## What is the Role of Civil Society in Social Change?

*By Chris Allan, Doug McAdam, and David Pellow, with support from the Global Greengrants Fund*

*June 2010*

The fundamental task of our work with civil society is to enable it to act as a force for fairness and justice for all the world's citizens. Civil society – which encompasses a whole diverse collection of formal and informal groups, organizations, and networks – can deliver basic services, but also must organize people to solve problems on a broader scale. Citizens must hold the public and private sectors accountable, to ensure that the public interest is protected. Civil society must organize people at the local, regional, national and international levels as needed to solve problems in a sustainable way.

Historically, social change driven by citizens has come through building social movements, broad collections of diverse organizations pushing toward a common goal. Simple changes in individual behavior, or providing more social services, or even changes in national legislation, are insufficient to deal with the myriad issues that confront us now. Only social movements can a) help people see that there is a problem, and there are alternatives, and b) mobilize enough people in all the right places to achieve not only policy shifts in the public and private sectors, but also to bring about the cultural shifts to sustain them. Only an effective social movement can bring together the diverse constituencies to demand an alternative way of doing things and successfully achieve it.

But movements are messy and hard to get a handle on. It is important that we understand better what successful social movement do if we want to achieve sustainable social change.

## What Do Successful Social Movements Do?

Experience with hundreds of activists around the world and examination of some of the literature on social movements show that successful social movements do the following three things:

- *Resource Mobilization and the Development of Movement Infrastructure* - build and sustain groups and organizations, either locally, or by linking groups together in more elaborated "networks of struggle"
- *Framing and Consciousness Raising* - engage in creative reframing of the issues to look at them differently and motivate people to act
- *Political Opportunities* - engage in actions—locally, regionally, nationally—that have the potential to render movement opponents newly vulnerable or receptive to change on environmental and/or social justice issues.

The following discussion explores these themes in more depth.

## 1. Resource Mobilization and the Development of Movement Infrastructure

Successful movements mobilize resources and build a stable infrastructure for carrying forward campaigns. Resources can be volunteers, contacts in media and government, skills and knowledge, effective leaders, and money. Infrastructure includes formal and informal organizations and the networks that tie them together. Resources—money in particular—can obviously help sustain infrastructure, but in the absence of infrastructure, monetary resources are never enough to make a movement. This infrastructure is normally built slowly over a long period of time, and is often held together by trust. For many movements, mobilizing resources and building organizations and networks can occupy much energy with few results to show for it for a long time. Yet the ability to make change and take advantage of political opportunities requires a strong and effective base, and few movements show results without significant investment here.

### Growing and supporting civil society groups

Successful social movements amplify the voices of individuals and communities. Activists need to build social capacity to analyze issues, frame alternatives, and organize people to act. Organizing communities, creating formal and informal organizations, and building the skills of the organizations that do exist are all essential to increasing this social capacity. Since most donor funding is only for larger groups with track records, it can be very difficult for new groups to get a foot in the door. In the final analysis, even if the immediate balance of political and economic power in society is not challenged in the short term, the development of civil society groups represents a major social transformation in and of itself. The existence of a stronger set of citizen groups creates a situation where development decisions are more likely to take the public interest into account. It is this social infrastructure that maintains momentum and allows movements to get their messages across at the right times.

There is a wide variety of groups that come together in movements, but they can be roughly grouped as follows:

- Community-based groups, which are made up of people directly affected by an issue. While they may all live near each other, communities also arise out of common cause, such as people with cancer, communities from different countries affected by the same mining company, etc.
- Non-governmental Organizations, which here refer to formally organized groups, often with paid staff, that work on issues beyond their own community at any level from local to international
- Professional or production organizations, such as cooperatives, unions, and artisanal associations
- Networks, which are coalitions of organizations drawn together in common cause, sometimes with a formal affiliation

- Movements, which are wide collections of formal and informal organizations working toward the same general goals, often with widely different tactics and strategies, and most often not in tight coordination.

Funders are normally set up to fund only a few of these types of organizations, but there is a role for funding all of them. Movements that do not build bases of each category are less likely to succeed. If a movement is only strong at the level of local NGOs, for example, it has little basis in communities themselves on the one hand, and little influence over policymakers on the other. Or international networks that do not have real roots in their member countries again lack leverage to make a difference. Yet movements that connect groups through the spectrum from local to international can bring a variety of voices and pressures to bear on an issue. They can also reinforce each other with their various skill sets: local community members can describe firsthand the effects of, say, pollution on their health, while national level NGO staff can back this up with scientific data and get it in front of the right policymakers, while international activists can use this input to make gains in international negotiations.

*Supporting effective networks*

The power of these groups is further strengthened by the increased networking of civil society groups, media, and sometimes business and government. The greater the scope of change proposed, the more important cross-sectoral alliances are. This means that local, regional, national and international networking must occur—the latter especially where the issues at hand move across borders. Linking local groups with allies in other parts of their region or the world strengthens their work. Networks can multiply the influence of their members. What we also see during such a process is a "frame extension" – a linking of issues -- among local groups, where activists articulate issues and themes that underlie a common struggle. An example here would be environmental groups that team up with groups working on human developmental disabilities, in recognition that chemical exposure is a common concern to both groups. Recruiting new constituencies to a cause is what movement building is all about.

