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The Global Legitimacy Game

Civil Society, Globalization, and Protest

Alison Van Rooy



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Audit Office 1995) and the UK (Cameron and Cocking 1993, Sur 1995); as well as review studies by the Overseas Development Institute (Riddell 1990, Riddell and Robinson 1992, Farrington and Lewis 1993), the International Institute for Environment and Development (Bebbington and Mitlin 1996), and the OECD (OECD 1997) (see also van Dijk on the Danish, British, and Dutch evaluations, 1995). Of course, coming up with an aggregate measurement of NGO effectiveness is a nearly hopeless task – akin to asking ‘how nice are people?’ – but in smaller doses, the results are fairly consistent. The general finding: on average, most projects meet their immediate goals and have an impact on alleviating poverty; but few can reach the very poor, be sustained beyond the funding period, or provide services at a significantly lower per-person cost than government services (Robinson 1992: 31–2, Oakley *et al.* 1998). For many it is hard to say even that much: impact data is often partial or missing altogether. Overall, few could be said to be successful in generating larger goals of social transformation (Smillie 1998: 194–5).

Then again, quelle surprise. The findings could hardly be otherwise. Smillie points out that ‘working with poor people who have few assets and who live on marginal land, NGOs know that effectiveness and efficiency in human development is not nearly as straightforward as the building of dams, roads and bridges’ (Smillie 1995: 158). Fowler, similarly, complains about the ‘linear production process’ used to plan development projects: real social change just does not happen in a tidy linear fashion (Fowler 1996). Edwards and Hulme likewise point to the problems involved in measuring performance particularly if the objective is ‘empowerment’ and many of the factors that influence NGO performance lie outside the control of the NGO concerned (government policies, for example) (Edwards and Hulme 1998: URL).

Effectiveness remains a criterion for legitimate standing, however. When relief agencies bungle their coordination efforts after the 1994 Rwandan genocide, they were quick to put their house in order. A keen awareness of the repercussions on their legitimacy generated a host of new mechanisms to maintain their status in the public eye: ‘a Code of Conduct; a Humanitarian Charter and set of technical standards; a not-quite Ombudsman called the Humanitarian Accountability Project (HAP); a new emphasis on the quality and transparency of evaluations; an active learning network gathering and sharing the lessons learnt from humanitarian operations (ALNAP), together with initiatives to explore quality models and professional accreditation’ (Slim 1997: 5). Here, and in other cases of codes of conduct reviewed in later pages, we see the invocation of a powerful legitimacy rule. Perceptions of effectiveness (including coordination) are crucial.

5.2 Qualifications of leadership

A group's legitimacy fortunes also rest on the personal characteristics and skills of its leader. Not only do elite skills contribute to an organization's legitimacy assessment (ability to speak English, understanding of Northern NGO tactics and preferences, party-political savvy about donor governments, and so on), but so also does the less tangible factor of charisma. For any organization, the public personality of its leader makes a profound difference to the organization's legitimacy standing – whether or not that reputation is deserved.

5.2.1 Elite skill

Sad, but true: entire organizations are judged on the basis of the skills and attributes of its (often sole) leader. An ability to speak English is particularly crucial, although French and Spanish will also do in UN and OAS circles. Conversational skills using the key development phrases (empowerment, gender equality, partnership, and so on) are probably as important as technical prowess in debating trade rules or debt forgiveness. A keen political awareness of the party-political tensions of donor/member governments involved in foreign intervention probably also helps (especially in lobbying the US Congress). Such skills aid the cause through better media messaging, broader alliances among Northern organizations, and improved campaign strategies and timing – certainly, all desirable outcomes for organizations seeking an international role.

Yet such skills are not developed accidentally. Sometimes, leaders come from the same class as their adversaries, and have attended the same universities and travelled in the same political circles. In other cases, leaders who are new to the international battleground undergo training, regularly organized by other CSOs:

The Unrepresented Nations and Peoples Organization in the Hague regularly holds intensive, week-long media and diplomacy training sessions for its member ‘nations,’ replete with role plays and mock interviews, helping them put their best foot forward in crucial venues. (Among others, Ken Saro-Wiwa praised the program for teaching him nonviolent direct action skills.) One of the most elaborate programs is the Washington, D.C.-based International Human Rights Law Group's two-year Advocacy Bridge Program, which aims to ‘increase the skills of local activists to amplify their issues of concern globally’ and to ‘facilitate their access to international agenda-setting venues’ (Bob 2002: URL).

