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The access of self-help networks
to the international arena:

Articulating local actions and global advocacy strategies

IRG – Ford meeting

Rambouillet (France) 23-24-25 March 2009

The last decade has witnessed the rise of a large demand, both from public opinion and from institutions themselves, for civic engagement in the elaboration of public policy decisions. Civil society actors have been actively mobilized in trying to build a closer interaction with public authorities at different levels, or at least to ensure that institutions provide wider public consultations as a prerequisite for creating public policies. However, the very access to such an institutional arena has been largely monopolized by a specific type of civil society actor, accustomed to working closely with international organizations and speaking the same language.

After a first seminar in 2007 focusing mainly on the advocacy strategies of professional NGOs, the second seminar jointly proposed and designed by the IRG and the Ford Foundation, will focus on another type of civil society actor: the "self-help network". Such networks can be defined as social movements, or as membership based organizations of marginalized populations. The defining characteristic is that members are both involved in the movements and personally concerned by the issue they defend.

1. The general issue

Most analyses focused on self-help networks shed light on the difficulty for such movements to articulate the existence of a daily, local community-based activity and the formulation and diffusion of a larger discourse, able to reach the international arena. They point out different types of obstacles: lack of time and relevant human resources; lack of capacity to articulate an international, codified vocabulary and develop professional methods of negotiation; lack of contacts in international organizations and media, etc. This difficulty is due to the very localization of the networks, rarely based in strategic "global cities" where most of the lobbying activity takes place.

Despite these difficulties, self-help and community-based networks do take on a growing role and present a very specific identity, largely distinct from NGOs. Their transnational development permits on one hand a more efficient advocacy action, by a bottom-up construction of discourse and action, and on the other hand a substantial empowerment of their local, grassroots members who benefit from the pressure effect of an international identity on local authorities. Some of them are engaged in a clearly political struggle, others act with a more technical and short term approach.

International NGOs often see their role as intermediary actors, able to fill those gaps and provide appropriate communication and networking skills for local communities to be heard in the international arena. However, the risk is that NGOs gradually capture the voice of local groups and finally speak "on behalf" without maintaining a permanent dialogue with the grassroots level.

The IRG/Ford seminar proposes to bring together self-help networks active in different fields of actions, in order for them to share their successes and experiences in the establishment of advocacy strategies at the international level and also to help evaluate the benefits and costs in establishing alliances with international NGOs.

2. The participants

The seminar will gather networks mobilized around 4 causes (fields of actions):

1. **Ethnic minority and indigenous movements**, with 3 networks participating :
   - *COICA (Coordinadora de las Organizaciones Indigenas de la Cuenca Amazonica)*
   - *International Alliance of Indigeneous & Tribal People of the Tropical Forest*
   - *Aman (Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantera, Indonesia)*

2. **Marginalized urban population**, with 3 networks :
   - *International Alliance of Inhabitants*
   - *Shack/Slum Dwellers International*
   - *Streetnet (Alliance of International Street Trader and Hawker Organisations)*

3. **People living with HIV/Aids**, with 3 networks:
   - *ICW (International Community of Women Living with HIV and Aids)*
   - *World (Women Organised to Respond to Life Threatening Diseases)*
   - *Nepwhan (Network of People living with Aids in Nigeria)*

4. **Grass-roots women**, with 3 networks :
   - *GROOTS (Grassroots organizations operating together in sisterhood)*
   - *WUML (Women Living under Muslim Law)*
   - *WEAP (Women's Economic Agenda Project)*
   - *With a special participation of Margaret Nakato (Katosi Women Development Trust)*

Each network will be represented by two members.

- one member active in a the local organization belonging to the network;
- one "articulator" of the network, more directly in contact with external institutions and actors.

