MOVING TARGETS
NOTES ON SOCIAL MOVEMENTS

A study by David Sogge and Gisela Dütting

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Since long before the dawn of aid, social movements have been major actors in processes of emancipation and democratization. Therefore, they have enjoyed a keen interest from aid agencies seeking to support transformative change. Under pressure to show tangible results, actors in the aid chain are increasingly attempting to align with social movements and to actively scale up their impact. Yet, the fluid nature of social movements does not lend itself easily to outside support and interventions have often worked to their detriment. The following paper by David Sogge and Gisela Dütting emerged from a Hivos research project carried out in 2008 and 2009. It confirms that social movements are moving targets, hard to pin down by supporters, with many dimensions yet unexplored by academics. Movements cannot be built or engineered, but outside actors can play a constructive role, especially by promoting an enabling environment in which movements can flourish and expand their outreach.

1. Introduction

How can we better understand social movements? What drives them forward or holds them back? How can their success be assessed? In what ways do social movements tend to interact? This study probes these questions. Based on available academic literature on social movements and writings by activist-practitioners, it presents a framework for social movement analysis. It identifies knowledge gaps and sketches some policy implications for social movement support.

Where there are contentious politics, collective action will usually be part of part of them. Collective action can take many forms, from militias and mobs to political parties, creative vanguards and pseudo-movements. Those phenomena need to be distinguished from the kind of collective action of interest here - social movements - which can be defined as follows:

> *Forms of collective action with a high degree of popular participation, which use non-institutional channels, and which formulate their demands while simultaneously finding forms of action to express them, thus establishing themselves as collective subjects, that is, as a group or social category.*[1]

The social historian Charles Tilly holds that 'the proper analogy to a social movement is neither a party nor a union but a political campaign. What we call a social movement actually consists of a series of demands or challenges to power-holders in the name of a social category that lacks an established political position'.[2] This notion implies among other things that a social movement is more than a collection of organizations.

Measured along certain dimensions, differences among social movements may be great enough to suggest that some belong to distinct categories. Often cited categories include 'transformative', 'revolutionary', 'reform', 'conversion', 'old', 'new', 'local', 'global'. Yet, movements are rarely so cut-and-dried. They are shaped by circumstance, and grow or shrink in response to factors that enable or constrain them. Theories of why and how social movements emerge are more helpful than the outside-in approach of categorizing them. We may want to see differences in *kinds of movements* whereas careful attention to them may reveal mere differences in *degree or emphasis*.

Social movements are often considered to be good things. After all, they have helped to bring about some of our most valued social and political achievements. Yet, social movements have also championed some truly bad ideas, some of them with catastrophic outcomes. Thanks to militant racial/cultural nationalist movements in India, Indonesia and Rwanda for example, many millions have perished in recent decades.

The structure of this paper is as follows: section 2 provides an overview of paradigms that explain the why and how of social movements. Section 3 and 4 adress the structural potentials of social movements and the issue of resource mobilization. Section 5 specifically looks at the concept of framing. Section 6 explores patterns of interaction, followed by measures of success in section 7. Section 8 highlights knowledge gaps. The concluding section provides policy guidance for social movement support.

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[1]Elizabeth Jelin (1986), quoted in Escobar and Alvarez (1992)
[2]Tilly (1985), cited in Ballard and others (2006:2)

2. Paradigms about why and how

Observers in the past have seen social movements from quite different standpoints. Durkheim and Le Bon saw them as expressions of irrational behaviour. Some Marxists explained them according to economic laws and class oppression. Over time, social theorists have abandoned the reductionist search for the invariant model that fits all and explains all. Most students of social movements now accept multi-variant models that make allowances for historical times and places. In any case Durkheim's judgemental emphasis on personal drives - 'propositional attitudes' of individuals - has lost ground. Social movements are more often seen as rational responses to social dislocation, crisis, fear, political oppression and humiliation.

