

BUILDING INTERNATIONAL CIVIL SOCIETY: LESSONS FROM THE AMAZON COALITION

By Melina Selverston-Scher

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comments welcome-melinas@igc.org)

Introduction

The Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment, or the Amazon Coalition, is a network is an example of a new international civil society network.¹ Housed in Washington, DC, it brings together indigenous, environmental, and human rights groups working to protect the Amazon basin. An evaluation of the structure and function of the first five years of the Coalition can lead to interesting insights about how such networks can function successfully. On the one hand, the network can serve to leverage political space for emerging civil society in Latin America. There were also local impacts of the Coalition in the U.S. On the other hand, the activities of the Coalition are most effective when all parties benefit and there is a tenable partnership. It should be noted that the following discussion is a largely subjective analysis based on my former role as the Founding Director of the Amazon Coalition.²

International Civil Society

Economic globalization and the resulting widespread growth in foreign investment in Latin America has led to escalating devastation to the rainforests of the Amazon Basin and its inhabitants. Oil and gas reserves, for example, are usually discovered in the most isolated parts of the rainforest, in protected areas and in the homelands of the region's diverse indigenous peoples. Access roads to these areas not only destroy the delicate ecosystem, they encourage unchecked colonization that introduces disease, clear-cutting, land disputes and accompanying violence, alcoholism and even prostitution to indigenous communities. Contaminants from extraction related activities overflow into soils and water supplies, and pipelines spill millions of barrels of crude directly into the environment. Sadly, the result of resource extraction is that indigenous communities are reduced and extinguished. Customary foods, medicines, and building materials disappear with the environmental degradation. The impacts of colonization complete the destruction.

Inhabitants of the Amazon Basin are defending their territories against this onslaught, increasingly with the aid of outsiders. Indigenous people are virtual non-citizens, living far from the political processes that have dominated Latin America over the last century. Due to the current expansion of civil society in the region, indigenous

¹ The Amazon Coalition was subsumed into the Amazon Alliance in 1999, but for this analysis I will refer primarily to the Amazon Coalition, the part of the Alliance that networks support groups in a partnership with the indigenous groups. I realize this account is expository. If I find an outlet for the work I will develop the examples to demonstrate the points raised and prevent a more useful case study.

² November 1994 – November 1999.

people are finding more opportunity to voice their concerns. Thirty years ago development of the Amazon inevitably led to the disappearance of entire cultures and to significant violence among the colonists and the local population. That violence remains as a contextual variable, but now any large development project in Latin America takes the rights of indigenous people into account. Some type of consultation with affected communities is required in most cases. Environmental organizations, both domestic and international, have aided these communities on a number of occasions with varying degrees of success.

International non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have played a role supporting indigenous communities in the Amazon basin. Scholars of Latin America have posited that democratic openings have led to growth in civil society participation. Oil companies may be held increasingly accountable for their actions as civil society strengthens in Latin America. This is also relevant to the developing world in general. In addition, international NGOs are held increasingly accountable by Latin American civil society, and new political associations are forming to resolve tensions between civil society organizations.³

The international political economy requires civil society to act at an international level. The Coalition for Amazonian Peoples and Their Environment is an international network grown out of this need. The success of the Amazon Coalition should be measured on two equally important counts. First, it is an experiment in building the type of international civil society organization that is necessary to represent public interests in this increasingly global political economy. What kind of structure can adequately host such an organization? Second, it is an attempt to unite the social movements involved in protecting the Amazon basin in order to be more effective in a common goal: protecting the territories of indigenous inhabitants of the Amazon. Is the international network an effective tool for protecting the Amazon Basin? These two complimentary objectives provided the endless tension between form and function that provide the framework for growth of the Coalition. This essay will evaluate both form and function. The Amazon Coalition has been very successful in both fronts, I suggest, but it has yet to take full advantage of its potential.

Indians and Environmentalists

“We Indians are born environmentalists”⁴ the Mapuche activist from Chile, Aukan Huilcaman, is fond of saying. He said it at the Summit of the Americas in 1995, where hundreds of environmentalists converged to challenge the North American Free Trade Agreement, yet he was the only indigenous voice there. He has repeated it in Chile, and at the Convention on Biodiversity, at the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, the Inter-governmental panel on forests, and so many other international meetings. The number of indigenous representatives participating in these meetings has grown over the past few years, and they often bring some of the most sophisticated arguments to the table. Yet, why don't environmental groups consider indigenous people

³ In “Accountability within Transnational Coalitions,” Brown and Fox discuss the tensions among international and national NGOs.

