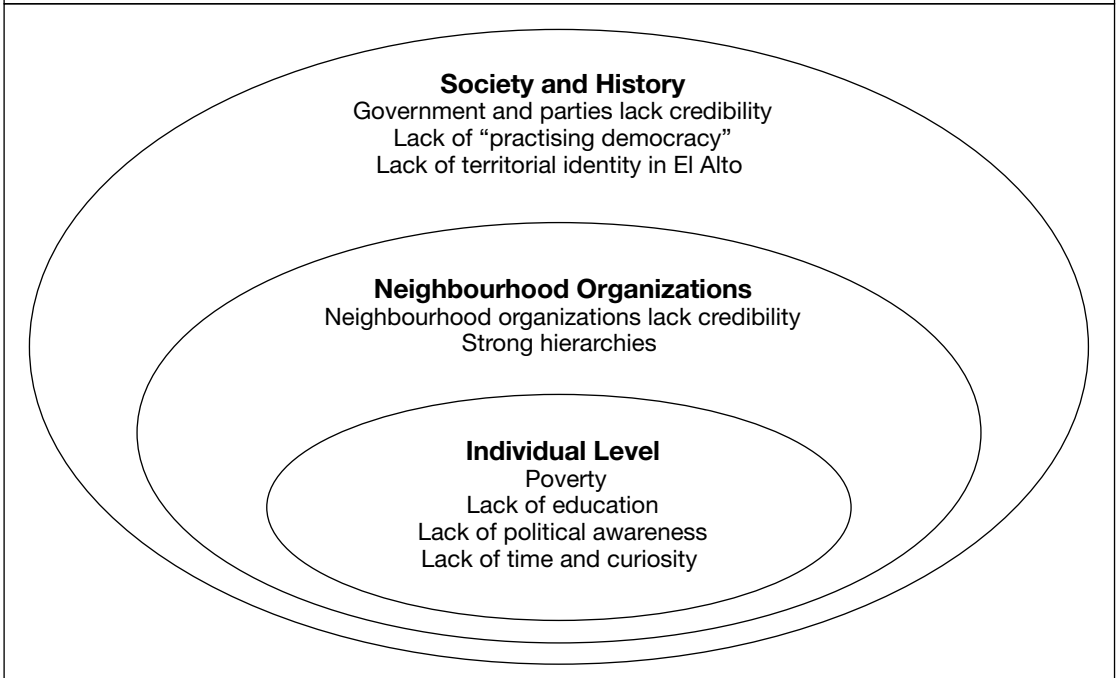
In addition to the reasons outlined above, there are factors at the individual level that influence political action of youth. They have to do with the individual level of poverty, the level of education and the level of political awareness, interest and curiosity. As mentioned, many children and youth work full time in order to contribute to the family income. They have limited time to engage in politics. In some cases, the low educational level makes it difficult for young people to comprehend the Law of Popular Participation. Juridical language is a disincentive to many, and there is little informative material about the Law of Popular Participation that is sufficiently comprehensible to get the message across. Basically, youth know about the existence of reforms, but they barely have a clear idea of their new rights and duties as citizens. One main reason for the low level of political education is the lack of initiative in this area both at home and at school. NGOs play a critical role in this respect, since they implement workshops, seminars and campaigns for political awareness raising, often on behalf of the government.<sup>(23)</sup> However, the activities of NGOs concentrate on the centre (the so-called *Ceja*) of El Alto.

But even if youth were consulted, and appropriate participation processes and mechanisms were institutionalized, it can be questioned whether the level of political involvement would change dramatically. Rather than a genuine interest in politics, the development of a personality and of self-confidence might be more relevant issues in this phase of life. Discrimination and cultural alienation are perceived by young people as more immediate concerns than the activities of neighbourhood organizations (i.e. the development and improvement of local infrastructure), which are seen as responding primarily to adult concerns.

Figure 3 illustrates the wide range of factors at the society, the community and the individual level that have an impact on this process. It is evident that there is no "one-size-fits-all" theory that serves to explain

22. See, for example, Ströbele-Gregor, J (2000), "Das gesetz zur volksbeteiligung und indianische bewegung in Bolivien 1994–1997", Hengstenberg, P, K Kohut and G Mailhold (editors), *Zivilgesellschaft in Lateinamerika. Interessenvertretung und Regierbarkeit*, Frankfurt a. M., pages 153–164; also Goudsmit, A and J Blackburn (2000), "Planificación participativa: una experiencia ambigua", *Revista Boliviana de Ciencias Sociales TINKAZOS* No 6, Programa de Investigación Estrategia en Bolivia PIEB, pages 37–47.

23. It must be kept in mind that this encompasses an enormous potential to influence the population, whether positively or negatively.

**Figure 3: Constraints to political participation of youth in El Alto**

fully the decision about whether to engage in political action or not. Ultimately, individual factors – in the opinion of the author – have the most important role to play.