However, perhaps the most important skill is impossible to learn in a training program. The leader's skill in forging a common bond (even under adversarial relations) with counterparts in the intergovernmental or corporate world is repeatedly mentioned in the civil society literature. In interviews undertaken after the 1992 Rio Summit, for example, 'bonding' between activists and officials was credited with many changes in the final conventions (Van Rooy 1997; see also Scott 1999, 2001 on the findings during the landmines convention). Not surprisingly, however, these common bonds also generate a legitimacy burden of their own.

As the book has hinted elsewhere, such easy rapport raises suspicion of elitism, of disconnectedness with those genuinely affected. In Russia, for instance, there has been a rise of professional organizations 'whose leaders can speak adeptly about concepts such as gender discrimination, advocacy, and civil society. Yet the segment of NGOs that speak this transnationalized language is extremely limited, and often detached from the grassroots concerns of most of domestic society' (Sundstrom 2003:148). Similarly, in an unhappy example from Thailand, Scholte reports:

I have in my time seen the meeting of one of the leading figures of the 'antiglobalization' movement with local militants in Thailand. I've seen this leader speak to those traditional fishermen, to these landless peasants, to these city-outcasts, in English - making simultaneous translation mandatory - about structural adjustment, the conditionality forced upon nations by the IMF and the rules of industrial property. After which he grabbed his suitcase and ran to catch a plane, without a chance for discussion... Even if this is an extreme example, one must be aware that this type of situation exists (Scholte 2003: URL).

Another critic, writing from the site of the 1995 Copenhagen conference, complains that:

In terms of mind set, modes of thinking and methods of living... [NGOs are] no different from the governments and multinational agencies which fund them. They use the same hotels, drive the same cars, drink the same wine together in the evening and commute together back and forth [to the meeting halls] (Hiralal Desarda, cited in Rosenau 1997: 336).

Of course, there is no *necessary* reason why elite bargaining might not generate very good solutions entirely in the public interest. The rule,

however, implies something else: while it is crucial that an organization's leader can work in the world of her opponents, she must avoid being tarred with the feather of elitism.

5.2.2 Charisma

Yet another personal attribute of importance is charisma: a charismatic leader can raise the profile of a given issue, make a stronger case for action, and win more influential allies. Civil society watcher Mary Kaldor points to the highly influential role of leaders Bernard Kouchner with Médecins sans frontières, George Soros with his Soros Institute, Morton Abramovitz of the Carnegie Endowment, and Aryeh Neier of Human Rights Watch in the success of their own organizations (Kaldor 2001: 110-11).

Yet in other instances, personality-driven leaderships can tarnish an organization's legitimacy. Writing on the indigenous movements of Latin America, for example, Brysk warns that 'charismatic leadership is also fragile and overcentralized. One of the movement's leading international symbols - Paikán - has had his international effectiveness compromised by an unresolved scandal involving rape charges in Brazil' (Brysk 1994: 44). Although unrelated to the work of his organization, the charge affected the credibility of the whole enterprise.

In a similar warning, Smillie points to the dangers of 'the ageing, charismatic leader who, two or three decades on, still runs the organization by personal fiat, sometimes as though it were still small, sometimes as though it were a family enterprise, rarely challenged by staff and seldom checked by trustees' (Smillie 1995: 151). Such was the case with one Indian NGO funded by the Dutch NGO NOVIB: in 1994, after years of support, a double-bookkeeping system was discovered whereby several million dollars had been squirreled away, possibly to set up an endowment. The leader's personal control over the organization kept the deception hidden for years (Smillie 1995: 151).

Again, in this instance, leadership credentials work both ways: charismatic leaders can improve the legitimacy of their organizations, but they can also gravely endanger their organizations' standing. Here, as elsewhere, the legitimacy rules require a very fine balancing act from global activists.

5.3 The marketplace of appeals

A third bundle of hidden legitimacy rules is wrapped around fundraising practices: Do CSOs unduly compete with each other for meager funds,