

# Sustainable Development, From Idea to Practice

A Case Study of an NGO in Cochabamba,  
Bolivia

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# Abstract

Sustainable development is a concept that can be interpreted and understood in many different ways. Given that the concept in itself does not provide specific guidance to what is to be achieved, how or when, actors who claim to work with sustainable development needs to know what sustainable development is to them. NGO's are seen as one group of many actors who are responsible of implementing sustainable development. This thesis contributes to the understanding of how NGO's understand sustainable development and how they turn this understanding to practical results. It does so through an in-depth empirical case study of one NGO – Sustainable Bolivia. Data gathered through participatory research is analyzed through the lenses of Complexity theory and the theory of Multiple rationales. Field notes, interviews with the Founder of the NGO, their website, strategic documents and minutes from a workshop constitutes data sources for this research. The results of this thesis shows that the organization transforms their idea of sustainable development to practice through the process of building relations and capitalizing on networks by taking different roles and applying multiple rationalities. Furthermore, the results of this research shows that the NGO understands the idea of sustainable development as (a) something practical rather than theoretical, (b) as something that does not need to be defined in detail in order to be understood and as (c) sustainability, as they avoid using the word development.

*Keywords* – sustainable development discourse, sustainable development definition, nongovernmental organizations, Complexity theory, Multiple rationales

# Abbreviations

ATTAC	Association pour la Taxation des Transactions financières et pour l'Action Citoyenne (Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Citizen's Action)
EU	European Union
GRI	Global Reporting Initiative
MDG	Millennium Development Goal
NGO	Nongovernmental Organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SWOT	Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats
UN	United Nations
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USD	United States Dollar
WCED	World Commission on Environment and Development
WWF	World Wildlife Fund

# Chapter I. Introduction

The introductory chapter, divided into four sections, first gives a background and context for this research. The aim and research questions are presented in section two. Thirdly, delimitations of this research are discussed. The fourth and last section presents the disposition of this thesis. These four parts will now be outlined.

## Background

The United Nations (UN) Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's) places sustainable development in a central position on the global development agenda. The SDG's point out in 17 goals ranging from ending poverty in all its forms everywhere to ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all at all ages. These 17 goals shall be guiding until 2030 (United Nations, 2016c).

Sustainable development is a concept that can be interpreted and understood in many different ways, it means different things to different people (Banerjee, et al., 2003). Hundreds of scholars have produced definitions of sustainable development (Kates, et al., 2005; Banerjee, et al., 2003). Given that the concept in itself does not provide specific guidance to what is to be achieved, how or when, actors who claim to work with sustainable development needs to know what sustainable development is to them. Every actor needs to go through the process of define what they want to achieve and how, a process that can be time-consuming and painful (Kates, et al., 2005). How sustainable development is defined and the approach to how it is to be achieved will differ from organization to organization, depending context, ideological background and interests. Hopwood, et al. (2005) argues that sustainable development has the potential to meet the biggest challenges of our time - if it is defined more specifically.

NGO's are alongside with actors from the public and private sphere, key actors in achieving the mission and to make sustainable development reality (Rogers, et al.,

2012; United Nations, 2016; Kates, et al., 2005). Alike public and private actors, NGO's need to undertake the process of defining sustainable development. NGO's differ from public and private organizations in the sense that they do not have to compromise with their mission to meet demands from the stock market or the electorate. NGO's working within the field of sustainable development could potentially focus solely on refining the process of making sustainable development. Could it therefore be assumed that it would be amongst the NGO's working with sustainable development, where the most refined strategies, methods and tools to define, produce and measure sustainable development are found? This thesis seeks to find out. The work of NGO's working within the field of sustainable development reflects how the organization understands and/or defines sustainable development. Little research has made any attempt to understand the process of how NGO's translate their understanding of sustainable development into practice. Gaining knowledge about this process is key to facilitate and improve the process as well as to understand how and to what extent NGO's can contribute to a sustainable development.

## Aim and Research Question

The overarching aim of this thesis is to contribute to the understanding of how NGO's approach and understand sustainable development and how they turn this understanding to practical results. This will be done through an in-depth empirical case study of one NGO – Sustainable Bolivia. Sustainable Bolivia operates in Cochabamba, Bolivia and as the name implies, the organization strives to contribute to sustainable development. To reach this aim, this thesis sets out to answer following research question:

**How is the idea of sustainable development transformed to practice by the NGO Sustainable Bolivia?**

More specifically this research will focus on how the NGO Sustainable Bolivia (a) define, (b) produce (c) measure and (d) communicate sustainable development.

## Delimitations

In this research, no other organizations than NGO's are considered. This research looks at NGO's working within the field of sustainable development and examines their role as agents for sustainable development. There are other agents who have very prominent roles within the field of sustainable development but are not included in this research. These are organizations within the private and public sector as well as supranational organizations such as the UN, the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. This thesis does not seek to examine these actors understanding of, position in and contribution to the sustainable development discourse.

This is not a thesis on organization theory. This research investigates how organizations understand sustainable development. This is done through a sustainable development discourse-perspective and from the standpoint of NGO's and their position as actors within the sustainable development discourse. This thesis makes no attempt to draw upon valuable insights from or contribute to organization theory to explain organizational processes of e.g. decision-making, implementation or evaluation.

## Disposition

The thesis consists of five chapters. This first chapter, *Introduction*, has presented a background and context for this research. The specific aims, the research questions and the delimitations of this research were also presented. In the next and second chapter of this thesis, *Theoretical Framework*, the key concepts, NGO and sustainable development, debates in the literature on how actors understand and approach sustainable development and the theory of Multiple rationalities and Complexity theory are presented. The third chapter, *Research Design*, discusses the method participatory observation, sources of data such as field notes and interviews, limitations of this research and ethics. The result of this research is presented in chapter four, *The Case*. The chapter discusses how Sustainable Bolivia defines, produces, measures and communicates sustainable development. The fifth chapter, *Discussion*, analyses and discusses the results presented in previous chapter by



looking specifically at how the NGO understands the idea of sustainable development, the process of transforming this idea into results and at what actual results are produced. The last and sixth chapter *Conclusions*, reflects on how the findings of this research can help to understand NGO's position within the sustainable development discourse and their work in relation to the SDG's.

# Chapter II. Theoretical Framework

This chapter presents the theoretical framework for this research. It does so in six parts. The two first sections discuss the key concepts NGO and sustainable development. In the third section debates found in previous research on how organizations approach sustainable development are laid out. Section four and five, discusses the theory of Multiple rationales and Complexity. The last part of this chapter discusses how the key concepts, NGO and sustainable development, debates in the literature and Multiple rationales and Complexity theory all relate and merge to a theoretical framework for this paper. These six sections will now be discussed.

## Nongovernmental Organizations

Nongovernmental organization (NGO) is a concept often used to describe actors within the field of development that are not connected to any state or governmental body and does not work for profit, but for the interest of civil society (Rogers, et al., 2008). NGO can refer to organizations that represent civil society in any aspect. These can be social movements, trade unions, indigenous people's organizations or religious organizations to mention a few (Rogers, et al., 2008). But an extreme right think tank is also an NGO, as Mitlin (2006) points out. The term includes organizations where citizens have entered voluntarily to work with their ideas and/or ideologies (Rogers, et al., 2008). This is, however, not a guarantee that these ideas or ideologies are in line with ideas of human rights, democracy, or whatever ideas one holds as noble. Rogers, et al. (2008) discusses three ways to classify NGO's. The first classification is by the level of their operation, such as local, national or international NGO's. The second classification is by the nature of their operation, such as NGO's specialized in research, training, advocacy, etc. The third classification is by theme, such as NGO's operating within environment, health or sustainable development.

Alongside with public and private organizations, NGO's have an influence on development through their active participation and engagement in decision-making. This makes NGO's an important group of stakeholders (Rogers, et al., 2008). The UN describes NGO's as one of nine sectors of society (alongside with *Business and Industry* and *Scientific and Technological Community*) who serves as a facilitator for the broad participation needed to achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 2016b). Furthermore, the UN depicts NGO's as independent, which the UN sees as a precondition for real participation, and as making a valuable contribution in promoting sustainable development (United Nations, 2016b). What underlying assumptions lies behind all this? Three main assumptions can be extracted from the literature on NGO's. The first assumption is that NGO's are good hearted (Mitlin, 2006). NGO's represents *good*, as business and government are *bad* (Mitlin, 2006). One example of the portraits of NGO's as good comes from Rogers et al. (2008). Rogers et al. (2008) also provides an explanation of why NGO's are and do good as he argues that NGO's are organizations based in civil society and constituted by people and "...[p]eople generally know what is right and what is wrong" (2008:79). The second assumption is that NGO's are present or in the field. They are therefore able to "approach people on a one-on-one basis" (Rogers et al., 2008:209) as they are represented where people are (in the villages, forests, on the farms) in contrast to government (Rogers et al., 2008). The third assumption is that NGO's want to achieve sustainable development. The UN's rhetoric when describing NGO's as actors who do make and could make valuable contributions in promoting sustainable development does not problematize whether NGO's are interested in doing so or nor. It is assumed that NGO's want to achieve sustainable development (United Nations, 2016b). While Mitlin (2006) point out that every NGO does not have the interest of the global development agenda.

