The advocacy politics of NGOs: shaping society to respond to climate change

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ADAM GROVES, JUL 13 2010

In his seminal article *The Tragedy of the Commons*, Garret Hardin (1968) described a dilemma whereby individuals, acting independently and in rational pursuit of their own self-interest, will ultimately destroy shared, limited resources – even when it is accepted that this is not in *anyone's* long-term interests. Addressing the case of pollution, Hardin wrote: 'The rational man finds that his share of the cost of the wastes he discharges into the commons is less than the cost of purifying his wastes before releasing them'. There is 'no technical solution' to this problem, he argued, and no realistic possibility of an 'appeal to conscience' working without a fundamental 'change in human values or ideas of morality' (pp. 1245-1246).

Today, climate campaigners see the 'Tragedy of the Commons' unfolding before their eyes. Each year, humanity releases more than thirty billion metric tonnes of carbon dioxide alone into the atmosphere – roughly a thousand tonnes per second. According to the 2007 Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report, greenhouse gasses such as CO2 will cause a global temperature increase of between 1.1C and 6.4C within the next century. More recent research suggests a possible rise of around 5C in this time period (Sokolov et. al 2009; Poulson, 2009). What would this mean?

'Global average temperatures are now hotter than for 50m years. The Arctic region sees temperatures rise much higher than average – up to 20C – meaning the entire Arctic is now ice-free all year round. Most of the topics *(sic)*, sub-tropics and even lower mid-latitudes are too hot to be inhabitable. Sea level rise is now sufficiently rapid that coastal cities across the world are largely abandoned' (Lynas, 2009).

The Maldives has already begun plans to move its three hundred thousand residents to a new home, with Sri Lanka, India and Australia mooted as possible locations. Meanwhile, the International Organization for Migration predicts that more than two hundred million 'climate refugees' will be on the move in the next forty years (IOM, 2009). The modelling of a 'plausible worst case scenario' foresees the collapse of critical ecosystems within fifty years (Gray, 2009). Yet, despite an almost complete scientific consensus about the reality, causation and seriousness of climate change, national governments, corporations and individuals continue to emit greenhouse gasses at a potentially catastrophic rate.

Major Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), such as Oxfam, Greenpeace and the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) have, in recent years, begun to campaign for action which would minimise the human and environmental impacts of climate change. These campaigns have generally taken one of two dominant approaches:

The first seeks to engage governments and corporations through lobbying. In the case of governments, this has seen NGOs campaigning for policy proposals which would mitigate the impact of climate change and facilitate adaptation to its already inevitable consequences. However, the approach has been vulnerable to the critique levelled by Shellenger and Nordhaus (2003: 25) that its 'technical policy orientation has created a kind of myopia: everyone's looking for short-term policy pay-off'. In other words, the constraints posed by weak political leadership and a lack of electoral demand, mean that the policy programmes being pursued are, according to the science, quite simply inadequate. Government decrees, it seems, will not be the source of change so much as a reflection of it.

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Meanwhile, in an effort to win around corporations, NGOs have been highlighting the 'business case' for sustainable development. Whilst there are certainly many examples where the convergence between commercial interests and the environmental imperative can be found, there are also many examples where the two concepts sit uncomfortably together. This strategy therefore does little to encourage corporations to take meaningful action in scenarios where contemporary economic orthodoxy would be undermined.

A recent WWF report (2009: 3) concluded that '…a focus on engagement with organisations -whether government or private sector – can point to clear successes in driving through new environmental policies and regulations, and changes in business practice. But such interventions are proving woefully inadequate'.

The second approach which NGOs have taken in their climate campaigns has focussed on changing behaviours. Projects such as Oxfam UK's 'Good Ideas Unltd' have attempted to motivate large numbers of people to embrace 'green lifestyles'. These are often premised on the idea that simple changes in behaviour can have a real impact – or as Oxfam UK (2009) puts it, 'Good ideas for a better life for you that mean a better life for people living in poverty'. Again, however, such campaigns have come in for criticism. Cambridge physicist David MacKay (2008: 114) writes that we should not be 'distracted by the myth that "every little helps." If everyone does a little, we'll achieve only a little. We must do a lot.' Furthermore, the comforting notion that that such campaigns might have an impact through a positive 'spillover process' (i.e. by increasing the likelihood of individuals adopting other more significant pro-environmental behaviours), does not stand up to scrutiny. A recent review of the literature by WWF (2009a: 6-7) concluded that that there is no evidence that positive spillover occurs 'with the dependability that would be necessary to responsibly advocate [its] use as a major plank in engaging environmental problems (such as climate change)…'

