The Power of NGOs for Making Peace and Democracy in Chiapas, Mexico
(Draft)

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1 Introduction: Roles of NGOs during the conflicts and in the areas of conflicts

In this paper I will analyze and assess the activities developed by some NGOs in the Chiapas conflict in Mexico taking into account theoretical considerations on the activities and roles of NGOs.

The Chiapas conflict is a struggle of the EZLN, an indigenous guerrilla organization in Chiapas, the most southeastern part of Mexico, against the authoritarian Mexican federal government and neoliberalism in search of real democracy, justice, liberty for all Mexican people and rights for indigenous peoples in Mexico. The declarations and communiqués they make public are put on the Internet through their domestic and foreign supporters. For this reason the struggle is called “Internet War” but the real war named “Low Intensity War” is still going on in Chiapas. Many Mexican and international NGOs are supporting the EZLN for reasons of human rights, peace and democratization in Mexico (See Yamamoto 1998 and 2002).

The roles of the NGOs are a very hot issue now in Japan. In this January at the International Afganistan Reconstruction Conference held in Tokyo, two Japanese NGOs, Japan Platform and Peace Winds Japan were rejected at first by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to assist the Conference saying that the NGOs which do no have trust in their government are not qualified to take part in it.

Referring to this incident, Mr. Yu Tanaka, board member of the Japan International Volunteer Center, made public his opinion in one of the principal newspapers in Japan:

NGOs are not a part of the government. It is important to connect citizens of a country directly with citizens of other countries in addition to the pipes between governments. Japan Platform has a problem, because it does not establish a clear boundary between the government and the citizens.
“The Japanese face” made by the government and the business circle was disgraced at the first Japanese initiated international advocacy conference. This is not merely a conflict between the government and NGOs, because the former, trying to control the civil
organizations financially, shut the gate on NGOs to participate in the conference and excluded them due to its narrow-minded orientation. What is necessary is to have a variety of possibilities and to have clearly separated roles. NGOs are like rescue teams. They try to save anyone without any consideration and discrimination of his or her nationality. Governments behave only in the framework of real politics. Governments and NGOs have different roles by their nature. NGOs play roles based on different values from those of governments. Citizens’ activities like these could lead, in many cases, to the dawn of a new era. To stop these activities is equivalent to suffocate social development. (The Asahi Shinbun, Jan. 26, 2002)

I think this argument is very sound. However, as we saw in the group interview to NGO related citizens in a TV program which was broadcast shortly after the incident, there are some NGOs which need government support including economic aid and whose activities develop on the assumption that a “good” relationship exists between the government and NGOs.

2 Ambiguity of NGOs

Tessa Morris-Suzuki (2000) presented a question about the widespread image on the NGOs as progressive sources of resistance to the power of global capitalism and argued that (new) social movements are usually taken to be agents of progressive social change, capable of altering government policies or transforming the life-styles of their members, while NGOs may pursue change, but they can equally work to maintain existing social and political systems (Morris-Suzuki 2000: 63-68).

Besides, she warned us not to have too much expectation from NGOs, noting the difficulty of drawing a sharp dividing line between the ‘governmental’ and ‘non-governmental’ and indicating ironic hybrids like the BONGO (Business Organized NGO) and the oxymoronic GRINGO (Government Run/Initiated NGO) (ibid.: 68-69).

As for the reasons of this ambiguity, she pointed out, in addition to the different agencies and objectives of social movements and NGOs, the following:

While the notion of new social movements tended to be based on the experience of the wealthier democracies, particularly those of Western Europe, NGO theory has by contrast drawn extensively on the experience of poorer nations. The recent popularity of the term
‘NGO’ may in this sense reflect difficulties in transferring theories of new social movements *in toto* from North to South. The very idea of ‘life politics’ or of the cultural nature of the political becomes problematic when crossing this geo-economic divide. (Ibid.: 69)

She also mentioned that “use of the NGO as an analytical category, moreover, risks creating a conceptual boundary between the ‘governmental’ and the ‘non-governmental’ which may in some ways be an obstacle to understanding contemporary social change” (ibid.: 70).

