Mapping Solidarity: How Public Anthropology Provides Guidelines for Advocacy Networks

Raúl Acosta

ABSTRACT: Current transnational networks of non-governmental organizations and social movements have challenged nation-states’ policy designs. Their increasing political legitimacy, however, is matched by cultural friction and misunderstandings among their members and stakeholders. This paper argues that anthropological insights may provide maps that can help shape advocacy networks’ guidelines for action. Just as social analysts of past centuries provided the language and imagined forms of social organization from systematic examinations of events, anthropologists can help explain current relations and processes within fluid structures in order to improve their practices and results. This idea is illustrated by the examination of a single socio-environmental advocacy network in the Brazilian Amazon: ‘Y Ikatu Xingu. This network was chosen because it brings together stakeholders from contrasting backgrounds, thus highlighting its intercultural challenges. Some members of the convening NGOs were anthropologists, whose work is focused on helping bridge understandings of environment and coexistence. The network was therefore strongly influenced by anthropological insights.

KEYWORDS: activism, advocacy networks, Amazon, NGOs, transnational

Introduction

On the morning of 25 October 2004, a meeting in the city of Canarana, in the southern frontier zone of the Brazilian Amazon, started with the projection of an image of the earth rotating as if seen from outer space. As it moved, the image gradually zoomed into Brazil, then the Amazon region, then the state of Mato Grosso, and froze in the Xingu River basin. This happened while a speaker said the opening words of the gathering that brought together over three hundred representatives of groups either based in the area or interested in its environment. It was the first time that local small farmers sat at the same negotiating table as industrial soy producers. This meeting was convened by a team of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) led by Instituto Socioambiental (ISA 2009). Its purpose was to form a network with all those in attendance to start a campaign to protect and restore the springs that feed the Xingu River, a tributary of the Amazon. The problems that have affected these springs range from drying up due to deforestation to increasing levels of pollution caused by industrial farming. Among those involved were several indigenous communities whose protected territories either lie in the basin of the Xingu or are crossed by the river, like the Xingu Indigenous Park, a protected area for 16 ethnic groups (Schwartzman and Zimmerman 2005). The name for the network and campaign chosen by vote in the general assembly was ‘Y Ikatu Xingu, which means ‘Save the good water of the Xingu River’ in the
Tupi language. There were also scientists and government officials who had never before sat in such a diverse congregation. An indigenous leader seemed to reproach this panel of white middle-aged men from government, NGOs and other institutions: ‘We indigenous peoples always waited for you to call us to start a dialogue, but as indigenous people we are considered a minority, as if we were animals. We are human beings, and need respect’ (field notes 2004). He nevertheless used a nationalist discourse to call for a joint effort to save the river, ‘because it’s not only the Xingu [river] that is dying, it’s the whole of Brazil.’

After three days of debates and presentations, the meeting ended with a series of specific tasks distributed among many of those attending. A committee was formed to coordinate activities and inform any news to all other network members. The meeting’s conclusions and plans seemed to be a roadmap for the collective effort to protect and restore the river’s springs. Other maps, physical ones, were an important part of the gathering. The main one distributed to all those attending was of the whole basin, based on a satellite photograph digitally manipulated to highlight in different colours areas that have long been deforested, have recently been deforested, are protected, have been re-forested or maintain their original vegetation. This map clearly showed the threats that pose a risk for the future of the river and, therefore, for the area’s environment.

It was the key to the meeting’s success, as it was designed to be easy to understand and very informative of the situation. The map was therefore the backbone of the NGO since its inception. This fact has allowed it to bridge cultural differences in sensitive issues. All this is summarized in ISA’s map, accessible to a wide variety of stakeholders, with their respective priorities and interests, and yet with a clear common goal of protecting river springs.

This paper puts forward the idea that public anthropologists can provide comprehensible maps for political action of advocacy networks. This idea stems from examples such as that described above, which entail ‘public conversations with anthropological insight’ (Borofski 2007). This requires that the analyses and deductions stemming from anthropological observations provide an understanding of the complexities of dialogues, linkages and relations across cultural practices, histories and contexts. In their political aspirations, advocacy networks strive to bridge a wide array of identities and localities in order to advocate for a common cause. These types of efforts inevitably lead to ongoing friction (Tsing 2005) that can in turn mean clashing projects or ideals, not only between those involved in networks but also between them and governments or other institutional actors.

