

_ DRAFT _

Discussion Notes

“Going Global, Staying Local, Trying ‘Glocal’? Challenges and Dilemmas in Transnational Networks Structuring”¹

Dominique Caouette

**Réseau d’étude des dynamiques transnationales
et de l’action collective (REDTAC)**

Université de Montréal

March 18, 2009

Oftentimes more visible in the form of discrete events of mass protest against specific international official summits and institutions, transnational collective action encompasses increasingly eclectic expressions. These include for example global social movements, federation of NGOs and loosely connected and flexible international networks.² In its bare form, transnational activism can be described as social movements and other civil society organisations and individuals operating across state borders.³

Contemporary transnational networks might resist the globalisation of production and finances in their various distillations, offer alternative solutions and mechanism (fair trade, codes of conducts for enterprises, organic agricultural production, seeds saving and exchanges, etc) or allow for marginalized and excluded groups to link and join their forces. These transnational initiatives and multiple modes of action are influenced by the advent of communications technologies and the related cultural diffusion of global proportions.⁴

Individuals involved in global networks and initiatives are seldom only working at the transnational level exclusively. Instead, they tend to be “rooted at the local level and national level” and engaging simultaneously different levels of government institutions.⁵ But most significantly, transnational networkers are able to create linkages and form coalitions among various types of actors operating on different levels (local, national, regional, international) and respond to various political contexts, each offering a different range of political opportunities.

In the following pages, I discuss how transnational networking constitutes one form of response to global socio-economic and political processes generally associated with globalization. In doing so, I suggest that while transnational networking offers possibilities for social transformation and has become an increasingly important modality of action for social justice organizations, it also creates a range of dilemmas that need to be considered. Developing an informed understanding of what are the implications and potentials of global networking in relation to the broad range of initiatives and endeavours for social transformation might permit to achieve greater complementarities with local and national level activism and influence on political processes.

Such a reflection is now timely as both practitioners and analysts are often faced with very concrete and difficult questions in terms of what are the priorities, what type of activities should be given greater attention and at what level (local, regional, national or supranational), or even, how can integration between these various levels of efforts can be ensured. This is especially true among international development organizations which find themselves increasingly involved in supporting this type of networks in addition to more grassroots locally-based work done by local community organizations and NGOs

The Ecology of Transnational Activism

As any global phenomena, contemporary transnational activism and networking are rooted and contingent of a specific context. These contextual elements need consideration as they represent important variables in order to comprehend the specific contours of transnational networking. For now, it is possible to identify at least four elements:

1. *Heterogeneous societies, languages, cultures, and uneven access to communication technologies:* A first element to consider is the heterogeneity of political, cultural and demographic contexts in which networking is taking place. Such diversity represents both an asset as well as a challenge for transnational collective action. The capacities of organisations and networks to understand and enrich their praxis from such diversity appear a central factor to ensure that transnational activism will become an important component and a complementary means to affect social transformation. Greater and cheaper availability of internet and new communication technologies, a more widespread knowledge of a common language (usually English), and the possibility of relatively cheap travel have now made transnational networking among grassroots organizations increasingly feasible.
2. *Fragility and limitations of the democratic space:* There are important differences in the nature and degree of democratic space that exists between states. In some cases, the “democratic space” is very limited and there are few domestic political opportunities that exist for domestic organizing. In such context, transnational networking might become an important modality of struggle as Keck and Sikkink and others have shown in analyzing human rights struggles and advocacy in Latin America.⁶ Transnational organizing is sometime used as an alternative to local and national organizing in cases where the domestic political space is limited and constrained. At the same time, such type of organizing can be seen as a diversion to the more pressing local and national issues of enlarging democratic space. It is important to examine if and how does transnational social networks interact with these domestic grassroots mobilization efforts and whether they contributed positively to open and enlarge democratic space.
3. *Unevenness of civil society organizing.* As a whole the unevenness of civil society organizing and experiences has to be considered and factored in while assessing the potentialities and possibilities of transnational networking. The density, the qualities and the attributes of social movements, self-help networks and NGOs vary significantly from one country and

one from region to the other. At the same time, there are now regional networks and organizations such as Focus on the Global South or Third World Network that play a key role by providing analyses and regional and national perspectives to resource-poor social movements and networks, improving and enhancing the quality and depth of the policy advocacy.

4. *Importance of the rural sector:* To a different degree, most states of the Global South have important proportions of their populations living and working in rural areas. It is also in those areas where poverty and exploitation are most obvious and widespread. This reality requires a critical examination in particular how rural issues - such as land reform, land tenure, right to food, people's control over seeds and genetic resources, fair trade, ecological agriculture, etc. - can be carried forward by transnational networks. For grassroots rural organizations, determining what value-added participation of transnational rural networks might add to local struggles is a central one as well as ensuring the participation of rural-based organizers.⁷

These above features, of what I called the "ecology" of transnational networking do not exhaust the range of differences and commonalities that exist. Rather, they were presented here as a first attempt to identify some of the defining features of the context in which transnational collective action takes place.⁸

Key Dilemmas and Challenges for Transnational Networking

While transnational networking action offers many advantages and significant potential for transformative action, it is not without its own set of dilemmas. The following paragraphs discuss those. The list here is not intended to be exhaustive but seeks to identify those important ones.

