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April 5th Summary Paper

Representing Transnational Environmental Interests: New Opportunities for Non-Governmental Organisation Access with the World Trade Organisation? (Mason)

In this article Mason discusses the action and role of transnational environmental civil society interests in relation to the WTO. Specifically Mason asks what opportunities the WTO offers for the representation of TENGOS and how the WTO engages with civil society organizations. He demonstrates that while the WTO (and other international organizations) have made progress toward increasing NGO input, such as extending access to ministerial meetings, de-restrict documents and facilitating NGO symposia and briefings (although it can easily be argued that this is simply a form of window-dressing rather than any real form of engagement or participation), overall NGO engagement and participation remains restricted in many ways. This is neither surprising nor new information to me; this has been discussed by numerous authors in the past. An important contribution, however, that Mason highlights is transnational environmental NGOs, particularly Northern based organizations, have begun to understand the need to “appeal to developing country interests” in order to increase environmental concerns within the WTO.

The Emerging Roles of NGOs in the UN System: From Article 71 to a People's Millennium Assembly (Alger)

In this article Alger highlights a series of proposals by the UN to improve/encourage civil society engagement and participation within the UN, however, little has been done to achieve any real success. In fact in my own experience at FAO it was common place to ‘work’ with civil society organizations, however, in practice this was often done for public relations purposes (both internally and externally) and collaborative action was frequently limited in scope and effectiveness. [Although to be fair to the UN, according to the current agreements and arrangements, the stated clients of the UN are the member states – not individuals, not the private sector or civil society. Nonetheless, I believe much more can and should be done to collaborate with civil society given the complex and cumbersome process of working with nation states. Of course, this must be carefully balanced with the role and obligation of UN bodies – this is something I would be interested in discussing in class further if people are interested] Alger highlights the growing ‘involvement’ of civil society with UN and World Bank agencies and he cites this as an important step forward. He also reviews an important point – some UN member states are overtly resistant to increased civil society participation in UN bodies and this becomes a complex matter than perhaps did not receive enough attention in his paper. As I mentioned earlier the UN members (or clients) are nations – therefore the UN must respond and represent member states – so if particularly states, such as China or Myanmar/Burma or Sudan, are resistant to further/increased engagement with civil society, the UN in certain respects is placed in a difficult situation. Of course, this then opens the discussion wide about governance versus government, but as we all know, reform within large bureaucratic systems can be slow and problematic since they strive for stability.

States, NGOs, and International Environmental Institutions (Raustiala)

Raustiala highlights that NGOs are “increasingly important participants in international environmental institutions”. (this article was written in 1997 so

perhaps this was an important contribution at that time, but today this would be considered uneventful information). Specifically the article reviews the increasing role of NGOs in the development of international environmental treaties how that benefits, rather than restricting or diminishing, state authority and sovereignty. In complex transboundary or global environmental problems sovereign nation state approaches to management are often overly myopic and tend to be coercive over non-state and/or private actors. However, Raustiala argues increased non-state participation in international environmental treaty making has, in fact, not diminished the role or power of state centrality. This is an important contribution to the literature since the intuitive logic would like be the opposite. However, the author acknowledges that the long-term effects of “NGO participation on the international system are not (yet) clear”. Increased participation, while mitigating criticism from some constituent groups, may lead to increased complexity and more complex negotiations. I believe this to be very true.