

Acting Globally: Transnational NGOs and Political Networks

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Globalization has become a buzzword for a variety of developments, including growth of a world economy, expansion of international political institutions, advances in transportation and communication technologies, global environmental impacts, and increasingly shared cultural interests and values. What strategic implications does this have for activists? Responses have tended in two opposite directions -- localism or globalism -- not necessarily mutually exclusive, but with very different emphases for practical work.

The first response, most familiar to U.S. activists, is exemplified by the work of Jerry Mander and the International Forum on Globalization -- which highlights economic activity, especially the role of transnational corporations in a global capitalist economy. This perspective sees nation states fading in power, and political institutions as inevitably subordinate to corporate influence. Activists denounce and oppose free trade treaties -- NAFTA, GATT, WTO, MAI -- and unrestricted flows of capital. For a positive program, Mander promotes what I would call "prefigurative localism," a range of local projects and perspectives including bioregional environmental restoration, community currencies, and ecologically sensitive small businesses -- which advocates see as visionary or prefigurative of a sustainable society. "Think globally, act locally" is an obvious slogan.

The second response, which I think deserves more attention and analysis, is what I would call "networked globalism," the work of citizen activists through transnational non-governmental organizations (NGOs) -- including social movement organizations (SMOs) -- on a regional or world scale. Focused less on economic activity and more on human rights, peace, environmental protection, and sustainable development, transnational NGO activists view political institutions as capable of regulating the activity of corporations, and civil society as capable of limiting the excesses of states. This perspective combines practical action on specific campaigns with prefigurative visions of peaceful conflict resolution, universal human rights protection, and environmental preservation on a world scale.

A glance at the history of transnational NGOs shows that global networks have been around for a long time. The oldest human rights organization still active is the Anti-Slavery Society, founded in 1839. Woman suffrage and temperance advocates formed international organizations and traveled throughout Europe and the English-speaking world in the decades between 1880 and 1910. Three venerable networks of peace advocates -- with members and organizations in a number of countries -- emerged in the second decade of the 20th century, in response to the First World War. These include the International Fellowship of Reconciliation (1914), Women's International League for Peace and Freedom (1915), and War Resisters International (1921). Transnational NGOs developed in tandem with the growth of transnational political structures, most prominently the League of Nations in the 1920s and 30s and the United Nations since 1945. After World War II the World Federation of United Nations Associations and the World Federalist Movement emerged to promote institutions of global governance.

UN related agencies, treaties and conferences constitute several arenas of activity for transnational NGOs. The 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in December 1998 serves to remind us of the importance of the key International Covenants adopted in 1966 on Civil and Political Rights and on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. Other crucial conventions prohibit genocide (1966), racial discrimination (1966), and torture (1984). Recently human rights activists have emphasized the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) and the Convention on the Rights of the Child, both passed in 1979. Amnesty International's global network has made publicizing these human rights agreements a central focus of its current work. Oxfam International, a network of 11 organizations in the developed world, approaches food and development as issues of human rights. As labor rights become an important focus of trade side-agreements and child labor issues, the role of the UN-related International Labor Organization deserves more attention from activists.

During the decade of the 1990s, the UN world conferences and summits provided significant new global forums for citizens and NGOs. Particularly notable were the conferences on children (New York, 1990), environment and development (Rio, 1992), human rights (Vienna, 1993), population and development (Cairo, 1994), social development (Copenhagen, 1995), women (Beijing, 1995), human settlements (Istanbul, 1996), and food (Rome, 1996). Less visible from the U.S. are the biennial Commonwealth Heads of Government Meetings (CHOGMs), the voluntary association of 53 countries historically part of the British Empire. The related Commonwealth Foundation supports the work of NGO networks, which conducted important campaigns for democracy in South Africa and the restoration of constitutional government in Nigeria. The Third Commonwealth NGO Forum, on strengthening the role of citizen action and civil society, was held in South Africa in 1999.

Environmental politics has emerged on a global scale over the last 40 years, dating from the formation of the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN) in 1948, a mixed association of government agencies and non-governmental conservation organizations. The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the first transnational environmental NGO, was organized in 1961. IUCN and WWF each play roles in enforcing the 1973 Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species (CITES). The UN Environmental Programme has facilitated numerous international agreements on oceanic and atmospheric protection. In the 1970s Greenpeace International and Friends of the Earth International emerged as important participants in global debates on environmental issues. On a regional level, environmentalists have monitored and participated in bilateral agreements, like the Border Environment Cooperation Commission, established by the U.S. and Mexico, which has been well covered by *The Workbook*. Activists continue pragmatic explorations of what can be accomplished within such structures, which may also provide lessons for bilateral labor activity under trade agreements.

Political networks, and their member parties at the national level, are often important allies, opponents, or objects of lobbying pressure by transnational NGOs. Four major

networks of political parties cross the spectrum from left to right. The Socialist International (SI), composed of labor, socialist, and social democratic parties, has its roots in the International Workingmen's Association (1864-76), and the Second International (1889-1914), which disintegrated under conflicts of the First World War. Reconstituted after World War II in 1951, the SI has 125 member organizations from 105 countries. As with the other political networks, the SI is strongest in Western Europe (member parties now govern 11 of the 15 countries of the European Union, and are governing coalition partners in another 3). Over the last 20 years the SI has gained strength in Latin America, and over the past 10 years in Eastern Europe.

The Liberal International (LI), founded in 1947, has member parties and observers from 69 countries. The Christian Democrat International (CDI), Roman Catholic in inspiration and also founded in 1947, now has 67 member parties. Generally conservative in Europe, CDI parties are more progressive in Latin America where influences of social justice theology are evident.

The conservative International Democratic Union (IDU), founded in 1983 at a conference hosted by British prime minister Margaret Thatcher, has 70 member parties from 56 countries. Greens have a coordinating body for the European Parliament, the European Federation of Green Parties, and a developing network of Global Greens. Responding to various scandals and crises in European Christian Democratic parties, the network has changed its name to Centrist Democrat International.

These political networks remain most visible in Europe, where they have coordinated campaigns along ideological lines for the election of representatives to the European Parliament. Many transnational NGOs with activist agendas -- including Greenpeace International, Friends of the Earth International, and Amnesty International -- now maintain offices in Brussels to lobby the administrative agencies of the European Union. In the U. S., connections to these networks are weak, but do exist. The Republican party is affiliated with the IDU; the Democratic party is associated with the LI. Individual progressive Democrats maintain some contact with the SI both independently and through its two U.S. affiliates, Democratic Socialists of America and Social Democrats USA.

The broader significance of transnational NGO activity is the emergence of a global civil society, able to engage in what Paul Wapner calls "world civic politics." How can the average activist begin to relate to global networks? Start with organizations you now support which have transnational connections. For a next step, get a copy of the annual *Housmans World Peace Directory*, which lists peace, environmental and human rights organizations in 150 countries. When you have the opportunity for international travel -- whether for vacation, business, or professional meetings -- connect with activists and organizations in your destination countries. Use the Internet to identify contacts through the Association for Progressive Communications (www.apc.org) and its member networks, or try the London-based One World (www.oneworld.org). Personal contacts constitute the foundations of global networks. We need to think globally and act on every available level from the local to the international.

Further Reading

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