1. *Allocation of resources:* Supporting transnational social movements, INGOs or activists networks means that funding agencies are making certain choices in terms of allocation of resources. These choices require at least two types of consideration. A first one is to ensure that there is coherence within the choices that are made and complementarities exist among the various levels of interventions. Ideally, transnational networks should echo and amplify actions at the local and national levels. In some cases, when local and national channels for social and political transformation are blocked, one could think of Burma, transnational action (cross border interventions) might become the privileged axis of work. A second consideration is to avoid situations when limited resources are being substantially allocated for transnational events, such as the World Social Forums and other important gatherings, with the end result that support of grassroots programming is undermined.
2. *Democratic processes and "voice":* A second set of consideration has to do with the functioning of transnational activism. As it is true for local and national forms of organization, issues of democratic participation and "voice" are very much at the heart of sustainable transnational action. How are decisions taken? Who is speaking for whom?

These are not easy issues to confront when dealing with relatively loose organizational forms and several national contexts, cultures and languages. However, these seem unavoidable issues that require discussions and considerations.⁹

3. *Local versus global issues*: Transnational networking does not imply necessarily global issues. Advocating only for regional and global issues (trade agreements, regional security, global regulations, etc.) only constitute one form of global networking. Very local issues such as the construction of dams, environmental threats by mining companies, or the impact of deforestation can all be sources of transnational networking. The decisive factor might be one of strategic and tactical considerations. What are the opportunities that exist to enable and initiate change processes? Are there clear connections and parallels between situations and problems in various countries and can resistance struggles be connected? Can such connections multiply or enhance the chances of policy changes?
4. *Existing models and frames of collective action*: Self-help networks have a rich history of social mobilizations ranging from very local resistance struggles to national movements. Throughout those struggles collective action frames and *repertoires* of collective actions were developed and tested. Social movement organizers, activists and NGO workers learned from previous failures and successes. Successful patterns of mobilization and themes of action are internalized and disseminated within societies and across societies. With the growing access to international information and the global connections that exist among activist networks, forms and theme of protest are now rapidly diffused. The challenge here is how to learn from other movements' experiences and struggles and adjust those to a particular context.
5. *High density of social movement activists, NGO and networks*: The growing number of social movements, NGOs and networks, in particular those that have regional connections means that it has become increasingly possible to organize coordinated campaigns and activities. The expanding density of civil society organisations also means that there are often several NGOs and networks working and addressing the same issues, oftentimes with differing views on tactics and strategies. This organizational plurality and diversity of responses is oftentimes depicted as a dilution and diversion of energy and dynamism. It nonetheless constitutes a significant achievement in terms of having now a ticker civil society capable of mobilizing a wide range of exploited sectors and proposing innovative alternatives. In the coming years, the challenge seems to be on how to construct deliberative processes and build common grounds that can strengthen the overall capabilities of grassroots organizations and activist networks to offer counter-hegemonic proposals on democratic and participatory governance, ecologically sustainable socio-economic development, accessible and universal health care and social housing and women's rights and feminist practices.
6. *Oppositional versus propositional politics*: This is not a new dilemma and as time is passing, less and less is it perceived as a binary opposition. To the contrary, whenever the two can be combined, the better the advocacy. As time passes, the importance of developing

alternative propositions is becoming a priority. In fact, the present time might be an opportune moment to document and present the growing range of alternative practices to globalization that have been set into motion. Two types of alternatives can be imagined: One would be constituted of the range of alternative organizational practices that have been proposed and set into motion by transnational civil society. This would require an effort of introspection by such actors to analyze and reflect on how global civil society organizes and functions in a way that is democratic, transparent and accountable. A second type would be made of the various development alternatives that have been put forward on the ground, especially those that have been implemented in more than one national contexts, for example, ecological agriculture, agriculture supported by the community (ASC), environmentally sound small-scale industrial, alternative urban settlement development, workers' managed coop. and community-managed programs, etc.

