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Evidence Based Advocacy: NGO Research Capacities and Policy Influence in the Field of International Trade

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Evidence Based Advocacy: NGO Research Capacities and Policy Influence in the Field of International Trade

*Paul Mably**

Abstract:

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are showing that they can produce policy-relevant research and influence the international trade policy debate, and some of the policies themselves, despite having limited access to trade negotiations fora. They do so with the aim of improving the lives and living conditions of the poor and marginalized. NGOs have put themselves on the map of political influence in trade policy matters by increasing the depth and breadth of their research and advocacy, improving the dissemination of their research, building long-term relationships with policymakers, forming coalitions and networks, building capacity with local and international partners, mobilizing broad constituencies for policy change, influencing negotiating agendas and engaging in all stages of the policy process. This report first reviews what studies of the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Overseas Development Institute (ODI) have revealed about the relationship between research and policy influencing. It then describes the capacities and characteristics of NGO research and influencing work in the specific area of trade policy, based on a prior study employing web searches and interviews with 22 international NGOs. It discusses lessons learned on the factors that enhance the uptake of research by policymakers, and looks at four kinds of research-supported policy influence NGOs have exerted. Several criteria for assessing the competence of NGO policy research and influencing are followed by suggested areas for further investigation. The study is a first attempt to understand NGO research and policy influence in one particular area, trade policy. Further work is needed to more fully to understand NGO production and use of knowledge in this field.

* This report and the underlying study were conducted under contract with IDRC.

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Introduction

Although non-governmental organizations were actively engaged in research and influencing of international trade policy prior to 1999, NGOs suddenly caught the attention of the public and trade policymakers in the disturbances that surrounded the World Trade Organization (WTO) Ministerial Meeting in Seattle, USA in December of that year. Rather than a celebration of the beginning of a new round of global trade talks, Seattle now symbolizes the revolt of developing countries and civil society organizations (including NGOs) against the negative consequences of globalization.

What was not caught by the TV cameras in Seattle was the profusion of research, briefs, seminars, consultations, press conferences and meetings with trade negotiators generated by NGOs from all over the world before and during that world gathering. But these tools of NGO lobbying, advocacy and campaigning had begun to leave their mark in trade policy and negotiation fora as surely as the street clashes that were televised.

The upsurge in NGO concern with multilateral economic policy goes back to the 1980s and early 1990s. Developing country organizations and international NGOs working together on grassroots development programs became keenly aware that restructuring policies imposed on indebted countries by International Financial Institutions (IFIs) like the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were severely undermining livelihoods of the poor. NGOs banded together to pressure the IFIs to adopt more development-friendly policies.

This NGO momentum for policy change extended to trade and investment policy arenas as concern about the implications for local development began to emerge from international negotiations toward the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA - 1994), the Uruguay round of the World Trade Organization (WTO - 1995), and the aborted Multilateral Agreement on Investment (MAI – 1997/8). The concern with these agreements – and with globalization as currently conceived - is that they simply further

the process of unbalanced economic growth witnessed previously under IMF and World Bank programs, whose result was all too often increased poverty and weakened democracy between and within countries rather than poverty alleviation and equitable decision making¹.

If economic growth is not shared throughout society, then development has failed.

– Stiglitz 2006: 45

NGO methods evolved over this period. NGOs began to realize “that policy engagement can often have a greater impact than contestation.” (Court 2006:1). In answer to challenges to NGO evidence and legitimacy, rhetoric-laden declamatory statements delivered from outside the walls of the policy dialogue gave way to the need to substantiate positions with solid research in order to be taken seriously within those walls². Less ideology, more evidence. By the latter half of the 1990s NGO trade policy research pieces were circulating more widely and showing up on NGO websites. NGOs were harnessing academic research methods to marshal knowledge generated through decades of grassroots work in the South. The run-up to Seattle featured a feast of NGO position papers, most but not all from northern-based NGOs.

Over the 2000 – 2006 period, NGO research and advocacy on trade policy has broadened and deepened, influencing strategies have become more comprehensive, relations with trade policymakers more familiar, and the effects of their policy influence more tangible. There are more policy papers coming from southern-based NGOs. Vast global knowledge networks have appeared, linking South and North, non-NGO and NGO. Case studies are now showing that NGOs have become successful in influencing negotiating and decision-making processes as well as the content of trade negotiations. As former Canadian Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy said as far back as

¹ Joseph Stiglitz provides one recent analysis of these trends in Making Globalization Work. For example: “[O]utside of China, poverty in the developing world has increased over the past two decades. Some 40 percent of the world’s 6.5 billion people live in poverty (a number that is up 36 percent from 1981)” (Stiglitz 2006:11)

² In Latin America, this change from rhetoric to substance was captured at the time by the phrase: “No solo protestas, si no propuestas”, loosely translated as “Don’t just protest, propose an alternative!”

1998: “Clearly, one can no longer relegate NGOs to simple advisory or advocacy roles...They are now part of the way decisions have to be made”. (Gemmill 2002:15) Though most trade negotiators might not yet agree with this statement, advances are evident³.

Box 1: NGO coalition works to push access to medicines onto WTO agenda

By the late 1990s WTO rules governing intellectual property rights (patents) were perceived by developing countries and NGOs to be a major impediment to developing country access to medicines to deal with grave health crises. In 1999 Médecins sans frontières (MSF) convoked a meeting of NGOs, intergovernmental organizations and some pharmaceutical companies in Amsterdam. A coalition was built that includes MSF, Oxfam International, Consumers International, ActionAid International, Third World Network, Health Action International, and many others. Coalition members produced research and advocacy materials, and mobilized a global campaign.

By the time of the Doha meeting of WTO ministers in November 2001, the pressure from developing countries and NGOs was so strong that the meeting was obliged to issue a statement affirming that “the TRIPS Agreement does not and should not prevent members from taking measures to protect public health”. This was after a global NGO campaign had forced 39 pharmaceutical companies to withdraw a suit against South Africa for passing a law allowing the importation of cheaper drugs from other countries in order to address its HIV/AIDS crisis. And after a similar outcry pushed the US to withdraw a complaint at the WTO against Brazil for similar legislation.

Through research, denunciation, lobbying and advocacy in recent years, the NGO coalition keeps the heat on through successive WTO, TRIPS Council, G8 and other meetings to obtain concrete changes to WTO and national policy. In August 2003, WTO members finally agreed to a TRIPS waiver allowing developing countries without pharmaceutical manufacturing capacity to use compulsory licences to import cheaper medicines from supplier countries. In May 2004, Canada passed legislation (Bill C9) to allow for export to such eligible countries under compulsory licences. NGO research and influencing played a role every step of the way.

The International Development Research Centre (IDRC) has also taken notice of NGOs. Inspired by a desire to become more knowledgeable about their work, the Centre commissioned a first study to understand better NGO research and influencing work in a specific policy area, that of international trade. The study’s purpose was to find out which NGOs are active in this area, some of their characteristics and accomplishments - and even such basic questions as what NGOs consider research, research management and research utilization to be. This paper’s author carried out the study between mid-2004 and March 2006. Being a first attempt by the Centre to grasp a vast global reality, the study does not pretend to be exhaustive in the treatment of the topic. It is a sampling. Much further work is needed to achieve a deeper

³ It is important to note nonetheless that NGOs present a diversity of positions on any given trade issue; rarely can it be said there is an “NGO line”.

understanding of NGO research practice, the dynamics of engagement with trade policy processes, impacts and so forth.

As much as possible the study reflects the understandings of the group of NGOs selected for study. Following an examination of their web-based materials, key NGO personnel were interviewed by telephone. The author drew together the information gathered to present tentative observations which require further study to confirm and deepen.

