S.M.A.R.T. ECOSYSTEMS: A GEOGRAPHIC PERSPECTIVE OF NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS IN BELIZE

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

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ABSTRACT: Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) are growing in numbers and impact in the developing world, but questions about their geography remain unanswered. Scholars and practitioners have theorized various push and pull factors that determine why or how NGOs go where they do and their geographic consequences, but the complexity of this phenomenon is still poorly understood. Research on how NGOs understand, perceive, identify, and respond to “needs” is large and diverse, while research of ‘why’ and ‘where’ they work remain limited. Furthermore, there is a debate that NGOs can cause more harm than good in the diverse geographies where they operate. Using the context of Belize, this research aims to build upon J. Brass’ (2016) theoretical framework to explain the relationship between the “mission” of NGOs and their geography. Through a literature review and discourse analysis I present a theoretical framework of ‘NGO ecosystems’ to highlight geographic relationships for NGO employees, donors, and volunteers. I proposed a new typology for NGOs based on fieldwork accomplished in
Belize that is mission centric. The categories proposed of NGOs are described as Sustainable Transformation Groups, Marginalized People and Places Groups, Aggressive Response Groups, and Technology/Niche Groups. This new typology reflects a multifaceted explanation for what NGOs do, how they might do it, implications for where (regionally and globally) they might go, and why they do what they do in the first place.

In light of this extraordinary, geography-shaping power of NGOs, the framework and typology suggested in this thesis hopes to encourage more collaborative decision-making, network strengthening, and a more productive engagement for NGO employees, donors, and volunteers in Belize and beyond.

**Keywords:** Belize, Sustainable, Community, Development, NGOs, Voluntourism, Mission Statements.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS ........................................................................................................ ii

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ........................................................................................................ iv

I. INTRODUCTION .................................................................................................................. 1

1. NGO issues that cause more harm than good ................................................................. 5
2. Research Questions and Justifications .......................................................................... 8
3. Thesis Outline .................................................................................................................. 11

II. LITERATURE REVIEW ..................................................................................................... 12

1. Defining the terms: local, sustainable, community-development .................................... 13
2. Local vs Expert Knowledge ............................................................................................ 14
3. Decolonizing Development: revelations on the tensions of development theory in the under-developed world ................................................................. 15
4. What is the difference between aid and development? .................................................... 16
5. The nuanced use of Sustainability ................................................................................. 17
6. Community-Development .............................................................................................. 18
7. NGOs in aid and development: International and Local geographies ............................ 20
8. Framing NGOs in Belize: Examples from other case studies ........................................... 22
9. The problem of Voluntourism and issues for NGOs ......................................................... 25

III. THE CASE OF BELIZE: The geographies of NGOs ....................................................... 28

1. The study area of Belize .................................................................................................. 28
2. The Regional Districts of Belize ..................................................................................... 28
3. Unsustainable Tourism: implications for NGO volunteers from the global north ....... 29
4. NGOs in Belize: a case for visibility of the shadow state ................................................. 30

IV. METHODS .......................................................................................................................... 32

1. Tabulated Data and creation of analyzable spreadsheets ................................................. 32
2. Secondary Data Collection: What is the NGO landscape in Belize ............................... 32
3. Mapping: Visual representations of the NGO Ecosystem in Belize ............................... 33
4. Interviews: what NGO employees, donors, and volunteers believe in their own words and from their own experiences ......................................................... 35

V. RESULTS ............................................................................................................................... 37

1. SECTION 1: creating the NGO ecosystem ............................................................... 37
2. The NGO Ecosystem in Belize: National Scale ............................................................... 45
3. NGO Ecosystem at District Level ...................................................................................... 47
4. Negative views of NGOs and conservation efforts in Cayo district ............................. 55
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. The Brass Paradigm for NGO Geography................................................................. 23
Figure 2. The number of NGOs in each administrative district with associated population density. .................................................................................................................................. 38
Figure 3. Map of Belize including roads that suggest access and conservation areas that suggest environmental governance. ........................................................................................................ 40
Figure 4. Percentage of NGOs by service provision sectors................................................. 41
Figure 5. Percentage of population living with less than $1.90/day in each District............. 42
Figure 6. Annual Budget Totals: How much NGO funding resides in each district............. 43
Figure 7. The Belize NGO Ecosystem: what do they believe and value according to their mission statements.................................................................................................................. 46
Figure 8. NGO Ecosystem: Belize District............................................................................. 47
Figure 9. NGO Ecosystem: Cayo District............................................................................. 48
Figure 10. NGO Ecosystem: Corozal District....................................................................... 49
Figure 11. NGO Ecosystem: Stann Creek District............................................................... 50
Figure 12. NGO Ecosystem: Toledo District....................................................................... 51
Figure 13. Adaptations to the Brass(2016) model. ................................................................. 73
I. INTRODUCTION

We had just finished calculating the angles, peak demand, and placement location for installing a renewable energy system with the intention of powering a remote education facility in Belize when it started to rain. Most NGOs in the field call site surveys “Needs-Based Assessments.” As the team shuffled through the screen door of the facility, the question of ‘need’ was humorously confirmed when we saw an oily gasoline generator sitting indoors with an exhaust pipe sticking through the exterior wall. This seemed to be an inefficient method for operating a toaster and a microwave. The facility was a single-wall construction primarily composed of open screens and windows for ventilation, which temporarily housed professional teachers who came from around the world to teach college-level courses to Belizeans. We were there to help this small institute transition to reliable, renewable energy sources and while we happened to be there, a Mayan village leader arrived unannounced and was introduced to the team. He was partnering with this school to send students from his village. As we talked with this leader and his partner, they expressed the idea that we visit their village and install a similar energy system for them in their ‘community center.’ I could see the wheels spinning inside the Chief Executive Officer’s (CEOs) head who had already agreed to support the private, nonprofit collegiate institute. How was he supposed to respond to this new request?

From my western perspective, the need seemed reasonable. Few Mayan dwellings and community structures have regular electric power, and this community would run a smelly diesel generator for their youth to practice electric musical instruments. Apparently, the young people of this village were exceptionally gifted and highly
celebrated across the Toledo district, receiving frequent requests for public performances. The CEO was processing this expressed need, but something was causing a sense of trepidation in agreeing or answering the request at the time. Perhaps the unsettling idea of ‘meeting needs’ resulted from the team’s growing experiences and knowledge in this context.

A different Belizean stakeholder shared an interesting perspective one day to this NGO team. A local Belizean was approached by well-meaning individuals about the condition of his home. This particular stakeholder was sitting on his dilapidated porch when asked about whether there was a desire to fix the condition of his home and prevent a more catastrophic problem. Furthermore, many of his neighbors were moved to consider how they could help meet this obvious ‘need’? The response given by the stakeholder was that he knew a nonprofit missionary team had purchased a building just a short distance down the dirt road from his house. Pretty soon, he expects that the church group will come by, see his house, see him on his front porch, and out of a sense of pity or other altruistic motivations; they will fix it for him. Why would he bother raising funds and do the work himself, if somebody else could do it for him? NGO welfare program activities that create this sense of dependency are well documented through research (Corbett, 2009). This story caused obvious, boisterous frustration followed by a string of profanity for another local stakeholder who knew the details of this story but was otherwise preoccupied with his own struggle to pay bills after the COVID-19 pandemic had halted all tourists to his business. Of course, this stakeholder wanted nothing to do with the churches that he feels are directly responsible for paternalistic development projects and further concretize government corruption in Belize.
A lively conversation ensued in the car ride, after we gave our farewells to the community, and we drove away from the site. The comments from one of the board members seemed to convey a feeling of disbelief, even surprise that the Mayan village was without electrical power or refrigeration. Upon further review, it was obvious that the Mayan villagers had not only survived for thousands of years without electricity or refrigeration, but it was a matter of pride in their cultural heritage. In other words, the different perspectives between the western NGO board member and the perspective of the Mayan village elder revealed a dramatically different understanding of ‘need.’

Regardless, the CEO of the NGO I was traveling with responded with less interest about this perceived ‘need’ and more of an interest in asking if this was part of their organization’s charter, or ‘mission.’ He pointed out that their specialty in technology application was to empower local NGOs and help them avoid troublesome disruptions in their work from having to fundraise and coordinate energy demands in remote, rural locations. His mission is to help NGOs, who in turn, help empower poor communities. Would there be a problem with helping the grassroots Mayan community-based organization? What would be different? What are the geographic dimensions to this complex problem that could help inform decisions? This is just one example of a regular problem facing nonprofit organizations around the globe. This is a great problem to address from the unique perspective of a geographer.

Finding solutions in a world plagued by poverty, injustice, and climate change is approached from countless directions to include governments, scholars, and nonprofits. There is a place for everyone at the table to use their skills, training, and creativity to make a positive change in the world around them and respond to these urgent needs.
However, public policy or knowledge produced can create unintended consequences of deeper inequality, vulnerability, and environmental chaos. Place, space, and the environment are conditions or consequences of human activities and the goal of this research thesis aims to contribute to the conversation on the geography-shaping influence of NGOs (Gregory et al., 2009). Furthermore, perennial issues of paternalism and siloed domains plague the efforts of NGOs globally. Unintended social and environmental consequences are center stage in the conversation about NGOs and their role in addressing poverty, injustice, and climate change (Bebbington, 2004; Brass et al., 2018).

With a diverse range of approaches to global problems, there is also a diverse range of opinions about solutions and techniques. The forces and institutions that emerge create hierarchies of power and can threaten productive collaboration. A useful analogy would be the coordinated approach required to row a boat across a lake. If the rowers are uncoordinated, the vessel will be unproductive and veer off-course or just spin in endless circles. Understanding the proper techniques, the pace, and the end line will ensure the boat makes it across. Goals and visions of change can become personality driven, resulting in frustration for NGOs who want to ‘make a difference’ and for the communities or grassroots organizations they hope to empower, champion for, or coach. This introductory section will describe and explain some of the common NGO hurdles and issues. After a brief explanation of the problem, I will outline the research goals and broader impacts of this thesis. The introduction will conclude with the justifications for doing this research of NGOs who want to ‘make a difference’ and why this is a geography problem.
1. NGO issues that cause more harm than good.

J. Keese (2003) is one of many scholars who has written about the failures of NGOs to recognize paternalism and their tendency to undermine similar activities in a place, space, or environment. An example is his compelling narrative on smallholder agricultural poverty and nonprofit interventions in rural Ecuador. The three primary failures he observed of the agricultural nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) were: 1) the failure to recognize patterns of paternalism, 2) a failure to perceive the uneven geographic distribution of NGOs, and 3) the failure to emphasize the collective efforts of the regional NGO cohort (Eversole, 2003). Some NGOs in the highland region were in the habit of giving away overly technical equipment and fostering a climate of dependency in the indigenous Ecuadorian villages. This forced other NGOs to abandon the more arduous process of participatory, community development in smallholder production. The result ten years later was a field of abandoned irrigation equipment, environmental degradation, and an increasingly impoverished rural community. That is a sad story. Unfortunately, this is a story echoed across the Global South and is the focus for much of the critique that NGOs inadvertently increase inequalities and leave local populations worse off than they were before the NGOs arrived (Eversole, 2003).

Coming down from the Ecuadorian Andes and back to our introductory story in Belize, we might see similar problems forming through the Mayan leader’s impromptu request. Providing high-tech renewable energy equipment has the potential to cause unintended harm, unevenness, or alter the ecosystem of aid and development in the region. In other words, questions should first be answered regarding what other NGOs are doing and what their best practices are in order to avoid the common problems of paternalism,
unevenness, and competition. Lacking contextual and situational awareness could result in unevenness in the Toledo district or other geographic consequences. Places like Belize have a long history of being over-saturated by paternalistic development projects that discourage local ownership and marginalize the same groups of people time after time (Wainwright, 2008). Forms of neo-colonialism have also conditioned some local persons in Belize to expect and demand high-cost giveaways from NGOs conducting participatory projects (Wainwright, 2008; Eversole, 2003).