7. *Anti-globalization élites or shared participation:* As the anti-alter globalization movement develops and expands, there is a need to assess whether or not the movement has ended creating its own sets of elites - the "rock-star" syndrome - who participate in all gatherings and campaigns. This might seem like an unavoidable situation, however, being conscious of it might trigger actions towards decentralized leadership, the development of a plurality of spokesperson and a greater concern for popular education and dissemination of analyses. Ideally, the more diverse, the more rooted and the more localized the leadership, the better, especially if aiming at building up another "World" respectful of differences and rooted in the multitude of local experiences.
8. *Mobilization-driven and campaign-driven?* Is transnational networking only rooted in mobilization and campaign activities? While it is clear to practitioners that it is much more than this, it might be important to reflect on the different components of transnational networking. In what ways is it having its greatest impacts? Is it able to make local and national governments and supranational institutions adjust and respond to pressures from below? Equally important is a discussion on the combination of forms of contentious politics. What issues, what forms and what timing are most likely to affect the dominant discourse and practices of ruling institutions and government.
9. *Policy influence and impact:* This is the most difficult aspect of transnational networking. Part of difficulty is that policy influence is often hard to measure. In very few situations, it is possible to trace direct causal relations between a civil society action and a policy change. However, this is also true of true of national level campaigns. What seems like important variables are: 1) the level of knowledge and expertise that transnational networks and organizations are able to bring and offer on key certain specific policy issues; 2) the level of public support they generate, especially their capacities to mobilize widespread opposition movement; 3) the type of political opportunities that exists: Are there divisions within the ruling elites? Are there divisions among decision-makers on policy issues? Are there possibilities for tactical alliances?

Conclusion

In this paper, I have briefly examined the challenges and dilemmas brought about by transnational collective action and networking. This form of collective action connects activist networks, NGOs and social movements across borders and can be seen both as a complement to local and national activism as well as an activist modality on its own. Concrete impact and policy influence of such form of activism takes different forms and is often difficult to trace in a linear way. At one level, transnational advocacy efforts produces shared identities and a common understanding of issues. It also generates common campaigns and proposals that can be put forward during regional and international gatherings and implemented both at the regional and national levels. In some cases, transnational activism influences the dominant discourse and forces its tenants to defend and justify their positions. In other cases, it can inform reformist policy-makers interested in developing alternative proposals to the more orthodox globalization agenda where are seeking the expertise and knowledge generated by transnational networks. But more importantly, by connecting community organizations and local networks to a broader set of issues and struggles, local activists are able to amplify and enrich both their work being conducted at the very local level and the advocacy and policy work conducted regionally and globally. Interacting with other local activists and global networks allows for new learning and experiences that later on can enrich and feed local organizing efforts.¹⁰ Transnational advocacy efforts produce shared identities and a common understanding of issues. It also generates common campaigns and proposals that can be put forward during international gatherings and implemented both at the regional and national levels.

As mentioned before, this emerging form of activism is not without its own sets of dilemmas and challenges. Exploring further the micro-processes at work when local issues and struggles become part of transnational network remain a key analytical challenge. Nonetheless, it offers important possibilities and potentials to augment and enrich the practice of international development organizations and civil society organizations. Linkages between local and global scales become all the more complex as cyber activism now forms one of the modalities by which local networks can disseminate globally (Bob 2001, Bennett 2003). Websites, mailing lists and other web 2.0 applications have been key tools for disseminating research and policy advocacy platforms. While it is essential to ensure that those directly affected at the local scale are able to access and use these new technologies, these do not replace the need for direct encounters and gatherings, as well as the need for public mass mobilizations.

In the coming years, a key analytical as well as practical challenge will be to understand concretely and operationally how such form of transnational networking “fits” in the overall picture of grassroots struggles and how it contributes to strengthening deliberative processes and fostering alternative practices that can improve the lives of the exploited people.¹¹ In doing so, it might become possible to illustrate and make operational what James Rosenau (2003) described as “distant proximities” to illustrate the contradictory and intertwined dynamics of these “glocal” connections. Understanding resistance on multiple scales might require us to break away from easily understood and usual dichotomies, local versus global, open versus hidden, inclusionary versus exclusionary, private versus public, and so on.

APPENDIX A

List of “factors affecting conflict and cooperation in transnational movement networks” as identified by Joe Bandy and Jackie Smith

In the concluding chapter of their book on transnational coalitions and protest against neoliberal capitalism, Bandy and Smith established: 1) a series of conditions auspicious to the formation of transnational networks; 2) a typology of contentious issues within these networks, and, 3) the elements that are most conducive to the construction of transnational coalition. These conditions, issues and elements are here presented in a point form:

I. Social Conditions that Enable Transnational Networks

- 1) The presence of IGOs [International Governmental Organizations] or INGOs [International Nongovernmental Organizations] that facilitate network development;
- 2) The presence of well-organized national movements;
- 3) The presence of well-organized foreign movement allies;
- 4) Many pre-existing similarities among movements of different nations;
- 5) The capacity for regular communication between national movements;
- 6) Government or corporate institutions that are open to change;
- 7) Economic conditions conducive to movement resource building;
- 8) The absence of international political conflict, such as war on terrorism; and,
- 9) Mass public dissent.