Movements can appear wherever opportunities arise. The early growth of social movements can be traced to broad economic and political changes including the rise of parliaments and of markets in goods, land and labour – hence, landless people and proletariats.[3]

But there is no one Law of Motion driving every social movement along a standard line of march. Rather, social movements are shaped by circumstance; they are contingent things, which grow or shrink in response to factors that enable or constrain them. Contemporary theorizing tends to include four kinds of factors: political opportunities and threats; mobilizing structures; framing processes; and contentious interaction.[4] Scholars differ about the mix and sequences of such factors. Since the 1970s scholarly work has tended to pivot around three main paradigms. New Social Movement Theory concentrates on conditions that give rise to social movements, explaining the 'why' that drives them. Resource Mobilization Theory focuses on strategies, explaining the 'how' behind social movements and their relationships with the state and politics. Constructivist Theory draws attention to how people jointly construct their social life, thus answering the question, 'According to whom?'. All three theories can be combined by paying sufficient attention to structural potentials (macro-processes) and strategic-instrumental action (micro-processes).

3. Structural potentials

Among the most common concepts is that of the political opportunity structure. Tarrow[5] defines it as 'dimensions of the political environment that provide incentives for people to undertake collective action by affecting their expectations of success or failure'. While notions of opportunity stand out, the concept by no means excludes the element of threat. Scholarly consensus holds that political opportunity structures normally consist of four key dimensions[6]:

- Space and access: relative openness or closure of the institutionalized political system;
- Elite bargains: stability or instability, conflict or peace, in that broad set of elite alignments that typically undergird a polity;
- Availability and ideological stance of allies, particularly elite allies;
- The state's capacity and propensity for repression.

Constraints arise where politics have been effectively emptied of meaning, such as where territorial governance and services have been privatized. Repression can often make participation in open social movements counter-productive and downright dangerous. Obstacles can also arise where politics are more institutionalized, such as where certain blocs in civil society (co-opted trade unions, employers' associations, the church etc.) enjoy certain privileges and roles, thus creating a 'corporatist' model. In such stratified settings, opportunities for social movements outside the mainstream may be narrow.

Social movement actors and organisations do not have to wait for opportunities. They can also help create or trigger them deliberately. Strikes or other non-violent direct actions have been used to insist on new rules of the game, or to change entire regimes. Think of anti-colonial campaigns in India led by Mahatma Gandhi, or the Iranian revolution, which in 2009 began its fourth decade. Shaping political opportunity, or at least anticipating it, are among the most effective - and therefore contentious - strategies social movements can pursue.

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[3] Tilly (2004)
[4] Tilly (1999: 58)
[5] Tarrow (1994: 85)
[6] From Kriesi, H. (1995) and McAdam (1996)

The opportunity structure can shrink or expand. Successful collective action by one social movement may enlarge political space for others. Opportunity structures in many places shrink where governments or corporations take counter-measures: their lawyers, riot police or rent-a-mobs intimidate public protest; their media de-legitimize citizen initiatives; their own pseudo-NGOs 'colonize' civil space. Research suggests that counter-movements are more likely to have state and/or elite support. Movements and counter-movements take turns capturing different segments of the state.[7] Certain kinds of social movements tend to arise where states and societies are breaking down.

Yet in most cases, if emancipatory movements are to advance the interests of their constituencies, a minimally functional state is indispensible. Where the public sector is weak and public politics poorly institutionalized, opportunities for emancipatory social movements will be much more constrained. Where states are ineffective, improving their capacity may be the best way to stimulate effective organisations of the poor. Governments can provide those incentives in ways that NGO- or private sector-led initiatives cannot:

> *NGOs are not authorities against which rights can be asserted. Similarly, NGO-managed development programmes tend to be very diverse, locally-variable and to change rapidly from year to year. From one perspective these facts can be viewed very positively: they imply 'flexibility', 'experimentation' and 'learning'. From the perspective of political organizations of the poor, the same facts can appear very negative: the instability, unpredictability and variability of those programmes makes it difficult for the poor to organize in relation to them… All else being equal, the use of NGOs as implementers of public programmes is likely to de-mobilize the poor.[8]*

A structure of incentives favourable to social mobilisation is one where the political environment shows: tolerance (is not hostile or punitive); credibility (is not one in which officials can't be relied upon to do their jobs correctly); predictability (is not unstable or subject to changing procedures); and the legitimacy of public benefits, with the force of law behind them (does not act arbitrarily or denies means of redress via the justice system).[9] The jury is still out, but there is considerable evidence that without a functional state and public politics, the prospects for emancipatory social movements will not improve very much.