⁴ “Nosotros los indigenas somos ecologistas por naturaleza.”

to be their allies? And why don't more indigenous groups build effective partnerships with environmentalists?

Increasingly Indigenous and environmental activists are forging important political alliances, yet there are fundamental discrepancies in the perspectives that have yet to be resolved. Environmentalists generally see nature as something to be preserved, focusing on conservation efforts. For indigenous groups, the primary goal is sovereignty and land rights. Sovereignty can include economic development, sometimes leading to clashes with environmental groups. Concurrently, environmental bias towards conservation can interfere with indigenous sovereignty, such as in the devastating cases of Indians being kicked out of their homelands to make way for 'protected areas.' Still, many struggles have been strengthened through the alliances. An international organization is stronger and more legitimate when it is backed by the voices of local communities. Conversely, indigenous communities can benefit from the resources environmentalists have to offer. This analysis of the Amazon Coalition contributes to an understanding of the potential benefits of building bridges between the indigenous and environmental movements.

The Amazon Coalition

The Case

The Amazon Coalition provides a fruitful case for analysis of the trend towards international networks and the struggling alliance between Indians and environmentalists. The Amazon is an obvious place to see the relationship between Indians and the environment. In much of the region indigenous communities lead traditional or semi-traditional lifestyles that have low impact on the ecology. Some even argue that the indigenous communities have formed an integral part of the delicate ecosystem of the rainforest. Without entering into that debate, it is safe to say that the indigenous people have a direct relationship with their environment in the Amazon, and in many cases, at least philosophically, they serve as the protectors of that environment.

Concurrently, the Coalition is a fascinating example of building international networks, which I call international civil society. The Amazon rainforest itself is an international arena. Geographically, it resides in nine different countries speaking five colonial languages and perhaps 500 indigenous languages. Environmentally, it is of importance to the whole world. While it is often called the lungs of the world, it is equally important for the vast biodiversity and unique species. Politically, the Amazon represents the unequal distribution of wealth, for most of the resources taken out of the rainforest are for use in the industrialized world. In addition, the forces currently devastating the Amazon are international, including multi-national corporations, multi-lateral lending agencies, and the forces of economic globalization in general.

History

The formal birth of the Coalition was at a summit between environmentalists and indigenous groups in Iquitos Peru in 1990. The summit was called by COICA, the Coordinating Body of Indigenous Organizations of the Amazon Basin. COICA had recently formed and was in the process of establishing its legitimacy. It had a formal partnership with a European network called the Climate Alliance, and it wanted to

establish a similar alliance with U.S. groups. More importantly, they felt that U.S. environmental groups were tromping around their rainforest homeland without taking indigenous inhabitants into account. The extreme problems were setting up protected areas and kicking the Indians out of them. The more frequent problems were a general lack of consultation or respect, particularly of the indigenous organizations.

The organizations that participated in the Iquitos summit signed a statement of alliance with COICA, committing them to support the organization. Through a series of meetings in Washington, DC, the U.S. groups became organized as a Coalition to be a parallel organization to COICA. Once the Amazon Coalition was established, the network in 1999 converted into a fully international representative organization, the Amazon Alliance.

Representation-Moving Beyond ‘Us and Them’

It was essential that the leadership of the Coalition represent the different groups involved in order to unite such diverse interests. The structure of the Amazon Coalition has constantly evolved according to the membership and its needs. Adjustments are made to the structure annually in search of more effective participation and more effective impacts. I suspect that this will be the case throughout its existence, as a fluid network of organizations. The consistent general skeleton of the structure is a unique combination of the political cultures expressed in the Coalition. The most important decision-making body is the general assembly, harkening to the syndicalist tradition of grassroots organizations in Latin America. The general assembly works through issue oriented working groups, more common in U.S. organizing experiences.

