Civil Society Collaboration and Contestation for Climate Change Action: From the Grassroots to Global Policy Coalitions.

Melissa Edwards1, Ian McGregor1, Nina Hall2

1University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia, 2Cosmopolitan Civil Societies, University of Technology, Sydney, Sydney, NSW, Australia

"We have no time to waste. We must reach a global climate change deal before the end of the year (2009) -- one that is balanced, comprehensive and ratifiable by all nations," UN Chief Ban Ki-Moon said.

Widely touted as the ‘year of climate change’, as indicated in the above quote, the urgent need for effective global climate policy has heightened the salience of such issues resulting in a proliferation of network constellations forming within global civil society (GCS). Recent GCS definitions incorporate a radical interdeterminacy, as a “contested political terrain where different social and political forces vie for hegemony” within an “emerging discursive field” (Munck, 2004). Essentially, this signifies the need to consider how “broad collective action” occurs within this “multi-organisational field”, through ideologies, identities and organising processes (Taylor, 2004: 4) and the inherent conflict such organising at the local, national and global level may attract.

The complexity of climate change issues opens such a highly contested arena within global civil society. These issues can be defined as ‘wicked problems’ that attract interest of a wide array of stakeholders forming in tension between shared and competing interests. Over previous years, organisations, networks and coalitions have emerged for collective solutions to such climate change issue. This paper examines collective responses emerging within civil society, at the grassroots, national and global polity levels, engaged in contestation within the climate change public policy arena and compares the mechanisms facilitating and hindering such endeavours. Using a complexity social movement framework (Chesters and Welsh, 2006), we further examine how the selected collective actions engage with and seek to influence the formation of climate change public policy, particularly at the national and global level.

Specifically, this paper builds on the work of three separate doctoral dissertations examining collective action around climate change issues in Australia both locally, nationally and globally. Each thesis incorporated a combination of qualitative research methods including participant observation, in-depth interviews and analysis of other secondary source materials. In all cases discourse analysis was used to re-construct the emergence of the grassroots organisations and the national and global policy collaborations and contestation.

Rather than examining the in-depth findings of these separate studies, this paper seeks to draw out commonalities and difference between the mechanisms that enabled collective action at the various levels of GCS and the dynamic interrelations between these levels. Thus examining the various organisational networks emerging in between organisations across the major levels of the third sector, local grassroots, national and international Environmental Non Government Organisations (ENGOs) and ‘supra-statal’ policy coalitions. Starting with the Australian context we focus upon the experiences of community based Climate Action Groups, the Climate Action Network Australia, the New South Wales Nature Conservation Council, 350.org Australia and Climate Camp Australia. We determine and compare the organising mechanisms shaping the collaborative campaigns of these various organisations, and the contestations and collaborations these civil society networks engaged in with other sectors. In relation to their collaborations, we unpack the mechanisms underlying the development of inter-organisational relationships and network formation around several key
campaigns in Australia both locally, nationally and globally. The key campaigns are Walk Against Warming, 350.org and the 2009 NSW Climate Camp.

Using a complexity framework we demonstrate how these key campaigns emerge through top-down/bottom-up interrelationships proliferating between various levels and in-between the variety of climate change organisations, loosely coordinated without centralised control. They represent ‘movement plateau’ arrangements resulting from the proliferation of ‘weak ties’ between various climate change organisations organising through rhizomatic network arrangements (Chesters and Welsh, 2006). Through comparing the organising mechanisms we focus on are the collaborative efforts to influence the formation of climate change public policy. More broadly these finding contribute to emerging theories of global civil society and provide detailed empirical evidence of the emergence of new organising forms within this contested political terrain.

References:

