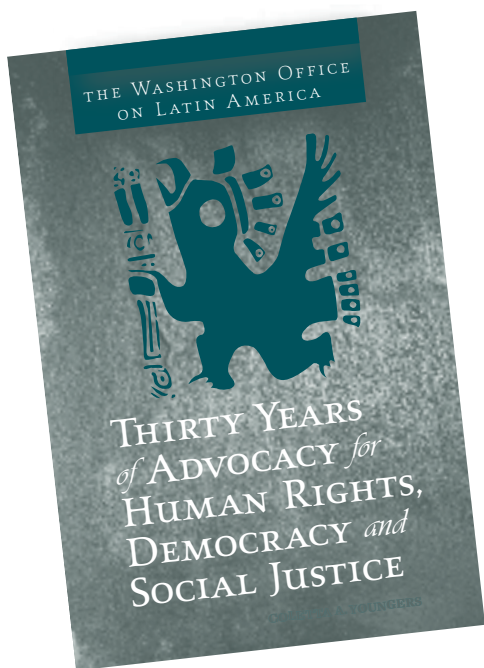


THE WASHINGTON OFFICE  
ON LATIN AMERICA



THIRTY YEARS  
*of* ADVOCACY *for*  
HUMAN RIGHTS,  
DEMOCRACY *and*  
SOCIAL JUSTICE


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## · THIRTY YEARS OF ADVOCACY FOR HUMAN RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY AND SOCIAL JUSTICE ·

 For more than three decades, the Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) has actively promoted human rights, democracy, and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. Over this time, WOLA has developed a reputation as a reliable source of information and analysis on the region and on U.S. policy toward it. WOLA has been an effective advocate for change in Washington, DC and in Latin America, a resource and interlocutor for Latin American colleagues, and a convener of the human rights communities in the region and in the United States.

In commemoration of its 30-year anniversary, WOLA launched a study—also published as a longer book—to document its history and reflect upon the lessons learned from its three decades of successful advocacy. WOLA's experience spans major transitions in the political and socioeconomic context in Latin America and the Caribbean, as well as shifts in U.S. policy over the course of six presidencies. WOLA staff have worked on almost every country in the region and on a myriad of issues reflecting the full range of human, economic, social and cultural rights. WOLA's history of effective advocacy can provide useful insights for campaigns to influence U.S. policies in other regions and issue areas, as well as for future work on Latin America.

Since WOLA's founding in 1974, both the human rights community and the community of nongovernmental organizations working on Latin American issues have grown and evolved. WOLA has had to rethink its position within these overlapping sectors and determine the best contribution it can bring to their collective work. Within the international human rights community, WOLA is respected for its expertise on U.S. foreign policy and its ability to use policy levers to advance human rights protections.

Within the broad coalition of progressive church groups and NGOs, WOLA provides policy-based research and analysis and a deep knowledge of Latin America and the Caribbean, serving as a liaison or interlocutor with key actors in the region.

WOLA's story is also the story of persistent and concerted efforts by a broad advocacy community working for social justice in Latin America. While the organization and its partner organizations can claim many short-term achievements, it remains dedicated to long-term efforts—seeking political openings for change, and, when no such openings exist, working to create the political environment in which change can eventually occur. In this way WOLA strives to create a new political reality that will allow for a more humane and just U.S. policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean in the decades to come.

### *Mission Statement of the*

### **WASHINGTON OFFICE ON LATIN AMERICA**

The Washington Office on Latin America (WOLA) promotes human rights, democracy, and social and economic justice in Latin America and the Caribbean. WOLA facilitates dialogue between governmental and nongovernmental actors, monitors the impact of policies and programs of governments and international organizations, and promotes alternatives through reporting, education, training, and advocacy. Founded in 1974 by a coalition of religious and civic leaders, WOLA works closely with civil society organizations and government officials throughout the hemisphere.

## · THE FOUNDING OF WOLA ·

**W**OLA emerged at a unique moment in U.S. and Latin American history. The immediate spark was the September 1973 coup in Chile, which provoked both sorrow and anger amongst those who witnessed or learned of the atrocities that resulted. Many U.S. citizens were outraged at growing evidence of the complicity of the U.S. government in the overthrow of a democratically elected government and in the human rights violations that followed. At that point, an ecumenical coalition of church-related and other political activists in the United States decided that to be more effective, they needed more information about U.S. policy toward the region, more access to policymakers and hence the ability to influence policy. They also shared a desire to create a space where Latin Americans and those living and working in the region could speak out in defense of hu-

man rights and social justice. In the spring of 1974, they pooled enough resources to set up a Washington office to carry out that mandate and WOLA was born.