This paper does not seek to imply that the referred network was ‘successful’, but rather that it has remained a sustained association for several years. Its long-term campaign does not rely on a ‘social construction’ of success like that of the development projects Mosse (2005) described in his ethnography of British aid in India. The difference lies in the fact that while official projects like those of the Department for International Development (DFID), which Mosse described, rely on short-term evaluations of achieved goals in order to be allowed to continue by a central office, while projects of an advocacy network such as ‘Y Ikatu Xingu rely more on an ongoing maintenance of their legitimacy to all stakeholders involved. In order to achieve this, the organizations convening ‘Y Ikatu Xingu stated a clear timeline over a long period of time for the various actions
to achieve the campaign's goal of protecting springs and improving the water quality of the tributaries that feed the Xingu River. These include scientific studies of pollution, establishing protected areas and training enough people to oversee the efforts to allow for ongoing protection and improvement. It is a scheme that allows everyone involved to understand the campaign's long-term logic. During that time, the network motivates its members with reports, workshops, information and events. Some of the activities are even celebratory, thus offering a renewed sense of intertwined purposes between the campaign and life in the area. A good example is the commemoration of the World Environment Day, for which in 2009 the network sponsored a series of sporting and recreational activities, as well as a music concert and a reception in the city of Canarana, where the network started. These many actions ensure a continuity of the association and its purpose, even if it changes in some of its aspects. A key ingredient that has allowed the survival of the network is the mediation work by anthropologists which has helped bridge cultural differences through research, documents or insights, which will be explained further below. The practice of public anthropology in this scenario is applied to the mediation between contrasting understandings of the relation between social life and its natural environment. This hands-on approach, it is proposed here, can provide guidelines or maps to help advocacy networks navigate through difficult terrains full of misunderstandings and conflict.

In order to make the case stated above, I divide this paper into two parts. The first one is a brief description of the advocacy network portrayed above in the Brazilian Amazon. It provides further details of meetings in which mediation skills within such webs were challenged by a diversity of cultural understandings, practical responses and intellectual approaches among their members. The second part is a reflection on the complex interconnections that are of increasing interest to anthropologists. It is a general discussion on advocacy networks as a transnational version of social solidarity and of the involvement of anthropologists both within such networks and outside of them as researchers. In a milieu where some academic production is readily available to activists and NGO workers, it is appropriate to reflect on such research and its consequences. Before exploring the web portrayed, the following paragraph provides further clarification about the type of associations advocacy networks entail.

Keck and Sikkink (1998) described transnational advocacy networks as webs that link social movements, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), epistemic communities, alternative media, individuals and other organizations. Keck and Sikkink defined these groupings as networks of ‘relevant actors working internationally on an issue, who are bound together by shared values, a common discourse, and dense exchange of information and services’ (1998: 2). They are becoming indispensable legitimacy providers in all scales of power structures. This has come about rather swiftly, a reason why most of them are innovating as they carry out their campaigns and activities. Their influence in the more institutional political arena comes from a reliance on their own flexibility and expertise. It is also related, however, to their organizing principle of collective decision-making in tune with the governance concept stressed by the World Bank and other aid agencies over the last couple of decades. Anthropologists have recently criticized some of these networks by dissecting their inner workings in thorough ethnographies. For example, Riles (2000) focused on aesthetic qualities of document production in Pacific networks of women’s rights, which had an effect on how their work was used once completed (usually filed away). Mosse (2005) looked at development projects from within an aid agency, trying thus to understand why some projects simply do not achieve their aims. These examples, among others, show how anthropological research can
deconstruct realities that are covered with politically correct language. These are academic approaches to hands-on associations. The argument in this paper relates mainly to hands-on anthropologists in such associations, who usually read and translate analyses from others into the ongoing deliberations and negotiations they facilitate. This combination, therefore, makes it possible for researchers to put forward principles that can serve as guidelines for these new political organizations.

**Networks Flow**

The research project on which this paper is based set out to observe two sets of advocacy networks, one in the Amazon and another one in the Mediterranean (Acosta 2007). The purpose was to study the political practice involved in them as an innovative way to engage in public issues. The study used a network model, which provides a useful focus to understand power relations that challenge established institutions. After analyzing the political practice of the networks, the role of anthropologists within their fluid structures became clear. This part of the paper is dedicated to an ethnographic description of one advocacy network in the Amazon, as it comprises several characteristics that are relevant to this analysis. The names of the main NGOs portrayed here will be their real ones, but their members and the activists involved have been changed, to guard their anonymity.