Several criteria were used for selection of the NGOs interviewed in the study:

- They had to have a track record of evidence-based research capacity on issues of international trade and investment policy and/or the capacity to use evidence-based research in policy influencing activities, and hopefully, some policy influencing successes.
- The objective of this research and influencing activity is to produce policy change that contributes to poverty alleviation and sustainable development in developing countries.
- Their activity is international in scope, that is, their research and advocacy activity reaches beyond their local area and targets national and international actors.
- The sample deliberately includes a broad range of NGOs with differing characteristics and personalities, of differing sizes, structures and complexity. Every major geographic region is represented.

NGOs come in many colours and from many backgrounds. Types of NGOs represented in this sampling, and examples, are:

- Small self-contained, self-governed, private research NGOs: Recursos e Investigación para el Desarrollo Sustentable (Resources and Research for Sustainable Development – RIDES, Chile)⁴

⁴ Research NGOs (centros de investigación) in Latin America are often similar to think tanks in other latitudes. Many such centres were established autonomously over the period of the 1970s to 1990s as

- Public research centres associated with a university: Christian Michelsen Institute (CMI, Norway)
- Vast networks spanning most of the globe and operating in a very decentralized manner from a base of semi-autonomous members: International Gender & Trade Network (IGTN, Brazil)
- National networks linked into international ones: Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (Mexican Action Network on Free Trade - RMALC, Mexico)
- Regional networks such as the South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE, Nepal)
- NGOs mainly concerned with one sector or problematic: Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN, Canada), and those that work on a plethora of trade and non-trade issues: Southern and Eastern Africa Trade, Information and Negotiations Initiative (SEATINI, Zimbabwe)
- NGOs with a strong in-house research capacity (Oxfam International – OI, UK), and others with no in-house capacity who commission all research pieces (Quaker International Affairs Program (QIAP, Canada)
- NGOs dedicated only to knowledge generation and dissemination, and bringing stakeholders together, but not lobbying or advocacy: International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD, Switzerland)
- NGOs that have a close relationship to their home government (International Institute for Sustainable Development - IISD, Canada), and ones that purposely remain at arms length from government (Alliance for Responsible Trade - ART, USA)
- NGOs whose staff approach trade negotiators and government officials directly in their influencing activities (Third World Network – TWN, Malaysia) and those that equip their constituencies to do the influencing work (Genetic Resources Action International – GRAIN, Spain)

public universities became starved of funding and politically controlled. Many of the leading intellectuals gravitated to the centros de investigación. Levy 1996 provides a fuller discussion.

- NGOs in the sample originate from many different traditions: relief and development work, gender or environmental activism, universities and academics, alliances of university-educated intellectuals with grassroots movements, anti-free trade protesters, religious organizations, and consumer groups.

The remainder of this paper is organized as follows. It first reviews what has been learned about the relationship between research and policy influencing through investigations carried out by IDRC itself and by the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) in London, UK. The paper then describes some of the capacities and characteristics of NGO research and influencing work. This is followed by a discussion of some of the lessons NGOs have learned about the factors that lead to the uptake of their research by policymakers, followed by an exposé of four kinds of actual policy influence successes. The paper concludes with observations summarizing what has been learned about NGO work in this area, relates this to IDRC and ODI findings, and suggests some criteria for assessing the competence of NGOs doing trade policy research and influencing. Finally, some suggestions for further study are provided.

Research to Influence Policy

By and large, NGOs are a practical bunch. Their resource limitations and hands-on, community-level, problem-solving orientations lead them rather directly to the conclusion that research on trade issues is done with a view to using it as a basis for campaigns to bring change to trade policies, national or international. Theirs is strictly applied research, not theoretical or academic, though they strive to produce rigorous, credible evidence to support their case.

IDRC shares with NGOs an understanding that this link between research and policy influencing is a means to an end - it “lead [s] to policies and technologies that enhance the lives of people in developing countries” (IDRC 2000). “This means that the Centre

sees the influence of research on policy as an important contribution to development” (Carden 2005:3). Or as John Young of the ODI says: “Better utilization of research and evidence in development policy and practice can help save lives, reduce poverty and improve the quality of life” (Young 2005:3).

In the past six years, IDRC and ODI that have led the way in assessing the relationship of research to policy influencing on a range of issues in developing countries. What they have discovered is worth reviewing, as it assists us later in interpreting and learning from NGO research and policy influencing practice in the field of international trade.

IDRC

Since 2001, IDRC has been undertaking an ambitious strategic evaluation of how IDRC-supported research has, over time, influenced public policy processes (see IDRC 2004 for a brief description of the evaluation). “The strategic evaluation was directed to map the way IDRC-supported knowledge is put to practical use. The study sought to learn how researchers channel ideas to decision-makers and...how decision-makers get access to the ideas that they need” (Carden 2005-2:1).

The evaluation entailed a literature review (Neilson 2001), a conceptual framework (Lindquist 2001), an examination of IDRC intent (Gonsalves 2003) and of project reports (Edwards 2001, Adamo 2002 & 2003), as well as 25 case studies and a cross-case analysis (Carden 2005-1, 2 & 3). It revealed many valuable insights.

In her literature review, Neilson retraces several ways in which the policy process has been characterized over the past 30 years. This sheds light on the evolving roles and interactions of researchers and policymakers, and of research and policy, within the following policy models (Neilson 2001:12-43):

- **Two Communities Theory:** In this model, social science researchers and policy-makers live in different worlds, respond to different incentives and sources of motivation, have different values, and therefore define problems and solutions differently. Increasing the communication between the two communities does not guarantee improved policy outcomes if the research is not seen as relevant or useful by policymakers. There is even a difference in what constitutes real knowledge: social scientists see it as emerging from theory and method, policymakers from experience.
- **Linear Policy Process:** This model follows a rational sequence of steps, from problem identification, to examination of all policy options, a decision on the preferred option, policy implementation, and evaluation. The researcher intervenes primarily in the second step by presenting evidence to support the various policy alternatives. The model is criticized as not being very dynamic and not accurately representing the policy process. For example, policymakers rarely have the time to examine all possible options to solving a problem, and political considerations often take precedence. As well, the model assumes a very limited role for researchers and other policy actors such as civil society organizations.
- **Incrementalist Policy Process:** A modification of the linear model, it describes a process of making “small incremental steps towards policy change” in order to reduce uncertainty, conflict and complexity. As a process of slow reform, this model does not deal well with policy making in crisis situations, or in response to the swift, fundamental changes that often characterize developing countries. Both researchers and innovation tend to be sidelined under such a *status quo* model. And again, external factors such as societal trends or ideologies which influence policymakers are not taken into account.
- **Interactive Policy Process:** This “model views policy reform as a process, one in which interested parties can exert pressure for change at many points”. Policymakers respond to a range of external influences and the political context. Needing to know the field, the actors and the context requires research and researchers. However, this model still “focuses on policy elites in the policy

development phase and assumes research is used directly in the policy making process”.