Originally the Coalition was to unite the U.S. environmental groups working in the Amazon Basin to meet the needs of COICA. First and foremost, they wanted a strategic alliance with U.S. groups working to protect the Amazon environment. Then, they wanted to establish some sort of representative body to hold accountable for the actions of U.S. groups. Also, the original working groups paralleled the ‘areas’ defined by COICA’s internal work plan. The specific objectives of the Coalition gradually changed as its membership changed and the group began to chart a path for itself. COICA’s original agenda when they hosted the Iquitos Summit was to call upon U.S. environmental groups to offer direct support to promote COICA in the United States. An early activity report by the first ‘ NGO coordinating committee’ for the Alliance (FOE, WRI, NWF, CI) demonstrates that early relationship. All of the actions listed are for and about supporting COICA directly. Examples are: Invitations for COICA to international meetings, generating media publicity about COICA, and approaching private foundations for funds for COICA.⁵ As more organizations became active members of the Coalition,

⁵ “Actividades de los Miembros del Comité de Coordinación COICA:ONG’s (sep.90 al enero 91). AC archives.

they voiced their concerns that the objectives of the organization go beyond direct support for COICA.

First, the Coalition came to represent a broader sector of civil society. NGOs working in the Amazon stated that they had established valuable partnerships with NGOs in the region, and thus they needed to be included as members. In addition, some of the more traditional indigenous groups, and many of the Brazilian indigenous groups, were not as involved in the COICA process and wanted to speak for themselves. Also, there was interest on the part of members that the Coalition support Maroons and rubber-tappers, whose lifestyles also protected the Amazon environment. It was noted that not all of the members were environmental groups, and the term 'NGO' already had a sour ring to it in Latin America. So by the end of the 1995 Amazon Coalition meeting, the first assembly since the office was opened, the membership of the Coalition included those 'support organizations' that were involved in defending the 'rights and territories of the indigenous and traditional peoples of the Amazon Basin.'

These changes were the result of endless hours of debate and discussion. COICA, understandably, protested the loss of direct support for their organization by the broadening of the mandate of the Coalition. Difficulty was heightened by the internal tensions between Amazonian environmental and indigenous groups who faced their own histories of distrust and competition for scarce resources and attention.

The Coalition became a significant tool to help bridge those in country divisions. Groups that might not have approached each other were given the opportunity to build a working relationship through the Coalition. This was also true of the Indian movement. In particular, local groups were able to establish working relationships with the COICA leadership with whom they might not have had the opportunity to work. In addition, the Coalition policy was only to entertain projects that included at least three members, a policy which encouraged collaborations.

The final result, once the Coalition of NGOs was consolidated and their political resources clearly demonstrated, was an alliance of unheard of equal representation. The Steering Council which guides the organization is half indigenous (named by COICA) and half NGO's (elected by the participants and the general assembly). The Coordinating office is now co-directed by an NGO staff and an indigenous representative. Note that the positions are not identical due to the different nature of indigenous and NGO structures. Indigenous groups are representative, and NGOs are professional. However, the positions are parallel in authority and responsibility. This unique structure is what makes the Coalition a flagship of international civil society. It reflects the diversity of its part, yet is an efficient tool to implement its mission.

The Coordination Office: Transparency and Neutrality.

The decision by the alliance to hire a coordinator was in effect a decision to institutionalize the movement, with all the benefits and pitfalls therein. The decision was taken by the participants of the Amazon Alliance meeting in Washington, D.C. in 1991. The decision to hire a coordinator was important to the Amazonians because it helped guarantee the continuity of the movement despite changing personnel in the organizations. For the U.S. NGO's it was key because it allowed them to participate without using too much of their own staff time. Once funding had been secured, I was

hired to coordinate the Coalition and an “office” was opened in Washington, DC in November, 1994.⁶

Neutrality

I was an interesting choice for coordinator as my background was in indigenous rights work, with marginal links to the environmental movement. In fact, one could have described my position as biased towards the indigenous movement and critical of the environmental movement. It was an appropriate set of characteristics to lead an organization of environmentalists towards a supportive role vis a vis the indigenous movement. I had numerous contacts with the continental indigenous movement, including the trusting relationships with some of its leaders that allowed for honest dialogue. Additionally, I was patient with cross-cultural misunderstandings, and familiar with indigenous perspectives on many issues. I was less familiar with the history and goals of the environmental movement in the Amazon Basin. Regardless, in my position as Coordinator I was equally responsible to each member of the Coalition, and in public I maintained a neutral position regarding most of our internal debates. This allowed the coordination office to play the role of a mediator for the Coalition, often called upon to mediate discussions or facilitate conflictive meetings. This was the case, for example, within the very complicated U’wa Defense Working Group.

Transparency

Where the U.S. –based organizations did not want to be bothered with the details of office administration, the Latin American groups were very concerned about every dollar spent that was not going directly to the Amazon. Their concern was very legitimate and through a process of learning the office developed the kinds of procedures that seem overly bureaucratic to most Americans but allow the full disclosure that members deserve.