The meeting described at the start of this paper showed the advantage of having anthropologists as mediators between different groups. ISA, the leading NGO in charge of the campaign, clarifies in its webpage that this project started because since the mid-1990s leaders of the Xingu Indigenous Park complained about the negative effects the Xingu River was experiencing due to deforestation and farming (‘Y Ikatu Xingu’ 2007). After years of ongoing projects and dialogues, its members decided to combine different types of information into maps, which were central for an effective socio-environmental campaign with a clear message. This effort paid off as all groups involved have shown their ongoing commitment to the plan, with wide support from many parts of the country. Several companies have awarded the project a series of grants and support of different sorts. In January 2006, HSBC awarded the campaign an award for environmental protection. By bringing so many different institutional and individual actors together and managing to organize activities in stages and with clear responsibilities and commitments, the leading team helped earn the support and sponsorship from different government agencies.

All this, however, did not mean that the negotiations ran smoothly. There were tensions among those attending for many reasons. One was between small family farmers and large industrial ones, as the former claimed to be forced into selling their land or crops at low prices to the latter, who have the resources, experience and connections to transport and commercialize the grains to markets worldwide. Another source of conflict is between the new-arrivals versus those who have been in the area for longer. One of the key clashes, however, which always grabs the attention of researchers and journalists, is the one between indigenous groups and the populations around them. The speech quoted in the introduction summarized the majority view of the indigenous groups attending to the meeting at Canarana. In fact, at the end of the meeting a group of Kaiabi held a war dance to show their concern about its potential outcomes; as one member of the group later told me: ‘It’s not the first time they tell us that everything will improve’. The ongoing negotiations were full of ongoing misunderstandings due to prejudice and lack of empathy. For example, one member of a large agribusiness company seeking to lease land from the protected areas destined to indigenous populations complained to me
in private about their unwillingness to lease it. ‘With only a few thousand hectares producing soy, all the community could make enough money to retire comfortably to Florida’, he said with a wry smile. All these conflicts, however, helped legitimize the meeting as each was addressed directly by the organizers. This open and direct effort to leave their historical mutual conflicts to one side and focus on a common goal has allowed the campaign to remain an ongoing project with collective support and a stated long-term agenda.

Another NGO that was part of the organizing team was IPAM, or Instituto de Pesquisa Ambiental da Amazônia. This is an NGO focused on scientific research, the results of which they use to ‘contribute to the development process in Amazonía’ (IPAM 2006). It has around 130 paid employees, plus students and volunteers who take part in experiments and studies. One of the founders and leading scientists of IPAM told me in an interview that the organization’s aim is to level the playing field between all stakeholders involved in the area to achieve fruitful negotiations that make a difference. Most of the organization’s projects are systematic studies of environmental matters, such as the study of effects of diminishing rainfall or fire in a primary forest area. They link these studies with social projects that aim to seek collective solutions to problems that affect all stakeholders. The detailed information they produce, along with their conclusions and proposals, are therefore shared with communities, producers and government. They take part in advocacy networks, usually in a leading or mediating role, alongside small farmers’ unions, large agribusinesses, indigenous groups, other NGOs, students and other stakeholders. The overall aim of their participation in campaigns such as ‘Y Ikatu Xingu is to achieve a better governance model in the area. During my observation period, at least two of IPAM’s researchers were anthropologists, whose inquiries directly concerned contrasting uses of forest goods and plants in the area. Their anthropological insights were therefore used along with other information for reports. What they provided that added value was a map of cultural reactions to particular problems of the area. This in turn helped the NGO design the way its members shared their analyses in order to reach potential solutions that would not alienate any of the stakeholders. The legitimacy that IPAM earned in governmental, academic or business sectors due to their peer-reviewed publications was not enough to help them be heard by union members or small farmers. ‘We need to be sensitive to how people understand scientific data’, one of the researchers told me after a problematic meeting in Santarém.

