

Social Movements and the Challenges of Transnational Coalition-Building

A Case Study on the Hemispheric Social Alliance and the Pan-American Campaign Against the FTAA

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Introduction

As cases of transnational political activism have become more numerous over the last years, so have sociological studies analyzing these cases. Excellent analyses of transnational movement coalitions can be found, for instance, in the recent volumes edited by Bandy and Smith (2005a), and Khagram, Riker and Sikkink (2002). Yet, as research on transnational social movement networks is still in its infancy, many important questions have remained unresolved. Little is known, for example, about how transnational social movement networks manage internal conflicts, and how their participants forge unity amid diversity. In his various publications on transnational activism, Sidney Tarrow (e.g., 2003, 2004) emphasizes that the challenges for movement leaders engaged in cross-border coalition building are legion. Not only is transnational activism plagued by the manifold difficulties inherent to intercultural and inter-organizational communication, but social movement coalitions are also embedded in a complex, multi-level political environment, which calls for equally complex contentious strategies and collective action frames. Transnational movement coalitions, Tarrow (2004: 16) argues, “must overcome cultural differences, correct imbalances in resources, and bridge the differences in opportunities and constraints that their different states and societies impose on activists once they return home.” Grasping these dilemmas of coalition formation, he then states, “is a major task of students of transnational activism today” (Tarrow 2004: 15).

I address this task in the present study by looking into the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) and its participants’ struggle against the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The HSA is a network organization connecting grassroots movements, labor unions and other non-governmental organizations from many different parts of the Americas, and can be seen as a paradigmatic case of effective transnational coalition building and durable coalition maintenance. Although its participants

represent various types of organizations from different cultural and socio-economic contexts, the HSA (colloquially: the Alliance) has now existed for almost ten years. Also, it has been able to increase the number of associated organizations, as well as win the support of several governments. (Among others, it has strong ties to the Chavez administration in Venezuela; and Bolivia's new head of state, Evo Morales, has been a participant of the HSA for many years.) The HSA is an excellent case, then, to identify the conditions and strategies that help social movement coalitions to manage internal tensions, build trust across cultural and organizational borders, and find ways to cope with changing opportunities and threats. On a more critical note, however, it is important to emphasize that grassroots activists are concerned about the HSA's inability, or unwillingness, to enable sustained mass participation outside the metropolises. Therefore, the Alliance also constitutes an interesting case to investigate into the limits of grassroots participation in transnational civil society organizations—a problem that challenges movement leaders and scholars alike.

This study draws on data collected by means of participant observation techniques, semi-structured interviews and qualitative content analysis of the HSA's publications. To understand how the HSA has forged unity amid diversity, I participated in one of the organizations' international coordination meetings, the *Iro Encuentro hacia la Cumbre de los Pueblos* (June 2005), and its 3rd People's Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata (November 2005). During these events, I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with movement leaders who serve as international delegates in the HSA's international boards, the Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council. I also carried out a field study on the HSA's national chapter in Argentina, the *Autoconvocatoria No al ALCA*, to investigate questions of mass participation and within-movement accountability. During this field study, which lasted for a total of almost four months, I regularly participated in the *Autoconvocatoria*'s weekly meetings, and interviewed over a dozen grassroots activists from both, Buenos Aires and Argentina's heartland.¹

Theoretical and empirical perspectives on transnational movement coalitions

Of the many theoretical perspectives social movement research has developed since the 1960ies, Resource Mobilization, Political Opportunity Structures and New Social Movements have been the most influential. As della Porta und Diani (1999: 3) cogently argue, these theoretical perspectives do not contradict and mutually exclude each other, but simply “approach the issue from different directions.” It is only by combining these theories that researchers can develop a comprehensive understanding of social movement dynamics.

When applied to the analysis of transnational movement coalitions, the existing theoretical perspectives show that transnational activists face the same challenges as activists operating at the national and local level. Transnational movements, too, must mobilize resources, find ways to take advantage of given political opportunities, create powerful collective action frames, and support the development of a sustained collective identity. In this respect, then, the currently dominant theoretical

perspectives, although developed to analyze national and local activism, reveal important insights into the challenges and dynamics of transnational movements.

It should be clear, however, that in the case of transnational activism the same challenges are more complex than in the case of activism at the national and local level. *Firstly*, as the participants of transnational movement coalitions tend to have unequal access to resources, externally imposed inequalities may translate into internal power disparities. Thus, transnational movements, particularly those involving participants from the global North and the global South, not only need to mobilize resources, but they also have to redistribute these resources in such ways that this internal redistribution may not create clientelism and dependency.

Secondly, transnational movements operate in a complex multi-layered political environment, which offers them various, yet often contradictory, local, national, and international opportunities. Activists thus need to develop strategies that not only match the diverse political situations in various countries, but also take advantage of the opportunities presented by the relevant international organizations. *Thirdly*, transnational movements have to find collective action frames universal enough to resonate with the various cultural contexts of the activists' home countries (or flexible enough to be adapted locally).

How, and under what conditions, may transnational social movement coalitions succeed in overcoming these challenges? How do they manage the strategic conflicts these challenges may produce among participants?—Unfortunately, the currently dominant approaches in social movement theory do not seem to have convincing answers to these questions. Existing theoretical approaches help shed light on the various strategic difficulties transnational activists must cope with, yet the same approaches do not provide any solutions to these difficulties. In particular, it remains open as to how transnational movement coalitions may bridge internal divisions and foster cohesion among culturally and politically heterogeneous participants. It thus comes as no surprise that contemporary analyses of transnational social movement activism often do without recourse to the existing theoretical approaches. The case studies in Bandy and Smith's *Coalitions Across Borders* (2005a), for instance, "waste little time trying to reconstruct existing theories" (Tilly 2005: xiii); they rather follow the inductive approach of thinking through concrete cases in order to reach new theoretical insights.

Looking beyond the area of social movement research, useful theoretical insights into how transnational movement coalitions may create unity amid diversity can be found in research on group cohesion. In experimental studies, this research strand has found group cohesion to be strongly influenced by the frequency of successful interaction and productive exchange among group members. As group members interact with one another and jointly solve certain practical problems, their sense of belonging to the group grows and they increasingly perceive their being part of the group as a gratifying experience (Lawler and Yoon 1998). Also, it has been shown that repeated successful interaction is causally linked to group cohesion not primarily through uncertainty reduction and the emergence of mutual trust, but through an affective process creating positive emotions (Lawler, Thye und Yoon 2000). These findings thus support the theory of relational cohesion (Lawler and Yoon 1998; Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000; cf. also Thye, Yoon, and Lawler 2002), according to which successful social interaction and joint accomplishments create mild, everyday feelings that the actors then attribute not only to the participants involved but the group as a whole:

“[A]ctors are motivated to understand the sources of these feelings ... [T]hey want to reproduce good feelings and avoid bad feelings in the future. Yet, the source of these feelings is unclear, given that exchange entails a joint accomplishment. This presents actors with an attribution problem ... The result is ‘cognitive work’ by individuals, in which social units—exchange relations or groups—are part of their explanation for the emotions felt. In productive exchange, then, groups become objects of attachment to the degree that they are perceived as a source of positive individual feelings. Cohesion and commitment behavior are consequences of this” (Lawler, Thye, and Yoon 2000: 626).

