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## Civil Society Vocabularies and Signaling Value: Cases From Colombia and Ecuador

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The context for civil society organizations (CSOs) in developing regions—restrictive policies, heightened accusatory and delegitimizing discourse, and decreasing international funds—leads in practice to major concerns for organized civil society. To confront this, CSOs are responding with the objective of explaining the work of organized civil society and its value. This article examines the discourses and tools used by organized civil society to frame its value in society in Latin America through the country cases of Colombia and Ecuador. Specifically, we look at the discourses and tools produced by national and subnational civil society networks that serve the sector as a whole. The article identifies key vocabularies found in the academic literature and discussed within policy spheres about civil society—mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience. The article concludes with both opportunities and challenges to the application of these discourses and tools and with suggestions for next steps for research.

In the last three decades, scholars have noted that civil society organizations (CSOs) exert substantially more impact on social, political, and economic spheres than previously. CSOs represent diverse efforts of collective action, political intervention, social service delivery, and/or watchdog activity over government and business sectors.<sup>1</sup> Globally, even as national constitutions and development strategies include and recognize CSOs as key contributors to development, restrictive policies toward them are prevalent (Appe & Barragán, [Forthcoming](#); Appe & Layton, 2016). CSOs in almost 100 countries have recently experienced restrictions through regulatory policies (CIVICUS, 2015, 2016). These regulatory policies have included making the legalization process for CSOs more difficult, implementing arduous controls on the receipt of certain funding sources, and applying vague guidelines to the degree in which CSOs are permitted to participate in political activities. Coupled with the restrictive regulations, is accusatory government discourse targeting CSOs, publicly asserting that CSOs are corrupt, that they incite public unrest, and that

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they represent international interests (Ellerbeck & Soloway, 2015; Gustafson, 2013; ICNL, 2009a, 2009b, 2015; Ruiz-Restrepo, 2005). In addition, the international donor funding to CSOs, which has been prevalent in many regions, is shifting and has been reduced in many cases (Banks, Hulme, & Edwards, 2015). All of this has led to concerns about what scholars and practitioners have called a “shrinking space” for organized civil society across various contexts.<sup>2</sup>

This context—restrictive policies, heightened accusatory discourse, and decreasing international funds—is especially present in Latin America (Pousadela & Cruz, 2016). In practice, it leads to concerns about organized civil society in the region, as CSOs are considered to be major contributors to public governance (Brautigam & Segarra, 2007; Cabrera & Vallejo, 1997; Heinrich, 2007; Pousadela & Cruz, 2016). Organized civil society is responding with the objective of explaining the work of CSOs and their value. CSOs are going beyond using the argument of their distinction and comparative advantages in development, which has been the default in the past. The purpose of this article is to critically examine some of the emergent discourses and tools used by organized civil society to frame its value in society, particularly in contexts which are undergoing a shrinking space for civil society and which are experiencing social and political transformation. The social and political transformations occurring in contexts like Latin America provide windows of opportunity for organized civil society to reaffirm and reestablish its role in social development.

Discourses are powerful. A discourse is “a relatively stable use of language, in the form of a structured collection of meaningful texts, which is of service to an organization and structures its social fabric” (Meyer, Buber, & Aghamanoukjan, 2013, p. 171). Indeed, in the academic fields of public administration and nonprofit studies, there has been rich scholarship on the pervasiveness of discourses and their implications for public agencies and nonprofit organizations, and the present research contributes to this literature. Several discourses have *seeped* into public and nonprofit organizations, such as the discourses of marketization (Alexander, Nank, & Stivers, 1999; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2009), managerial practices (Meyer et al., 2013), and entrepreneurialism (Sandberg, 2016). Scholarship has also included the discourses and tools related to the non-profitization of public goods, services, and policies; that is, nonprofits being encouraged or coerced to assume the responsibilities of providing public goods and services to communities (Swanstorm, 1999), and the parallel “NGOization” of social movements—the strategic professionalization of civil society organizing (Alvarez, 1999). From a critical perspective, these discourses have been linked to the marketplace and neoliberal ideologies that prioritize individualism, utilitarianism, and new forms of governmentality and knowledge production. Our research adds to these scholarly contributions by introducing emergent categorical discourses, or “buzzwords,” which are increasingly applied and, as we propose, offer opportunities and challenges for organized civil society.

Buzzwords are pervasive in contexts undergoing “development” as noted by several scholars (Cornwall, 2007; Rist, 2007), and their “usage beg[s] closer critical attention” (Cornwall, 2007, p. 471). We wish to examine how discourses and tools around the buzzwords “mapping and spatial strategies,” “sustainability,” and “resilience” are used by organized civil society. Empirically, we assess their use and application by civil society networks which serve the sector as a whole in the Latin American countries of Colombia and Ecuador. The two countries have distinct social and political currents, but are both undergoing significant social and political transformations that have called on organized civil society to argue and shape its role in each country.

The article is organized as follows: First, it outlines the literature on the emergent buzzwords, or vocabularies: mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience.

Second, it addresses the cases and methodological approach used for the content analysis of civil society networks' documents and texts. Third, it presents findings from an in-depth analysis of the networks' documents and texts. Fourth, we discuss the findings and present insights on how civil society networks signal value. The article concludes with both opportunities and challenges to the application of the discourses and tools and suggestions for next steps for research.

## VOCABULARIES OF CIVIL SOCIETY: MAPPING AND SPATIAL STRATEGIES, SUSTAINABILITY, AND RESILIENCE

We seek to examine discourses and tools used by organized civil society to frame its value in society through the country cases of Colombia and Ecuador. Before examining the contexts of Colombia and Ecuador, we propose the three key vocabularies that are found in the academic literature and policy discussions about civil society. As outlined below, we review the literature and highlight the key debates around these buzzword categories. The buzzword categories have been selected based on fieldwork and the authors' own experiences with civil society in Latin America. The buzzword categories represent pervasive concepts used; however, we contend that they have not received attention generally, and less so using a critical lens.