Both IPAM and ISA were skilled mediators between all stakeholders, who came together in Canarana for the inaugural meeting of the ‘Y Ikatu Xingu campaign. ISA’s history and current work is informed by anthropological studies of the diversity among Brazil’s indigenous populations, and their relation to the natural environment. IPAM is focused on a natural-scientific study of the Amazon, but always with an acute awareness of the need to translate their results into a clear discourse with images that allow all stakeholders to understand them and their implications. The endeavour of both NGOs as conveners of the network thus represented an effort to achieve a dialogue between all sides interested in the issue at hand (the protection of the springs). The main tool they used, a map with descriptive layers pointing to several waves of deforestation, helped everyone understand how quickly the area had degraded, thus inviting the sceptical groups to become involved. Members of both organizations talked about the situation with care not to exert any type of pressure on others, but rather explain plainly what is happening, and what would change if everyone in the area were involved in protecting the springs. This strategy proved useful because
everyone was witness to the quick transformation of the area. The city where the meeting took place, Canarana, in the state of Mato Grosso, had only existed for a few decades. It was created in the 1970s as a colonizing project organized by a Southern protestant pastor to cultivate the land in the region, using a North American model of urbanization and land use. In four decades, the area surrounding the city changed from a thick forest to mainly soy producing fields. Migration to the region, especially from the south of Brazil, has been the main force behind the increasing agriculture and cattle ranching (Lisansky 1990).

A key population in the area are the fourteen ethnic groups that live in the Xingu national park. The long experience of ISA personnel in the area endows them with legitimacy to help local communities and to mediate their dialogues with other groups. One of ISA’s members’ father was among the founders of the park in 1961. This focus has been at the core of ISA. Several of its anthropologists work for long periods of time within the communities in the park. Other non-anthropologist personnel have acquired a type of anthropological sensitivity towards cultural diversity in order to carry out their work for ISA. As an NGO focused on socio-environmental issues, however, it has framed its focus within environmental perspectives. It has published studies of urbanization, environmental hazards, conservation areas, indigenous rights and diversity, among many others. I believe that its expertise in anthropology within a socio-environmental frame has allowed it to bridge cultural understandings of development and wellbeing, as well as of environment and social life. Having IPAM as a close associate has allowed both organizations to gain experience in this line and benefit from the production of scientific experiments. These elements have allowed them to communicate successfully the common benefits of working together in the ‘Y Ikatu Xingu’ campaign.

**Anthropological Perspectives on Interconnections**

Anna Tsing (2005: 4) referred to friction in terms of a stress caused by cultural interaction, as ‘the awkward, unequal, unstable, and creative qualities of interconnection across difference’. Cultures, however contentious the concept may be, are continuously co-produced by this process, she argued. Networks do not hold any kind of cultural unity, nor do they entail cultural reifications. They do suffer from friction produced by difference. Rather than trying to homogenize a type of identity, members of the network described above are involved in efforts to engage social and political diversity in order to reach a unified solution to a common problem. This characteristic makes them a privileged type of association for anthropologists to observe interactions across difference. This capacity is particularly relevant in the current historical moment, due to the increased infrastructure that allows for ongoing densification of interconnections in various public spheres. Only recently has our discipline left behind its tendency to look for homogenized cultural units. This has allowed anthropologists to focus more on the shades of grey of people’s interaction and place. This is of critical significance in the development, and possibly survival, of our discipline, as it can become a vehicle to aid the increasingly complex transnational public sphere by facilitating such interconnections.

Anthropology’s thick perspective on reality’s polyphony is specially needed in our ‘network society’ (Castells [1996] 2000; Dijk [1991] 2006). The idea of global interconnectedness has spread throughout the academic world during these last decades (Giddens 1990). Just as in previous stages of Euro-American academic production there existed ‘master metaphors’ about life and society such as ‘the machine’, ‘system’, ‘structure’, ‘market’ or ‘organism’, today’s metaphor seems to be the ‘network’.
Several academic disciplines have used it as a theoretical model to observe complex relations that currently abound. It has also shed a new light on the past, as historical events and social structures are being reconsidered through a focus on their network structures (McNeill and McNeill 2003). This positive appreciation of the network as a human feature has also reached the study of maps. In her study of the cartography of ancient empires, Smith (2005) argues that it was misleading to consider such polities as bounded within a specific territory as was marked in a map. She suggests that it is more relevant to study empires through a network structure, as their ‘boundaries were flexible, porous, and constantly redefined’ (Smith 2005: 833).