II. Conflicts within Transnational Movement Networks

- 1) Resource conflicts, resource dependencies
- 2) Organizational conflicts
- 3) Identity conflicts
- 4) Conflicts over goals and strategies

III. Collective Actions Conducive to Coalition

- 1) The leadership of skilled movement brokers
- 2) The development of coalition forums towards transnational public spheres
- 3) The promotion of a flexible, democratic organizational culture
- 4) Perceived successes of coalition

Source : Bandy, Joe and Jackie Smith (2005). “Factors Affecting Conflict and Cooperation in Transnational Movements Networks.” In Coalitions Across Borders: Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield: pp.231-252.

Notes:

¹ Briefing Notes for Session 3 « Challenging in going global and structuring a transnational network : network structuring », *The Access of Self-Help Networks to the International Arena*, IRG-Ford Meeting, 23-25 March, 2009.

² Some of the ideas presented here are further explored in Caouette, D and S. Turner eds. (2009), *Agrarian Angst and Rural Resistance in Contemporary Southeast Asia*, London: Routledge.

³ See, Piper, Nicola and Anders Uhlin. (2004). *Transnational Activism in Asia : Problems of Power and Democracy*, London: Routledge; p. 4-5. The same authors define activism as “political activities that are: (1) based on a conflict of interests and thus are of a contentious nature; (2) challenging or supporting certain power structures; (3) involving non-state actors; and (4) taking place (at least partly) outside formal political arenas.” (p.4). Using Thomas Risse-Kappen’s work, they define *transnational* as “interaction across state borders involving at least one non-state actors” (p.5). See, Risse-Kappen, Thomas ed. (1995). *Bringing Transnational Relations Back In: Non-State Actors, Domestic Structures and International Institutions*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. This definition was further refined by two social movement specialists, Della Porta and Tarrow who referred to *transnational collective action* as “the coordinated international campaigns on the part of networks of activists against international actors, other states, or international institutions.” Della Porta, Donatella and Sidney Tarrow (2005), *Transnational Protest and Global Activism*, Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield; p.7

⁴ See, Louise Amoore, (2005), “Introduction: Global Resistance – Global Politics,” In *The Global Resistance Reader*, ed. L. Amoore, Oxon: Routledge: 1-11; Robert W. Cox, “Gramsci, Hegemony and International Relations: An Essay in Method,” In *The Global Resistance Reader*, op.cit., 35-47, Stephen Gill. “Theorizing the Interregnum: the Double Movement and Global Politics in the 1990s,” In *The Global Resistance Reader*, op.cit., 54-64

⁵ See, Della Porta, Donatella and Sidney Tarrow (2005)

⁶ See, Keck and Sikkink (1998), op.cit; Brysk, Alison ed. (2002). *Globalization and Human Rights*. Berkeley: University of California Press; and Risse, Thomas, Stephen C. Ropp and Kathryn Sikkink eds. (1999). *The Power of Human Rights: International Norms and Domestic Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

⁷ See, Desmarais, Annette (2003). « The WTO... Will Meet Somewhere, Sometime. And We Will Be There,» Prepared to VOICES: The Rise of Non-Governmental Voices in Multilateral Organizations. Ottawa: North-South Institute (September); and Borrás Jr. Saturnino.(2004). “La Via Campesina: An Evolving Transnational Social Movement.” TNI Briefing Series No.2004/6. Amsterdam: Transnational Institute.

⁸ One might want to read a similar effort by Piper and Uhlin, in their chapter « New Perspectives on Transnational Activism », in particular the sub-section “Contextualizing Transnational Activism in East and Southeast Asia”. Piper and Uhlin eds. (2004). *Transnational Activism in Asia*, pp.19-20.

⁹ See Appendix A taken from Bandy, Joe and Jackie Smith. (2005). « Factors Affecting Conflict and Cooperation in Transnational Movement Networks. » in *Coalitions Across Borders : Transnational Protest and the Neoliberal Order*. Lanham : Rowman and Littlefield : pp.231-252.

¹⁰ See Caouette, Dominique (2006), « Thinking and Nurturing Transnational Activism in Southeast Asia : Global Advocacy through Knowledge-Building. » *Kasarinlan: A Philippine Quarterly of Third World Studies*, Manila, Philippines, 21, 2 (2006): pp.3-3.

¹¹ A recent work of Jonathan Fox can provide a useful starting point: Fox, Jonathan. (2002). “Assessing Binational Civil Society Coalitions: Lessons from the Mexico-U.S. Experience.” In *Cross-Border Dialogues: U.S.-Mexico Social Movement Networking*, edited by D. Brooks and J. Fox. La Jolla: Center for U.S.-Mexican Studies, University of California-San Diego: pp.341-417. Another useful effort is Clark, John. ed. (2003). *Globalizing Civic Engagement*. London: Earthscan.