

**Transnational Coalition-Building in the Americas:
The Case of the Hemispheric Social Alliance**

Thomas Legler, Ph.D.

**A Paper Presented to the Summer Institute on
“Building the New Agenda: Hemispheric Integration and Social Cohesion,”
Robarts Centre for Canadian Studies, York University, Toronto, July 10-20, 2000.**

July 2000

Draft: Please do not cite or quote without permission from the author.

Introduction: The Phenomenon of Transnational Coalitions

There has been an impressive growth in cross-border, transnational coalition building among civil society organizations in the Americas over the past decade. For example, resistance to the negotiation of a North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in the early 1990s provided the impetus for the formation of a variety of continental labour, environmental, and human rights networks (Dresser 1996; Hunter 1995; Kidder and McGinn 1995; Carr 1996; Rosen 1999; Thorup 1991). The *Zapatista* Army of National Liberation (EZLN) has forged important international links with other organizations sympathetic to their struggle against neoliberalism (Schulz 1998). Indigenous groups in countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru have joined together as well as with international solidarity groups to coordinate their struggle on an international level (Brysk 1996).

What are the challenges confronting transnational coalition building in the Western Hemisphere? In order to shed light on this question, this paper utilizes a social movement framework in examining one important current transnational collective actor: the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA). Briefly, the HSA is a heterogeneous consortium of civil society organizations from across the region that have united in their resistance to the current economic model, the Free Trade Area of the Americas, multinational corporate rule, and the social exclusion of the majority of citizens in the region. The analysis of the HSA reveals the myriad of limitations and constraints to transnational coalition building. As an effort at cross-border mobilization, the HSA not only shares a number of similar challenges to local and national based social movements, but also confronts a unique set of international problems and dilemmas.

Elements of a Social Movement Framework for Analysing Transnational Coalition Building

Transnational coalitions are essentially attempts to construct social movements at the international level. Thus, contemporary social movement theory provides us with a useful set of analytical tools for analysing transnational coalition building. This section outlines six such factors: socioeconomic and political conditions; resource mobilization and/or mobilizing structures; political opportunity structure; collective action framing; collective identity formation; and, the collective action repertoire.

A number of political economy and historical studies have highlighted the importance of prevailing socioeconomic and political conditions for understanding the rise of social movements. That is, dramatic changes in social and economic structures have often “pushed” collective actors to mobilize (Eckstein 1989). For instance, a deteriorating economy, the removal of state agricultural subsidies, or a rising debt load might threaten the livelihood of peasants, inducing them to mobilize.

Nonetheless, since poverty and inequality are persistent phenomena throughout the Americas, normally other factors come into play in accounting for episodes of collective action. Certain pull factors compel disenchanted or upset citizens to mobilize. For example, the American-based resource mobilization theory underscores that social movements are a function of resource mobilization (McCarthy and Zald 1987). In other words, in their actions they mobilize an ensemble of different resources, from leadership and administrative skills to financial resources. Moreover, with an emphasis on the internal attributes of movements, resource mobilization theory also highlights the significance of collective actors as mobilizing structures, entities that tie together networks of social actors and bring together resources for the purpose of collective action.

Other theorists have posited that social movements are a function of political opportunities and/or constraints (Tarrow 1998; Tilly 1978). That is, emerging movements seize political opportunities in their struggles. These opportunities may take the form of political allies, such as

sympathetic individuals or policy currents within government, internal divisions within an incumbent elite, or democratic reforms that reduce the potential for encountering repression. Movements may also time their actions to coincide with election campaigns in order to attract maximum media attention and to oblige candidates to consider their issues and grievances seriously.

Various scholars have pointed out that much of social movement activity takes place in the realm of perceptions. Social movements construct collective action frames embedded in discourse, slogans, and symbols whose purpose is to galvanize support for the cause, as well as legitimize and rationalize the struggle (Snow and Benford 1988, 1992; Tarrow 1998). The most successful movements have fashioned overarching “master frames” that reach out to and foster sympathy among wide sections of the population. The civil rights movement of the 1960s is a prime example. Nascent transnational social movements confront a unique framing challenge: frame bridging (McCarthy 1997). That is, not only must they frame their struggle in a way which creates networks of support at the local and national level, but also internationally. Given, language and cultural differences from one country to another as well as the distance factor, this is a daunting task.