Fifty years ago, Hardin concluded that the only escape from the Tragedy of the Commons would be for humanity to relinquish certain freedoms through the 'recognition of necessity'. Today, there is little sign that we are anywhere close to accepting this prognosis despite increasingly stark and urgent warnings of the potential for climate chaos. For their part, NGO campaigns have had little or no success in bringing about the regulations or self-imposed behaviour changes which would be required to halt climate change. It is against this backdrop that a number of high profile environmental campaigners have suggested that major NGOs should begin work on a third, more radical, approach – one which Hardin apparently dismissed out of hand: fundamentally shifting people's values; reshaping individuals and societies through 'identity campaigning' (WWF, 2009).

Identity campaigning rejects the conventional wisdom that environmental campaigns should appeal to existing self-interested values, asserting that such an approach risks 'undermining more fundamental attempts to address systemic environmental challenges' (ibid: 60). Instead, it focuses on strategic points of intervention, aiming not simply to 'deliver specific regulatory change that impacts directly upon a developmental or environmental problem (e.g. emissions regulations)', but engaging 'the underlying values and identities which constrain more ambitious public and political responses to these challenges' (Crompton, 2008). As one campaigner recently put it when discussing NGO strategy in the build-up to the UN Copenhagen Climate Conference: 'The interventions that we make have to shift the underlying assumptions of our culture' (Reinsborough, 2009).

What does this mean for the study of NGO advocacy politics?
If this shift towards 'identity campaigning' continues, it will raise some difficult questions for scholars of international politics. *How are NGOs working to shape societal values through their climate campaigns* ? The notion of 'identity campaigning' defies existing conceptions and analysis of NGO advocacy politics. It sidesteps the traditional focus on policy and moves beyond attempts to build issue-based social movements in favour of fundamentally seeking to affect people's world-view.

National and international NGOs are frantically mobilising as scientists warn of the devastating impacts of climate change.[1] But to what extent, are campaign communications already being designed to promote broader value constellations through engagement with human identity? Which organisations are innovating and implementing 'identity campaigning' and what are the wider implications for the practice and analysis of advocacy politics?

The argument that environmental campaigns should work to shape human identity was mainstreamed within NGO

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policy circles as a result of the 'Strategies for Change' programme of WWF-UK. Its publicly-available reports draw on psychological research to make the case for a values-based approach to campaigning. Yet whilst the fields of psychology and environmental philosophy are beginning to offer real insights as to how this approach might motivate effective long-term action on issues such as climate change (cf. WWF, 2009; Booth, 2006), other disciplines remain largely silent on the ability and potential of NGOs to actively shape societies' underlying values and identities.

Research within the field of International Relations is a case in point. Following decades of debate surrounding NGOs' relevance to the discipline, there has, in the past ten to fifteen years, been a broad acceptance of their role and a surge of academic literature examining their ability to influence states, corporations and international regimes. As part of this turn, NGOs' political advocacy strategies have been the subject of rigorous inquiry. For example, in their seminal study, *Activists Beyond Borders*, Keck and Sikkink (1998) explored how transnational advocacy networks deploy 'information politics' and 'cognitive frames' in order to reach decision-makers. Such research has been vital to highlight NGOs' political activism, but it has focussed almost exclusively on the tools available to conduct specific policy-based campaigns (also Price, 1998) – the very tools which climate activists are now identifying as not fit for purpose. The constructivist turn within IR theory has seen more encompassing explorations of NGOs' role in shaping international norm dynamics (cf. Finnemore and Sikkink, 1998), but as Checkel (1998: 332) notes, this literature tends to overlook their agency at the domestic level and therefore fails to engage with important issues regarding the transformation of societal identity. Those studies which have explored the societal impacts of NGO campaigns are often highly critical, focusing not on their capacity to transform, but on their function in maintaining and legitimising the status-quo (cf. Biccum, 2007).