Generally, NGOs claim that their mission is to meet the “needs” of people and nature in a responsible and productive way (Brass et al., 2018). After all, one would be hard-pressed to argue that less-hungry, less-sick, and less-vulnerable communities are not better (Eversole, 2003). However, answering the questions of how, where, and why NGOs intervene, can highlight some of the risks and possibilities of causing more harm than good (Bebbington, 2004). ‘How’ NGOs provide services is never a one-size-fits-all process, and often falls somewhere on a spectrum between aid (top-down) and development (bottom-up) (Corbett, 2010, Eversole, 2003). Unfortunately, this is still too binary of an explanation for NGO aid and development which needs a geographic perspective.

2. Research goals

This thesis aims to problematize the conversation on NGOs by presenting a new framework and typology that explains functional differences of NGOs, and the relationships to ‘why’ and ‘where’ they operate. The goal of this new framework will demonstrate relationships between NGOs around their values and beliefs in reference to the work that they do. This goal is designed to create a typology using a geographic
perspective of Belize NGOs and characterize them based on their missions and mission statements.

**Broader Impact Statements**

NGOs are extraordinarily influential in shaping and changing both human and physical geographies (Bebbington, 2004). The reason for this research thesis is three-fold. First, the debate about NGOs doing more harm than good relies primarily on organizational case studies and minimizes the broader effect of geographies of NGOs and the networks that shape their existence (Bebbington, 2004; Brass et al., 2018). Keese (2006) was able to highlight this tension in the Andes and my research will use Belize as a case study to analyze approximately fifty NGOs. Looking from the broader perspective across multiple sectors and at a national scale may be able to contribute a geographic perspective to this larger debate.

Second, the gap between geography and NGOs causes donors and volunteers to misunderstand their roles, resulting in the unregulated importation of western-ness and the persistent objectification, commodification, and consumption of the ‘Other’ (Said, 1978; Rease, n.d.). This thesis hopes to approach the geographic relationships of NGOs and influence decision-making processes. Additionally, the discussions in this thesis will influence NGO best practices in Belize.

Finally, the siloed characteristic of NGOs continues to inhibit transformations and larger social impacts. If the goal of NGOs is to help poor people or restore the environment, then careful attention to the complex systems and geographical context will be required for any productive intervention and lasting transformation. Otherwise, the project and the
process will remain in its siloed domain, inadvertently creating a competition in the ‘NGO ecosystem.’ This thesis is designed to provide a framework that can be used in other locations at different scales to facilitate a conversation around geography impacts and the shared values of NGOs.

Other research on NGOs has been criticized for weakness in providing an explanatory rationale to the beliefs and values of NGOs (Bebbington, 2004). Conversely, the research for this thesis centers on analyzing the different mission statements and geographic distributions of NGOs in Belize and is bolstered by personal interviews with NGO employees, donors, and volunteers. This thesis hopes to contribute to the discussion of the tradeoffs in NGO aid and development efforts while encouraging NGOs to bridge across their siloed domains and align in support of common mission sets and geography.

3. Research Questions and Justifications

The early stages of developing this thesis began by asking, ‘how’ are NGOs facilitating local solutions for sustainable community development in Belize? As the thesis developed, it became obvious that it was not simply asking the question of ‘how’ NGOs intend to change the world around them, but also asking the question ‘why.’ This led to the overarching question of what geographic relationships exist between a NGO’s mission (values, purpose, and beliefs), where they choose to serve, and how those relationships might inform best practices or methodology. Like the story in the introduction suggested, the mission of an organization can be mis-applied geographically, resulting in catastrophic failures. Regardless of failure or success, NGOs contribute substantially to shaping physical and human geography across space and time. Keese’s (2006) research in Ecuador revealed issues of paternalism and NGOs undermining each
other with their methodologies, but the problem is not simply a matter of methodology. Rather, there exists a bigger problem of what the mission of the organization is and how their methodologies are shaped by that mission. Aggregated together, these diverse missions and methods constitute a service-provision ‘ecosystem.’ A partial answer to my questions can be found by answering the following sub-questions:

- What is the NGO ‘ecosystem’ in Belize and what are their collective efforts?
- What does this ecosystem of ‘values and beliefs’ tell us about the geography of place-making in Belize?
- Based on this ecosystem, are there any change(s) to the current modus operandi that NGO employees, donors, and volunteers in Belize need to take? (What are some of the tradeoffs?)

Answering these questions will be accomplished by first sketching the geographic distribution of NGOs in Belize. The spatial distributions will include a thematic mapping of NGO mission statements to present the concept of a NGO ecosystem. Through literature review and field interviews, I will map NGO missions at the national and regional scales to show geographic relationships that can inform NGO best practices in Belize.

While mission statements are not verified practice, they do express the focused beliefs and values of an organization while providing meaning and purpose to the work for employees, volunteers, and donors (DeFilippis et al., 2017). At first, a mission statement seems to be a way to explain the needs being met or the functions of an organization, but the story in the introduction reveals that the meaning behind ‘why’ an NGO meets those needs or functions that way, yields some power in shaping the decision-making process
and effects of NGO geography. This justifies the labor-intensive discourse analysis accomplished during this research thesis.

A NGO ecosystem is a spatial model, with NGO demographics and physical placements based on available data. The primary focus of this ecosystem will be on the mission-values that reside in their publicly articulated mission statements. Creating this ecosystem allows us to hypothesize that the way NGOs communicate their mission explains a more holistic understanding of needs, how to respond, and where those needs are to be met. Mapping the common values of NGOs could also address the issue of siloed domains of service provision and community organizing (Casper-Futterman, 2016). Creating an NGO ecosystem will help identify possible disagreements or commonalities across organizations.

Another justification for the discourse analysis approach is that interpreting NGO mission statements along with their functional characteristics can help create a new typology that has an explanatory capacity that Bebbington (2004) calls for in answering the ‘why’ and ‘where’ questions of NGO interventions. No typology can answer every question about NGOs, but this thesis aims to provide one that pays careful attention to the extent that what they say they do and the relationships to ‘how’ or ‘where’ they provide service. With this new framework and typology for NGOs in Belize, it becomes obvious that popular NGO practices, like voluntourism and relief-aid, are out of step with the broader NGO culture and landscape in Belize. This concept of an NGO ecosystem can be applied at different scales and geographies to perhaps explain the proliferation and life-expectancy of NGOs in a variety of context, especially in developing countries.
4. Thesis Outline

The outline for this thesis follows the introduction with a literature review focus on NGO development history, critiques in development theory, practical problems in NGO practice, and example case studies that guide the theoretical framework of this research. Following the literature review, I will describe the context of Belize and its many NGOs. The section on the study area of Belize describes the present problem of tourism saturation that challenges notions of ecological sustainability and highlights the nascent relationship between the Government of Belize (GoB) and the Belize Network of NGOs (BNN). The following two sections will describe the methods and present the main results of the study. The final section is the conclusion, which discusses recommendations and considerations for NGOs and future research. Subsequently, this section will also speak more authoritatively on the tradeoffs of the common practice of Voluntourism in Belize.
II. LITERATURE REVIEW

The theoretical framework for this thesis on NGO geography draws from a deep well of literature. The last thirty-five years has revealed a great deal of analysis on NGOs in a variety of contexts, since there is a generally understood debate that NGOs can cause more harm than good (Brass et al., 2018). However, the majority literature indicates that there is a more positive response to NGOs in the international development context if they can properly articulate the concepts presented in this chapter (Brass et al., 2018). This thesis approaches the subject of NGO geography from a post-development and community development/organizing theoretical perspective.

Adapting these perspectives to the geography of NGOs confronts some of the misconceptions about traditional development theories and charity as they are insufficient for achieving lasting transformations, especially in poverty-stricken, war-torn, vulnerable, and marginalized places. Additionally, the increasing body of research demonstrating positive outcomes and effects of nonprofits and NGOs reveals careful consideration and application of these theoretical perspectives as they develop their service-provision techniques and organizational approaches for empowering and enabling aid and development projects (Brown, et al., 2012). Combining elements of these perspectives will allow us to explain complications from NGO interventions, especially in the Global South.

**What is an NGO?**

NGOs are local, national, and international nonprofit organization that perform functions of humanitarian service, promote or monitor government policy changes, and encourage
community participation in support of the public good (Leverty, 2008). This description can become impossibly broad or overly narrow as some NGOs are large, multinational organizations while others remain relatively small in both organizational structures and service provision sectors (the type of work they do). International NGOs, small-local NGOs, grassroots organizations, religious missionary groups, research groups, foundations, and an endless combination of these examples constitute the organizational structure of an NGO. One important note is that the majority of international NGOs are founded, funded, or managed in the global North, but do work in the global South, presenting a priori challenges to the counterhegemonic ideas of democracy, empowerment and social transformations (Escobar, 1997; Bebbington, 2004).

1. Defining the terms: local, sustainable, community-development.

One of the biggest problems in this kaleidoscope of NGOs is the endless opinions and misunderstandings of the terms. Presenting a scientific understanding of what is meant by “local solutions for sustainable, community development” is one of my first tasks. In average parlance, ‘local’ is widely assumed to be ‘better’ but few readers in the Global North can explain why, besides general impressions of uniqueness. The answer for NGOs is an ethical issue of paternalism, colonialism, and power. Joel Wainwright (2008) unpacks the theoretical framework of post-colonialism in Belize for the continually marginalized and excluded Mayan people. In his book, *Decolonizing Development* (2008) he articulates the geography of imperialist domination in Belize to suggest that modern notions of development are rooted primarily in the continuation of colonialism, orientalism, exclusion, and capital extraction (Wainwright, 2008). From this context, ‘local’ solutions attempt to break from the chains of superiority, racism, and inequality.
With the majority of International NGOs hailing from the Global North, this makes for concrete tensions in this debate over aid and development in the Global South (Escobar, 1992; Brass et al. 2018).

2. Local vs Expert Knowledge

The scenario described by Keese (2006) in the Ecuadorian highlands shows how organizations entering a community with predetermined ideas and “expert knowledges” prevent ownership of the equipment and new methodology (Eversole, 2003). In support of Wainwrights’ thesis, Keese warns that the last fifty years of globalization have ‘colonized’ many communities in the global south who now believe that the only way to address their ‘local problem’ is to insist that NGOs assist them by using the latest technologies or modernized techniques (Eversole, 2003). In most contexts of the global south, this is clearly not sustainable (Eversole, 2003). In such cases, NGOs can be coopted into championing, brokering, or training local communities in unsustainable technologies or techniques (Eversole, 2003).

Eversole (2010) points out in a recent article that ‘participatory methods’ are a mirage since it is almost always the professional who ‘invites’ local knowledge into the participatory process in the first place. However, Eversole (2010) goes on to explain that there is still hope to find a terrain where ‘translating agents’ who understand the perspectives of both the powerful and the powerless can help both groups of people navigate through this journey of participation (2010). This is a clear warning to NGOs on the importance of how they view local vs. expert knowledges. Good intentions cannot undue the harm of NGOs who arrogantly believe that they possess the “expert knowledge” to swoop in and change the world around them.
3. Decolonizing Development: revelations on the tensions of development theory in the under-developed world.