But is strengthening the state enough? There are reasons for doubt. In today's rapidly globalising world, decision-making authority is migrating away from local and national levels. Power and influence over sovereign issues of trade, investment, taxation, labour and national security are being de-nationalised. There is a double movement at work. On the one hand, authority over crucial matters is moving relentlessly upward and outward into non-transparent realms where inter-state institutions, specialist councils and private multinational arrangements control the serious money, operate powerful military and security apparatuses and churn out hegemonic ideas. This seriously limits the policy space at lower levels. Successful social movements, such as the women's movement and the environmental movement have understood the interplay between global arenas and domestic politics and have operated in those realms with positive results. On the other hand, decentralisation measures in some countries have clearly changed opportunity structures. In certain cases, such as devolution of politics to Brazilian municipalities and states, those changes have enabled emancipatory social movements to advance and make a difference. But Brazil may be a special case. A growing body of research on decentralisation in other places, namely Africa, points towards more pessimistic conclusions.[10] Decentralisation potentially creates political opportunities, but it can also reduce them whils disguising them as 'participatory'.

4. Resource mobilization

Among issues getting scholarly attention is the mobilization of resources: leadership, recruitment of members, use of local networks, access to political and material resources, development of strategies for communication and (symbolic) self-representation. Three important resources for social movements are suggested[11]: (a) campaigns, (b) repertoires of contention, including such things as special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, solemn processions, petition drives, statements to and in public media; and (c) WUNC displays: concerted public representation of their Worthiness, Unity, Numbers, and Commitments.

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[7]Mottl (1980)
[8]Moore (2001:327)
[9]Joshi and Moore (2002)
[10]See for example Jütting, J. and others (2005) and Nijenhuis (2003)
[11]Tilly (2004)

Repertoires and Reinforcement

Organisations in social movements may rise or fall according to their strategies or 'repertoires of collective action'. Three common repertoires are:

- Service provision to a constituency, without pressing for change in policy;
- Protest - challenging elites through non-routine means;
- Advocacy - challenging elites through routine means.

Funders can influence which repertoires dominate. They tend to pay for and legitimize some kinds of collective action and to deny funds and legitimacy for others. This can set up dynamics of rivalry. For example, new organisations pursuing strategies preferred by donors will compete resources away from those organisations committed to less-favoured strategies. Thus some organisations flourish while others wither away.

Grant-maker insistence on bureaucratic capacity to comply with donor priorities and to absorb funds and account for them can influence strategies, but so too does the struggle for survival and security by the organisations themselves. Similar findings emerge from a study of the feminist movement, focused on a global sample of organisations.[12] Four major kinds of constraints are identified:

- NGO-ization, often with a narrow focus on an issue or on provision of services, without broader, political understanding or analysis;
- Movements built from above, with little or no organised base, and in the hands of organisations and organisational leadership that is increasingly less connected and accountable to the constituencies they claim to serve;
- Donor policies and approaches;
- Alignments with political parties, leading to instrumentalisation of movements.

Most social movements and their support organisations are in weak bargaining positions and refuse to confront donors about these debilitating effects.[13] Yet some have long expressed ambivalence about funders. Today there are signs of open resistance.[14] Some social movements are seeking new lives beyond philanthropy and foreign aid - that is, a kind of existence that most social movements have known throughout history.

5. Framing

Students of social movements associated with a 'social constructivist' school have in recent years focused on meaning, morality and emotions. This approach notes the importance of symbolic resources, highlighting how movements cultivate or construct collective identities. This has been termed *framing*. In today's media-dominated world, the communication of images and symbols strongly influences the course of politics. Social movements therefore face strong incentives to apply collective, usually cultural frames focused on subjective factors of shared values, statuses and meanings. For a growing school of "constructionists", social movements were *both* carriers of meanings and makers of meaning. By *naming* grievances and expressing new identities, they constructed new realities and made these identities collective.[15] Insights from studies of these identity-based movements have now been 'incorporated into the study of social movements more generally to work to address questions of collective identity, consciousness and solidarity that earlier models had difficulty solving'.[16] This includes perceptions of risk, and accompanying feelings of fear, which affect the quality and amount of agency that social movements can build upon.