The broader political context in which WOLA was founded was one set in the dynamic of progressive ideals in and towards Latin America. The Cuban revolution in 1959 sparked a new period of optimism about the possibilities of radical change to improve the lives of the region's poor majority. At the same time, the proliferation of military dictatorships led many traditional politicians and national leaders to become outspoken advocates for democracy. U.S. policy at the time more often than not was perceived, correctly, as supporting entrenched interests, even if that meant allying with brutal militaries. U.S. efforts to oust Fidel Castro in Cuba, the invasion of the Dominican Republic in 1965 and support for General Pinochet's coup in Chile generated growing discontent with Washington among leftwing

# 30

YEARS OF ADVOCACY FOR HUMAN

### FROM THE FORWARD BY THE CHAIR OF THE WOLA BOARD ALEX WILDE

**The Washington Office on Latin America is one of the rare organizations in Washington that wins both respect and affection.** From its origins as a project of U.S. churches, it has been an influence through many seasons in U.S. policy, with a presence beyond its modest size and resources. At the same time it has maintained a distinctive spirit — *una mística* — that has drawn successive generations of activists to the staff and bound the organization to the hopes and causes of the people of Latin America. While adapting its strategies and ways of working over the years, WOLA's work has flowed from its mandate: advocacy for human rights, democracy, and social justice.

Throughout its history, WOLA has served as a translator and interlocutor between the United States and Latin America. It has made the ways of Washington comprehensible to Latin American colleagues, helping them connect with policy makers and communicate in the language that policy makers understand. Latin Americans, for their part, have brought facts and perspectives that U.S. decision makers unaccustomed to hearing and that they could weigh against official views. Ultimately, the force of WOLA's moral appeals rested on its ability to frame the issues and deliver unimpeachable facts to the right people at the right time.

and more moderate Latin American sectors alike. In short, these developments created a propitious environment for WOLA to grow.

Of particular importance were two trends underway within the churches. Priests, sisters and other missionaries working in Latin America were becoming sensitized to the poverty and injustice in their communities and were sharing that information with their U.S. counterparts. The Catholic and Protestant churches began taking a critical look at the deep injustices prevalent across the region and the role of the church in response. They began to challenge not only the traditional church, but also the status quo and increasingly found themselves confronting state power in countries such as Brazil and Chile. At the same time, a growing sense of ecumenicism was bringing church groups together, allowing for the coalition work that ultimately led to the formation of WOLA.

Finally, the United States was also undergoing significant transformations. The civil rights movement led to greater awareness of human rights issues more broadly. The Vietnam War led many to question the fundamental assumptions underlying U.S. foreign policy and the role of human rights in that policy. It also created an opposition

movement that later propelled many into political activism on Latin America. At the same time, the Watergate scandal changed the political landscape in Washington. An overwhelmingly Democratic Congress was elected in November 1974. Many of the new members were young, progressive idealists who worked closely with WOLA in the coming years to champion human rights and democracy issues.

Initially a tiny operation, WOLA functioned to a large degree as the churches' response mechanism. Although it did not speak out on behalf of any particular church, it was viewed as representing the thinking of the churches more broadly. In its early years, church leaders functioned as its board and played a defining role in shaping the work of the organization. That changed by the end of the decade; WOLA evolved into an organization in its own right. Its funding base expanded, the number of staff grew and its constituency evolved to include a range of solidarity groups and other NGOs working on Central American issues in particular. Today, WOLA maintains deep roots in the church community and its commitment to the social justice values espoused by the churches, but now has a more diverse constituency, primarily rooted in the Latin American and U.S. NGO community. ■

## RIGHTS, DEMOCRACY, AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

In 2006, Latin America appears to be entering a new period in which the “Washington consensus” has worn thin and the people of country after country have voted for change. With the attention of U.S. policy makers, the media, and the public elsewhere, this larger regional dynamic is poorly understood. Now into its fourth decade, WOLA is well informed on these important developments and well positioned to tackle new issues—among others, the “hidden powers” that thwart democracy in post-conflict Central America; violence against women along the U.S.-Mexican border and gang violence in the isthmus; the militarized U.S. international drug policy and its “collateral damage” to democracy and human rights; and the Pentagon’s emerging “independent” foreign policy for Latin America. Although the specific issues have changed over time, WOLA has maintained its abiding commitment to a human rights-based U.S. foreign policy. The challenge for WOLA and its partners remains what it has been through the decades: to bridge the different realities of the United States and Latin America and help the people of all the Americas forge a better future.

Alexander Wilde  
 Chair, WOLA Board of Directors  
 Santiago, Chile 2006

## · THE U.S. FOREIGN POLICY MAKING PROCESS ·

**W**OLA's formation came in response to brutal military dictatorships and U.S. complicity with them; yet it coincided with this new political mood in Washington. The time was ripe for incorporating human rights concerns into law and there was a committed group within the U.S. Congress willing to take a stand on the issues. Although Latin America was not initially on the agenda of these new members, the situation in Chile — the overthrow of a long-standing democracy, the gravity of the human rights situation and the complicity of the U.S. government — quickly drew them in, and Latin America became the centerpiece of congressional debate on how to craft a more humane U.S. foreign policy.

