2002

Kinsey Dialogue Series #4: Claiming Global Space: Global Grassroots Movements

Srilatha Batliwala

#4

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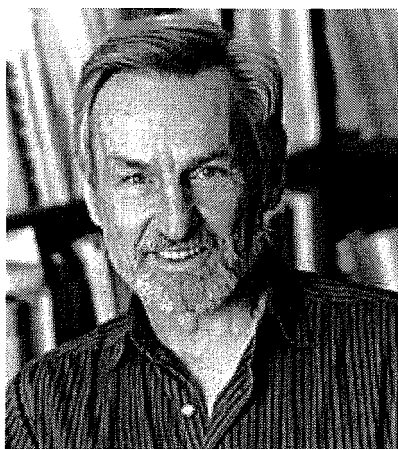
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About the Author

Srilatha Batliwala is an Indian feminist activist and researcher. She is currently Civil Society Research Fellow at the Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations in Harvard University. Prior to this, Batliwala was a Program Officer in the Governance and Civil Society Unit of the Ford Foundation in New York, handling programs related to strengthening international civil society and the nonprofit sector internationally. Before joining the Ford Foundation in late 1997, she worked for nearly twenty five years in India in a range of social change and gender justice activities that spanned grassroots organizing, advocacy, and research, with a deep commitment to gender equality and the women's movement in India.

Her work experience includes the co-founding of SPARC (1984-88), a Bombay-based NGO that organized and mobilized pavement and slum dwellers--particularly women- to struggle for sustainable, people-centered solutions to their housing and survival needs in the urban context. She was also founder and state program director of Mahila Samkhya Karnataka (1989-93), a Government of India special project for women's empowerment which was instrumental in organizing over 30,000 poor rural women into village-level collectives which fought for changes in their social, legal, and political status. She was South Asia Coordinator of DAWN (1993-96), the network of Southern feminist researchers and activists, and set and headed the Women's Policy Research and Advocacy Unit (1994-97) at the National Institute of Advanced Studies, Bangalore. She has published extensively on a range of development and women's issues.

For more information about her, please visit the following sites; http://www.qweb.kvinnoforum.se/papers/RFSU1.htm

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Introduction

The influence of transnational civil society organizations and networks – both civil and uncivil - in global politics is growing and unprecedented.[1]   Among them, those dedicated to greater social and economic equity and equality, to human security, ecological sustainability, peace, inclusion, and tolerance, have played a particularly effective role in restructuring the norms that inform policy and regulatory frameworks for the world.   Some scholarly analysts grant that they have in fact effectively *restructured global politics* in visible and lasting ways.[2]   For this very reason, perhaps, their legitimacy, accountability and constituency base is being challenged by states, multinational corporations, scholars, and leaders of the powerful global institutions they seek to influence or discipline.   These challenges make it imperative that they democratize their own structures and the processes by which they generate their agendas. They also bring into the limelight the emerging set of transnational grassroots networks and movements that are contesting for space in global policy making.   These newer entities can teach us a great deal about how to create more grounded, constituency-based, accountable global advocacy structures that embody the right to represent those for whom they speak.

The Rise of Transnational Civil Society

First, let us take a look at the recent history of transnational civil society and the factors that contributed to its growth and development. There is a widespread belief that these organizations and networks emerged as a result of the various United Nations global conferences and the negative impacts of global economic integration. In fact, the process began much earlier even in the modern era. The unregulated practices of multinational corporations in particular, and of global capital in general, provided the earliest catalysts for civil society groups to join hands across national borders, protest, educate the public, launch boycott campaigns, and demand accountability from these errant companies.[3] By the late 1970s, global networks focusing on the environment, human rights, and gender equality had emerged. Several factors fueled this process.

- There was growing recognition that while poverty, discrimination and environmental degradation may manifest particularly in local socio-economic and political contexts, there were universal elements to their genesis and eradication, requiring unified international policy mechanisms. Transnational organizing around the issue of debt is a case in point. Civil society activists and advocates

committed to equity, human rights, justice and sustainability also discovered the power of international networking, support, resources, and intervention in strengthening local work or fighting local repression.

- Worldwide, there was growing acknowledgement that governments could not – or would not– achieve equitable development without the participation of civil society, especially those sections that were organized around the interests of poor and marginalized peoples.   In many areas, states themselves had failed, were failing or in retreat, making civil society entities the "safety nets" and/or parallel providers of basic services to communities.

- The United Nations "Conference Decade" of the 1990s accelerated the global associational revolution by affirming the right of non-governmental actors to participate in shaping national and global policies on the environment, population, human rights, economic development, and women.[4]   Transnational networks formed in the preparation for these conferences, as well as during and after them.

The increasing integration of the world's economies into a vast global market has probably provided the strongest fuel for the growth of transnational civil society. A whole range of old and new economic and financial institutions and mechanisms, operating across borders and regions, are increasingly shaping the policies and priorities of individual nations. At no time in world history has the local been more influenced by the global.

