Political Responsibility in Transnational NGO Advocacy

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Summary. — Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) manifest a new political reality in the global realm. NGOs have come to mobilize, articulate and represent people's interests or concerns at different levels of decision-making: locally, nationally and internationally. The central argument of this paper is that the relationships that emerge among transnational NGO networks are highly problematic. The dynamics in these relationships determine the quality of NGO advocacy, both in terms of its function as a channel to articulate different development aspirations and as in terms of effectively embracing their responsibilities to other actors in the network. This paper introduces a concept of political responsibility to clarify representation and accountability in transnational NGO networks. Based upon different case studies of NGO advocacy campaigns, the paper also introduces four typologies of relationships which may develop among networks, leading to a varying degree of political responsibility. © 2000 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

Key words — globalization, NGOs, democratization, accountability

1. INTRODUCTION

Nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are widely considered to be one of the most dynamic phenomena in international relations today. Most of the literature on NGOs is exceedingly optimistic about the roles NGOs play in the international, national and local arenas. The academic literature has addressed NGOs as the citizen sector (Najam, 1999), NGOs as agents of accountability (Brown & Fox, 1998), NGOs as the magic development bullet (Edwards & Hulme, 1996) and the expanding role of NGOs in global governance (Williams & Young, 1994).

This paper contributes to the critical literature on what Keck and Sikkink (1998) refer to as the “most interesting” dimension of transnational NGO advocacy networks, namely the management of risks and tensions in international advocacy campaigns. Keck and Sikkink (1998), Nelson (1997), and others have discussed inherent tensions within these networks. For example, Keck and Sikkink (1998) note:

Because transnational advocacy networks normally involve people and organizations in structurally unequal positions, networks can become sites for negotiating over which goals, strategies, and ethical understandings are compatible (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 121).

Nelson writes:

Although NGO networks have often united northern and southern NGOs in opposition to a government policy, North-South differences have extended in part, to the NGO activists network (Nelson, 1997 p. 427).

Keck and Sikkink (1998) while touching upon this topic do not elaborate on how tensions in
transnational advocacy networks are resolved. Nelson argues that some tensions are structural features of the networks. In this paper, we postulate that tensions arise when NGOs active in campaigns fail to understand the political responsibilities that arise in a campaign process. When political responsibilities are not embraced, NGOs are left open to criticism about their legitimacy and accountability. After presenting some key concepts (Section 1) we introduce the concept of political responsibility (Section 2). We then outline four typologies of transnational advocacy campaigns (Section 3). Based upon the typologies we conclude with questions about existing literature on transnational advocacy, accountability and representation (Section 4).

The political responsibilities inherent to transnational advocacy campaigns reflect a healthy debate about the role of NGOs, their legitimacy and accountability. The role of NGOs continues to be contested between a narrow service delivery role and an advocacy role. The service delivery role is perpetuated by the World Bank, some United Nations agencies and national governments, while some NGOs prefer to describe themselves in terms of advocacy. Furthermore, the legitimacy and accountability of NGO advocacy is increasingly questioned not only in the academic literature (Edwards & Hulme, 1996) but also by international financial institutions such as the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank, generally in an attempt to divert attention from the pressure of NGOs on their activities (Bain, 1999). If NGOs are to respond successfully to these challenges, they will need to deal with the political responsibilities inherent to promoting issues such as the rights of the poor, poverty alleviation, natural resource conservation, human rights and sustainable development.

NGOs have come to be a force in many societies, or are at least so perceived. As NGOs have gained experience and credibility, they have recognized that national and international policies as well as commercial market forces often undermine sustainable development efforts and limit the ability of people at the grassroots level from participating in public or private policy decisions that will affect them. Informed by the needs and experiences of the poorer or disadvantaged sectors in their or other societies, NGOs have come to mobilize, articulate and represent people's interests or concerns at different levels of decision-making: locally, nationally and internationally. This advocacy work is increasingly seen by NGOs as an integral part of the role they play in civil society. Using information as a key tool, it entails the ambition to change the course of human development by promoting equal power relationships in national and international arenas.

NGO advocacy is an act of organizing the strategic use of information to democratize unequal power relations. This definition differs from others that tend to emphasize actions related to influencing policy, especially public policy (Tandon, 1994; Edwards & Hulme, 1996). Others tend to outline advocacy relatively unspecified, simply as “communication for change.” In our view, these definitions are too limited in expressing what advocacy stands for, as they assume too much unity in objectives and value systems among the NGOs involved. Furthermore, they often emphasize impact on formal political systems, while disregarding other functions of advocacy. NGO advocacy can very well be aimed at directly influencing reality rather than policy.

The act of advocacy to empower weaker sectors of society is not limited to helping people to access information or giving them tools to reach out to decision-makers. The underlying function of advocacy is often to enhance the self-respect of weaker communities, to improve their self-confidence, constitute integrity and promote mutual trust: all essential ingredients to develop a healthy community. It is often overlooked that NGO advocacy also entails a fight against cynicism and despair to which powerless communities tend to fall victim, in the face of massive political and practical obstacles impairing them to improve their lot.
Grounding NGO advocacy in democratizing power relations rightly puts up-front the fact that NGOs challenge the status quo. In general, advocacy NGOs reveal truths that are not liked by vested interests and power holders. Being involved in NGO advocacy therefore entails taking risks: politically, legally, mentally and physically in the South as well as in the North. Managing these risks invokes a political responsibility toward other groups active in the campaign.