- **Policy Networks:** In this model, “public policy results from conflict, bargaining, and coalition formation among a potentially large number of societal groups organized to protect or advance particular interests common to their members”. Various types of networks exist (individual networks, issue networks, epistemic communities, policy communities, advocacy coalitions) with their different characteristics. Policymakers are often a part of networks, along with researchers and advocates, some of whom are from NGOs. The research of the networks becomes more relevant to policymakers, giving networks greater potential to influence policymaking. The research is often global and multidisciplinary in nature. However, networks “merely act as a route to political influence, rather than as a source of political influence”. They “are perhaps more effective as sources of knowledge and information sharing than as sources of direct policy impact”. So this model neither “explain(s) policy development very well”, nor the complexities of developing country contexts.
- **Agenda-Setting (Multiple Streams) Model:** This model looks at why a policy issue is included in or excluded from the agenda of any of three streams of the policy process: the problem stream, the policy (or solution) stream, and the political stream. “(I)t is only when these three streams come together at a given point in time that policies change.” A problem is recognized, a short list of solutions is proposed in the policy stream, and a “policy window” opens in the political stream, providing a momentary opportunity for a solution to be adopted as policy, or dropped from the agenda. The chances of it surviving in the political stream depend upon the “technical feasibility and value acceptability” of the solution. A “policy entrepreneur”, acting from self-interest or in accordance with belief or values, and with the requisite expertise, connections and tenacity, is central to pushing the issue and solution onto the agenda and taking advantage of the policy window. Problem definitions and solutions must generally be developed well in advance of the policy window opportunity. This framework is somewhat limited in explaining

policy processes in non-democratic or one-party states, or where there are no organized interest groups or policy entrepreneurs.

- **Policy Narratives:** Policy narratives are ‘stories’ that simplify very complex issues and processes, and outline “a specific course of events which has gained the status of conventional wisdom within the development arena”. An example is the ‘tragedy of the commons’ narrative to explain desertification. Their simplicity makes policy narratives powerful and more resistant to evidence that might disqualify them. Policymakers often base policy decisions on these narratives, sometimes ignoring evidence that belies them. Certain networks and communities may use policy narratives to maintain ownership of a development process and the methods of research and analysis associated with them. Narratives are criticized for ‘blueprinting’ the solutions of outsiders on developing country situations, and reducing the role and expertise of indigenous and local groups in the policy process. Researchers need to be aware of the relationship of their work to the sustenance or piercing of policy narratives, and the consequences for their relationships with both policymakers and developing country communities.
- **Policy Transfer Model:** “(P)olicy transfer refers to a process by which actors borrow policies developed in one setting to develop programmes and policies in another.” The replication of privatization of state enterprises from Britain and the US to developing countries in the 1980s is an example. International organizations, think tanks, researchers and consultancies often perform the role of policy transfer agents. But the tendency has been toward either North-North or North-South transfers, leaving open the opportunity for more research and learning from Southern policies by the North.

None of these models may *per se* constitute a fully adequate explanation of the experience of the policy process and the role of researchers in developing countries. However, all contribute something to an understanding of this complex process.

Recently IDRC has been pulling out an interesting array of lessons and observations from the documents generated by its evaluative process (Carden 2005-1, 2005-2,

2005-3). These are instructive for both NGOs and donors to research programs designed to gather evidence and influence trade policy:

- There are no “best practices” or single planning tool when it comes to research to influence public policy. What is important is the way a number of factors work together to produce influence, or not. It is important for researchers to keep watch on how these factors evolve and their relative strength over time in order to build an effective influencing strategy. These factors include the stability of policymaking structures, policymaker capacity to use research, the type of governance structures (centralized vs. decentralized), external pressures and research project design.
- Policy influence remains a means, not an end. The end is to use influence to produce improvements in people’s lives and living conditions.
- The relationships that researchers build with decision makers are critical to cultivating influence.
- Context matters. Elements of the *internal* context can often be managed to the advantage of the influencing effort. IDRC’s analysis identified five different contexts, each reflecting a different level of receptivity of the policy process to the use of research findings, or to the integration of researchers into the decision process. Each context informs the researcher regarding the efforts required to attain this use and integration. For example, if there is weak desire for research amongst decision makers, researchers need to consider the nature and level of dissemination of research findings and of advocacy efforts they will employ. If decision makers are open to research inputs, then these convincing strategies are less relevant.
- Elements of the *external* context, such as the situation of the country, or the state of its decision-making bodies, are harder to manage but nonetheless inform the process of influencing. For example, instability in the country’s decision making structures or lack of policymaker capacity to use research data, may necessitate efforts by researchers to mitigate these problems, or may result in research findings not being used at all. Research influence seems to be higher when it is linked to fulfillment of the economic needs of the country.

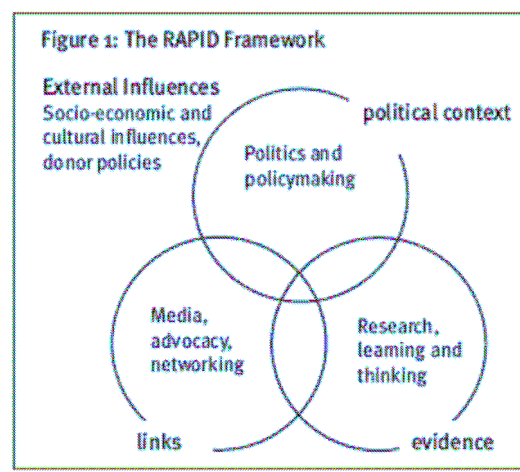
- Research networks are important. They become ‘platforms for action’ that facilitate the creation of new alliances, policy spaces, ways of negotiating, of regional solutions to regional problems, and ultimately of effective ways to influence policy. In networks, ideas are exchanged across borders, and policymakers are finding uses for research even if that research was conducted in a country other than their own.
- Networks help strengthen researcher capacities, skills and positions within a region, such that research becomes more policy-relevant and communication of research findings to policymakers more effective. Within networks, smaller countries without research capacity benefit from research done in larger ones.
- A sense of ownership of research encourages the uptake of research and enhances the effectiveness of policy influence. The issue of ownership also challenges donors to be conscious of their involvement and role in a research project.
- Building research capacity takes a long time and requires persistence. Support to a single research project cannot hope to bear much fruit (the ‘project trap’). Rather, over time, or through a collection of projects that build on each other, researchers generate skills and knowledge, their roles change, demand for their input increases, as does their capacity to engage in linkages with networks and policymakers.
- Donors need to be clear on their intentions in relation to influencing policy. If policy influencing is intended in a research project, then policy influence should be part of the original project design and budget, not added in later. This requires donor understanding of what is meant by ‘policy influence’, in the case of the particular project at hand. And recognition that policy influence is a variable term with no single definition. Research projects can also be designed to identify issues where influence could be exerted in the future, so that research takes place on them before it is needed. The Latin American Trade Network is an IDRC-supported example of a program that tries to anticipate emerging policy issues.
- Researchers routinely experience difficulties in being able to communicate and disseminate their findings to policymakers in understandable language and

formats. Researchers are now expected to do more than research. They are expected to understand the effectiveness of communications packaging, to disseminate their work in appropriate formats, to understand policy- and decision making processes, to build communications and advocacy strategies – in short, to be ‘research entrepreneurs’. This requires a new thrust in capacity building, and donors need to be willing to support these activities as part of research projects.

- Research projects are generally funded with a linear process in mind: research – findings – dissemination – policy change. The research gets funded, then the funder waits to see if the findings are of sufficient quality to fund a communications and dissemination phase. However the policy process is not linear. “As a result, [by the time the second phase receives funding], dissemination is often too late for policy influence.” Project management and support systems must evolve to ensure both project accountability and agility in seizing opportunities as they emerge. This might mean multi-year flexible budgets or building in funding for dissemination from the outset.

ODI

The Overseas Development Institute’s RAPID (Research and Policy in Development) program and the Global Development Network’s Bridging Research and Policy project have carried out theoretical and practical research over the past six years and developed an analytical framework to “unpack the complex range of factors which can influence research uptake” (Young 2005:2). Again, a literature review



was done (deVibe *et al.* 2002), followed by a conceptual synthesis (Crewe and Young 2002) and testing of the framework in both research projects (50 case studies) and practical activities (Court and Young 2003 & 2004).