At the vanguard of the economic and financial globalization process is a set of institutions that have growing influence on the economic, development agenda and policies of individual nations– especially poor nations. They include the World Trade Organization, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and regional development banks, and regional trade organizations (NAFTA, EU, ASEAN, etc.). The domestic and global economic arrangements propelled by these institutions are highly complex, generally opaque, and have largely eclipsed – if not replaced - the power of the UN system. They have formed a virtual quasi-state at the global level, since they are re-shaping national policies and compelling legislative and fiscal reforms that will serve global market interests (such as lowering trade barriers, loosening labor laws, and adhering to new copyright laws.)

- These institutions have no democratic base or direct accountability to citizens. Their awesome and largely unchecked power has provided a powerful catalyst for the formation of transnational citizen activism, as witnessed by the mass protests in Seattle, Washington, Prague, and other venues. Consequently, a number of associations have formed at the global level specifically to engage and advocate with institutions like the World Bank, to protest the power and lack of accountability of arrangements like the WTO, and to monitor the social impacts of debt and debt-servicing, and of new trade and investment agreements, particularly on poor nations.

- Finally, the unprecedented possibilities unleashed by new information and communication technologies has accelerated the "globalization" of civil society. Individuals and organizations can exchange information, network, forge transnational alliances and respond to new challenges and developments with unprecedented speed and ease. This has helped to both create and expand access to an autonomous global civic space, a space that even the most authoritarian states and regimes, hostile to civil society, cannot control.

All these forces have wrought both a broadening and deepening of citizen formations. Individuals, groups, organizations, networks and federations, with vastly different attributes and stakes, can be found on a continuum from the local to the global. The focus of activity is also highly diverse: from lobbying and advocacy specialist groups, to research and documentation centers, to direct mobilization and organization of populations most directly affected by a given issue. Regardless of activity focus, however, attempts to influence international policy in favor of the constituencies they speak for is their common purpose.

Let me begin by paying tribute to the contributions made by transnational civil society organizations – not only because any balanced analysis must do so, but also because the critique in this paper must be placed in perspective. Let us acknowledge that much of what the world has gained in the realm of greater consciousness about global equity, as well as some very practical policy frameworks for promoting equity, have come from the efforts, campaigns, and alternatives developed by transnational organizations. If we have guidelines and policy instruments for protecting and repairing the environment, population policies that acknowledge the rights of the poor and of women, a body of thought and formal acknowledgement of the concept of human rights and a full range of rights that deserve

protection, frameworks for promoting gender equality and eradicating discrimination against women, bans on landmines and child labor, awareness of the rights of indigenous people, the possibility of liberating poor countries from their international debt, and a myriad other developments that have helped us find better ways of being in the world and relating to each other, we owe the transnational networks and movements that put these on our agenda a debt of gratitude.

Democratizing Transnational Civil Society

Even as we feel all warm and fuzzy about this panorama, comforted by the fact that people are speaking up, being heard, and participating in the search for solutions across the world, we have to recognize that not all sets of organized citizens have the same degree of access and influence in shaping the debate, speaking for the affected, and gaining entry into policy-making arenas. There is nothing wrong with that in and of itself – at least some citizens are speaking up and being heard. But in fact, there have been some very serious attacks on the legitimacy and right to representation of civil society in recent months. The head of a major multi-lateral organization is reported to have said that unless the civil society representatives seeking a place at his policy-making table were elected by

broader constituencies, he would have nothing to do with them. This self-selecting quality of many citizen advocates at the international level is proving to be the Achilles heel of civil society access to global policy arenas. Even a sympathetic analyst like Ann Florini describes them quite tellingly as "a loose agglomeration of unelected activists."[5] These attacks are a distorted tribute to the impact that non-governmental forces have had on international policy.

It is incumbent upon us, therefore, to address the challenge of democratizing transnational civil society and transnational movements. If transnational civil society does not transform its own structures and systems of accountability and rights of representation, it could well discredit itself and lose access to the global policy spaces it has fought so hard to enter. This would be a tragedy for us all. And so, we must begin to make a conceptual and practical distinction between the formations of those who are negotiating the adverse impacts of economic changes in their own homes, communities and lives – what I am going to call "direct stakeholders"– and those of the less directly affected, no matter how committed to the goals of equity, justice, and participation. The perspectives, priorities, and analyses of the two sets of actors can be very different. This is important not just for moral and analytical reasons, but for strategic and political ones as well. Many movement scholars have analyzed these differences in some depth.[6]

They have shown, for instance, that the "green" and the "red" components of the environmental movement have not only differing, but competing and sometimes clashing perspectives and solutions to environmental degradation.[7]

Of course, we have to make another obvious distinction: between movements that adopt obscurantist ideologies and strategies of violence and those that are committed to progressive and peaceful agendas, even if equally militant. As Appadurai says, "..... among the many varieties of grassroots political movements, at least one broad distinction can be made. On the one hand are groups that have opted for armed, militarized solutions to their problems of exclusion, invisibility, oppression, and cultural obliteration. On the other are those that have opted for a politics of partnership" – I would say engagement rather than partnership – "......between traditionally opposed groups, such as states, corporations and workers."[8]

So we have to begin to pay attention to the progressive, inclusive and equity-oriented grassroots movements that are now emerging at the transnational level, and to learn from them how transnational civil society organizations and networks – especially those involved in global policy advocacy– must ground and democratize their analysis, agendas and advocacy. We need to do this not only to protect the space for citizen voices that has been so hard won, but simply because it a better way to do things.