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[12]Batliwala (2008)

[13]Support for this statement can be found in Baez (2005 pp 73-78 and 158-160); and in Wallace (2006). A finding arising from the latter is summarised as follows: "Few people or organisations are willing to challenge the dominant, rational planning and accountability paradigms."

[14]Expressed in publications such as Incite (2009):The Revolution Will Not Be Funded: Beyond the Non-Profit Industrial Complex, Boston: South End Press

[15] McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (1997:149)

[16] Ballard and others (2006: 6-7)

6. Patterns of Collaboration

In charting the significance of cultivating relationships among organisations, research findings are not abundant. However across ten case studies in the women's movement, Batliwala[17] found four patterns:

- *Equilateral/circular/symbiotic* - neither the movement building organisation nor the movement has greater overall control or power, with one or the other taking the lead on action or decision making in different contexts;
- *Paternalistic/instrumentalist/clientalist* - Here, the allies, supporters or movement-building organizations are in command, with the movement leadership and its organizations being in a dependent or instrumental relationship with the former;
- *A continuum of formal to informal* - with elected governing-structure organisations at the formal end, and relationships built on common understanding or shared agendas, but with little governance, financial or other controls at the informal end;
- *Informal bonds* - a "glue" that binds the relationship among activists, which 'overrides the superficial structures visible in these movements'.

Current constructivist theory emphasizes looking at situated axes of identities. In this context, this means an emphasis on context, and a focus on framing processes. Political subjects are always necessarily collective subjects, constructed along the 'we' / 'they' binary. By spotting the adversaries ('they'), the political 'we' emerges, from which 'they' are excluded.

The *vehicles* of interaction can also be important. Today, some have begun to announce the arrival of what they call 'social movements 2.0', that is, forms of collective action shaped by new, cheap communication technologies. These technologies have impacts on social movements, helping to 'flatten' and decentralise them, allowing regional clusters to operate with greater autonomy in a global grid.[18] While the 'technological optimism' in some of these arguments may generate misplaced expectations, there is little doubt that new communication technologies carry important consequences for social movements and public politics.

Patterns of Interplay

The previous sections have highlighted the complexity of social movements and have offered a number of lenses, through which they may be analysed. Social movements emerge indeed as moving targets and it is the interplay of the opportunity, mobilizing and framing processes that can help us understand collective action in motion.[19] This results in a more dynamic and complex framework which effectively focuses on processes such as:

- Boundary activation (defining 'us' and 'them');
- Diffusion (transmission of ideas and approaches to new populations);
- Brokerage (linking of previously unconnected actors and sites);
- Radicalization (shifts toward more extreme tactics or agendas);
- Social appropriation (appropriation of previously non-politicised sites or activities into sites of mobilisation);
- Category formation (creation of a new social category);
- Object shift (change of perceptions and relations among actors); and
- Certification (validation of actors by an external authority).

Many of these patterns are as of yet poorly researched.

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[17]Batliwala (2008:61)
[18]Smith (2004)
[19]McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly (2001)

7. Meanings of 'Success'

How and in what measure can a social movement be said to have impact or to have failed? Views among researchers converge around the importance of paying attention to broader socio-political processes, be they formal, such as the making of laws, or less formal, such as changes in public discourse.

A social movement's success can be measured by broader socio-political processes, whether the passing of laws, changes in public discourse, or 'stages' of (a) issue creation and agenda-setting; (b) change in discursive positions or policy commitments of states and international organizations; (c) institutional procedural change; (d) influence on policy change in 'target actors' that may be states, international organizations or private actors; and (e) behavioural change in target actors.

> *[S]ocial movements do not only (or even mainly) engage policy with counterproposals for particular policy domains (for instance on poverty or social protection) but rather they challenge the meanings of core ideas that underlie policy debates, challenge dominant notions about what counts as legitimate knowledge in the process of forming policy and argue that alternative actors and alternative sources of knowledge ought also have a seat in policy making processes.[20]*

More generally, a social movement's impact may be assessed according to the extent to which it informs and motivates constituents and members, enhances its public profile, contributes to networks and coalitions involved in other movements, develops contacts and dialogue with decision-making bodies, and mobilizes and accesses larger constituencies.