### Mapping and Spatial Strategies

In the context of civil society, mapping and spatial strategies have been used by academics, policy actors, and practitioners. These strategies often include georeferenced information or practices and the measurement of civil society. For scholars, practitioners, and CSOs themselves, "mapping" of civil society is now common practice. "Mappers" argue that the collection of information on CSOs is critical to understanding civil society. Some assert that we cannot see CSOs as legitimate players in policy if we have no clear ways to define them and if we lack information explaining their functions (Salamon & Sokolowski, 2004, 2016). As a result, massive efforts have been made in the last several decades to describe and assess a civil society's composition, strength, and impact. Civil society mapping projects have garnered resources and attention, as well as debate. These projects can be grouped into five types, as proposed by Appe (2012; 2013): (a) mapping of what has been called "global civil society" to capture a civil society that is not confined by national or regional borders; (b) mapping of civil society in specific contexts, generally at the national level, to then subsequently compare civil societies—their composition, strength, and impact—across contexts; (c) mapping that is performed by international donor institutions, often to determine possible partnerships with civil society; (d) mapping that is conducted by government to collect data, to regulate, and/or to foster collaboration; and (e) mapping by CSOs, and most likely by their networks, to increase public legitimacy and/or to develop self-regulation regimes.

Civil society scholarship has identified the role of mapping as a tool for communication in the sector, coinciding with mapping's "discourse function" as presented by geography scholars (see Wood, 2010). Critical geographers like Wood (2010) explain maps as demonstrating power by presenting "the existence of the things on them. 'This is here,' maps say, 'and that is there,'

as they do so simultaneously affirming the precedent existence of whatever is in question” (Wood, 2010, p. 34).

The social sciences and policy analysis have taken what Pickles (2003) calls a “spatial turn,” using maps and georeferences to communicate. Mapping and other spatial strategies define the extent of CSOs’ programing by location and other georeferencing (Roberts, Jones, & Frothling, 2005, p. 1854). Spatial strategies enable social processes in practice to be presented through “projects, reports, and evaluations” (Roberts et al., 2005, p. 1854). These spatial strategies correspond with the rationalization of civil society, as they often include data collection and have functions beyond communicating only spatial information. In fact, the mapping of civil society and the application of other spatial strategies have become almost normalized in civil society (Appe, 2012; 2013; 2016; Nickel & Eikenberry, 2016). When thinking about it critically, researchers posit concerns about how mapping might influence the everyday practice of CSOs (Appe, 2013) and their role in democracy (Nickel & Eikenberry, 2016). Considerations about how mapping and spatial strategies cause burdens or how they might have tangible benefits for CSOs and the good and services they provide deserve further attention. The empirical inquiry of this research seeks to understand how the vocabularies of mapping and spatial strategies are used to signal civil society’s value.

## Sustainability

The use of the term “sustainability” is commonplace for organized civil society. The word “sustainable” comes from population biology and means having and using resources without depleting their renewal or ability to reproduce (Gudynas, 2013). Sustainability is what Gieryn (1999) “calls a ‘boundary term’: one where science meets politics, and politics meets science” (see also Scoones, 2007). There is no doubt that the terms “sustainability” and “sustainable development” have been adopted by many actors. CSOs define and implement programming often explicitly related to sustainable development (see Fifka, Kühn, Loza Adai, & Stiglbauer, 2016). Sustainable development emerged in 1970s, and then was coined and defined in the late 1980s at the Brundtland Commission: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (Brundtland, 1987, Chapter 2). However, the construct of sustainable development is still criticized for its focus on economic growth and its framing of the environment and its protection as “a necessary condition for achieving” economic growth (Gudynas, 2013, p. 21), not as important in its own right. Before the sustainability development paradigm emerged, the environment and the economy were framed as in opposition, but under sustainable development, they are dependent on each other.

In September 2015, the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit 2015 was held as a high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly for the formal adoption of the post-2015 development agenda through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which replace the UN Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs present a new phase in global coordination in order to solve pressing global social, economic, and environmental problems under the umbrella of sustainable development. CSOs have inserted themselves as actors in the global charge. The trend of CSOs, in particular, engaging in the sustainable development paradigm for the last several decades is considered by scholars “a sign that they are serious about breaking out of

a charity or welfarist cocoon to embrace a more effective and professional approach to development” (Devine, 2003, p. 228).

As CSOs work for sustainable development purposes, there has been a greater pressure for CSOs themselves to be sustainable. In the organizational context of CSOs, sustainability “is commonly used to describe [a CSO] that is able to sustain itself over the long term, perpetuating its ability to fulfill its mission [and] includes the concepts of financial sustainability, as well as leadership succession planning, adaptability, and strategic planning” (National Council of Nonprofits, 2016, p. 1). Sustainability is “the ability of administrators to maintain an organization over the long term” (Sontag-Padilla, Staplefoote, & Gonzalez Morganti, 2012, p. 2). More specifically, financial sustainability can be considered as “the ability to maintain financial capacity over time” (Sontag-Padilla et al., 2012, p. 2).

Devine (2003) researches CSOs in developing regions, empirically examining Bangladesh, and shows shifting programmatic activities by CSOs due to organizational sustainability pressures. He writes that “economic programs (micro finance) have been prioritized over and above other traditional CSO activities such as social programs” (p. 233). This has produced, he argues, complications in development that create a paradox. These programs help CSOs garner resources and allow them to move away from reliance on donor support, but the revenue streams for these programs derive from fees and service charges and put the burden on the beneficiaries, who are often the poor (see also Pratt, 2016). Thus, sustainability in the context of work by CSOs is multifaceted—related to development models as well as the financial and programmatic functions of CSOs.