Transferring these findings to the study of social movement activism, a first factor potentially contributing to cohesion in transnational movement coalitions becomes apparent: the capacity of social movement leaders to convincingly portray important political events as the outcomes of coalition efforts. To the degree that movement leaders and coalition coordinators succeed in presenting such events—e.g., the collapse of free trade talks or the breakdown of other international negotiations—as the merit of transnational contention, activists develop positive feelings cognitively attributed to the movement coalition. As Bandy and Smith (2005b: 245) put it, “coalitions are sustainable when they can convince members that there is reasonable progress toward common goals. ... With every success, however minor or fleeting, coalitions achieve greater legitimacy for participants.”

Joint protests and other large gatherings—especially those that include not only movement leaders but also rank and file activists—constitute another factor that, according to the theory of relational cohesion, may contribute positively to the survival of transnational social movement coalitions. While facilitating the exchange of information and the planning of future events, protests and meetings also have a positive effect on coalition maintenance by generating what Kohler (2006) calls “networking moments”, i.e. personal and sometimes very emotional intercultural encounters among participants. In these gatherings, activists learn to respect each other’s experiences and visions, and to the extent that some of the participants use the event as a platform to publicly express themselves through artistic means such as photographs, music and other performances, their encounters also manage to overcome language barriers. However, as Wood (2005) and several others have pointed out, transnational movement meetings tend to suffer from an overrepresentation of participants from the global North, as these have more access to travel funds and rarely face restrictive visa regulations. There is a risk, then, that transnational meetings become dominated by cliques of Northern activists and other frequent participants.

The existence of hierarchical relations constitutes another factor, which, according to research on relational cohesion, can endanger the development of person-to-group attachment in transnational social movement coalitions. As Lawler and his colleagues (Lawler und Yoon 1998; Lawler, Thye und Yoon 2000) demonstrate in group experiments, repeated successful cooperation increases person-to-group attachment only in such settings in which group members have been endowed with the same degree of centrality and power. In groups showing an unequal distribution of power, social cohesion remains virtually unchanged as the frequency and success rate of interactions increase. Total cohesion is presumably greatest in such transnational social movement coalitions that show a relatively equitable distribution of power and a homogenous distribution of interaction frequencies among participants. According to Bandy and Smith (2005b), sustained transnational cooperation is most likely to happen in movement coalitions whose organizational culture is flexible and democratic.

Yet another factor fostering the cohesion and survival of transnational movement coalitions is the leadership of skilled movement brokers (Bandy und Smith 2005b)—that is, the capability of

movement leaders and coalition coordinators to accommodate different movement cultures. In their role as “bridging persons” (Brown and Fox 1998), movement leaders need to have certain qualities to make the process of coalition building and maintenance work. The case studies reviewed by Bandy and Smith (2005b: 241 f.), for instance, show that for coalitions to be successful and enduring, brokers need to have abundant charisma and enjoy a high level of legitimate authority. Also, leaders and coordinators of successful movement coalitions tend to be skillful communicators, culturally sensitive interpreters, and patient listeners. “They may translate languages, but they also translate between different discourses of grievance and forms of action used by members. They promote dialogue among members, and thus mutual learning, trust, and the sharing of resources” (Bandy and Smith 2005b: 241). To the degree that movement leaders and coalition coordinators actually have these capabilities, they may not only transform potential and actual conflicts into productive learning experiences, but also help activists engaged in transnational movement coalitions develop a sense of belonging and collective identity.

In summary, the above considerations make it clear that for transnational social movement coalitions to survive and succeed, leaders and activists need to overcome several challenges. These challenges are similar to those usually faced by movements operating at the local or national level, but they typically show a greater degree of complexity. As Bandy and Smith (2005b: 231) emphasize, transnational movement coalitions have to deal with many differences among participants which, when not addressed properly, not only create social strain, but can lead to ruptures. “It is very difficult even for nationally based movements to survive as they challenge power holders, but transnational networks must traverse even larger gaps in power, wealth, ideology, culture, strategic interests, and organizational forms.” As Lesley Wood (2005: 97) puts it, “In transnational coalitions, participants often speak different languages, operate within different national and local contexts, have distinct organizational cultures and histories, and come from movements as diverse as rural fisherfolk in Bangladesh and Canadian trade unionists.” However, given several cases of coalitions that have overcome these challenges, it should be clear that building and maintaining long-lasting transnational movement coalitions is by no means impossible. In a comparative analysis of several case studies, Bandy and Smith point out that all cases of successful long-term coalition maintenance show four commonalities: i) they are able to convince members that there has been reasonable progress toward stated goals; ii) they create coalition forums such as the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre or PGA’s Hemispheric Encounters, in which activists can build intercultural ties; iii) they show a relatively flat hierarchy and flexible organizational culture; and iv) they can count on the intercultural competence of their coalition delegates and movement leaders. Interestingly, these findings corroborate the theory of relational cohesion outlined above. In the following sections, we will analyze as to whether the same success factors have been at work in the case of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, as well, and what other factors need to be taken into account.

The Hemispheric Social Alliance and the struggle against the FTAA

To analyze how transnational collaboration has been sustained in the case of the HSA, this study will first give a descriptive account of the organization’s history, organizational structure, and repertoire

of contention. Although politically influential through its protests and other activities, the HSA is relatively unknown to the general public, especially outside Latin America. The mass media tend to address the HSA in terms of the organization's activities, referring to their members as 'the organizers of the People's Summit of the Americas', or 'the coordinators of the mass rally against the latest ministerial meeting of the Organization of American States.' And while there is a vast scholarly literature on civil society protests against the NAFTA treaty, there are relatively few studies on the struggle against FTAA. Some important exceptions notwithstanding (Massicotte 2003, 2004; Foster 2005; ongoing research projects: von Bülow 2006; and Saguier 2005), the present analysis of the HSA appears to be breaking new scholarly ground.

Historical roots

As one of the participants in the 3rd People's Summit of the Americas put it, the history of the HSA and its campaign against the FTAA goes further back than the history of the FTAA itself. The organizational roots of the Alliance can be traced back to the collective struggles against the bilateral free trade agreement between the United States and Canada (CUSFTA), and against the NAFTA agreement. As Foster (2005) reports in his study on civil society struggles against NAFTA, negotiations around free trade in North America originally gave rise to a broad variety of relatively unconnected local protest movements, but eventually several of these movements came to coordinate their struggles in four national and regional network organizations: the Alliance for Responsible Trade (ART) in the United States; the Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC) in Mexico; Common Frontiers in the English-speaking regions of Canada; and the Réseau Québécois sur l'Intégration Continentale (RQUIC) in Québec. These were the organizations, which, at a later stage, initiated the creation of the HSA.