Partnership-both sides benefit

The most fundamental precept confirmed by the early Coalition experience is that international networks are most effective when all participants benefit. This is true for both form and function. For the Coalition the benefits were important enough to maintain the cohesion of such a diverse group.

For the local environmental groups in Latin America, The Coalition gave them access to resources including financial and technical, as well political such as media attention, and allies. For example, when the Coalition held a meeting or event in a Amazonian country, there was always a press conference to publicize it. These were invariably very successful and were often attended by important government officials, and received wide coverage. When a delegation from the Amazon came to Washington, we could get increased coverage of the visit from Latin American or Spanish speaking press. Besides furthering the cause of protection of the Amazon, these processes served to bring legitimacy to the local civil society organizations, both indigenous and environmentalist.

⁶ The location of the office was never seriously questioned (although the coordinator voiced regularly that Rio de Janeiro might be a more popular site).

The U.S. –based groups also benefit from the partnership. The most important benefit is legitimacy. Any U.S. based organization on its own is hard pressed to make demands of a foreign government, but they can put pressure on U.S. companies, and the U.S. government when it is at the request of the citizens of that foreign country.

For an international civil society campaign to be successful I observed three general requirements in the case of the Amazon Coalition. The original call for an international campaign needed to have come from the Amazon. It could not have been invented in a Washington DC think tank, no matter how strategic it might have seemed. Second, the issue needs to have a mobilized base in the region. This means that there is a genuine international civil society action. In our case, this meant the indigenous organizations and the support groups in country, along with the U.S. based groups. Third the campaign needed to be carried out at different strategic levels: In the streets, in the U.S. government, in the media, in the Amazonian government, at the lending agencies, etc. different levels. Working at only on of these levels is much less likely to be effective.

For example an example we can look at the campaign to reverse Decree 1775 in Brazil, a presidential Decree that challenged the demarcation of indigenous lands. The call came from indigenous and support groups in Brazil. The Decree concerned local and national indigenous organizations. A number of Coalition member organizations had been working since the Rio Summit to press the government to finalize the demarcation of indigenous lands in Brazil. Coalition members understood that a coordinated effort working at different strategic political levels could be effective. To compliment the ongoing activities in Brazil, the Coalition sponsored a strongly worded letter signed by most of our members to Vice President Gore with copies to the Brazilian government. We used the letter to generate press coverage including the New York Times, the San Francisco Guardian, and many others. We enlisted the help of celebrity human rights advocate Bianca Jagger. We sponsored a delegation to the U.S. that included a congressional briefing and a very high-level state department meeting. The campaigns went on for a number of months and as a result the government of Brazil was not able to use the Decree to roll back any of the promised indigenous land demarcations.

Building International Civil Society

Strength in Diversity

The diverse member organizations of the Coalition did not agree on everything, but when they did agree and unite their forces it sent a very strong message. When a letter was sent to a government office it was signed by such a broad range of groups - the more conservative organizations (NWF), the think tanks (WRI), the large membership organizations (Sierra Club), and the more activist groups (RAN) - the issue could not be considered a fringe problem. Since it was generally acknowledged that the Coalition was strong because it was diverse, the procedures to kick some one out of the Coalition were significantly more difficult than membership procedures.

Local Impacts in Latin America

The Coalition was able to provide significant increase in political space for civil society to organize around indigenous rights and the Amazon in the Latin American countries.

Local Impacts in WDC

The continual presence of a voice in Washington DC supporting the rights of indigenous peoples has definitely helped to place their issues on the agenda permanently in both environmental and human rights circles.

Coalition Math: Multiplication, not Addition

We quickly learned that a Coalition would be most successful if it multiplies the impacts of the members without creating too much new work. Many of our first meetings resulted in shopping lists of activities that would never be carried out. A far more effective strategy was to begin with a survey of what members were involved in, and discussing ways in which to coordinate activities.

The Coalition lost the active support of some of the larger environmental groups, partly because we failed to articulate or incorporate their immediate interests into our agenda. For example, at the time the Coalition was consolidating its institutional space, many of the Environmental international programs were focused on international finance reform (such as: How will free trade effect the environment, and how can we monitor the International Finance Commission?) Indigenous communities were focused in general on more immediate concerns like preventing a specific community from drilling for oil. It is the job of the coordinating office to help translate these goals into common objectives with specific action items that the Coalition could carry out in order to advance the objectives of both movements.