WOLA worked successfully with congressional offices to shed light on the human rights situation in countries throughout the hemisphere, and it was instrumental in crafting a range of human-rights related legislation that conditions the provision of U.S. assistance and other forms of support on the human rights practices of recipient governments. By the time President Reagan took office in 1980, human rights could not simply be ignored or dismissed so readily, and the laws were used to attempt to roll back Reagan Administration policies towards Central America.

WOLA was instrumental in another profound change in Washington at the time that would shape its work in the following decades. When WOLA was created, U.S. foreign policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean was the domain of official policy makers, the business community with interests south of the U.S. border, and others with sufficient standing to belong to the Council on Foreign Relations or the occasional blue-ribbon commission. Determined to get a seat at the table not only for itself but for a diverse set of

actors from the region, WOLA sought to transform the role of civil society in the formation of Washington's Latin American policy.

WOLA's first long-term executive director, Joe Eldridge, remembers: "Before, there were protestors on the outside, but no conversation or dialogue taking place on the inside. We sought to change that, as the only way to change policy was to engage in dialogue with [policy makers]."<sup>1</sup> This approach became the norm for progressive NGOs, but at the time it was groundbreaking, at least with regard to policy making on Latin America. WOLA was instrumental in opening space both on Capitol Hill and within the executive branch so that Latin American voices could be heard and even sought out. As WOLA sought new ways of interacting with official policy makers, doors opened to its staff because of the information, analysis, and contacts in Latin America that they could offer.

Once the Carter Administration came into office, WOLA found itself in the position of sharing human rights policy goals with both key members of Congress and the White House. WOLA staff had sustained access to top officials and it took advantage of that to bring a steady flow of visitors through the doors of the State Department and the National Security Council. WOLA staff also sought out good working relationships with U.S. embassies and particularly during the Carter years, worked closely with U.S. embassy personnel in the Southern Cone to document human rights atrocities. Over time, WOLA's advocacy initiatives expanded to include other U.S. agencies, including the Justice, Treasury, and Defense departments, as well as European governments and the Organization of American States, the United Nations, the Inter-American Development Bank and other international organizations. ■

### LETTER FROM ARCHBISHOP OSCAR ROMERO

In October 1979, just months before his death, Monsignor Oscar Romero wrote:

"Truly the support which WOLA has given us has been very important, especially in regard to making known the systematic violation of human rights which we are suffering, and in bringing this information to important Members of Congress of the United States. This service has been so very important for the Salvadoran church and people because the pressure of international public opinion, above all that of the United States, has so far proved effective in various cases in freeing someone who had been captured or holding back at least some of the growing repression against the people and persecution of the Archdiocese."

## • WOLA'S REGIONAL AND U.S. PARTNERS •

While enlarging its network of contacts in Washington, WOLA also worked to strengthen its relationships with regional partners and develop and carry out advocacy campaigns with them. The nature of those relationships and collaborative efforts evolved over the years, reflecting changes in the Latin American NGO community and the political context in the region as well as an increasingly strategic approach on the part of WOLA.

In its early years, WOLA, with its church base, had direct communication with priests, nuns, and other religious workers who were living in the region and witnessing events there, and who could speak to the impact of U.S. policy. As few other sources of reliable information on Latin America existed at the time, WOLA had unusual access to cutting-edge information and became an interlocutor between these religious activists, U.S. policy makers and the U.S. public. Because of its contacts in the region, WOLA could often identify emerging issues before they appeared on official Washington's agenda. WOLA's working relationships with partners in Latin America were essential to the development of its reputation as a credible source of information.

In turn, WOLA would share information about policy developments in Washington with its regional colleagues. Moreover, WOLA was founded with the idea of "giving a voice to the voiceless," a principle reaffirmed by WOLA staff over the years. The idea was not to "represent" Latin Americans, but to create a space for them—and for others living and working in the region—to speak out and to have access to those making the policies that had a direct impact on their lives. WOLA provided such access by organizing seminars and other public events, by setting up meetings with policy makers, and, at times, by arranging quiet, off-the-record conversations.

In its early years, in addition to religious workers and church groups, WOLA began establishing ties with leftwing politicians and grassroots activists (such as union and peasant organizers) that shared WOLA's concerns about social justice. In addition, WOLA forged alliances with more traditional politicians who were victims of military rule and sought Washington's influence to restore democracy to their countries. Wilson Ferreira (Uruguay), Eduardo Frei, Sr. (Chile), Hernan Siles Suazo (Bolivia) and José Napoleon Duarte (El Salvador) were among those who came through

WOLA's doors. WOLA also worked closely with victims of human rights violations, providing them with the opportunity to tell their tragic stories in Washington.