In the RAPID analytical framework, the question, “How can research evidence be transported from the research to the policy sphere?” is replaced by the question “Why are some of the ideas that circulate in the research/policy networks picked up and acted on, while others are ignored and disappear?” This reflects the reality that rather than a linear, one-way process, there is a two-way process between research, policy and practice, “shaped by multiple relations and reservoirs of knowledge”.

In the RAPID framework, understanding of the wide range of inter-related factors that determine whether research-based evidence is taken up by policymakers is facilitated by organizing them under three headings and giving them a graphic representation (Figure 1). The three headings are: the political context, the evidence, and the links between policy and research communities, all of which are conditioned by a fourth dimension, external influences, such as the socio-economic context or donor influence:

- **Political context:** includes the degree of political freedom in a country, levels of contestation, strength of vested interests, institutional pressures, attitudes and incentives among officials, their room to move and be innovative, power relations.
- **Evidence:** must be topically relevant and credible. Using this evidence, research presents viable solutions to problems, preferably pilot tested to prove their usefulness. Communication with policy-makers must be interactive, employing research messages that are packaged in appealing and intelligible ways.
- **Links:** Involvement of researcher/influencers in networks with policymakers such as policy communities or advocacy coalitions creates trust, legitimacy and openness. Translators and communicators between research and policy people, such as the media, also play a role in building links.

- **External influences:** these range from the impact of international policies and processes such as liberalization or democratization, to donor attitudes and priorities that may influence the usefulness of research projects to beneficiaries.

ODI testing of the framework through case studies and workshops affirms that research “is more likely to contribute to policy if:

- It fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures acting on policymakers, it resonates with their assumptions, or sufficient pressure is exerted to challenge them,
- The evidence is credible and convincing, provides practical solutions to pressing policy problems, and is packaged to attract policymakers’ interest, and
- Researchers and policymakers share common networks, trust each other and communicate effectively”.

RAPID goes on to present in table form more detailed recommendations on how researchers can enhance their chances of having influence on policy under the context, evidence, links and external influences headings (Court and Young 2004:4). In synthesis, they must:

- “Develop a detailed understanding of i) the policy making process, ii) the nature of the evidence they have, or hope to get, iii) all the other stakeholders involved in the policy area,
- Develop an overall strategy for their work – identify political supporters and opponents, keep an eye out for and be able to react to policy windows, ensure the evidence is credible and practically useful, and build coalitions with like-minded groups, and
- Be entrepreneurial – get to know and work with the policymakers, build long term programs of credible research, communicate effectively, use participatory approaches, identify key networkers and salesmen and use shadow networks”.

Researchers who want to be good policy entrepreneurs also need to become storytellers, networkers, engineers and fixers (Young 2005:11).

NGO Research Capacities

Nourished by the thinking from previous IDRC and ODI studies and frameworks on policy influence, we now turn to the work of international NGOs in the area of trade policy. Research, conducted by the author, with this narrower focus is preliminary. It consists in the identification of those NGOs that are active in influencing international trade policy, then a first examination of the work of a sampling of 22 NGOs from various parts of the world, using information searches and telephone interviews (a list of the NGOs contacted appears at the end of this article). While the study has produced a number of interesting reflections on the research and policy influence capacities of NGOs, much more needs to be done to test research methods and to verify the policy influence achieved through NGO lobbying and advocacy.

First, what do NGOs mean by research? As indicated above, they are practical when it comes to research. They tend to define it not in terms of what it is - its essence, but rather in terms of what it should accomplish - its use. They link it with action. Research gathers evidence to support an action strategy. To most NGOs, research for the sake of research has little meaning. Resources are too scarce for theoretical enquiries, though NGOs stress the need for academic levels of rigour in their research.

The most common actions NGOs cited for the use of their research were:

- Action to influence and change public or corporate policy to the benefit of the marginalized,
- Capacity building or popular education, and
- Building alternatives to the free trade agenda.

“If you want to influence anything, you must win the intellectual debate. To do that you have to have bullet-proof research.”
-- Céline Chervariat,
Oxfam International

Also mentioned was the use of research for alerting grassroots groups to emerging issues so that *they* could take action in their localities, countries or regions. Some NGOs see their research as a function of relating local concerns to regional and global

ones and vice versa, with the NGO in the role of link-builder, knowledge broker or translator among several levels of reality, as per the ODI framework. Again, NGOs equip their constituencies and local partners with the information needed to formulate positions and take action. One NGO sees research simply as a way to create better dialogue among stakeholders. The idea is that if informed dialogue takes place among the parties, better outcomes can be reached in situations that could become conflictual.

What are some characteristics and capacities of NGO research on trade policy issues? What the study found in just the small sampling of NGOs interviewed is that they are active in just about every trade forum imaginable, be it multilateral, regional or bilateral. As well, the range of expertise in this group, that is, the particular niches where they have developed special knowledge, with positions and papers to advance their arguments, touched all the major trade issues currently under discussion.⁵

The larger NGOs have put together powerful teams of researchers and tend to do most of their research in-house, contracting out studies where in-house expertise is lacking. Smaller NGOs contract out a proportionately larger share, but there are exceptions. Some smaller centres with small teams, like the Centro de Investigación Económica para el Caribe (CIECA) in the Dominican Republic or Recursos e Investigación para el Desarrollo Sustentable (RIDES) in Chile, do most of their research in-house. Large networks like the the International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN) and Alliance for Responsible Trade (ART) in the US count on a web of researchers throughout their affiliate organizations, with little centrally-located research capacity. Still other large networks, such as Oxfam International (OI), Consumers International (CI), the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD) and

⁵ This includes agriculture (especially subsidies/dumping, food security, farmers' rights, GMOs), non-agricultural market access, technical standards, services (water, energy), investment, intellectual property rights (especially patents on medicines and life forms, biodiversity, TRIPS-plus provisions), competition policy, gender issues, WTO governance (democratization), EU-Africa Economic Partnership Agreements, trade preferences, special and differential treatment, corporate social responsibility, environmental impacts of trade agreements, sustainable development, labour impacts and voluntary compliance with labour codes.

the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD) have both a strong central capacity in their northern-based trade policy teams and a decentralized regional capacity in the South, while contracting specific local or topical expertise when needed.

Several NGOs mentioned that they use the research of other NGOs, especially syntheses of others' research, which they incorporate into their own research pieces or publish for a non-English-speaking constituency. Thus, there is learning from each other in the NGO community. However, few said they use the research of others, either synthesized or unchanged, in their advocacy, campaigning or convening work.

Research findings are usually published separately from influencing materials. Some NGOs find that the credibility of their research is enhanced if research findings are not mixed with an institutional viewpoint when it is presented to policymakers. Rather, the institutional viewpoint is inserted into separate materials for influencing campaigns. Others see it as a matter of different materials for different audiences: more technical research materials for trade negotiators, more popularized materials for media and social organizations.

While desirous of maintaining a standard of rigour in their research, it is notable that less than half of the NGOs interviewed stated that they have a formal quality control or peer review system in place as part of their research process. Further, none said they have specific guidelines for ensuring that the independence of their research is not affected by, or perceived to be affected by, the interests of their financial supporters.

NGOs were asked how they assure that their research stays relevant to the needs of their constituencies and target groups. They invariably spoke of the need to involve these groups directly in the research process, from the determination of research topics to the final recommendations and their implementation. This means advisory groups with stakeholder participation, circulation of research drafts for comment by stakeholders, dialogues, briefings, workshops and seminars. This is evidence that

many NGOs understand that the policy process is not linear, but rather a two-way one involving continuous dialogue.