The term NGO is used in this thesis with an awareness of that not all NGO's have the capacity, knowledge or even the intentions to contribute to a sustainable development. This research will focus on thematic NGO's, working *within* the field of sustainable development and the NGO Sustainable Bolivia (presented in chapter IV) specifically.

# Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is often portrayed as an alternative development (Banerjee, et al., 2003). Since sustainable development not only focuses on economic growth, but also on environmental and social aspects (Hopwood, et al., 2005; WCED, 1987; Potter, et al., 2008) it is presented as the solution to problems that economic growth causes (Banerjee, et al., 2003). Even though there are over hundred definitions of what sustainable development is (Banerjee, et al., 2003, Kates, et al., 2005) the most commonly referred to is the one from the UN, which is that sustainable development is to meet the needs of our generation without jeopardizing future generation's ability to meet theirs (WCED, 1987).

It was at the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, where the conflicts between environment and development were first acknowledged (Kates, et al., 2005; Rogers, et al., 2008). In 1987 the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) publishes its report *Our Common Future* (Kates, et al., 2005; Rogers, et al., 2008), often referred to as the Brundtland report, as WCED was chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, prime minister of Norway at the time (Kates, et al., 2005; Rogers, et al., 2008). This is where UN introduces the concept of Sustainable Development and defines it as the “ability to make development sustainable – to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs (WCED, 1987). The work of WCED and the Brundtland Report led up to the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the “Earth Summit” in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992 (Rogers, et al., 2008). Development and environment was the overall theme, but social issues such as poverty were also given focus (Rogers, et al., 2008) and sustainability entered the development debate as an political issue (Potter, et al., 2008). Striving to create a broad support for sustainable development amongst social movements, UNCED turned to NGO’s and encouraged an independent Earth Summit where 1400 NGO’s participated (Kates, et al., 2005). In 2000 an environmental summit took place in New York, the Millennium Summit. At this conference the Millennium Development Goals (MDG) were set to address global issues that neither development or sustainable development had managed to overcome, such as poverty, equality and environmental sustainability. The MDG’s

were formulated in eight goals and 18 targets (Rogers, et al., 2008). In 2002 the first UN conference on sustainable development was held in Johannesburg, South Africa and (Kates, et al., 2005; Potter, et al., 2008). Through this conference, also called the World Summit, sustainable development as a concept became popularized (Potter, et al., 2008). At the World Summit on Sustainable Development world leaders signed a political declaration and committed to achieve sustainable development (Kates, et al., 2005). And in 2015 world leaders agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals, such as to end poverty in all its forms everywhere and ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages. The SDG's shall be guiding until 2030 (United Nations, 2016c).

Two main types of arguments are heard among the critiques in the sustainable development debate. The first critique is that sustainable development is not sustainable. Critiques argue that sustainable development is based on economic rationality, rather than environmental or social. And that sustainable development is used as a strategy to sustain *development* and not to respect and value environmental and socio-economic factors (Sachs, 2010; Banerjee, 2003). The concept of *sustainable growth* is used as an example of how sustainable development allows for the private sectors to preserve a status quo (Banerjee, 2003). Due to the lack of a fixed meaning to what is sustainable development and what is not, the concept has received critique for being used to cover or greenwash activities that are everything but sustainable (Kates, et al., 2005). The second line of critique towards the concept is based on the argument that sustainable development (just as mainstream development) is an extension of colonial thought (Banerjee, 2003). Sustainable development is criticized for being a western concept (Banerjee, 2003), guiding the global development agenda, based on the colonial idea that western knowledge is more rational (Banerjee, 2003).

In this thesis, the term sustainable development is used to describe the direction and the vision of the global development agenda. The term is used with an understanding of the postcolonial critique aimed at sustainable development and at the global development agenda.

## Debates in the Literature

Given the elasticity of the concept sustainable development, a lot of research has been done on how it is understood and what different approached actors take within the sustainable development discourse. Hopwood, et al. argues that “[t]here is no such thing as a single unified philosophy of sustainable development; there is no sustainable development ‘ism’” (2005:47). This sections attempts to highlight how actors understand sustainable development by presenting four starting points for differences in opinion and debate within the literature.

The first debate springs from the question of what is to be sustained and what is to be developed (Banerjee, et al., 2003; Kates, et al., 2005). The term sustainable development as such implies, that something is to be sustained while something else is to be developed. This debate holds different perceptions, from one extreme of *develop mostly* to the other - *sustain mostly* as well as debates of *what* should be sustained and developed (Kates, et al., 2005; Kates and Clark, 1999). The second debate has its starting point in the fact that the concept of sustainable development contains both a social and an environmental aspect (Hopwood, et al., 2005; Banerjee, et al., 2003). The social aspect of sustainable development contains ideas of equality and social justice (Hopwood, et al., 2005). The use of natural resources, agriculture and fishery are some of the major global issues constituting the environmental aspect (Rogers, et al., 2008). This does not mean however, that sustainability is synonymous with social justice or environmental justice. There is a broad variety in the debate of how much importance that is subscribed to the social versus environmental concerns in cases when these policies conflict (Hopwood, et al., 2005). The environmental aspect of sustainable development is the starting point for the third debate. This debate holds different stands ranging from eco-centric to techno-centric (Hopwood, et al., 2005). Advocates for the eco-centric stand argue that nature must be conserved and species protected while advocates for a technocratic standpoint have faith in that new technology will provide the solutions needed (O’Riordan, 1989; Hopwood, et al., 2005). The fourth and last debate is rooted in opinions on what societal changes are necessary to achieve sustainable development. Hopwood, et al. (2005) identifies three

standpoints within this debate. Advocates for the first standpoint, the top-down *status quo*, see economic growth as part of the solution and argues that sustainable development is achievable within the existing system. The European Union (EU), OECD and the World Bank are advocates for status quo. *Reform* is the second standpoint. Supporters of reform argue that fundamental changes are necessary within the system and that government needs have to have a key role, as business needs a push. Amongst the supporters for reform are mainstream environmental groups (such as Greenpeace and WWF), the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Association for the Taxation of financial Transactions and Citizen's Action, ATTAC. *Transformation*, the third standpoint, stems from the idea that it is the very system, the power and economic structures, which are the roots of the problems that sustainable development is a solution for. In this group consists of eco-feminists, anti-capitalist movements and indigenous movements. All the actors within the sustainable development discourse – from the EU to Greenpeace to eco-feminists – are advocates for sustainable development, but their approaches to achieve it vary (Hopwood, et al., 2005).

These four debates all show different ways of how actors can approach and understand sustainable development. An actor's approach and understanding of the concept will have implication on their output; on what sustainable development they produce, communicate and measure.

## Multiple Rationalities

Ever since the idea of the *rationality* in the sense that man always seek the best means to reach what she is after was born, the rationality concept has been contested. Several theories have emerged in the wake of rethinking rationality (Bryman, 1984). Multiple rationalities is one of these theories. It does not fundamentally reject rationality, but it explains how multiple rationalities can operate on different levels (individual level, sub-unit level, organizational level) at the same time, without this necessarily being un-rational or meaning that rationality is absent (Bryman, 1984). Multiple rationalities can explain discrepancy in for instance attitude and actions, how actors can argue that one thing is important e.g. environmental conservation, and the same time contradict oneself in its actions. Berthou highlights

an example of multiple rationalities in her research on challenges in pro-environmental practices, as she shows that knowledge and information on climate change does not necessary translate in to an environmental friendly lifestyle (2013). The rational model for an organization is signified by clearly defined goals and highly calculative decision-makers (Bryman, 1984). Multiple rationalities is used in this thesis to understand that different rational can co-exist within an organization, and in this case, an NGO. Instead of rejecting an organization as not being rational, this theory is useful to understand that organizations can be rational, but in different ways and on different levels, in relation to several actors in a complex environment.