The nature of WOLA's partnerships in the region evolved over time. An incipient human rights movement was taking shape in Latin America and the Caribbean by the end of the 1970s, as country-based human rights NGOs were established. WOLA saw its role at this time as helping to strengthen the work of these organizations in two ways. First, WOLA provided information, analysis, and opportunities for interchange on international human rights instruments, documentation methodologies and other tools to help build local capacity. Second, WOLA worked to boost the local legitimacy and credibility of the organizations by providing them with international linkages. In turn, these groups facilitated WOLA's work by identifying priority issues, providing information and analysis from a regional perspective, and by helping WOLA gain access to other local organizations and individuals.

By the mid-1980s the Latin American human rights movement was being consolidated and space was opened for NGO activity in the region. WOLA collaborated regularly with groups such as the Instituto Interamericano de Derechos Humanos (Inter-American Institute of Human Rights) in Costa Rica and the Comisión Andina de Juristas (Andean Commission of Jurists) in Peru. By the late 1980s, more country-based human rights organizations and networks had established themselves in Colombia, Guatemala and other countries. WOLA continued to help build the capacity of these local organizations. It also played an important role in convening the Latin American and international human rights community to discuss new challenges, issues, and strategies. Increasingly, WOLA worked in partnership with these organizations, developing and carrying out joint advocacy campaigns.

The end of military dictatorships in South America and peace accords in Central America led to a proliferation of NGO activity. New spaces emerged for social movements, civil society organizations and NGOs. As more and more organizations came to WOLA for guidance and assistance, WOLA began a Spanish-language publication called *Enlace* and in 1996 it launched an Advocacy Training Program in Central America intended to strengthen the capacity of local actors to develop and carry out advocacy campaigns to promote social change. In addition, major projects were

launched to both partner with and build the capacity of local organizations in a variety of areas, including promoting transformative reconstruction in the wake of Hurricane Mitch (which hit Central America in 1998) and promoting public security reform in Central America.

Likewise, in the United States, work with partners in coalitions, and collective work in general, has been critical to WOLA's success. U.S.-based groups with which WOLA has had particularly close working relationships over the years include the Center for International Policy, the Colombia Human Rights Committee (now the U.S. Office on Colombia), the Friends Committee on National Legislation, and the American Friends Service Committee—to name only a few.

Special mention must be made of the essential role played by the Latin America Working Group (LAWG). LAWG convenes religious groups, humanitarian organizations, peace and justice groups, and other NGOs to coordinate advocacy strategies aimed at influencing U.S. foreign

policy toward Latin America and the Caribbean. Its antecedents go back to a Central America task force pulled together in 1983 under the auspices of the Coalition for a New Foreign and Military Policy and staffed by longtime activist Cindy Buhl. This initial coalition brought together a diverse and impressive group, from small religious and peace groups to trade unions to NGOs like Common Cause, and pioneered many of the advocacy strategies that are in use today. It quickly developed the capacity to carry out sophisticated lobbying campaigns on Capitol Hill, influence public opinion and policy makers through the media, and mobilize grassroots activists to influence policy. Since its formation, LAWG has been a crucial WOLA partner.

Equally important is WOLA's close collaboration with other human rights organizations with offices in Washington, particularly Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch, and the Center for Justice and International Law (CEJIL). Joint statements or letters by the four organizations have strengthened numerous advocacy campaigns. ■