## VI. SOCIAL AND CULTURAL PARTICIPATION OF YOUTH

THERE ARE A number of alternative, non-political areas of youth engagement and participation in El Alto, both formal and informal. Amongst the most important organizations responding to youth are the church (*Pastoral Juvenil*), workers' organizations (*Asociación de Jóvenes Empresarios*), the scouts (*Asociación de Scouts*), sports associations, students' associations and various NGOs. Many of them carry out activities at both the local and national level.

There are also numerous non-institutional, informal youth groups in El Alto. They vary in terms of the organizational setting, the areas of activity, the source of funding and so on. Some authors have attempted to classify them, for example into ideological-cultural, leisure-oriented and income-oriented groups.<sup>(24)</sup> Generally speaking, it is difficult to determine the exact number of these informal groups, since many of them pop up and disappear within a few weeks or months. About 800–1,200 more or less organized youth groups are estimated to be active in El Alto today.<sup>(25)</sup>

### a. Self-perception and rationale of youth groups

There are various forces that drive young people to organize themselves and become active in these groups, some of which have been indicated

24. Sandóval, G and M F Sostres (1989), *La Ciudad Prometida. Pobladores y Organizaciones Sociales en El Alto*, SISTEMA / ILDIS, La Paz, page 192.

25. Ugolini, E and M Rodriguez (1998), *Was bedeutet "Jugendlich – Sein" am Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts? Ein Vergleich zwischen El Alto (Bolivien) und Biel (Schweiz)*, unpublished document, Biel, page 22.

above. In the absence of recreational spaces and organized leisure activities, the youth group often becomes the most important opportunity to meet peers and for hanging out. In some cases, youth groups assume the role of families, where the members feel accepted and experience allegiance, solidarity and friendship. It is not surprising to see that many young people participate in different groups simultaneously, and they are quite proud of this.

Many of the groups undertake cultural activities such as music, theatre and poetry, which provide an opportunity for artistic performance. Apart from that, they are a means to articulate young people's discontent and protest. Their music and theatre pieces tell about the everyday violence in the families and in the street, about poverty and the fight for survival, and about the dreams for a better society.

These critical youth groups (*Agrupaciones Juveniles Críticas*) are often characterized by a high degree of self-organization and autonomy, that is, they belong neither to the church nor to any other institution. A key element and characteristic is their attitude towards the "system", the existing political, economic and social structures. They blame these structures for being the origin of social polarization, injustice, racism, poverty and corruption. They mistrust the government, parties and institutions, and they use their own groups as a way of catalysing their protest. Although they constitute a "conscious minority" within the multiplicity of youth groups in El Alto, they can be qualified as potentially important agents of change.

In addition to cultural activities, these groups organize and carry out seminars and workshops, often with the support of local NGOs. These workshops deal with different issues such as human rights, political formation and participation, leadership, and self-perception and cultural identity in El Alto.

A particularly interesting outcome of these activities is that, in many cases, young people increasingly identify with their own town, El Alto. The much more western-oriented and wealthier neighbour town of La Paz is associated with the "dark side" of modern society – its social fragmentation and the lack of solidarity. Although modernism and urban lifestyles play an important role in the socialization of these young people, there is a clear trend towards recollection and going "back to the roots". Young people increasingly declare themselves to be Aymara, that is, they intend to follow their parents' traditions and indigenous culture. An indicator of this trend is the increasing number of autochthonous music and dance groups, with their respective costumes, which play at different occasions such as community festivities, celebrations and anniversaries.<sup>(26)</sup>

## b. Challenges to collaboration and networking

What are the possibilities for a joint mobilization, and the potential to scale up these scattered and individual movements? What role do NGOs play in this respect? Is there the potential for creating a youth movement in El Alto that has political impact?

NGOs play an ambiguous role in the process. On the one hand, they are, in most cases, the only possibility for youth groups to obtain some sort of financial support. They provide premises and infrastructure for workshops, seminars etc. Unfortunately, there is only little cooperation amongst NGOs. The relationship between them is frequently characterized by rivalry, particularly if they are operating in the same part of the

26. Merkle, C (2001), "Zwischen t'inku und techno – jugendliche in El Alto", *Informationsstelle Lateinamerika* 11a No 244, pages 28–29.

city. On the other hand, many NGOs are heavily criticized for their limited capability to address the problems of youth. Many NGO "expert" staff neither grew up in El Alto nor do they live there today but, rather, in La Paz in most cases. Their insight into everyday life of youth in El Alto is only partial.

Bad experiences in the past contribute to the negative image of NGOs; for instance there are cases in which aid and financial resources did not reach youth groups but, rather, were spent on administration and prestigious projects. Many NGOs have not met the expectations they have raised, and they are regarded as no better than the government. The increased institutionalization of NGOs adds to their lack of credibility. Bureaucracy and hierarchies make it difficult for them to reach youth and to speak on behalf of their interests. The dynamic and life span of youth groups is an additional factor that makes a continuous collaboration with NGOs difficult. Many youth groups mushroom and vanish within a few weeks or months, with short-term activities through a working group, a project or a campaign. Taken together, these factors explain why various youth groups prefer to maintain their independence. They carry out their activities without any linkage to institutions and NGOs.