Economic growth and material progress have been the prescription of development thinkers in the Global North since the end of WWII. Post-development theorists have illuminated the social pathologies, unevenness, and drug and human trafficking that flourish in the rapidly urbanizing global south (Escobar, 1992; Esteva et al. 2013). Post-development scholars have alternatively demonstrated that grassroots social movements and bottom-up experiments prove more profitable in creating enduring community transformations than the traditional economic theories of capitalist expansion (Escobar, 1992). The false notion of “catching up” to the west is insufficient for combatting injustices and inequality and is a foundational concept for NGOs who operate in this context (Escobar, 1992). History demonstrated that a top-down mandate for development manifested into a global crisis of deeper inequalities and injustices. However, the cooperative, co-production of socio-political movements at the local community level can sometimes generate different results. Escobar (1992) posits that agency coming from social nuclei, families, and communities, present these alternatives to development. However, governments and organizations must be willing to acknowledge new forms of [expert] knowledge production and cultural manifestations (1992).

Post-development theory offers a full rejection to development, but aside from the social nuclei of families or communities, fails to offer up constructive alternatives in most cases (Wainwright, 2008; Matthews, 2018). However, post-development theory is helpful to explain on a basic level that it is the Western understanding of poverty that is fundamentally flawed (Escobar, 1992; Matthews, 2018; Corbett et al., 2014). Therefore,
differences in perspective of the market economy and social economy, and just simply how to define poverty, have created issues in providing the right solution to poor communities in the Global South (Escobar, 1992; Matthews, 2018; Corbett et al., 2014). Issues of class and race can instantly create problems when well-intended individuals with global mobility insist that they can create a development solution without a careful reflection of geographical context.

4. What is the difference between aid and development?

A short discussion on the concept of aid and development is necessary. Aid and Development should be thought of as opposite ends to a spectrum regarding the type of services provided by NGOs and how they intend to provide it (Corbett et al., 2014). Many well-funded international NGOs, even some in Belize, claim to provide humanitarian aid and disaster relief. It is not in the scope of this thesis to critique humanitarian aid and disaster relief NGOs, but this does show a fundamentally skewed view of natural hazards and vulnerable people groups across the globe. As early as the 1970’s, field researchers started to identify more broadly that,

“bad governance, corruption, skewed access to resources (land, water, etc.), and lack of investment in infrastructure and social services had far more to do with turning a natural phenomenon such as drought or coastal storm into a disaster than did either faulty risk perception (aka “bounded rationality”), lack of good policy on natural hazards, or, indeed, lack of good engineering.” (Wisner, 2016)

While some NGOs are specifically skilled in providing emergency medical aid that has been well-received in many scenarios, most NGO work falls on the side of long-term
commitments to reducing vulnerability and increasing resiliency for communities in a thoughtful development strategy (Bebbington, 2004; Corbett et al., 2014). This is not always the case, but a clear understanding of the difference between aid and development can prevent the misdiagnosis of root causes to social and environmental issues. Conflicts and exogenic shocks can easily disrupt service provision and create great challenges in the nonprofit sector when consistency and sustainability hinge on fluctuating markets and global economic trends.

5. The nuanced use of Sustainability

Just the use of the word ‘sustainable’ often causes a gnashing of teeth among most social scientists. The 1987 Brundtland Report described sustainability as the ability to meet present needs without compromising the ability to meet future needs in future generations (Gregory et al., 2009). The disconnect between economic growth and ecological preservation challenges this concept and problematizes issues in developing nations, especially those in the tropics that hold dense biodiversity and resource-rich natural environments. In this context of NGO development, sustainability can hold a variety of meaning from ecological preservation, economic sustainability for a community, or the sustainability of the aid organization (Keese, 2006).

There is a delicate balance in what is truly sustainable for both humans and the environment. One of the biggest problems in tropically biodiverse countries is the designation of conservation land that is often an excuse for land grabbing and indigenous displacement (Zoomers, 2010). In many cases, including in Belize, this land grab is also accomplished under foreign investment for the purpose of eco-tourism. With most of this revenue being exported to these international organizations, the benefit to designating
protected areas robs the poor of their land and potential earnings from eco-tourists (Zoomers, 2010).

There are multiple cases of this in Belize that invite this critique. The overstimulated coastline and beach resorts recently urged the Belize Tourism Board to create a 2030 goal to redistribute eco and mass tourism to different parts of the country (BTB, 2012). Land is being purchased and turned into “private protected” areas by international NGOs like BFREE Belize who now owns over 1,000 acres of rainforest (bfreebz.org). This misunderstanding of sustainability will be taken on during the interviews discussed later.

6. Community-Development

‘Community’ implies specific actions and perspectives for aid and development NGOs. Community wields a great deal of power as an ontological framework. Often, community is undertheorized as a unit in social science or even misrepresented in Tobler’s mythical law of homogeneity that says, “nearness is likeness”. Community can simultaneously share identities and spatial borders or transcend borders in both space and time (Rabig, 2012).

Community-development has emerged as a comprehensive framework to address social problems by the empowerment and mobilization of people and processes to accomplish the sustainable transformation of a community (Swanstrom, 2012). Similarly, community development is the holistic and highly dynamic network of connections between policy and society shaping the relationship between nature and societies (Sampson, 2012). Rubin (1994) provided a theory of organic, holistic community development that reminds
organizations that they are not working ‘for’ a particular community but instead working ‘with and alongside’ communities.

7. Community-Organizing: Enabling the doing

Under this umbrella discipline of community development is the concept of community organizing. The concepts that Rubin (1994) and other community organizers popularized in the last half century were validated through the transformation of poor neighborhoods of the U.S. with this careful focus on ‘enabling the doing’ at the lowest levels (Alinsky, 1971). If this is a rule or focus, then the hopeful anticipation for a handout, like the situation described in the introduction, would not be case. Even though Rubin (1994) and many other community-development scholars wrote contextually on poor neighborhoods of the global north, the theory still works, perhaps with greater impact in the global south (Abrahams, 2008). This is primarily done through the focused goals of increasing civic engagement, economic opportunities, social capital, and organizing in poor, marginalized communities (Abrahams, 2008). This theoretical framework dovetails into the ‘local solutions’ concept to dissuade paternalistic knowledges, methods, and relationships, especially within the framework of post-development where the community assets, character, culture, experiences, and education are part and parcel to ‘development’ (Rubin, 1994). For this reason, many scholars and practitioners continue to study the possible opportunities and consequences of ‘Asset-Based Community Development’ concepts in the global south (Dwyer-Voss, 2019; Corbett, 2014). Unfortunately, institutional forces and power often prevent people and communities from using and employing their own assets and resources.
Much of the existing community development literature focuses primarily on work done in poor neighborhoods in the United States, but the international context of NGOs seems to similarly operate as a primary vehicle for community mobilization and empowerment where the government is weak and basic needs are not being met (DeFillipis, 2010). Because community-development NGOs do have a long history of success in the US, there are many helpful, theoretical similarities to the participatory, holistic, and organic methods of NGOs working in the international context.

8. NGOs in aid and development: International and Local geographies

Not only is the organizational structure of NGOs incredibly diverse, but so are the service sectors they represent. Sector groupings usually detail the primary “needs” that NGOs address like poverty, human rights, agriculture, environment, economics, or affordable housing. Especially in the global south, most NGOs provide development services that can be either economic or non-economic, or a combination of both (Eversole, 2006). This flexibility requires a juggling act for NGOs, further complicating their mission and goals in complex and dynamic environments. One may also be tempted to assume that NGOs that are composed of people and primary networks outside of a community, region, or nation would be less effective than a grassroots organization. However, research has debunked this generalization and serves as a caution for NGOs as they execute their intended mission.

Another way to think about the problems of an NGO’s role in aid and development is to ask, “who do they (NGOs) work for?” (O’Connor, 2014). NGOs with even the best of intentions can disenfranchise or sometimes doubly disenfranchise communities if they do not attend carefully to this question (Lake and Newman, 2002). Studies have shown that
NGOs will favor working with communities that have a better chance of showing
demonstrable improvement rather than working in areas where the need is greatest
(Bebbington, 2004). This becomes a case of ‘double-disenfranchisement’ when the
government fails to meet basic needs and services for the poor, but then doubly
marginalizes some of the poorest communities and people when NGOs focus their
limited capacity and resources on those who might show the greatest progress (Lake and
Newman, 2002). Simultaneously creating new economies of ‘need,’ some NGOs seem
satisfied with pointing at some visible success without attending to the cascading
consequences of dependency and exclusion (Sanyal, 2007; Raberg and Rudel, 2007;
Corbett, 2014). This creation of a ‘need’ economy is another strong post-development
critique that bodes poorly for the persistent nonprofitization-issue of NGOs who must
often wonder not only who they work for, but also what happens when the money runs
out.

While NGOs in their various forms appear to provide an alternative to intergovernmental
aid and development, embedded into NGOs are the political, economic, and social
institutions from where they come (Bebbington, 2008). It is nearly impossible for NGOs
to sever their relationships to power and privilege when they approach poor communities
or complex socio-political ecology problems. Some folks argue that the reason why some
NGOs can cause more harm than good is simply a matter of understanding the culture.
This is obviously too simplistic since cultural understanding is not just rituals and
languages, but it is the institutional forces that shape existence (Eversole, 2003). A true
understanding of culture, in this international context, would also consider the culture that
NGOs create by their presence and existence. Understanding the culture of NGOs, where
they come from or how they interact together in space and time, is critical for understanding harmful approaches in community-development activities.

9. Framing the study of NGOs in Belize.

There are three case studies that I referenced during my literature review and help me frame the research underlying this thesis. The first study was accomplished by Raberg and Rudel (2007) to account for NGO geographic clustering in Ecuador. The typology they presented in their research article was oriented around NGO organizational structures. The typology was: International, Intermediate, and Base Group NGOs, which have intrinsically geographic qualities. They noted clustering around urban centers and comfortable road networks during people-intensive projects, whereas government-funded projects geographically distributed towards rural, hard-to-reach areas. Government-funded projects were also more common amongst international NGOs. The uneven distribution of NGO assistance in this case study showed a growing disadvantage to people in rural areas as more and more responsibilities were being removed from government channels towards intermediate and base group NGOs (2007). However, the authors also noted that some NGOs place just as high a priority on the welfare of residents in dense urban centers as they did on the environmental conservation projects when establishing their project goals and performance metrics (2007). This case study demonstrated that NGO considered more than just their primary service provision sector as they demonstrated an understanding of the dynamic tradeoffs and root causes of place-making and deforestation in Ecuador. In their conclusions, Raberg and Rudel (2007) stated that there seemed to be some relationship between the projects locations and the mission statements of the NGOs themselves—this connection between NGO location and
their mission statements appeared to have a stronger geographic connection (Raberg and Rudel, 2007). They concluded that further research on this connection between mission statements and geography was useful for explaining collective efforts and methodology (2007). If one were able to better explain the “why here and not there” question for NGOs, some issues of disenfranchisement, paternalism, and unevennes might be avoided and lead to more productive NGO engagements. This is a central topic addressed in the thesis.