## SELECTED WOLA VISITORS IN THE 1980s

**Amalia Bell**, Moravian Church,  
Nicaragua

**Sergio Bitar**, Convergencia  
Socialista, Chile

**José Burneo**, Centro de Estudios y  
Acción para la Paz (CEAPAZ),  
Peru

**Vinicio Cerezo**, Guatemalan  
politician (later president)

**Ramón Custodio**, Comité de  
Defensa de los Derechos Humanos  
(CODEH), Honduras

**Javier Díez Canseco**, member of  
Parliament, Peru

**Amancio Elda and Carmen  
Sánchez**, landmine victims,  
Nicaragua

**Father Ignacio Ellacuría**,  
Universidad Centroamericana,  
El Salvador

**Gustavo Gallón**, Comisión  
Colombiana de Juristas, Colombia

**Alejandro González**, Vicaría de  
la Solidaridad, Chile

**Rudy González**, editor of *Ultima  
Hora*, Dominican Republic

**Oswaldo Hurtado**, former  
president of Ecuador

**Alberto Koschuetzke**, Nueva  
Sociedad, Venezuela

**Domingo Laíno**, Partido Liberal  
Radical Auténtico, Paraguay

**Elizabeth Lira**, psychologist for  
victims of repression, Chile

**María de Mariani**, Abuelas de  
la Plaza de Mayo, Argentina

**Lucila Mejía de Morales**,  
Federación de Mujeres  
Campesinas, Bolivia

**Rigoberta Menchú**, indigenous  
leader, Guatemala

**Emilio Mignone**, Centro de  
Estudios Legales y Sociales  
(CELS), Argentina

**Luis Alejandro Pedraza Becerra**,  
Central Unitaria de Trabajadores,  
Colombia

**Father Luís Pérez Aguirre**, Servicio  
Paz y Justicia, Uruguay

**Adolfo Pérez Esquivel**, 1980 Nobel  
Peace Prize winner, Argentina

**Sonia Picado**, Instituto  
Interamericano de Derechos  
Humanos (IIDH), Costa Rica

**Francisco de Roux**, Centro de  
Investigación y Educación Popular  
(CINEP), Colombia

**Monsignor Samuel Ruiz García**,  
bishop of San Cristóbal de las  
Casas, Chiapas, Mexico

**Luis Inácio “Lula” da Silva**,  
Partido dos Trabalhadores, Brazil

**Juan Tokatlian**, Universidad de los  
Andes, Colombia

**Gilma Torres de Reto**, mother of  
Willy Reto, killed in Uchuraccay  
Massacre, Peru

**Guillermo Ungo**, FMLN-FDR,  
El Salvador

**Zenaida Velásquez**, Comité  
de Familiares de Detenidos-  
Desaparecidos en Honduras



## · WOLA IN HISTORICAL CONTEXT ·

While WOLA's mission has remained the same, the political environment in which it operates both in Latin America and in Washington has undergone profound transformations. Over WOLA's first two decades, Latin America — as the battleground of the second half of the Cold War — played a preponderant role in U.S. foreign policy. This stands in stark contrast to the situation today, as Latin America has returned to the bottom of the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

While the political environment in the 1970s in Washington was more conducive to WOLA's efforts, the situation in Latin America itself turned from bad to worse. Southern Cone dictatorships remained entrenched, though movements for the return of democratic rule were growing. In Central America, conflicts were on the rise. In Nicaragua, the Somoza dynasty dug in its heels as the Sandinistas' strength grew; fraudulent elections kept the military — and its death squads — in power in El Salvador; and Guatemala's scorched earth policy was in the making. Foreseeing the tragic path ahead, WOLA sought to put Central America on Washington's radar screen.

The election of Ronald Reagan in 1980 marked a major turning point for U.S. policy, for its impact on the region and for progressive NGOs like WOLA. After Reagan took office, the policy debates in Washington shifted sharply to the right and national security concerns took center stage in U.S. for-

ign policy. Moreover, Central America became the battleground where the Reagan Administration waged its war on Communism. Perhaps at no other time in recent history has Latin America played such a predominant role in foreign policy and in power struggles between Republicans and Democrats, and between the White House and Congress.

Reagan staked his presidency on ridding Central America of the perceived Communist menace — to the point that his administration launched an illegal proxy war in its efforts to promote the overthrow of the Sandinista government in Nicaragua. Those advocating for an alternative approach based on negotiated settlements to the region's conflicts, be they on Capitol Hill or in the United Methodist Building (where WOLA and many other NGOs were located), were accused of being "soft on Communism" and closet Sandinistas. Much of the political space that opened up in the 1970s was closed in the 1980s and remained that way until the end of the decade.

Many legislative battles were lost during the Reagan years. However, the relentless efforts of the coalition described above created a powerful advocacy machine that was well positioned when the conditions for meaningful policy change emerged. Battles over U.S. military aid to the Contras and, to a lesser extent, El Salvador, made it politically costly for the subsequent Bush Administration to continue the path set out by his predecessor, particularly in the wake of the Iran-contra scandal. WOLA and other organizations

### THE REAGAN YEARS

Rep. Michael Barnes (D-MD), Chairman of the Subcommittee on Western Hemisphere Affairs of the House Foreign Affairs Committee from January 1981 until January 1987, reflects on WOLA's role in the Central America policy debates of the 1980s:

During the Reagan years, the Subcommittee worked closely with WOLA and other advocacy groups on a number of human rights issues, especially in Central America. WOLA's contribution was expertise, and contacts with popular organizations in the different countries. WOLA brought people to meet with us, helped us set up meetings beyond the official agenda when members of staff traveled down to the region, and even organized unofficial delegations for staff without travel budgets. Meeting people affected by U.S. policy had a real impact. Members got first-hand accounts from victims of human rights violations, and could testify about what was happening on the ground... Anything that served to counter the administration's disinformation, and insert accurate information into the debate, helped us during those years.