When the US administration under Bill Clinton announced its plans to launch the FTAA initiative, it was clear to the members of the trilateral coalition against NAFTA that they had to build a pan-American resistance movement. In South America, and parts of Central America, many social movement activists and progressive non-governmental organizations knew only little about the implications of neoliberal free trade agreements, and they knew even less about how to effectively fight such agreements. The networks that had formed the trilateral alliance against NAFTA thus decided they would have to reach out, educate civil society organizations in other countries about these topics, and mobilize potential network partners across the continent (source: interview with a founding member from Brazil). Conversely, there was a widespread belief among North American politicians, as well as in the North American population in general, that people in Central and South America generally favored free trade because it would produce economic and political development. Therefore, it seemed very important to North American activists to become more connected with Latin American activists, as only direct testimonies from their Southern partner organizations would make a plausible case that people in the global South were indeed *against* free trade (source: interview with a U.S. American participant).

After a while, the “NAFTA veterans” (Foster 2005) were able to mobilize the support of several civil society organizations in Chile, and of various organizations in Brazil. The latter eventually created a network organization called REBRIP (*Rede Brasileira da Integração dos Povos*: ‘Brazilian Network for the People’s Integration’), and together with the initial North American networks, the future REBRIP members organized a transcontinental civil society meeting in 1997 in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. It was in this meeting, described by Foster (2005: 220) as a “diverse gathering of trade union, antipoverty, environmental, and other NGOs”, in which the participants not only decided to found the Hemispheric Social Alliance but also began to organize the First People’s Summits of the Americas, which then took place in 1998 in Santiago de Chile, as a counter event to the official Summit of the Americas held by the Organization of American States. The HSA’s actual founding act, in which the participants signed a founding charter, took place during a meeting in 1999 in Costa Rica. By this time, the initiators had been joined by two other participants: *Via Campesina*, a global association of small-scale peasants, and ORIT (Organización Regional Interamericana de Trabajadores), the inter-American association of labor unions.

Since its informal creation in 1997, and even more so since the formal founding act in 1999, the HSA has experienced a quite unexpected growth, as several additional organizations, big and small, joined in. Currently, the HSA has national chapters and affiliated members in at least twenty American countries, including Argentina, Bolivia, Chile, Colombia, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, and Guatemala, to name just a few (www.asc-hsa.org). The latest HSA-organized People’s Summit of the Americas in Mar del Plata (November 2005) attracted movement leaders and grassroots activists representing over 500 organizations. The final mass rally mobilized about 50’000 people (according to official sources; according to the organizers, there were 60’000 people). Press coverage of the event, although overshadowed by reports on violent clashes between the police and autonomous radicals later in the evening, was vast and surprisingly sympathetic.

Aims and Organizational Structure

Opposition against the FTAA negotiations has always been the HSA’s *raison d’être*, but several other objectives have been relevant to the organization as well. The founding charter (HSA 1999), for instance, emphasizes the need to fight the WTO negotiations and the OECD’s Multilateral Investment Agreement. And over the last years, the HSA has also become engaged in protests against bilateral free trade negotiations between the United States and individual countries in Central America, as well as against negotiations between Mercosur countries and the European Union. More recently, the campaign against U.S. military bases in Latin America, and support for Jubilee South’s struggle for the cancellation of foreign debts, seem to have become almost as crucial to the HSA as the initial campaign against the FTAA. The anti-FTAA campaign, in turn, has developed a kind of life of its own, as it is supported and co-sponsored now by organizations, which do not consider themselves participants of the HSA. An organizational ‘emancipation’ of this campaign has taken place, which is expressed symbolically by the fact that its participants have created their own website (<http://movimientos.org/noalca/>). The website states that the participants “give priority to the

campaign—not just consider it as just one more activity”. Coordination meetings, however, are still organized by the HSA (especially its Cuban chapter), and HSA staff in Brazil is in charge of the campaign’s Operations Secretariat.

The Hemispheric Social Alliance is organized as a ‘network of networks’, or a ‘mega-network’. Although the Alliance recognizes individuals and individual organizations as possible participants, all members of the HSA’s international coordination boards, the Organizing Committee and the Hemispheric Council, are themselves coalitions of groups from various segments of civil society. More specifically, the Hemispheric Council consists of so-called Thematic Networks and National Chapters, which represent two different organizational principles. The Thematic Networks combine organizations from various countries working on the same topics, whereas the National Chapters usually combine organizations from the same country working on different topics. The *Organización Continental Latinoamericana y Caribeña de Estudiantes* (OCLAE), for instance, is a typical Thematic Network, as it combines students associations from several places in Central America and the Caribbean. The Argentinean *Autoconvocatoria No al ALCA*, in turn, is typical for the HSA’s National Chapters, as it represents human rights organizations, nation-wide trade union associations, neighborhood councils in Buenos Aires, unemployed workers, and many other segments of Argentina’s civil society.

Interestingly, in its founding charter and its website the HSA never characterizes itself as an ‘organization’; it rather uses the terms “forum”, “process under construction”, “space”, and “platform” to describe its organizational form. The intention of its founding members and participants has always been to avoid strict hierarchies, keep the organizational structure as decentralized as possible, and give its participants maximum autonomy. By evading the term ‘organization’ the participants want to make it clear that the Alliance is never to develop a strictly hierarchical structure with ‘NGO-like’ professional staff and institutionalized mechanisms to sanction non-compliance with group decisions. It is important to note, however, that the Alliance does have an institutionalized division of labor in that it has formed an administrative secretariat, which is in charge of organizing meetings, maintaining communications, and dealing with other day-to-day business. Political guidelines are developed by the HSA’s Hemispheric Council, whereas actual policy decisions are made by the international Coordinating Committee. The Hemispheric Council, which meets once or twice a year to discuss the broad policy lines, consists of delegates of about 30 organizations, whereas the Coordinating Committee consists of delegates of only eight organizations. The latter meet several times per year and share information through a steady exchange of e-mails, fax letters and international phone calls.

In sum, then, there *are* elements of formal organizational structures in the HSA, but the participants try to keep these as minimal as possible. In fact, the minimization of hierarchies and centralization are addressed explicitly in the founding charter, which states that “although the HSA does not conceive itself as an organization with structures and hierarchies”, participants cannot avoid “the creation of coordinating spaces and instances”, as only these can “ensure that the HSA be not confined to a

concept, but become an instrument for action and contestation.” Yet, coordinating instances are to be kept “minimal and flexible” (HSA 1999).

Repertoire of action

On the website of one of its founding members, Common Frontiers, the principal objectives of the Hemispheric Social Alliance are identified as follows: i) to impact, and eventually stop, the FTAA by lobbying, influencing public opinion, and developing corresponding media strategies; and ii) to mobilize broad-based support for this struggle in collaboration with the trade union movement, environmentalists, women’s organizations, “and all other social movements, especially those most marginalized by the present economic model” (www.commonfrontiers.ca). In other words, the HSA aims at building support among like-minded civil society organizations, while also raising public awareness and influencing the opinions of people outside the social movement sector. To reach these goals, HSA participants have developed a broad repertoire of contentious activities. Or, as the website of Common Frontiers states emphatically, “The HSA is not short of ideas!” (Ibid.) Among other things, HSA issues press statements, maintains a newlist to disseminate updates on the official FTAA negotiations, and initiates coordinated mass rallies and so-called ‘Hemispheric Days of Action’ across the Americas.