## Resilience

Sustainability and its discussion in academic literature and policy spheres often lead to the use of terms related to change, adoption, and, most recently, the heightened use of the term “resilience.” The use of sustainability and resilience in social settings represents biologism: using biological principles to explain human social behavior. Since the 1980s, the application of the “new biologism” in international development has been present through arguments of self-reliance, focusing on local capability and resources and related to perspectives of endogenous development (Gudynas, 2013).

Resilience has its origin in ecological science, Radcliffe (2015) explains; “whereas resilience was used to refer to bio-environmental feedback loops and ecosystem stability, it is increasingly applied to understand the capacity of human societies to cope with and manage disturbances in natural and human environments, such as natural disasters” (p. 859). Radcliffe (2015) argues, however, that there has not been critical reflection about its application. The framing of community and development problems around the risks and vulnerability of certain populations deserves more scholarly attention.

Under the new biologism, the term “resilience” has garnered enormous popularity in diverse settings from international development to parenting and high-tech industries (Sehgal, 2015). For example, a *New York Times Magazine* article cites the use of the term by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) through its “Resilience Agenda” (Sehgal, 2015). USAID explains: “Our goal is to accelerate investments that help countries, communities and households get ahead of shocks; more effectively align global development partners;

break down stovepipes; and support country-led resilience strategies” with a focus on climate change and conflict (Lindborg, 2014, p. 101).

The term “resilience” is also used in ways specific to the nonprofit sector in Western contexts. It was used in the first edition of the seminal work by Salamon (2003), *The Resilient Sector*, about the nonprofit sector in the United States. In the second edition, it was used again in the introductory chapter. Salamon (2012) explains that “nonprofit America has responded with striking *resilience* [emphasis added] to the complex challenges and opportunities it has recently confronted and continues to confront” (p. 44). He frames it as one of the sector’s strongest assets under its “story of resilience” (p. 43), and explains, “there is no denying the dominant picture of *resilience* [emphasis added], adaptation, and change” in the nonprofit sector (Salamon, 2012, p. 44). When applied to civil society, reliance, as with sustainability, can not only be framed around an organization’s ability to adapt to change and challenges, but can be directly related to its financial resilience (Aschari-Lincoln & Jäger, 2015; Prentice, 2015).

There are criticisms of the use of the term “resilience” and its focus on the individual and the management of risks. As cited in the *New York Times Magazine*, Ban Ki-moon explains, “we cannot stop disasters, but we can anticipate the risks and reduce them” (Sehgal, 2015, p. 2). That is, this thinking puts the burden on the communities (and in the case of the present research, on the CSOs) to adapt to events rather than make public policy that helps to avoid threatening environmental and external events. As such, a resilience framework mirrors a neoliberal development framework of “pro-active, self-generating subjects” (Radcliffe, 2015, p. 860). At an individual level, resilience is consistent with “American bootstrap logic” by suggesting that a person’s success or lack thereof is a result of the person’s actions and decisions (Martin, 2015; Sehgal, 2015; see also Nickel & Eikenberry’s, 2007). Given the wide, and increasing, use of the term “resilience,” our inquiry seeks to explore how organized civil society is using it and other, related terms to produce meaning.

## CSOS AND SIGNALING VALUE: RESEARCH APPROACH

We have purposively selected the neighboring-countries cases of Colombia and Ecuador. Colombia, and Ecuador provide rich case studies to examine how organized civil society signals value, because each context has experienced the challenges outlined in the introduction during the last ten years—restrictive policies, heightened accusatory discourse, and decreasing international funds. In addition, we have selected Colombia and Ecuador due to their common experiences of recent and current periods of major social and political transformation. While the transformation in each context is distinct, the changes have propelled organized civil society to reconsider its role in each country. In Colombia, the social and political transformation includes the historic negotiations for a peace agreement that seeks to end over fifty years of violence since 2012. In Ecuador, the social and political transformation is defined by the sweeping expansion of the public sector and major government-led reforms in several sectors.

### Colombia

According to different international rankings, Colombia has been historically one of the most unequal countries in the world (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014). However,

in recent years (2010–2013), there have been signs of improved of social conditions. For example, inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, has decreased (0.56 to 0.539), suggesting that the inequality gap is lessening. Additionally, the poverty rate decreased 10 percentage points (from 39 percent to 29 percent) and the extreme poverty rate decreased from 12.3 percent to 8.4 percent during the period 2010–2013 (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014, p. 18). This has resulted in 2.4 million people lifted out of poverty and 1.5 million people out of extreme poverty. Poverty is still more present in rural zones of the country, which have been historically affected by the internal armed conflict (42.8 percent poor in rural areas, compared to 26.9 percent in urban area, in 2013). Additionally, during the same period, the richest segment of the population received 17.3 times more income than the poorest segment. As such, Colombia has a narrower middle class than other countries of the region, such as Chile, Brazil, or Peru (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014, pp. 20–21).

Organized civil society has an important role in Colombia in the provision of public goods and services. The Colombian constitution recognizes CSOs as important actors in democratic and participatory action (Article 103), linking them as partners with government in the implementation of development plans at the national, regional, and local levels (Article 355). Since the 1990s, the number of CSOs has rapidly increased in Colombia, although several leaders and organizations have been affected by the violence in the country during the last five decades (Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, 2014). Government-implemented decentralization and democratization have fostered CSOs activity—including agendas about human rights and housing issues in particular—and CSOs have contributed to the planning, implementation, and evaluation of local government policy (Instituto de Comunicación y Desarrollo, 2014).

Colombia is seeing a major social and political transformation, given the peace negotiations that started in 2012 between the government and the left-wing FARC guerrilla group, historically the most important insurgent group in the country (Departamento Nacional de Planeación, 2014). In June 2016, the peace negotiations came to a bilateral ceasefire. A draft peace agreement went to referendum in Colombia in October 2016 but was unsuccessful. As a result, in November 2016 a revised version of the peace agreement was signed and ratified by Congress without holding a second referendum. Moving forward, the end to the conflict and the post-conflict peace process will certainly influence Colombia's development and the work of CSOs. Given this, CSOs since before 2012 have been discussing what post-conflict looks like for Colombia and the role of CSOs (Fantón, 2013). Several key civil society players in Colombia have joined together to create the National Pact for Peace, which argues that the transition to peace will require the expertise and experience of organized civil society.

