

Global Activism and Changing Identities: Interconnecting the Global and the Local. Examples from the Grand Council of the Crees and the Saami Council

Author(s): Kristina Maud Bergeron, McMaster University

When a group or an organization engages in global activism, it expresses and exercises its autonomy. By "going global" the group or organization contributes to the diffusion of an issue, to the diffusion of ideas about that issue, and to the development of connections between ideas and between other groups or organizations — that is, to globalization. Many Indigenous peoples engage in global activism in this sense through their political organizations.

An organization undertaking global activism will be changed by this political action because it forces the organization to position itself in relation to more and different factors than when it lobbies at a national or local level. The identity of the organization is modified by its contact with other actors, and by being present in discussions that take place, at least partly, at a global level.

By looking at the dynamics associated with global activism, we can learn how globalization is perceived by organizations looking for opportunities to engage in activism, and how autonomy is used by Indigenous peoples' political organizations to advance the concerns of the peoples they represent. In a globalizing world, the study of identities, and of collective identities in particular, has become more important than before to understanding how and why individuals create links between themselves now that geographical distances can be covered quickly or are made irrelevant by new communication technologies.

My research looks at two Indigenous peoples' political organizations: the Grand Council of the Crees (Eeyou Istchee) and the Saami Council. The James Bay Crees live in the Canadian province of Quebec. The Saami live in Norway, Sweden, Finland, and in the Kola Peninsula in Russia. Specifically, I am interested in changes in their organizational identities that can be linked with their global activism. Organizational identities, like all identities, change consciously and unconsciously. The identity of a representative organization is influenced by its leadership, its finance, its activities, its public image. Change is hard to predict and is difficult to observe when in constant contact with the organization. It is like aging; differences only appear after some time when we compare the person or organization observed with its previous, less recent image.

There are two "movements" interconnecting global activism and changes in identity: when the local is brought to the global, and when the global is brought to the local. To illustrate the first movement, from the local to the global, we can think about the representative of an Indigenous people speaking or submitting a statement about the marginalization or discrimination faced by her community at the United Nations, whether in an explicitly Indigenous space like the Working Group on Indigenous Populations or the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues, or in a general UN body such as the Commission on Human Rights. She submits to the world an issue that contributes to a discussion already underway at a global level. She adds a new case to a topic already considered of general

significance. It is a new example to show that a problem is really global. Indigenous peoples' organizations have often presented precise cases of discrimination, demonstrating the relevance of global discussions on human rights, and the particular dimensions of human rights violations Indigenous peoples face. Doing so, the organization (and the people it represents) is projected onto another stage, the global stage, and this modifies the way the organization presents itself to decision-makers in its own country and to other organizations. There is a change in what the organization is doing, in its identity, because new "Others" are looking at it, and new solidarities are created. The Grand Council of the Crees talked numerous times to global forums when it was fighting against the building of new dams on the Nottaway-Broadback-Rupert and the Great Whale rivers from 1989 to 1994. The Grand Council also created a coalition with environmental groups, many of them American, so that their position was supported and stronger. The Grand Council already had a resistance identity, and this campaign reinforced that element in the organization's identity.

Bringing the local to the global may also mean that a specific situation is presented and linked with other cases elsewhere in the world. New ideas and concepts are created or are applied to the examples mentioned. The media often becomes part of this process when it talks about the issue that the organization has unveiled and pushed on to a global plane, about the actions of the activist organization at a global level, and about the reactions both the issue and the organization generated locally and globally. A global public would often not be reached without the intervention of the media. The global public is formed of people predisposed to be touched by global activism, because they are attentive to world politics or to issues with a global dimension. And when a global public mobilizes, governments react.

It is often when we look at local circumstances that we realize the importance of globalization in everyday life. Global activism also incorporates the movement of bringing the discussions and progress made on the global scene back home to influence the local situation. This "movement" also has an impact on the identity of the organization doing it. An important way to bring the global to the local is to report regularly to the members of the group on the impact of the global activities carried out in their name and interest. In the context of Indigenous peoples' global activism, it is even more important given that the organizations doing the activism are often the official representatives of these peoples, delegated to speak in their name at global forums. For example, the Saami Council holds a conference every four years to inform its member organizations on its activities, and also about general trends that they observe and in which they often participate in the Indigenous peoples' world. The Grand Council of the Crees meets the communities it represents and asks them to endorse the activities undertaken at the global level.

Over time, the objectives of an organization change too. Obviously, this is not always related to the global activism of the group. But as some problems evolve or are solved, new issues are brought onto the global scene and others are refocused to better fit activism at a different level. In many cases, this can also change how an organization perceives its own role vis-à-vis the people it represents, and thus its own identity. It is a dialectical process, where the organizational identity continues to evolve as the organization engages in more and different types of global activism.

By being present on the global scene, organizations become more conscious of the other actors interacting on the same kind of issues. It is also possible to learn from each other, and to share experiences. These avenues give comparison points to an organization, and may well change the role it sees for itself in that debate.

Creating links with the outside world through global activism can change the perspectives persons,

and organizations, have of their own situation. Getting at the same time a global point of view on an issue as well as on local situations constitutive of this global problem certainly feed reflections and discussions. Having a chance to look at the reactions a situation has generated elsewhere, or to witness the responses of governments in a global forum help a group to find solutions or ways to engage in a dialogue with appropriate actors.

Global activism affects the world, and the vision peoples have of the world. Many Crees and Saami now think about themselves as Indigenous peoples, and as part of the world's Indigenous peoples "family." They see their particularities, but they also see what they share with other peoples from around the world because they are Indigenous too. This change in their understanding of self, of their identity, would not have existed without the global activism of Indigenous peoples' organizations.

There are many forces globalizing our world, global activism is just one of them. But it is one that uses the autonomy of individuals, groups, and organizations to reach out, to extend the local to the global, to take part in globalization, and to bring the global back home, although all the lines between these worlds become intertwined. The reason behind global activism is to change things to make a better world for the people for whom one is working, and this comes with changes in organizational identities, and sometimes also in Peoples' identities.