Advocacy is often the key activity of transnational NGO networks, operating in global campaigns. We define transnational advocacy networks as a set of relationships between NGOs and other organizations that simultaneously pursue activities in different political arenas to challenge the status quo. Political arenas are spaces within which decisions are made. Most are geographically bound, such as Washington or Nairobi, but they can also be institutionally bound such as the process of establishing a biodiversity convention. The definition of transnational advocacy networks does not lead us into the sticky territory of assuming shared values among NGOs engaged in advocacy. Transnational advocacy networks are often led by activists, a concept elegantly defined by Keck and Sikkink (1998) as “people who care enough about some issue that they are prepared to incur significant costs and act to achieve their goals” (Keck & Sikkink, 1998, p. 14).

Transnational advocacy networks often form around global campaigns. A transnational NGO advocacy campaign (global NGO campaign) as described herein is the pursuit of loosely linked political objectives carried out by transnational advocacy networks. Campaigns are often named after the dominant concern or after the targeted object. For example, the Land Mine Campaign is commonly understood to describe a global campaign against the use of land mines. The Toxics Trade campaign is the common reference for a decade old campaign against the trade in toxic waste, etc.

2. INTRODUCING POLITICAL RESPONSIBILITY

Global campaigns challenge development projects, economic policies and political forces that threaten to further marginalize local communities or ruin pristine ecosystems. There are political responsibilities that are inherent to taking part in these advocacy campaigns. Political responsibility is a commitment to embrace not only goals in a campaign but to conduct the campaign with democratic principles foremost in the process. Political responsibility is a normative concept that differs slightly from accountability in that accountability has formal obligations embedded within its definition. Within transnational advocacy networks there are no formal mechanisms to enforce obligations. Thus, to discuss accountability within these networks would be to suggest something that is not yet existent.

Many NGOs deny the concept of representation, pointing out that local communities, be they in the North or South, are able to adequately represent themselves. This position belies the fact that in global NGO campaigns, NGO networks are often formed to allow for the expertise and experience of multiple NGOs to be heard in varying political arenas. While it is true that local communities are often able to present adequately their own interests, spokespersons are often tied to the local geographical space within which they live and reluctant or unable to leave the area under threat. They do not have daily access to other political arenas. Nor have they invested the time required to understand the mechanics of investment banks, the United Nations, etc. Thus there is a need for networks to engage in multiple political arenas. With the globalization of decision-making on the increase, we can only expect that the need to articulate concerns in more than one political arena will continue to grow. A democracy deficit is on the rise precisely because of the dispersed nature of decision-making across national borders. NGOs, by organizing advocacy campaigns in different political arenas at the same time, try to address this democracy deficit, either implicitly or explicitly.

While cooperation in a global advocacy campaign does not easily compare itself to academic concepts of representation, it cannot be denied that NGOs are in fact representing interests when they operate with an expertise in a specific political arena and use that knowledge to carry a campaign concern to a new level of decision-making. The sheer fact of participation in a global campaign embodies a political responsibility toward others engaged in the campaign but operating in a different political arena.

We introduce the notion of political responsibility to respond to the problem that “representation” does not provide a sufficiently viable
conceptual or practical approach to come to terms with power relations and responsibilities as they emerge in the context of transnational NGO advocacy campaigns. Transnational NGO advocacy usually works in and around systems of formal representation and established forms of international governance, but does not replace them. A member of parliament in a Northern country has no resources to effectively conduct a certain level of control over a bilateral aid program. A local community in the South equally has no means, no knowledge and no established avenue to articulate its interest in Washington. An authoritarian government may actively repress the voice of its citizens calling upon international human rights standards, who subsequently resort to their NGO friends abroad. These are the gaps in which the democratizing contribution of transnational NGO advocacy networks has to be framed. A network requires a different approach to simultaneously qualify the responsibility for the actions of both the individual players in the network and the aggregate results of the network as a whole.

An additional advantage of introducing political responsibility is that "accountability," as having a political connotation in conjunction with "representation," is extremely difficult to translate effectively into any other language and for that reason alone provides a major problem in a conceptual framework about transnational NGO advocacy. 2

Political responsibility in NGO advocacy manifests itself in the following seven areas:
   — dividing political arenas;
   — agenda setting and strategy building;
   — raising and allocating financial resources;
   — information flow;
   — information frequency and format;
   — information translation into useful forms;
   — the formalization of relationships.

In each area there are parameters by which political responsibility can be assessed. The sum of all variables combined can help NGOs to measure the extent to which they have successfully managed political risks and embraced their political responsibilities. While in case materials below, we have predominantly used examples of environmental campaigns to further illustrate our arguments, these areas of political responsibility arise in any development action that utilizes more than one political arena. In any action whereby an international and a locally based organization are engaged, be it a food delivery service in an emergency situation or an agriculture extension service, these responsibilities arise, regardless of the nature of the partnership between beneficiaries and NGOs.