## Ecuador

Ecuador has seen social development progress, as numerous indicators have improved over the course of the last several years. According to the National Development Plan 2013–2017, poverty in Ecuador, when measured by income, has fallen from 44.6 percent in 2004 to 27.3 percent in 2012, with an average decline of 2.16 percent annually. However, challenges are present, as the economic crisis currently facing the country, spurred by the decreasing price of petroleum on the global market, has led to an increase in the unemployment rate to 5.7 percent, above the 5 percent rate in 2007 (INEC, 2015).

Ecuador's 2008 constitution includes civil society participation through "civil society representatives" in national councils that contribute to "the drafting, cross-cutting application, observance, follow-up, and evaluation of public policies" (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Articles 156 and 157). These councils include themes such as gender, ethnicity, and disabilities among other equity issues. The 2008 constitution also recognizes organizations within civil society as a means of expression and a mode to strengthen citizenship (Constitution of the Republic of Ecuador, 2008, Articles 96 and 97).

Ecuador is also experiencing social and political transformation. Since 2008, the start of the first term of the Rafael Correa government, civil society–state relations have changed radically. Ecuador has implemented a new development paradigm, "Good Living," which challenges the idea that economic growth is the only measure of development. The shift has included changes in the regulation of several sectors, including higher education, media, and organized civil society itself.

In 2010, the Organic Law of Higher Education was adopted to regulate and focus on quality higher education through more research and university community outreach (Consejo de Educacion Superior, 2010). It was considered a major reform to higher education and has received mixed reviews by universities and the public.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the Communications Law adopted in 2013 regulates and seeks to promote quality in journalism. The law has sought to limit journalists' ability to damage the reputation of political leaders and citizens at large. However, the law has been criticized for allowing "arbitrary and disciplinary application" and has generated oversight that is onerous for media and said to be "disproportionate" regulation (Fundamedios, 2015).

Regulatory reform in Ecuador has also specifically targeted the sector of organized civil society. Regulatory reform targeting CSOs in Ecuador started in 2008 with the enactment of Decree No. 982 (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2008), which aimed to improve the transparency of CSOs and mechanisms of accountability through the creation and implementation of a registry of civil society and an accreditation process for organizations that receive public funding (Chiriboga, 2014). In 2013, Executive Decree No. 16 replaced Decree No. 982 with new mechanisms to strengthen CSOs. These mechanisms include processes of training, technical assistance, and the establishment of competitive funds for CSOs (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2013), but they have yet to be operationalized in practice. Decree No. 16 is criticized by CSOs and international actors for having a high level of discretion related to the closure of organizations. More recently, in 2015, Decree No. 739 was released; it reformed the government registry and removes the need for lawyers and other financial burdens for the registration of a CSO, but it maintains discretion to dissolve organizations as was laid out in Decree No. 16 (Presidencia de la República del Ecuador, 2015).

### Civil Society Networks

To examine the proposed discourses and tools used by organized civil society to frame its value in society, we conducted a content analysis of documents and texts produced by civil society networks. We selected the national confederations and active subnational federations from each country for a total of four civil society networks across Colombia and Ecuador. Civil society networks, "groups of three or more civil society organizations that pursue [a] shared purpose" (Ashman & Sugawata, 2013, p. 394), have established their role in organized civil

society in various contexts.<sup>4</sup> Networks have “important roles to play in advocating for the sector, earning public support, and improving the provision of public goods and services” (Appe, 2016a, p. 189). Research has explained networks as adopting and diffusing CSO practices (Appe, 2016a), leading capacity-building efforts for the sector (Brown & Kalegaonkar, 2002), promoting advocacy in the sector (Acosta, 2012; Young, 2001), and changing key descriptors in development discourses (Appe, 2016b). The present research expands the empirical evidence about networks’ functions in organized civil society; in particular, the research focuses on how networks frame organized civil society’s value by using specific discourses and tools.

The Colombian Confederation of Nongovernmental Organizations (hereinafter referred to by its Spanish acronym, CCONG) is comprised of associations, corporations, foundations, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) throughout Colombia. In existence since 1989, its membership includes federations of NGOs across ten government departments, eight national associations and networks, and fourteen national NGOs that work in social development with over 850 NGO members. Its mission is

to associate, strengthen, and represent nongovernmental organizations and promote their self-regulation within ... the constitutional and legal framework, to support the visibility and consolidation of the sector in order to foment democracy and the construction of public goods to overcome exclusion in all dimensions. (CCONG, n.d., p. 1)

It engages in dialogue with government and seeks to influence government decisions in social policy. At the subnational level, the Federation of Antioquian NGOs (hereinafter referred to by its Spanish acronym, FAONG), is based in Medellín, Colombia, in the Department of Antioquia, and represents 120 organizations. Since its creation in 1988, FAONG has been a leader in creating dialogue with local and regional governments. For example, it had a seat at the table when public policy in Medellín was reformed to help strengthen CSOs. As a result, opportunities for CSO capacity building and leadership training were created by local government (Salazar, 2011). Its four action areas are similar to the national level CCONG’s and include: institutional strengthening of social organizations, representation of interests and rights of social organizations, impact on public policy decisions, and positioning the federation with other networks and collaborations (FAONG, 2016).

