

*Voluntas: International Journal of Voluntary and Nonprofit Organizations*  
Vol. 13, No. 4, December 2002 (© 2002)

## Grassroots Movements as Transnational Actors: Implications for Global Civil Society

Srilatha Batliwala<sup>1</sup>

---

*The past two decades witnessed the emergence of a new range of transnational social movements, networks, and organizations seeking to promote a more just and equitable global order. With this broadening and deepening of cross-border citizen action, however, troubling questions have arisen about their rights of representation and accountability—the internal hierarchies of voice and access within transnational civil society are being highlighted. The rise of transnational grassroots movements, with strong constituency base and sophisticated advocacy capability at both local and global levels, is an important phenomenon in this context. These movements are formed and led by poor and marginalized groups, and defy the stereotype of grassroots movements being narrowly focused on local issues. They embody both a challenge and an opportunity for democratizing, legitimizing, and strengthening the role of transnational civil society in global policy.*

---

**KEY WORDS:** transnational civil society; social movements; grassroots movements; direct stakeholders; Slum/Shack Dwellers International; Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing.

The rise in number of internationally orientated civil society actors over the past two decades has been exponential. An entirely new range of social movements, networks, and organizations has emerged at the transnational level, often collectively—and somewhat inaccurately—described as “global civil society,” in what has clearly developed as a sort of global civic space. This phenomenon is a cause–effect spiral generated by several forces in recent history, generally described as “globalization.”

<sup>1</sup>To whom correspondence should be addressed at The Hauser Center for Nonprofit Organizations, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 79 John F. Kennedy Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02138. E-mail: [srilatha.batliwala@harvard.edu](mailto:srilatha.batliwala@harvard.edu)

## THE RISE OF GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

The unregulated practices of transnational corporations in particular, and of global capital, in general provided the earliest catalysts for civil society groups to join hands across national borders to demand accountability.<sup>2</sup> By the late 1970s, global networks focusing on environment, human rights, and gender equality had emerged, recognizing the universality of these issues and the need for unified international policy mechanisms. Worldwide, there was growing acknowledgment that governments could not achieve development goals without the participation of civil society. The United Nations (UN) "Conference Decade" of the 1990s accelerated the global associational revolution by affirming the right of nongovernmental actors to participate in shaping national and global policies on the environment, population, human rights, economic development, and women.<sup>3</sup> On their part, civil society actors had also discovered the power of international support, resources, and intervention in strengthening local work or fighting local repression.

The increasing integration of the world's economies into a vast global market has provided further fuel for the growth of global civil society. A whole range of old and new economic and financial institutions and mechanisms, operating across borders and regions, are increasingly shaping the development 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 health, development agenda, and policies of individual nations—especially poor nations. They include the World Trade Organization (WTO), the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and regional development banks, and regional trade organizations (the North American Free Trade Agreement, the European Union, and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations). The global economic arrangements ushered in or supported 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 because they are reshaping national policies and pushing forward legislative and fiscal reforms that will serve global market interests (such as lowering trade barriers, loosening labor laws, and adhering to new copyright laws).

<sup>2</sup>Such as the worldwide boycott of Nestlé products to protest that multinational corporation's marketing of infant milk formula to poor rural households, using salespersons dressed as nurses, which resulted in countless infant deaths. This was an effective boycott, in the days of snail mail, which led to a change of marketing strategy. Also, the Bhopal gas disaster helped unearth evidence of the unethical practices of the multinational Union Carbide, causing civil society organizations of the North and the South to unite in a joint campaign demanding accountability from multinational corporations.

<sup>3</sup>The 1990s 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; the women's conference in Beijing in 1995; and the Habitat II conference in Istanbul in 1996.

These institutions, however, 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. 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.

Moreover, the unprecedented possibilities unleashed by new information and communication technologies have further 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.

### TRANSNATIONAL GRASSROOTS MOVEMENTS

With the emergence of transnational movements and campaigns, there have been both a broadening and a deepening of citizen formations. Individuals, groups, organizations, networks, and federations, with vastly different attributes, structures, and ways of functioning, can be found within each of these movements at different locations—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, there are very few movements or citizen networks that do not recognize the necessity—some might say urgency—of organizing across borders and dealing with the range of international institutions that are increasingly influencing their local realities.

Although it is very comforting to view this panorama—what Ann Florini (2000) describes somewhat unflatteringly as “a loose agglomeration of unelected activists” (p. 3)—through the rosy lens of “social movement,” the fact is that these different actors enjoy varying levels of power and privilege in shaping the debate, speaking for the affected, and gaining entry into policy-making arena. Which is why a distinction must be made between those who are negotiating the adverse impacts of economic changes in their own homes, communities, and lives—what can be termed “direct stakeholders”—with those who are less directly affected, no matter how committed to the plight of others. This is important not for moral but analytical reasons, especially in the context of social movements. Another important distinction is that 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 inclusion, recognition and participation. On the other are those that have opted for a politics of partnership—partnership, that is, between traditionally opposed groups, such as states, corporations and workers. (Appadurai, 2002, p. 2)

As the most important “popular” force pushing for greater democratization and accountability of global governance and financial institutions, it is vital that “good” global civil society—that is, the segment committed to peace, equity, democracy, and tolerance—introspect on its own level of democracy and representativeness. It is in this context that transnational grassroots movements manifest an important force for democratizing global society’s structure, agendas, and strategies. And it is in this regard that four propositions can be advanced to establish the rationale for this concern, and the implications of transnational grassroots movements for discussions about global civil society.