*Figure 2.1.* Multiple rationales. The figure shows how individuals within an organization apply different rationalities, one on an individual level and one on an organizational level.

## Complexity Theory

Complexity theory contains a broad spectrum of theories and concepts, which together explain the characteristics, and implications of complexity. One idea is that every organization is interconnected to other actors (such as government, donors, partner organizations, competitors), discourses (such as sustainable development) and phenomenon (such as environmental degradation, poverty, social injustice etc.). This landscape of networks is in constant motion (Ramalingam, 2013). Complexity theory explains that traditional linear problem solving is not enough in a world that is complex. Traditional linear problem solving refers to the idea that one can predict the outcome from an intervention to a problem and simply draw a straight line of logic from a problem to the solution to its effects. Not all components from Complexity theory are relevant for this research. This research focuses primarily on the idea of interconnectedness and the importance of networks. These ideas are helpful in understanding what context the NGO Sustainable Bolivia operates within and what actors and phenomenon it needs to relate to.



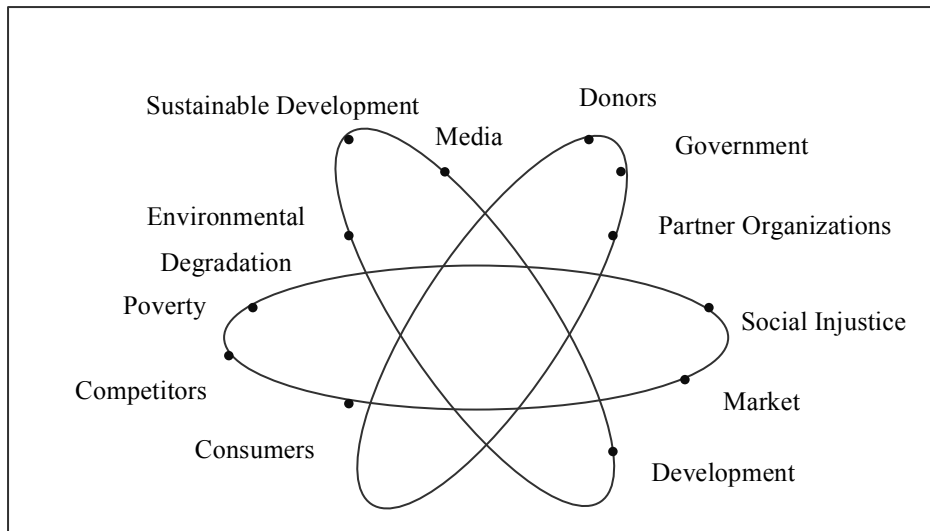
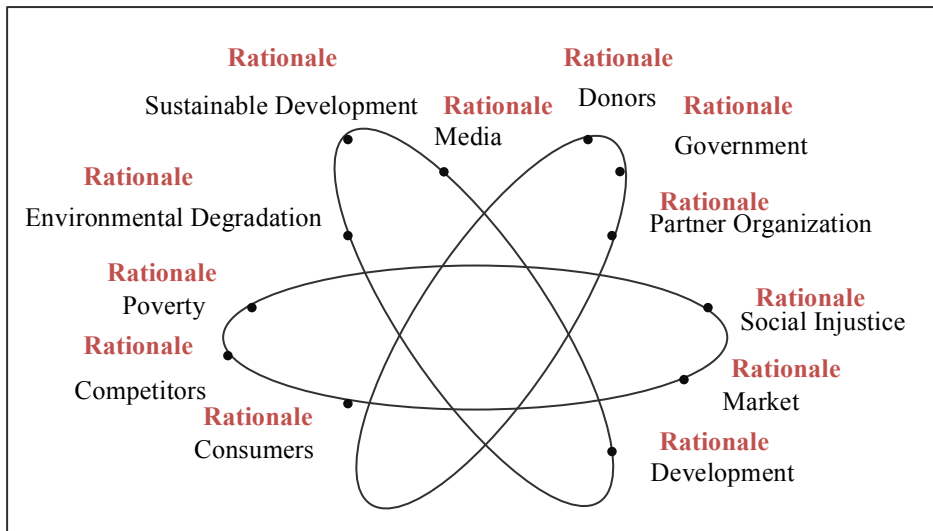


Figure 2.2. Complexity theory. The figure explains that an individual or an organization does not operate in isolation but as interconnected to other actors, discourses, phenomenon etc.

How do the key concepts, *debates in the literature* and the theories all relate? Looking at the opposites of Multiple rationalities and Complexity theory is one way of making clear how these theories relate. The rational organization or the rational individual follows the principles of linear problem solving. The best means towards maximizing benefits are something that can be calculated and predictable and the linear chain of process is not disturbed or altered by other unexpected factors from a surrounding environment. The figures below summarize the theoretical framework used in this thesis. It illustrates how Multiple rationalities and ideas of network and interconnectedness are merged to a theoretical framework together with the concepts of NGO and sustainable development. The NGO operates in the middle of this web, which represents the actors, phenomenon and debates within the sustainable development discourse in which the NGO operates. This complex environment opens up for several debates and topics, which for an organization means several potential standpoints and positions. This web of opportunities for an organization to position oneself reflects the different debates highlighted under the section on *debates in the literature*. This is the theoretical framework used to understand how the NGO Sustainable Bolivia approaches and defines sustainable development, how it positions itself in relation to the discourse and how it makes use of multiple rationalities in doing so.



*Figure 2.3.* Theoretical framework merged. In a complex environment the individual does not only make decisions and act according to the rationales of the organization or the individual. Complexity theory's ideas of interconnectedness and networks, provides multiple layers of how many roles and situations the organization operates in, which all call for a unique rationality.

# Chapter III. Research Design

This chapter presents what specific measures were employed to gather and analyze data needed to answer the research question. It does so in four parts. First, participatory research as the chosen research method is discussed. The second section goes through the sources of data and discusses strengths weaknesses and methods for analyzing the data. Section three examines limitations and biases relevant to this research. Finally, the last section reflects on ethics. These four sections are now presented below.

## Participatory Research

The method employed for data gathering for the case analysis is participatory research. The NGO Sustainable Bolivia is the setting for where the data collection takes place. This case provides an example of an NGO working within the field of sustainable development. The NGO is well established within the local community of Cochabamba, Bolivia and it has a tradition of working with sustainable development, as it has been a driving force for the organization since inception (Ketonen, 2016a). The organization have a number of sustainability projects and every year they open up for a three month long position as a Sustainability Intern to monitor the organization's sustainability work (Ketonen, 2016a; Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). Through the position as the Sustainability Intern 2016, the researcher gained access to the organization; its day-to-day operation, processes (such as weekly staff meetings) and information material. The participant observation served to create an understanding of the organization and board members, staff and volunteers behavior, within the context of Sustainable Bolivia (Bryman, 2012). Through regular observations, engaging in and listening to conversations, interviewing informants, collecting documents and taking notes a rich data material was gathered. A high level of participation and involvement characterized this participant observation as the researcher lived and worked together with volunteers, members of staff and the founder during ten weeks.

Involvement and access to the organization does not necessarily mean access to people (Bryman, 2012). In this case, key informant the Founder's open approach might have facilitated the researcher's access to the rest of the staff. The role of the researcher during these ten weeks was to work as a Sustainability Intern and evaluate the organization's performance in terms of sustainability. In this role the researcher had natural access to every aspect of the organization that deals with sustainable development. The researcher's role shifted between being an *open* and a *disguised* researcher. It was known to the NGO that their Sustainability Intern was going to conduct research while there. And was in this sense an *open* researcher. However, in new relations or in some encounters with volunteers, the researcher can very well be described as *disguised* (Bryman, 2012).

## Sources of Data

The sources of data consists of field notes, transcribed interviews with the Founder, the organization's website, strategic documents produced by the organization and minutes from a workshop. Each source of data is discussed below.

### *Field Notes*

The field notes from the internship serve as a backbone to structure the participant observation (Bryman, 2012). The field notes consists of information on what happened every day during the internship, such as notes from unstructured interviews, meetings and chats with staff, volunteers and board members together with the researcher's reflections. The field notes also contain minutes from the weekly staff meetings and from follow-ups with the National Director, who also served as supervisor of the Sustainability Intern, on site. It is hard to avoid the risk of field being subjective in terms of what gets written down and what is not (Bryman, 2012). The same structure of taking field notes was used every day in order to minimize this risk. One strength with the field notes is that they reflect the observations of the organization in its own setting (Bryman, 2012). Even though it lies within the very nature of the organization to be in constant transformation due to the continual turnover in volunteers an international staff (more about this in chapter IV), the organization settles into a day-to-day mood in ten weeks, even in the presence of a researcher. Therefore the observations can be claimed to provide a high level of

validity in terms of describing the organization daily operation. The field notes provide a rich material in terms of comparing private and public discourses, i.e. if opinions, answers or data change depending on the nature of the discussion (Bryman, 2012), which increases validity.