The Ecuadorian Confederation of Civil Society Organizations (hereinafter referred to by its Spanish acronym, CEOSC) was formally created in January 2013, more recently than Colombia’s national confederation created in 1989. CEOSC’s formalization process dates back to 2009 as a response to Decree No. 982 (then known as the Collective of CSOs). CEOSC’s mission is dedicated “to grouping, strengthening and representing its associates, in addition to promoting the sector to contribute to the transparency, solidarity, and democracy” (CEOSC, 2015a). With its twenty-six founding organizational participants and membership of about 100, CEOSC’s three main principles are: the consolidation and visibility of the sector, the sustainability of the sector, and the promotion of intersectoral relations and policy dialogue. At the subnational level, the Association Network of NGOs of Guayaquil (hereinafter referred to by its Spanish acronym, AROG) is a federation which serves the city of Guayaquil and surrounding areas with a membership of about sixty CSOs. It was created in 2001 to strengthen CSOs, to improve the quality of social organizations’ interventions, and to promote transparency, good governance, and social responsibility (AROG, 2016).

TABLE 1  
Coding for Three Buzzword Categories

	<i>Mapping and spatial strategy</i>	<i>Sustainability</i>	<i>Resilience</i>
Preset codes	Map Mapping Space Spatial Cartography	Sustainability Sustainable Sustain Sustainable Development goals (SDGs)	resilience
Emergent codes	Measurement Corners/nooks Public space Spaces of integration Spaces of intersectoral Coordination Spaces incidence Spaces of interrelation spaces of participation Spaces of training Spaces of visualization	Financial sustainability Sustainable development Human sustainable development	Perseverance Adaptation Change Crisis Risks

We propose that because networks have the function of advocating for the sector, this function can be examined through public documents produced and made available by the networks. We examined dozens of texts produced by the four civil society networks, including their websites, blog posts, press releases, collective accountability reports, and training agendas, and reports.<sup>5</sup> These documents were available on the websites of each network for public consumption. Based on literature about our three buzzword categories—mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience—we agreed on initial preset coding that we would identify in the texts to examine their meanings within the context of the texts (Table 1). Each of the authors examined the texts individually in the initial stage. During the first step of the data collection and analysis, we used the process of memoing, as defined by Corbin and Strauss (2008). They define memos as “written records of analysis” (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 117). Throughout the data analysis, we wrote memos to develop the concepts in the context of the texts and further coded and classified the data. We compiled memos and gradually built on analytic ideas through these documents. We also allowed for emergent codes related to our three buzzword categories (Table 1). We then reviewed our memos from the first step and further discussed the meanings of the terms and concepts to develop the main findings of the research. The following section provides the findings of the content analysis of documents and texts produced by the civil society networks in Colombia and Ecuador.

## FINDINGS: CIVIL SOCIETY VOCABULARIES AND SIGNALING VALUE

The analysis of documents and texts by the four networks illuminated themes related to the vocabularies and how the civil society networks use them to signal value. References to mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience were present, both explicitly and implicitly.

## Networks' Mapping and Spatial Strategies

While not all of the networks make reference to the practice of mapping or even situate civil society as something to be mapped, there are several geographic and spatial references across the materials produced by civil society networks in Colombia and Ecuador. With regard to mapping, the means in which this language was being used was in reference to the network's own member organizations. CEOSC has a georeferenced mapping of CSOs with an online interface. Inclusion in this mapping is subject to an organization's membership in CEOSC, which, as mentioned, includes approximately 100 organizations. According to government records, there are over 50,000 registered CSOs with legal status in Ecuador (Registry of Civil Society Organizations, 2011). Thus, even if the government's numbers are overestimated, there is still a large difference between what CEOSC is counting and what government is counting. Therefore, CEOSC's map does not capture a full picture of CSOs in Ecuador; rather, the map is limited to CEOSC members (CEOSC, 2015a). While not as sophisticated with an online map interface, the other networks also provide member organizations listed by georeferences, such as province or department, on their websites.

There are several other materials produced by civil society networks that are georeferenced. For example, the processes of collective accountability reporting collects numerical information from participating organizations. Collective accountability reports are published to provide descriptive data on the participating organizations in order to demonstrate organized civil society as an "important sector" (Collective of Civil Society Organizations of Ecuador, 2011). The collective accountability reports do not use the specific term "mapping" but do make geographic references. For example, the reports observe the geographic coverage of organizations within the context, namely the country context. Additionally, the term *rincón* (Spanish for "corner" or "nook") is used to describe geographic areas where the government is not meeting the demand. Therefore, networks are able to frame CSOs as providing services such as education and public health in geographic locations that government is not reaching (Aportes Ciudadanos a las Regulaciones de las Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil del Ecuador, 2009; CEOSC, 2015b; Collective of Civil Society Organizations of Ecuador, 2011, 2012).

Geographic location is an important variable, as it shows the coverage of projects at the local, provincial, and national levels. The networks signal that most organizations are working at a national scope. Contributions by CSOs to national development through the objectives of international, national, and local development plans in Colombia and Ecuador are often highlighted across their networks' documents. For example, FAONG highlights that its work has been recognized not only in the local context and Colombia but also in other countries in Latin America (Collective of Civil Society Organizations of Ecuador, 2011).

Analysis of the networks' texts illuminates the use of measurement as well. Measurement is related to mapping, as it seeks to communicate information and define a variable; however, it might not always use spatial strategies. References to measurement should not be all that surprising, given the interests and pressures to define and demonstrate performance indicators for CSOs (Mirabella, 2013). This becomes important to civil society networks' efforts to signal value. For example, several of the documents cite growth. In 2011, Ecuador's collective accountability report's introduction explains that the number of organizations participating in the accountability process nearly tripled since its previous report (from 37 organization in

2010 to 102 in 2011) (Collective of Civil Society Organizations of Ecuador, 2011). FAONG highlights the growth of participating organizations in its collective accountability processes as well, steadily growing during the period from 2006 to 2010 (FAONG, 2011). Related to growth is the reference to size and quantity as it relates to CSOs. FAONG mentions the quantity of participating member organizations as higher in comparison to other federations in Colombia.<sup>6</sup> In addition, CEOSC uses the number of people served to signal the scope of the sector. It calculates that approximately 10 percent of Ecuador’s population has directly benefited from thirty-seven organizations in its 2010 collective accountability report (Collective of Civil Society Organizations of Ecuador, 2011).