This context serves to point to anthropology’s potential for mapping social relations. In the case of advocacy networks, such mapping entails a focus on ‘solidarity’. Recent scholarly work on these issues has pointed towards the use of the gift theory to understand altruism and the will to help others (Komter 2005). What would follow, then, is an aim to understand such maps of relations. It is not a case of network analysis (Barnes [1968] 1969; Boissevain and Mitchell 1973), but rather of a study of network structures among activists and politically engaged individuals working within civil organizations or on a personal basis. As was mentioned above, these groupings are innovating the way professional political practice is carried out, while having a direct influence in communal life. The fact that the groups are fluid, that is in constant change and adaptation, makes them hard to pin down and study as solid units. That is why the idea of a map as a photograph, at a particular time and place, becomes relevant. Drawing on Foucault and Derrida, some cartographers have argued that the process of mapping is more about ‘creating, rather than simply revealing, knowledge’ (Kitchin and Dodge 2007: 332). It is therefore suggested here that by analysing advocacy networks, anthropologists can create maps that in turn provide guidelines for advocacy networks.

This potential contribution can help capture the social dynamics that allow for advocacy networks to come together and subsist. So far, this type of network has relied on the experience of its most skilled members. The life expectancy of these networks varies according to the clarity of its purpose for all those involved. If one has clear aims and projects and appeals to all its members and stakeholders, then most organizations that comprise it will remain together for a longer period. If its aims are vague and its projects do not take off, however, then it will slowly wane until it disappears (or only appears in papers as ‘advocracy’ – advocacy bureaucracy). Furthermore, a network may be so successful that its discourse and symbols overflow its own capacities and structures, thus leading to its dispersion. For all these processes, a key element is good intercultural communication, in order to avoid easy misunderstandings or mutual prejudices and distrust. There are other factors that influence their performance, but public anthropology is especially relevant to address the ones described above.

As new organizational forms, furthermore, their characteristics and functioning are still being created and experimented with. This is where anthropological insights may result in maps that in turn provide a sense of direction that help their members recognize risks and advantages of certain decisions or paths. It entails an engagement of the sort Eriksen (2006: 130) claims as a potential contribution of our discipline: ‘Anthropology can teach humility and empathy, and also the ability to listen, arguably one of the scarcest resources in the rich parts of the world these days’.

Some would say that life does not need a map. The logic behind maps is that every path taken is made easier when there is an idea of where it leads, or of other possible routes. Political philosophy, for example, started as a simple reflection on the way society coex-
isted. By classifying reality, it made it easier to think about what was possible, desirable or convenient for societies to improve their organization and governance. It thus became a normative arena by moving into what should or ought to be (Miller 2003). Many would say that it is impossible to think of anthropology as a normative discipline. Its descriptions and theorizations have more of an explanatory vein. The debate on the use of our discipline is usually more about its application to practical issues (van Willigen [1993] 2002) or its engagement with the public sphere (Eriksen 2006). In both issues, as in other discussions about the role and aims of the discipline, the concern of critics is mainly restricted to ideological stances and the uses of theories. Many anthropologists, however, aspire to a sort of dispassion in their descriptions (Geertz 1995). But, are descriptions not already types of abstract maps?

There is a strong humanistic heritage within our discipline. This sole fact provides it with a sort of normative stand. Its main moral stance follows Enlightenment values and a philosophical pursuit of the truth. Some argue that the grand scheme of anthropology is to prove the existence of ‘Sameness’ among all of humanity (Argyrou 2002), thus refuting racism and ethnocentrism. In an evolution of democratic ideals and practice, advocacy networks are reclaiming the public sphere for citizens of different backgrounds and places. Their efforts are about making bridges among those interested in and affected by specific issues. In doing so, they are themselves putting into practice the dialogue that they ask for. Their network structure allows for an ongoing criss-crossing of mutual influences, references and shared data and information, but also conflict and contestations. They are certainly moving into new terrain, by forcing governments and society at large to take them seriously, while avoiding becoming static institutions. By mapping their actions and interactions, we are not merely describing spaces and relations between their components but also helping to shape them.

Raúl Acosta finished his doctoral degree at Oxford University in 2007, for which he carried out fieldwork in the Amazon and in Barcelona. He is currently a lecturer at ITESO, where he carries out research on local advocacy networks. His interests are on the understandings of political activism, advocacy networks, solidarity and what is public. Email: rgacosta@iteso.mx

References


Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink (eds) (1998) 