New social movement theory (NSMT) has interpreted social movements as instances of collective identity formation (Alvarez, Dagnino and Escobar 1998; Escobar and Alvarez 1992; Foweraker 1990, 1995). That is, while collective actors engage in protest activities against authorities, a crucial dimension of their struggle has to do with the realm of cultural politics: forging a group identity, creating meaning for their adherents, affecting the political discourse, and influencing changes in political culture. According to NSMT, successful movements create coherent identities that provide the basis for altering the dominant culture. Latin America’s new social movements, such as environmental, human rights and democracy, gay, lesbian, feminist, urban

popular, and church-based movements, have allegedly contributed to the spread of an alternative, participatory, democratic political culture.

Finally, social movements employ a set of tactics to press for the successful resolution of their grievances. With an inclination toward forms of protest, these tactics are intended to disrupt, to embarrass and/or compel authorities to negotiate or dialogue, and to build public support by attracting media attention. These tactics are drawn from what has been called a “collective action repertoire” (Tilly 1978; Tarrow 1998). This repertoire contains conventional, time proven tactics but is augmented from time to time by innovative forms of collective actions. Over time, what were once considered innovative, radical, and daring tactics almost inevitably become part of the conventional repertoire across countries. Such is the case with labour strikes, marches or demonstrations, hunger strikes, and sit-ins. Once forms of collective action become conventional, they are often less successful in terms of disruption, pressuring authorities, and attracting media attention. Movement activists are thus constantly challenged to come up with new twists on old tactics to advance their agendas through protest. Given today’s televised, globalized, and sound-bite oriented media, there has been a strong tendency toward the theatrical and macabre in protest activities.

The table below summarizes the core elements of a social movement approach to transnational coalition building. In brief, after a short introduction, subsequent pages will use this framework to examine the push and pull factors as well as tactics of the Hemispheric Social Alliance.

ELEMENTS OF A FRAMEWORK FOR ANALYSING TRANSNATIONAL COALITION BUILDING	
Push Factors	- Changes in socioeconomic and political conditions
Pull Factors	- Resource mobilization and/or mobilizing structures - Political opportunities and/or constraints - Collective action frames, frame-bridging - Collective identity formation
Tactics	- Collective action repertoire - Conventional vs. innovative tactics

The Hemispheric Social Alliance: Background Information

The Hemispheric Social Alliance is a network and forum of over fifty hemispheric and national organizations opposed to neoliberalism, corporate rule, social exclusion, and the Free Trade Area of the Americas.¹ Conceived in May 1997 at the Belo Horizonte Meeting of Trade Ministers from the Americas, the HSA has also attempted to develop an alternative model of economic integration for the Hemisphere that is more democratic, participatory, egalitarian, and environmentally sustainable. The basic assertion is that trade agreements must advance people's rights and a socially and environmentally sustainable agenda over the interests of international business. This is captured in

¹The description and analysis of the HSA contained in the following pages draws on information provided on Common Frontiers' website: <http://web.net/comfront/>

the living document *Alternatives for the Americas: Building a People's Hemispheric Agreement* (HSA 1999). The HSA also seeks to strengthen civil society in the Americas and to promote the enforcement of International Labour Organization standards and international human rights covenants.

In March 1999, the membership decided to elect a Coordinating Group. This group consists of Common Frontiers Canada, Civil Society Initiative on Central American Integration (ICIC), Quebec Network on Continental Integration (RQIC), Alliance for Responsible Trade (USA), Mexican Free Trade Action Network (RMALC), Latin American Congress of Rural Organizations (CLOC), the Brazilian Network for People's Integration (REBRIP) and the Interamerican Regional Workers Organization (ORIT). RMALC currently acts as the secretariat for the HSA.