### *Transcribed Interviews*

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with this research's key informant: the Executive Director and Founder of Sustainable Bolivia (referred to as the Founder). Interviews were conducted in order to gather data on how the organization understood, interpreted and defined sustainable development. The Founder is naturally the person with longest experience of the organization. When asking others in the staff questions of strategic characteristics, they constantly referred to the Founder, due to lack of knowledge and/or experience. This makes it hard to crosscheck the Founder's answers with other informant's ditto. However, the findings can be triangulated as they can be analyzed and compared to data from other sources, such as; observations, informal conversations and meetings minutes from the field notes and the data from the website. It would only be natural if decision makers, who also bear the responsibility of the operation, would want to highlight positive aspects of the operation. The relation between the researcher and the key respondent was however characterized by openness and a strong will to learn and improve the operation. In the beginning of the internship and the participatory research the researcher presented a scale of focus for the Founder as starting point for a discussion on what purpose the Sustainability Intern work should serve. One side of the scale was to focus on critically examine the organization in the search for potential areas of improvements. The opposite side on the scale was to focus on finding successful examples and best practices to spread in order to strengthen the organization's reputation and position as a sustainable organization. Being presented to the choice of strengthening the organization through self-criticism or through brand building, the Founder chose the former. This set the tone for the researchers work in terms of priorities, formulating questions etc. Given the approach of the Founder the answers from these interviews should be considered valid. Any risk of reactivity, i.e. that informants adjust their behavior due to the fact that they were interviewed by a researcher (Bryman, 2012), was minimized as the informant was interviewed by the

researcher in the position as an Sustainability Intern, whom the respondent shared a common goal with; to evaluate the organization's performance in order to improve the same.

### *Website*

Sustainable Bolivia's English website - [www.sustainablebolivia.org](http://www.sustainablebolivia.org) - is a source of qualitative and quantitative data. It contains, amongst other things, text information on the organization's services, their work with sustainable development, their partner organization's and promotional videos produced by the organization. This source of data comprises text available on the website, whereas videos and uploaded documents available on the website (such as the newsletter archive) is not considered. The website is one of the channels that the organization uses to promote itself towards potential volunteers and the public. It can therefore be expected that material presented have a tendency to highlight the positive aspects of the organization. This will be taken in to consideration when analyzing data from this source. Qualitative data will be used primarily to analyze how the organization describes sustainable development. Quantitative data from the website will be use with caution, primarily due to the fact that the website not always shows the most recent facts. When figures from the website do not correlate with figures from other data sources, such as the annual report (see next section *Documents*), they will be cross-checked with staff of the NGO. One strength with this source of data is that it is non-reactive in the sense that it does not change due to the fact that a researcher is present (Bryman, 2012). Replicability can be limited as websites are updated, this can have an effect on reliability.

### *Documents*

Documents gathered during the participatory research are reports that present the work of the organization and strategic documents that presents future plans and strategies. This source of data consists of following documents: *Annual Report 2015 Sustainable Bolivia*, *2015 SWOT Analysis* and *Sustainability Report 2011*. Documents produced by the researcher during the participatory research will not be considered in this research. The data is non-reactive in the sense that the data does not change due to the fact that a researcher is present (Bryman, 2012). A weakness with this source of

data is that documents available do not represent a full picture of the organization's strategic documents.

### *Minutes from Development Workshop*

During the period of participatory research, the researcher organized and led a workshop on *Development, postcolonial development critique and sustainable development*. Some ten volunteers together with members of staff, board members, the National Director and the Founder participated in the workshop. The minutes from this workshop present data on the participant's perception of development, sustainable development and their role in relation to the topic. The data can be considered having a high validity in term of displaying the diversity of the participant's views on development, their role in relation to development and what questions and concerns they had. The topic *Postcolonial Development Critique* might have influenced the discussions during the workshop, this will be taken into consideration when analyzing the data. The minutes were written down after the workshop, and not during, which affects the richness of details.

## Content Analysis

A content analysis is being carried to examine how the organization defines, produces, measures and communicates sustainable development. This analysis will quantify how the organization uses the terms sustainable development, development and sustainability and explore in what context they are used. This analysis is carried out in several steps. First the frequency of these terms in all data sources will be counted and registered as *Total* in a coding schedule, see Appendix 1. After that a first selection will be made based on the context of which the term is used. In this first selection the term *sustainable* will not be counted when it is used as the name of the NGO, *Sustainable Bolivia*. But above all, the terms will not be counted if they are used to describe something other than Sustainable Bolivia; their organization, operation, documents, plans etc. The number of times words are used to describe the organization (with expectance from the usage of *sustainable* in the organization's name Sustainable Bolivia) will be registered as *1<sup>st</sup> selection* in the coding schedule, see Appendix 1. Third, the usage of the terms, that passed the first selection, will be subject for a more thematic analysis. The context of when the terms sustainable

development, development and sustainability are used will be coded after certain themes. The terms will be classified into types such as: (i) used to describe a direction or a desirable future, (ii) used to describe a practical task, (iii) used to describe a document, (iv) used to describe a partner organization, etc. The context of how the terms are used will be analyzed through these themes. Bryman stresses that coding must be consistent in order to be reliable (2012). As each source of data provide limited amount of text, the coding will not have to be carried out over an extended period of time or by multiple researchers. This minimizes the risks of inconsistency over time (intra-coder reliability) or between coders (inter-coder reliability) (Bryman, 2012).

## Limitations and Biases

It is important to highlight the limitations of this research design. One case study of one NGO cannot be used to draw general conclusions for all NGO's working within the field of sustainable development. It is often said that a case study design does not allow for general conclusions. However, this case study design acknowledges the complexity of the reality of in which the NGO operates, and does not seek to simplify what cannot be simplified in order to draw general conclusions. There are also limitations associated with data gathered. Data gathered for this case study does not provide the full picture of the NGO Sustainable Bolivia. The organization is in constant transformation and motion, due to e.g. changes in partner organizations, turnover in staff and volunteers, seasons, local politics etc. The data can however illustrate a rich snapshot from the organization during a ten-week period in the beginning of 2016, from a Sustainability Interns perspective. Observations during this period of time cannot say how the organization has operated in the past or how it will operate in the future. The researcher herself also has implications on limitations of this research in terms of experience and language skills. Case study relies on the researcher, as the researcher is the tool for collecting and analyzing data. Given that the researcher did not have a background of extensive training in participatory research, in situations of observing or interviewing, the researcher often was left to make decisions and act based on instinct. Even though key recipients were English speakers and the website and the document are in English, the limited Spanish skills of the researcher could be seen as a limitation. As roughly half of the staff was



Bolivian with limited English skills, the weekly staff meetings were held in Spanish. By going through the minutes from the meeting with English speaking staff and compare these with the researchers minutes the risk of misunderstanding or missing out on information was minimized. However, the informal meetings and conversations between the Bolivian staff and the researcher were nevertheless limited. Being a foreign woman from a western country with a western education the researcher shared characteristics' with the rest of the international staff. The fact that the organization is used to interns of this kind helped the researcher to establish rapport with respondents. In this context, the researcher was simply a foreigner amongst other foreigners, working in the office. The attributes of the researcher's persona would potentially have had a completely different impact in another context. One example could be if the research was conducted in the sometimes non-English speaking, local community of Cochabamba, looking at partner organizations of the NGO perception of the sustainability of Sustainable Bolivia.

## Ethics

Before the internship started the researcher confirmed with the NGO that data generated during the internship could be used for this thesis. As previously mentioned, the researcher was an *open* researcher and a *disguised* researcher. Living with the volunteers and staffs gave the researcher 24-hour access and insight to the organization. It is worth reflecting on the ethical challenges this posed. Living together with the organization clearly provided lots of opportunities for observation, listening to and engaging in discussions. This posed challenges in terms of being an *open* researcher. It is simply not feasible to seek informed consent in all situations of observation, without having reactive effects, i.e. risking that people adjust their behavior because they know that they are observed (Bryman, 2012). Even if the researcher was *open* towards the staff team from the beginning, living together *disguised* the researcher to some extent, as friendship relations between the researcher and staff developed.

