

## Introductory Notes For Framing Our Discussions

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Goals: For the purposes of this workshop, we define "human rights" broadly, to include not only liberal individual civil rights but also social, economic, and environmental rights, as well as collective rights. We propose to examine a series of "issue areas" in two comparative modes: across issues and among regions, with a focus on the dynamics of local-national-transnational civil relationships within civil society. We are inviting workshop participants to present papers that analyze the diverse ways in which transnational relationships have affected local and national social and civil society dynamics. Our hope is that exchanges across issue areas and regions of the world will provide new comparative insights into the overarching shared question about local and national impacts.

Our point of departure was that if we asked such a diverse set of analysts to come together to address the same core question, we might generate unpredictably fruitful insights. In other words, long live the inductive approach.

Why did we choose this particular focus on local and national impacts? One reason is that many analysts assume that building transnational networks and coalitions is always wonderful, and that the reasons for it are obvious - when in practice such a task often proves easier said than done. Specifically, the social actors involved often pay different kinds of costs, while the benefits are often far from clear-cut – or so long term that they are not yet visible. Sometimes transnational campaigns can even be counterproductive for local and national civil society actors, provoking authoritarian nationalist backlash that sometimes outweighs the limited leverage wielded by foreign alliances. So one goal of the workshop is to develop a more comprehensive sense of the nature and pattern of impacts, rather than simply assume that we know what they are.

We asked the analysts and activists here today to address how transnational civil society relationships have affected local and national social and civil society dynamics. These kinds of impacts might include, for example, analyzing the emergence of new actors and coalitions, changing power relations between them, identity formation, ideological transformation, agenda-setting, institutional change, or policy leverage. In other words, we left wide open the different kinds of possible impacts that each analyst might address, but what each panelist shares is a concern for assessing what difference participation in transnational civil society networks makes.

I'd like to focus these introductory remarks by sharing a broad conceptual point that I hope will provoke feedback in the course of the workshop. The point emerged from a research project that I will not be presenting here, one that tracks the nature, density and impact of Mexican-US civil society coalitions across sectors. This project found that most Mexico-US civil society relationships involve networking between fundamentally *national* social and civic organizations. Moreover, relatively few networks have consolidated into dense, balanced civil society partnerships, in spite of rapid integration between the two societies on other fronts. Basically, the nature and impact of transnational relationships remain fundamentally determined or constrained by national factors.

This finding led me to try to distinguish more clearly among transnational civil society relationships in terms of different *degrees* of density and cohesion. We often use the terms transnational “network,” “coalition” or “movement” interchangeably, as synonyms. I suggest that it might be useful to define each term with more precision. This would involve indicating, for example, whether different participants engage in mutual support, whether they have organized social bases, whether they engage in joint action or share ideologies and political cultures. Here is a chart that tries to distinguish between different degrees of cohesion in terms of a set of possible indicators:

**Distinguishing between Transnational Networks, Coalitions and Social Movement Organizations**

Shared characteristics:	Transnational networks	Transnational coalitions	Transnational movement organizations
Exchange of information & experiences	Yes	Yes	Yes
Organized social base	Sometimes more, sometimes less or none	Sometimes more, sometimes less or none	Yes
Mutual support	Sometimes, from afar and possibly strictly discursive	Yes	Yes
Joint actions & campaigns	Sometimes loose coordination	Yes, based on mutually agreed minimum goals, often short-term, tactical	Yes, based on shared long-term strategy
Shared ideologies	Not necessarily	Not necessarily	Generally yes
Shared political cultures	Often not	Often not	Shared political values, styles and identities

Note: Shading illustrates suggested degrees of relationship density and cohesion

This chart is drawn from: “Assessing Binational Civil Society Coalitions: Lessons from the Mexico-US Experience,” Working Paper No. 26, Chicano-Latino Research Center, University of California, Santa Cruz, April, 2000. This paper is on-line at: [http://www.irc-online.org/bios/pdf/index\\_docs.html](http://www.irc-online.org/bios/pdf/index_docs.html). This monograph synthesizes the proceedings of a multi-sectoral conference of activists and researchers, to in David Brooks and Jonathan Fox, eds., Cross-Border Dialogues: Mexico-US Social Movement Networking, La Jolla: University of California, San Diego, Center for US-Mexican Studies, forthcoming

In this view, *networks* may be limited to exchanges of information, experiences and expressions of solidarity. Sometimes these exchanges generate the networks of ongoing relationships needed to be able to envision coordinated action. Coordinating action across vast differences in culture, power and goals is easier said than done. Nevertheless, some transnational networks manage to generate the shared goals, mutual trust and understanding needed to form *coalitions* – which are defined here in terms of actual collaboration on specific campaigns, beyond expressions of mutual support. In this view, what makes coalition different from networks – more dense, more cohesive, within limits – is that they *coordinate* their actions, and come to agreement on specific joint actions – often involving shared targets. In an exchange with Mimi Keck, whose earlier work does not make this distinction between weaker networks and more cohesive coalitions, her response was quite helpful. As she put, “coalitions are networks in action mode.”

Thinking about cohesiveness, neither networks nor coalitions necessarily involve significant horizontal exchanges between social actors or broader goals or ideologies shared by the participants. Even action-oriented transnational coalitions might be quite instrumental and limited in their goals – like any other kind of coalition. Indeed, many rely on just a handful of interlocutors to manage relationships between NGOs or broad-based social organizations that have relatively little awareness of the nature and actions of their counterparts across borders. The concept of transnational social movement organizations, in contrast, implies a much higher degree of density and much more cohesion than either networks or coalitions. In this view, to speak of transnational movement organizations suggests that what Latin American social scientists would call a cohesive “social subject” is active in more than one country.