### 3 Boomerang Pattern

In sharp contrast to Morris-Suzuki’s argument, Keck and Sikkink described very positively the roles of NGOs that defend human rights in developing countries. They supposed the power of transnational advocacy networks as ‘pressure groups’ against governments (states) and their theoretical generalization is well indicated in the following boomerang pattern’s figure (Keck & Sikkink 1998,12-13).

![Figure 1: Boomerang Pattern](image)

Source: Keck & Sikkink 1998,13 Figure 1

According to this model, State A blocks redress to organizations within it; they activate network, whose members pressure their own states and (if relevant) a third-party organization, which in turn pressures State A (Ibid: 13). In other words,

When channels between the state and its domestic actors are blocked, the boomerang pattern of influence characteristic of transnational networks may occur: domestic NGOs
bypass their state and directly search out international allies to try to bring pressure on their states from outside. This is most obviously the case in human rights campaigns. Similarly, indigenous rights campaigns and environmental campaigns that support the demands of local peoples for participation in development projects that would affect them frequently involve this kind of triangulation. Linkages are important for both sides: for the less powerful third world actors, networks provide access, leverage, and information (and often money) they could not expect to have on their own; for northern groups, they make credible the assertion that they are struggling with, and not only for, their southern partners. (Ibid.: 12-13)

In the case of the Chiapas conflict, not only domestic but international NGOs take a strong oppositional stand towards the Mexican government establishing a clear boundary between the ‘governmental’ and the ‘non-governmental’, playing important roles to maintain peace and defend indigenous peoples’ living conditions and rights in the conflict area. Here I will apply the boomerang pattern or model to the Chiapas conflict to analyze and assess the activities developed by some NGOs.

4 The case of Chiapas conflict

First I will sketch out the activities and roles that some representative NGOs are playing in the Chiapas conflict (note that not all the principal actors are included).

1) Domestic NGOs:
Unlike the “standard” boomerang pattern, domestic NGOs in Mexico collaborate and help each other to protest against the Mexican government’s policy towards the EZLN and the Chiapas conflict, making public what is really happening in Chiapas. For example, the Global Exchange Chiapas office and CIEPAC, a civil research center on Chiapas economic and political problems, co-authored a book entitled Always Near, Always Far: The Armed Forces in Mexico aimed at the world to know about the Low Intensity War in Chiapas.

2) International NGOs:
Global Exchange (GX), a San Francisco based transnational human rights NGO, plans and carries out study tours named “Reality Tours” which give opportunities mainly to U.S. citizens to see and hear directly what is really going on in Chiapas. They also organize protests against U.S. military aid to Mexico interviewing Subcomandante Marcos, leader of the EZLN who insisted that what he wanted U.S. citizens to do for the EZLN was to protest against U.S. military aid to Mexico (Benjamin 1994).
Moreover GX opened a Chiapas office in 1998 to get information and collaborate with local agencies.

3) “Third-party” country:
Quite different from the boomerang model, the United States, a country not “involved” in the Chiapas conflict plays an adverse role. It is clear that the U.S. constitutes an economic community with Canada and Mexico under NAFTA. To support his partner, the U.S. government not only offered an economic reconstruction package with developed allies in the case of the Tequila Shock, peso crisis in Mexico occurred at the end of 1995, but also is strengthening military connections with Mexico exporting military equipment under the pretext of exterminating the drug traffickers and training Mexican military officials in the U.S. military academy for low intensity war against guerrillas. Fazio 1996; López Astrain 1996.

4) International Organizations:
Every year Amnesty International publishes its report on human rights violations in Mexico. On March 28, 1998, in addition to this report, the international organization made public that the new issuing conditions of Mexican visas could be an obstacle to the activities carried out by international human rights observers and on June, 1999, they asked the U.S. government to carry out an investigation on Julio César Ruiz Ferro, ex-governor of Chiapas, on account of his alleged involvement in the massacre of 45 indigenous people in 1997. On the other hand, the United Nations sent a human rights observation mission to Chiapas in November, 1999 and the high commissioner of human rights expressed his concerns about the militarization in Chiapas.

To summarize these activities in the Chiapas conflict we can get the following picture showing the dynamics of the actors involved in it.