Not using the name of the organization could be a way to further protect the integrity of the organization. The name of the NGO – Sustainable Bolivia – is discussed as a part of the analysis to how the organization creates sustainable development. The

name is considered a valuable part of the research and is therefore used. The names of the informants are however not used. Their positions are revealed, such as the Founder or the National Director, to provide a context to the data.

# Chapter IV. The Case

This chapter presents the results of this research, and it does so in six sections. First the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia is introduced. Second, the NGO Sustainable Bolivia is discussed; what type of NGO it is, its operation and role as a network facilitator. The four following sections discuss how Sustainable Bolivia defines, produces, measures and communicates sustainable development.

## Cochabamba

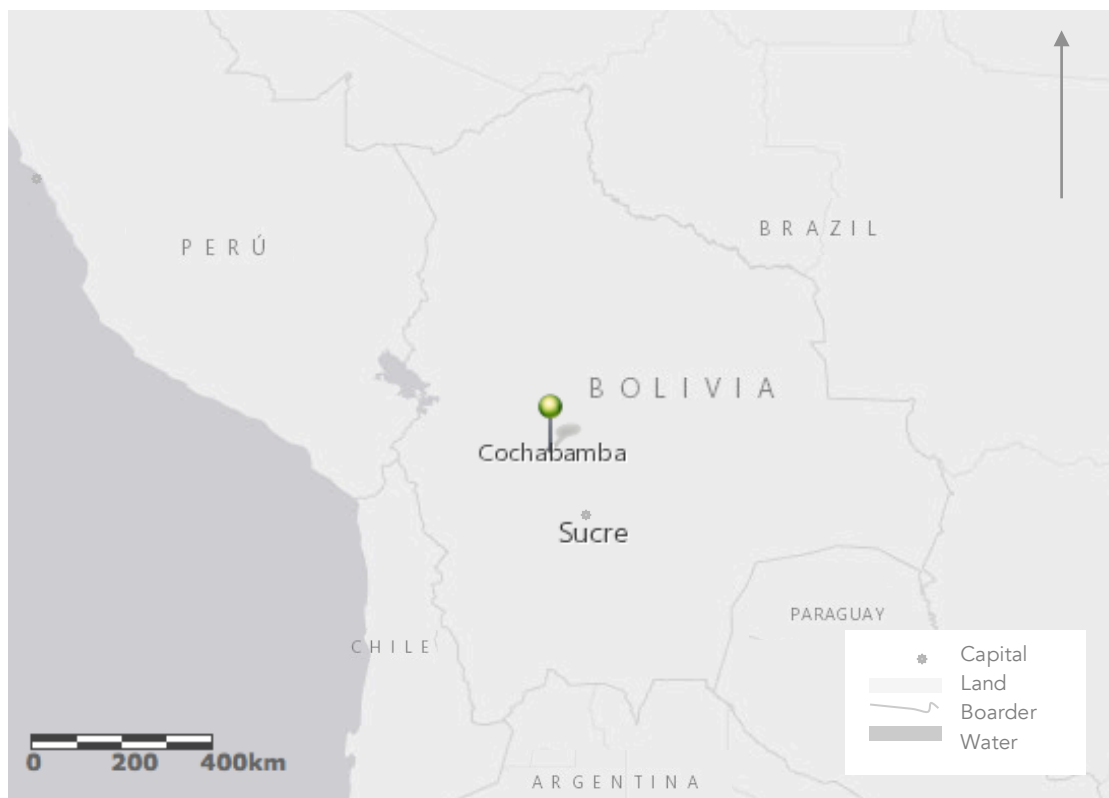


Figure 4.1. Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Cochabamba, Bolivia's fourth largest city is home to almost 2 million inhabitants. The city is located in the center of Bolivia in a valley of the Andes (Kaijser, 2014; Sustainable Bolivia, 2016c). Being situated in a valley, the climate is warm all year

around. Plumbing and running water is considered a luxury and the city suffers of water shortage, especially during the dry season (Kaijser, 2014; Sustainable Bolivia, 2016c). NGO's play a great part in providing services, such as health and sanitation (Biggemann, et al., 2014).

## Sustainable Bolivia

The NGO Sustainable Bolivia is based in the city of Cochabamba, Bolivia since 2007 (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016). As the name suggests, the NGO sets out to work within the field of sustainable development. The organization's core operation is to connect international volunteers with local NGO's, i.e. volunteer tourism. Volunteer tourism is when people use their holidays to participate in development projects and pay to do so (Wearing, 2001). According to Sustainable Bolivia, their mission is "...[t]o promote economic and environmental sustainability through international collaboration with local Bolivian initiatives" (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016). Classifying Sustainable Bolivia is not as straightforward as Rogers et al. (2008) ideas on classifications on NGO's by theme, nature and level of operation (discussed in *Debates in the Literature*, chapter I). Sustainable Bolivia can be described as a thematic NGO, working with resource distribution, empowerment or enabling as they are connecting volunteers with other local NGO's, which they call their partner organizations. What's not as straightforward is how to classify the organization after level of operation. Sustainable Bolivia can be described as both a local NGO and an international NGO. It is a local NGO, in the sense that it is physically based in and has its operations within Cochabamba. It is an international NGO, as Sustainable Bolivia is registered as an NGO in both the United States of America (the USA) and in Bolivia. As the NGO is registered in Bolivia and in the USA, it thereby has to follow California state law, US non-profit regulations, US law, Bolivian laws and regulations (Ketonen, 2016a). One reason behind this is that the Founder of the NGO is from the USA. The Founder, master in social sciences through the Global Studies Program (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016), describes Sustainable Bolivia's role as a being a link between the global and the local (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). According to the Founder, Sustainable Bolivia brings international attention to local projects that are carried out by their partner organizations. Sustainable Bolivia is an international organization also in terms of the composition of volunteers and staff. Volunteers

come mainly from outside of Bolivia and South America (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016e). The staff team consists of both Bolivians and people from other countries i.e. the United Kingdom, Australia and the USA (Ketonen, 2016a).

The matching of volunteer and internship with partner organizations generates the main revenue stream for the organization (Ketonen, 2016a; Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). During 2015 the NGO received 137 volunteers who volunteered for an average of 7.3 weeks according to their website (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016e). The NGO has received and organized replacements for 869 volunteers from 46 countries since the start in 2007 (Sustainable Bolivia, 2015). The majority travel to Cochabamba by air (Ketonen, 2016a). The NGO reaches out to presumptive volunteers around the world through social media, sites that advertises volunteer opportunities and their website, which exists in Spanish, English and German. Volunteers apply all over the world, with a majority (around 50%) of the volunteers coming from the USA (Ketonen, 2016a; Sustainable Bolivia, 2016e). Volunteers are matched with a partner organization after their interests, the duration of their stay, their experience and level of Spanish (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview; Sustainable Bolivia, 2016f). Every partner organization sets the requirements for the volunteers that they accept. Other than these, Sustainable Bolivia wants the volunteers to be “motivated and active people” (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). Sustainable Bolivia’s network stretches to some 35 partner organizations (Sustainable Bolivia, 2015) working within the fields of education, youth service, social service, environmental conservation, health care, agriculture, the arts and research (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). Sustainable Bolivia provides marketing of the service, administration of volunteers applications and the matching with partner organizations. The partner organization provides volunteer placements. While in Cochabamba, Sustainable Bolivia provides accommodation. The large majority of the volunteers choose to stay in one of two houses that Sustainable Bolivia rent or with a host family arranged by Sustainable Bolivia (Ketonen, 2016a). The NGO also arranges social activities, such as workshops and debates and communal cooking where volunteers gather to cook together and share their dinner in the main house. The message of sustainability meets the volunteers on signs around the house, one example being “A sustainable kitchen is a clean kitchen wash your dishes” (Ketonen, 2016a). One social activity that has gained a lot of attention in the local community and in media

(Ketonen, 2016a) is the Cristo Clean Up. Cochabamba is home to the world's largest Christ statue, Cristo de la Concordia (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016c). And once a week a group of staff and volunteers gather by dawn to climb the some 1400 stairs up to the statue of Christ (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016b; Ketonen, 2016a). On their way down they pick up garbage (Ketonen, 2016a).