There were several attempts in the past to set up a youth movement or a network that would integrate the numerous youth groups in El Alto. Although collaboration takes place between a few groups that meet from time to time, a network of initiatives has not been effective to date. The reasons for this are manifold. First, many (particularly small) youth groups focus on activities in their own town district. From their local point of view, they simply do not feel the necessity to articulate their demands on a wider scale.

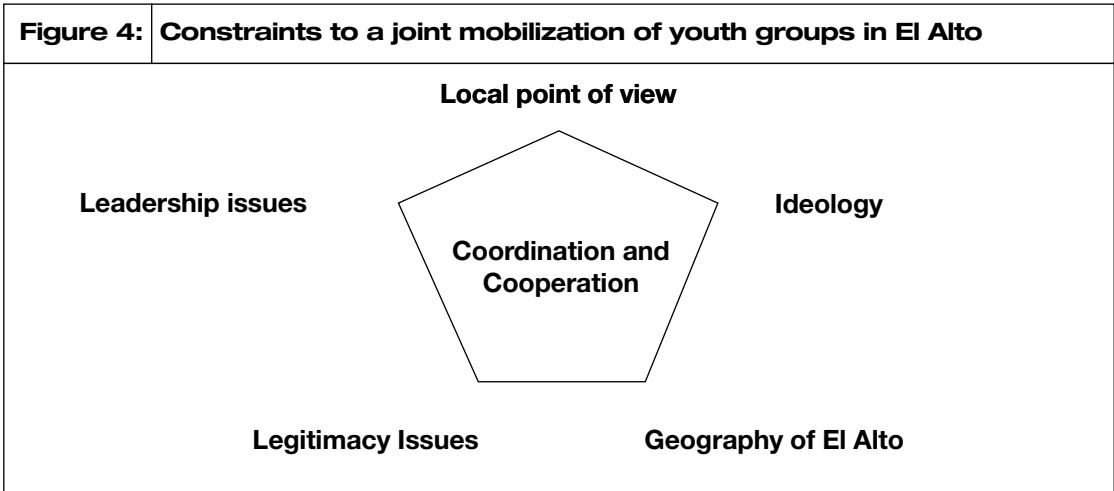
The ideology of groups plays another key role. As illustrated above, many of them see themselves as "anti-political", and they refuse to be involved with the government, institutions and NGOs. Instead, they strive to maintain their high degree of self-organization and autonomy.

The geography of the city contributes to the isolation of movements and initiatives. El Alto is divided into a northern and a southern part, with the airport between them. This spatial separation corresponds to significant differences in income distribution, infrastructure development and poverty levels. The result is envy and resentment between the two parts of the city, which makes collaboration between youth groups difficult.

A further issue relates to the question of how to set up a network of youth groups in El Alto. Many worry that such a coordinated, institutionalized approach would imply the creation of bureaucracy and hierarchies. Individuals might benefit from this: there is a certain danger in the establishment of élites, that decision making would remain in the hands of a few. It is further possible that parties and the government will try and influence a network of youth groups, as has been the case with institutions and NGOs in El Alto.

Finally, the question of leadership is probably the main constraint to effective networking and collaboration. Many, if not most, youth leaders in El Alto have known each other since childhood and through participation in former initiatives. They are anxious about losing power, respect and control in their sphere of influence. New initiatives are carefully observed. Personal relationships between them determine whether or not a joint mobilization becomes feasible.

The constraints to effective collaboration and networking are illustrated in Figure 4.



VII. CONCLUSIONS

THIS PAPER HAS presented factors at the society, community and individual levels that can account for the low level of youth political participation in El Alto. It has become clear that these reasons might not be merely youth-specific: apathy towards politics and politicians and a lack of motivation to participate through traditional channels (political parties, neighbourhood organizations) seem to be applicable to many adults in El Alto as well.

Most young people in El Alto engage in alternative, cultural activities within youth groups instead. These serve as a platform to articulate their protest and discontent with society. Due to their high degree of self-organization and wide range of activities, these youth groups have the potential to become important agents of change. However, there are various constraints to networking and cooperation amongst the groups. The likelihood of creating a youth movement with a political impact seems to be limited at this point.

However, there are some aspects that emerge from this situation that could serve as entry points. If one looks at the different constraints and obstacles to young people’s engagement, it is at the local and – in the opinion of the author – even more at the individual level that initial steps are to be taken. Paradigm shifts, both in adults’ thinking about youth and in young people’s attitudes towards their own leaders as well as organizations and institutions, are key to enabling and encouraging youth involvement in arenas traditionally reserved for adults.

If, for instance, neighbourhood organizations encouraged young people in such a way that they became active members and citizens of their local environment, this could become a constructive contribution to the political system. If youth leaders changed their perception of each other and their position towards any form of institutionalization, this could be a step on the way to a joint mobilization.

Finally, the article has pointed out that local culture has a vital role to play in El Alto, in particular for youth. Youth groups with cultural activities have great potential to provide a strong sense of identity. They can help to develop a sense of pride, of belonging to the community and of commitment to civic engagement.