Figure 2: Dynamics of Actors in the Chiapas Conflict
5 Comparison between the “standard” boomerang model and the Chiapas case

Compared with the “standard” boomerang model described by Keck and Sikkink, we can indicate the following points:

1) The “standard” boomerang model is not totally valid for the Chiapas case. There exist networks and collaborative works between domestic NGOs that pressure the government. This is because, on one hand, the political system in the conflict country, Mexico in this case, has been multipolarized due to the appearance of strong opposition parties and, on the other, domestic NGOs are having stronger voices to the government since the latter must make efforts to democratize the political system after the fraud of the presidential election in 1988. Keck & Sikkink 1998,116. In addition to this, a third-party country, the United States of America in this case, does not pressure the conflict country but gives military aid.

2) However, like the boomerang model, Mexican and U.S. NGOs pressure the Mexican government through international organizations such as Amnesty International, which has reported human rights violations in Mexico, and the U.N., which has sent an observatory mission to the conflict area.

3) Mexican and U.S. NGOs pressure the Mexican government together like in the boomerang model and have had certain results such as cease-fires in January 1994 and in February 1995, and human rights watch and peace keeping activities after the cease-fires.
4) As far as the Chiapas conflict is concerned, it seems that there do not exist BONGOs or GRINGOs in Mexico. This could be because the Mexican civil society, parent body of the NGOs, was born and has been developed as actor against the authoritarian State according to the theory of Gramsci (Ogura 1999).

6 Conclusions: The Power of NGOs

The NGOs are not powerful in a traditional sense of the word, so they must use the power of their information, ideas and strategies to change contexts and value systems in the national and international societies so that the governments have to alter their policies. Keck & Sikkink 1998, 16.

Applying the arguments of Keck and Sikkink (1998: 16-25) to the Chiapas case, we can enumerate the following four strategies when the NGOs involved in the Chiapas conflict exercise their power:

1) Information politics
The NGOs offer different facts and testimonies from the official information so that the citizens may pay attention to their opinions and act in their favor to pressure the government. Besides, in order to strengthen the power of information, they try to make common use of the dispersed information and create a network from it. In the case of the Chipas conflict, the activities of GX and CIEPAC are representative examples as can be seen in the web site of the CIEPAC; there is plenty of information about the low intensity war in Chiapas.

CIEPAC Web Site

![CIEPAC Web Site](http://www.ciepac.org/ 28/03/02)

2) Symbolic politics
Symbols become not only tools to explain and persuade the people for action, but catalysts for the growth of networks. The biggest symbol in the Chiapas conflict is ski-masked
Subcomandante Marcos on horseback with his Guevara-like pipe, and his posters and goods are sold at the supporters’ shops. With both his image and the one the EZLN portrays, he was able to draw audiences totaling more than a hundred thousand people to the Zócalo plaza in Mexico City in March, 2001.

Subcomandante Marcos

Photo by Yuji Shinoda

EZLN in Zócalo, Mexico City
3) Leverage politics

Leverage means more powerful institutions than the NGOs and by leveraging these institutions, weak NGOs can gain influence far beyond their ability to influence the government policies. In the Chiapas conflict, NGOs leveraged Amnesty International and the U.N.

4) Accountability politics

Taking up the principles and positions officially announced by the government, NGOs expose and demand to redress the gap between their words and practice. A typical example of this accountability politics in this case is the fact that the indigenous peoples’ rights, especially self-determination and cultural rights are not fulfilled in Mexico as ratifying the ILO convention 169 in 1989. Mexico was the second country in the world to sign the convention. NGOs demand to fulfill the rights stipulated under this convention and the San Andrés Accords on indigenous peoples’ rights in Mexico, agreed by the Mexican federal government and the EZLN.

In the era of globalization, transnational civil advocacy networks represented mainly by the NGOs play a very important role in international and national politics. Some predict “the Retreat of the State” (Strange 1998) as the globalization makes loose its framework. But I believe that in this century, states remain as principal players in international and national politics although, as we have seen in this paper, it is also true that civil organizations already have the power to demand the transformation of the State, criticizing the policies of the State that behave only in the traditional way of power politics and offering alternatives from the viewpoint of not state, but peoples’ interests.
References


CIEPAC Web Site, http://www.ciepac.org/