3. The methodology

The meeting will be initiated by a **presentation of the core activities and objectives of each network**, shedding light on the transnational dimension of their action (1st session)

Then, 2 main transversal questions will be addressed:

1. **Challenges in going global and structuring a transnational network**

- *2 sessions* on :

   - ✓ What are the costs and benefits of going global? For example, how does global engagement contribute to empower local communities, and what are the tools for that?
   - ✓ How to define collective challenges, objectives and modes of action, between groups embedded in different cultural and economic contexts? For instance, are there problems concerning mutual understanding of keywords, different time management practices, defining common identity symbols, etc.
   - ✓ Defining the accurate level of formal structuring: how have self help networks managed to organize dialogue at the transnational level without having heavily institutionalized structures? Have they experienced tendencies of bureaucratization while increasing their activities?

      - *A practical workshop* on internal communication strategy : using ICT and internal media to structure global networks (blogs, wikis, social networking sites, video…) and facilitate global communication, exchange of experiences, etc.

▢ **Challenges of having networks voice heard in the international arena**

- *2 sessions* on:

  ✓ How do networks integrate a political dimension in their advocacy discourse and positioning? How do they articulate short term compromises and long-term more radical struggles?
  ✓ What are the network strategies for approaching and negotiating with institutions? To what extent are they different from those of NGOs? Which kinds of successes and failures have been experienced?
  ✓ Have the networks maintained a healthy relationship with professional NGOs in their field, in order to benefit from their expertise without having their voice appropriated by external actors?

  - A practical workshop, on external communication strategies: using media and ICT and to enhance global advocacy and disseminate claims and proposals.

Each of the thematic sessions will be introduced by short videos of networks in action (each network participating in the meeting has been requested to produce an interview of a few of its members, a film will be produced by compilation/selection of the footages)

It will also be introduced by a specialist of the theme, who will propose a range of issues for the discussions.

After this, each session will be composed of:

- 3 case studies presented by the networks,
- debates, either in plenary, or during buzz or small working groups.

4. Provisional agenda

Monday, March. 23d

09:00-12:30 : **Session 1 - Introduction, networks presentation session**

12:30-14:00 : Lunch

14:00-17:40 : **Session 2 – Challenges in going global and structuring a transnational network (1ˢᵗ part):**

- Introductory film in plenary (15')
- Issue presentation in plenary, by Jan Aart Scholte (20')
- Debate on this presentation in buzz or small groups (45')
- Coffee break (20')
- Case study network 1 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 2 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 3 in plenary (15')
- Plenary debate on the session's issue (60')
- Synthesis in plenary, by Lisa Jordan - Ford Foundation (15')

Tuesday, March 24ᵗʰ

09:00- 11:35 : **Session 3 – Challenges in going global and structuring a transnational network (2ⁿᵈ part):**

- Introductory film in plenary (15')
- Issue presentation in plenary, by Dominique Caouette (20')
- Debate on this presentation in buzz or small groups (30')
- Coffee break (15')
- Case study network 4 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 5 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 6 in plenary (15')
- Plenary debate on the session's issue (30')
- Synthesis in plenary, by XXX

11:35-11:50:   Coffee break

11:50-13:20:   **Session 4 : practical workshop on internal communication strategy** (coordinated by Marty Kearns)

13:20-15:00:   Lunch

15:00- 18:40   **Session 5 – Challenges of having networks voice heard in the international arena (1st part):**

- Introductory film in plenary (15')
- Issue presentation in plenary, by Elisa Peters (20')
- Debate on the this presentation in buzz or small groups (45')
- Coffee break (20')
- Case study network 7 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 8 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 9 in plenary (15')
- Plenary debate on the session's issue (60')
- Synthesis in plenary, by Martin Vielajus - IRG (15')

Wednesday, March 25th

09:00-12:40:   **Session 6 – Challenges of having networks voice heard in the international arena (2nd part):**

- Introductory film in plenary (15')
- Issue presentation in plenary, by XXXXXX (20')
- Debate on the this presentation in buzz or small groups (45')
- Coffee break (20')
- Case study network 10 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 11 in plenary (15')
- Case study network 12 in plenary (15')
- Plenary debate on the session's issue (60')
- Synthesis in plenary, by Michel Sauquet - IRG (15')

12:40-14:30   **Lunch**

14:30-16:00   **Session 7: practical workshop on external communication strategy** (coordinated by Marty Kearns)

16:00-17:00   **Session 8: general synthesis and final debate**