9-2011

Better ways to run the world

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Published in OECD Observer, Issue No 228 (Sep 2001): 33-34.

Abstract: Wherever government ministers and international bureaucrats gather to debate and shape the global economy, hordes of protesters converge. And now some of the groups involved in the coordinated protests plan to diversify their targets to include multinational corporations. The protests themselves are merely the visible tip of a vast iceberg of transnational networks tying together people from all parts of the world who share grievances about the current rules governing global economic integration. Transnational civil society networks should not and will not end up making the rules themselves: the final decisions must rest with governments. But the protest movement has become too large to ignore, and it will not go away. Unless international organizations and corporations wish to relocate to Antarctica, they will have to seek out ways to grant a meaningful voice to these groups.

It will happen again in Doha in November, just as it did in Seattle, Prague, Quebec City, Washington and, most horrifically Genoa. Wherever government ministers and international bureaucrats gather to debate and shape the global economy, hordes of protesters converge. And now some of the groups involved in the co-ordinated protests plan to diversify their targets to include multinational corporations. Who are these people? What do they want? And what should be done about them?

Commentators frequently dismiss the protestors as ill-informed Northern do-gooders or wild-eyed anarchists. Most are neither. The call to mobilisation around the September 2001 meetings of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, for example, was issued by a coalition including groups from a dozen mostly poor countries. The "counter-Davos" World Social Forum in Brazil in January was heavily populated by Southern-based groups. The violent fringe is just that, a tiny minority widely resented by the much larger number of peaceful protesters.

The protests themselves are merely the visible tip of a vast iceberg of transnational networks tying together people from all parts of the world who share grievances about the current rules governing global economic integration. Those grievances are often voiced by the rapidly growing number of civil society groups working locally or nationally who find that the roots of their problems lie at the global level. If your interest is national environmental protection or labour rights, you must pay attention to global trade rules that affect domestic regulations. If your concern is national economic development, you cannot ignore the implications of conditionality and financial volatility.

Asking what these civil society groups want is like asking what governments want, as though all governments would share a common agenda merely by dint of being governments. Different civil society groups want different things, from environmental safeguards to old-fashioned protectionism, the end of capitalism, or liberty and justice for all in a globalised world. But one basic idea does pervade the protest movement: an end to secretive and exclusionary processes of decision-making. The leaders of the September 2001 mobilisation, for example, called for "institutional reform to make openness, full public accountability and the participation of affected populations in decisionmaking standard

procedures at the World Bank and the IMF" Other groups aim similar demands at national governments, trade negotiators and other international institutions. All complain, rightly, that corporations are getting far too much say in setting the rules for economic integration, and that other interests, including the public interest, are getting far too little.

One priority in responding to these groups obviously must be to contain the violence. The non-violent majority is already taking steps to repudiate the anarchist hooligans and are proposing codes of behaviour for peaceful protest. But the responsibility for ensuring public safety cannot lie with non-governmental organisations, which have every right to speak out publicly and assemble peacefully The security operations surrounding global gatherings have been deeply flawed. Amnesty International and others have reported many cases of extreme police brutality directed against non-violent protestors, or even uninvolved bystanders. Many protectors are convinced that violence is often permitted or even deliberately provoked by police forces seeking excuses to round everyone up. Good policing, in co-operation with the peaceful protestors, is essential.

But the more important question in the long term is how to respond to the demands for broader participation in global governance. The egregious case of the Quebec City trade negotiations, when citizens were denied access to the negotiating text that was nonetheless granted to hundreds of corporate leaders, exemplifies the most objectionable biases of global economic decision-making. While some institutions, such as the WTO and the IMF, are getting better about providing information to the public, few have developed meaningful channels for enabling that public to have input into their work.

There are models for how to get participation right. The original plan for the International Trade Organization in the 1940s envisaged that non-governmental organisations would receive documents, propose agenda items, and even speak at conferences. Many environmental agreements contain language allowing non-governmental groups "technically qualified" in areas related to the agreement to be admitted as observers and/or to assist the secretariat. To permit broad participation while keeping out the lunatic fringe, groups are allowed in unless a super-majority of member states wants them out.

Transnational civil society networks should not and will not end up making the rules themselves: the final decisions must rest with governments. But the protest movement has become too large to ignore, and it will not go away. Unless international organisations and corporations wish to relocate to Antarctica, they will have to seek out ways to grant a meaningful voice to these groups. And because many of the groups are raising important substantive points about real flaws in the current rules for running the world, incorporating their views can help make the rules better and more effective as well as more broadly legitimate and thus politically sustainable.

References

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