Complex Environments and Emergent Order in International Advocacy Efforts: The Case of an International Gun Control Coalition

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This paper is based on a comparative study of two advocacy gun control coalitions: the Coalition for Gun Control in Canada, and the International Action Network on Small Arms (IANSA). It proposes that complex systems theory provides a useful lens for examining the enactment of advocacy strategies in the global environment focusing on the need to respond to complex local environments (e.g. geographic, ideological, demographic, and sectoral) while also responding to the globalization of guns, driven in large part by large scale economic and political interests. In contrast to studies of political strategy based on rational actor theories, this paper proposes that political strategies are partially planned and partially emergent. In an environment characterized by great uncertainty and constant change, the advantage coalitions may be linked to the need to create capacity to respond dynamically to challenges by generating flexible, emergent organizing strategies in response to environmental uncertainty and complexity. Implications for the theory and practice of social action and the successful organization of advocacy coalitions are examined.

Recent approaches to examining political "issue management" have focused on integrating economic and political strategies drawing across disciplines (Baran, 1997, 1999, 2000; Marx, 1992; Shaffer et. all, 2000 and Shafer and Russon, 1998). Most of the work is founded on rational actor models (Windsor, 2002) even though there is an acknowledgement that "despite the existence of issue management models, some issues still produce unanticipated outcomes" (Rowley, 1996). While considerable attention has been focused on corporate government relations, less attention has been paid to the process of public mobilization (Kollman, 1998). Networks, partnerships, alliances and coalitions are now commonplace have been studied in the management, strategy and policy literature (Coulson, 1997; Chisholm, 1997; Kickert, 1997; Painter, 1997; Huxhaum and Vangen, 2000; Hewitt and Clayton, 1999; Obach, 1999; Jenkins-Smith and Sabatier, 1994 and Windsor, 2002). Most of these studies, however, highlight the incentives to collaborate in terms of economic models (Windsor, 2002).

This study suggests that complex systems theory may provide a robust framework for understanding social movements and successful collaborations that drive their success (Goldstein, 1999; Capra, 1996). Often collaborations are more complex and ambiguous than the literature or prescriptions would suggest (Huxham and Vangen, 2000). Complex system theory suggests that the system as a whole may and does exhibit properties different from those of its constituent elements (Stacey, 1993). We find this to be particularly relevant for an understanding of social advocacy networks and alliances. Given the bounds of rationality, outcomes of organizations are only partly a result of planned rational actions and partly emergent and self-organizing (Weick, 1995). This approach argues that for a system to be innovative, creative and changeable, it must be driven far from the stability of equilibrium in order to make use of disorder, irregularity, and difference as essential elements in the process (Stacey, 1995). Consequently, new strategic directions must be negotiated in real time and cannot be planned in advance, since strategic management planning tools and techniques are less applicable under conditions of great uncertainty. The recent paradigm of business strategy - "sense and respond" -
suggests that firms that are most agile flexible are able to adapt to change (Bradley and Nolan, 1998, Haeckel and Slywotzky, 1999). In this study, we suggest, the same applies for advocacy organizations.

This paper examines two case studies based on action research into the development of two gun control coalitions of diverse organizations which "muddled through" to substantial political success. It draws on archival material, media and government reports, and participant observation of the organizations from 1989-2003. The organizations are Canada's Coalition for Gun Control, and the International Action Network on Small Arms. Canada's Coalition for Gun Control: The Coalition for Gun Control developed into a collaborative effort involving 350 organizations from across the political spectrum and the country including well-established institutional advocacy groups such as the Canadian Bar Association, the Canadian Public Health Association, the Canadian Association of Chiefs of Police and the Church Council on Justice and Corrections, as well many small issue-oriented advocacy groups (Cukier, 1996). The International Action Network on Small Arms: IANSA was founded in 1998 was created to mobilize efforts internationally to counter the misuse and proliferation of firearms and small arms in conflict as well as crime. The organization consists of 350 groups in more than 60 countries. Characterized as a "network of networks" or a "campaign of campaigns" IANSA has attempted to apply many of the principles used by national coalitions at the international level.

The study examines critical events in the history of these gun control movements, including a series of key interventions with national and international policy development, the media, and the courts to explore the relationship between the coalition organizational structure and their respective environments. It considers the formation, composition, strategic positioning and operation of the Coalitions in response to the complex nature of their environments. In particular, it examines the nature of collaboration, participation and decision making within the Coalitions.

The paper suggests that critical to its success were: a) the alignment between the complexity of the organization and its environment; b) the flexibility created by marrying the agility of small issue-oriented advocacy groups with the legitimacy of large, well-established, conservative, institutionalized organizations (Pross, 1986); c) the multiple identities of the actors (both at the organizational and individual level); d) the importance of individual action and interpersonal networks. At the same time, the challenges of managing in these contexts are considerable. The paper suggests further direction for examining social movements and the tension between the need for diversity and coordination in the global context.

Finally, it examines how these unique networks leveraged their inherent diversity to enact strategies aimed at countering dominant forces of producer countries (USA, Russia and China) as well as counter-groups such as the American gun lobby. While such coalitions offer advantages, they also impose limitations. While diversity, for example, was demonstrated to provide strengths in terms of media, lobbying, community mobilization, and countering opponents, it also presented challenges in terms of coordination costs, conflicting identities and, at times, competition. Maintaining collaboration among individuals and groups with widely divergent agendas and ideological orientations presented huge challenges (Weick, 1979). Based on a critical examination of these Coalitions, this paper considers several implications for the
development and maintenance of collaboration among diverse organizational networks, and the challenges of balancing emergent versus planned strategy in response to uncertain and complex political environments.