8. Knowledge gaps

A number of questions could appear on a more fully elaborated research agenda. Some of these questions will be treated in this working paper series.

- Under what circumstances do emancipatory social movements advance or retreat as influenced by changes in the 'enabling environment' (political opportunity structure)? What roles have outsiders played in helping promote such changes?

- Under what circumstances (internal and external) have groups promoted emancipatory movements without outside financial resources?

- What constitutes 'effective framing'? Personal or collective identities? Fairness? Inclusion? What roles have funders played in helping make effective framing possible?

- Under what circumstances have resource-constrained social movements overcome those constraints through effective framing of issues?

- Under what circumstances have social movements contributed to open public processes and outcomes at supra-national political levels? What are the results of engagements with official bodies and engagement in politics? How and in what measure have official or private aid agencies contributed positively to those circumstances or to those social movements' efforts?

- Among successful movements, what lessons emerge in their contributions to 'spaces' and 'enabling environments'? What lessons emerge from their approaches to 'upstream' forces ? Their approaches to funders? To 'epistemic communities'?[21]

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[20]Bebbington (2006:5)
[21]See Borras & Franco (2009) for observations on the case of Via Campesina movement; d'Cruz & Mitlin (2005) for the shackdwellers movement case.

9. Policy guidance for social movement support

- **As power migrates to supra-national levels and redefines executive power and institutions at national and local levels, social movements are challenged to engage on all these levels**

  Many social movements operate at domestic levels only. Yet, as globalisation advances, power moves to supra-national levels, redefining domestic spaces and their political relevance. Capacities to see and grasp opportunities at all these levels, including the forming of alliances, are of increasing importance for emancipatory movements of many kinds. This needs to be combined with insights on how local and domestic executive authority and accountability mechanisms are functioning and shaped in a globalised context.

- **Effective social movements' lasting contributions emerge in a changed climate of ideas rather than in changed policies**

  It can often make sense to see social movements as vessels or vehicles for ideas – that is, in terms of belief systems, norms, means of framing and ranking issues. Their ideas almost never get a 'free ride'; they evolve in competitive, and sometimes hostile, environments. Monitoring achievements and setbacks in these 'battles of ideas' is no simple task, since it must focus on intangible developments in diverse arenas through often unclear processes.

- **Some donor preferences and practices to support social movements can be disabling**

  Because effective social movements usually require effective states, development approaches that weaken the state and public politics should be reversed. Yet approaches promoted by all official (bilateral and multilateral) donors since around 1980, persisting in somewhat softer versions up to the present moment, have not stopped the rot. Many international NGOs have gone along with the official mainstream, some of them participating actively in creating aid chains that by-pass the state.[22] Those approaches and other policies have crippled public finance, promoted de-regulation and privatization and banked heavily on non-state actors, both for-profit and not-for-profit. As a result, in many countries the public sector and the rule of law are weaker, even to the point of collapse. That has often meant weaker incentives and protections for emancipatory social movements, with de-mobilizing effects. Thus a further challenge to outside agencies is to put an end to approaches pursued by their own collegial agencies, and by official back donors, whose ultimate effect is to de-mobilise people.

- **Direct support to social movements needs careful consideration.**

  There are valid arguments to be cautious about the practice of direct, open-ended subsidies by funders who themselves are not part of social movements. There is need for sophistication, given the precautionary principle of 'do no harm'. A guiding hypothesis is that social movements can flourish without direct outside subsidies. An enabling environment would be one with more and better 'infrastructure', such as independent public media and stronger political-legal mechanisms, to allow them to work. It would also be one with stronger and more transparent public processes of decision-making and accountability. There is evidence - such as from the shackdwellers' movements in some African cities and major landless peoples alliances - that emancipatory social movements can make significant anti-poverty gains by engaging with local level authorities, not by merely denouncing them. Of course there are risks of official co-option and manipulation of citizen initiatives. Yet movements like the shackdwellers movement and the landless movement have preserved much of their autonomy and critical edge.

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[22] By-passing the public sector is increasingly disapproved, as expressed by for example the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness.

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