

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

Sometimes, in the world of social justice organizing, it can seem like there are actually two worlds. One is made up of theoreticians and scholars, while the other is made up of organizers on the ground.

Legal scholars Cesar Rodriguez-Garavito and Watson Senior Fellow Peter Evans challenge this distinction. Their most recent work, an anthology titled, *Transnational Advocacy Networks*, looks at how locally-based organizations are connecting on global scales, and how scholars are engaging in the daily work of social justice organizations. These types of connections, they believe, are key to confronting human rights problems around the world.

We started our conversation by looking more closely at that phrase, *transnational advocacy networks*.

PETER EVANS: I think that the middle word, the *advocacy* word, is perhaps the most important of the three words. Because what we're really talking about here is intentional collective action in support of organizations, movements, mobilization, and policy initiatives, all aimed at increasing opportunities for dignified, sustainable livelihood, and increasing opportunities for people's voices to be heard and the decisions that affect their lives. So that's the middle word.

And then the *transnational network* part is very important, but should not obscure the fact that these networks are always rooted in local organizations, communities, and movements. And so the local roots are essential to the transnational networks.

On the other hand, the transnational networks are very important in reinforcing these local organizations, communities, and movements. Because they build durable ties to other groups across national boundaries and regional divides.

CESAR RODRIGUEZ-GARAVITO: There's a lot that these organizations and actors do together. They share information. They support each other. Whenever, for example, one of them organizes a campaign, sometimes they become coalitions that run full-blown campaigns even for a long time.

So I'll give you one specific example. So Dejusticia organization that I lead, it was part of a coalition of Latin American NGOs that came together to defend the Inter-American Human Rights System. There's a commission of human rights and there's a court of human rights that

have been around for several decades now. They were coming under attack from several Latin American states, governments, that wanted to take away some of the powers of those institutions to protect human rights on the ground.

We mobilized-- there was a network of around six, seven organizations from around the Americas, and made a concerted effort at informing the public and sharing information among ourselves, to know what was going on in each other's countries, so that we could be more effective collectively in pushing back against those efforts by Latin American states to weaken the Inter-American system.

SARAH BALDWIN: So there's strength in numbers, in a way.

CESAR Yes.

RODRIGUEZ-

GARAVITO:

SARAH BALDWIN: And were you successful?

CESAR Yes. It was not only-- it's not just our credit. But it was part of a larger effort to defend Inter-
RODRIGUEZ- American System. And yes, that effort was largely successful. The commission based in DC
GARAVITO: and the court based in central state Costa Rica kept most of their powers, and continue to be key actors in the human rights scene in the Americas.

SARAH BALDWIN: Why is it important to codify practices, or at least to collect these insights about transnational advocacy networks? Are human rights in Venezuela the same as they are in the minds in Bhutan?

PETER EVANS: I think the answer to that is obviously no. And it's not just that people's definitions of human rights varies across different national contexts and different regional contexts. But also what the important aspects of human rights depends on the situation of different individuals within that society.

One of the essays in the book is by Daniela Ikawa, and she makes the point that the idea, or the important facets of human rights, for an able-bodied white male living in a semi-democratic society is very different from the facets of human rights that are most salient to an poor, Afro-descendant LGBT person living in a dictatorship.

And so, what facets of human rights are most salient and become the most prominent foci of

people's organization and energy depends on their individual situations.

I think that said, it's important to, at the same time, recognize that there is a universal quality to the idea of human rights. There is a universal sense of what it means to have a dignified, sustainable livelihood. And so while there is immense variation and specificity, there is also a shared core of concerns that unites people from these very different situations and perspectives.

CESAR

RODRIGUEZ-

GARAVITO:

Just to give an example from a different field, environmental activism against, say, climate justice networks, working today to try to get organizations and corporations and states to do more about climate change, to heed the warnings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change that clearly show that we need to decarbonise the economy in a matter of 12 years or so, or else we'll be in deep trouble.

Those networks have a common understanding of the problem climate change, of the urgency of the situation. But then, with that common framework, and even can work with common legal frameworks. Like the Paris Accord, coming out of the 2015 Conference of the Parties Climate Summit.

But then adopt those common understandings and those common concerns to the local circumstances, so that their message resonates with the cultural codes, with their historical trajectories, with the ways in which those topics are talked about in the public spheres of those countries there.

Sally Maria, an anthropologist at NYU, has called this process vernacularization. Meaning translating to the local level those global aspirations and frameworks and languages that make it possible for these networks to understand each other and find common causes.

SARAH BALDWIN: This is a north-south collaboration, or a south-north collaboration, right? Why is that important? Why should we care about that?

PETER EVANS:

Well, I think it's not only the collaboration that's important, but the fact that we conceptualize it as a south-north collaboration is also fundamental to our sort of way of proceeding and our way of thinking about these projects and these ideas. And the reason I would say that we like to emphasize the fact that it's a south-north collaboration is, first of all, of course, it's obvious that most of the people in the world live in the global south. That is, to live in countries that are, in general, poorer, and are, in general, geographically located in the southern hemisphere.