(a) Dividing political arenas

It is typical for a global NGO campaign to grow from the need to engage more than one political arena. In addition no one NGO generally has the understanding of each arena that needs to be engaged. For example, it cannot be expected that a grassroots social movement organization in the hinterland of India will know all of the politically important people in Washington, DC, will understand the protocol associated with contacting relevant decision makers, or will have the resources to bring pressure to bear in that political arena. The opposite is true as well. Organizations based in Washington, New York or Geneva may be intimately familiar with the way in which those arenas work and how decisions are made, but will not be able to understand the pace, the mechanisms or the reality of a local situation in Africa. Many readers may interpret our division of arenas to be a North–South division. That is not the case. Expertise in a political arena is based upon a long-term presence in that arena. Thus, FAVDO, which is an African-based organization, maintains a presence in Washington, DC and has expertise in the Washington arena that we would argue should be respected by partner organizations when practicing advocacy. Recognizing who has expertise and knowledge in which political arena and respecting the boundaries established by that expertise is the first necessary act of accountability in a joint NGO advocacy effort. By recognizing the boundaries within which each NGO prevails, NGOs networks go a long way toward recognizing the political responsibility in advocacy.

(b) Agenda setting and strategy building

The second major issue that NGOs need to engage is the question of agenda setting and strategy building. Questions that require engagement include: what are the substantive priorities; for whose benefit; using which time frame and with what level of antagonism are authorities or power holders approached in which political arena? These questions point at the fact that agenda setting and strategy building are closely related to the management of risks. Tactics and strategies decided upon
can have major consequences for all actors involved. Agendas in advocacy will vary depending upon the objectives of each NGO. It is therefore essential to find a format to lay out explicitly what one’s objectives are and to then develop a strategy with transparent goals. Among the issues that need to be recognized is who bears the risks associated with campaign positions. Not surprisingly, specific attention is often needed for the NGO in the campaign who has fewer resources or has to deal with a repressive government.

(c) **Allocation of available financial resources**

The need for financial resources varies from arena to arena. The availability of financial resources is a major factor contributing to the risk of lopsided relationships among NGOs around the globe, as the bulk of financial resources is in the hands of a relatively small group of NGOs in the North. Prioritizing expenses is an issue that can cause tension among organizations. Determining who has money and can pay for activities, who has access to other sources of financing and who cannot contribute financially to the activities agreed upon is one step toward recognizing the relationships of power which money generates among NGOs. A rough review of a number of NGO networks and relationships with which we have been involved has taught us that it helps for more powerful, i.e. financially resourceful, organizations to separate clearly the responsibility for raising and appropriating money from advocacy. Financial accountability and political responsibility are different and should not be confused.

(d) **Information flow**

In advocacy, information is the most powerful tool: the direction in which the information flows in networks, whether all participants in an advocacy campaign have equal access to the same information, the density of the flow of information and the quality of available information will all have an impact on how and whether political responsibility is embraced. The ability to actually analyze, process or generate information is equally important.

(e) **Information frequency and format**

The frequency with which NGOs relay information to one another is not only important in the context of the management of political responsibilities, but also in the effectiveness of the campaign. Significant events can erupt at any given moment and can either positively or adversely affect any member of a campaign. Getting information out can help other partners in the campaign to be prepared and/or protected. Equally important is determining an appropriate mix of communication formats. The necessary trust to seriously discuss agenda setting, strategies and risk-management cannot be developed by Email alone (if it is available). Again, certain participants in the advocacy effort at hand may prefer to speak rather than write, which requires using the phone, while a certain frequency of meetings in person will also be inevitable, preferably including meetings in the political arena(s) where the most urgent problems occur.

(f) **Articulating information into useful forms**

Information by itself is not enough to pursue effective advocacy. Often the available information needs interpretation in accordance with the political arena in which it is being articulated. For example, World Bank documents and Indian newspaper articles are equally difficult to understand unless they are translated for the reader who is not familiar with the institution or the political arena. Pointing out the critical statements or aspects of the documentation to fellow activists in other political arenas and translating the important pieces of information (either from the local language into English or vice versa), are critical responsibilities. In many situations, oral communication is the only method of communication that is effective at a local level. A key indicator of the quality of a campaign is the length to which NGOs will go to break through communication and language barriers.

(g) **The formalization of relationships**

In global campaigns, networks are often fluid. Global campaigns require time to determine who is going to be involved in the issue. As campaigns develop, relationships tend to become more formalized. They can even get to the point where they have statutes such as in the case of World Rainforest Movement (WRM) or the International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID). Action committees, a memorandum of understanding, the production of joint newsletters etc. repre-
sent varying levels of formalization of mutual relationships in NGO advocacy. Formalization can help to establish transparency, which is another key issue in advocacy. Transparency is a very valuable tool in that it often highlights the lack of transparency in counter forces.

Recognizing and clearly establishing the parameters of networks involved in global campaigns can help in defining political responsibilities, certainly if the relationships in question are expected to be productive over a longer period. The more parameters that are defined, the more explicit the level of responsibility toward partners in the network and the better that risks can be managed. 4

3. TYPOLOGIES OF NGO RELATIONSHIPS IN TRANSNATIONAL ADVOCACY

The seven areas above are intended to help recognize different aspects of political responsibility in global NGO campaigns. Below, we take one step further and suggest four overall typologies of transnational NGO relationships. The typologies are highlighted by campaign case studies meant to illuminate the above areas of political responsibility in practice (see Table 1). They are not meant to be the definitive historical description of what happened in each of these cases. Nor do we fully explore the success or failures of these campaigns vis-à-vis their ultimate goals or objectives. The sole purpose of suggesting these typologies is to further elaborate our argument and to propose an additional tool to better understand political responsibility in transnational NGO advocacy.