As a core element of its campaign against the FTAA, the HSA has been conducting sporadic *consultas populares*—unofficial plebiscites—in several countries. These plebiscites serve the threefold purpose of raising public awareness of the planned free trade agreement, informing critically about its possible effects, and surveying people’s opinions. The methodology of how the *consultas* are conducted can vary in accordance with the available resources and political opportunities in each country. In Chile, for instance, the *consulta* process has been restricted so far to a survey-based consultation among left-wing civil society organizations, whereas in Peru the consultation has been carried out in gatherings of grassroots movements (Berrón and Freire 2004). But the intended procedure (as implemented in Brazil and Argentina, for example) is that of a broad-based plebiscite ‘from below’. In these plebiscites, activists put up stands with ballot boxes in as many major (and sometimes minor) localities as possible, and during approximately a week they talk to passers-by about the planned free trade agreement. The passers-by are then asked to vote anonymously on whether or not they agree to their government continuing the negotiations.

A first wave of *consultas* took place over the years 2002 and 2003 in Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Mexico, and several other countries. The response this first wave managed to produce varied significantly from country to country. In Paraguay, for instance, the HSA’s national chapter collected only 163’000 votes (with an overwhelming majority, obviously, opposing the FTAA), while in Uruguay the campaign was never really able to take off, and the *consulta* cancelled before it had even begun. But in other cases, the *consulta* turned out a considerable success. In Argentina, the HSA was able to collect 2’250’000 votes, while in Brazil, thanks to the unfailing effort of several thousand grassroots activists, it collected an overwhelming 10 million votes (95% of which opposed the free trade agreement; Berrón and Freire 2004). To date, then, the *consulta* process has enabled the face-to-

face dissemination of critical information about the FTAA to several million people, especially in the most powerful economies of the Southern Cone, Brazil and Argentina.

While the *consulta* campaign has been focused almost exclusively on the negotiations around the Free Trade Area of the Americas (though in some cases combining this with the issue of bilateral free trade agreements and CAFTA), the HSA-organized People's Summits of the Americas have been broader thematically. They run counter to the official Summits of the Americas held by the Organization of American States, the platform for the American heads of state to negotiate the FTAA and advance several other mechanisms of regional integration. There have been three People's Summits so far, the first in Santiago de Chile (1998), the second in Québec (2001), and the third in the Argentinean beach resort Mar del Plata (2005). The organizational format of these People's Summits is that of a semi-structured forum. Alongside plenary events and discussion rounds organized by the HSA, the People's Summits also provide open space for a broad variety of self-organized events by other civil society groups. Hence, the People's Summits constitute ideal opportunities for the HSA to strengthen their ties with other civil society organizations in the Americas. The 2005 version of the People's Summit, for instance, hosted a well-attended meeting of indigenous resistance movements, a workshop on the economic effects of genetically engineered soy production on small-scale farmers, and a workshop on non-violent protest tactics, to name just a few of over hundred self-organized events. But the main objective of this most recent People's Summit was to promote a broad-based discussion on socially and environmentally sustainable alternatives to the FTAA. As one of the organizers put it, the first two People's Summits had intended to raise public awareness of the FTAA initiative and build a broad-based resistance movement. These aims being reached, the time seemed ripe to begin discussing more seriously the issue of possible counterproposals to the FTAA.

The HSA has provided an inspiring basis for the discussion of counterproposals to the FTAA in the form of its "Alternatives for the Americas", a "living document" under continual revision. Formulated by several HSA participants from Canada, Mexico and the United States, a first version of this policy paper was presented and discussed at the occasion of the First Peoples' Summit of the Americas in 1998. Since then, several international working groups have been in charge of revising and updating each chapter by collecting and coordinating input from various conferences and working meetings. The participants in these international working groups have continually circulated draft versions of the document by email and met in various countries to discuss and advance their respective chapters. As each revision has taken into account suggestions raised during plenary discussions in the Peoples' Summits (and several other broad based civil society meetings), the policy paper is reflective of the HSA's particular *mélange* of 'top-down' and 'bottom up' approaches. While the original draft had been elaborated 'top down' by movement leaders and professional NGO staff, it has gradually turned into a construction 'from below', increasingly integrative and conducive to the strengthening of the HSA's collective identity. According to one interviewee, the HSA's policy paper has served as an important source of inspiration for the ALBA (*Alternativa Bolivariana para la América*), the counterproposal to the FTAA put forward by the Chavez administration in Venezuela.

The fourth version of the ‘Alternatives for the Americas’ was released in October 2002, and can be downloaded from various websites (e.g., www.commonfrontiers.ca).

What has been accomplished?

In assessing what the HSA has accomplished to date, it is worthwhile to note that the FTAA has not come into effect yet. While the official schedule envisaged the implementation of the agreement by January 2005, the negotiations have not even produced a consensual working draft yet. In fact, the FTAA initiative appears to be blocked, as the Venezuelan government under the leadership of Hugo Chavez refuses to proceed with the negotiations altogether. Also, the presidents of Argentina, Nestor Kirchner, and Brazil, Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva, have stated that their future participation is conditional upon the elimination of agriculture subsidies on the part of the United States, and the provision of effective market access in all those sectors, in which the United States themselves have been trying to protect their businesses from Southern American competitors. In other words, Argentina and Brazil have not opposed the treaty altogether, but demand it to be really free. And yet, as their demands seem currently unrealizable in the U.S., this position amounts to a temporary veto against FTAA.

It should be clear, of course, that the current deadlock in the FTAA initiative must not be credited to the efforts of the HSA alone. As Tarrow (2003: 20) puts it, “the most impressive roadblock to the successful completion of the FTAA is not the notable transnational educational and lobbying activities of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, but formidable and growing objections of Brazil to U.S. domestic trade policies.” And these, it should be added, are reflective of, or a pretext for, Brazil’s geostrategically motivated interest to remain South America’s uncontested economic leader. Brazil’s inclusion in the FTAA would turn the most powerful economy in the *Cono Sur* into a ‘junior partner’ of the United States, whereas the strengthening of the Mercosur, the Southern counterweight to the NAFTA, would improve the geostrategic position of both, Brazil and Argentina. Hence, geostrategic interests seem to have been at least equally decisive for the stagnation of the FTAA process as the popular resistance against the agreement.

However, while the role of the HSA should not be overrated, nor must it be underrated. As discussed above, the HSA has been able to inform several million people about the FTAA’s potentially devastating social and environmental consequences—and it has also heightened preexisting resentment toward the United States by framing the proposed agreement as an imperialistic attempt on the part of this country to oppress the rest of the continent. On the website of the Argentinean *Autoconvocatoria No al ALCA*, for instance, textual and pictorial representations of this (anti-)imperialistic frame are legion. “The United States need the FTAA to solve their economic problems, and to satisfy their ambition to dominate”, the site states; and: “This is not regional integration; this is an ongoing attempt to finalize our imperialist annexation.” In the *consulta popular*, several of the organizers recount, such (anti)imperialistic slogans have had massive resonance. If the Argentinean government were to sign the FTAA now, many activists speculated during interviews, this would probably cause mass protests similar to the ones that overthrew several presidents in 2001 and 2002.