Mapping and spatial strategies found in the texts include the use of the term “space.” Spaces are framed as needed, and this results in several efforts to signal and propose how civil society, CSOs, and civil society networks themselves provide spaces. Civil society networks referenced public space, spaces of integration, spaces of meetings and exchanges, spaces of participation, spaces of intersectoral coordination, spaces of incidence, spaces of training, and spaces of visualization (Table 2).

TABLE 2  
Uses and Meanings of the Term “Space”

<i>Term referencing space</i>	<i>Meanings signaled by networks</i>
Public space	Positions civil society as arena where CSOs are creating and participating in public space. This public space is where society can debate and have dialogue about social development.
Spaces of integration	Spaces that integrate CSO representation and action at local, regional, and national levels, promoting culture of consensus, as well as strengthening and coordinating CSOs. Spaces which integrate information, in particular CSO databases shared with municipal and national governments.
Spaces of meeting and exchanges	Spaces of meeting and exchanges to address proposals and joint actions related to social development. Annual network meetings as spaces to debate propositions and actions.
Spaces of interrelation	Spaces for consolidating alliances in promotion of effective social transformation and implementation of strategies. Spaces for exploring public–private partnerships. Spaces to work with other institutions, in particular the state, not only in provision of public services but also in drafting and implementing public policy.
Spaces of intersectoral coordination	Spaces to demonstrate collaborations between government and CSOs. Such spaces confirm work being done by organizations across sectors. They allow CSOs to position themselves as counterparts of state institutions and show their relevance in provision of public services.
Spaces of impact	Spaces of impact in international arenas such as United Nations. Spaces about specific contributions to public policy.
Spaces of participation	Spaces to find general consensus, evaluate and give feedback on public policies, and interact with other CSOs. These spaces are seen as spaces of exchanging information and mutual learning, addressing specific issues and needs of organizations involved. Spaces as key characteristic of democracy which are closing and need to be revived. Spaces to work with networks in Latin America and beyond.
Spaces of training	Spaces of collective teaching and learning, such as workshops, courses, certificate programs.
Spaces of visualization	Spaces to visualize CSOs results and their contribution to development of countries.

## Sustainable Development and Organizational and Sectoral Sustainability

We found sustainability to be a consistent theme and part of the vocabularies used by civil society networks. “Sustainability” is a term that might mean so many things that it will eventually not mean anything. It is demonstrated in civil society networks’ texts as something to which CSOs (and the sector as a whole) are contributing; it is used, as well, to reference sustainability at the organizational and sectoral levels.

Sustainability is used to denote sustainable development in two ways: (a) CSOs generally contribute to sustainable development in society and (b) CSOs are part of the UN’s 2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agenda. For example, CCONG makes a clear account of its role in building a plural and sustainable society. Its statutes state that its purpose is the promotion of sustainable human development as part of the approach that both CCONG and its members seek through their organizational missions. CCONG observes the promotion of human sustainable development as linked to the fight against poverty and combating exclusion in society. CCONG and its members conceive themselves as relevant actors in the consolidation of peace and sustainable development in Colombia through their participation in public discussions and the policy process. This includes functions such as informing National Development Plans and monitoring regulatory reforms that target CSOs in Colombia. The network embraces sustainable values as the promotion of human rights, gender equity, democratic participation, good governance, and the sustainability of the environment.

Sustainability is also linked to international spheres. Civil society networks address the issue of sustainability in relation to organized civil society’s commitment to the SDGs. In Ecuador, CEOESC is working jointly with the United Nations Development Program to promote outreach about the SDGs to civil society actors. In Colombia, CCONG has several documents that highlight perspectives about the post-2015 agenda and the SDGs. The network published a 2016 document to highlight the sector’s value, distinction, and relevance, stating that the sector has the ability “to influence decisions to solve the problems of poverty, exclusion and war” (CCONG, 2016, p. 5) within the implementation of the SDGs.

In addition to sustainable development and SDGs, the term “sustainability” is specifically applied at the organizational level in response to external pressures—such as restrictive policies or reducing international aid—and is used also in regard to financial sustainability. In its most recent collective accountability report in Ecuador in 2015, CEOESC suggests that sustainability of organizations is threatened and this might lead CSOs to more alliances with the private sector, in particular to sustain public services and the promotion of rights (CEOESC, 2015b). In 2016, from the perspective of organizational sustainability, CEOESC organized several workshops focused on improving the sustainability of CSOs by promoting discussions and mechanisms to confront political and economic changes in Ecuador.

AROG in Ecuador also focuses on organizational sustainability at the subnational level. Publications related to financial sustainability, fundraising, social responsibility, and public–private partnerships are included on its website. In this case, AROG compiles the information and makes it available rather than produces it. AROG also leads trainings about sustainability. In 2014, it co-organized a workshop on sustainability reporting for its members and other stakeholders in the city of Guayaquil, Ecuador. The workshop covered sustainability reports and how they help improve not only the financials of CSOs, but also their relationships with stakeholders. AROG emphasized the benefits of social responsibility as a management model

to provide knowledge and tools, so that accountability reporting to stakeholders by CSOs can use a framework of sustainability based on ISO 26000<sup>7</sup> and the Global Reporting Initiative for NGOs.<sup>8</sup>

Sustainability is also used beyond the organizational level and applied to the sector as a whole. AROG has been analyzing and promoting discussions on sector financial sustainability, especially with the changes in funds available for CSOs in Ecuador and the need to find new sources to finance the sector's programs and projects. This is an issue that CEOESC has addressed in various fora at local, national, and international venues through capacity building opportunities and shared learning communities. There are apprehensions related to sustainability for the sector as well. FAONG attributes its concerns about the sustainability of organizations and the sector to the fact that revenue generated by organizations does not always cover organizational costs and this might "mean that in the short term ... [there will be] the closure of several organizations" (FAONG, 2011, p. 19).