One group mentioned that it attempts to identify issues that will be on the agenda 3-5 years in the future, and to invest in the necessary research *before* the issues become topical (IISD, on investment agreements, for example). So when the “policy window” opens, they are ready with a well-researched alternative. Another group said that besides anticipating issues, some NGOs bring an invaluable historical memory on issues, which has been lost to governments where staff turnover is rapid.

As much as you look forward [by monitoring the issues], you also have to look backwards...The institutional history is what is missing all the time in policy-making circles, because of the way governments are set up... – Chee Yoke Ling, Third World Network, interview 2006

Networks are important to NGOs. Almost all in the IDRC survey are either themselves networks or part of regional and/or global networks where research and strategies are shared and combined. Link- and network-building helps NGOs overcome resource constraints, both for research itself and for inter-NGO strategizing. It helps them cover widely-dispersed policy fora. And for small organizations particularly it is a way of increasing policy influence. Since the lead-up to the Seattle Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in 1999, NGOs have demonstrated increasing skill in using the Internet to build coalitions for these purposes.

Finally, only the larger NGOs tend to have developed a strategy for enhancing the capacities of their own trade policy researcher/influencers. However several NGOs emphasize capacity building of local organizations through research practice. Part of this capacity building occurs through the execution of research projects jointly by the international NGO and its national-level partners. Primary research by the partners on local realities is combined with secondary-level research by the NGOs on international realities such as trade agreements. Such collaborative action builds the skills of all participants.

Box 2: Consumers International influences standards on water provision at ISO

Since September 2002, Consumers International (CI) has been participating in developing a standard for 'Service activities relating to drinking water supply and sewerage' at the International Organisation for Standardization (ISO). Though this may not seem to be in the realm of trade policy, "This is a place which is setting a standard that will be a reference point at the WTO and be widely adopted globally", says Bjarne Pedersen, Head of Policy and Advocacy at CI, in an interview with IDRC. It is often ISO standards that are the 'international standards' and 'technical standards' referred to in the WTO agreements on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and trade in services (GATS). Whether assumed under trade agreements or not, these are standards that governments and professional organizations may use to define the quality of essential services such as water and sewerage that under globalization are often supplied to developing countries by international corporations.

CI has been very active in ISO's Technical Committee 224 and has submitted "over 30 written amendments, nearly all of which have been successful." For example, CI successfully argued for standards not only for "connected pipe and sewer systems of rich countries...but also for the development of standards for non-integrated networks characteristic of poorer countries: wells, bulk-delivered water, pit latrines, septic tanks... This was for CI a point of principle without which we would probably not have continued to participate" (Simpson 2006:1)

"To put it bluntly, we were not interested in developing a standard that would simply improve the service for the better-off and do nothing for the poorest..." (Simpson 2004:147)

"The fact that we have access to the complicated decision-making processes within ISO means that we have high scope for setting the agenda and influencing them... By focusing our resources, we have become part of the policy and decision-making debate," adds Pedersen.

CI's credibility comes from a long-term commitment to work on standards and on water at the ISO. And the fact that their proposals are based on evidence from case studies done or contracted by CI national members in Latin America, Africa and Eastern Europe. For instance, CI backed up its case for the inclusion of non-connected services in the standard by referring to studies done in Peru, Mali and elsewhere. Many studies include direct data gathering in shantytowns and rural areas as well as documentary evidence. Often, national consumer organizations consulted policymakers from regulatory bodies and industry in roundtable discussions where this evidence was presented. CI policy positions are also discussed in international fora with organizations like the World Bank. Such research and consultation give CI the ability to intervene effectively at the ISO Technical Committee, where, despite not being a voting member, CI finds that its proposals for amendment of the standard are taken seriously.

CI is nonetheless self-critical of its successes. It believes it could have improved the methodology of national case studies in order to generate more explicit conclusions, done better syntheses of case study findings in its campaign documentation, coordinated its campaigning better with national members, and made better use of media to get its points across.

Consumers International represents 234 consumer groups and agencies in 113 countries. Its head office is in London, UK.

NGO Influencing Capacities

We now turn to some of the characteristics and capacities of NGO influencing work on trade policy issues, then consider what NGOs have learned about the factors that encourage the uptake of their research in policy processes. And finally we consider what influence all this NGO activity is having.

NGOs employ various strategies in their influencing activity: lobbying, advocacy, promotion and mobilizing public pressure (Arts 2003:23). A campaign seeking any given policy change may use one or, most often, a combination of these strategies. Lobbying and advocacy are similar in nature, but lobbying refers to a more informal process of approaching policymakers. Advocacy is a more formal process whereby NGOs advocate their views within a formal political process such as a meeting on trade matters (while lobbying government representatives in the corridors). NGOs are somewhat limited in the use of formal approaches since in general they are not admitted into formal trade negotiations or dispute hearings. Promotion, or dissemination, is the distribution of position papers, press releases, research findings and other information. Mobilizing public pressure takes place outside the political arena and employs methods such as information meetings, rallies, sit-ins, marches, media or fax blitzes and protests.

Most of the NGOs interviewed make no separation of roles between researchers and influencers. Researchers do influencing and advocacy; influencers do research. The only exceptions to the melding of the two functions were the two institutions that were found to be doing no or almost no influencing themselves, the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) and the Quaker International Affairs Program (QIAP). In these two cases staff produce or commission research that is fed into processes involving other entities, which carry out influencing work.

National and regional government officials, political decision-makers, trade negotiators and officials of global or regional trade bodies were found to be the most frequent targets for NGO influencing. Congresspeople are a target for the two NGOs located in the US (International Gender and Trade Network-IGTN⁶, Alliance for Responsible Trade-ART) and for Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC) in Mexico. Elsewhere parliamentarians and the private sector are less frequently mentioned. Several of the NGOs also target overseas development

⁶ Since the interview with IGTN took place, the Network has moved its coordination office to Brazil.

agencies, standards-setting bodies, academics, consumers, social organizations, other NGOs and the media.

The NGOs were asked at what point in their target group's policy process they preferred to intervene. The question can lead to various levels of response, given that policy processes differ between national and international levels, and among countries with more, or less, open and transparent governance systems. Several NGOs said that, in general, the ideal entry point is at the very beginning of conversations about the negotiation of a new trade agreement, when there should be consultations with non-state actors.

In fact, they said, this almost never occurs. Most often these conversations are held in secret. NGOs and social organizations end up having to play catch-up and to force open spaces for dialogue with governments and multilateral officials, either during on-going negotiations or even at the implementation stage back in countries. Said IISD: "By the time issues get to the negotiating table, positions are already determined and negotiators have little flexibility to change them".

Some NGOs felt they *were* able to influence policy even at the early stages. Consumer Unity and Trust Society / Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS/CITEE) attributed this to dynamic and "continuous engagement with policy-makers". Establishing a trust relationship with policymakers determines how early on and how close the NGO can get to the policy-making process. For IISD, a key consideration in establishing the relationship and effective entry points is location. For this reason, IISD set up a Geneva office as the core of its trade policy work, so that it can remain in constant contact with WTO trade negotiators. Another key for IISD is understanding how trade policy is put together and how to influence it at the national level, before it gets to Geneva, and the interplay between the two levels.

It is interesting that none of the NGOs consulted expressed the need for governments to facilitate additional resources to increase civil society access to the trade policy-

making process – and thereby, enhance NGO legitimacy - so that NGO access is more on a par with that of the private sector (IADB 2002:iv).