Among its main forms of collective action, the HSA has organized a series of alternative events that run parallel to major official international meetings. These parallel forums are meant to pressure governments to alter the current course of FTAA negotiations, to draw public and media attention to issues of concern, and to promote popular participation in policymaking. Thus, in May 1997, the HSA ran the "Our Americas Forum" to coincide with the Belo Horizonte Trade Ministerial. In April 1998, the People's Summit took place at the same time as the Santiago Summit of the Americas. In October 1999, the Americas Civil Society Forum occurred side by side the Toronto Trade Ministerial and Business Forum. In April 2000, the HSA plans to organize a "People's Summit" parallel to the Quebec City Summit of the Americas. The HSA's initiatives also include the preparation of participatory, "living" policy documents such as *Our Americas* (1999) and *Social Exclusion, Jobs, and Poverty in the Americas* (1999). The Alliance also maintains an electronic discussion group.

The Challenges Confronting the Hemispheric Social Alliance

Following the social movement framework outlined above, this section identifies some of the key challenges facing the Hemispheric Social Alliance.

Prevailing Socioeconomic and Political Conditions

As the HSA (1999) underscores in its document, *Social Exclusion, Jobs, and Poverty in the Americas*, growing numbers of people in the Americas are facing increasing poverty and worsening income inequality. Moreover, across the region, democratic citizenship rights are often limited, suggesting an emerging crisis of representation and democratic consolidation (Domínguez 1997; O'Donnell 1994; Vilas 1997). The question is, however, whether these conditions are creating an organizational imperative among the excluded and marginalized. Certainly, pressures to mobilize have been mitigated somewhat in many contexts by the functioning of migration as a safety valve and by the ongoing diversification of family survival strategies. Nonetheless, there have been important recent episodes of social mobilization, such as the protests by the Brazilian Landless Movement (MST), collective resistance in Bolivia to the planned privatization of the public water system, and the indigenous and workers' convergence in Ecuador against dolarization that toppled former president Jamil Mahuad. On the other hand, in other countries such as Venezuela, mass popular support has been directed into a populist revolution against the old political system led by Hugo Chavez.

Two important observations stem from these comments. First, the responses to adversity, whether voice or exit, seem to vary considerably from one country to another. One sees instances of

both popular grassroots mobilizations and populism. Clearly, further attention must be paid to the path dependence variables that influence patterns of resistance and non-resistance across the region. Second, the examples of protest cited above indicate that collective action throughout the region tends to focus on concrete local and national issues. It is thus a considerable challenge for the leaders of international coalitions such as the HSA to mobilize groundswell support against socioeconomic and political issues that transcend borders, despite the objective existence of social exclusion throughout the region.

Resource Mobilization and Mobilizing Structures

There are a formidable array of resource and organizational issues confronting the Hemispheric Social Alliance. For example, the HSA's preferred tactic of parallel events as well as the ongoing demand for network coordination create an expensive challenge for its constituent organizations: how to finance such undertakings.² One concrete problem is that the Alliance's diffuse structure lacks a central nucleus that can be used for fundraising purposes.³ The financial challenge translates into four potential inequalities within the HSA. First, northern partners within the Alliance generally have greater resources than their southern counterparts, leading to potential strains over leadership, influence, and control. Second, even within countries represented in the HSA, some organizations, such as trade unions, will have deeper pockets than others. Does this lead to a greater voice for

²Alejandro Villamar, the Mexican Free Trade Action Network's (RMALC) Director of environment and development, confirmed in a recent interview for the ezine *Cross Border Links* that the HSA's lack of financial resources was one of its biggest obstacles (<http://www.irc-online.org/cbl/cblzv1n1.html>).