In our typologies we match the commensurability of different objectives of an advocacy campaign in different political arenas with a qualification of what happens with information and how strategies, risks and funds are managed. The level of political responsibility that is attained in each typology is an outcome of these indicators. An overview of the four typologies is given at the end of this section.

(a) The cooperative campaign

We call our first typology of relationships among NGOs engaged in advocacy a “cooperative campaign.” In a cooperative campaign, the level of political responsibility toward the most vulnerable actors is optimal. For the most part, advocacy agendas and strategies are set in close consultation with the groups who are supposed to benefit from the campaign and risks are assumed only in regard to the burden that can be born by the most vulnerable. There are four dynamics that frame the typology:
— a pursuit of interlocking objectives by different NGOs in multiple political arenas is intertwined;
— a very fluid and continuous flow of information among all NGOs involved;
— a continuous review of strategies and joint management of political responsibilities by all NGOs involved. Risk management is purely based on local realities in the political arena where participants in the campaign are most vulnerable;
— a high level of political responsibility.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Cooperative</th>
<th>Concurrent</th>
<th>Disassociated</th>
<th>Competitive</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Interlocking</td>
<td>Compatible</td>
<td>Conflicting</td>
<td>Opposing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information</td>
<td>High frequency, global distribution, easily accessible, freely shared</td>
<td>Regular, multiphased, more tightly directed, freely shared</td>
<td>Infrequent, lopsided, difficult to access, shared with reservation</td>
<td>Minimal, no direct flow, inaccessible, not shared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Continuous review, joint management, risks based upon most vulnerable</td>
<td>Frequent review, coexisting management, risks based upon national arena</td>
<td>Occasional review, management and risks exclusive to varying arenas</td>
<td>No review, single arena management, no recognition of risks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Level of political responsibility achieved</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>None</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(a) The cooperative campaign

Table 1. Overview of campaign typologies
To highlight the parameters of political responsibility in a cooperative campaign we take the relatively well-known case of the Sardar Sarovar dam in the Narmada-river in India as an example (Alvarez & Billarey, 1988; Fisher, 1995; Morse, 1992). The Narmada campaign had a high level of political responsibility among campaigners because the above four factors were achieved. The objectives of each set of actors in their own political arena were clearly defined, understood and eventually intertwined. There was a fluid and continuous flow of information among all actors involved. There was a continuous review of strategies and joint management of political responsibilities by all actors involved. Risk management was based upon the strength of the most politically exposed.

By way of providing the reader with a very brief history, the Sardar Sarovar dam in India provoked controversy from its inception in the early 1980s. The project became controversial because in its original formulation it would have resulted in the flooding of the traditional lands of over 250,000 tribal people living on the banks of the Narmada river in Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra. In total, over one million people are expected to be affected. The NGO campaign to stop the dam became an international campaign when the World Bank agreed to finance the construction of the Sardar Sarovar dam.

On the local level, the objectives of the tribal people were first limited to obtaining proper resettlement compensation. On the international level, the destruction of pristine wildlife areas motivated the first campaigners in countries other than India to raise their voice. The concern for the environment, however, was quickly blurred by a concern for the rights of the tribals. Once it became clear that the authorities involved would not be able to properly compensate “oustees,” the campaign on the local level became an anti-dam campaign. Gradually the anti-dam message filtered through to the international campaign.

The targets of the various actors in the campaign differed from the outset. The tribals targeted the national state of India and the three states involved in the project. The tribals employed national NGOs in India, based in New Delhi, to help influence both national level ministries and as the campaign developed, the national court system. International actors targeted national bilateral aid programs and the World Bank. Each actor in the campaign concentrated on their own political arena, developing dialogues and tactics specific to those arenas. But, there were many instances where shows of mutual solidarity worked best and thus there were many instances when actors visited other political arenas than their own. The purposes of these visits were either to tell their own stories, as in the case of the tribals coming to Washington, or to better understand the realities and threats at the local level and to provide protection to those who were politically exposed, as was the case when international actors went to the Narmada Valley. While the varying political arenas were shared, the strength of each set of actors in specific arenas was recognized and respected. Overlap was by invitation only.

In the Narmada campaign, advocacy agendas of different NGOs were varied: to seek proper compensation for the tribals; to get the Bank out of the project; to stop other governments from supporting the project; to expose the Bank’s failure to be able to abide by its own policies; to expose the State governments’ failures to abide by their policies and to ultimately stop the construction of the dam. Not all of these agendas were shared on the tactical level. But, all agendas were repeatedly discussed among the various actors involved and agreed upon. Different tactics were developed in the different political arenas and regularly shared.

A Narmada Action Committee (NAC) was established on the international level to keep communication flowing and to highlight new events and decisions taken in the Narmada Valley. The NAC fulfilled not only information needs but also established a level of responsibility to the tribals from many centers around the world. The tribals knew they could call collect to Amsterdam or Washington and their requests would be heard all over the world within a matter of hours. The NAC also helped people share in decision-making. Generally, once a year, actors would meet to compare notes; to reaffirm their interest in the case; and to hear from someone who may have just arrived from the Valley. In this way, the global relationships among international campaigners active in the Narmada case was somewhat formalized. The lines of communication were relatively clear; the frequency of communication was substantial; the responsibility of each actor to the local arena and to one another was articulated and transparent.
Similar mechanisms were employed between the national level in India and the local arenas. Information generated on the international level was translated into tribal languages while the Narmada Bachao Andolan produced updates of local facts and events for the international NGO community on a regular basis. These were often handwritten bulletins faxed to Washington and then distributed globally.