“The close interaction between researchers and policymakers throughout the research process is seen as being critical for the use of research in the policymaking process” (Carden 2004:138). As already noted, most of the NGOs interviewed recognize the value of nurturing long-term relationships with their advocacy targets as a key to influencing the positions of these targets. Among the means NGOs named for building and maintaining the relationships between their researchers and their targets are the organization of seminars, conferences and dialogues on trade issues. In some cases, government policymakers and/or negotiators are invited to be involved in the NGO’s research process, to define research topics and to review research drafts.

Only a few NGOs appear to have in place a plan or strategy for upgrading the skills of their influencers/advocates. Third World Network (TWN) and CUTS-CITEE gradually give their researchers/influencers more responsibility for representing the organisation at national or international fora. OI assigns the various trade topics among its members such that each Oxfam affiliate becomes specialized and takes the lead on a given topic or topics, and produces papers on those topics. These papers are discussed and used by the advocacy staff of all OI affiliates so that all become better able to dialogue with trade officials on a broader range of topics.

An asymmetry was noted amongst those NGOs wishing to diversify and amplify their areas of trade policy work⁷. That is, those NGOs with a strong knowledge base and some research experience base find it much easier to produce serious trade policy research, then take on advocacy and campaigning work using this base, than do campaigning and advocacy NGOs to develop their own research base. Developing research skills, a body of research and an ‘institutional memory’ takes a longer-term

⁷ This point was raised at a workshop on the role of research on trade policy changes in the developing world, Buenos Aires, August 1-2, 2006, where a draft of this paper was presented.

commitment, especially where an NGO wishes to anticipate policy trends that will emerge several months or years in the future. Further, research skills are not as easy to develop in countries with weak education systems and where up-to-date data is inaccessible. Funding for researchers is often tougher to access as well. These differences in research capability among NGOs can result in varying degrees of effectiveness. In some places in Latin America, some campaigning NGOs have lost credibility because their demands are perceived to be less well documented, whereas many think tank NGOs have become credible sources of information to governments, civil society and/or the private sector.

Most of the NGOs consulted use some internal or external evaluation process to gauge the successes and difficulties in reaching influencing objectives. It may be a strategic planning exercise or a funder-led evaluation. However, few admit to having a methodology for assessing results. Oxfam reviews results and impacts both internally – in its campaign projects group and its board – and externally – in a mid-term review involving ambassadors, partners, allies and media, among others. The Southern and Eastern Africa Trade, Information and Negotiations Initiative (SEATINI) has an Evaluation Unit that reviews implementation in all its program areas.

In most cases, NGOs do not receive funding from their direct target groups to carry out their trade policy research. Some do receive funds from the development cooperation arms of governments whose trade policy they are trying to influence. Others do not accept government funding on principle (IGTN, ART), in order to safeguard their autonomy. No one reported interference from funders in the determination of their policy positions or influencing programs, and all declared the independence of their policy positions from the particular interests of their institutional funding sources.

NGO Experience with Research Uptake

Both the IDRC and ODI research dedicated much effort to determining what factors are likely to lead to research actually being taken up and used by policymakers, or not. On this, the NGOs interviewed as part of the study offered the following thoughts:

- Research must meet the needs of policymakers for facts, figures and technical analysis, in relation to the hot topics of the day. It has to present fresh ideas that can help break the policy logjams WTO negotiators are facing.
- Research findings must be brought directly to the attention of policymakers, by writing them letters, and convening meetings with them to present the findings in ways they understand.
- Research must be: 1) timely in its analysis, 2) neutral, objective, 3) inclusive of all points of view, but especially Southern perspectives, 4) constructive, non-threatening, non-partisan in tone, 5) solidly based and accurate, and 6) very focussed on the subjects of negotiation currently in play.
- The NGO must cultivate contacts and develop long-term relationships both with groups that are experts on the ground in the South, and with policy-makers and decision-makers in the North.
- The NGO must have knowledge of trade issue trends and developments, which means it must: 1) monitor, 2) anticipate, 3) recognize, 4) alert, and 5) respond. The response may be defensive to a negative trend, or pro-active to put something positive in place.

These responses echo and serve to verify from NGO experience the ODI and IDRC points about credibility of research and link-building. To summarize, ODI and IDRC concluded that research must present viable solutions to the policy problems of the day, findings must be disseminated to policymakers, and the links among researchers

and policymakers must be two-way and sustained long-term in order to create credibility and trust.

Influencing Trade Policy

In what ways have NGOs influenced international trade policy? Adapting categories used in the IDRC evaluation (Lindquist 2001:23 and Neilson 2003:2), the NGO study breaks ‘policy influence’ into four types: expanding policy capacities, affecting policy debates, affecting policy regimes, and developing new policy regimes. We look at each type in turn, along with the policy changes highlighted by the NGOs that were interviewed.

Expanding policy capacities refers to the strengths developed within an NGO and among its partners: 1) to conduct and create useful policy-relevant research, 2) to translate the research into policy positions and knowledge which policymakers can use, 3) to communicate that knowledge and those positions to diverse target audiences for the purposes of educating, convening, mobilizing or influencing policy changes, and 4) to build and use networks for research and exchange. It encompasses the improvement of the capacities of the NGO’s researchers, as well as those of the NGO’s own policy-making bodies (boards, committees), education and campaigning staff, or volunteer groups at national or local levels. It tries to determine if research contributed to the policy capacity of the NGO and its (domestic or overseas) partners such that these bodies are now in a better position to understand the value of research to influencing work, to grasp the policies themselves, and to represent the findings more effectively to target audiences whose policies they want to change.

All the NGOs interviewed reported an expansion of their policy capacity in recent years, in terms of better analysis among staff, boards and the constituencies they work with; more topics around which they feel confident to do influencing work; better understanding of the relationship between trade and development; better understanding of how the trade system and private sector systems function; or more

acceptance of their presence and their materials by policymakers (see case study below, Box 3). Research and advocacy networking at the regional or international level is an important strategic priority for all. In sum, many felt they had a better grasp on how to produce, disseminate and use policy-relevant research. Only one reported improved skill in managing contracts for research. Three reported better primary source data-gathering ability at country level. One mentioned improvement in analytical methods for research.

Box 3: Third World Network: rigorous capacity building for research and influencing

"We have a conscious strategy for training our people. Because TWN's work is very much based on research, documentation and dissemination, everyone that comes in new gets to work writing for or editing various in-house publications that go out. We encourage our staff to write a lot, because that means they have to read, understand, build their knowledge. Otherwise what they write makes no sense! We look for and build the research and writing skills.

"One of our major challenges is how to be involved at a high level of intensity [in international trade fora] with our limited human resources. Sometimes we just don't have the right people to send to very crucial meetings, workshops, etc., to be effectively present at national, regional and WTO levels simultaneously. This lack of people conditions our ability to respond to increasing demands as we begin to have an effect in these fora.

"It's also a political thing. There might be a brilliant person, who knows the issue very well, but that person cannot be sent to some of these meetings straight away. In situations where trust has been built up, and there are certain dynamics going on amongst the players, you need experienced people, people that will be listened to. So we bring the next generation of people with us, introduce them to the players at all levels so they begin to take part and see how it's done. You cannot teach this in any other way than for them to be there with you. So we twin people going to important meetings.

"Participating in meetings means you are in a position to write, to render an account of what happened and outcomes. This is really demanding. You've been in negotiations until 3 o'clock in the morning for a week, and you have to file stories at the same time. There is a lot of discipline involved.

"Then, since we have very good partners around the world, we send people around for exchanges and internships. We also bring people from partner organizations to Geneva to attend meetings of the WTO, WIPO, or UNCTAD, where they work out of the TWN Geneva office. The office becomes a training ground."