When we make this shift, however, we encounter the fact

that *in a globalized world, the understanding of who and what is **grassroots** is being changed,* and we must interrogate the politics of this change. As a young activist in a poor country, the concept of "grassroots" was very clear to me. It meant those at the bottom of the pile, or at least at the base of communities and societies: the villages or neighborhoods where the "common man"– and woman– lived. In my context, the term was also used to distinguish the poor or working class people from the rich and the political and social elites. But today, globalization and the emergence of a "global" citizen has changed the way in which the term "grassroots" is used. Articles in a progressive online journal about both the recent street protests in New York City during the World Economic Forum meeting, and about the deliberations at the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre, for instance, were clubbed under the heading "grassroots globalization." The authors make it clear that they considered those two events, attended by very few of the really poor or marginalized, as expressions of grassroots voices.[9,10] So it would appear that in a national or local context, grassroots means one thing, and in the context of global activism, quite another. Consequently, the meaning of "grassroots movements" begins to change in quite troubling ways. On the other hand, I don't wish to propose that you and I, sitting in this room, can never be grassroots because we are relatively affluent, or located in one of the richest countries in the

world. But I would hesitate to suggest that we can know the realities of or speak for anyone but ourselves, or our class. And I certainly do not mean to suggest we have no right to speak out against inequality, exclusion, war, or violence. I have done so all my life!

I propose, however, that in a globalized world, we have to be more precise in our use of the term "grassroots" and more mindful of our relative power and privilege. *I suggest that while grassroots should be a relative and dynamic rather than absolute or static term, it should be applied to those who share the greatest **degree of vulnerability** to global policy and economic shifts.* In other words, it should always refer to those who are most severely affected in terms of the material conditions of their daily lives or their voice and rights. in society. I make this assertion not because I am being essentialist, or romanticizing the poor and their wisdom – I have worked too long with the really poor to succumb to either of these afflictions – but for very political and even pragmatic reasons.

To me, the broadening of the term grassroots and grassroots movements is dangerous because *it disguises the very real differences in power, resources, visibility, access, structure, ideology, and strategies between movements of directly affected peoples and those of their champions, spokespeople or advocates.*[11] These imbalances must be

corrected not only because they provide its critics and enemies a powerful weapon with which to weaken civil society's right to a voice, but because they have a direct bearing on who can effectively access advocacy spaces for civil society at the global or even national level, or whose views get heard.

For instance, several grassroots groups who recently attended a UN event in New York were exasperated when an international coalition of NGOs kept deleting the term "women" from their draft, and substituting it with "gender," without bothering to determine whether they had consciously chosen to use the former term. The assumption was that the grassroots organization was not "au courant" with the new language. Similarly, at another international event, the international NGO organizers refused to give space for a public meeting by a set of grassroots actors who had embraced the position that globalization with equity and peace was what they wanted, because it didn't "fit" their anti-globalization stance – a stance they claimed was supported "in *toto*" by the world's poor. I am giving these extreme examples to illustrate a point. Obviously, most international NGOs are more sophisticated than this and are far too savvy to practice such outrageous discrimination against grassroots groups.

The case is quite similar at the national level. Advocacy spaces for influencing public policy are often occupied by more "elite" NGOs – or even individual citizens – who may or

may not have direct links with or accountability to the constituencies affected by such policy. I am personally a great fan of Arundhati Roy's, but her sudden emergence as the Narmada movement's spokesperson caused much consternation and criticism in India.[12] Government authorities and multilateral institutions often collude with and reinforce this process, for instance, by inviting the elite NGOs into policy-making processes, rather than the grassroots groups who do not speak the same bureaucratic language or terms of discourse that elite social advocates have mastered.

Grassroots constituencies and their organizations often feel "used" by their NGO brethren in many ways. Links with them – often extremely perfunctory – are used to establish legitimacy and credibility for NGOs claiming to speak for the masses. Issues are often taken out of the hands of the grassroots stakeholders, who might have been the first to mobilize around them, with sometimes negative results for their communities. The example comes to mind of a lawyer's collective that took the state government to court over the eviction of pavement dwellers in Bombay. After promising that they would fight for alternative settlements for them, the lawyers disappeared for several years as the case wound its way through the courts, and failed to offer an explanation to people when they lost the case and the municipal authorities began mass demolitions. The pavement dwellers felt betrayed: this high-profile,

precedent-setting case had actually impaired their ability to negotiate with local authorities.