Analysis

The historical account above has made it clear that the HSA can be seen as a successful case of transnational coalition building and maintenance. But, what has made this success possible? And to what extent will it be possible for movement coalitions in other regions to replicate the HSA's experiences?

Regional Factors

Although the interviews for this study have tended to take unexpected thematic turns, the issue of diversity and potential divisions has come up in all of them. What has enabled the participants of the HSA to overcome the challenges imposed on them by their cultural and organizational diversity? Interestingly, almost all respondents explain the HSA's success by emphasizing, first and foremost, the crucial role of historical and regional factors lying beyond their sphere of influence. In fact, one activist states (in an unrecorded and informal conversation) that in the case of the HSA the issue of diversity must not be overrated, as the American continent in general is far more homogeneous, culturally and linguistically, than other continents. The Americas have all been shaped by the same European influences, this respondent argues, and while in Africa and Asia, for instance, there exist hundreds of different languages, American peoples are able to communicate in just four languages, Spanish, Portuguese, English, and French.

Other respondents, of course, contradict this notion of homogeneity. Instead, they emphasize that the notable heterogeneity of the American peoples has filtered down into the HSA and other transnational movement coalitions. In the words of one of the Argentinean interviewees (my translation), "the movement is politically diverse, ... it shows diversity in terms of politics, culture and religious beliefs, to name only three important aspects of this diversity, ... and this has to do also with different national identities and many others things." However, nearly all interviewees emphasize the notion that the American peoples have gone through the same historical experience—namely, the suffering of colonialism and neocolonial imperialism—and that this shared experience has unified the Americans beyond any cultural differences. The common past of the American countries, the respondents seem to suggest, has led the inhabitants to develop a kind of multiple collective identity: they have come to define themselves as the American peoples in the plural, and as the American people in the singular.

As an Argentinean labor unionist explains, a collective American identity, based on the common desire for independence from oppression, had existed long before the HSA set out to bring together activists from across the entire continent: "America, especially Latin America, is the outcome of an invasion; therefore, its identity is one of continual struggle for liberation. This is an identity that runs through the whole hemisphere" (my translation). The same respondent then recapitulates the history of the Americas over the last six centuries as a history of continual domination and resistance. In a remarkably elaborate narration, he manages to rhetorically connect the (ambivalent) role of the

Guaraníes in Artiga's liberation movement with the Bolivarian revolution and to link the latter with the HSA's ongoing resistance against the FTAA.

While most of the other respondents are less eloquent than the labor unionist just quoted, the same basic idea reappears throughout nearly all interviews: while foreign domination, in various forms, has left a mark in the collective memory of all American people(s), resistance against this foreign domination has become part and parcel of a distinctive (Latin) American identity. This collective identity has been present in all participants of the Hemispheric Social Alliance since the organization's very beginning. Therefore, the respondents suggest, the HSA has always been more likely to turn out an enduring endeavor than have similar coalitions in other regions.

In a similar vein, most interviewees point to the importance of popular resentment towards U.S. foreign policy over the last century. They depict this resentment as both, a particularly significant element of the (Latin) American collective identity, and a favorable condition for the HSA's success in mobilizing enduring support for its campaign against FTAA. As an Argentinean human rights activist put it, the continent-wide struggle against FTAA has clearly profited from the fact that people were tired of U.S. American economic and political interventions:

"It should be clear that this was a continent in uproar, fed up with U.S. American domination, with years of misery caused by this domination, and with the local social elites that had made way for all of this. (...) There was this special social climate—this seems very important—and in this social climate (...), (...) our collective intelligence—because I don't think this has been the work of one or two people in particular—succeeded in detecting the connection between the FTAA and the old imperialistic strategy of domination. Because, this is nothing new. There is a history that is very much soaked with pain—and pain leaves scorch marks—...with pain and with struggle. Not with passive pain, but with the struggle of various sectors of the continent" (my translation).

In short, what the activists suggest in their (highly analytic) narrations is that the HSA has profited from the effects of structural and historical circumstances over which the movement coalition had no control whatsoever. Possible explanations that connect the HSA's longevity with the agency of the participants themselves are usually brought up at a very late point in the interviews, and given little, if any, importance. Instead, the respondents emphasize as success factors the comparatively high degree of linguistic homogeneity and the important role of what could be called 'historical opportunity structures' specific to the Americas.

This emphasis on contextual success factors means bad news, of course, for coalitions outside the Americas. If unity among the participants of the HSA has been rooted primarily in structural and historical characteristics of the American continent, other movements may be unable to copy the HSA's successful experience with coalition building. As these regional characteristics are unique to the Americas, and external to the movement, movements struggling in other regions and for other issues cannot replicate them.

It is very debatable, however, whether or not these factors have really been as decisive as most of the interviewees seem to argue. In fact, it seems reasonable to assume that they haven't. Firstly, even though the activists themselves have not attributed much importance to factors related to agency and organizational form, these internal factors (see below) may have been just as important as contextual ones. Secondly, the external 'factors' emphasized so far are probably not as factual as the activists have depicted them. References to a common American culture, history, and collective memory, are

by no means references to undisputed realities ‘out there’. Rather, they must be seen as the outcomes of a framing process, which has taken place within the (Latin) American Left, and the HSA in particular, over the last decade or two. The historical material that these frames have been constructed from is probably unique to the American continent; but material for similar frames can be found in other places as well.

The notion of cultural and linguistic homogeneity among the American peoples is a good case in point. It is possible, perhaps, that the American continent is relatively homogeneous when compared to others; yet, in absolute terms its inhabitants are too diverse for a well working and broad based pan-American movement coalition to be taken for granted. In fact, the idea proposed by one activist, that diversity ‘must not be overrated’, as ‘there are only four languages on this continent’, is extremely misleading, as it clearly neglects the presence of several hundred First Nations and their native languages. But a similar objection can be raised against the notion of a common American history. It should be clear that this represents a very particular perspective on history that is by no means consensual. For the Italian immigrants in Buenos Aires, for instance, the allegedly ‘shared’ history of oppression and resistance has been another than for the First Nations in Peru, or for the African slaves in Brazil.

What this suggests, then, is that the respondents’ narratives are reflective of a movement frame, rather than a factual, or consensual, ‘reality’. They constitute selective, and strategic, (re)constructions of reality that suppress notions of difference, while simultaneously reinforcing unifying perceptions of possible commonalities. As such, they do not necessarily represent frames that have been proffered by the HSA to convince external audiences of their political claims; they are elements of what could be termed subcultural or ‘in-house’ framing. As a matter of fact, many of the HSA’s press statements and other publications refer to the FTAA as a common threat to the American peoples (in the plural), but no publication that I know of makes reference to a specific ‘American collective memory’ or ‘American historical identity’. These must be seen as outcomes of internal discourses aiming at the creation and reinforcement of cohesion. In other words, they are ‘cohesion frames’.