When particular activists might be tempted to go too far with a strategy, the threat of being cut off from the primary sources of information and the threat of being ostracized by the movement in the Narmada Valley were used. Furthermore, decisions made in the most politically vulnerable arena were respected by all players. When the actors in the local arena chose not to participate in an academic study about the movement, all international actors abided by that decision and did not cooperate.

The Narmada case was special in that money did not flow between various arenas. Money from the international arena was considered to be more harmful than helpful for the tribals, although, resources were shared. For example, faxes were paid for by the international organizations, telephone calls were made with charges being paid by wealthier NGOs, etc. Money hardly ever crossed from one political arena into another. This dissipated any unhealthy power relationships that might have developed in the campaign.

(b) The concurrent campaign

Our second typology of relationships among NGOs that are engaged in advocacy is the “concurrent campaign.” The concurrent campaign has coinciding representation of different but compatible objectives. It does not achieve a high level of political responsibility given that the objectives in various political arenas are different. Thus, information loops are not as tight as they would be in a cooperative campaign where everything is intertwined and direction is taken from the most politically exposed. The dynamics of a concurrent campaign can be qualified as follows:

—a coinciding representation of different but compatible objectives by NGOs operating in their own political arena;
—a regular but multiphased flow of information among NGOs involved;
—a frequent review of strategies and coexisting management of political responsibilities by varying combinations of NGOs involved at different levels;
—a medium level of political responsibility.

We present the Arun Dam campaign as an example of a concurrent campaign. The Arun III was a Japanese-conceived run-of-the-river hydroelectric dam project scheduled to be built in a remote area of Nepal, the Arun valley (Bank Check Quarterly, 1992–95; Brown & Fox, 1998; World Rivers Review). The valley, while relatively sparsely populated, contained an eco-system rich in biodiversity. The dam was meant to supply energy to two major city centers in Nepal and the rest to India. The total cost of the project (over a decade) was estimated at US$764 million, about the size of Nepal’s annual national budget.

In the Arun case the objectives of NGOs in different political arenas varied. On the national level in Nepal, the Arun case was an anti-dam campaign from the outset. The issues advocated upon were purely environmental and economic. At the international level, the case was also anti-dam, predominantly because of its environmental impact. The case in part, however, became an international one because it arose at a time that coincided with the creation of the World Bank’s Inspection Panel. The planned participation of the World Bank in the financing of the Arum Dam thus provided an opportunity to test the new inspection mechanism. These objectives were well understood by all actors and were not in conflict with one another. In fact, it was the national-level actors who chose to use the Inspection Mechanism as an additional advocacy tool. Nevertheless, the possibility of using the mechanism generated interest in the case at international levels to a greater extent than before. Overlap in the objectives occurred in the writing of the inspection claim, where the economic arguments favored by the local people were predominant, next to alleging violations of environmental assessment, resettlement and other World Bank policies. After the Inspection Panel had completed a review of the project, newly appointed World Bank President Wolfensohn announced in August 1995 that the Bank would no longer support Arun III, thereby effectively killing the project.

The flow of information in the Arun case was specific as opposed to all-encompassing in the Narmada case. Information flowed between various actors but not across, so that the Nepalese were responsible for communicating with each and every contact made at the
international level (as opposed to contacts flowing between and among international players). Relationships between campaigners internationally were less formal than in the Narmada case. On the national level in Nepal, however, relationships were formalized by establishing two NGO coalitions, the Alliance for Energy and the Arun Concerned Group. The connections to the local arena were weak in the Arun case so theories about the needs and desires of the local people were not very well tested. This was the greatest weakness of the campaign. There was a low level of maintaining political responsibility with respect to the local region. As a result, when the World Bank's decision to withdraw from the project was announced, the Nepalese NGOs initially were afraid to openly show their satisfaction as they feared a backlash from some local interest groups that had anticipated benefits from the project. At the same time, international NGOs released a press statement declaring victory on the assumption that Nepalese people were dancing in the streets.

(c) The disassociated campaign

We call the third typology to qualify the relationships among NGOs engaged in transnational advocacy the “disassociated campaign.” This type of campaign takes us one step further away from truly interwoven relationships among NGOs, to a situation where—based upon the same issue—advocacy objectives represented by various NGOs in different political arenas begin to clash. The dynamics of the typology are:

— a parallel representation of conflicting objectives by different NGOs in their own political arena;
— a regular but lopsided flow of information among the NGOs involved, usually more information flows from the South to the North rather than vice versa;
— occasional and unaffiliated review of strategies and management of political responsibilities among different NGOs involved, predominantly exclusive to their own political arena;
— a low level of political responsibility.

The example we use to illustrate the typology of a disassociated campaign is the intended investment of the US Scott Paper company in a pulp and paper plantation in Irian Jaya, East Indonesia (Cleary, 1997; Stern, 1991). Like the previous cases, environmental concerns and issues of peoples' participation were at the forefront of the NGO agenda(s). Next to national and provincial authorities, however, the main target of the campaign was a private company rather than the World Bank.