These contestations for access and power within transnational civil society should not surprise us. It is, after all, a microcosm of the imbalances of power, resources, and access that characterize the world at large. Northern groups and networks – even if they have "southern" organizations in their membership – occupy much of the space for citizen input at the multilateral institution level, as do "elite" NGOs at the national level. In some path-breaking research, Edwards found that "only 251 of the 1550 NGOs associated with the UN Department of Public Information come from the South, and the ratio of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC is even lower."[13] And whether from the North or South, most *transnational* NGOs and advocacy groups, while representing the issues and concerns of poor or marginalized people in global policy debates, often have very weak structural links or consultation processes with grassroots stakeholders. Their "take" on issues and strategic priorities is rarely subject to debate within the vulnerable communities whose interests and concerns they seek to represent. When investigated closely, one finds that their priorities and positions have not been derived through any authentic process of grassroots debate and legitimization. As Michael Edwards puts it, "...NGOs and citizen networks... feel they have the *right* to participate in global decision-making, yet much less

attention has been paid to their *obligations* in pursuing this role responsibly, or to concrete ways in which these rights might be expressed in the emerging structures of global governance" (emphasis his).[14]

This is a serious issue since the power that transnational civil society organizations and networks have gained at the global level is growing and unprecedented.[15] Keohane and Nye challenge the role nongovernmental actors in global governance, and refer to their capacity to influence norms and outcomes in global policy-making as "soft power."[16] But Katherine Sikkink argues that there is nothing particularly soft – i.e., weak or less effective – about the ability to "shape the agenda, or to shape the very manner in which issues are perceived and debated..."[17] Indeed, she says, this "can be a deep and substantial exercise of power" as Lukes defined it. If these global advocacy groups are *"Restructuring Global Politics"[18]*, it is imperative that they democratize their own structures and agenda-building processes.

The Emergence Of Transnational Grassroots Movements

The good news is that grassroots movements – i.e., movements of, for and by people most directly affected by the consequences of public policies – are emerging as global movements and forming networks to sustain

movements. What is more, *they are beginning to represent themselves in public policy processes at both national and international levels.* A growing number of grassroots, direct-stakeholder, and progressive identity-based and occupational associations have created transnational networks, unions and federations: home-based workers, street vendors, child workers, self-employed women, small and marginal farmers, fisherpeople, gypsies, shack/slum dwellers, poor grassroots women, indigenous people, and many others. And several of them are beginning to contest the right and need to have their issues and concerns represented by others. Their analyses, strategies, and tactics often differ radically from those of the usual INGOs and advocacy networks. Some could be far more militant (such as the Via Campesina or Narmada Bachao Andolan and others far more pragmatic and less "ideological" (such as the home-based workers and slumdwellers) than their counterparts.

Transnational grassroots movements are struggling with several ironies: the resistance to resourcing them from funders who have pigeon-holed them as "local" and cannot see a role for them in the global arena; and the struggle to enter global advocacy spaces dominated by more elite representatives who have been speaking for them. They are tired of the development apartheid that dictates that local groups remain local and global groups global. Several are tired of being the "little brothers and sisters" of dominant

global NGOs, or the "mass-base tokens" used by them to lend credibility.[19] These groups are often impolite and impatient with their NGO colleagues and have raised important questions of legitimacy, right to representation, and other uncomfortable issues.[20] Their capacity to impact on public policy at the international level is growing, but not yet fully realized.

These movements are also inventing new kinds of partnerships, institutional arrangements, and relationships to sharpen their engagement with public policy processes at both national and transnational levels. Although there are many effective transnational grassroots movements, I am going to describe the two specific cases I know best that bring out the power and potential of grassroots movements when they go global.

Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO)

In 1994, unions of home-based workers in both developed and developing countries, led by SEWA in India, joined hands to form HomeNet, the International Network of Home-based Workers. The intention was to provide an international network and voice for these workers, the vast majority of whom are women. These groups had struggled

for years to join existing trade unions, failed, and then formed their own. They had sought membership in international trade union federations and had been rejected. Their aims were to (a) build an international network for home-based workers and their organizations, *as well as* allies from among NGOs, cooperatives, trade unions, researchers, women's groups, etc. who were committed to improving the conditions of such workers; (b) coordinate an international campaign for the improvement of working conditions for home-based workers at national, regional, and international levels; and (c) strengthen home-based workers themselves through information, technical assistance, etc.

It soon became apparent, however, that these goals could work against each other; for instance, that the task of making home-based workers more "visible" internationally, and of influencing international labor standards, could undermine the on-the-ground strengthening and capacity building goals. More importantly for the purpose of our analysis here, they realized that research and enumeration, macro-economic and labor policy analysis, and international advocacy campaigns would require building and managing relationships with a diverse range of actors, and that this process could overwhelm the network. Finally, HomeNet realized that there were other types of informal sector work with large numbers of women that needed similar visibility and policy advocacy – street vendors, for example, who are

continually vulnerable because of city zoning and vending regulations that work against them.

Thus, WIEGO was formed in 1997 to take on these tasks and to become the international research and advocacy platform for women in informal employment. WIEGO strives to improve the status of women in informal employment "through compiling better statistics, conducting research and developing [enabling] programmes and policies."[21] WIEGO's Steering Committee includes representatives from three different types of organizations: grassroots organizations (e.g. HomeNet and SEWA), research or academic institutions (Harvard University, where WIEGO's secretariat is located), and international development organizations (UNIFEM). WIEGO's research and advocacy agendas are generated and monitored through annual meetings where all its different constituents are present, but privileging the priorities and concerns of its grassroots members for whose benefit it exists.

