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Globalization and Civil Society: NGO Influence in International Decision-Making

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Preface

Since the 1980s, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) have emerged as an important force on the world stage working to democratize decision-making processes, protect human rights and provide essential services to the most needy. Underpinning this expanded role in global governance has been a certain disillusionment with the role of the state in facilitating sustainable human development and the belief that more flexible, motivated and decentralized structures have the required skills and responsibility to undertake this role.

In recent years, the arena of NGO action has expanded rapidly from local and national settings to the international level. The institutional transformations that are occurring in the context of globalization have seen international actors — such as United Nations agencies, regional organizations, finance and trade institutions and transnational corporations — as well as inter-governmental “summits” assume an increasingly prominent role in global governance. NGOs have been late-comers to this evolving system of global governance but are now finding ways to influence the international decision-making process associated with development issues.

UNRISD work on the institutional and social effects of globalization has highlighted the concern that certain international economic, finance and trade organizations are enjoying greater freedom and power, but often without any commensurate increase in social responsibility. There are high hopes that the role of NGOs on the world stage will act to correct this potentially dangerous imbalance. But are NGOs sufficiently effective to perform this role? Have they been able to penetrate the dominant fora of international decision-making? And can they retain the cohesion and moral authority needed to influence the process of global governance?

These are some of the questions addressed in this paper by Riva Krut. Basing her inquiry on a rich collection of secondary sources and a survey of 500 NGOs, she examines the achievements, tensions and limits of NGO action in global governance.

Following an introduction that identifies some of the concerns that globalization poses for democracy and the potentially constructive role that civil society organizations might play in global governance, the paper consists of three main sections. The first considers the issue of NGO representation and participation: who are they, what do they stand for, and how representative are they? The second section looks at the varying degrees of access which NGOs enjoy to different international decision-making institutions. The third assesses the impact of NGOs in certain areas of international decision-making and the various strategies adopted to exert influence and pressure.

The author concludes with a dual warning. First, NGO access to global institutions of power has indeed improved — but it remains highly uneven, and in relation to certain key institutions that have tremendous power to affect our lives the door still remains firmly shut. Second, the ability of global civil society to act in a cohesive fashion may be coming under greater strain as the NGO “community” becomes increasingly differentiated and as tensions increase between Northern and Southern NGOs.

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April 1997

Dharam Ghai
Director

Abbreviations and Acronyms

BAPEDAL	The Indonesian Environmental Management Agency
CSD	Commission on Sustainable Development
CSO	civil society organization
CUTS	Consumer Unity and Trust Society (India)
DAC	Development Assistance Committee (OECD)
DPI	Department of Public Information(United Nations)
ECOSOC	Economic and Social Council
ELCI	Environmental Liaison Centre International(Nairobi)
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GATT	General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade
GEF	Global Environment Facility
IATP	Institute of Agriculture and Trade Policy
IBFAN	International Baby Foods Action Network
ICEL	Indonesian Center for Environmental Law
IDB	Inter-American Development Bank
IMF	International Monetary Fund
INGOF	International NGO Forum
ISGN	International South Group Network
ISO	International Organization for Standardization
MAI	Multilateral Agreement on Investment
NGLS	United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service
NGO	non-governmental organization
OECD	Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development
PAN	Pesticide Action Network
PPT	Permanent People's Tribunal
RAFI	Rural Advancement Foundation International
RIOD	Réseau international d'ONG sur la Désertification
TNC	transnational corporation
TWN	Third World Network
UK	United Kingdom
UN	United Nations
UNCED	United Nations Conference on Environment and Development
UNCTAD	United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
UNRISD	United Nations Research Institute for Social Development
US	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WAHLI	Indonesian Environmental Forum
WEDO	Women's Environment and Development Organization
WHO	World Health Organization
WSSD	World Summit for Social Development
WTO	World Trade Organization
WWW	World Wide Web

1. Introduction

*The Fate of Democracy in an Age of Globalization*¹

The late twentieth century has been accompanied by more and faster change than ever before. Military dictatorships have been overthrown in Latin America, communism has collapsed in Eastern Europe, the period of apartheid has closed in South Africa. At the same time as there has been a growth in liberal democratic régimes, outbreaks of ethnic violence have increased — 52 major conflicts were identified in 42 countries in 1993 alone. Even as medical science has reached new heights and the average age of Westerners increases steadily, nearly a third of the global population lives in hunger, malnutrition retards the physical or mental development of one child in three in the developing world, and six million children under the age of five died in 1992 from pneumonia or diarrhoea.²

Economically, the picture remains unsettled and inequity between rich and poor increases. Of the US\$ 23 trillion global GDP in 1993, US\$ 18 trillion is in the industrial countries, and US\$ 5 trillion in the developing countries, which are home to 80 per cent of the world's population. The assets of the richest 358 people in the world exceed the combined annual incomes of countries with 45 per cent of the world population. In the last 30 years, the ratio of shares of global income between the richest 20 per cent and poorest 20 per cent of people has doubled — from 30:1 to 61:1.³ Developing country debt has multiplied, and even major Western countries now find large proportions of their national debt held by foreign investors.

The global economy has been integrated by a massive increase in international economic activity, particularly in the last 15 years by the concentration of world capital among transnational corporations (TNCs). At the same time the establishment of the World Trade Organization (WTO) marks unprecedented power in a new global institution while the authority of the United Nations as an agent of global governance is diminished and its coffers are bare.

In this context, there is a view that globalization has not been accompanied by democracy but quite the opposite: globalization has put democracy at stake. In this view, the crucial role of civil society today is to advocate democracy against the rising anti-democratic tendencies of global capital concentration and a new international economic institution with a singular commitment to “free trade” as the primary basis for international economic relations.

Further, this view holds that it is the role of civil society to democratize global governance by harnessing the advantages that can come from globalization — such as new communications — while resisting its drawbacks, most specifically the centralization of economic power in the hands of TNCs and the international economic institutions — the WTO, IMF, and the World

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