### The Resilience of Civil Society?

The documents analyzed do not explicitly address resilience, even though some aspects related to organizational sustainability necessarily involve change and adaptation to new contexts. We are surprised, given the buzzword's "hotness" in other contexts. However, concepts related to resilience were found in the texts and include risks, crisis, change, adaptation, and perseverance.

As with sustainability, informational materials presenting ideas around resilience are not always authored by the civil society networks themselves, but rather are made available. AROG provides information on its website from other sources on topics such as strategic risk management, crisis, and linking CSOs to the digital culture (AROG, 2016). These texts indirectly address the issue of resilience by suggesting ways in which CSOs can adapt to new legal, funding, and technological contexts, and by observing the importance of financial sustainability in doing so (AROG, 2016). These materials are intended for consumption by the public and organized civil society.

While the term "resilience" does not appear, the term "perseverance" is used. The 2010 collective accountability report in Ecuador describes the work of CSOs as persistent and persevering, highlighting CSOs' work in major public policy "wins" in areas such as rights for indigenes, women, children, and youth as well as the 2004 Organic Law of Transparency and Access to Public Information, for which civil society played a large role in lobbying (World Bank, 2007). FAONG has identified perseverance as a fundamental reason why collective accountability reporting has functioned well in Antioquia (FAONG, 2011).

## DISCUSSION

The context for civil society in many regions is indeed complex, given the increasingly restrictive and/or vague regulatory policies targeting the sector, the heightened discourse against civil society, and the reduction of international aid funds. In addition, Colombia and Ecuador are both experiencing major social and political transformations, Colombia with the pending peace agreement and Ecuador with the major social and regulatory reforms driven by its current

administration. Given this, CSOs are seeking ways in which to signal their value and advance their missions to preserve a role in social development. While the cases of Colombia and Ecuador cannot be generalized to represent the entire global South or even the region of Latin America, the cases demonstrate countries undergoing major transformations and how civil society is prepared and responding. The cases suggest important discourses and tools used by civil society networks that might be relevant in other contexts. We find several means in which the vocabularies of mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience present in the literature are used by civil society networks in Colombia and Ecuador. We review them below, and because our inquiry is from a critical perspective, we consider their implications for organized civil society.

Consistent with other empirical studies, there is evidence that civil society networks use mapping and spatial strategies. In particular, networks map civil society and provide georeferenced descriptors most often specific to their members or participating organizations. Previous studies have shown the limitations to defining the sector which might result in missing key civil society actors (Appe, 2013) and a network's map that accounts only for member organizations might do just that. There is a distinction between Ecuador and Colombia related to mapping, as well as a difference between Ecuador's national confederation and the other three civil society networks. Ecuador's CEOSC has a mapping of its members available online. We suspect this is due in part to CEOSC's recent establishment, in comparison to that of CCONG in 1989, FAONG in 1988, and AROG in 2001. The map has become a tool to identify and define the new national confederation in Ecuador. In the cases of CCONG and FAONG in Colombia and Ecuador's AROG, while georeferencing is present, they do not have a mapping tool available to the public. CEOSC was established as a response to regulatory policy reform targeting organized civil society, and as such, it might be the civil society network most reliant on establishing its existence and promoting its value and legitimacy. Mapping its members, we argue, is one way to go about this.

We also found that the use of measurement more generally is important. This includes referencing growth and size in particular. While mapping and measurement were important discourses and tools, perhaps the most used term related to this buzzword category is "space." As listed and described in Table 2, space was woven into the discourses and tools used by civil society networks. This is in contrast to mapping and measurement, as these tools tend to limit the idea of civil society by defining and counting it. The use of the term "space" presents organized civil society as promoting and driving "spaces." This frames organized civil society's value as a sector as inclusive, collaborative, and open to multisector dialogue.

The term "sustainability" included macro and micro applications. That is, civil society networks framed CSOs' value as contributing to both societal sustainable development, often referencing human development, and also the broader global charge of the SDGs. Additionally, sustainability was used at organizational and sectoral levels, this was particularly the case with financial sustainability. Civil society networks provided information and training related to these themes. Clearly, sustainability is on the minds of civil society networks, and has wide application. Therefore, as mentioned, "sustainability" might lead to meaning everything and therefore mean nothing.

Finally, we found that despite its hotness right now, the term "resilience" is not used to the degree we expected. That is, considering that it is being adopted by several sectors (from international development to parenting and high-tech industries, as mentioned) and that it has

relevance in the U.S.-based literature about the nonprofit sector, civil society networks in Colombia and Ecuador are not using the term to frame civil society's value. Other words are used, such as "risks," "crisis," "change," "adaptation," and "perseverance"; however, our findings show they are still not pervasive.

In these contexts of vast and continuing social and political transformations, CSOs need to consider the discourses and tools they use to communicate. It is observed in Latin America that the "actions and initiatives generally performed by individual organizations are losing impact to the extent that social changes are presented faster than the institutional capacity of organizations to react and adapt to changes in the environment (political, social, economic, environmental, etc.)" (Barragán, 2011, p. 101). This indeed gets at the categories of sustainability and resilience. However, we do not want to put the burden solely on CSOs. Being "resilient" CSOs, or CSOs with the ability to react to changes, puts the burden on organized civil society to adapt to events, removing the burden to create public policy and communities that could help to avoid instability and actually nurture and enable CSOs, as well as other social action and development efforts. Still, we find that the burden remains on organized civil society to signal and communicate its value, and that this is an important function that civil society networks in contexts like Colombia and Ecuador are assuming.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The vocabularies of mapping and spatial strategies, sustainability, and resilience embedded in documents and texts of civil society networks allow us to explore further how the sector's value is signaled. They also provide more evidence of the important role of civil society networks in shaping perceptions of organized civil society.

