Social Movements and the Globalisation of Environmental Governance[1]

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1 Introduction

As we approach the millennium we are told that our era is one of irreversible globalisation. Orthodoxy claims that global environmental issues demand global policy solutions. Environmental governance is in part institutionalised in the form of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs), which are themselves a product of a broader process of global governance-building. As the Commission on Global Governance Report *Our Global Neighbourhood* tries to persuade us, 'the development of global governance is part of the evolution of human efforts to organise life on the planet, and that process will always be ongoing' (1995: xvi). Such parlance is not a reaction to, or outside of, processes of globalisation, but is embedded in them and reflects a wider agenda of global governance adopted by key institutions such as the World Bank, IMF or the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The image of top–down, externally imposed governance is being softened by claims that this process has become democratised through the inclusion of a global civil society that is nestled somewhere between the inter-state system and the global market. Documents such as *Our Global Neighbourhood* or *Agenda 21* advocate the extension of the stakeholders involved in global governance to all corners of the globe and sections of society. This notion of global civil society projected in these documents comprises social movements (ranging from grassroots movements to established NGOs) as well as business and industry, and is said to be providing a counterpart to the top–down approach.

This article focuses on the environmental aspect of global governance, particularly how it is played out at the WTO. As concern grows about the effects of increasing trade liberalisation on environment and society, the WTO has emerged as one of the key institutions of global governance. Social movements are challenging the WTO and top–down governance from the bottom–up through differing means and strategies. On the one hand, established NGOs, firmly located in global civil society and contending with business and industry, are engaging directly with the WTO to influence the policy

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[1] This article draws on a forthcoming paper (Williams and Ford 1999).

debate. On another level, less institutionalised social movements are rejecting outright the global agenda and calling for radical change from the margins. As things currently stand, the more institutionalised forms of NGO activity may actually serve to legitimise global governance through co-optation. If the democratisation of global governance really is the purpose behind the WTO's attempt to engage with civil society, taking seriously the charges of non-transparency and unaccountability, then global civil society would need to be more actively integrated into the process of reform and given an equal footing in order to ensure a process of democratisation *within* the institutions of global governance themselves.

2 Global Environmental Governance

Environmental degradation and governance are embedded in processes of globalisation and have become globalised. None of the institutions of global governance can ignore the calls for environmental protection and sustainable development and increasing efforts are made to find common ground between MEAs and the regulatory mechanisms of global governance. Global environmental issues, it is claimed, need global solutions. Vandana Shiva, for example, has argued that issues designated as global are actually those issues that most concern the 'dominant local', that is the North, seeking to escape local, national and international restraints on its industrial activities (1993: 150). Indeed, charges that the institutions of global governance are dominated by a handful of powerful rich countries are not new. This begs the question as to whether the inclusion of global civil society constitutes the democratisation of global governance, or whether this actually acts as a distraction from questions of democracy *within* the very institutions themselves.

As part of global environmental governance MEAs have become prominent and are seen as 'the building blocks of international environmental protection' (Hausman *et al.* 1995: 13). The focus is on global environmental problems, such as ozone

depletion, climate change, species extinction, loss of biodiversity or toxic waste. In particular a lot of energy has gone into analysing how these issues affect other regimes, for example trade, rather than the reverse.[2] At the heart of such agreements is the quest for sustainable development, which in its dominant incarnation remains faithful to calls for sustained economic growth and development.

Outside of, but not entirely separate from the official international institutions, business has carved itself a niche within global environmental governance by taking on board the discourse of sustainable development. The International Chamber of Commerce and the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD), for example, have been working hard to 'greenwash' the corporate image. The result has been *The Business Charter for Sustainable Development: Principles for Environment Management*. This states, for example:

> Economic growth provides the conditions in which protection of the environment can best be achieved, and environmental protection ... is necessary to achieve growth that is sustainable ... In turn, versatile, dynamic, responsive and profitable businesses are required as the *driving force* for sustainable *economic* development and for providing managerial, technical and financial resources to contribute to the resolution of environmental challenges. Market economies, characterised by entrepreneurial initiatives, are essential to achieve this ... making market forces work in this way to protect and improve the quality of the environment – with the help of standards such ISO 14000, and judicious use of economic instruments in a harmonious regulatory framework – is an on-going challenge that the world faces in entering the 21st century.[3]

At UNCED in 1992, business and industry succeeded in validating their place amongst the global environmental managers (Chatterjee and Finger 1994: 105ff). While claiming to have seen the green light, however, other evidence indicates that corporate actors have been using their financial resources

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[2] See, for example, Sands (ed.) (1993); Zaelke (*et al.*) (1993); Anderson and Blackhurst (eds) (1992). In much of this literature the emphasis is on how environmental issues *affect* trade, and not vice versa.