In October 1988, the US-based Scott Paper company announced a US$653.8 million investment in a tree farm and pulp mill project in the Southeast part of Irian Jaya. The project was to be realized by means of a joint venture between Scott Paper and PT Astra, a large Indonesian conglomerate, well connected to the Indonesian Suharto regime. The aim of the project was to gradually establish a eucalyptus plantation of up to 200,000 hectares to provide logs for a pulp and wood factory in nearby Merauke.

Soon after the public announcement of the project, local and national NGOs began to put forward criticisms and demands. The Indonesian Network for Forest Conservation (Skephi) led a coalition with nine other Indonesian Jakarta-based NGOs, who began to raise concerns. Skephi questioned how a forest concession could have been granted to PT Astra Scott Cellulosa without the implementation of an Environmental Impact Assessment in conformity with Indonesian Environmental Law. Other issues raised by Indonesian NGOs were: how Scott and Astra planned to involve local communities in the project, especially with respect to the use of tribal land; the impact on customary land ownership; the selection of pristine tropical rain forest (which would lead to the destruction of genetic resources, while the resulting deforestation could lead to the drying up of natural rivers); the composition of the necessary labor force and how it would be recruited; and whether upstream and downstream wastes would be handled appropriately. NGOs in the United States adopted these demands.

In response to initial NGO criticism, Scott promised an environmental as well as a social impact assessment, and explained that there would be an extended test-period for the project to review its environmental and social soundness. The company stated that the intention was to carefully approach the project. The relationship with the local communities was described as a “win–win” situation with promises being made as to the creation of 6,000 jobs, training for local people, as well as the provision of schools and medical facilities.

Subsequently, communication between Scott and NGOs developed on various levels,
primarily in Irian Jaya and in the United States. A group of five local NGOs got together and established fairly regular communication with representatives of PT Astra Scott Cellulosa. The local NGOs obtained a copy of the project plans, which they translated into Indonesian and circulated among local communities. NGOs were assigned to help explain and discuss the documents and the project in general with the local communities, in a series of meetings that were organized by the NGOs. The local district authorities also got involved in these meetings.

In the course of 1989, an agenda for local NGOs emerged, in which they basically accepted the establishment of the plantation, trying to gain training and employment opportunities, fair compensation for tribal land and proper control over environmental, social and cultural impacts. The discussions with Scott went as far as the establishment of an agreement to keep prostitution and bars away from the project area. With respect to the important question of land ownership, Scott started making a map of the project area using village maps, as opposed to using official maps that did not properly reflect traditional land ownership. The local communities also expressed a preference to lease—rather than sell—their land, which Scott was willing to discuss. Part of the financing of the local level negotiations and capacity building efforts was provided for by USAID and the Asia Foundation.

Meanwhile, at the international level, an NGO campaign with a different character had emerged. The project in Irian Jaya was framed by linking Scott Paper to their responsibility for environmental damage in the United States and Canada. Scott Paper in the United States and its subsidiaries in Europe were vigorously targeted by a number of NGOs, like the Rainforest Action Network (RAN) and Survival International. NGOs threatened a consumers’ boycott of Scott Products if Scott would not leave pristine rain forest and the areas of tribal people untouched. These NGOs cooperated in particular with the Skephi led coalition in Indonesia. Some Jakarta-based NGOs and some international groups, such as the Indonesian Environmental Forum (WALHI) and the Environmental Defense Fund (EDF), tried to follow a road in between. They communicated in a less aggressive way with the Scott Paper company and stated their willingness to accept the project, as long as a number of demands were met.

While NGOs at the international level communicated intensively with each other, there was not much communication between the local and international levels of the NGO campaign. International groups suspected that local people were in fact not well informed and were already worn out by years of Indonesian oppression and intimidation in this remote region of Irian Jaya. This perception was strengthened by the decision of the Indonesian authorities to virtually close off the area to outsiders.

The situation reached a climax in the second half of 1989. The Scott Paper project was one of the cases highlighted by RAN in a full-page advertisement in the New York Times, pointing at the destruction of tropical rain forest. On October 13, Scott announced its withdrawal from the project, apparently quite to the surprise of PT Astra and the Indonesian authorities, who had already boosted the overall data of foreign investment in Indonesia in 1989 by including the project in Irian Jaya. The reason for the withdrawal given by Scott was that “extensive studies now indicate the Company can meet its anticipated needs for pulp from other sources.” In interviews, however, Scott agreed that NGO pressure played an important role in the considerations of the company to withdraw.

The differences between NGOs operating at different levels in appreciating the outcome of the campaign, were best summed up in a letter from a local NGO to Survival International after Scott’s withdrawal. The local NGO agreed that it would be best if the project would be stopped altogether. But PT Astra and the Indonesian authorities had already announced that negotiations with various new potential foreign counterparts for the project were on the way. The question from East Irian Jaya was what would the international NGOs do if a new company from Japan, Taiwan or Korea entered the local arena, most likely much less willing to negotiate with the local communities or NGOs as compared to Scott Paper? To date there has been no new investment of this kind.

(d) The competitive campaign

Our fourth typology provides the worst case scenario, the “competitive campaign.” In this situation, advocacy on one level may actually have an adverse or counterproductive impact at another level. There is a serious lack of infor-
mation exchange and coordination among the NGOs involved, resulting in an absence of accountability and a failure to embrace political responsibilities. The dynamics of the competitive campaign are:

— a parallel representation of opposing objectives by different NGOs in different political arenas;
— no direct flow of information among different NGOs at different levels;
— no joint review of strategies or management of political responsibilities which may result in human rights violations or other negative impacts on the interests of local communities;
— no political responsibility.