SOURCE: MICHAEL BARNES, "THE REAGAN YEARS," WOLA CROSSCURRENTS, NOVEMBER 2004, P. 8.

worked to link the House Democratic leadership and other Members of Congress to key actors in Central America promoting peaceful alternatives. This effort helped create the conditions by which a Democratic Congress quickly jumped on the peace band wagon after the Central American presidents put forward a regional peace accord in 1987. That marked a definitive moment in U.S. foreign policy toward the region—a shift from waging war to waging peace—that was made possible by the sustained advocacy work of WOLA and its coalition partners.

Dramatic changes were taking place in the region by the end of the 1980s. The fall of the military junta in Argentina in 1983 marked the beginning of the end of the period of military rule in the region. In 1988, the military led by the infamous General Pinochet in Chile was voted out of office and General Alfredo Stroessner in Paraguay fell not long thereafter. In Central America, negotiations were underway that led to the disbanding of the Contras and historic peace accords in El Salvador in 1992 and in 1996 in Guatemala.

For groups such as WOLA, this changing political reality offered both challenges and opportunities. The emerging “democratic” regimes often failed to meet basic standards of functioning democracies and human rights abuses continued. In countries where military dictatorships came to an end, militaries continued to wield significant power and other endemic forms of violence, such as police brutality and poverty-related crime, continued. In other countries, human rights crises continued under civilian elected governments, such as in Peru and Colombia, where militarized counterinsurgency strategies predominated. Yet at the same time, there were new opportunities to promote reforms that could institutionalize human rights guarantees and deepen democracy. Similarly, space opened up for Latin American

social movements, civil society organizations and NGOs to influence the reform processes and political debates in ways that simply were not possible during the years of political repression and conflict.

In this new context, Latin America became a sort of testing ground for democracy promotion, with new kinds of assistance provided by the U.S. government and other international actors. WOLA’s focus shifted to helping strengthen basic institutions, such as judiciaries and police forces, to make them more accountable within fragile democracies and to support efforts to seek truth and reconciliation in post-conflict societies. In Washington, WOLA continued to push for the United States to demilitarize its policy toward the region, support reform processes, and give economic assistance for democratic reforms and poverty alleviation. Part of the challenge was simply to keep public attention and debate focused on Latin America at a time when U.S. policy and media coverage were shifting their emphasis to other parts of the world. At the same time, Latin America was moving lower on the U.S. foreign policy agenda.

As the Cold War waned, however, the U.S. War on Drugs escalated, leading to a dramatic increase in U.S. military assistance, training and support to the very countries that had become the primary human rights concern in the 1990s: Peru and Colombia. Once again—but this time through its counternarcotics policy—the United States began down the slippery slope of involvement in brutal counterinsurgency wars. While the increasingly dictatorial direction of the Fujimori government in Peru prevented large-scale U.S. involvement, Colombia became the primary recipient of U.S. military aid in the hemisphere. WOLA was prescient in identifying the militarization of the U.S. War on Drugs and calling for an alternative approach.

## SELECTED WOLA VISITORS IN THE 1990s

**Mariclaire Acosta Urquidí,** Comisión Mexicana de Defensa y Promoción de los Derechos Humanos, Mexico

**Xavier Albo,** Centro de Investigación y Promoción del Campesinado (CIPCA), Bolivia

**Antonio Aranívar,** former foreign minister, Bolivia

**Irma Graciela Azmitia Dorantes,** Recuperación de la Memoria Histórica (Comisión REMHI) de la Oficina de Derechos Humanos del Arzobispado de Guatemala

**Catalina Barbosa,** Organización Asháninka, Peru

**Rafael Barrios,** Colectivo de Abogados “José Alvear Restrepo,” Colombia

**Ligia Bolívar,** Programa Venezolano de Educación-Acción en Derechos Humanos (PROVEA), Venezuela

**María Cristina Caballero,** Revista SEMANA, Colombia

**María Elisa Carrio,** member of Congress, Argentina

**Miguel Chiriboga,** Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción (ALOP), Costa Rica

**Wanda Colón,** Proyecto Caribeño de Justicia y Paz, Puerto Rico

**Edgar Cortéz,** Centro de Derechos Humanos “Miguel Agustín Pro Juárez,” Mexico

**Gino Costa,** Defensoría del Pueblo, Peru

**Lucho Garzón,** Central Unitaria de Trabajadores, Colombia

WOLA staff carved out a niche as leading experts on U.S. drug policy within the NGO community, and became key interlocutors with U.S. policymakers on the Andean region and later on Mexico.

The election of Bill Clinton in 1992 marked another sea-change in the political environment in Washington. Many WOLA colleagues assumed key posts within the new administration; unlike the Carter period, however, by 1994 the Republicans had gained control of both chambers of the U.S. Congress. WOLA staff again had significant access to high-level administration officials, but conditions for impacting legislative action on Capitol Hill became increasingly difficult. While policy conflicts eventually emerged with the Clinton Administration on some issues such as drug policy and Colombia, WOLA staff believed that they had an important impact on policies adopted with regard to El Salvador, Nicaragua, Haiti and Peru. WOLA, continuing in its traditional role, also sought to provide civil society groups and other key actors in the region with access to Clinton Administration officials.