Organizational decentralization and flexibility

Transnational movement coalitions tend to experience deep internal conflicts over divergent organizational demands (Bandy and Smith 2005a). While some participants usually champion decentralized mass participation and ‘horizontal’ coordination processes, others favor hierarchies and the centralization of decision-making. Comparative research has demonstrated that a central commonality of durable transnational coalitions has been their ability to find a balance between these two opposite principles. As Bandy and Smith (2005b: 244) put it, “both demands—efficient coordination and decentralized participation—are vital to coalition survival.” Coalition maintenance requires that participants develop “a flexible organizational culture that accommodates members’ autonomy and diversity, while nonetheless uniting them around common goals—a strategy of reconciling difference with unity, the universal and the particular” (ibid.: 244).

The sustained survival of the Hemispheric Social Alliance corroborates this finding, as the HSA's internal politics have been reflective of what could be termed 'subsidiary federalism' (to borrow a term used by the European Union and Switzerland). The Alliance provides its participants with institutionalized means to coordinate their struggles, and with the possibility to be perceived as a powerful unitary actor by the media and politicians, but decisions are made at the lowest organizational level possible. Likewise, decisions that need to be made at the 'hemispheric' level—by the Hemispheric Council and the Coordinating Committee—usually leave a broad margin for flexible adaptation at the local and national level. Not only does the HSA lack formal means to sanction non-compliance, but also decisions made at the uppermost organizational level usually have the form of general guidelines rather than binding rules. The idea of 'thinking globally, acting locally', though developed by business advisors for transnational corporations, seems to apply here as well.

A good case to illustrate that the HSA operates on the principles of organizational flexibility and decentralization is its 'living' policy paper, the "Alternatives for the Americas," discussed in the previous section. Another case in point is the *consulta popular*. As described above, this informal plebiscite has taken on different forms in different countries, although the initiators originally wanted the process to have the same format throughout the whole continent. While the intended format has been implemented in just a few countries (e.g., Argentina and Brazil), in others the process has needed to be adapted to the capabilities of the local organizers and to specific political opportunity structures. And yet, despite these cross-national variations, the *consulta popular* has not only been made possible; local organizers have also managed to give it a unitary appearance by using the same slogans and logos.

The notable diversity in how the *consulta popular* has been carried out can be interpreted as an ambivalent outcome of both, organizational 'strength' and 'weakness'. On the hand, as suggested by Massicotte (2004: §35; own translation), the flexible implementation of the plebiscite is a sign of weakness in that it is reflective of divisions among the HSA's leaders:

"(It) reveals the presence of divergent opinions as to the most efficient way of organizing the campaign and reaching out to the citizens. There seems to have been dissension on available resources and strategic options. In the end, the delegates came to an understanding which was based on the need to stay flexible in order to realize their common objectives. They kept adhering to the principle of consensual decision-making, but the consensus reached indicated notable discrepancies among the various movements on the continent."

On the other hand, the *consulta*'s flexible implementation must also be seen as a pragmatic and strategically adequate response to cross-national differences in political and cultural opportunities. In view of these differences, a 'one-size-fits-all' model would have been unreasonable. Decentralization and flexibility "have permitted each organization and coalition to adapt the campaign to the particularities and needs of the popular forces in their respective region" (ibid.; own translation). In this sense, then, the flexible implementation of the campaign is not so much a sign of weakness, but has allowed the campaign to become embedded within the local context. Moreover, it has permitted the local organizers to develop a strong sense of ownership for the campaign.

Participatory deliberations and consensus-oriented decision making

While organizational flexibility has been critical for the HSA's survival, consensus decision-making has been crucial to build up cohesion among its participants. International meetings (such as the Hemispheric Encounters for the Struggle Against the FTAA), and the meetings of national chapters (such as the Argentinean *Autoconvocatoria*), operate on the principles of consensus: participants are expected to deliberate and encouraged to express dissent, and decisions are only made if all participants agree. In large meetings, deliberations usually take place in parallel discussion groups consisting of twenty to thirty people, and the results of these decentralized discussions are gathered, and deliberated once more, in a plenary round. If the group reaches no consensus, but there is a majority championing the same option, matters are adjourned until the next day, or the next meeting.

While none of the activists interviewed for this study has criticized the principle of consensus decision making, several have emphasized its merits. Firstly, they argue, the consensus method helps to strengthen group cohesion and build up a collective identity, as it leaves no room for participants with minority positions to be continually overruled. No group can ever feel like its views are not welcome. Secondly, consensus decision-making increases compliance with the outcomes. As the decisions are 'owned' and supported by all participants, effective implementation is ensured. Thirdly, the search for consensus involves an intense exchange of ideas and information. To substantiate their respective positions, participants in consensus-oriented debates often refer to the history and political situation in the countries, or provinces, they come from, and to the current situation of the group they represent. Hence, consensus decision making sparks mutual learning, which in turn brings participants closer together. Fourthly, as one respondent argues, consensus decision-making is slow, but remarkably effective. In meetings operating on the principles of majority voting, discussions are usually cut off as soon as there is a selection of two or three options to vote on. Yet, the proffered options are not necessarily the most useful. Consensus decision-making being a slower, yet more creative, process, it often produces solutions that are not only consensual but also more adequate and clever. As Polletta (2002: 2) puts it, "The sheer diversity of input into tactical choice that participatory democracy makes possible, (...) enable(s) activists to outpace their opponents in generating novel tactics."

This is not to say, however, that consensus decision-making will invariably have positive effects on any kind of group. Rather, the effectiveness of this method depends on specific group characteristics and social context. Polletta's (2002) case studies suggest that for consensus-oriented forms of participatory decision making to work, participants must share the same basic goals, and have a similar understanding of their situation. As each participant can use the right of veto to continually block the decision making process and immobilize the group, the consensus method can hardly create cohesion in groups with fundamentally different interests. In fact, problems also arise when a participant who repeatedly expresses dissent is just *suspected* of trying to immobilize the process. Hence, mutual trust and respect, too, are important preconditions for the consensus method to produce satisfactory outcomes.

Basic similarities of participating groups and frequent interaction among leaders

In the case of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, it can be argued, the preconditions for successful consensus finding—a common understanding of the situation, shared goals, and mutual trust—have been fulfilled since the organizations' onset. The Alliance was created by a core group of initiators through the mobilization of like-minded groups with which there had been previous ties. In other words, the Alliance has grown in what could be described as a concentric process of self-selection. When the core group of coalitions that had fought against the NAFTA agreement began searching for potential partners to build a hemispheric network, they reached out to groups they already knew to be trustworthy and share the same interests. Once these groups joined in, they in turn began mobilizing others, which they happened to know from previous struggles.

Moreover, as one of the founding members recounts, in many Southern American countries the progressive Left knew very little about the FTAA and its possible consequences. The members of the trinational coalition against NAFTA were thus expected by potential partner organizations to educate them about this matter. Drawing on the expertise they had achieved in the struggle against the NAFTA agreement, the North American networks informed Southern civil society organizations on their experiences and insights, and thereby contributed to the diffusion of a shared understanding of what was at stake. Hence, the HSA has never been in a situation where it needed to bridge fundamentally divergent perspectives on the same cause.