Whilst the interdisciplinary debates within Social Movement theory provide a rich body of work for exploring the role of values in activism (cf. Snow and Benford, 1988; 1992), much existing research has focused on internal movement processes – the forming of collective identities or the creation of specific movement cultures – rather than the external cultural effects of movements (Williams, 1995). Leo d'Anjou and John Van Male (1998) went some way to addressing this tendency when they sought to understand how social movement organisations communicate with publics in a way that both challenges and corresponds with extant culture. Even so, their analysis is oriented towards the issue (or issues) around which the movements in question are seeking to mobilise, rather than focusing on the broader constellation of values triggered by their communications – and the potential implications of this messaging for longer-term efforts to overcome systemic challenges. There is evidence that Social Movement scholars increasingly recognise the importance of these wider belief structures and their potential to guide action however (cf. Gillan, 2008: 246).

Cutting across the fields of International Relations and Social Movement theory there are of course several studies which focus more broadly on cultural transformations in society. Too often though, they have neglected to interrogate the potential of NGOs to shape underlying values as part of their work. For example, in *Culture Moves*, Thomas Rochon (1998) investigates how certain values win societal acceptance. Yet despite an explicit focus on 'ideas and activism', the study views NGOs' contribution in terms of their political work – seeking 'authoritative sanctioning of new values' (pp. 31) – not their ability to steer the course of 'culture moves' through direct engagement with society.

Research on persuasive messaging within the Political Communications literature is already providing important insights for campaigns of all kinds – including those of political parties, corporate lobbyists and activists. Furthermore, the field is beginning to analyse issues relating to values and identity in more depth, including 'subjective realities of citizenship, their processes of sense making in concrete settings, and how these may impact on participation and the modes of (dis)engagement' (Dahlgren, 2004: 17). This body of work has much to offer in terms of understanding how NGO campaigning might actively steer societal identity. So far however, leading scholars have failed to investigate NGOs' capacity to shape values through their communications. Lance Bennet (2005: 213-214), for example, views the task of 'value change' as one which will be undertaken by new and different organisational forms – a 'second generation' of activism. This reading, which suggests that NGOs will be left to continue with the standard work of single-issue advocacy and policy reform, may not bear scrutiny in light of contemporary campaigning shifts in the UK.

Values are widely recognised as a critical factor for successful civil society activism. However, much existing

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research has largely been confined to analysing their role in policy-specific contexts and has overlooked the potential of NGOs to shape societal values more broadly through strategic and sustained approaches. Whilst it is accepted that NGOs can affect the way that people understand themselves and the world around them, scholars have yet tended to ignore this dimension of their work. Why? First, alterations in cultural life are difficult to gauge whereas the activities and effects of political lobbying tend to be relatively visible (Wapner, 2002: 38); second, the impact of NGO activities on society's underlying values may have seemed to lack political significance in the context of successful policy-based campaigns; finally, within the context of broader social movements, NGOs' role in shaping values may have seemed peripheral.

Major NGOs have already begun to explore the potential of 'identity campaigning', leaving academic analysis at risk of falling sorely behind innovations being implemented on the ground. It is time that scholars of international politics seriously investigated NGO efforts to nurture new social and political modes of expression within society through the shaping of people's underlying values and worldview. There will be significant 'real world' implications if NGOs are shown to be consciously affecting underlying societal identities; it opens the door for new forms of advocacy – and new types of advocacy networks. For the first time, we might see broad based coalitions of organisations deciding to operate beyond the constraints of policy- and issue-specific campaigns, to focus instead on dismantling the underlying barriers that limit fundamental structural change.

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Adam Groves co-founded e-IR

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The advocacy politics of NGOs: shaping society to respond to climate change
Written by Adam Groves

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The advocacy politics of NGOs: shaping society to respond to climate change
Written by Adam Groves

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[1] In addition to individual NGO campaigns, a number of national and global coalitions and networks have emerged to tackle the climate crisis. These include the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition (SCCC), Global Campaign for Climate Action (GCCA), the Climate Action Network (CAN), and the Catholic Coalition on Climate Change.

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