[3] This charter was adopted in 1990 and first published in 1991, ICC (1991). The ISO is the International Organisation for Standardisation, an NGO concerned with setting standards, mainly technical, voluntary, market-driven; ISO (1996). See Finger in this volume.

and power to undermine environmentalism through grassroots PR exercises, government lobbying and blatant bribery (Beder 1997: 23). While social movements have actively participated in getting the environment on the global agenda, it seems that the more powerful corporate actors within global civil society and the global institutions themselves are determining the direction of the agenda. The environmental discourse has been effectively hijacked and used to legitimise the practices of global elites (Paterson 1996: 401).

Global environmental problems have clearly been taken on board and have, in the process, led to transformations in orthodox discourse, as seen for example in the greening of global institutions or corporate actors. However, this top–down approach to environmental governance remains unsatisfactory to social movements, which continue to challenge the agenda as well as call for more transparency in, and access to, the structures of global governance. Institutions such as the WTO, in essence an intergovernmental forum not open to other actors, are heeding these calls and providing informal mechanisms for hearing the voices of social movements.[4] Several symposia have been held, one of which will be examined in more detail, and the WTO's General Council took two decisions in 1996 which facilitate the consultation of social movements (Williams 1998; Williams and Ford 1999). The *Guidelines for Arrangements on Relations with Non-Governmental Organisations* (WTO 1996a) acknowledged the value of NGOs in the public debate on trade and trade-related issues. More importantly, the *Procedures for the Circulation and De-Restriction of WTO Documents* (WTO 1996b) allow the public greater access, although important current documents will remain restricted (Van Dyke and Weiner 1996; Weiner and Van Dyke 1996). Thus, it seems the WTO is showing signs of acceding to demands for transparency and access.

3 The Challenge of Social Movements

This democratisation and opening-up of global environmental governance is taking place through global civil society, which is institutionalising a channel of dialogue between state actors and non-state actors. Civil society organisations are said to play a vital part in making the world trading system more transparent and accountable (Enders 1996; Esty 1997). The term 'global civil society', however, needs to be examined more closely. Paul Wapner describes global civil society as 'the domain that exists above the individual and below the state but also across state boundaries, where people voluntarily organise themselves to pursue various aims' (1997: 66). This liberal conception of global civil society is fostered by the inter-state system and the integrated world market. The space for 'bottom–up' activity is actually demarcated by the 'top–down' structure and is not designed to provide space for a radical challenge. The guidelines for global environmental governance laid down in *Agenda 21* could.be seen as a case in point. It called for the invigoration of democracy on the path towards sustainable development, appealing to governments and international institutions to create the mechanisms for incorporating social movements, business and industry into the procedures of policymaking and implementation, in effect creating new forms of participation at all levels (UN 1992). Clearly some of these calls are being met, as seen earlier with the attempts at the WTO to create channels of dialogue. Established NGOs amongst the social movements, business and industry are engaging in debate, which is one form of participation. However, it is the powerful corporate actors of global civil society that have had more influence in shaping the actual direction of global environmental governance. This democratisation of global environmental governance has created a pseudo political forum where NGOs become coopted, while real decision-making power remains within organisations which have not been democratised, such as the WTO, World Bank, the Global Environment Facility (GEF) or the BCSD and which are paying more attention to the business and industry voices (Chatterjee and Finger 1994:151ff).

The view that global civil society is a democratic sphere that is separate from the global market and the inter-state system becomes difficult to sustain. Social movements are situated in the same sphere as business and industry, competing for participation

in global institutions. The presence of corporate actors undermines the liberal notion of global civil society as separate from the global market. In the liberal descriptions of this sphere there is no analysis of power relations within civil society. There are clearly power differentiations between corporate actors and social movements. Further, amongst social movements themselves there are differentiations that cannot be ignored. They are not homogeneous, and are not immune to power relations of class, race or gender or between 'North', 'South', 'East' or 'West', and are further differentiated on the basis of ideologies and strategies.