Sustainable Bolivia's runs a Mini-Grant program, through which volunteers can apply for up to USD 75 per month during their stay (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016d; Ketonen, 2016a). The volunteers apply for and invest their Mini-Grant in a project in collaboration with their organization. In 2015, 26 of Sustainable Bolivia's partner organizations received USD 9.610, through the volunteers' Mini-Grant (Sustainable Bolivia, 2015). A few examples on how Mini-Grants have been used are to fund material for classroom renovation, promotion of the partner organizations projects or buying water filters for the partner organization's project sites, making tap water drinkable and cutting the partner organization's expenditures on bottled water (Sukley, 2015). Some of the volunteers engage in fundraising for the organization they volunteer for. By using social media or existing websites specifically for fundraising, this can be a way to further support the organization (Sukley, 2015).

The NGO runs a language school open for volunteers as well as the public. Seven professors offer one-on-one lessons in Spanish and Quechua (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). The language school is the second largest revenue stream (Ketonen, 2016a; Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). The organization conduct what they call internal sustainability projects. The NGO count their kitchen garden, composting system and recycling to these projects. Recycling is central in sustainable living, as the organization puts it, and the National Director wants every volunteer to be a part of this; "...if [the volunteers] are preaching Sustainable Bolivia, they should be practicing it" (Ketonen, 2016a). The staff and volunteers experiment with reducing the organization's amount of garbage by being creative and e.g. turning empty bottles into drinking glasses. Since 2011, the organization has had a Sustainability Intern for approximately three months per year (Ketonen, 2016a). Within the role and responsibilities of the Sustainability Intern lies launch new initiatives, educate and inspire volunteers to a sustainable lifestyle. In 2011, the first sustainability intern evaluated the organization's performance in terms of sustainability and wrote a

sustainability report (Ketonen, 2016a). Sustainable Bolivia has a scholarship program, through which they provide support to “...low-income Bolivian students who demonstrate the potential for future success” (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). The scholarships are funded by the Rotary Club Munich Airport and The Don and Jackie Taylor scholarship fund (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016). Furthermore, the organization has a studio and a room dedicated for an international art residency. The art residency program aims “...to promote the arts in Bolivia while fostering intercultural exchange between international and local artists” (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a).

By the time period for the participatory research which this case study builds on, the staff team consisted of ten to twelve persons, approximately 50% local Bolivian staff members and 50% foreign staff members. The foreign staff members came from English speaking countries, traditionally labeled as Western or as part of the Global North. However, the countries of origin of the foreign staff vary constantly with the turnover of staff (Ketonen, 2016a). And there is a turnover in the foreign staff. The international staff stays for a limited time period due to a lifestyle characterized by traveling and/or visa related restrictions (Ketonen, 2016a). While the Bolivian staff tend to stay longer with the organization. It is the Bolivian staffs that (together with the Founder) give the organization stability, in terms of knowledge accumulation and collective memory (Ketonen, 2016a). The weekly staff meetings are one example of how this is manifested. During the weekly meetings staff informs each other what they have been working on previous week and what they will be working on in the week to come (Ketonen, 2016a). These meetings are also used to discuss strategic questions, personal goals and vision for the organization. In these discussions the Bolivian staff has a longer time horizons than someone whose visa will expire in six weeks (Ketonen, 2016a). The organization has had a new National Director every two years on an average (Ketonen, 2016a). The staffs do not have academic backgrounds in the field of development. This is something that the organization has received feedback on as an area of improvement from interns evaluating the organization (Ketonen, 2016a).

The NGO is in many ways a hub for networking. The organization describes their greatest accomplishment as connecting people from all over the world with local Cochabambinos and Bolivians. Sustainable Bolivia is an example of what Brown

(1991) calls a *bridging organization*. According to Brown (1991) sustainable social and economical development depends on bridging organizations. Through the use of social media, common projects, field trips, organized debates and language exchanges, together with other activities associated with communal living, the organization aims to build a sense of community and familiarity, and this is confirmed by the volunteers (Ketonen, 2016a; Ketonen, 2016b). This community is often referred to as the SB (Sustainable Bolivia)-family, by amongst others, volunteers and staff. The SB-family encompasses the volunteers, the partner organizations, the staff, the language teachers, as well as friends of the organization (Ketonen, 2016a; Ketonen, 2016b).

## Defining Sustainable Development

The organization makes it clear in their name, through their internal work and on their website, that they promote and work for sustainability. But what does sustainability mean to the organization and what approach do they have to how it should be achieved? The National Director consequently passes questions of how the organization defines sustainability and what their goal is, onto the Founder (Ketonen, 2016a). The answer of the Founder – “That’s a tough question” (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview) – indicates that the organization does not have a grounded overall definition of sustainability by the point of the first interview. The Founder touches upon a definition, while reflecting on the economic, environmental and social aspects of sustainability in the contexts of what the organization wants to achieve. Economic sustainability for Sustainable Bolivia is about being able to *balance the books*, according to the Founder. To generate revenue from the existing revenue streams, the volunteer program and the language school, and not being dependent on donations is to be an economically sustainable organization (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). Environmental sustainability for Sustainable Bolivia is about constantly reducing carbon emissions created in relation to the NGO’s operation (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). The Founder describes social sustainability as having two components. First, social sustainability is about connecting people and establishing relationships that continue to thrive, between local people and international volunteers. In one of the interviews, the Founder explains the importance of connections, “Our biggest accomplishment is establishing these connections” (Taylor, 2016a, personal



interview). The second aspect of social sustainability is about the organization's position in relation to the local community of Cochabamba. Social sustainability is about being viewed in the community of Cochabamba, as an organization that provides a beneficial service. The Founder describes this component of social sustainability as the result of the organization and the volunteer's ability to understand power dynamics. It is about balancing the fact that Sustainable Bolivia has the financial and human resources to support local organizations, with the fact that the local establishment has the greatest knowledge to what the local community needs. The Founder stresses the importance of that international volunteers "...respect the local culture and try to understand it, and trying to also then to interact and exchange" (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview), and that this exchange goes both ways. Further the Founder speaks about how insights from abroad can benefit the local community, and highlights the host families who receive foreign volunteers as an example – "Whether it be widening their perspective, or, you know, just, just demonstrating how we're all deep down pretty much similar" (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview).

## Producing Sustainable Development

The ways of how Sustainable Bolivia produces sustainable development can be divided to internal and external to the organization. The internal production of sustainable development consists of the organization's internal sustainability projects described in previous section. The organization presents what they call their internal sustainability work on the website. This work consists of teaching and inspiring volunteers to sustainable living, use of sustainable techniques and sustainability projects to reduce the organization's impact on the environment. When aiming towards an operation with minimal environmental impact, travels by air must be addressed. The Founder describes that they have tried to introduce carbon offsets as an alternative for the volunteers. Volunteers are encouraged to "...[b]uy carbon offsets to minimize the impact of emissions from their airline flights to Bolivia" (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016). Further the Founder describes Sustainable Bolivia as a budget organization compared to the pricing of other organizations. Therefore the organization attracts younger people who are traveling on a budget. This, the Founder believes to be the reason to why the implementation of buying carbon offsets did not succeed. The Founder puts forward that buying carbon offsets is not a solution to the

carbon emissions created from volunteers flights, but a “major step in the right direction” (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). The Founder adds that there is really no solution if they want to continue to exist as an organization attracting international volunteers (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). The support of human (the volunteers work and efforts) and financial (the Mini-Grant) resources to local actors is how sustainable development is produced in an external manner. In that sense the organization starts producing sustainable development when they partner up with an organization that fits into Sustainable Bolivia’s understanding of sustainability. Sustainable Bolivia chooses to work with organizations that have social or environmental benefits (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). When asked to specify this, the Founder gives examples of projects and themes that these partner organizations work with, such as health projects, projects with children from low-income families, orphanages and artistic projects (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). The evaluation of a potential partner organization does not follow any fixed and documented criteria. Decisions are made on a case-to-case basis, followed by a personal meeting and a visit to the project site (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview; Ketonen 2016a).