There is a cost to this wider linking, in that the time and resources devoted to connecting with wider networks take away from local organizing. Local leaders may open themselves to accusations of being coopted by outsiders. And issues are often framed differently by wider networks than they are by local groups. So groups need to balance the benefits of collaborating with a wider network against the costs of a reduced focus on local issues.

Given the complexity of social problems, many perspectives are needed to generate ideas and tactics for experimentation. Solutions are uncertain, and unlikely to occur in single steps over a short period of time. So successful movements tend to be large, diverse, internally inconsistent, and often in conflict, but movement members push roughly in the same direction. The danger of diversity is that different parts of the network will unintentionally undermine the work of other parts, so coordination and communication is important to avoid that. Having said that, not everyone in the network will always agree

with every other part, which is fine as long as they are not contradicting each other's work.

One specific effect of diversity within a movement bears mention. The presence of more threatening "outsider" groups within a broad array of organizations tends to benefit the movement for at least two reasons. More specifically, these groups:

1. Tend to encourage elites to bargain in good faith with more moderate movement groups;
2. Are often repressed, which has the effect of generating more support from the general public in sympathy.

These groups are often seen as marginal or radical in the beginning, but as a movement gain strength and social agendas shift, their points of view can come to be mainstream.

### *Effective leadership*

Successful movements develop leadership which can motivate people, develop strategy, and maintain involvement over the long term. Effective leadership does not necessarily mean the presence of one or two dominating personalities. Movements with a thin layer of leaders are precarious, and risk disintegration should something go wrong with one or two people. Successful movements nurture leadership at all levels, transforming members into leaders along the way. Charismatic leaders can often be powerful symbols for a movement, such as Martin Luther King, Jr. or Nelson Mandela, but movements that do not develop leadership at all levels have difficulty continuing to mobilize people and respond to changing events.

### *2. Framing and Consciousness Raising*

Resources and movement infrastructure alone do not produce a social movement.  They only offer those challenging the status quo a certain objective "structural potential" for movement activity.  Movement emergence always implies a certain transformation in consciousness.  Before movement activity can really begin in earnest, a critical mass of people must define their situation as unjust and subject to change through group action.  Further, these perceptions must have an emotional as well as a cognitive component.  It is not enough that people simply perceive injustice or disadvantage.  Strong felt emotion is always critical.  Anger and hope are the typical affective fuel of movement activity.

Framing of an issue can be broken down into three types:

1. Diagnostic frames – presenting an alternative view of the problem from the prevailing notion
2. Prognostic frames – persuading that there are other ways of doing things
3. Motivational frames – convincing people to take action by putting the case in a way that leads people to get involved.

*Scientific documentation of concerns and alternatives*

Technical and scientific documentation deepens understanding of problems and alternatives. Citizens need to analyze problems technically, as well as analyze alternatives. Good, sound information is essential to diagnosing problems and presenting solutions. Also important are qualitative documentation practices—where people's testimonies, stories, and oral histories complement and enrich technical sources. This is a point where the diagnosis and prognosis of the problem can emerge in a way that moves activists, allies, and funders to support an initiative or organization. Creating and documenting these alternative understandings – for example, that large dams violate human rights and damage the environment, and that other alternatives are practical – are essential to gaining wider public support for a movement's point of view. This reframing often carries more weight by appealing to moral principles, rather than simply relying on scientific or financial reasoning. In this way activists can often achieve victories against campaigns which are far better funded and connected.

*Promoting alternative production and distribution*

More sustainable production and distribution techniques are necessary for consumers and businesses to survive and thrive. Fisheries must be limited to allow continued production, farmers must not poison the land that produces crops, extractive industries must work without destroying surrounding communities and environments. And societies must create governance systems that encourage sustainable production and discourage short term profit at the expense of long term production. This is a key basis underlying any path toward sustainability.

It is important for movements to get beyond what might appear to be an exclusively oppositional orientation toward one that is focused on embracing something positive and transformational (instead of a "just say no to X" we insist that we are "saying yes to Y"). Social movements must be better at articulating to potential adherents what it is they stand for in a way that is consistent with their vision.

*Market campaigns*

Boycotts and economic pressure tactics directed at producers and distributors can have wide ranging effects. It becomes much more difficult to ignore alternative points of view if movements can have an impact on business as usual. Economic leverage must go hand in hand with political leverage. Economic pressures can create opportunities for movements: they can draw public attention to a previously ignored issue, they can raise the cost of ignoring the movement, and they can open up avenues for dialogue and negotiation that would otherwise never become available. At the same time, they can make alternatives more attractive. An excellent example of this has been the dramatic shift in recent years to "green products," for everything from electronics to cosmetics. Campaigns to raise consumer concerns about these products have driven changes in corporate behavior in response.