This innovative arrangement – of separating the grassroots organizing entity and the international advocacy entity, but ensuring the latter is accountable to the former – has enabled both HomeNet and WIEGO to have immense impact on the public policy environment in a relatively short space of time. For example, HomeNet and SEWA's successful lobbying led to the adoption by the International Labour Organization of a new Convention on Home Work in June, 1996. Now, WIEGO works closely with allies within the

ILO to improve and strengthen the basic framework of the convention – such as sharpening definitions of home-based work and as also monitoring; HomeNet and its members work to campaign at the national level for both ratification of the convention by their governments and implementation and enforcement of the standards and protections within their countries. To support these initiatives in South Asia, HomeNet and WIEGO organized a regional policy dialogue on home-based workers in which mixed delegations of representatives from government, NGOs and worker organizations from five South Asian countries participated.

In the case of informal workers, especially women, their statistical invisibility has facilitated policy apathy. To enhance visibility and thus force policy makers to address their issues, WIEGO has made incredible strides in four short years. It has developed a close working relationship with the United Nations Statistics Division and the ILO Bureau of Statistics, to help improve the definitions, enumeration, and database on informal workers. It sponsored the preparation of five technical papers for the international Expert Group on Informal Sector Statistics and it was commissioned to write two papers on "Informality, Poverty and Gender" for the World Development Report (2000). In order to help estimate the size and shape of the informal sector in Africa for the national accounts of African countries, WIEGO works with the Economic Commission for

Africa. It has similar working relationships with national statistical institutes across Asia and Latin America. Recently, WIEGO was commissioned by the ILO to prepare a booklet of *all existing statistics on the informal economy worldwide*. WIEGO's uniqueness lies in having created a single space in which a diverse range of actors – statisticians, economists, activists and organizers, policy analysts, with different capacities and interests, can work together to improve the situation of informal workers.

Slum / Shack Dwellers International (SDI)

Slum/Shack Dwellers International was the outcome of a process of lateral learning and strategic planning processes undertaken from 1988 to 1996 between grassroots organizations of slum and shack dwellers and their partner NGOs in Asia and Africa. In India, these included the NGO SPARC,[22] Mahila Milan[23] (literally, "women together"), and the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF),[24] and the Asian Coalition for Housing Rights based in Bangkok. The learning exchanges soon extended to African groups through the South African Homeless Peoples Federation and People's Dialogue. SPARC, NSDF and Mahila Milan had developed a powerful and innovative strategy of organizing slum and pavement dwellers in Bombay city into

federations and engaging the city and state authorities to work with them to find community-driven sustainable solutions to slum clearance. This "federation" approach was then utilized, with appropriate adaptation, by groups of the urban poor in other parts of Asia and Africa.

SDI was founded not only to strengthen and extend this process of lateral learning, but to have a single transnational entity that could dialogue with international institutions like the World Bank that had a major influence on the urban development policies of Third World cities. SDI was formed in 1996, formally registered in 1999, and comprises federations representing over one million urban poor in 11 countries. SDI's structure comprises national and regional federations of the urban poor (most of which have more than 50% women members and women in their leadership structures), a governing committee of five federation representatives and two representatives of partner NGOs, and a series of networking activities that focus on sharing the strategies and learning of member groups in their local efforts with each other. SDI also uses successful partnerships with state actors such as local bureaucrats and elected officials in one city to create similar partnerships in other locations.

Initially, the focus of SDI activities was to build and strengthen community-based organizations of the urban poor and their negotiations with local and national

authorities to find sustainable, community-driven solutions to their housing and livelihood needs. Their strategies include credit savings and credit groups to provide consumption loans, building their creditworthiness for future housing loans, and developing the "bridging social capital" to form federations of slum organizations, as well as rigorous, community-managed enumerations of informal settlements and slum populations so that official data could be contested as a basis for resettlement planning.

Quite rapidly, however, the locus of advocacy and negotiation had to be expanded to include multilateral institutions. As some of SDI's founders state, "Choices as to how investments are made in development are increasingly influenced by a wider spectrum of actors that they were decades ago. While decentralization has moved decision-making and resource utilization from the national to the local level, paradoxically, many of the organizations that influence these resource flows are located beyond national institutions in the global development arena."[25]

The network is interesting because while federations of the urban poor such as the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India and the South African Homeless Peoples Federation are its primary members, it includes a handful of NGO partners, such as SPARC in India and People's Dialogue in South Africa. The NGO members, however, are required to play a supportive rather than leadership role; for I

instance, they monitor and analyze public policy developments, open spaces for the federations to engage with local, national and international policymakers, manage the formidable databases generated by the federations through their settlement surveys, and do much of the fundraising for the movement. They are not allowed to represent the grassroots federations at any public policy forum unless they have been authorized to do so alongside federation leaders. They must discuss and review fundraising strategies with the federation leaders. Thus, SDI represents a good model of the balance between the role of external activists and grassroots stakeholders and their leaders in determining action priorities and intervention in policy arenas.