The second case study referred to extensively was conducted in 2016 by J. Brass. This case study from Kenya is an empirically rich study about NGOs and collaborative relationships. While the case study focuses more acutely on the relationship between NGOs and governments, the geographic perspective in this study is foundational to my thesis. The Brass (2016) paradigm for NGO decision-making on where to geographically locate is displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. The Brass Paradigm for NGO Geography

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1 This is an illustration adapted from the theory used in Brass’ (2016) research of NGOs in Kenya. I created this figure to illustrate the three possibilities for NGO geographies to change based on the functional differences of their organizations and possible socio-political influences, their understanding of needs, and pragmatic reasons of convenience.
The Brass (2016) paradigm is a result of statistical probabilities of the more than 4,000 NGOs in Kenya also resulting in the typology that NGOs might be: Saintly, Self-serving, and Political. The variables Brass used were based on needs (illiteracy rates, HIV prevalence, access to clean water), conveniences (how far to city centers, nearness to tourist sites), and politics (constituency, election cycles, etc.) (Brass, 2016). NGOs ‘claim’ to operate in areas of greatest need (Raberg and Rudel, 2007; Brass, 2016; Bebbington, 2004). However, J. Brass (2016), and common sense would suggest that there are other influential factors on where NGOs provide service besides ‘greatest needs’. As the literature review has shown this far, the moment a NGO locates in a place, there is an immediate shift in culture, power, etc. Brass (2016) noted that in some circumstances NGOs would acknowledge “convenience” desires to maximize the quality of employees or volunteers by locating near elite goods or urban centers. Similarly, NGOs have also expressed instances where donor funding could be maximized by being near (less than 3-hrs) international airports and resort lodging (Brass, 2016; Bebbington, 2004; Eversole, 2003).

Not only does location influence visibility with donors, but densely populated urban areas can also help maximize service provision numbers since the visibility of need is more easily observed (Brass, 2016). Despite popular speculation, the author in this Kenya case-study found little correlation to the political influences of patronage, and instead noted that NGOs were sometimes charitable and sometimes pragmatic and varying degrees of both (Brass, 2016). A closer look at individual organizations helps one hypothesize that it may be possible to detect the weight of these factors in a NGOs mission or vision statement. Similarly, the primary mission of a NGO as it relates to these factors should be
reflected geographically. It is not helpful to simply map where NGOs are providing services without explaining to an extent the influence of these factors on how and why they provide those services.

The third case study that was insightful for understanding common ground across a diverse group of organization that work with communities was studied by E. Casper-Futterman (2016). This study demonstrated successful attempts by community organizing NGOs and nonprofits to span across organizational siloes by finding common values. In other words, educational and agricultural NGOs may have dramatically different methodologies, skills, and resources, but their end-goals may be similar in that they are interested in facilitating community organization and sustainable development. Casper-Futterman called this reflection on organizational values and goals an ‘ecosystem of values’ and was a useful idea during the analysis and discussion of this thesis (Casper-Futterman, 2017).

10. The problem of Voluntourism and issues for NGOs.

The Brass (2016) paradigm offer positive and negative consequences for the different drivers behind NGO locations. Particularly, the ‘convenience’ factor can present unintended harm in a variety of ways. One of the specific harms that ‘convenience’ can cause is the constant influx of short-term, unskilled volunteers. Factors like low salaries and austere living conditions can discourage highly-qualified, highly-skilled individuals from working for NGOs. The trade-off is to hire or employ low-cost employees or volunteers with lower skill levels or no qualifications at all. On the surface, it does not seem like this would cause much harm, but the research shows a more devastating result. The scholarly framework that best describes these individuals and this phenomenon in
developing countries is “Voluntourism.” The principal promoters and vehicles of voluntourism are NGOs who attract people motivated with a sense of altruism, often using a visually arousing sense of place, in order to accomplish aid and development work (Keese, 2011). J. Keese (2011) took the knowledge produced about NGOs in Ecuador to examine this phenomenon on a global scale. The research demonstrated that safety, accessibility, and attractiveness of a location played a major role in the numbers and clustering of voluntourism destinations. Convenience contributes directly to this decision for NGOs on where to locate, also driving considerable funding and resource distribution. It has been estimated that more than 50,000 non-sectarian travelers from the U.S. participate in these trips annually, and the numbers would be substantially higher if faith-based organizations are included (Keese, 2011).

The most popular area was Latin America, which does have considerable, urgent need, but this region was also advertised through imagery and prose as an exotic, friendly, tropical destination for ‘serving’ (Keese, 2011). Voluntourists travel the entire globe, but this phenomenon is especially accentuated in places like Belize that are over-saturated by short-term volunteers and missionaries who are looking for a fun, natural experience while acting as moral agents (Occhipinti, 2016). Despite the insistence from the volunteers, studies continue to show that the short-term model is “extravagantly inefficient” and often fails to produce any lasting, meaningful change in the communities that are ‘served’, prompting the need to explore more efficient forms of development (Occhipinti, 2016). Most NGOs will insist that they are the exception to this generalization, but in places that experience heavier volumes of these ‘service-seekers’ numbers and impacts can be much larger than anticipated.
Voluntourism primarily serves as a holiday for white, globally-mobile persons to participate in poverty tourism and international ‘hug-an-orphan’ trips under the flimsy claim of ‘doing good’ (Rease, n.d.; Keese, 2011). Case studies have shown that human trafficking, paternalism, reinforced stereotypes, enslavement, and environmental degradation are just a few of the persistent problems resulting from voluntourism (McGehee and Andereck, 2009; Garrison, 2015; Rease, n.d.). Since NGOs are a primary vehicle in this paradigm, the geography of certain social issues are closely related to the NGO ecosystems across the globe.

The preceding paragraphs are a small drop in the ocean of literature covering post-development, community development, and community organizing theories that informed my research journey. Something needs to change in this messed up world where opulence and extreme poverty exist as neighbors. The most vulnerable people and our planet need protection and justice. Unfortunately, the ‘savior’ mentality that plagues cross-cultural exchanges and even good intentions have unintentionally caused harm to everyone involved in many cases of NGO intervention. Weaving together these literatures could be summed up by the Industrial Areas Foundation’s (IAFs) famous ‘iron rule’ for community organizing: “Never do for people what they can do for themselves” (https://citizenshandbook.org/iaf.pdf)

There are cases when people can do nothing for themselves, and that needs to change. In other cases, NGOs have stolen freedom away from communities and individuals by doing things and ‘meeting needs’ that those communities could and should have done themselves.
III. THE CASE OF BELIZE: The geographies of NGOs

1. The study area of Belize.

Belize is a highly biodiverse nation nested along the Caribbean coast of the Yucatán Peninsula. Situated between 23 degrees north and south latitude, Belize is a rainforest-covered, tropical hotspot playing a well-documented role in global carbon sequestration (Sweetman, 2019; Barlow et al., 2016). A victim of British colonization and formerly known as ‘British Honduras’, Belize faces development challenges to end systemic poverty, social injustice, and the threat from human and drug trafficking, all while emphasizing its crucial role in environmental conservation for the region. Gaining its independence from Britain in September 1981, weak governance and slow economic growth left Belize an “unequally-developed” nation with more than 40% of its population still living in poverty (SIB, 2020). With 75% of its 22,000 km² covered by lush rainforest and its sovereign claims to the Belize Barrier Reef system, Belize is one of the most crucial ecological systems in the world, necessitating urgent conflict resolution between so-called “sustainable development” and the conservation of a delicate ecosystem that is increasingly vulnerable to climate change (NPAS, 2015). In addition to Belize’s responsibility to preserve the largest living coral reef in the western hemisphere, decreasing vegetation along its 175 miles coastline continues to increase Belize’s factors of vulnerability due to the increasing threats of hurricanes and rising sea-level (Sweetman et al., 2019).

2. The Regional Districts of Belize.
The country is divided politically in the following districts: Belize, Cayo, Corazol, Orange Walk, Stann Creek, and Toledo. Phillip W. Goldson serves as the only international airport, located just outside of Belize City, which is contributing to the rapid urbanization of the city. Belize City was the capitol of Belize until it endured widespread destruction from Hurricane Hattie, after which the British government relocated to the present location of Belmopan another 30 miles inland (Twigg, 2006). The main roadways from Belmopan allow for easy access to the northern districts and Belize City, but the southern district of Toledo is isolated by the Mayan Mountain Range, requiring a three-to-four-hour ride by vehicle.

3. Unsustainable Tourism: implications for NGO volunteers from the global north.

A recent land-cover change analysis revealed 10% deforestation from 2000 to 2017 and detected a 39% increase in urbanization in the study area of Ambergris Caye (Sweetman et al., 2019). The most sensitive driver of deforestation was tourism, as Ambergris Caye provides close access to the Belize Barrier Reef system, which is Belize’s most popular tourist attraction. While this area is frequented primarily by “eco-tourism” companies, both the carrying capacity of the reef system and the destruction of mangrove forests are regularly violated by mass tourism, land grabbing, and fishing which challenge future sustainability and increase landscape vulnerability in the Caye (Blersch and Kangas, 2012; Sweetman et al., 2018). The conservation of the nearby reef is challenged not only by the unsustainable deforestation but also by the built environment that will contribute to localized pollution and other habitat degradation on the Caye.
4. NGOs in Belize: a case for visibility of the shadow state.

The Belize NGO Act Chapter 315 established in 2000 and amended in 2016 guides basic expectations for the good governance of NGOs in Belize (belizelaw.org, CAP.315). However, the regulation and history of NGOs in Belize is unclear and absent from academic scholarship. Even the Government of Belize (GoB) websites are very unclear and outdated as to who the NGOs working in Belize are. This was an immediate obstacle for researching this thesis. Furthermore, comprehensive analysis is impossible since throughout the project it was revealed that numerous NGOs, possibly hundreds, do work in Belize but do not report their findings, results, progress, success stories, or best practices to anyone in a policy-making position in the country.

The only consequence for local NGOs not registering with the GoB is the forfeiture of their tax exemption status. In Kenya, Brass (2016) was able to accomplish research by accessing a list of over 4,000 NGOs from the national government, which included international NGOs with headquarters outside of the country. The provisions for NGOs who register with the GoB is a satisfactory step in governance, but there could be a better process to provide transparency and accountability of NGOs. A more complete registry would also help in understanding their effectiveness. There will be recommendations in the conclusion of this thesis regarding this discovery.

What is even more peculiar is the Belize NGO Network (BNN). The BNN claims to be the “unified voice” of NGOs in Belize. The BNN is the officially recognized liaison between the NGO sectors and the GoB. In 2017, the BNN elected its own representative to the 13th seat in the Belizean Senate. This nascent relationship between the government and nonprofit sector raises many questions about the institutionalization of the BNN that
may blur these lines. Furthermore, there are NGOs registered with the GoB, who are not even part of the BNN.

The interview process of this thesis will reveal that there is a growing gap between the NGOs established formally in the BNN and those who view this as a possible overreach of government influence and a political power struggle by the BNN. On one hand, the BNN could be an instrument of democracy and a restraint against government corruption. On the other hand, this seat in the government might corrupt the BNN itself, or result in top-down development approaches and a misdiagnosis of root problems in poor communities and environmental ecosystems.
IV. METHODS

1. Tabulated Data and creation of analyzable spreadsheets

The goal of this thesis is to explore geographic relationships of NGO missions and methodologies. This requires a research methodology that describes and explains NGO demographics, spatial distributions, and validates the geographic perspectives of their goals and methods. This section is divided into three parts: Secondary data collection, Thematic Mapping, and Interviews. The first method required a massive collection of available data on NGOs who work primarily in Belize and asking ‘how’ and ‘why’ they work there. The section on thematic mapping includes a spatial and thematic distribution of NGO based on mission statement analysis. The final section discusses the interview process that includes in-person conversations in Belize and remote conversations with NGO employees, donors, and volunteers.

2. Secondary Data Collection: What is the NGO landscape in Belize

My methods begin with a compilation of the available data on the NGOs who work in Belize. J. Brass (2016) and others mention that most governments have some visibility on NGOs working inside their sovereign territory and maintain some kind of roster or data. The only such relationship was found under the oversight of the Belize NGO Network (BNN). Their website has a publicly accessible roster of NGOs and this list was used to create a spreadsheet used for analysis. This was a simple Excel spreadsheet that included available data of NGO names, estimated budgets, headquarter locations, and URL homepages. This spreadsheet was used to categorize NGOs by service sectors, understand the municipalities served, and download their public mission statements.
I carefully categorized each NGO based on their primary service provision sector and where the operational headquarters for the NGO was located. The categories I used mirrored the categories found on the wango.org website, which might encourage future information sharing with this research organization. Categorizing each NGO according to sector was accomplished unsupervised.