Findings demonstrate that there are opportunities and challenges for civil society networks to use the examined discourses and tools to signal value. We selected formal civil society networks because they have been constituted to lead the sector and advocate for it. We acknowledge that there are additional actors in organized civil society, more informal networks, and other types of associations of CSOs that deserve attention. However, for our research, we wanted to examine the organizations that have been explicitly created to serve the sector as a whole. We would welcome a systematic close reading of civil society networks in other contexts in Latin America and beyond to better understand the ways in which organized civil society is signaling its value.

In the contexts of Colombia and Ecuador, our research shows that using vocabularies related, in particular, to spatial strategies allows CSOs to demonstrate their ability to open up new opportunities for dialogue and impact. This might indicate a need for recognizing further nuance in the emerging articulation about the shrinking space of civil society. That is, organized civil society has agency and is responding in a way that highlights this. Networks signal that CSOs are providing space. Additionally, the use of the term "space" can be interpreted as a direct response to the perception of discourses and actions by governments and donors that suggests shrinking spaces. These themes should be examined not only by a close reading and discourse analysis of documents and texts by civil society networks, but also by examining practices through interviews and observations. Further inquiry about created spaces might capture the nuances among the different kinds of CSOs and their functions, including roles in advocacy versus service delivery and any combination of these roles (Pousadela & Cruz, 2016). In addition,

opportunities can be recognized in the vocabularies of sustainable development. Framing CSOs as contributors to global objectives like the SDGs will provide a platform to demonstrate civil society's value, distinctiveness, and relevance as observed by CCONG (2016).

However, through a critical lens we still caution about the challenges inherent in these discourses and tools. Mapping and spatial strategies might miss the complexity of civil society and define the sector too narrowly, as the case of CEOSC suggests—its map is member organizations only. The overuse of words like “sustainable” and “sustainability” results in their meaning everything and then, therefore, nothing. And finally, the burdens that are placed on CSOs when they frame themselves as being or needing to be resilient (or in the cases of Colombia and Ecuador, as being able to react, adapt, and change to complex environments) might hamper the work of organized civil society. This still needs further exploration. We are curious about how the relationship between sustainability and resilience will play out in contexts like Colombia and Ecuador and other contexts undergoing social and political transformation. Is the absence of the use of the term “resilience” a strength of organized civil society in these contexts, or might it be a weakness? Will its absence allow the consolidation of civil society as a sector, brushing off the individualism that a resilience lens promotes, or might it threaten CSOs' capacity to adapt and be “sustainable”? Are these terms new, emergent understandings for organized civil society, or are they repackaged ideas that relate to the marketplace and neoliberal ideologies, like many of the discourses that scholars have come to be critical of, such as the discourses of professionalization and the discourses of entrepreneurialism, for examples? These are important questions to consider as civil society networks and CSOs seek how to not only signal but also practice the values they are signaling.

Through this exploratory research, we note and demonstrate several ways in which civil society networks can use vocabularies to outline their value. However, we also identify limitations to the adoption of these buzzwords which deserve more attention. Organized civil society will have to explore the pros and cons, the opportunities and challenges that can influence, reaffirm, and reestablish its contributions to social development in contexts of shrinking space and social and political transformation.

## NOTES

1. CSOs can include a range of organizations working in social development that might also be described as nongovernmental organizations, nonprofit organizations, third-sector organizations, or voluntary organizations. We use the overarching term “civil society organization.”
2. The phrase “shrinking space” was a running theme during sessions on civil society at the 2016 conference of the International Society for Third Sector Research. It proved to be a noteworthy phrasing during the conference, given this article's findings. As will be explained, the use of the terms “space” and “creating space” have emerged as an important discourse and tool for civil society networks in Colombia and Ecuador.
3. While these changes have mixed reviews by universities, there is a perceived window of opportunity for CSOs, as many CSO leaders suggest that universities in Ecuador do not have the experience in research and community outreach and argue that CSOs' expertise and experience can be of help to universities (Appe & Barragán, *Forthcoming*).
4. We use the term “civil society organization” (CSO) to describe organizations that engage in social development. In the context of Latin America in the last fifteen years or so, organizations themselves are using the descriptor CSO due, in particular, to the criminalization of the term “nongovernmental organization” (NGO) (see Appe, 2016b). The most recently created civil society network, Ecuador's CEOSC, is the only network to use CSO in its name. This also demonstrates that the term CSO might be more commonly used more recently.

5. We specifically use documents that are available publicly. We examine how organized civil society, in this case civil society networks, are framing civil society's value. As such, we sought to systematically examine documents which are targeted for public consumption. There is value to examining other documents, such as those for funders and other stakeholders, which might not be publicly available and might tell a different story, demonstrating differing means with which to show value. Audiences matter, and we want to thank Andrada Nimu and Mario Aquino Alves for their helpful comments about documents and discourses at the ISTR 2016 conference, which informed our thinking and our methods in this article.
6. Other federations in Columbia which represent CSOs in Colombia at the subnational level (and are also members of CCONG) include Federation of NGOs of Caldas, Corporation for Development of Meta, Federation of NGOs of Choco, and Federation of NGOs of Quindio, which exist but are not as active as FAONG and do not have functioning websites for dissemination of documents to the public. In addition, the Santander Federation of NGOs and Federation of the Caribbean are active subnational federations in Colombia but have smaller membership bases.
7. ISO 26000 is a global standard that provides voluntary guidance on social responsibility and sustainability, and is applicable for organizations of all types, including nonprofits (International Organization for Standardization Secretariat, 2008).
8. Global Reporting Initiative (GRI) is an international methodology to build that helps businesses, governments and other organizations understand and communicate the impact of business on critical sustainability issues such as climate change, human rights, corruption and many others. (<https://www.globalreporting.org/information/about-gri/Pages/default.aspx>). Global Reporting Initiative helps businesses, governments, and other organizations understand and communicate the impact of business on critical sustainability issues such as climate change, human rights, corruption, and many others (GRI, 2016).

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