CHAPTER 4

The Power of Partnerships

Introduction

When asked about the Argentine government’s relationship with CSOs, the president of a small foundation answered wryly, “If you don’t attend a meeting, they won’t miss you. They’re not going to call to see why you didn’t show up.” It does seem rather far-fetched to expect policy makers to “miss” a single organization absent from such a gathering. On the other hand, what occurs when groups join together? Are governing elites as likely to marginalize an entire network or coalition of CSOs as they are to ignore individual groups?

The advantages of cooperation seemed obvious to many civil societal actors: “Either we unite, or we unite,” an NGO member concluded. It was a matter of increasing “resources, efficiency, and pressure,” she explained; “Why make similar demands separately from one another?” Trying to effect change single-handedly struck her (and other advocates) as unproductive. The activists interviewed for this project often bore in mind past experiences with resource constraints and political marginalization while weighing the costs and benefits of alliance building. In this chapter, I provide support for the claim that successful interorganizational cooperation increases the likelihood of civil society involvement in policy. As discussed in Chapter 1, alliances can help individual groups overcome the obstacles that tend to limit their political influence in Latin America: few resources, limited visibility, and high fragmentation. Through cooperation, CSO members can pool and mobilize resources, solve coordination problems, achieve strength in numbers to back their collective demands, and present a united front vis-à-vis governing elites and other actors. The benefits of alliances are evident during the formulation, agenda-setting, and adoption phases of policy making. Efficacious partnerships therefore represent a second important pathway to participation. Moreover, certain characteristics enhance the effectiveness of alliances. These include ties to other alliances or political movements, a good
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division of labor and successful coordination, and a balance between internal diversity and cohesion (or agreement on basic goals and strategies). Given the difficulty of this balancing act, advocates often identify group differences as the most challenging aspect of alliance building.3

Comparative analysis uncovers some very different interorganizational dynamics and levels of cooperation: an effective coalition in Argentina’s FOI campaign; mixed success with alliance building (and considerable change over time) in the issue area of children’s rights in Argentina; an emergent but relatively efficacious network of child welfare advocates in Chile; and the absence of a strong partnership among Chilean environmentalists. I briefly summarize the organizational resources of the groups involved in each issue area. Specifically, I am interested in the potential for translating these resources into political gains through alliance building. I then outline the main features of the alliances that have emerged—their members, configurations, strengths, and weaknesses—and the forces conspiring against partnerships. More importantly, I examine the effects of alliance building on CSO involvement in policy making. Given that civil societal actors do not always manage to cooperate with one another, I go on to elaborate some of the challenges they face while endeavoring to create, maintain, and participate in partnerships.

A “Model” Freedom of Information Coalition?
The struggle for access to information legislation demonstrates the importance of alliances for policy involvement. The civil society coalition that favored reform was a principal means by which FOI proponents participated in policy debates, kept the issue on the formal agenda, and pressured leaders to endorse the law. The coalition was a crucial factor explaining civil society’s involvement during the adoption phase, the focus of the following paragraphs. Indeed, the coalitional strategy exemplifies many of the proposed benefits of forming alliances. Different NGOs making similar demands separately from one another seemed like a recipe for political marginalization. Instead, the strategy of joining forces created a critical mass and a common voice vis-à-vis the authorities. The CSOs coordinated activities skillfully, established a good division of labor based on their respective specialties, and pooled valuable resources. Additional characteristics strengthened the coalition’s effectiveness: participants were motivated by a concrete objective, diverse in terms of their missions, histories, and politics, and able to combine different publics into a wider constituency interested in transparency.4 Finally, other civil society networks and actors seeking political reform joined with the coalition and augmented its influence.