³This shortcoming was identified and discussed in a meeting of the RMALC in Mexico City, June 12, 2000.

labour organizations over other civil society organizations? Third, the expensive travel costs to the HSA's international parallel events rule out in most instances mass popular attendance in favour of a more narrow presence by organizational leaders and professionals. Lastly, while the HSA promotes popular participation via an electronic discussion group and the elaboration of living documents, the cost of computers, telephones, and internet service is prohibitive to all but the wealthiest among individuals and organizations that support the Alliance.⁴ Real participation in the HSA is therefore very limited. The aims of the HSA to represent the socially excluded and to promote popular participation are real challenges in this context.

As a mobilizing structure, the HSA faces a series of potential constraints. Some of these relate to coordination: how to coordinate initiatives within countries, across borders, and in at least four languages (English, French, Spanish, and Portuguese). Others have to do with the question of transnational leadership among member organizations that have traditionally jealously guarded their autonomy. One sensitive issue to work out in practice is how to prevent northern paternalism in a context where many southern constituent organizations may depend on northern financial support.

Political Opportunities and Constraints

On the whole, the prevailing political opportunity structure at the international level does not seem very propitious for the Alliance. For example, while the HSA enjoys growing civil society support across the region, it has few if any allies among governments and international organizations (IOs). This comes as no surprise, given its pointed criticism of neoliberal government policies and IO's such

⁴For an interesting treatment of the inegalitarian tendencies of cyberpolitics and internet-based struggles, see Everett (1998).

as the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization, and the Organization of American States.

Thus far, the HSA has also not been able to count on any serious divisions among the region's elites. While there has been some growth in criticism of the Washington Consensus by some of its most renowned architects, such as Jeffrey Sachs and Joseph Stiglitz, there seems to be little sign of any cracks beyond the rhetorical in the state-business consensus behind market reforms. Leaders like President Hugo Chavez who at least rhetorically sympathize with the HSA's interpretation of the region's problems are isolated within the region as well as extremely limited in their scope for supporting popular initiatives that risk alienating international investors and international financial institutions.

Lastly, the HSA is constrained potentially by the fact that much of the international media is controlled by its sworn enemy: big business. Understanding the crucial role the media plays in helping to promote (or criticize) social movements, this has serious possible repercussions for the future growth of and popular support for the Alliance.

Framing

The HSA has framed its struggle in terms of resisting neoliberalism, economic integration a la Free Trade Area of the Americas, corporate rule, and corporate-driven globalization as well as promoting people power against social exclusion. The question is, how effective, resonant, and galvanizing are these collective action frames? Looking at Canada and the United States, while many people undoubtedly sympathize with the types of issues raised by the HSA's constituent organizations, they are also interested in tax cuts and law and order concerns such as personal and home security against

assault and robbery. These people do not necessarily make any direct link between the two sets of issues. The challenge at the international level is to construct frames that convince people of the links between international phenomena and their localized manifestations and compel them to mobilize. The lack of convincing collective action frames makes it difficult for the HSA to project itself as a popular interlocutor, a daunting task at the international level. Furthermore, notwithstanding big business influence over much of the international news vehicles and venues, it is questionable whether the HSA's framing efforts, its symbols, slogans, and frames, are successfully grabbing media attention.

Collective Identity Formation

Related to its framing efforts, the Hemispheric Social Alliance also has the challenge of fashioning a coherent collective identity that provides meaning and inspiration to its membership. Ultimately, its future as a potential social movement relies on it. The truth is that the HSA is a very diffuse and heterogeneous collective actor. It brings together labour, peasant, human rights, environmental, church, development, and economic and social justice organizations. While this diversity creates a potential advantage of strength in numbers in collective actions, it might also pull the Alliance in different, opposing, and conflicting directions.

Tactics

The HSA faces the important challenge of devising and selecting tactics to advance its agenda of promoting an alternative economic model and trade agreement and people power. Unlike the local and national spheres, one tactical problem at the transnational level is that the target of the HSA's actions is unclear and diffuse. While local and national struggles have the advantage of focussing a

sustained attack on a visible, tangible objective, the HSA's efforts have been targeted at various institutions, from national government ministries and heads of state to the OAS, IMF, and WTO. Given that the typical goal of social movements, at least at the local and national levels, is to disrupt public order, attract sympathetic media attention, and thereby compel authorities to negotiate or dialogue, the HSA's selection of multiple opponents may not be the most conducive way to advance its agenda. The HSA might well be "scattering its shots."