The article will now turn to an illustration of two cases of social movement attempts to influence the agenda. While the first is firmly located within the liberal conception of global civil society, the space of the second example is not so clearly defined. Indeed, while the first case is clearly an attempt by more institutionalised NGOs at engaging with the institutions of global governance and influencing the agenda directly, the second case illustrates marginalised grassroots movements taking a confrontational attitude in opposition to the top–down process.

3.1 WTO/NGO Symposium on Trade, Environment and Sustainable Development

This symposium was held in May 1997 and was designed to enrich the discussions in the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE) which was held immediately afterwards. Over 70 NGOs representing business, environment, development and consumer organisations were given the opportunity to raise their concerns and discuss their views with members of the CTE and other NGOs in an attempt to influence the debate with the aim of changing institutional procedures and reforming policies (Williams and Ford 1999). The symposium was a direct result of the WTO General Council Decision of July 1996 on Guidelines for Arrangements on Relations with NGOs which indicated that the Secretariat 'should play a more active role in its direct contacts with NGOs, who, as a valuable resource, can contribute to the accuracy and richness of the public debate' (IISD 1997). The International Institute for Sustainable Development claimed afterwards that the Symposium was a success, because for the first time there was actual interaction between NGOs

and member states. Most came away with a greater understanding, though perhaps not sympathy, for the positions of their traditional 'opponents'. In addition, most agreed that this meeting might represent the first of a number of such informal sessions tied to CTE meetings. 'The door having been opened and no monsters having been found on the other side, the beginnings of trust between the trade community and civil society may have been established' (*ibid.*). During the meeting many NGOs actually referred to themselves as 'members of global civil society'. The representation of NGOs alongside corporate actors corresponds very much with the liberal description found in *Our Global Neighbourhood*. The NGOs represented tended to be established NGOs such as Greenpeace, World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) or the Third World Network, rather than grassroots movements. During the symposium many NGOs, especially from the South, made radical contributions to the debate. However, it remains questionable to what extent these views are actually taken on board as part of the agenda. The CTE meeting afterwards was closed, and many of the CTE members' seats were empty during the two-day symposium. The fact that this forum was provided is a sign that global institutions are aware that calls for participation and transparency need to be addressed, though it remains to be seen to what extent this forum goes beyond paying lip-service to the rhetoric of *Agenda 21* or *Our Global Neighbourhood*. This is not to undermine the vast efforts made by NGOs within the UN system and other global institutions. However, the question of co-optation remains. Even though NGOs were critiquing the agenda, it is questionable to what extent the agenda is up for negotiation within a forum that is designated from the start by the dominant institutions, who can themselves be scrutinised on questions of democracy.

3.2 The Peoples' Global Action (PGA) against the WTO and 'free trade'

The second example is one of social movement resistance to the top–down approach. This conference was held in Geneva in February 1998. Unlike the previous example, the PGA was an invitation for people's movements from around the globe to meet up and launch a worldwide coordination of resistance against the global market, as a new alliance of struggle and mutual support against the perceived

destruction of humanity and the planet by the global market (PGA 1998). Though this article has been concerned with environmental governance in particular, it may have become clear by now that orthodox environmental governance is ill-equipped to eradicate environmental degradation, but is perpetuating a system that produces environmental degradation. Ecological exploitation and degradation is fundamentally tied up with other forms of exploitation, be they social, cultural, economic or political. The PGA acknowledges this in a broad call for radical change.