From an IDRC interview with Chee Yoke Ling, Third World Network, 2006. TWN is a resource centre and international policy network. Its secretariat is in Penang, Malaysia. It publishes SUNS daily bulletin from Geneva, the fortnightly "Third World Economics" and the monthly "Third World Resurgence."

Affecting policy debates (process and/or content) refers to the interaction between the NGO and its partners on the one hand, and the groups that are the targets of NGO influencing activity (governments, corporations, multilaterals, etc.) on the

"Changing the process (the way things are done) is as important as changing the policy (what is done)."
– Court & Young 2003:10

other. It is an attempt to gauge whether the NGO and its viewpoints are seen as more credible, even if these views differ from those of the target group(s), and/or whether the terms of debate with these target audiences have noticeably changed – in either process or content - as a result of the dialogue and influencing activity. Or have NGO efforts created a broader policy horizon amongst policymakers? All this is independent of whether any actual policy change has taken place.

All the NGOs surveyed indicated ways in which their influencing work has affected policy debates on trade, from local and regional to international levels. For example, CIECA speaks of helping to open the way for actors other than the private sector, that is, social organizations in the Dominican Republic, to participate in the national debate on trade. The Trades Centre in Zimbabwe says that two of its research pieces on how Economic Partnership Agreements with the EU will affect the southern Africa region formed a basis for the dialogue and negotiations between the Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the EU. At the global level, IGTN believes its leadership on gender has been responsible for the attention given to gender issues at the WTO and UNCTAD.

Some NGOs use the increased demand from target groups for their services or their materials as one proxy for gauging their effect on the trade policy debate. Others say their research and influencing have increased their access to higher-level decision makers. Campaigning was mentioned as a contributing factor among only a minority of those surveyed.

Many of the examples used by the NGOs to illustrate their impact on trade debates remain at a general level, as above. But some are more precise, linking specific research to specific debates. QIAP credits its paper on the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) with having influenced other players more seriously to question the functioning of this organization, mentioning Brazil, Argentina and the South Centre particularly. ICTSD believes its materials played a similar role in the WIPO context, and says also that its approach of 'situational analysis' has changed the nature of WTO

discussions on special and differential treatment for developing countries. OI credits its research on cotton with having stimulated four West African countries to examine how US cotton subsidies are affecting their producers, and to take this case to the WTO prior to the Cancún ministerial meeting. IISD says its environmental proposals have found their way into proposals made by developing countries at the WTO Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE).

Some of these examples point to another role NGOs sometimes play in opening up and increasing public transparency in policy debates. As Thomas Weiss notes: “NGOs are...capable of making sensitive or politically important information public – something that intergovernmental organizations often are reluctant or loathe to do because of their dependence on member states for resources” (Weiss 1999, quoted in Gemmill 2002:17).

As IDRC has discovered in its work on assessing the policy influence of research (Carden 2004: 136), the causal link between a given research activity and a specific effect on the policy debate is often difficult to ascertain. Many of the NGOs interviewed were careful to point out that there are often other factors besides their own research and influencing that lead to the broadening and deepening of the debate. Some attribute it also to other activities they are engaged in, on their own or with allies, such as capacity building with social organizations or government officials, or media campaigns. Some mention external factors such as the occurrence of a trade dispute, the start of negotiations or the impact of a trade measure on a local constituency.

Affecting policy regimes refers to actual changes of policy by target groups which can be ascribed in some measure to the influencing activity of the NGO and its partners (the evidence rarely shows a one-to-one cause and effect relationship). Such policy changes can come in several more formal (and perhaps rarer) forms: new or amended laws, regulations, rules of trade, or structures for decision-making, implementation or monitoring. Or they may be manifested through changes in positions the target audiences bring to the discussion or the negotiating table.

Changing the terms of the debate is one thing, but it is usually a great leap from there to actually producing policy change. As expected, most NGOs had shorter lists of accomplishments under this type of advocacy. But in some cases the increased debate on trade issues leads to tangible results. Among those mentioned was:

- a shift in the Ghanaian government position on government procurement (TWN-Africa)
- Nepal's resistance to pressure to join the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) during negotiations on WTO accession (SAWTEE)
- a more precise Caribbean Community and Common Market (CARICOM) position on special and differential treatment (CPDC)
- slowing down the pace of the Dominican government's program of tariff reductions (CIECA)
- rejection by the European Parliament of a directive on biotechnology patents (GRAIN)
- an environmental assessment carried out under the US-Chile Free Trade Agreement (RIDES)
- delaying passage of the US-Central America FTA through the US Congress (ART)
- influence on WTO policy on access to medicines at Doha, in South Africa, Brazil and Canada (QIAP, OI – see Box 1)
- a change in EU position from one of supporting inclusion of an investment agreement at the WTO (AAI, with others)
- acceptance of CUTS-CITEE recommendations on amending the Patent Bill of India in 2005
- acceptance for the presentation of *amicus curae* briefs by civil society organizations at NAFTA dispute settlement panels (IISD)
- acceptance at the International Standards Organisation ISO of amendments to a standard relating to drinking water supply and sewerage (CI – see case study below, Box 1)

- several major clothing brands now require their suppliers to respect their workers' right to freedom of association; some brands have adopted labour codes of conduct (MSN).

Developing new policy regimes refers to emerging issues on which an NGO may have been able to pressure a target group, which responds by establishing policy in an area where there was no policy previously.

Inserting a new policy area on a political agenda is even more difficult than swaying a debate that is at least already under way. But NGOs cited a few examples:

- the EU's adoption of a position and action plan on commodities (OI)
- development of policy and legal options to protect traditional knowledge, and to define *sui generis* systems and disclosure of origin at WIPO (GRAIN)
- an FAO policy on Farmers' Rights (GRAIN)
- Chilean government consideration of a policy on biosafety (RIDES)
- agreement to put the cross-border movement of GMOs on the agenda of Convention on Biological Diversity, which led eventually to the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety (TWN, with others)
- business organisations grouped in the India-Brazil-South Africa Business Council appear ready to accept recommendations from an NGO on policy advocacy by this body to the respective governments (CUTS-CITEE)
- in Canada, 13 universities, one city (Vancouver) and six school boards have adopted ethical purchasing policies in relation to their garment needs (MSN).

Notwithstanding the caveat regarding attribution, this body of policy change among just a small sampling of NGOs demonstrates some important political energy and muscle. There are of course many other well-known examples not captured by the IDRC study, such as the role environmental NGOs played in bringing Canada, the USA and Mexico to include provisions on the environment in NAFTA in the early 1990s (Esty 1997:12). NGOs do have impact on trade policy.

Conclusion

“In 1996...trade was only understood by a handful of government officials, private sector experts and academics...”. Today, “trade negotiations make it to the newspaper headlines almost on a daily basis” (ICTSD 2005). Part of the responsibility for this increased exposure and public interest in trade issues is due to NGOs - their influencing and information campaigns, their drive to open trade processes to transparency.