Another ongoing tactical challenge is to come up with innovative, attention grabbing, and effective tactics. The parallel forums sponsored by the HSA, such as the Our Americas Forum in Belo Horizonte in May 1997 and Toronto in November 1999, and the People's Summits in Santiago in April 1998 and April next year in Quebec City, are illustrative of the possible problems and dilemmas involved. While these events in theory provide a forum for popular participation and voicing grievances, it must be asked whether they carry the same punch as direct popular participation in the official meetings they parallel. In addition, while originally innovative, they have become a conventional tactic that might well not draw the same degree of public and media attention with each successive parallel event. As previously discussed, given the high cost of international travel, these events might also contribute to uneven participation among the leadership and popular base as well as among the northern and southern partners of the HSA.

The "Battle of Seattle" shut-down tactic also reveals the declining returns that "proven" forms of collective action may encounter over time. While 50,000 protestors were successful in preventing the WTO from meeting in Seattle in December 1999, their shut-down success also provided police and security forces with a worst case scenario from which to learn and devise more effective countermeasures against similar protests in the future. The result can be seen clearly in the cases of

attempts to close the IMF and World Bank meetings in Washington, D.C. in April and the OAS General Assembly in Windsor in June, which were successfully prevented. As this example shows, tactical innovation entails a see-saw learning competition among protest organizations and authorities.

Concluding Thoughts

Using the case of the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA), the preceding analysis highlighted the variety of challenges faced by attempts to construct social movements at the international level. In terms of socioeconomic and political conditions, these may or may not give rise to an organizational imperative. In any event, movement formation occurs more naturally at the local and national levels where supporters can identify common problems more easily, than across borders where the links are harder to make. The paper also underlined the potential financial limitations and coordinating problems confronted by international mobilizing structures. The Hemispheric Social Alliance's struggle also draws little support from the contemporary regional political opportunity structure. Political constraints seem to be more the rule. The HSA has had an enormous challenge in framing its struggle in a way which fosters international collective action and attracts sympathetic media attention. It has also not been easy for the HSA to forge a coherent, meaningful collective identity among a very disparate membership. From a tactical standpoint, the potential punch of the Alliance is weakened by the fact that its target is unclear. Moreover, it must continually undertake tactical innovation in order for to promote its agenda successfully.

However, perhaps the biggest challenge that lies ahead for the HSA is to fulfill its mandate as an agency for social inclusion and democracy. While social movements normally arise from grassroots mobilization, the idea of the HSA was conceived by the leaders and professional cadres

of civil society organizations across the region. The HSA must therefore take a step back and expand its mass base appeal.⁵ This is by no means an easy task, for the HSA runs the risk of a paradox of exclusion: championing the cause of the Hemisphere's socially excluded and marginalized majority while enjoying little popular participation. International collective action is expensive, whether viewed from the angle of international travel, coordination, or communications. As things stand right now, even if they are sympathetic to its cause, most people that the HSA claims to represent cannot afford the price of participation. Unless this challenge is met, the Hemispheric Social Alliance's future does not look encouraging.

⁵The need for the HSA to expand its base of support among the popular masses was discussed in a meeting of the RMALC in Mexico City, June 12, 2000.