## Measure Sustainable Development

The *Sustainability Report 2011* is the organization's first documented attempt to monitor and evaluate how the organization performs in terms of sustainability. The report starts with a statement from the Founder. The founder states that quantitative reporting is one important aspect of the organization’s sustainability work, but that “...[t]he most important part of increasing our sustainability is living it, learning it, and laughing about it together” (Killigrew and Beasley, 2011:2). The Sustainability Report 2011 uses figures from 2010 and follows the *Global Reporting Initiative* (GRI) framework. GRI is a set of guidelines for voluntary sustainability reporting for companies (Brown, et al., 2009). GRI is a partner organization of United Nations Environment Program since 1998 (Brown, et al., 2009). Neither the Sustainability Report 2011 nor the staff currently working at Sustainable Bolivia can give any answer to why the GRI framework was chosen for the Sustainability Report 2011 (Ketonen, 2016a; Killigrew and Beasley, 2011). The Founder states that “...there’s no reason that we chose [GRI]” (Taylor, 2016b, personal interview). The Sustainability

Report 2011 was followed up in 2016, with an evaluation of the organization's performance, using figures from 2015. As the GRI framework is not explicitly created for NGO's and Innes and Booher argues that "...indicators must be developed with the participation of those who will use and learn from them" (2000:173), the Sustainability Report 2015 did not follow the GRI framework (Ketonen, 2016a). Measuring sustainable development is something that falls under the Sustainability Interns role and responsibilities and is not a routine implemented in the day-to-day operation (Ketonen, 2016a). Within the framework for the day-to-day operation several things are evaluated and measured, and a lot of different statistics are gathered. While no indicators for measuring sustainable development are defined by the organization, the progress within sustainable development cannot be measured by monitoring and measuring specific indicators. Instead the report from 2011 focuses on what activities the organization has undertaken under the umbrella of sustainability (Killigrew and Beasley, 2011).

## Communicating Sustainable Development

The organization communicates through different channels, such as through their website, through social media and through the day-to-day operation and organized social activities such as workshops and debates on the topic (Ketonen, 2016a). However, as discussed below, these channels are not used to communicate sustainable development, but *sustainability*. Sustainable Bolivia's website, <http://www.sustainablebolivia.org/>, contains of entire 105 pages. The organization does not mention *sustainable development* on any of these 105 pages to describe their operation. The only times *sustainable development* is mentioned, is to describe one of the 32 partner organization presented on the website. Neither do the strategic documents reviewed for this research use the concept of *sustainable development* or *development* when describing the operation. The organization uses the term *sustainability* and not *development* or *sustainable development* to describe what they do and strive for, with one exception. In monitoring the number of volunteers and Mini-Grants, statistics are presented by area of work. *Social/Economic Development* is one of six areas of work. The other areas are (i) Education and training, (ii) Environment, (iii) Health, (iv) Human rights and (v) Social care (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). All areas except for (ii) Environment - could be argued to fall under the

umbrella of Social Development. The term sustainability is used in three different ways by the organization. First, it is used in to describe the organization's mission: “To promote economic and environmental sustainability through international collaboration with local Bolivian initiatives” (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a). Second, it is used to describe a desired future, where the volunteers and interns have had a sustainable impact on the community. Finally, it is used as a characteristic to describe what the NGO does, such as; *sustainability efforts* (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a), *sustainability practices* (Sustainable Bolivia, 2015) and *sustainability projects* (Sustainable Bolivia, 2016a).

The name of the organization - Sustainable Bolivia - communicates sustainability. The Founder describes that when naming the organization, *sustainable* was a term that could include a wide range of partner organizations. “Sustainable Bolivia, two words that I think are easy to remember, and have a very broad definition, you know” (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). When asked about the why the term development is not used by the NGO, the Founder answers: “I think we’re just careful in terms of what our role is and not overstepping our boundaries, I think. We *support* organizations, we *support* volunteers” (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). He highlights that their partner organizations are autonomous organizations and grassroots organizations, and that Sustainable Bolivia’s role is “...to provide support where it’s needed, but not try to tell people where support is needed” (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). This, the Founder argues, has to do with why they shy away from the idea of Sustainable Bolivia as a developmental leader and the development concept. To the Founder, there is a balance for Sustainable Bolivia between (1) making an impact in the community through providing support in terms of financial and human resources and (2) not overstepping the organization’s boundaries, i.e. intruding on the autonomy and independence of the partner organizations. The non-existing use of development is an expression of this balance (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview).

# Chapter V. Discussion

This chapter applies the theory of Multiple rationalities and the ideas of interconnectedness and networks from Complexity theory on the results presented in previous chapter. It does so by following the structure of the research question – *How is the idea of sustainable development transformed to practice, by the NGO Sustainable Bolivia?* – breaking it down in three components: idea, transformation and results. The first section discusses how Sustainable Bolivia understands the idea of sustainable development. Section two discusses the process of transforming ideas to results. The third section highlights the results, which the idea of sustainable development is transformed into. The last and fourth section makes an attempt to summarize the discussions in this chapter and give an explicit answer to the research question.

## The Idea of Sustainable Development

Mitlin et al. argues that “...it is far more important to ask how the term “development” is used to serve particular /.../ interests rather than to ask what it means“ (2006:1699). One key characteristic of how Sustainable Bolivia approaches the idea of sustainable development is their non-use of the word development. The organization does not use the term sustainable development or development to describe their work. Instead the organization uses the term sustainability. The Founder reflects on the choice of some words and the neglect of others in one of the interviews. He explains that he has some apprehensions with the word development as he stresses the fact that the organization is not a developmental leader and does not promote development (Taylor, 2016a, personal interview). The global idea of sustainable development is by the NGO understood as the idea of sustainability.

A rational organization could formulate sustainable development in the terms of a goal, which translates to specific measurable target, accompanied by specific

indicators of progress. But, within the NGO, sustainability is not an idea of a goal. Neither is it an idea that translates into a documented definition known by the staff. There seems to be an idea with the staff that the meaning of sustainability is something so obvious, that it does not have to be defined (Ketonen, 2016a). The National Director expresses this, when talking about volunteer's behavior when it comes to recycling, "...if [the volunteers] are preaching Sustainable Bolivia, they should be practicing it" (Ketonen, 2016a). What the National Director expresses is that people who apply for a volunteer position through Sustainable Bolivia does this partly because they support the organization's idea of sustainability. Because the volunteers share the idea of sustainability, they should also recycle and use the compost, which reflects the National Director understanding of what sustainability is about. The absence of a joint definition does not consequently mean that staff does not have an idea of what sustainability means to the organization or to themselves. Given the variety of approaches to the concept introduced in *Debates in the Literature*, chapter I, it just makes it less likely that the staff and volunteers all share the same sustainability-picture. The idea of sustainability is understood by the NGO as being the same thing for everyone, or at least not as something that can be interpreted in two contradictory ways.

The data shows that the term sustainability is used as a characteristic to describe an action, a project or an organization. Examples of this usage are *sustainability projects*, *Sustainability Intern* or *sustainability efforts*. When an activity, a project or an organization is given the prefix *sustainability* it also gives legitimacy to the same. The name of the organization is an example of this. The name of the NGO – *Sustainable Bolivia* – gives the impression that it is an organization that strives for and promotes sustainability. This thesis does *not* argue the opposite. The argument made is that by using the term in the name, the organization effectively places themselves as agents in the sustainable development discourses. And thereby the organization uses the term to legitimize the organization's position. Another example of how the term can be used to legitimize actions is the sign above the communal kitchen sink saying: "A sustainable kitchen is a clean kitchen wash your dishes". The sign is as trivial as the example is clear. The idea of sustainability is that it is a characteristic, which can be used to legitimize e.g. actions and organizations.

In the absence of a definition, grounded in a theoretical foundation – sustainability is defined in the process of producing it. Sustainability is defined by the activities and projects that the organization frame as sustainable, such as the kitchen garden, the compost, or experimenting with turning glass bottles into drinking glasses. Whether a lifecycle analysis would agree on that turning perfectly functioning recyclable bottles into drinking glasses is sustainable in terms of e.g. having less environmental impact or having more positive effects on local economy than any alternative method, is neither clear nor interesting. The point is that the idea of sustainability is something *hands on*, a tangible result that is created through a creative process. Not something theoretical, which can be calculated or measured. The idea of sustainability is that it is something tangible and practical.