Among its great successes in the policy arena is the growing acceptance by government and city authorities across its countries of operation, that coercive forms of slum clearance and ignoring the claims of its poor urban dwellers in urban infrastructure projects is simply not sustainable. Specifically, SDI has been able to push through formal recognition of the claims of pavement dwellers to government-supported resettlement programs for the first time in India's history; gain legitimacy for slum census data generated by its member federations as the basis for official resettlement policy rather than government data; acceptance from local and national authorities of low-cost housing and community sanitation block designs developed

by its members (as opposed to the more expensive and less appropriate designs developed by the state); and enable affected communities to select their resettlement sites (from an approved menu of choices) in cases where existing settlements are to be cleared. It's a lasting irony of and tribute to the power of the SDI model that chapters of the South African Homeless People's Federation and Mahila Milan in South Africa were able to secure land and build new housing and settlements in Captetown six years before the pavement dwellers of Bombay. Bombay pavement dwellers were intensely proud of this achievement rather than resentful.

At the international level, too, SDI has begun to impact on policies. The World Bank in India has opened up its tendering system for development of urban sanitation projects to NGOs and community federations whereas earlier, only construction companies with adequate "technical" expertise could bid for these. Through sustained lobbying, SDI convinced them that "social" expertise and an organized base within communities counted for more in urban sanitation projects than technical expertise. The UNCHS sought out SDI as its partner in launching its Secure Urban Tenure Campaign in 2000. As we speak, SDI is getting ready to play its role as co-convener of the Urban Poverty Forum in Nairobi (May 2002) which they helped design. This will run alongside the UN Habitat Urban Forum, an outcome of the Habitat Conferences. In Bombay

city, the World Bank changed its tendering procedures for the urban sanitation project it finances, allowing slum federations to bid for the tenders without meeting the "prior experience" and "earnest money" requirements from private contractors. Several European bilateral donors have agreed to resource SDI's idea of a venture fund for poor communities to experiment and develop pro-poor, community-controlled infrastructure projects in urban areas.

Interestingly, this very success at the transnational level has created new tensions in the network about the balance between local and global work. Members hold different views on what this balance should be, and the current phase is one of debating this issue and finding a formula that works for all its constituents.

Why they work and why they are different

The remarkable achievements of these transnational movements merit more in-depth analysis than this paper allows. But even the limited overview we have offered here generates some significant insights about what has enabled them to become such effective policy actors and change agents at both domestic and transnational levels:[26]

1. **They have been created by a mass base of direct stakeholders and enjoy high levels of legitimacy and right to representation**. These are not movements that

need to establish their credentials or mass base organizations, they did not mobilize a constituency, *they were created by their constituents.* When SDI or WIEGO leaders represent their movement in any forum, it is clear to all concerned that hundreds of thousands of their constituents are standing behind them. This has enormous impact, particularly on their power and legitimacy to negotiate with formal institutions.

2. They are women-centered and have evolved a genuinely "gendered" approach. While WIEGO's founding networks are women-driven, they do not exclude men, since obviously, men also form a substantial segment of informal workers. Their priority areas for research and action reflect this, with an emphasis on social security measures, for instance, rather than wage issues. SDI's organizing strategies at the community and federation level are focused on building women's savings and credit groups and women lead both the federations and all negotiations with local, state, national and international agencies. Mahila Milan (Women Together) is a co-founder of SDI. Consequently, their approaches to informal work and the urban poor are deeply and fundamentally gendered.

3. They have avoided the "poor me" syndrome: Neither of these movements position their constituents as poor, exploited victims, appealing to the world's conscience.

They do not ask to be heard because they are downtrodden and deserving, or out of some moral obligation on the part of the powerful. They position themselves as populations that are playing vital roles in both macro- and micro-economic contexts, providing critical services to their cities, local and national economies, and to the world economy. This is a subtle but important psychological shift for both themselves and the institutions they seek to engage. It is an empowering mind-set, demanding to be taken seriously rather than pleading for a place at the table.

4. **They have made powerful use of research and data to empower their members and challenge public policy**. Generating data to challenge and force a shift in mainstream perceptions of their role and as a basis for organizing communities, building awareness and developing people-centered solutions, has been a fundamental strategy of both WIEGO and SDI. Data is used not only to increase visibility, but as the basis of both *contestation* and *partnership* with state and multilateral actors.[27] And in both cases, the data is controlled by the movement, not by remote researchers or outside institutions. Rightly or wrongly, they do not allow access to or manipulation of their data by outside researchers to build their professional profiles or out of academic interest when there is no perceivable benefit to the movement.

5. They have created new forms of partnership between grassroots actors and NGOs, other private and public institutions, scholars and researchers, and state and multilateral agencies. Again, what distinguishes these relationships is their fundamentally democratic character. These are partnerships between relative equals: each brings to the engagement a different source of power, but that power is recognized and acknowledged by the other. This recognition is forced by their strong organizational "mass" base, and their database. There is little subordination, condescension, or patronage in these engagements. I have personally witnessed this: an UNCHS official told an SDI representative in my presence that their Secure Tenure Campaign would get little traction without SDI's support and backing. An official of a national statistical office told a WIEGO representative that they could not strengthen their enumeration of informal sector workers and quantification of their contribution to GDP without HomeNet and WIEGO's support. Again, they have assigned interesting roles to their allies and partners, rather than accepting whatever was offered or thrust upon them by the latter.

