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# Lessons for the Movement

## A Short Structural History of the Boston Global Action Network

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*In the year following the people's victory in the streets of Seattle, activist organizations all over the world endeavored to sustain the fire of resistance to corporate globalization by forming networks, building upon the successful coalition of labor, environmental, human rights, religious, community, and direct action groups that successfully stopped the WTO.*

*In Boston, over 40 organizations would come to constitute the Boston Global Action Network to support that goal and continue the movement for global justice. This is the abbreviated account of its story from inception on a cold December day to Winter 2001.*

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**T**he Boston Global Action Network appeared on the Boston scene with a Seattle solidarity protest on December 1, 1999. In the next five months, BGAN helped build a local movement against corporate globalization with four major local protests and two national demonstrations.

BGAN was originally envisioned to operate on a network model with no institutional center or membership. BGAN's founders assumed that the initiative would shift to local hands subsequent to Seattle. Although Seattle jump-started a mass movement, the convenors of the Boston coalition felt that without effective national coordination, local global action networks would have to build it city by city and area by area.

To accomplish this and other tasks, BGAN's first coordinating committee adopted the following principles and priorities:

- ◆ to pull together existing groups to support each others' actions,
- ◆ to gradually establish an ongoing "Seattle coalition" in Boston by building trust among labor, environmental, student, and other organizations,
- ◆ to avoid the political bickering that had isolated and narrowed many left-oriented coalitions in the past by:
  - not creating a new organization with its own individual members;
  - not having an elaborate mission statement as a potential ideological flashpoint; and
  - not having BGAN's own campaigns, but organizing around the actions of member groups.

### The First Few Months

In the first few months of 2000, this model was attempted with positive results. In February, the Rainforest Action Network organized a protest against oil drilling on indigenous land in Colombia, targeting Fidelity Investments. Other groups in BGAN turned out their members and helped make it a major protest against corporate globalization.

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The next month, Grassroots International and BGAN sponsored a teach-in with major global speakers, and the biotechnology industry held a national convention in Boston. Food safety and environmental groups organized a counter-conference and theatrical street protests called “Biodevastation 2000,” while BGAN helped turn out more people, providing logistical support, and training street marshals.

Through these events, BGAN carried out its original mission to unite a fractious activist movement. Labor activists came to the environmental events and environmentalists returned the favor months later when General Electric unions faced an uphill contract fight in June.

Meanwhile, BGAN made some headway in involving labor unions, immigrant communities, environmental groups, and others in a steady working relationship. A part-time staff member was initially shared with Rainforest Action Network and subsequently with Jobs with Justice, while strong institutional direction and material support remained rooted in United for a Fair Economy and Jobs with Justice.

A transformation came unexpectedly with mobilization around the April 16 IMF/World Bank protests in Washington DC. BGAN had selected this ‘East Coast Seattle’ as one of its key campaigns of the spring. To organize and mobilize for the protest, an A16 working group was constituted, and it brought over 300 activists to DC.

The success of the A16 working group started a major shift in the initial organizing model of BGAN. The A16 working group drew new activists into its fold. Many identified with BGAN and not any member group as anticipated by the BGAN model. The working group itself survived the end of its mission, metamorphosing into BankBusters, a new member group of BGAN.

## Young Activists Take the Helm

In the following months, BGAN emerged as quite a different kind of organization led by activists in their 20s and 30s who sought out BGAN’s role as a key nodal point in the global justice movement. Their summer focus was the demonstration against the Republican national convention in Philadelphia. Although few of BGAN’s member groups voiced strong support for this national protest, individual activists stepped in and took the initiative, forming task forces to carry on the work.

BGAN’s founders had not expected the highly decentralized globalization movement to keep coming up with national demonstrations. The movement generated these as well as more compelling imperatives such as the need to connect with people of color. This goal shifted BGAN’s focus away from its existing network of member groups and towards community-based organizations not already in the network. Some efforts to connect with communities of color, such as the September 25 immigrant-led forum on structural adjustment, were spectacularly successful initially, though difficult to sustain over the long haul. Others like the Africa AIDS Project formed quietly at first, but exploded with activity in later months. In the case of the Africa AIDS Project, the group convened as an informal discussion forum, yet would manage to stage two major protests by the end of the year.

Meanwhile, another program that began as a way to network interns of BGAN member groups, also broadened its reach to topics not addressed by the existing task forces. The Activist Summer program that was established in May (later Activist Fall, and Activist Winter) originally trained new organizers, although by fall it was hosting workshops on such issues as the relationship between animal and human

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liberation and the union organizing practice of “salting”. By December, organizers were tentatively planning a series of workshops on Boston’s racial history for the following spring.

Through these various task forces and working groups, both unaffiliated and affiliated activists of member groups worked together, drawing in more interested individuals. Some of them volunteered enormous amounts of time to launch the BGAN web site, coordinate existing resources, and help organize the New England Global Action Network.

Moreover, some of these same activists responded to BGAN’s structural weakness with proposals to strengthen the network and to restore its network hubs — the steering and coordinating committees that were waning in energy and participation. In fact, the evaluation process was given a boost in late August with a segment of the R2K Task Force attempting to address longstanding issues it had faced in its organizing (other segments joined local affinity groups in ongoing legal defense work for arrested activists). In November, after several assessment meetings, an enlarged steering committee was constituted and a new part-time coordinator selected and assigned the task of putting BGAN’s house in order.

## **One Year and Counting**

By BGAN’s first anniversary this January, the coalition that started as a network had become a hybrid network/organization. As an organization, it became driven by committed individuals who identified with the anti-globalization movement, but not with any particular member group of the network. Many of these activists became politically involved through the mobilizations of 2000. Witnessing the fraying of the network for want of member group participation, interest, and resources, many of the activists took responsibility for creating and sustaining the broad-based movement. Recognizing that even a network needs organizers, the adjustments to the network model were found necessary to ensure both BGAN’s responsiveness to member organizations and its vital role in helping shepherd new movements and groups for the cause of global justice.

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