Over the course of the 1990s, numerous new countries and issues emerged on WOLA's increasingly diverse and inter-related agenda. At the country level, work on Mexico, Cuba and Haiti took on increased importance. At the same time, WOLA's work was increasingly framed in terms of broader issues that cut across the countries in which WOLA had established expertise. (A healthy tension has always existed between WOLA's traditional focus as country experts and work on broader thematic issues). These include the drug policy work mentioned above, public security reform and economic rights issues. More recent initiatives include work on organized crime, gang activity and violence against women in Mexico and Guatemala.

The election of President George W. Bush, followed closely by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks, represent yet another sea change in U.S. policy toward the region.

With official Washington focused on waging a "war on terrorism" and preoccupied with events in the Middle East, Latin America and the Caribbean dropped even lower on the U.S. foreign policy agenda. The region also was seen increasingly through a counterterrorism lens, though there was no evidence of significant terrorist threats aimed at the United States from its southern neighbors. A multitude of issues were cast in counterterrorism terms and discussed as threats to U.S. national security, including "narco-terrorism;" illicit trafficking in drugs, people, and weapons; forgery and money laundering; kidnapping and urban gangs; "radical movements;" and mass migration.<sup>2</sup> U.S. officials also pointed to the need to create a "third border" in the Caribbean to prevent terrorists from coming into the United States. These arguments led to an expansion of the role of the U.S. military in shaping and implementing U.S. foreign policy toward the region.

With conservative Republicans entrenched in both the White House and on Capitol Hill, WOLA presently faces one of the most difficult political environments of its thirty year history. Yet WOLA staff continues to create space for dialogue and to seek out opportunities for positive policy change. Indeed, one of the important lessons learned over WOLA's three decades of advocacy is the importance of laying painstaking groundwork for change when confronting the status quo or entrenched interests. Organizations such as WOLA must seek to create an environment where change is possible and then seize the opportunities that present themselves to make that change happen. ■

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## · THREE DECADES OF ADVOCACY ·

**T**ransnational civil society exercises its influence through its ability to make someone, policymakers or publics, listen and act,” writes Ann Florini, an expert on civil society organizations. “The currency of its power is not force, but credible information and moral authority.”<sup>3</sup> Over three decades of advocacy, it is precisely this combination of analysis and moral voice that has contributed to WOLA’s ability to shape policy debates.

Similarly, in their study of transnational civil society organizations and networks, *Activists Beyond Borders*, Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink note that the most successful organizations often seek not only to influence policy outcomes but also to “transform the terms and nature of the debate.”<sup>4</sup>

WOLA has consistently sought to do the latter; that is, to change the nature of the policy debate and the status quo, even when that has meant confronting existing power structures or strong countervailing forces. Sometimes this means making present policy more politically costly to implement; at other times, it means putting a new issue on the policy agenda. WOLA has also promoted incremental changes that move in the direction of reshaping a particular policy. Sometimes these are targeted campaigns to influence U.S. assistance to a given country or, occasionally, a piece of legislation.

WOLA staff learned how to carry out advocacy initiatives by trial and error. However, with a strategic planning process put in place in the early 1990s and the establishment

of the Advocacy Training Program, the organization began taking a more formal approach, seeking to define the steps involved in effective advocacy. While staff has always thought strategically, in recent years WOLA has developed the capacity to design and implement sophisticated advocacy strategies and campaigns. These have been a key factor in recent policy successes.

Five specific characteristics are key to WOLA’s effectiveness and its valued role in the Washington foreign policy community. WOLA . . .

*. . . gives a voice to the voiceless.* WOLA was founded on the principle that the actors and interests defining U.S. policy toward Latin America should be broadened and the policy-making process democratized. Toward that end, it has sought to create space in Washington and access to U.S. policy makers for those who did not previously have such access, including both Latin Americans and U.S. citizens living in the region. This approach has allowed WOLA to provide direct testimony on the situation in a given country.

*. . . works closely with regional colleagues.* WOLA’s relationships with its Latin American and Caribbean partners are perhaps the most important factor contributing to its effectiveness. Much of the information and analysis upon which WOLA bases its work is gleaned from these colleagues. WOLA staff members develop work plans and set institutional agendas based on the input provided by those living and working in the region. At the same time, WOLA enhances the work of counterparts in the region and serves as a translator in the broadest sense, helping Washington

### FRIENDSHIP, EXCHANGE, AND DIALOGUE

A Salvadoran colleague, Roberto Cuéllar, head of a human rights organization in Costa Rica, reflects on WOLA’s role:

“It is a fact of life that one can be blinded by his or her own vision. For that reason, one expects from *UN AMIGO AMERICANO* not only sympathy and understanding—certainly necessary—but also advice, sincere and high-quality dialogue and a critical look that helps us to see ourselves better. In that sense . . . the spaces for interchange created by WOLA between the U.S. political community and Latin American human rights organizations have been . . . authentic spaces for intercultural exchange and dialogue . . . Through this dialogue, we all grow and learn; we are all enriched.”