This is not to say, however, that there have not been any conflicts. On the contrary, despite manifold initial commonalities among its members, the Alliance has gone through all of the conflicts that Bandy and Smith (2005b: 238) see as typical for transnational movement coalitions, “including those over representation, decision making, divisions of labor, leadership styles, hierarchy, and centralization.” Not surprisingly, there have also been “debates over strategies that vary between radical and reformist, legal and illegal, nonviolent and violent” (ibid.: 240), as well as between cooperative and disruptive. Several of the initial participants reported in the interviews for this study that in the first years there was a deep conflict on whether the Alliance should struggle for a socially tolerable reform of the FTAA, or reject the treaty altogether. As one respondent put it, the way towards the now uncontested strategy, to stop the FTAA altogether, was “tough, very tough” (my translation).

That strategic and tactical differences have not produced major frictions has been, to a great extent, the merit of the movement leaders who represent the National Chapters and Thematic Networks in the HSA's international boards. The delegates in the Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council have repeatedly acted as skilled and committed interlocutors, or bridging individuals, and managed to negotiate viable compromises despite manifold centrifugal forces (cf. Brown and Fox 1998). Moreover, as there has been relatively low fluctuation in the composition of these boards, the delegates have been able to build up emotional bonds. As Massicotte (2003: 110) notes, the HSA “reaches out to grassroots movements, but only a few social leaders coordinate its regular activities.” In fact, several founding members have been delegates in the Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council since the HSA's very beginning. Hence, just like in the cases of durable

coalitions discussed by Brown and Fox (1998: 455), “direct, repeated, sustained contact among bridging individuals appears to have been an important factor in the development of solidarity, trust, and shared values among participants.”

The unresolved problem of grassroots participation

The previous sections have depicted the HSA as a case of effective coalition maintenance. There are, however, unresolved difficulties, especially with regard to grassroots participation at the local level. Whether or not the HSA’s experiences should be evaluated as a ‘success’, thus depends on the evaluation criteria. Taking into account that many transnational movement coalitions are short-lived and centered around a single-issue campaign, the HSA can indeed be seen as a success story. It has survived manifold internal crises, and grown increasingly more inclusive in terms of both, participating organizations and issues covered. And yet, measured against one of the HSA’s main objectives, to strengthen local civil society organizations and encourage their political empowerment, the balance seems more ambivalent. According to its founding charter, the Alliance aims at creating “participatory democracy at the hemispheric level” (my translation), but critics point out that in reality it has allowed less mass participation than would have been possible, and been unable to avoid the reproduction of internal asymmetries.

Massicotte (2003), for instance, points out the notable overrepresentation of professional NGO staff, researchers, and union leaders in the HSA’s Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council. She notes that,

“While it has gained the support of mass organizations, only a few *leaders*, maybe a hundred, from key national and regional coalitions, regularly participate in the HSA’s activities. Its limited resources and the ‘hemispheric’ scale at which it primarily functions make it extremely difficult for grassroots participation” (ibid.: 111).

Moreover, Massicotte emphasizes the notorious underrepresentation of delegates from areas outside the major metropolises:

“The Alliance is not as hemispheric as its name suggests. Regular participants live in major cities, and come from about ten countries. Being in large cities provides leaders with easier access to information and governments for their lobbying strategies, especially national offices dealing with interstate trade” (2003: 121-122).

The consequences of this overrepresentation of professionals with similar social backgrounds are, of course, ambivalent. On the one hand, the relatively pronounced homogeneity and stable composition of the HSA’s hemispheric boards appear to have been crucial for the organizations’ survival. On the other hand, the regular participants in these boards can be argued to have become an elite, increasingly detached, perhaps, from the ideas, needs, and interests of grassroots activists. Based on interviews conducted in the United States, Canada and Mexico (ibid.: endnote 19), Massicotte observes that local activists indeed perceive a gap between their own work and that of their regular delegates in the HSA’s hemispheric boards:

“Many grassroots activists (...) are disappointed about not being able to participate. They often see coalition politics as the preserve of a few social leaders who can travel to meetings and participate in conference calls

to deepen their analysis and plan joint activities. Many are therefore sceptical about the idea that coalition-building strengthens their struggles for deeper democracy and justice. The HSA promotes the latter goals, but there are continual dilemmas and debates about how to ensure representativity and democratic participation, especially at 'transnational' levels" (ibid.: 121).

Interestingly, however, Massicotte's findings do not quite correspond to the perceptions of Argentinean grassroots activists. The Argentinean activists interviewed for the present study seem to have a more pragmatic perspective on the issue of transnational representation and participation than the North American respondents in Massicotte's study. While they find hemispheric coalition-building very important, many Argentinean rank and file activists see it as 'normal' and 'logical' that only a few leaders can afford traveling to international coordination meetings. As they cannot think of any viable alternative, they do not seem to be disappointed, or angry, about not being able to participate.

Moreover, most of the Argentinean respondents seem quite confident that the participants in the Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council have maintained strong connections to the movement's popular base. And they trust the hemispheric delegates to represent this base to the best of their knowledge. As one of the respondents put it, increased grassroots participation in the HSA's hemispheric international boards would probably not change their policies, as the boards are already aware, and sufficiently reflective, of grassroots interests. Another respondent, however, emphasizes the autonomy of local activists to implement the HSA's policies as they wish. If the decisions made by the HSA's coordination boards appear useless, she says, the local participants "just do it differently" (my translation).

In sum, then, a certain lack of mass participation in the HSA's coalition politics does not seem to be a major concern for Argentinean grassroots activists. However, grassroots activists from outside Buenos Aires emphasize, and criticize, that there is a notable lack of grassroots participation at the *national* level. This is interesting, insofar as the HSA's Argentinean chapter, the *Autoconvocatoria No al ALCA*, not only operates on the principles of participatory democracy, but also constitutes what participants call an 'open space'. That is, deliberations and decision-making take place in weekly plenary meetings, and these are open to anybody who agrees to the *Autoconvocatoria's* basic objective, to stop the FTAA. The problem is that these meetings take place on weekdays in the capital, invariably and exclusively, and activists living in remote (and not-so-remote) areas cannot attend. Most grassroots activists in the hinterland cannot afford to travel to Buenos Aires, and those who can, usually have no time to do so except on weekends. Hence, grassroots activists operating outside the metropolitan center are almost entirely excluded from the *Autoconvocatoria's* participatory decision-making.

Activists in the hinterland have thought of several creative solutions to resolve this problem, but their suggestions seem to have fallen on deaf ears. Therefore, the *Autoconvocatoria's* inability to stimulate mass participation outside Buenos Aires has come to be seen as the result of arrogance and indifference. As an activist in the Province of Santa Fe puts it,

"They always talk about Buenos Aires and the situation in the Latin American subcontinent, but the Argentinean heartland, *el interior*, never comes up. Really, it's like we're reproducing the very logic of the model we've been fighting against. We have so many difficulties in democratizing all levels and spaces. (...) (...) But it's as if in Buenos Aires they don't see the problems of small organizations: that we don't have

money, that we only get by because we put in a lot of volunteer work, that we don't have all this infrastructure that big organizations have—the ones that participate in the Hemispheric Council, and in the World Social Forum, in which we are unable to participate” (my translation).