But even more important I think currently is the fact that the most interesting sort of innovative ideas, the most new kinds of mobilization, et cetera, are things that have been coming out of the south, out of these countries.

And so therefore, we want to reverse the sort of standard asymmetry, which is that rich countries in the north sort of have a first mover advantage with regard to defining things and organizing things. We want to reverse that, not just because people in the South are the most important kinds of constituencies for outcomes. But we also want to reverse it because if we don't reverse it, then the kinds of innovation, the kinds of possibilities that are emerging from a host of groups in the south will not be taken advantage of by the world as a whole, by the communities as a whole.

And I think I would say that Cesar and Dejusticia are perhaps one of the most salient examples of innovation, new ideas, and new initiatives coming from organizations that are based in the south.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's a great lead-in to my next question-- this book is reviewing 20 years of practice and theory. But it was-- the idea for it came about five years ago, if I've understood correctly. How did the two of you begin working together? You're a sociologist. Peter, you're an attorney and an activist. How did the two of you come together so fruitfully?

PETER EVANS: Well, I should point out that Cesar is also a sociologist.

SARAH BALDWIN: Which I-- sorry, yeah. That's true.

PETER EVANS: Who wears many, many hats.

SARAH BALDWIN: Having read his bio that many times, I should have known that.

CESAR That's all right.

**RODRIGUEZ-
GARAVITO:**

PETER EVANS: But I would also say that Cesar and I have been working on a multiplicity of projects for at least 20 years, I would say. And they have ranged from Hong Kong and Guangzhou Jo, to Bogota, to Berkeley, to Providence. And it's been an incredibly fruitful collaboration. Perhaps, in a way, it sort of exemplifies the potential fruitfulness of south-north collaborations. And it would

obviously take us probably till tomorrow to recount the various projects in which we've been involved together.

But it's also the case that Cesar has been institutionally connected with Brown for quite a while. I mean, I don't know whether your stay as Kogut professor was the was your first institutional connection with Brown. But in any case, he's played many roles here at Brown. So there's a Cesar-Brown connection, and a connection between the two of us. And of course, I have a long connection with Brown as well.

SARAH BALDWIN: Mm-hmm. And what are you most excited about with this book? I noticed that it's available for free. Who do you who do you hope will read this? And what will the takeaways be?

CESAR RODRIGUEZ-GARAVITO: Yeah, so that's another feature of our collaboration, that tries to bring together not only contributions from the south and the north, but also from academia and practice. Right? Action research is what we do. And the fact that Brown and the Watson Institute have been open to this type of collaboration, I think, speaks volumes about the intellectual project here. And the willingness and openness to contribute to and learn from the knowledge that practitioners like my colleagues and myself produce in doing human rights advocacy.

So in this volume, although we have mostly scholars, there's also a group of practitioners that contribute to some chapters. And that's been the case with the other collaborations. Because this is the third volume in a series that we've published over the course of five years. And we've always had a mix of practitioners and academics. Or people who, like myself, try to combine those two professional roles into some sort of hybrid action research type of work.

And this is something that is very much present in this structure and in the division of the chapters. And we hope that that will equally be represented in the audience that will read the book. One of the reasons why we make it available for free is because we want practitioners to have access to it. And we also want to have global south scholars and students to have access to these materials, regardless of their purchasing power.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's a great point about bridging theory and practice. And I wonder, can you describe a little bit what practitioners who are on the ground doing this kind of work, what they can gain from the academy, from a more scholarly approach or angle?

CESAR RODRIGUEZ- Yeah. Well, there's a mutual learning process. So I'll say something briefly about what the practitioners can gain from an engagement with academia, but also what academics can gain

GARAVITO: from engagement with a practice.

So one of the things that I see lacking in human rights practice-- I spend most of my time to an environmental human rights advocacy with my advocacy hat. And also on the research side, I try to mirror that with academic work on both the environment and human rights.

The missing piece for practitioners, oftentimes, is the opportunity to step back, and look at the big picture. Longer term, comparative. Because they're completely absorbed, for good reasons, in the daily grind of the urgency of the latest litigation, of the latest election cycle. And there's simply no time to reflect systematically, even about their own practice. So academia, by definition, has a comparative look at-- especially the type of academic work that gets done in places like Watson.

So for example, in this specific case, one of the recent engagements Dejusticia has been working on, pretty intensively, is supporting Venezuelan organizations that are going through very difficult times given the humanitarian crisis in Venezuela and the active persecution of some of those organizations by the Maduro government. And when we get together with our Venezuelan colleagues, they are completely immersed in the Venezuelan situation, to the point that they cannot see the parallels with what's going on, say, in Turkey, in India, recently, in Brazil.