The conference was convened by the PGA, an instrument for coordination rather than an organisation, and was initiated by people's movements such as the Zapatistas and the Peasant Movement of the Philippines. The four points of departure were, first, a clear rejection of the WTO and other liberalisation fora, second, a confrontational attitude, third a call to non-violent civil disobedience and to the construction of economic alternatives by local populations, and fourth decentralisation and autonomy as organisational principles (PGA 1998). The forum, rather than a concessionary provision of the institutions of global governance, was a space forged from the bottom–up. Of the 350 delegates from 90 countries very few were mainstream NGOs and there were no representatives from the WTO or from the transnational corporate sector. The PGA's bottom-line was a clear rejection of economic globalisation and a call 'to build bridges to connect the different social sectors, peoples and organisations that are already fighting globalisation across the world' (ibid.). A major part of the conference was taken up with drafting the manifesto, which was approached collectively through a variety of issues, ranging from corporate power, housing, culture, and health, to the rights of particular groups including peasants, indigenous peoples, trade unions, the unemployed, and migrants. The manifesto identified the need to 'develop new structures....new types of organisations that emphasise that there is no way of solving the problems we are facing without questioning the logic of capitalist globalisation'. It was further stated that these organisations must bypass the top–down approach, that is they must be 'independent of governmental structures, autonomous from economic powers, and democratic, promoting the people's participation' (ibid.).

The forum was by no means homogeneous, but was a gathering of groups from a diversity of backgrounds, ages and cultures. In the words of one activist, the PGA is 'an attempt to build a transnational alliance of people's movements in contrast to the transnational capitalist class'. However, although the attitude was one of confrontation, it remained unclear how a position of bypassing rather than engagement or dialogue with the dominant institutions and other organisations within global civil society would actually bring about the fundamental transformations the PGA was striving for. Above all, global social activism, as epitomised by the PGA, was successful in forging a global consciousness amongst a myriad of grassroots movements. One of the main aims of the PGA was to build bridges and mutual awareness of the struggles going on around the globe centred around the issue of globalisation.

4 Conclusions

Environmental governance has become globalised as part of an overall process of governance building. Environmental issues are firmly on the agendas of the institutions of global governance which, it is argued, are becoming democratised through the creation of a space that allows for the consultation of global civil society actors, ranging from social movements to business and industry. These diverse actors seek to influence the trade and environment debate at the WTO, which has created informal mechanisms for dialogue. Some groups seek to influence the debate directly by engaging with the WTO at the kind of symposia described above, with the aim of changing institutional procedures and reforming policies. They are the kind of invited guests that fit into the WTO's notion of global civil society. It has been contested, though, that the sphere of global civil society is actually a bottom–up counterpart to top–down governance. The sphere itself is not an unproblematic, level playing-field, but contains social movements alongside business and industry whose interests are often at odds. The boundaries of the sphere and parameters of dialogue are those set by the institutions of global governance. This process has been described by some as not so much one of dialogue but of co-optation, lending a veneer of legitimacy to a business-as-usual approach of the institutions of global environmental governance. Further, the inclusion of global civil society may bring more stakeholders on board, but it does not

actually democratise the institutions themselves. Unequal power structures amongst the member states, particularly divided along North–South lines, have long been a bone of contention. These are serious issues that extend beyond intermittent consultations with global civil society.

Another type of social movement activity is the resistance by movements such as the coalition of the PGA. These movements claim the top–down approach is not concerned with the eradication of crucial issues like poverty and environmental degradation as mediated through social, economic or political relations, but with the smooth functioning of the system. These grassroots movements do not fit easily into the orthodox notion of global civil society. Their chosen strategy is one of rejection rather than dialogue, and they see engagement as merely watering down the top–down approach while the structures of power behind global governance are reinforced. Though social movements may be instrumental in getting issues on the agenda by lobbying and raising public awareness, it remains questionable to what extent they actually exert influence in determining where the agenda goes. The PGA rejects a strategy of engagement and advocates a radical challenge that goes deeper – it is

not just about influencing the agenda but fundamentally altering the system and building a new agenda that puts people and the planet first.

The environmental movement is not simply polarised into those who engage in dialogue and those who reject the system. A whole spectrum of groups exists, whose goals sometimes overlap, and at other times are at odds, but all resisting and challenging in different ways. Most recently, social movements have been calling for structural transformation of the WTO and revision of the Uruguay Round rather than the proposed launch of yet another Round, the Millennium Round. Such calls highlight the need for a pause to take stock, and mirror concerns about the lack of democracy and accountability *within* the WTO and other institutions of global governance. Whilst the WTO continues to define its mandate in such a narrow way, making only the most incremental of concessions, its attempts to engage civil society will only reach as far as the mainstream elements of the environmental movement. Until it allows for a dialogue whereby priorities can be mutually developed, it will be viewed as an institution in search of legitimacy and approval and not of meaningful interaction with a range of social movements.

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