As an example of a competitive campaign we take the case of the Huaorani fighting against US oil interests in Ecuador (Kane, 1995). Since 1967 American oil companies have exploited oil resources in Ecuador with impunity. Leaking pipelines, oil-fires, violence and intimidation have all been part of the operational realities in search for the black gold. Rainforests and thriving tribal communities have been destroyed by the practices of Texaco and Petroecuador. In the battle to keep Texaco or any other oil interests out of the Huaorani territory, some international activists fought to save the rainforests while the battle on the local and national level concentrated on protecting the lives and rights of the indigenous peoples. While these two interests did not necessarily compete at all stages of the campaign, at various points in the campaign the differing interests did result in competition. The international campaign against Conoco ran from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s.

In the case against Conoco drilling in Huaorani territory, many US and European-based environmental and human rights groups had taken up the issue and staked out political positions which ran from opposition to Conoco to support for the company as the best option in a bad situation. For the most part, these positions were taken without consultation with the Huaorani (who were deep in the forest) and at best using information provided by a variety of national level actors in Ecuador, but sometimes with no in-country contacts at all. According to one source, the only thing the European and US groups had in common was that the Huaorani people did not recognize any of them.

There was very little information flowing between the different actors in the campaign. Strategies were adopted based upon what was considered to be politically feasible, as opposed to what was requested by the affected communities. Deals were agreed which undercut the rights of indigenous peoples to manage their own territories. In some cases, environmental and human rights organizations raised money in the name of the campaign but did not share those resources in any way with the people on whose behalf they had raised the funds. In fact, activists close to the indigenous people operated on shoestring budgets while those operating in the United States or Europe had plenty of money. At one point, a US-based environmental organization attempted to cut a deal with Conoco which would have allowed the company to build a road straight through the Huaorani territory. While decisions taken in the international political arena did not immediately jeopardize the safety of the people on the ground in Ecuador, those decisions in effect cut off the negotiating abilities of the indigenous communities and destroyed a fledgling alliance between the local arena (indigenous peoples) and the national arena (Ecuadorian environmentalists). The struggle of the Huaorani continues. The campaign against Conoco in Ecuador provides an example of the worst kind of campaign when measuring political responsibility.

4. MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS IN TRANSNATIONAL NGO ADVOCACY

The central argument of this article is that the relationships that emerge among NGOs engaged in global campaigns are highly problematic. If not handled with care, they may reflect as much inequality as they are trying to undo. The inability of national and international bureaucracies and powerful sections of the private sector to include and respect a variety of development aspirations is perhaps the main driving force behind NGO advocacy across borders. But it is difficult to deal with multiple desires for change that can only be realized by engaging many organizations in complex relationships. This is true at a practical level as well as for theory construction.

Many observers like to reduce the fundamental plurality which is expressed in NGO advocacy to a format which is easier to grasp and allows for picking up on what is seen as
The ideal form of cooperation and interaction in transnational advocacy networks, which we have labeled a “cooperative campaign,” is the exception rather than the rule. In that sense the success of the Narmada campaign has perhaps set an example to strive for, but at the same time has misinformed the debate on NGO advocacy, precisely because the case is not representative of what often happens in transnational networks.

We believe that NGOs will set themselves a more feasible and still very useful target if they begin with trying to manage their relationships minimally at the level of what we have called a “concurrent campaign.” The concurrent campaign leaves more room for a variety of objectives in different political arenas, however, with care taken to respect the interests or aspirations of the most vulnerable groups involved in the campaign. The overlap between different players at different levels in a concurrent campaign is dispersed and far from complete. That is what most transnational NGO advocacy efforts will look like when the participants try to embrace their political responsibilities but take into account the limitations in their capacities.

What deserves to be highlighted is the extreme difficulty of pursuing NGO advocacy effectively and responsibly outside one’s own political arena. There are three reasons for this and they are among the most important factors that help to explain why some of our typologies are enacted in practice.

First, people and NGOs primarily act upon incentives which emerge in their own space, certainly not upon a notion of “planetary risks” (Sogge, Biekart, & Saxby, 1996, pp. 169–170). In this respect, the popular slogan “think globally, act locally” is highly confusing, because it suggests an inherent link between local actions and an aggregate global political clout of local actions which is far from evident. Moreover, it assumes the capacity to “think global,” but what does that exactly mean? For sure, no transnational NGO network has a mechanism to check whether all network participants have the same thing in mind if they start to “think globally.” At the end of the day, connecting activities from a global to a local level and vice versa in a way which is both strategic and meaningful for all network participants involved is a long road full of potholes. The frontiers of nation states may be crumbling as an obstacle for the physical movement of information, capital or people.

We are also uncomfortable with attributing too big a role to the binding function of common values in transnational NGO advocacy networks. As a matter of fact, most networks start with a campaign concern and not by determining shared values among the network-participants. Particular values may very well motivate the individual NGO activist, but provide a disproportionate approach to explain the communality in transnational networks. The one crosscutting principle standard in transnational NGO advocacy is the international system of human rights. But this is a well-defined and institutionally enshrined normative framework, as opposed to a much less distinct value-orientation (Van Tuijl, 1999). Moreover, human rights provide an essential practical foundation for NGO advocacy strategies as well.
Regardless, NGO activists do have borders in terms of who they are and what they possibly can do when considering their legitimacy, language, culture, education and ways of communication.