This spreadsheet became the basis for my analysis and allowed me to code qualitative data into quantitative formats. Pie and table charts allowed for better visualization of the NGO demographics and the beginnings of the development of the NGO ecosystem in Belize. Table and pie charts showing NGO distributions and graphics are presented in the results section of this thesis. The Statistical Institute of Belize (SIB) has a robust and thorough database used to bolster the geographic data described in the results section alongside the spreadsheet data.


ArcGIS was used to build the first map that showed NGO distributions according to administrative districts in Belize alongside population density information from the 2010 SIB census. This map can be used for future analysis to determine other geographic relationships such as land change/land use data and NGO project locations. For this baseline study, this map highlights and confirms the distribution traits of NGOs in majority developing nations.

4. Discourse Analysis: NGOs communicate their values, beliefs, and purpose

The collection of mission statements in the data spreadsheet were coded and a word count was accomplished using several different qualifiers. The first round simply looked for the
number of times words or forms of words appeared in the mission statements. For example, sustain[able][ability][ment] were categorized under ‘sustainable’ regardless of how many times it showed up in the same organization’s statement. In some cases, the same organization would re-use the same words or forms of a word multiple times. Therefore, the second round eliminated this duplication and only identified the number of organizations that expressed the following values or beliefs: sustainable, community, development, poverty, vulnerability, partnership, participatory, local, environment, conservation, human rights, social justice, advocacy, equity, equality, inclusion, housing, disabilities, etc.

This process was accomplished at the national level, as well as individual administrative districts in Belize. The word count numbers were tabulated, and percentages of frequency were assigned to each concept. The spreadsheet allowed me to thematically map the national and regional scales and allowed me to analyze the geographic distribution of missions in Belize. I then input the frequencies into table graphs that are reviewed in the results section of this thesis. While phrases, themes, and vocabulary do not fully answer my research questions and concerns over NGO efficacy, this discourse analysis methodology bolstered the interview process and revealed deeper connections in some cases between mission statements and NGO geographic distributions.

Recalling Brass (2016) paradigm encouraged the further analysis of qualifying terms such as: ‘most, extreme, more’ impoverished, needy, and vulnerable that appeared in some but not all mission statements. This discovery helps to explain the new typology described in the results section and the adjustments to Brass (2016) paradigm I present there as well. The method used to explain these themes was further validated through the
conversations and interviews I had with NGO directors and volunteers during my field work.

5. **Interviews: what NGO employees, donors, and volunteers believe in their own words and from their own experiences.**

The interviews I conducted were informal and were conducted in casual settings. Most of these interviews took place in person while I was in Belize from 18-25 January 2021. I would begin the interview by introducing myself, explaining that I was a student at Rutgers University, and that I was interested in understanding how and why their organization operated in Belize.

I acquired an eIRB exemption through the Rutgers University website which required that I communicate to each interviewee that I would maintain strict anonymity of their answers and responses. I explained that no names or organizations would be included in my thesis and there would be no way to attribute this information to them for fear of reprisal or other negative affect. I also encouraged everyone by saying that if anyone asked about what we discussed, they could say they were just talking to a student who was writing a paper about Belize and NGOs.

I conducted approximately 20 interviews primarily on the ground in Belize, and some via electronic means from my research location at Rutgers University. During the interviews I asked the following questions in random order:

- What were the circumstances that led them to start or start working with an NGO in Belize?
- How long had they been working with/for the NGO?
- What kind of training did they receive?
- What were some of their experiences?
- Were there any success stories or failures?
- What was their understanding of sustainable, community, development?
- How would they describe their mission and the needs that they are meeting?
- What are the processes and procedures used to ensure community participation?
- How do they communicate with donors?
- How do they communicate with communities?
- When or how will they know that their NGOs mission is done?
- What is their relationship with the government?
- What is their relationship with other NGOs?
- Do they coordinate formally with the BNN?

In my original research proposal, I intended on visiting Belize for two months during the summer of 2020. However, the COVID-19 pandemic curtailed these plans and made contacting many NGOs impossible as most of their offices were empty, rarely attended, and many of their projects were indefinitely on hold. Three organizations have conducted follow-up interviews and email correspondence since I returned from fieldwork.

The interview process allowed me to solidify some of the prior assumptions I made about the understanding of existing research on NGOs. In most cases, the directors or CEOs of NGOs were able to articulate a thorough understanding of development theories, issues of paternalism, and some of the other issues described during the literature review.
See Appendix A for a table listing online sources and number of interviews.²

V. RESULTS

This section is divided in two parts. In the first section I present a geographic perspective of the NGOs that were analyzed primarily through secondary data and online sources. This section allows me to create an ecosystem of NGOs that is mission-centric and not limited to service provision sector. The second section of the results is the emerging typology that is also mission centric. This typology contributes to the conversation of geographic complexities of NGO interventions.

1. Creating the NGO ecosystem.

Building a NGO ecosystem is a new approach towards NGO geography and is a first step towards the new typology I will describe in section 2. This approach of describing the relationships of NGO values also provided an improved understanding of ‘how’ and ‘what’ NGOs do in Belize with respect to the way they talk about the ‘why’.

² Appendix A is used for the web data and interview data used to create the NGO ecosystem and the S.M.A.R.T. typology
Figure 2. The number of NGOs in each administrative district with associated population density.³
Figure 3 shows how population density and NGO density are not collinear. It is worth noting the fact that Orange Walk district has zero NGOs headquartered there. Orange Walk is the most ethnically non-diverse administrative district, comprised primarily of Mestizos and the largest Mennonite populations in the country (Statistical Institute of Belize, 2010). Mestizos occupy 77% of the population while Mennonites represent 11% of the population, with no other ethnicity touching double digits (SIB, 2010). Even the Toledo district, the predominantly Mayan district, is more ethnically diverse (SIB, 2010). Orange Walk is also the largest agricultural district in the country.

Figure 3 and Figure 5 show that 77% of Belize NGOs are in just two districts. Figure 4 ignores population density and simply shows that the Belize and Cayo districts contain over 50% of the Belize population and the two largest urban centers of Belize City and Belmopan respectively. The most obvious gap in this regard is in the Cayo district where only 11% of the annual NGO budget contacts the highest indigent population per capita in the country. Compared with the 60% budget invested in the Belize district, there is an obvious mismatch. The following figures provide demographic information and additional insight to the geographic clustering of NGOs.

3 Source: ArcGIS was used to create this map of the Belize administrative districts showing population density and NGO distributions. Population density was calculated using 2010 census data from the Statistical Institute of Belize. Density estimates are number of persons per Km².
Figure 3. Map of Belize including roads to suggest access (convenience) and conservation areas that suggest environmental governance (politics).
During the discussion section, it becomes clearer how some critics claim that Belize is oversaturated by NGO and non-profit volunteers. The discussion will show how the geographic clustering of NGOs interact with the values that NGOs claim to hold and believe. For example, the J. Brass (2016) paradigm and other researchers suggest there may be some logical geographic distribution of NGOs but the data, including this research thesis, demonstrates a higher concentration of NGOs in urban areas that does not correspond with ‘objective’ needs like poverty rates of population, minority populations, etc. This result is presumably because the issues that NGOs wish to address is easier to see in the more densely populated areas. It is especially helpful to see how NGOs might reconsider their geographic placements not only from a population density perspective, but also from the common missions and values. In other words, the following data demonstrates there may be some geographic de-confliction of NGOs based on service sectors, but not necessarily on the ‘mission’ of the different organizations.

Figure 4. Percentage of NGOs by service provision sectors

\footnote{Source: data was collected from the 2010 census available on the Statistical Institute of Belize website.}
Figure 4 reflects the broad diversity in service provision sectors and the ‘what’ behind NGO activity in Belize. What we will see in further analysis is that this incredible diverse group of organizations share common mission priorities and themes in their values and purpose for doing work in Belize.

Figure 5. Percentage of population living with less than $1.90/day in each District. Data collected from the 2010 census at Statistical Institute of Belize website
Figure 5 is useful for pointing out which districts we find the majority of poorer communities and most vulnerable groups in Belize. Because of population size and density, Cayo district has the largest population of poor people, followed closely behind by Toledo district. A rough estimate would place between 16 and 14 thousand people in these two districts respectively, with under half as many (less than 7 thousand) in the Belize district.

Figure 6. Annual Budget Totals: How much NGO funding resides in each district.5

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5 This information was obtained by collecting data from the belizengo.org website and the individual websites of the NGOs as described in the methods section.
Toledo district has the second highest budget overall despite the similarly sized indigent population as the Cayo district. Belmopan, the nation’s capital city, is in the Cayo district. Eight of the twelve NGOs in Cayo district are headquartered in Belmopan.

The data available were a roster of NGO headquarters and not project site locations. However, I think using headquarter addresses represent projects as well. In the Raberg and Rudel (2007) and the Brass (2016) case studies, both teams of scholars discussed the fact that most NGOs do not take on projects far from their primary offices. In the case study of Ecuador, the large, international NGOs who were headquartered outside of the country usually found project sites in the hard-to-reach places. J. Brass (2016) noted similarly that if a NGO was going to the furthest reaches of Kenya, they were less likely to have formal connections in the larger cities since it might be a temptation or distraction for employees or donors who may not want to devote as much time to the rural, hard-to-get-to locations. These two case studies also noted that the presence of a NGO also prompted plenty of ‘requests’ for assistance from people and communities that were used
to dropping by the NGO to ask for whatever they could give them (Raberg and Rudel, 2007).

The second reason for confidence in these results was through a detailed analysis of these NGO websites and the associated project literature. There were some NGOs that had detailed maps of their projects and they were generally more evenly distributed across the administrative districts or, in some cases, across the country. However, this was a minority finding so the aggregated data serves its purpose by using just NGO headquarters. It is possible that individual project mapping could produce additional insight and knowledge and would be a useful, future undertaking.

2. The NGO Ecosystem in Belize: National Scale

With this spatial information, we can make some conclusions after we look at the thematic map oriented around NGO mission statements. At the national level, the three most common words used to articulate the values and beliefs of the NGOs were “sustainable, community, development.” In other words, the most common reason ‘why’ NGOs facilitate projects in Belize is because they believe in these values, which also provide meaning and purpose to their employees, donors, and volunteers. Because of the discussion we had in the early chapters of this thesis, we can also validate some of our assumptions about ‘how’ and ‘where’ they choose to work.
Figure 7. The Belize NGO Ecosystem: what do they believe and value according to their mission statements.  

The building blocks of the above figure demonstrate the frequency of key terms in NGO mission statements. This aggregated data shows the comparative usage of those key terms that might distinguish NGOs or may demonstrate similar purpose. This overwhelming solidarity in mission tells us something that transcends the different provision sectors and organizational structures. In fact, some of these mission statements are clearly articulated as sustainable, community-development ‘through’ education, conservation, or participation. In other words, whether an NGO is focused on youth services, disabilities, environmental conservation, or poverty alleviation, they are all approaching these issues.

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6 This table graph was generated using the word count numbers from the spreadsheet created described earlier in methods, correcting for multiple uses of similar words in the same NGO mission statement. Meaning, the numbers are representative of individual NGOs and not just how many times the numbers appeared.
with a similar value system and starting place. NGOs overarching discourse is ‘sustainable-community-development.’ This initial observation is crucial for explaining why NGOs would want to bridge across functional lines (or silos) to understand how the many issues of poverty, climate change, and injustice are affecting the people of Belize.

