



Unintended Consequences of Transnational Activism: Case Studies from the Brazilian Amazon

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The Rubber Tappers



The rubber tappers of Acre are subsistence rubber harvesters and nut collectors who live in the western Brazilian Amazon near the borders of Peru and Bolivia. In the 1970s, they began a grassroots movement against state-incentivized land clearing that threatened their livelihoods and traditional ways of life.

The group struggled to make their voices heard. The tappers lived in such small and isolated communities that mobilization proved difficult. They had little preexisting social organization and possessed few economic resources that could be used to plan protests or engage in the political process.



In the 1980s, they connected with several North American NGOs and environmentalists, who sponsored a trip for rubber Tapper leader Francisco "Chico" Mendes to the United States to speak with members of the U.S. Congress, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. However, the group quickly became dominated by these foreign activists. They convinced them to reframe their movement in environmental terms and to adopt a proposal to establish a series of "extractive reserves" in the Amazon rainforest, a plan which failed to address many of the core problems faced by the local populations.

After the establishment of several extractive reserves, many rubber tappers actually experienced declining standards of living. Increasing numbers were forced to abandon traditional economic activities and became further marginalized within Brazilian society. Transnational activism had failed them.

Research Problem

Beginning in the late 20th century, social activism has become an increasingly globalized phenomenon. More frequent interactions between local social movements in developing countries and activists and national governments in the developed world have led to the formation of transnational advocacy networks, groups of NGOs, intellectuals, local peoples, and other actors that work to promote principled causes, ideas, and norms. While in some cases, relations within these networks are mutually empowering, in other cases they advantage powerful Western groups at the expense of local populations. Oftentimes, Western activists gain legitimacy and prestige for their efforts to help marginalized peoples but local groups find themselves in no better or even worse condition than if they had never interacted with outside activists at all.

Research Question

Why do some local groups benefit from participating in transnational activism while others do not?

Theory

This study draws on both traditional social movement theory (McCarthy & Zald, 1977; Jenkins, 1983; Tarrow, 1994) and the burgeoning field of transnational advocacy (Keck & Sikkink, 1998; Khagram, 2002; Bob, 2005) to make the following arguments:

1. Local grassroots movements possessing greater resources and organizational capacities are less dependent on the assistance of foreign activists, allowing local leaders to play more prominent roles in agenda setting and strategic decision-making
2. The extent to which these groups can exert power within transnational advocacy networks reduces the risk that their efforts will be co-opted or their message reframed away from its local context, increasing the likelihood that they will achieve their local objectives

Data & Methods

This study conducts a comparative analysis of two cases of local grassroots movements that began in Amazonian Brazil and grew into transnational campaigns. Both the rubber tappers of Acre and the Kayapó Indians began struggles against state development efforts during the 1970s and 1980s and established connections with Western activists that helped bring their movements to international prominence. However, while the Kayapó benefited from these interactions, the rubber tappers did not. This study examines how the resources and organizational capacities possessed by each group prior to connecting with outside activists affected to what extent each group achieved the original objectives of their movement.



Findings

- The rubber tappers' lack of economic resources, organizing skills, and collective identity contributed to their marginalization within the transnational extractive reserves campaign. Their inability to influence the movement's agenda and strategies led to the creation of a proposal that failed to address the group's original local concerns.
- The Kayapó's wealth, experience with outsiders, and strong common identity allowed them to play a more influential role in the transnational anti-dam campaign. As a consequence, they were better able to control transnational advocacy efforts in order to address local objectives.

Conclusions

- Partnerships between Western activists and local, marginalized peoples are not always as beneficial as previous research suggests.
- Characteristics of local groups, especially access to resources and various factors that influence organizational capacity, play an important role in determining whether groups will benefit or not benefit from transnational activism.
- Western activists must become more cognizant of the risks of marginalizing local groups within broader transnational campaigns.

The Kayapó



The Kayapó are a relatively large group of indigenous peoples inhabiting a vast area across the Central Brazilian Plateau along the Xingu River and its tributaries. In the 1980s, they began a local campaign to block the construction of a series of dams along the Xingu that threatened to flood portions of their territory.

The Kayapó possessed significant experience with outsiders through interactions with mining and logging companies, to whom they provided concessions in return for money. They also benefited from a strong sense of collective indigenous identity and the presence of large, tightly-knit villages that could be easily mobilized by community leaders.



In 1987, several North American environmentalists sponsored a speaking tour for two Kayapó chiefs to the United States and Europe, which they used to draw international attention to the dam project and their efforts to stop it. They used the money raised during the tour to plan an enormous demonstration in the frontier town of Altamira for February 1989. The event drew so many foreign activists, journalists, and celebrities, and generated so much international attention that the World Bank cancelled its power sector loan to Brazil, effectively ending the dam project.

The Kayapó became politically, economically, and culturally empowered as a result of their efforts. In the years following, they won legal rights to territory the size of Scotland. They extracted further concessions from mining and logging companies and experienced a strengthening of group self-awareness and pride.