Right? So providing some sort of comparative view is really an analytical contribution that academia can provide.

But then briefly, the relationship also works in the other direction. What can academics learn from practitioners? I think one thing that I would say very briefly is a sense of urgency. By connecting with activists, my hope-- and I've seen this happen-- academics gain a sense of urgency, of relevance, and of impact that's oftentimes lacking in scholarship.

PETER EVANS: We have a phrase that we use, which is that the book is a combination of engaged scholars and reflective activists. And so Cesar has just very nicely specified what those terms put together mean.

The one thing I would add is that I think it's important to remember that for engaged scholars, one of the benefits of engagement is that they are more likely to have an accurate view of what is actually happening in the world. It's quite easy, doing scholarship, to be at one remove from actual events, and to think that you've understood a relationship without really

understanding the dynamics that are creating that relationship.

And so, I think for scholars, the possibility of having their work and ideas evaluated, checked, basically sort of grounded by interaction with people who are more closely engaged with what's going on is a tremendous advantage, simply from the point of view of getting accurate scholarly work produced.

SARAH BALDWIN: And that sort of real feedback.

PETER EVANS: Yeah.

SARAH BALDWIN: Both of those directions are so interesting. And one was clearer to me than the other. And I hadn't thought about the perspective that scholarship gives, given the urgency of what the work is on the ground, sort of patterns a comparative dimension to that. I would not have thought of that. That's really interesting.

And speaking of the times we live in, with more and more seeming nationalist populist leaders on the rise, what do these leaders and their sort of proliferation mean for transnational advocacy networks? Are we up to the challenge?

PETER EVANS: That last question is certainly the question that we are all asking ourselves and asking each other. And clearly, it is a very serious challenge, because these reactionary, nationalist, populist regimes are vicious. They are quite astute, in terms of their use of political frames. And they have very deleterious consequences for people's rights and for peoples sustainable livelihood.

And I think we could go further, and say that for these regimes, transnational advocacy networks have become a principal target. Everywhere from Poland to India, and probably soon, Brazil, leaders have focused on a essentially witch hunt kind of attack on transnational advocacy networks.

And that is, in some ways, of course, a compliment. They feel that those networks are somehow threatening their agendas. I mean, it's nice to be seen as a threat by those people in some ways.

But I think our conclusion in the book is that these networks are more robust and more resilient than their attackers may believe. And that they have been organizing for a long time. They have very complex and sophisticated relationships among each other. And so I would

say we are cautiously optimistic regarding the ability of transnational advocacy networks to be resilient in the face of these attacks.

**CESAR
RODRIGUEZ-
GARAVITO:**

I am also cautiously optimistic. And the optimism part comes from-- partly from having worked with a transnational advocacy network for a long time, and with engaged scholars who know that this is a long-term endeavor. None of these concepts is an easy cause, right? Like Paul Farmer, the public health scholar at Harvard said once that if I had wanted to work on easy causes, I would have done cosmetic surgery instead of trying to provide public health in Haiti. Right?

But also because-- Albert Hirschman, the well-known political scientist once said that just like in physics, activist energy doesn't get destroyed, but gets transformed. Right? So all the trust, all the infrastructure, all the ideas that have been accumulated by decades of work by activists from around the world working together, are the capital that now they have to face up to the new challenges of the rising nationalist, populist regimes.

They know, as Peter said, that these networks can be very effective, to the extent-- to point out, one of the first measures that these authoritarian leaders take, is trying to cut off financial flows of philanthropic money coming into the country that will go to support some of these human rights organizations. That's happened in India, happened in Russia. Let's hope that it doesn't happen in Brazil, but I would not be surprised if Bolsonaro tried to do exactly the same thing.

Because they know that it is through these alliances of like-minded people working on human rights, environmental, and other types of causes that they can be somehow tamed in their authoritarian instincts.

And also, doing some introspection and reflexive constructive criticism of what transnational advocacy networks have done and have failed to do, I think there's a moment of opportunity for transnational advocacy networks to do some housekeeping they should have done a long time ago. For instance, some [? DINs ?] continue to be too northern-centric. Some organizations in the global north continue to be too dominant. And so now, everyone is feeling the pressure. And one of the ways in which I would hope that pressure would get translated into imagination would be by working along the lines of a more horizontal, collaborative model of advocacy.

SARAH BALDWIN: I'm going to end on that note of cautious optimism. I'll take cautious optimism right now any

day.

Thank you both so much for coming in and talking with us. I could just keep you here for another two hours. But I wish you all the best with this work and with the volume. I hope it's well received. I'm sure it will be. And with your conference as well. Thanks a lot.

PETER EVANS: Thank you very much, Sarah, for giving us this opportunity to talk about what we've been up to.

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards, Jon Maza, and Alex La Ferrier. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to Brown.Watson.edu. Thanks for listening. And tune in next week for another episode of *Trending Globally*.