It is critical to briefly reflect on the broader impacts of this thesis, highlighting that research should have a synergistic effect on NGOs themselves. However, NGOs are not a solid unit and donors, volunteers, board member, and employees may only share some understanding of the implications for these ‘values.’ This will become even more complicated during the second section of these results when each NGO is compartmentalized into a new typology that is focused on their mission statements.

This ecosystem ‘mapping’ exercise could be applied to different countries and regions, and across different scales to better answer Bebbington’s question ‘why’ do NGOs work here and not there. If this were accomplished across a global scale, the usefulness of this project would be better tested. The following is what I found at the regional (district) scales.

3. **NGO Ecosystem at District Level**

Figure 8. NGO Ecosystem Belize District (Proportional usage of key terminology in NGO mission statements.)

The solidarity around sustainable, community development breaks apart slightly at the six individual district levels. It is interesting that despite dramatically different population densities, Belize and Toledo district share remarkably similar mission priorities. The district with the largest indigent population (perhaps the largest poverty ‘need’) is the Cayo district, but appears to be home for NGOs that mainly prioritize ‘sustainable conservation of the environment through education.’ I was not expecting to see this result.

Figure 9. NGO Ecosystem Cayo District.
Something that jumps off the page from this chart is the comparison to poverty levels (Figure 5) in the Cayo administrative district and the low emphasis on poverty alleviation, community development/organizing, and marginalized/vulnerable populations. Cayo has the second largest overall population and if 21% of those persons are living on less than $1.90 a day, this district has the highest total population of poor people in the country. Belmopan is the largest city in Cayo and is also the nation’s capital, however, the absence of NGOs and the low budgetary percentage (see Figure 6) invested in this district means one of two things. Either the government organizations are doing most of the poverty alleviation work and community organizing in this district, or, NGOs who claim to focus on the poorest communities and the most vulnerable are misplaced geographically. This misplacement could be a desire of NGOs to stay away from government oversight. Alternatively, it could be a matter of convenience and a tradeoff NGOs are willing to make to maintain close proximity to the largest urban city and coastline.

Figure 10. NGO Ecosystem Corozal District.
Alternative, you can see in the Corozal chart that there is a substantially higher percentage of organizations that claim to work with the most poor and most vulnerable communities. Most NGOs will quickly find limits to their capacity for engaging in sustainable, community development but rarely look to other NGOs to break through this scalar stalemate highlighted by S. Alinsky (1971) and E. Casper-Futterman (2016). Some NGOs interviewed would even mention the relatively quiet geography that they worked in as a way to focus on their service provision and the local communities. In a way, perhaps the larger concentrations of poor, marginalized communities is just too overwhelming for NGOs as they begin their advocating, organizing efforts.

Figure 11. NGO Ecosystem Stann Creek District.
The Stan Creek district provides convenient, immediate access to both preservation land and the barrier reef. The emphasis on community and participatory approaches to conservation and nature is reasonable and appropriate given the fact that there are fewer poor communities in the district and a densely populated coastline, boasting numerous resorts, hotels, and retirement communities. A short distance down the road to the Toledo district, however, demonstrates an increasing emphasis on sustainable development and the widespread poverty that is not as present in Stann Creek. This is what I expected to find and seems to be an appropriate geographic distribution, all other districts and demographics being equal. Future research using this technique should also be able to demonstrate a similar pattern at national and regional scales, and point out organizational misplacement like what we saw in the Cayo district.

Figure 12. NGO Ecosystem Toledo District.
Since this is a current snapshot, the temporal evolution of NGOs would likely reveal a change in values and mission. Since the connection between climate change and problems of globalization is a recent study area, there would likely be a noticeable shift in focus for many of the organizations over the last two or three decades. Figure 4 reveals that Environmental and Conservation NGOs makeup the majority of NGOs in Belize. On one hand, it would be sufficient to simply count the number of NGOs in this service provision sector and see if the trend towards NGOs of this type was most prevalent over the last two or three decades. However, there may be other factors that have encouraged NGOs to divide their focus or compliment their focus on nature-society relationships in Belize. One possible explanation is due to a study completed by Brechin and Salas (2011) that utilized a ‘hollow state’ theory to argue that government-NGO relationships in Belize filled an otherwise absent presence in the protection of the Belizean ecosystems. Osmany Salas, who happens to be the president of the BNN and the Belizean 13th senator, justified
environmental and conservation NGO networks in Belize since the GoB has relinquished control and management of over 70% of all national parks and 35% of all protected areas to NGOs working in Belize (Brechin and Salas, 2011). Since the publication of this research in 2011, it would be interesting to see how this justification has influenced NGOs across the different service sectors in Belize. For example, many of the youth education NGOs in Belize are acutely focused on environmental education issues that was not a major focus point until recently. While the lifespan of NGOs would also contribute to this sense of the NGO ecosystem in Belize, this information is not readily available, but the majority of NGOs are relatively young. It is rare to see NGOs that last longer than a few decades possibly due to NGOs ties to original founders, employees, and donor interest. Further research may demonstrate a correlation between NGO lifespan and proximity to environmental issues in Belize.

While the geographic connection is still unclear, there is definitive evidence that the mission statements, the values and beliefs for ‘why’ NGOs are working in Belize, do have a spatial quality. It is even possible that the spatial distributions of NGOs relies on this additional pressure for organizations to align their mission with environmental or conservation missions. This exercise of aggregating NGO values and beliefs into an ‘ecosystem’ helps to identify areas of collaboration and agreement across sectoral differences. As successes and best practices are observed across these NGO relationships and networks, this concept of an ecosystem of ‘values’ can also be used to find collaborative efforts between government organizations and affect national policies. However, there is a real challenge for encouraging cooperation across political commitments that cannot be ignored. While goals vary between organizations, the shared
values and purpose should serve as a connecting point between NGOs who will be able to facilitate sustainable, local solutions to a variety of issues. It is a sincere hope that this new typology can encourage a conversation around those common values and mission priorities for NGOs in Belize despite a variety of political and ideological perspectives.

4. Examples from interviews of community-led development and local knowledge.

While in Belize, the Mayan village community leaders confirmed the common issue that some NGOs fail to use local knowledge in their projects and activities. Twenty years ago, a group of missionaries came to the village, proselytized the community, and suggested that they build a facility that could be used for gatherings, worship, and education. The missionary organization funded the project but insisted on using concrete blocks and a tin roof instead of the bamboo and thatch roofing common to the village. Twenty years later, the facility, and the religious group, are abandoned.

There is a new facility in the village, with a large thatch roof and plenty of room for community gathering. I interviewed the newest NGO administrator who pointed out that the local villagers built the new facility, in their own style and construction methods, while the NGO merely helped with financial support. Now the local village has a community center that sees heavy traffic for use as a student center, social gathering space, and faith-based meeting house. The previous group of missionaries created an unsustainable solution and widened the gap in their relationship with this village through acts of paternalism and orientalism. It would have been interesting to see what the previous organization’s mission statement was and how they explained their purpose for being in Belize and working in the Toledo district. The Mayan village leader was also interviewed about this new facility. He and his partner both validated the new approach
of the NGO and how their relationship was quite different and more productive than previous organizations. The primary difference was the focus on community organizing, driven by the NGOs mission of sustainable, community-led transformation. The NGO enabled the doing, rather than simply increasing village capacity with new building equipment or materials.

Unfortunately, there was one issue noted during this interview with the local Mayan family. They mentioned that while there was a pivot towards participatory engagements with some NGOs, they also felt like they were fatigued by Needs-Based Assessments and interviews that usually resulted in NGOs gathering information on their communities, but never returning to help them make the changes they were hoping to make. Interestingly, this village elder also noted that different organizations came to ask similar questions, but never seemed to know that other organizations had visited to ask for the same exact information. This confirms the siloed aspect of NGOs working in this region.

5. Negative views of NGOs and conservation efforts in Cayo district

A disturbing fact that I uncovered during my interviews in the Cayo district was that the ecotourism industry was beginning to establish a dominant footprint there. Despite being the district that contains the highest indigent population and an extremely high landscape conservation area percentage, a large local sawmill notified their 200+ employees to start looking for new jobs. This could be an example of the land grabbing issue Zoomers speaks of in the literature review section, as well as the issues with tradeoffs when designating conservation areas that also provide livelihoods for poor, rural communities. It was not clear who this organization was, but some local stakeholders believe that the conservation NGOs in the Cayo district are partly to blame for this land grab. Without
any public data available on this recent transaction, the mystery around the NGO role in this district on similar issues is unknown. Despite several attempts to contact the U.S.-based LLC that owned the sawmill, nobody could be reached for further comments.

6. Government Corruption and how it may affect NGOs in Belize.

Corruption is taken on regularly by the Belizean media, but a compelling indictment of the overtly corrupt government came directly from a Belizean stakeholder. During the interview, the stakeholder mentioned that the corruption in the government was overt and that the authorities did not even try to hide the fact. This stakeholder told a story about five-hundred people showing up to the duty-free in August last year to exchange their votes for free cartons of cigarettes and alcohol. The stories shared took an even darker turn when this person recounted how one of the government political parties burned down the house of one local Belizean when it became known they had voted for the opposing party in the most recent election.

Overall, spatial connection with NGO mission statements reveals three points for discussion: 1) Some NGOs are misplaced since objective data and demographics are not clearly supported by what NGOs claim their mission is. On an individual basis the misplacement may not be obvious, but the aggregated data reveals a different reality in some districts especially the more rural ones. 2) The spatial map interacts with the ecosystem of values to show that mission and mission statements have some impact on spatial distribution. This distribution could be based on impressions and perceived needs and not on empirical data or statistics. 3) The interaction between the map and ecosystem

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7 Belize News Now is a primary source for articles on possible government corruption, nepotism within the ministries of government, and class clashes across the country.
of values also reveals that many NGOs share a lot more in common about their purpose and goals than may appear on the surface. If NGOs were able to focus on commonalities rather than their perceived differences, the scalar stalemate and capacity limits may be overcome as they enable communities to organize around their own set of values and beliefs.

7. SECTION 2: The S.M.A.R.T. Typology

Bebbington (2004) mentions the endless typologies used to describe NGOs. Some typologies describe organizational characteristics (International, Local, Grassroots), how they interact on behalf of poorer communities (brokers, coaches, champions, advocates), or where they decide to provide services based on perceived needs (saints, self-serving, political) (Raberg and Rudel, 2007; Eversole, 2006; Brass, 2016). Looking to our NGO ecosystem in Belize, there is a way to categorize NGOs based on values and beliefs that are strongest or provide some explanation as to ‘why’ they make the decision they do about ‘how’ and ‘where’ they decide to do work. The typology presented in this thesis is an attempt to explain the extent to which values and ‘mission’ affect NGO geography seen in the Belize case study.

As I mentioned earlier, there should be a place at the table for everyone. While the NGO ecosystem does provide a democratic solidarity, it by no means delegitimizes the NGOs whose values or charters do not reflect the majority position. What we need to do is find categories that can differentiate mission emphasis as it relates to geography. One of the issues with forcing organizations to fit inside of a singular category is the problem mentioned previously of NGOs to rarely operate as a solid, cohesive unit (Lake and Newman, 2002). Instead, they are flexible and represent a broad spectrum of ideas and
perspectives. Even the NGO that I followed to Belize had differences in opinions between the board president, board members, and the wildly-diverse donor base. Similarly, there are ideological and political barriers between many NGOs that may keep them from acknowledging shared values. However, one of the primary purposes of this exercise is to identify potential ways for bridging across seemingly unpassable differences since the focus and purpose of their work should not be about the lifecycle of the NGO, but rather focus on enabling communities and ecosystems to flourish on their own.