References

- Alvarez, Sonia E., Evelina Dagnino, and Arturo Escobar, eds. 1998. *Cultures of Politics, Politics of Cultures: Re-visioning Latin American Social Movements*. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Brysk, Alison. 1996. "Turning Weakness Into Strength: The Internationalization of Indigenous Rights." *Latin American Perspectives* 23, 2 (Spring): 38-57.
- Carr, Barry H. 1996. "Crossing Borders: Labor Internationalism in the Era of NAFTA." In *Neoliberalism Revisited: Economic Restructuring and Mexico's Political Future*, ed. Gerardo Otero, 209-31. Boulder, CO: Westview.
- Domínguez, Jorge I. 1997. "Latin America's Crisis of Representation." *Foreign Affairs* 76, 1 (January-February): 100-13.
- Dresser, Denise. 1996. "Treading Lightly and Without a Stick: International Actors and the Promotion of Democracy in Mexico." In *Beyond Sovereignty: Collectively Defending Democracy in the Americas*, ed. Tom Farer. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Eckstein, Susan. 1989. "Power and Popular Protest in Latin America." In *Power and Popular Protest: Latin American Social Movements*, ed. Susan Eckstein, 1-60. Berkeley, CA.: University of California Press.
- Escobar, Arturo, and Sonia E. Alvarez, eds. 1992. *The Making of Social Movements in Latin America: Identity, Strategy, and Democracy*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Everett, Margaret. 1998. "Latin America On-line: The Internet, Development, and Democratization." *Human Organization* 57, 4 (Winter): 385-93.
- Foweraker, Joe. 1995. *Theorizing Social Movements*. Boulder/London: Pluto Press.
- Foweraker, Joe. 1990. "Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico." In *Popular Movements and Political Change in Mexico*, ed. Joe Foweraker and Ann L. Craig, 3-20. Boulder, CO.: Lynne Rienner.
- HSA. 1999. *Alternatives for the Americas: Building a People's Hemispheric Agreement*. [Http://www.web.net/~comfront/alts4americas/eng/eng.html](http://www.web.net/~comfront/alts4americas/eng/eng.html).
- HSA. 1999. *Social Exclusion, Jobs, and Poverty in the Americas*. [Http://www.web.net/comfront/forumdocs_socialex.html](http://www.web.net/comfront/forumdocs_socialex.html).

- Hunter, Allen. 1995. "Globalization from Below? Promises and Perils of the New Internationalism." *Social Policy* (Summer): 6-13.
- Kidder, Thalia, and Mary McGinn, 1995. "In the Wake of NAFTA: Transnational Workers Networks." *Social Policy* (Summer): 14-21.
- McCarthy, John D. 1997. "The Globalization of Social Movement Theory." In *Transnational Social Movements and Global Politics: Solidarity from Beyond the State*, ed. Jackie Smith, Charles Chatfield, and Ron Pagnucco, 243-59. Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press.
- McCarthy, John D., and Mayer N. Zald. 1987. "Resource Mobilization and Social Movements: A Partial Theory." In *Social Movements In An Organizational Society*, ed. Mayer N. Zald and John D. McCarthy, 15-42. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books.
- O'Donnell, Guillermo. 1994. "Delegative Democracy." *Journal of Democracy* 5, 1: 55-69.
- Rosen, Fred. 1999. "The Underside of NAFTA: A Budding Cross-Border Resistance." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 32, 4 (Jan.-Feb.).
- Schulz, Markus S. 1998. "Collective Action Across Borders: Opportunity Structures, Network Capacities, and Communicative Praxis in the Age of Advanced Globalization." *Sociological Perspectives* 41, 3: 587-616.
- Snow, David A., and Robert D. Benford. 1992. "Master Frames and Cycles of Protest." In *Frontiers in Social Movement Theory*, ed. Aldon D. Morris and Carol McClurg Mueller, 133-55. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- _____. 1988. "Ideology, Frame Resonance, and Participant Mobilization." *International Social Movement Research* 1: 197-217.
- Tarrow, Sydney. 1998. *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics*. 2d Ed. New York and Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Thorup, Cathryn L. 1991. "The Politics of Free Trade and Dynamics of Cross-Border Coalitions in US-Mexican Relations." *Columbia Journal of World Business* 26, 2 (Summer): 12-26.
- Tilly, Charles. 1978. *From Mobilization to Revolution*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall.
- Vilas, Carlos M. 1997. "Inequality and the Dismantling of Citizenship in Latin America." *NACLA Report on the Americas* 31, 1 (July-August): 57-63.