6. These partnerships with high-caliber expertise, combined with a solid grassroots base, has enhanced their access to and impact on public policy, especially at the international level. Both SDI and WIEGO are taken very seriously by international policy institutions because of their

capacity to straddle the worlds of global, national, and local policy, to speak the required language, to bring to the negotiating table solid data, analysis, and alternatives. This confidence and capacity in turn arises from the creative ways in which they have built partnerships and alliances with other epistemological communities.

7. They come to the table with concrete strategies, not problems. They demonstrate that sustainable solutions are possible only through partnerships. Both these movements have been extremely creative in the way they innovate solutions and strategies in specific locations, and use these to push for changes at other locations and levels. For instance, at national and city level, SDI's members have proven[28] that sustainable solutions to slum rehabilitation are possible only when slum dwellers are actively involved in designing and implementing the solutions. WIEGO's member networks have demonstrated viable ways of providing informal women workers health and unemployment insurance, challenging the neglect of these vital benefits for informal workers.

8. They have changed definitions, debates, and policy dialogues about their constituents. WIEGO has helped transform the earlier very narrow, economistic definition of informal employment, and gained endorsement for a broader definition from an international body like the ILO.

SDI has changed definitions of the urban poor, altered construction and tendering norms, and pushed through policies such as joint tenure for men and women that have far-reaching transformative implications.

9. They have changed the traditional relationship between researcher and activist. Both WIEGO and SDI demonstrate a radical alteration in the power equation between practitioners and scholars. They do not lend themselves as passive subjects of research; they *initiate* research, they invite and control engagements with a whole range of experts, fully realizing its importance in their long-term struggle. The information and analysis that emerges, as a result, is knowledge-generation in the most powerful sense.

10. **Size and spread matters!** The experience of both these movements seems to demonstrate that institutions like the World Bank or UN agencies like the ILO take them very seriously also because they represent serious numbers, across a serious number of countries and regions. It is doubtful if they could have had the same access or negotiating space without these two attributes. For grassroots movements, small doesn't seem to be beautiful in the international public policy arena.

Conclusion

Given the increasingly strident attacks on the legitimacy of civil society organizations, especially at the global level, the role of transnational grassroots movements has become critical and their organizing principles contain many important clues and lessons for other transnational civil society actors. A growing number of grassroots movements have also developed the capacity to represent themselves and influence public policy at all levels, but particularly in international arenas. Those transnational actors who have achieved high degrees of access, visibility, and voice in global arenas need to make links with such movements, and make way for them in forums where they could ably represent themselves. In issues and campaigns where such entities are yet to emerge, existing global advocacy groups need to link up more consciously with local movements and develop their positions and agendas in more bottom-up ways. In fact, it is vital that all civil society organizations and networks engaged in both local and global advocacy build strong and accountable relationships with grassroots organizations and movements wherever they do exist.

The success of some of these emerging global grassroots networks contains a critical lesson for anyone engaged in advocacy on behalf of the poor and marginalized, viz., "...the locus of power and authority lies

and is kept in the communities themselves rather than in intermediary NGOs at the national and international levels."[29]   Thus, they have claimed the *right* to participation in global and local decision-making by having met their *obligation* to earn this right from a broad base of grassroots constituents.   They contain within their structure and character the four elements that Edwards identifies as critical: *they have legitimacy and the right to represent* their members; *their structure is balanced* (between North and South, between grassroots and non-grassroots members, etc.); *they have expertise on the issues* and demonstrated solutions, strategies and policy alternatives; and *they have effective links and balance between their local, national, and global work.*[30]

To put it more simply, I will use the words and the wisdom of Sundaramma,[31] a grassroots women's leader, telling me what she thought my role should be as an outside activist vis-à-vis her women's collective: "In the beginning, you may walk in front of us. After a while, as we grow stronger, you must walk beside us. But finally, you must learn to walk behind us."

ENDNOTES

1. Keck, Margaret, and Kathryn Sikkink, 1998, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

2. Khagram, Sanjeev, James V Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, 2002: *Restructuring World Politics – Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Social Movements, Protest and Contention Series, Volume 14. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press

3. The Bhopal gas disaster, for instance helped unearth evidence of the unethical practices of the multinational Union Carbide, causing civil society organizations of the North and South to unite in a joint campaign demanding accountability from multinational corporations.

4. The Nineties witnessed five major UN world conferences, spanning the key developmental challenges of our times: the environment conference at Rio in 1992, human rights conference in Vienna in 1993, the population conference in Cairo in 1994, the Social Summit in Copenhagen and the women's conference in Beijing in 1995, and the Habitat II conference in Istanbul in 1996.

5. Ann M. Florini, 2000, The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society, Washington, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and Japan Center for International Exchange, P.3

6. Ramachandra Guha, 2000. *Environmentalism: A Global History*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.

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8. Arjun Appadurai, 2002, "Deep democracy: urban governmentality and the horizon of politics", Public Culture, Vol.14, No.1

9. Kenny Bruno, "The Whole World Was Watching - New York Stages a Peaceful Protest Against the World Economic Forum", CorpWatch, February 6, 2002

10. Joshua Karliner, "Porto Allegre: Globalizing Hope", CorpWatch, February 6, 2002

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12. Harsh Sethi, "Movements and Mediators", Economic and Political Weekly, 2001.

