

Extended Abstract – For the Full Paper Please Contact the RGK Center

**Global Governance and the Structuring of Global Civil Society:
the Field of Transnational Advocacy and the WTO**

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The growing power of global governance institutions, such as the World Trade Organization (WTO), International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and United Nations, has prompted a dramatic expansion of global civil society advocacy directed at these institutions. The burgeoning of global civil society has generated considerable excitement in academic, activist and policy circles, based in large part on optimism about its potential to act as a transformative force in global governance and the process of globalization. Global civil society has been heralded as a democratizing force in global governance. It has been seen as an oppositional force acting against the state and the market and providing a source of counter-hegemonic resistance to the current path of neoliberal globalization. It has been hailed as creating a new “globalization-from-below”, based on values such as democracy, inclusion, participation, justice, and equality.

The World Trade Organization (WTO) has emerged as one of the most important institutions of global governance and a major focus of a diverse range of global civil society actors. Since its inception in the mid-1990s, there has been an explosion of transnational advocacy targeting the WTO, most dramatically captured in the massive street protests surrounding the 1999 Seattle Ministerial Meetings. The WTO has been a central target of the global justice movement since it burst onto the world stage nearly ten years ago with the Seattle protests.

While there is a growing body of theoretical literature on global civil society and its potential to act as a democratizing force in global governance, there have been relatively few empirical studies of how transnational civil society organizations are actually operating to influence supranational policy-making, particularly in the case of the WTO. The existing literature on the relationship between global civil society and the WTO has focused almost

exclusively on the latter. The result is that relatively little is known about the actual dynamics of transnational civil society contestation on trade policy. Where there has been attention to transnational civil society in the realm of trade, it has been focused on occasional headline-grabbing street protests, rather than on the less dramatic but likely far more influential day-to-day work of transnational civil society organizations in Geneva.

In this paper, I set out to analyze the current dynamics of transnational advocacy directed at the WTO. By examining the field of transnational advocacy surrounding the WTO, we can not only shed light on the contemporary dynamics of the global justice movement but also improve our understanding of global civil society. I focus on how transnational advocacy organizations are engaging with and seeking to influence the WTO. By *transnational advocacy organizations*, I refer to groups that transcend the boundaries of the individual nation-state and work to influence policy at the supra-national level. This analysis grows out of interviews with the major transnational advocacy organizations working on the WTO, as well as with WTO policy-makers including Secretariat staff and member-state delegates.

In the paper, I draw on the case of the WTO to argue that we need to be more attentive to the ways in which institutions of global governance structure global civil society. Looking at the WTO, I contend that the nature of the policy-making environment results in very specific opportunities and constraints for transnational advocacy organizations seeking to influence the global trading system. I present evidence that suggests that transnational advocacy organizations are being transformed by and from within the context in which they operate. Specifically, important changes are taking place in these organizations' strategies and in how they formulate their critiques, as they adapt and respond to the circumstances they face in engaging in advocacy at the supra-national level and in the particular context of the WTO. These shifts center

primarily around issues of expertise and discourse. I argue that these represent significant changes in both the style and substance of protest, with important implications for the dynamics of civil society contestation surrounding the WTO and the scope of debate in the global public sphere over the direction and governance of globalization. Examining the engagement of transnational advocacy organizations with the WTO can therefore not only improve our understanding of the dynamics of the global justice movement but also prompt us to rethink the way we conceptualize global civil society.