When I interviewed most NGOs and asked them why they would or would not work well with other organizations or governmental organizations the response typically focused on subtle aspects of the mission that are probably better characterized as their service provision sector and not on values. In other words, it was hard for NGOs to see that environmental NGOs might have a more profound impact on child-poverty NGOs despite the fact that these organizations recognized similar root causes and identified similar values in their overarching missions. What this demonstrated is that they did not realize they were part of this broader ecosystem of shared values and instead believed incorrectly that their mission was unrelated to other NGOs if they were not of similar service provision sectors. This is why another typology could be helpful for characterizing NGO geography. The typology I recommend designates NGOs into the following four categories based on aspects of their missions and how they articulate those missions: (S) Sustainable Transformation Groups, (M) Marginalized Groups, (AR) Aggressive Response Groups, and (T) Technology/Niche Groups.
8. Sustainable Transformation Groups

This first type of NGO I would like to talk about is the Sustainable Transformation Groups. The following are some examples of their mission statements:

- Working to sustain the natural world for the benefit of people and nature.
- We work hand in hand with individuals and communities to transform lives.
- Serve as a unified industry voice, influencing tourism policy, legislation and marketing for the sustainable development of the tourism industry of Belize.
- We envision environmentally literate communities creating a vibrant, sustainable future.
- The mission of Our Circle is to advance legal and lived equality for LGBT-formed family units.
- This Indigenous-led model increases food security and climate change resilience, reduces deforestation, and ultimately provides proof of the success of community-based sustainable development.

Through these mission statements, organizations reflect on how they propose lasting social and environmental transformations. Obviously, there are also vastly different political commitments in these groups, but the essential focus for empowering local communities towards sustainable, social transformation is very similar. As we walk through these mission statements, that clear message of community empowerment and organic-community development/organizing begins to take shape. This is also consistent with the NGO ‘ecosystem’ that we unveiled earlier in the thesis. I interviewed one of the

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8 These are some of the mission statements for the NGOs that reflect a focus on sustainable, community development.
directors of a small NGO that fits into this category. Providing restorative care and psychological counseling is part of their day-to-day operations, but the director wants to go after the root cause of social problems in the community. This director’s goal is to get ahead of the problem and help educate families on conflict resolution, anger management, and community organizing. Unfortunately, the director recently shared this mission and vision with a donor base in the U.S., but the response was that they were not interested or not able to partner in the long-term projects he presented. Instead, many of the donors and partners continue to express a desire to come for short-term visits and small projects, despite lacking qualifications as psychological counselors, life coaches, or being Belizean. The responses the director received showed a disconnect between the cultural nuance of doing the type of work they do in Belize, and the way that type of work might be done in the global North. The director has found ways to redeem this constant flux of volunteers, but it is still baffling how unqualified volunteers could provide culturally relevant care in a brief visit.

The predominant values of sustainable, community-development at the national level best describe this type of organization. This mission type is also congruent with the district and several other NGOs interviewed. Some of the challenges to this group type are spanning across the siloed domains, which should theoretically be easier with this common set of values and beliefs that I highlighted in the NGO ecosystem. Regardless of service provision sector (i.e. youth, environment, disabilities, city planning, etc.), Sustainable Transformation Groups should be able to bridge the gaps between these sectors and recognize the opportunities for holistic NGO development interventions. If further research using the NGO ecosystem approach reflects similar results, it may be
possible to say that Belize as a nation is primarily a Sustainable Transformation Group region. The results in this study showed that most administrative districts of Belize contained NGOs that talked about their mission in this way.

Thinking through this category using the Brass (2016) paradigm might lead us to place this category squarely in the center of need, pragmatic, and political reasons for location selections. On the spectrum of aid and development, this NGO type would be more influenced by the development side of the spectrum as the reasoning for intervention is less focused on the immediacy of aid or relief, and more on the side of reducing vulnerability and increasing resilience through community organizing. This was validated during the interview process when some NGO directors spoke about helping communities find ways to prepare for climate changes and increasing risks of natural hazards. The transformative change that this type of NGO is dedicated to is accomplished by empowering and enabling the ‘doing’ of local communities. The other NGOs in this new typology may share similar missions but the focus is less consistent on enabling or empowering based on the geographies they operate in. Categorizing NGOs is not an effort to limit them or assume they are some homogenous unit, rather, the point is to highlight collective efforts, common methodologies, and roadmaps towards common goals. The transformative end-state may be different, but these NGOs will operate further away from the aid side of the development spectrum and the associated problems with paternalistic approaches and short-term relief or charity.

9. **Marginalized people and places groups**

The superlative qualifiers of helping those in the ‘most’ need or those in the ‘greatest’ vulnerable categories places some NGOs higher into the ‘Need’ category of the Brass
(2016) paradigm. This second category of NGO are those who work with the ‘most’ marginalized groups or in the ‘most’ marginalized geographic spaces. The following are highlights from their mission statements:

- We provide opportunities for children with disabilities.
- We empower and mobilize individuals, families, and communities to reduce poverty and vulnerability through local actions and capacity building.
- Our primary focus is to bring the Good News of Jesus Christ to the people of Belize by befriending those in greatest need and committing to walking with them, step by step, down whatever road they are on.⁹

Aid in the form of medical interventions and literacy education has been lauded by the local stakeholders I spoke with as productive NGO activities in Belize. However, this category of NGOs is not simply a category that fits neatly into the ‘need’ portion of our paradigm. In fact, some international NGOs in Belize specifically advertise the challenge or inconvenience in getting to their project sites. One such organization is featured in the statements above and another is an international NGO that paints a picture of the needs found in Belize that is inconsistent with the majority of local NGOs in Belize. There is no doubt that there are highly marginalized people and ecosystems in Belize, but the use of this hyperbolic language of ‘greatest’ need can be slightly misleading and is a challenge for this type of NGO as it impacts their decision-making process and approaches to needs.

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⁹ These NGO mission statements also reflect similar values as the previous group, but they also include specific language about marginalized people or places.
In some cases, the purpose of using this kind of language is not to communicate something about the needs being addressed, but more of an emphasis on the level of effort taken by the organization. This is not necessarily an indictment on an NGO since this language has ‘pushed’ resources and assistance into some of the most remote areas. As mentioned in the literature review, there are some NGOs in Belize that mention the difficulty and challenge that awaits volunteers or employees based on the rough living conditions or distance from urban centers. One such NGO even intentionally attacks the idea that ‘this won’t be a vacation’ if a person chose to volunteer with them.

The primary concern with this ‘mission’ type is the possibility of misunderstanding or misrepresenting the needs of a community or a landscape. For example, there was a breakout discussion at one point with several NGO employees about the Mayan village being a ‘marginalized and unengaged” geographic space. Wainwright (2008) described the Mayans as one of the most scientifically researched people groups in all of Latin America, but the problem is that their inputs and knowledges are largely ignored resulting in no lasting, sustainable change. Perhaps in that respect, they are more and more marginalized by the NGOs who visit them. It is possible that this type of NGO that focuses on marginalized peoples also naturally targets indigenous people groups like the Mayans. The emphasis on ‘poorness/poverty/vulnerability’ surfaced 50% more frequently in the Toledo district than the Belize district.\textsuperscript{10} While there are more indigent people in Cayo district, perhaps the visibleness of poorness is easier to see in the Toledo district attracting this type of NGO.

\textsuperscript{10} This data point came from the spreadsheet analysis completed and described in the methods section of this thesis.
Another case of this language is used by an NGO located in the Corozal district, a district with a substantially low poverty rate. This type of NGO would fall further towards the aid and relief side of the spectrum but seems slightly out of place in an ecosystem dominated by sustainable community development like Belize. When working with marginalized people or places, methodologies may be very similar to the previous category of Sustainable Transformations, but the percentage of the use of words about poverty and poorness do increase with further distances from the international airport.11 Because of the overwhelming solidarity in mission at the national level in Belize, this mission type or category of NGO in Belize seems to be a small contingent and mostly focused in the youth with disabilities service sector. There are certainly places globally where this type of NGO mission would be more prevalent, but it does not seem to be the case in Belize. Since it is difficult for a single organization to focus on community organizing while also focusing on the immediacy of relief-aid, the first two categories of NGO take up the polarizing ends of ‘aid and development.’ Unfortunately, in Belize, this appears to only be attached to a level of effort asserted by the NGO and not on the immediacy of needs. In other words, the emphasis noted from many of these organizations is a focus on building capacity rather than empowering the doing as was seen in their mission statements or in the descriptions of their projects and geography.

10. Aggressive-Response Organizations

Aggressive Response organizations are like the special operations units of the NGO sector. They typically have missions that requires a special set of skills, a clear end state,

11 There are higher percentages of the use of poverty or poorness in Toledo and Corozal districts.
and robust funding. There are only two organizations that fit into this description in Belize. One of them is the Human Trafficking (HT) Institute of Belize. The reason for highlighting this NGO is because there is an extremely specific geography for this mission type to operate in. Belize has repeatedly been recognized by global communities as ineffective in the fight against HT. Since the early 2000’s, the US has published annual Trafficking In Persons (TIP) reports to create global awareness of trafficking issues (Cullen-DuPont, 2009). Using a tier grading system, nations like Belize have been assessed by the US as Tier 3 (worst grade) for their insufficient attention to combat HT. In the case of Belize, it is not necessarily that they are contributing massive volumes of victims into the larger global trafficking statistics, but what is problematic is their lack of protection against trafficking transit. In a way, it almost seems unfair to label this country as Tier 3, since they are not a Country of Origin, nor did they declined to ratify the UN conventions and protocols. Rather, the real issue is the fact that these transition countries are shaping the flow of victims and compounding the problem of detection if they are not aggressively combatting HT and their complicity in the trafficking in persons GCC.

In other geographies and context, we would also expect to find this type of NGO focusing in areas of war, conflict, or refugee crises. One of the biggest issues with this type of organization is the top-down approach they take in interventions. However, this concern may be unfounded in certain geographies where the immediacy of needs and urgency of aid require a top-down approach. If such an organization were to utilize this thesis framework for characterizing and explaining a country’s NGO ecosystem, some of these aggressive response-type groups might benefit from local knowledge and networks of NGOs. In the case of Belize, some of the NGO directors I interviewed were familiar with
the human trafficking problem, but very few of them had any training or idea on how to confront or report suspicious activity. With a more holistic view of the NGO landscape in Belize, perhaps future information sharing, and knowledge collection could bridge the gap across siloed areas of expertise. During interviews, most NGO had not considered reaching out to this category of NGO which could strengthen the collective efforts against human and drug trafficking across the country.

Before we jump to any conclusion and say that this is not a mission-centric category and merely a need-specific category, remember that there is a political influence in the Brass (2016) paradigm that certainly influences this decision for a U.S.-based NGO to focus resources in Belize to combat HT. While there may be a short-term advantage to this type of NGO, it is unclear to how they are bridging across the NGO landscape to provide long-term solutions to this specific problem of HT. To provide a more holistic understanding of how this category of NGO might fit into the broader ecosystem it would be worthwhile to conduct a specific case study on an Aggressive Response organization.

The discussion of ‘transformation’ as it relates to this NGO type is concerning because of this deep, political commitment outside of the local community. Another NGO in Belize that fits into this category apparently focuses on the drug trade through Belizean waters and jungles. Again, this NGO type is concerning since they may cause cascading issues for communities if they do not consider the NGO landscape and geography. While there may be a place for an immediate, aggressive response to geographic issues, this type of NGO may need to recognize the long-term potential for transformations alongside NGOs that have established connections and relationship that facilitate community-led transformation. On the other hand, in geographies plagued by oppressive institutions and
systemic marginalization, this type of NGO can act as a jump-start for future transformational approaches and pave the way for democratic, community-led solutions.