Second, the expansion of NGO relationships to overcome the limitations of one’s own specialization in one political arena and create more effective alliances with other types of social or civil actors within and across national borders is often not a feasible solution. There are numerous ideas for human rights NGOs to work with environmental NGOs, for private aid agencies to work with knowledge-based NGOs, for development NGOs to work more with trade unions or local governments, for intermediary NGOs to work with grassroots organizations and social movements, etc. This is related to NGOs playing a role in concepts such as the “thickening” of civil society or the development of “social capital” (Fox, 1997, p. 963). But what NGO is capable of managing such a multitude of relationships effectively? Even at the basic level of information exchange, the maintenance of every relationship requires resources.

In addition to the question of resources, there is the related danger of becoming entangled in conflicting alliances if NGOs continue to expand their relationships. The more relationships an NGO is involved in, the more it becomes possible that one alliance will at a certain moment articulate a position which contradicts another alliance in which the same NGO is involved. We are aware of NGOs who are simultaneously affiliated with the International Union of Conservation (IUCN), with World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), with Friends of the Earth (FoE) and Greenpeace, even though these four entities have very different global strategies and visions.

For an NGO to engage effectively in transnational advocacy requires hard choices about resource allocation: which issue to take up, which networks to join, which research to participate in, which meeting(s) to attend? It is difficult for NGOs to deal with their political responsibilities because necessary choices about resource allocation are avoided or made in a haphazard way. For example, NGOs often give in to the expectations of donors, to the urgency of a problem or to the desire to be perceived as a courageous actor on the cutting-edge of important change. Resource allocation and priority setting for transnational advocacy within NGOs are usually not the result of a clear planning and decision-making process. As a result, there is a risk for NGOs and their networks to become overburdened and spread their resources too thin. This in turn exposes them to superficiality, and insignificance and can ultimately backfire when targeted parties turn the table and start to question the accountability and representational aspects of the NGOs’ actions.

Some authors have argued that networks which include NGOs concerned about multiple issues (such as environment and human rights) will be more accountable (Covey, 1996). This argument misses the point. The composition of an NGO network, in terms of the variety of backgrounds and specializations of the NGOs involved, does not say anything imperative about the political dynamics between these organizations or about the impact of their advocacy work. As we argued in the previous section, one level of action in a particular political arena may be very effective in itself, but could be counterproductive in another arena. Likewise, looking at different sources of legitimacy invoked by individual NGOs to support their advocacy role, such as specific expertise or a strong bond with a particular constituency, does not provide much insight into the dynamics between these organizations or the impact of their advocacy (Nelson, 1996).

A third reason for NGOs to be careful in operating outside their own political arena is that it may lead to an erosion of relationships in the local arena. The difficulties of engaging effectively and responsibly in NGO advocacy away from home rapidly increase if one loses touch with a place of origin, because working the global arena can easily be all-consuming but does not provide a self-standing legitimacy. The iron law of transnational advocacy is that a firm relationship with one’s own political arena is a essential condition for working in one or more other political arenas. This approach to transnational NGO advocacy equates the importance of advocacy in the local arena with that in the global arena.

Our vision is related to those who have tried to frame global NGO campaigns in the language of universal human rights in which development policies should be formulated, including the actions of NGOs themselves (McCormack & Mendonca, 1997). The hallmark of an NGO which fully embraces the concept of political responsibility is its capacity to sustain coherence and consistency between
the goals it professes and the manner in which it pursues them. In NGO advocacy decisions about what to do—or not to do—with a certain piece of information are often made in a split second. In that sense, the exercise of political responsibility in NGO advocacy is foremost an operational problem.

The democratic quality of NGO advocacy depends to an important extent on how NGOs manage their mutual relationships. Being rooted in one political arena, NGOs are setting out to seek each others cooperation and partnership to overcome the democracy deficit which is being created by globalizing processes of decision-making. Somewhere in between a competitive campaign and a cooperative campaign, transnational NGO advocacy may very well help to open up space to articulate strategically a plurality of development aspirations, at peoples’ own conditions and risks, using their own time frames, speaking their own language and applying their own design of political expression or association.

NOTES

1. The power attributed to NGOs in popular perceptions is sometimes astonishing: “Once relegated to the do-good fringes of traditional diplomacy, NGOs have moved front and center on the world stage . . . There is a basic re-sorting of power from nation–states to nongovernmental entities . . . The century is ending with state power in decline throughout most of the world. And without many people having clearly noticed, NGOs are rushing in where soldiers and bureaucrats no longer tread.” Newsweek, 1 August 1994.

2. Accountability in a context of finances stands as a translatable term. In fact, the dominant connotation of accountability with finances is one of the reasons leading to difficulties in translating the word as being related to political relationships.

3. This is not always the case. Advocacy NGOs in the North often either cannot or do not avail themselves of funds from government sources and thus can have fewer resources than large NGOs in the South.

4. There is an argument against formalizing relationships which is applicable to situations whereby NGOs may not want to explicitly identify themselves because of threats to their security. This is a valid argument. There is, however, often the further counterargument that safety lies in numbers.

5. Events now underway in this campaign have not been taken under consideration in this discussion.

6. An elaborate description of another case which we would qualify as a concurrent campaign can be found in Rumansara in Brown and Fox (1998, p. 123).

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