The huge range of NGOs and their approaches to trade policy research and influencing, compared to the limited scope of the NGO study that is the basis for this paper, make it somewhat hazardous to conclude with definitive statements that apply to all. As well, it was only the views of the NGOs themselves that were sought, not those of other policy actors or knowledgeable outside observers. Nonetheless, this study advances some tentative observations, which bear further verification testing in the future:

- NGOs tend to have a practical, applied viewpoint on the purpose of their research – the intent is to gather evidence to influence the policies of their target groups in order to make trade rules more an instrument for poverty reduction and sustainable development.
- The organizations consulted have increased the depth and breadth of their research and advocacy capacities in recent years.
- Trade policy-related NGO staff tend to function as both researchers and influencers, cultivating the range of skill sets involved - rather than there being a separation between the roles.
- NGOs with the best access to national and international policymakers, and the most influence, tend to illustrate the wisdom culled from the IDRC and ODI studies on the relationship between research and policy:

- o NGO researcher/influencers build long-term relationships with policymakers, with whom they are in constant dialogue.
 - o These NGOs place researcher/influencers in locations where they can closely monitor the context and policy process, be attuned to the debates and take advantage of policy windows as they open.
 - o Their research goes beyond description of the problem, to proposals for viable solutions.
 - o Research is backed up with evidence of the effect of policies on people and communities, and testimonies from those affected. NGOs sometimes produce the best information because of their deep roots in local communities.
 - o Many have learned to use a conscious strategy for dissemination of research results in a timely fashion and in formats of use to policymakers, and know how to involve media.
 - o They participate in extensive networks with other NGOs, sharing research, building research capacity and influencing strategies for greater combined political clout.
 - o Many are able to mobilize a broad constituency behind a policy change due to their, or their grassroots partners', presence in communities (in South or North) and their use of strategies of education, communication and/or mobilization.
 - o In many there is a catalyzing individual who acts as a leader, policy entrepreneur and media spokesperson.
- NGOs with the most influence tend to have a centralized core of researcher/influencers, with networks of other researchers they can call on or contract in key geographic locations around the globe or on key topics. Such NGOs are of course able to mobilize more resources to support their policy work (as distinct from their long-term development or humanitarian response work).
 - A significant number of the NGOs surveyed employ strategies to build research capacity in southern communities, often in partnerships where local organizations

These networks have proved to be a key vehicle for capacity building, information exchange, technology transfer and, most importantly, policy reform and strengthening.
-- Sikoyo 2003: 24

or experts provide the micro-analysis on the effects of trade policies, and the NGO the macro-analysis of global trade rule debates, and directions for alternatives. These NGOs build links between the local and the global. Local research findings provide evidence to sustain global alternative policy formulations; the global perspective brought by international NGOs enriches the national policy debate.

- It is easier for an NGO having a solid knowledge base and research capacity to diversify into dissemination, campaigning and influencing functions than for a campaigning and advocacy NGO to develop the necessary research capacity.
- Most NGOs are focused on the policy issues of the day. Few are able to put research time into issues that may emerge three to five years in the future.
- The organizations consulted have through their work affected either the process or content of the international trade policy debate. Many have had an influence on changing specific policies or put new policy issues on the agenda of decision makers. Using a combination of strategies and alliances, NGOs have put themselves on the map of political influence in trade matters. The strength of that influence is still undoubtedly less than that of other actors such as states and the private sector. Further, NGOs have yet to be accorded the recognition in official trade negotiating fora that they have won in environmental arenas, for example. But their influence is growing.
- The main impediments to better research among NGOs are funding, short supply of adequately trained personnel both for research and organizing the contracting of research, and lack of access to up-to-date information/data.

Finally, what could be the “criteria for competence” of an NGO in trade policy research and influencing? Here is an initial list to ignite further thought and discussion.

- Ability to understand policy processes and develop effective strategies to engage with them (ability to locate the ‘policy change windows’), taking into account internal/external and macro/micro contexts. Must have a finger on the pulse of the policy process.

- Ability to gather ‘hard’ (e.g. data) and ‘soft’ (e.g. stories) credible evidence, from local, regional and global levels, primary and secondary sources, as appropriate to the various stages of the policy process.
- Ability to use research evidence to formulate proposals having a realistic potential for changing trade and investment policy in order to advance the cause of the poor and marginalized and/or enhance the environment.
- Ability to use a range of tools to engage directly and indirectly with policymakers, gain their trust, build relationships based on two-way communication, and establish the NGO as a credible voice.
- Ability to communicate evidence and policy proposals to policymakers in ways policymakers can understand and use
- Ability to combine forces with other organizations in networks and coalitions for learning and greater political impact.
- Ability to engage in a peer review process to validate research findings.
- presence of a strategy for development of trade research and influencing capacity, whether in-house, within grassroots or networked partner organizations, or through contracted expertise.
- Ability to self-critically reflect on their own research and influencing performance and apply lessons learned (monitoring and evaluation).
- Persistence over the long term, to follow the entire policy process.
- Ideally, the ability to anticipate issues before they surface on policymaker agendas so that research and proposals can be readied beforehand.
- Ideally, some successes in getting their issues onto policymaker agendas, changing the terms of the debate, or affecting policy regimes.

Would such an array of criteria be fulfillable only by a large well-funded international NGO? Hopefully not; rather, that there is enough space to include smaller, local/national/regional NGOs, which are important links in the chain.

Areas for Further Research

This brief paper and the study that spawned it are only a first look at NGO trade policy research and influencing. The observations remain broad and general in nature. There is now a need to drill down to greater depth. Among remaining questions and avenues for further investigation are:

- A qualitative assessment of NGO research methods and products, and the degree to which researched policy proposals are appropriate to contexts and to each stage of the policy process. Such an assessment would draw a fuller picture of the nature of NGO research than was possible in the initial study and look at additional attributes such as how NGOs determine research topics, methodologies used, types of research undertaken, research dissemination and the choice of researchers in relation to political/contextual realities.
- A selection of more detailed case studies to determine with greater certainty: 1) the effects of NGO research on trade policy or negotiations, through triangulation amongst the views of the players involved (this first study asked only the NGOs producing the research), and 2) what methods and what circumstances ensure the greatest uptake of research by trade policy processes (or conversely, the relative weight of NGO research among many factors leading to policy change). A related aspect would be to understand what factors best contribute to establishing NGO legitimacy/credibility in trade policy debates and fora. Such studies would need to take better account of the policy and political context and external factors impacting policy processes.
- Research to identify how NGOs can anticipate and prepare research on trade and investment issues likely to emerge in the medium term (up to five years from now) and to influence policy agendas to include them.
- An assessment of capacity building for trade research and influencing in southern NGOs and communities.

- NGO network, partnership and coalition building for research and trade policy change (national, regional, global levels).
- NGO inclusion in national trade negotiating teams: pros and cons, how NGOs gain access, results.
- The trade policy research and influencing abilities of Civil Society Organizations (beyond NGOs).

Appendix: List of NGOs Contacted in the NGO Study

- ActionAid International (AAI), Johannesburg, South Africa
- Alliance for Responsible Trade (ART), Washington DC, USA
- Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC), St Michael, Barbados
- Centro de Investigación Económica para el Caribe (CIECA), Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic
- Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI), Bergen, Norway
- Consumer Unity and Trust Society / Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS/CITEE), Jaipur, Rajasthan, India
- Consumers International (CI), London, United Kingdom
- Focus on the Global South, Bangkok, Thailand
- Genetic Resources Action International (GRAIN), Barcelona, Spain
- International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD), Geneva, Switzerland
- International Gender and Trade Network (IGTN), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil
- International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), Winnipeg, Canada
- Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN), Toronto, Canada
- Oxfam International (OI), Oxford, United Kingdom
- Quaker International Affairs Program (QIAP), Ottawa, Canada
- Recursos e Investigación para el Desarrollo Sustentable (RIDES), Santiago, Chile
- Red Mexicana de Acción Frente al Libre Comercio (RMALC), Mexico City, Mexico
- South Asia Watch on Trade, Economics and Environment (SAWTEE), Kathmandu, Nepal
- Southern and Eastern Africa Trade, Information and Negotiations Initiative (SEATINI), Harare, Zimbabwe
- Third World Network (TWN), Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia
- Third World Network Africa (TWN-A), Accra, Ghana
- Trade and Development Studies Centre Trust (Trades Centre), Harare, Zimbabwe

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