11. Technology/Niche Organizations

The last NGO mission type we could describe from this research in Belize is the Technology Niche organizations that usually operate under the umbrella of larger NGOs. This was the primary organization that I followed during fieldwork in Belize. As evidenced in the introductory story, these organizations play in a delicate game since they rely on the existing relationships and networks of umbrella NGOs. The primary mission focus of these organizations is on the application of technology to enable established NGOs to do their work with minimal disruption. Unfortunately, as you also see in the introductory paragraphs, there is a possibility for them to be pulled or pressured into projects and places where their technology can create an immediate power hierarchy and fundamentally change the geography of place-making. The examples that Keese (2003) gives on a technology mismatch are a sure warning for this type of organization.

There is a growing number of organizations like this globally that are using the latest technologies like aerial vehicles, solar, and wind energy production. While it is possible to find them in a variety of NGO ecosystems, it is not clear where they might fall in the Brass (2016) paradigm. During the interview and observation process, it was noted that there were times when convenience of smooth roads and quick access were appreciated, but there were also times when there seemed to be a willingness to go great distances to fill a need in remote places. Because this type of NGO can be successfully employed in a variety of contexts, it is not clear where it falls on the aid and development spectrum or where it falls in the Brass (2016) paradigm. What is clear, is that there is a clear need for
Technology/Niche Groups to focus on understanding the larger NGO ecosystem in order to avoid intervention failures like those described by Keese (2006) and others.
VI. DISCUSSION

This thesis set out to explain geographic relationships between NGO missions, where they choose to work, and how this relationship might inform best practices. The two primary contributions to research were the introduction of an ‘NGO ecosystem’ and the S.M.A.R.T. typology from the different mission sets and mission focus we see in Belize. These contributions to the vast literature of geography and NGOs are not meant to remain in this context of Belize, and their broader impacts are waiting to be tested in different geographies and different scales. This thesis is the beginning of a larger conversation on NGOs and their missions, in the next section I present a few discussion points.

Missing pieces: In the shadows of the shadow state

Missing from this ecosystem are the dozens of NGOs that do not show up on any roster or localized database in Belize. Just like a physical ecosystem, an NGO ecosystem can become imbalanced by invasive species. It was mentioned during the methods section that the roster of NGOs came from the BNN, which is recognized as the primary source for NGO information in Belize. A recent United Kingdom (U.K.) study collected information on all the NGOs registered in the U.K. and where they work. This list showed that 58 NGOs work in Belize (ngoexplorer.org), but only four of these organizations also showed up on the BNNs roster. The ngoexplorer.org research database showed that the nearby countries of Honduras and Costa Rica had 89 and 91 U.K. NGOs
respectively (ngoexplorer.org). Comparing the population sizes of Honduras, which has 9.5 million people, and Costa Rica with over 4 million, it is curious that there are 58 NGOs in Belize with only a population of 400,000 people—it seems awkwardly imbalanced. After a deep exploration for available data on the unregistered NGOs in Belize and through the interview processes, it was determined that most of these unregistered organizations are directed by persons who are not native Belizean. This is often the case for international NGOs that emerge from the Global North, but one of the primary questions is why there such a high number of ‘outsider’ organizations in Belize, and has that caused any turf wars in this NGO ecosystem?

One of the primary explanations for the presence of so many ‘outside’ organizations that wish to remain incognito is that Belize is the only Central American country where English is the primary language. This allows NGOs and volunteers to operate with relative ease since there is no issue with traveling with a translator or tribal representatives. Another issue is that land can be purchased and owned by foreign citizens. Belize creates the perfect situation for NGOs to operate incognito. Some of the unregistered NGOs interviewed are committed to participatory approaches and sustainable community development. However, this is merely an observation of the potential disagreement of NGOs operating in the shadows of the shadow state. There was also a strong sense of distrust of the government and the BNN from these unregistered organizations. Transparent communication could resolve some of these problems in Belize, along with a better tracking mechanism that can help NGOs network and understand the best practices or lessons learned by other organizations operating in the country and administrative districts.
Rethinking Voluntourism

As mentioned in the literature review, voluntourism is a counterproductive practice but one that is in high existence in Belize. Several NGO websites present volunteering opportunities for gap-year students, universities, and faith groups (pelicanmission.org & volunteerabroad.org). The extent of voluntourism is a difficult data point to capture but is a crucial point of study since tourism and ecotourism continues to over-saturate the Belize coastline, barrier reef, and cultural sites (Sweetman et al., 2018; Blersch and Kangas, 2012). The unsustainability of the tourism market was magnified during the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, if NGOs were to see the extent of this problem it would certainly curtail this unsustainable practice. As I traveled to Belize, the customs form asked for a “reason for stay.” Some of the NGO websites even go so far as to direct volunteers to put down, “staying with friends” since it is more accurate than “business” or, from their viewpoint, “tourism.” If the Belize tourism board put “working with nonprofit” or “volunteering with NGO” there might be a possible way to capture data on the extent of voluntourism in the country.

However, the issue with volunteers also revealed a problem on a different front. One of the organizations interviewed acknowledged the disconnect with western volunteers and the mission of the organization to focus on Sustainable Transformations. Because this organization is primarily funded by partners in the U.S. and the U.K., there is a geographical linkage to these donors who often overwhelm this organization with a constant influx of short-term ‘volunteers.’ Not only does short-term volunteer presence rob local communities from meeting each other’s needs, but it damages the progress made by these communities when volunteers show up and take over.
Of course, these NGO directors would likely never deny these groups and churches from coming to the project locations, especially since they rely on their funding. Interestingly, not only did these directors articulate a passion for the communities they worked in, but the locals showed up while I was there and said some of the same things. Despite this early progress at building a deep connection in the social fabric of the local community, these organizations will probably continue to receive well-intentioned volunteers caught in the hug-an-orphan, consumer culture of the Global North. Some directors noted that one of their biggest challenges is keeping Belizean culture intact with such a heavy presence of ‘outsiders.’ Another director pointed out that while many organizations employ local Belizeans with regular paychecks, these salaries are extremely small, resulting in many of them working multiple jobs in addition to this role as life-coaches. It is unlikely, however, that volunteers from the U.S. and the U.K. will abandon the celebrity-volunteer culture and simply find ways to redistribute wealth from the global north into these communities or directly to the local NGO staff. One director seemed to believe that this is part of the “non-profitization” issue that relies on donor funding. Many donors want more ‘hands-on’ presence in how and where their donation money is being used. This was not always the case and there were a few examples of organizations that could easily approach their donor base for money, and it would show up without any objections or disagreements. Certainly, the extravagant and economically inefficient model of voluntourism does not help this common problem for NGOs in Belize.

Most of the NGOs interviewed recognized that the need to network across a broader category of NGOs was not just a good idea, but a necessity if true social transformation was going to take place. For this reason alone, the construction of the NGO ecosystem
was useful in pointing out the contradictory values of sustainable, community development and the continued phenomenon of voluntourism and short-term mission trippers in Belize. The combined effects of unregulated mass tourism, ecotourism, and voluntourism pose a significant risk to the Belize Barrier Reef, coastline, and the economic independence of the nation.

1. Finding a balance in the J. Brass (2016) paradigm.

Figure 13. Reframing Brass (2016) Model of NGOs: *I propose to explain the geography of NGOs as they are part of a larger ecosystem of aid and development through space and time. Further research may also find a way to quantify these factors as they relate to the S.M.A.R.T. mission typology presented in this thesis.*

The S.M.A.R.T. typology was built from this paradigm by relating each category to how it articulated needs, conveniences, and politics. There may be other categories in other contexts, but this is what I saw in Belize. Speculatively, the different emphasis in certain
administrative districts could have something to do with the visible nature of widespread poorness or even frontier imaginaries. This discussion begins to open new possibilities for further research to understand if there could be an “aid by aesthetic” element to NGOs in Belize.

This is extremely complicated. Recalling the stories from the introduction, there may even be considerable effort taken by stakeholders and peasants to ensure that their deteriorated living conditions are noticed by passing-by ‘moral agents.’ In this Belize case study, with the contributions of the NGO ecosystem to describe the majority values and the S.M.A.R.T. typology, the connection between geography and NGOs mission is clearer than when this thesis began. Hopefully, as NGOs emerge in this geography, they will be able to better see the ecosystem they operate in.

**Conclusion**

Work by geographers like Bebbington (2004), Brass (2012, 2016, and 2018), and Keese (2006) have encouraged this conversation towards asking tough questions about NGO geographies, specifically, ‘why’ and ‘how’ they intend on changing the world around them. Furthermore, the extensive lists of existing typologies have not considered the values or beliefs of NGOs to explain these questions. This thesis approached that through the S.M.A.R.T. typology. The usefulness of this typology and the NGO ecosystem framework will be better understood if similar attempts were accomplished at different spatial scales. Perhaps different temporal scales could also reflect something about the changing values and methodologies of NGOs.
The key findings in this thesis showed that there was a unique geographic distribution of mission statements, but the S.M.A.R.T typology helps us understand why some organizations may emphasize certain values and geographies over others. Since the majority of NGOs in Belize are Sustainable Transformation Groups that focus on sustainable, community development strategies in neighborhoods, villages, and environments, unsustainable practices like voluntourism are incompatible with this geography. Unfortunately, voluntourism thrives under the primary vehicle of NGOs. If this practice remains the status quo, NGO may continue to promote or encourage it.

Similarly, while budgets are small in Belize, with such an oversaturation of international NGOs who claim to do work there, there should be a clearer impact and progress report available in a consolidated format. Extremely little centralized data for evaluation existed on NGOs in Belize, but hopefully this thesis encourages a pivot in a different direction. The idea that NGOs can cause more harm than good is woven throughout this thesis and the issue of voluntourism in Belize should be confronted. There is a lot of good that is happening in Belize through the cooperative efforts of NGOs who understand their role and their mission in this highly dynamic geography.

To revisit the story in the introduction about the NGO working with the Mayan village, the subsequent Needs-Based Assessment revealed a more complete conversation that was in line with this Technology/Niche Group mission. When the NGO arrived in Toledo district, it became obvious very quickly that the Mayan elder was not going to try and feed the privileged westerners a line about hardships or vulnerability. In fact, the Mayans led the conversation confidently and proudly by stating that they would do the prep work, acquire the resources to build the support structure, and had already thought through the
long-term requirements of maintenance and repair. All they wanted was the NGOs' expertise on how to install a solar panel and their advice on the best system to meet their limited need to keep the band practicing in a more environmentally responsible way. The project will be a community-owned solar system, and only used for the community center activities mentioned earlier in the introduction. While there is still good reason to be cautious with this type of request, it seems like this project fits squarely within the NGO ecosystem and the mission description of a Technology/niche group. Did the NGO just get lucky this time? Perhaps. But the deep conversations with the CEO, board members, and volunteers revealed that there was a lot of careful consideration involved in avoiding some of the NGO issues described in this thesis and providing sustainable, local community development solutions in Belize.

Meanwhile, another NGO director is preparing for another summer filled with a rotating flow of volunteers now that Belize is open to international travel after the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, one NGO director mentioned that the nicest thing persons of privilege could do would be to come to Belize and have a holiday and support the local economy. No more service trips, no more missionaries, just come to Belize on vacation, the directors said. Maybe that might bring back a few jobs to the crippled economy and help NGOs focus on sustainable, community development.
# APPENDIX A.

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