*Supporting alternative media and culture*

Groups need to have access to information (through media and communication technologies and social networks) and produce their own information (via newsletters, Internet, newspapers, radio and research reports). Understanding issues is crucial for citizen groups, so information must be available not from only generally accepted viewpoints, but from alternative perspectives as well. And if groups hope to reframe debates, to shift discussions to their priorities and point of view, then they must be able to get their views out in mass media. Media technologies facilitate a public engagement with problems that may not be widely recognized or acknowledged, and present alternatives for consideration. Media and culture come together as groups use symbols, stories, and oral traditions to communicate concerns and solutions through web, print, visual, and audio technologies.

A critical tool in this struggle to control the debate is the power of moral persuasion, of being "right." The power of struggling for healthy communities and environments can sometimes overcome million dollar campaigns mounted in opposition. Social movements use the power of moral persuasion to reach and convince wide audiences far beyond the power of money.


*3. Political Opportunities*

Under ordinary circumstances, movement groups face enormous obstacles in their efforts to confront entrenched ways of doing things. These challengers are relatively powerless precisely because their bargaining position, relative to established political and economic elites, is so weak. As all-powerful as a given regime may seem, changes—demographic, economic, political, cultural—are always taking place that have the potential to undermine the power and authority of incumbents. Successful movements tend to take advantage of these kinds of destabilizing change processes, even as they expand "political opportunities" through their own actions.

The ability of movements to bring about and take advantage of political opportunities depends on four things:

1. Openness of the system
2. Elite disunity
3. Support outside the movement
4. Unexpected events

The greater the first three, the more likely movements are to be successful. Movements adjust their strategies and tactics depending on this context. For the fourth – unexpected events – success depends on the ability of movements to take advantage of them when they occur.

*Changing policy*

Policy changes (often as a result of the above activities) can be legislative, administrative, judicial, or corporate, and can occur at the local, regional, national, or transnational scales. For many movements, achieving change in policy is a watershed moment in the struggle.  At this moment, the new policy begins to codify the underlying social change taking place. While policy changes do not guarantee social justice, they do indicate a fundamental change in the social agenda which recognizes the perspective of the movement. Achieving policy change requires involvement of the whole range of groups necessary to make it happen: community based groups directly affected by the policies in question, local NGO groups that support them and help articulate their views, groups based in the capital with contacts with policy makers. Just as important, support must be readily available when the time is ripe for policy changes. This is a particular problem for funding social movements, since these opportunities can arise quickly, not when a funder has a funding cycle approaching. Policy changes often come when opportunities for a break through present themselves, after long preparation by movement groups. Movements must take advantage of those openings to get the policy change they want. These changes are important, not simply for whatever substantive effects follow from the policy shift, but also for the powerful signal they send indicating that the system may be newly vulnerable and/or receptive to change.

### *Increasing resilience to deal effectively with external events*

External events– those beyond the control of activists—must be conducive to change, or at least not hinder it.  Activists need to be able to take advantage of unforeseen events quickly and flexibly. Activists must also be able to create those events—*making* political opportunities happen, not just waiting for them to open up. Making opportunities happen can take years of practicing the strategies listed above, waiting for the right time.  When the opportunity finally arrives, a movement can have a major impact, but only if the movement infrastructure and resources are in place to take advantage of it.

There are circumstances where movement leaders set up everything quite well, but wider events outside their control make success impossible under current conditions. So even with the best designed and led movement, external events must not undermine that work for movements to be successful. Movements that are resilient can weather a change in circumstances and choose a more propitious time to press their case.

### **Conclusion**

To pull this discussion together, it is important to remember that these three factors – resources and infrastructure, reframing issues, and political opportunity -- are not discrete.  Rather they are linked in ways that begin to suggest a more dynamic model of movement emergence.  To specify all these links is beyond the scope of this paper, but we can at least gesture to some of the key interactive dynamics.

- Lots of research has shown that the kind of transformation of consciousness so critical to movement emergence is *much* more likely to take place in the kind of

group settings or "free spaces" that here we have simply referred to as "infrastructure." That is, as people organize into groups, changes in thinking are more likely to happen.

- But there is a reverse effect here too. That is, as more and more people begin to share a new consciousness about some issue, they are far more likely to commit to building the infrastructure needed to sustain collective action.
- Expanding infrastructure and the spread of a new consciousness may, in and of themselves, constitute a new "political opportunity" weakening the power of entrenched political and economic elites.
- The emergence of true "external" political opportunities generally has positive effects on the development of both infrastructure and movement consciousness. As external events or change processes increase the power of challengers and/or weaken movement opponents, the credibility of movement frames is enhanced, encouraging additional resource mobilization and infrastructure building. In other words, as movements gain in strength, their ideas do not seem so impractical or unrealistic, and the movement may grow in a snowball effect.

While most successful social movements benefit from favorable shifts in the broader political environment, "political opportunities" alone do not make movements successful. In the absence of sufficient resources/infrastructure, linked to an emerging new social/political consciousness, objective political opportunities rarely produce successful movements. It is when political opportunities emerge *in the context of sufficient infrastructure and consciousness* that movements develop most rapidly and successfully.

For simple social problems, simple solutions may suffice. For complex problems, such as persistent poverty or climate change, simple solutions are not enough. Complex problems require multi-faceted, long term solutions. Social movements historically have been the sole means by which complex social problems have been resolved peacefully.