13. Michael Edwards, NGO Rights and Responsibilities – A New Deal for Global Governance, London, The Foreign Policy Centre, P.18, 2000

14. Michael Edwards, "Global civil society and community exchanges: a different form of movement" Environment & Urbanization, Vol. 13, No.2, 146, 2001

15. Keck, Margaret, and Kathryn Sikkink, 1998, *Activists beyond Borders: Advocacy Networks in International Politics*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press

16. Keohane, Robert, and Joseph S. Nye, Jr. 2001 Governance in a Globalizing World,

17. Katherine Sikkink, 2002, "Restructuring World Politics: The Limits and Asymmetries of Soft Power" in Khagram, Riker and Sikkink, (Eds), 2002, *Restructuring World Politics - Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and*

Norms, Social Movements, Protest and Contention Series, Volume 14. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, P.303-304

18. Khagram, Sanjeev, James V Riker, and Kathryn Sikkink, 2002: *Restructuring World Politics – Transnational Social Movements, Networks, and Norms*, Social Movements, Protest and Contention Series, Volume 14. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press

19. Personal communication of A. Jockin, President of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, and co-founder of Shack Dwellers International.

20. Srilatha Batliwala, 2001: Acting for Change – Trends and Challenges in Citizen Movements, Background Paper for CIVICUS General Assembly, Vancouver, Canada; Washington, CIVICUS; available at www.civicusassembly.org

21. Home page of www.wiego.org

22. The Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) is an NGO founded in 1984 in Mumbai, India, by a group of social work professionals who were frustrated with the approaches of the welfare-oriented NGOs in which they had been working. SPARC was established at a time when the homes of pavement families were being regularly demolished by the Mumbai Municipal Corporation. SPARC began to work with the women of these households to better understand how they could organize themselves to counter demolitions through more effective and long-term policy changes and the demonstration of more pro-poor alternatives. Training programmes were set up through which women learnt to survey their own settlements and use the data generated to campaign for alternative sites chosen by them, and for secure title to land. From this work, the community-based organisation Mahila Milan was formed and its

work with SPARC was expanded through the formation of an alliance with the National Slum Dwellers Federation.

23. Mahila Milan (Women Together), is made up of collectives of women pavement and slum-dwellers whose central activity is the operation of savings and credit activities that become the basis for organizing poor urban women to have a voice in policy dialogues, and to ensure that women's priorities and interests are reflected in these. Set up in 1986, as a result of SPARC's work with the Muslim pavement dwelling women of the Byculla area of Mumbai, the rationale behind Mahila Milan lay in the recognition of the central role of women in their communities, and the enormous potential that women's groups have in transforming relations within families and society. Mahila Milan now conducts informal training and support activities, as well as supporting savings and credit groups, and aims to empower women to play a greater role in community management. MM works closely with NSDF in broader policy advocacy at state and city levels. Thus, it represents both opportunities to meet the credit needs of poor women and a strategy to mobilise them towards taking a more proactive role in relation to addressing poverty. Together with NSDF, Mahila Milan now has over 300,000 households and over 500,000 individual members across India.

The National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) is a community-based organisation formed by slum dwellers associations. Established in 1974, it has a history of organising the poor to fight demolitions and seek to secure basic amenities. While the Federation was initially a male slum-dwellers' organisation, in 1987 it began working in partnership with Mahila Milan and SPARC, and since then the number of women members has grown, with around half of Federation's community leaders now being women. Within its Alliance with SPARC and Mahila Milan, NSDF is mainly responsible for the organisation and mobilisation of slum-dwellers

and homeless families. The NSDF has constituent federations such as the Railway Slum Dwellers Federation, the Airport Authority Slum Dwellers Federation, the Pavement Dwellers Federation.

25. Sheela Patel, Sundar Burra and Celine D'Cruz, "Slum / Shack Dwellers International: from foundations to treetops", Environment & Urbanization, Vol. 13, No. 2, P.47, 2001

26. This section of the paper is taken from Batliwala 2002, op.cit., P.11-14

27. In India, local federations discovered early that government data about slums was highly inaccurate, and biased towards under-enumeration. They demonstrated this through their own census of India's largest slum in Bombay, which showed 80% undercounting in the official census, and then challenged the state government to undertake a joint census to see which one was accurate. WIEGO has demonstrated similar under-counting of informal workers in virtually all national economic surveys.

28. SDI's Indian member, the National Slum Dwellers Federation, has successfully worked with local authorities to clear and resettle over 10,000 households formerly living in slums along Bombay's railway tracks and roads. More importantly, these slums have not reappeared, as they usually did within months of forced evictions, because the new settlements were located and designed by the affected groups, keeping in mind their social and economic infrastructure needs.

29. Edwards 2001, op.cit., P.145

30. ibid., P. 146

31. Personal communication of Sundaramma, Mahila Samakhya Sangha (women's collective) leader of Bagdal village, Bidar District, Karnataka State in South India, in February 1991.