SOURCE: ROBERTO CUÉLLAR M., “*EL AMIGO AMERICANO*,” *WOLA CROSSCURRENTS*, NOVEMBER 2004, P. 10. CUÉLLAR IS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR OF THE INSTITUTO INTERAMERICANO DE DERECHOS HUMANOS IN SAN JOSÉ, COSTA RICA.

policy makers understand Latin America and helping Latin Americans understand Washington.

*. . . uses a broad definition of human rights.* WOLA's work extends beyond a traditional human rights focus in two ways. One, it encompasses the full set of human, economic, social, and cultural rights, a much broader range of issues than those addressed by most human rights groups. Two, it emphasizes the political context within which human rights violations occur and seeks to influence this context by changing policies of the U.S. government. These two aspects have defined a unique niche for WOLA within the Washington advocacy community. To the question of whether WOLA is a human rights or a foreign policy organization, Tom Quigley says the answer is a resounding "Yes!" on both counts.

*. . . produces consistently credible information and analysis.* Over the years, WOLA has earned a reputation for providing reliable and accurate information, analysis, and ideas. This has helped staff members gain access to high-level officials, even ones who do not agree with their analysis. According to one State Department official, "I could always quibble with [WOLA's] conclusions, but not their facts."<sup>5</sup> WOLA staff speaks the lingo of Washington, and they compile and disseminate information effectively. They know that to be heard they must strike the right tone, frame arguments in certain terms, and get information into policy makers' hands at pivotal moments, before decisions are made.

*. . . thinks strategically and formulates positive policy recommendations.* Studies of civil society networks point

to the ability to think and act strategically as one of the most important elements of effective advocacy. From early on, WOLA came to understand the U.S. policy-making process and learned how to demystify it for collegial organizations in the United States and abroad. Subsequently, the organization developed a planning process for designing effective advocacy strategies. Of particular importance is having clear goals and objectives, a well-thought-out plan for achieving them and a sound understanding of who needs to be influenced and the best way of doing so.

Equally important is WOLA's emphasis on crafting positive and feasible proposals for policy change. It is not enough simply to criticize. As one congressional staffer put it, WOLA has mastered the art of articulating "things that people on the Hill can say yes to."<sup>6</sup>

WOLA was founded on the belief that a profound transformation of Latin America and the Caribbean and U.S. policies toward the region is needed for more just and equitable societies to take root. This commitment to human rights and socioeconomic justice means that WOLA staff members share a vision for change that goes beyond what is normally on the table in Washington policy debates. Working with collegial organizations throughout the hemisphere, WOLA has sought to alter the terms of policy debates and has put new items on the policy agenda with a remarkable degree of success. After three decades, WOLA goes forward more committed than ever to promoting human rights and social justice, educating policy makers and the public, and creating space for political and social change in our hemisphere. ■

## ENDNOTES

- 1 Joe Eldridge, interview, 4 November 2004.
- 2 "Posture Statement by General Bantz J. Craddock, United States Army Commander, United States Southern Command, Before the 109th Congress House Armed Services Committee," March 9, 2005, p. 4.
- 3 Ann Florini, ed., *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society* (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2000), p. 11.
- 4 Margaret E. Keck and Kathryn Sikkink, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1998), p. 2.
- 5 Roberta Jacobson, interview quoted in Chipoco and Schoultz, "Program Evaluation of the Washington Office on Latin America" (report prepared for the Ford Foundation, 1991), p. 12.
- 6 Madalene O'Donnell, interview, January 26, 2005.

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This history traces WOLA's path, in words and pictures, from its beginnings as a tiny faith-based advocacy group to its current role as a key player in Washington's policy dialogues on Latin America. It describes how WOLA has pressed for just U.S. policies toward the region for more than 30 years, creating a hospitable space in Washington for its Latin American colleagues to join the Washington dialogues as well.



Este libro traza, en palabras y fotografías, la trayectoria de WOLA, desde su origen como una pequeña organización religiosa de cabildeo, a su papel actual como actor clave en los diálogos de políticas en Washington sobre América Latina. Describe como WOLA, en los últimos treinta años, ha empujado para que las políticas estadounidenses hacia la región sean justas, creando en Washington un espacio receptivo para que sus colegas latinoamericanos también puedan participar en dichos diálogos.



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