## The Process of Transformation

Through the lens of Complexity theory, this thesis argues that – regardless of approach to sustainable development or sustainability – the transformation of the idea of sustainable development to result occurs through the process of networking. Transforming ideas to results is about implementing and realizing. And the NGO's network and social relations are a prerequisite for implementation and realization. I.e. volunteers, partner organizations, and the community they serve and the staffs are all essential as they contribute in the transformation of idea to result. Not as isolated actors, but as a network. The notion of networks of actors being a prerequisite for producing sustainable development is expressed by the Founder in the Sustainability Report 2011: “The most important part of increasing our sustainability is living it, learning it, and laughing about it *together*” (Killigrew and Beasley, 2011:2, *my italics*). Sustainable development is something that is achieved together. By building relationships the NGO establishes channels through which ideas can transform to results. The transformation of idea to result is enabled through the organization's network. The organization is constantly interconnected to other actors (Ramalingam, 2013). Sustainable Bolivia is affected by and have an impact on (a) actors such as donors, partner organizations and volunteers, (b) phenomenon, such as environmental degradation, social injustice and market forces (c) ongoing public debates and (d) discourses. Sustainable Bolivia have been successful in benefiting from and capitalizing on this interconnectedness since they have a strong focus on establishing

and building relations. Bryman (1984) argues that multiple rationales are applied within an organization, on e.g. an individual level and on an organizational level. This thesis argues that the NGO applies multiple rationales, not only on different levels within the organization, but also when taking on different roles in relation to other actors and when navigating in this landscape of networks. One of the roles that the NGO takes on is the *Partner Organization*. Sustainable Bolivia has a network of up to 35 partner organizations, and in relation to and in contact with these, the rationale is to build strong and stable partner relations. Another role the organization takes on when interacting with the community of Cochabamba is the role of the *Community Actor*. The Community Actor wants to be viewed as an organization that provides a beneficial service on local conditions and follows a rationale, which maximizes these objectives. Actions and decisions based on these two rationales are likely to harmonize, as the both the *Partner Organization* and the *Community Actor* are relation oriented. There are however roles and rationales that can result in a disharmony or inconsistency in decisions and actions. The *Financial Organization* and the *Environmentalist* are two examples. The *Financial Organization* follows the rationale of *balancing the books*. This includes attracting more volunteers to travel (often by air) to Cochabamba. While the *Environmentalist* acts and takes decisions on the rationale of reducing the organization's environmental impact. This rationale is expressed in e.g. the Cristo Clean-Up. Examples of other roles that all follow their own rationale, and which the organization takes on are the *International NGO* and the *Local NGO*, the *Ad-hoc Problem Solver* and the *Strategic planner*, the *Tenant* and the *Landlord*, the *Service Provider*, the *Employer*, the *Language School*, and so on. The organization applies multiple rationales when building a strong network, through which ideas are transformed to results.

## The Practical Results

The largest category of results of sustainable development, as the organization defines it, are the results that volunteers and partner organizations produce every day. Besides these results, the organization also produces sustainable development as a result of the organization's sustainability projects, such as the kitchen garden and the compost. All these projects and experiments not only result in tangible products, but they also contribute to the collective knowledge of the organization. The



Sustainability Report 2011 is an example of a result that the NGO's idea of sustainable development transformed into. Monitoring and evaluating sustainability follows a rational organization model (see chapter II) as it builds on the assumption that evaluation leads to the discovery of areas of improvements, which can be translated into goals, which in turn leads to improvement. The theory of Multiple rationales explains how it is possible to take on a rational organization's model as one of many rationales applied within the organization. Meyer and Rowan (1977) argues that organization's implement practices and procedures that by surrounding society are seen as rational. They do so, not to maximize efficiency or goal attainment. But instead these practices, such as the Sustainability Reporting, "...serve ceremonial and symbolic functions which signal to the external environment that the organizations to which they are attached are legitimate and so are worthy of support and resources" (Bryman, 1984:393). The rationale applied by the NGO when producing a Sustainability Report (and choosing GRI as framework) is the rationale of maximizing legitimacy as an actor within the sustainability discourse.

## Answering the Research Question

This model sets out to summarize the discussion above and show how Sustainable Bolivia translates the idea of sustainable development into results.

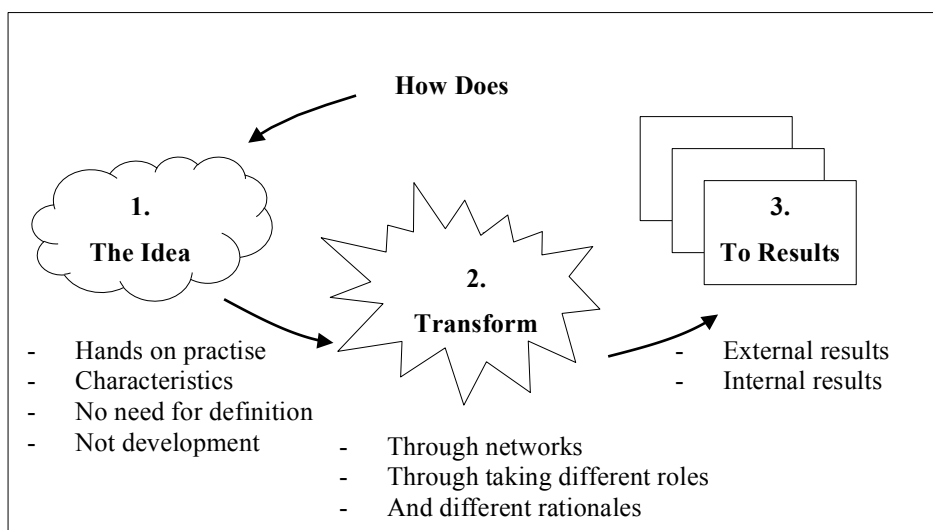


Figure 5.1. Summary of the answer to the research question.

Figure 5.1 shows how (1) the idea of sustainable development (2) transforms (3) to results within the NGO Sustainable Bolivia. It presents the answer to the research question in three steps. (1) The idea of sustainable development as something practical, as a characteristic, as something that does not need to be defined in detail in order to be understood and as sustainability. (2) It is transformed by Sustainable Bolivia through the process of building relations and capitalizing on networks by taking different roles and applying multiple rationalities. (3) It results in outcome within the organization, such as sustainability reports, but above all, outside of the organization through the work of partner organizations and volunteers.

# Chapter VI. Conclusion

Sustainable development can have many different meanings and organizations can take different approaches in a number of debates within the discourse. Every organization can define sustainable development according to what fits their context or suits their purpose. The elasticity of the concept allows for organizations to use sustainable development to legitimize and their mission or actions. NGO's are one category of actors who are assumed to contribute to a sustainable development.

This thesis started with an ambition to explore how one NGO, Sustainable Bolivia, working within the field of sustainable development, transforms their idea of sustainable development to practice. More specifically by focusing on how the NGO Sustainable Bolivia define, produce measure and communicate sustainable development.

This research shows that it is not self-evident that NGO's actively undertake the process of defining sustainable development. As this research draws on one case, it is not possible to draw wider conclusions of how general this is amongst other NGO's working within the field of sustainable development. Given that many NGO's rely on volunteers and donations, it is reasonable to assume that not all NGO's have the possibility to allocate resources, or have the expertise needed to define sustainable development. The findings of this research show that NGO's do not always follow a rational organizations model. It cannot be expected that the organizations approach their work with sustainable development by systematically defining what it means to the organization. Or that they use this definition to formulate goals and find the best means to achieve them. This rationale approach to sustainable development, would build on the idea of linear problem solving which this thesis shows is not applicable for an NGO operating within a complex environment. For an organization that rejects the term *development*, views *sustainability* as something practical and not as an

abstract vision, places emphasis on relations rather than on defining and concretize theories to activity plans, it is difficult to see how the SDG's will translate from the global vision it is depicted as to a sense of ownership. In the case of Sustainable Bolivia, there is a substantial gap from the global idea of sustainable development and the SDG's to the local context and day-to-day sustainability work.

This thesis shows that there is not a clear line from the SDG's to the day-to-day work of Sustainable Bolivia. This does not mean that the sustainable development, which the NGO produces, is in disharmony with the SDG's. It does however express that the SDG's are not the driving factor behind the work of the NGO. So does the case of Sustainable Bolivia support UN in their depiction of NGO's as agents for implementing the SDG's? Possibly. Can Sustainable Bolivia's sustainability work be attributed to the SDG's? Probably not.

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# Appendix 1

Source		Frequency	Development	Sustainable Development	Sustainable	Sustainability
Field notes		Total	4	16	15	34
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	0	0	2	2
Transcribed interviews	Taylor, 2016a	Total	5	5	17	25
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	4	2	4	9
	Taylor, 2016b	Total	0	0	5	3
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	0	0	2	0
Website, summary of 150 pages		Total	194	3	18	24
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	6	0	6	20
Strategic documents	Annual Report 2015, Sustainable Bolivia	Total	2	0	2	3
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	0	0	0	2
	2015 SWOT Analysis	Total	2	0	0	0
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	0	0	0	0
	Sustainability Report 2011	Total	11	0	5	47
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	3	0	4	42
Minutes from Development Workshop		Total	3	1	0	0
		<i>I<sup>st</sup> selection</i>	0	0	0	0

Table 1. Summary of coding schedule.