Quite surprisingly, however, most of the other local activists in the Argentinean heartland do not conceive the lack of mass participation in the *Autoconvocatoria* in terms of a lack of representativity and internal democratic accountability. Most respondents agree that the ideas and interests of the *Autoconvocatoria*'s participants in Buenos Aires are more or less identical with those of grassroots activists in the hinterland. As another respondent from Santa Fe emphasizes, the actual differences are small:

“Suppose you conduct a poll about this... You would find that there are no differences between what the comrades in Buenos Aires have in mind and what the [people from the other] provinces would ask for if they were included” (my translation).

What the grassroots activists outside Buenos Aires *do* emphasize are motivational problems. As their comrades in Buenos Aires seem to pay very little attention to what goes on at the local level, several respondents in the heartland report that they often lack the energy to continue with their struggle. It is difficult for them to keep in mind, they argue, that they are part of a ‘hemispheric’ movement if the regular participants of the national chapter keep excluding them.

Conclusions

Coalitions of social movement organizations and activists from different countries can take advantage of a great variety of strategic inputs. As Khagram (2002: 228f.) has shown in his analysis of social movement struggles against the World Bank's Narmada Dam project in India, transnational civil society coalitions pursue their goals using an innovative combination of various protest forms and other actions—“combining and coordinating the full range of strategies, from grassroots protest to elite lobbying, in the widest possible range of institutional contexts, from the local to the international level.” Also, transnational coalition building helps civil society organizations gain symbolic weight and political capital. The Hemispheric Social Alliance, for instance, claims to be a joint project of all the people from Alaska to *Tierra del Fuego*. In many respects, then, transnational coalitions are more than just the sum of their parts. To the casual bystander, the transnational form of these coalitions suggests that the problem the activists struggle against is not only crucial, but also universal: why else would participants take on the significant effort of cross-border organizing?; how could a problem of only minor significance create such outrage?

Having said this, building and maintaining transnational coalitions is by no means an easy task. The challenges that transnational activism must cope with are legion. “Coalitions are difficult wherever they occur, but the diversity of languages, political experiences, and national cultures within transnational coalitions as well as the uncertainties and complexities of intergovernmental negotiating arenas create some unique challenges for organizers” (Smith und Bandy 2005: 7). For skeptical observers such as Sidney Tarrow (2003, 2004), successful cases of transnational coalition maintenance constitute the proverbial exceptions confirming the rule. Normally, skeptics suggest,

transnational activism consists of short-lived and monothematic campaigns, which tend to fall apart easily.

The present study demonstrates this skeptical perspective to be overly narrow, as the empirical object of this study, the Hemispheric Social Alliance, has been in existence for almost decade now. Initiated in the mid-1990s by a group of social movement organizations in Canada, the United States, and Mexico, the HSA now has participants in over twenty countries across the Americas and the Caribbean. Member organizations include politically influential actors such as CUT, the Brazilian trade union association, but also hundreds of less known human rights organizations and rural grassroots projects. Hence, the example of the HSA demonstrates that sustained transnational coalition maintenance is possible even in the presence of high levels of heterogeneity and ideological diversity.

To understand how the HSA has forged unity amid diversity, it is important to take into account its organizational culture. *Firstly*, decision-making operates, at all organizational levels, on the principles of participatory deliberation and consensus-orientation. This participatory consensus method encourages a respectful exchange of views and thus fosters the development of mutual trust and understanding. *Secondly*, the HSA works according to the principles of subsidiarity and greatest possible local autonomy. While the HSA provides its participants with structured means to coordinate their activities, exchange ideas, and have a joint public appearance, its campaigns and other activities show a significant margin of flexibility in local implementation. Local participants typically have the right (as well as the responsibility) to adapt the coalition's activities to their individual context. *Thirdly*, cohesion among the HSA's member organizations and participants can also be attributed to the diplomatic skills and intercultural competence of the national and regional delegates to the coalitions' steering boards, the Coordinating Committee and the Hemispheric Council. In many cases, the personal biographies of these delegates contain multicultural elements such as multilingualism, personal migration experience, and transcultural marriage. Also, interviews with these delegates suggest a high level of conflict tolerance and respect for the diversity of opinions.

In general, the findings presented here lend further support to the results of studies on other transnational movement coalitions (Bandy und Smith 2005a; Fox und Brown 1998; Khagram et al. 2002). These previous studies also emphasize the importance of a flexible and decentralized organizational culture (Bandy und Smith 2005b) and of coalition coordinators being skilled leaders and intercultural interlocutors (Fox und Brown 1998). However, in addition to these well-established factors, the present study reveals the importance of yet another element of social cohesion in transnational movement coalitions—the presence of a (regional) collective identity. In the activists' own accounts, this seems to be the single most important explanation for the HSA's longevity: their belonging to a regional collective is mentioned by some respondents as the first, by others as the only success factor. In fact, almost all respondents attribute social cohesion among HSA activists to their common historical experience of resisting external oppression. The century-old struggle against foreign colonial and imperialist forces, they suggest, has united the American peoples despite any cultural differences—and made it relatively easy for the HSA to create sustained group attachment.

It should be clear, of course, that the activists' historical narratives represent an understanding of American history that is unconventional and rather selective. Nevertheless, this selective reconstruction of American history seems to have enabled the HSA's participants to create a sense of belonging and mutual respect. It can be seen as collective identity frame, the purpose of which is to put emphasis on participants' commonalities whilst downplaying potentially conflictive differences. Though the historical material, from which this identity frame has been constructed, is unique to the Americas, movement coalitions in other regions will surely find similar material from which they can build functionally equivalent constructs.

In summary, this study contends that sustaining long-term cooperation in transnational movement coalitions is difficult, but by no means impossible. Exaggerated skepticism as to the possibilities and limits of transnational activism seems unjustified. However, caution is warranted when overly enthusiastic observers portray contemporary progressive movement coalitions as the unmistakable precursors of an emergent "planetary democracy" (Ziegler 2003; own translation) and see these coalitions as having the potential to not only bring about selective reforms but also radically transform global politics altogether (Monbiot 2004). Typically, such assessments are not based on rigorous empirical research, but result, to a significant degree, from wishful thinking. In fact, empirical research demonstrates that transnational movement coalitions tend to suffer from internal democratic deficits and power imbalances, which not only reduce their potential to produce transformative innovations, but also help opponents undermine the coalitions' legitimacy (Bandy and Smith 2005a; Khagram et al. 2002). In the case of the HSA, portrayed as a "success story" of sustained transnational activism in this study, movement leaders and coalition coordinators have so far failed to produce the participation and empowerment of local grassroots activists that the organization's founding charter (HSA 1999) deems so critical (cf. Massicotte 2003, 2004). In Argentina, for instance, grassroots organizations working outside the capital city have virtually no influence on the decisions made by the HSA's national chapter, the *Autoconvocatoria No al ALCA*. The *Autoconvocatoria* operates on the principles of participatory and consensus-oriented deliberation, but local grassroots activists simply cannot afford frequent trips to Buenos Aires.

Notes

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