**Proposition 1.** *In a globalized world, the understanding of whom and what is “grassroots” has changed; hence, the characterization of “grassroots movements” is also being changed.*

The concept of “grassroots” was once very specific: it meant the basic building blocks of society—small rural communities or urban neighborhoods where the “common man” (or woman) lived. In some contexts, it was used to signify the poor, labor, or working class, as opposed to dominant social elites; in others, it was usually applied to rural, village-level communities rather than to urban ones. But today, globalization and the emergence of a “global” citizen have changed the way in which the term “grassroots” is used. Consequently, the meaning of grassroots movements is also undergoing a sea change. Recent papers by Bruno (2002) and Karliner (2002), for example, about both the protests at the World Economic Forum in New York City and the deliberations at the World Social Forum in Porto Allegre are clubbed under the heading “Grassroots Globalization.” Both authors make it clear that they consider these very separate activities, attended by very few of the really poor or marginalized, as expressions of grassroots voices. So it would appear that in a national or local context, grassroots means one thing, and in the context of global activism, quite another. This creates conceptual and analytical problems in our attempts to understand grassroots movements at the transnational level, and we must move toward greater clarity about whom we want to include in the category grassroots. Thus, grassroots and nongrassroots should be differentiated in terms of the *degree of vulnerability* to global policy and economic shifts. In other words, grassroots can be a relative rather than static term, but should always refer to those who are most severely affected in terms of the material condition of their daily lives.

**Proposition 2.** *This broadening of the term grassroots and grassroots movements 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. These imbalances have a direct bearing on who can effectively access advocacy opportunities or participation spaces for civil society at the international public policy level.*

Global civil society is a microcosm, in many ways, 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, and “elite” NGOs at the national level. As 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. (Edwards, 2001, p. 146)

Elsewhere, Edwards writes that “only 251 of the 1,550 NGOs associated with the UN Department of Public Information come from the South, and the ratio of NGOs in consultative status with ECOSOC [United Nations Economic and Social Council] is even lower” (Edwards, 2000, p. 18). Global NGOs and civil society networks, while representing the issues and concerns of poor or marginalized people in global policy realms, often have few formal or structured links with direct stakeholder constituencies. Their “take” on issues and strategic priorities is rarely subject to debate within the communities whose concerns they represent. When interrogated closely, one finds that their priorities and positions are not necessarily derived through any convincing process of grassroots debate and legitimization.

For instance, several grassroots women’s groups (identities withheld at their request) who recently attended a Commission on Status of Women meeting in New York were exasperated when an international coalition of NGOs kept deleting the term “women” from their draft, substituting it with “gender,” without bothering to determine whether they had consciously chosen to use the former term. The assumption was that they were using outdated language.<sup>4</sup> Similarly, during the mass protests during the meeting of the WTO in Seattle in December of 1999, the NGOs that were “regulating” spaces for public meetings declined to allot the space requested by members of GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood). The reason was apparently their less than hard-line stand—these poor Third World women were demanding equal access to global markets. These are obviously extreme examples—most transnational NGOs are subtler than this, and are far too savvy to practice such outrageous discrimination against grassroots groups. The point is that the growing sophistication and complexity of global policy debates—especially regarding economic policy and

<sup>4</sup>Personal communication of Prema Gopalan, Director, Swayam Shikshan Prayog, a grassroots NGO working in earthquake-affected communities in Central India. Swayam Shikshan Prayog is also a member of the transnational GROOTS (Grassroots Organizations Operating Together in Sisterhood) network.

financial flows—create their own pressures and assumptions of expertise among those who frequent these arenas. Again, the speed at which some of these processes occur often requires rapid-fire interventions that may not allow for extensive debate among affected constituencies.

The case is quite similar at the national level. Advocacy spaces for influencing public policy are often occupied by more “elite” NGOs that may or may not have direct links with or accountability to the constituencies affected by such policy—and often have distinctly different perceptions of the nature of the problem. Several Indian scholars have analyzed, for instance, the differences in priorities between “direct stakeholders,” conservationists, political parties, and other environmental activists in recent environmental struggles (Bawiskar, 2001, pp. 3–6; Guha, 2000). Government authorities often collude and reinforce the exclusion of direct stakeholders by inviting the elite NGOs into policy-making processes, rather than the loud, militant, and difficult to control grassroots groups who do not speak the same bureaucratic language that elite social advocates have learned. In older civil societies, or countries with longer histories of organizing and more democratic space for citizen participation in policy formation, however, larger numbers of grassroots or community-based organizations have gained direct access to policy processes.

On the other hand, grassroots constituencies and their formations 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 Mumbai in India. 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 (Batliwala, 1987).

**Proposition 3.** *There is a need to advance and sharpen theory and analysis of social movements. We need to rebuild our definitions and theories of social movements to address not only transnational movements, but of cross-border grassroots movements.*

The term “movement” has become so *au courant* and loosely used in current discourse as to become almost devoid of meaning. So before we can address the question of grassroots movements and their role in public policy, we need to revisit our definition of movements and be clear about what is and is not a movement. For, it is somewhat troubling how many different phenomena are described as movements: agglomerations of organizations working on a particular issue (women’s empowerment, child labor, peace and security, land rights, etc.), single

organizations mobilizing people around a single issue (preventing the construction of a large dam or nuclear power station, demand for political autonomy or statehood, abolition of bonded labor, etc.), and federations or networks of organizations with different foci but affiliated in pursuit of some generic or sectoral interests (such as nonprofit umbrella organizations, businesses, trade associations, etc).

Classic social movement theory seems almost irrelevant juxtaposed with the current array of transnational claimants to the movement title. Khagram, Riker, and Sikkink, quoting McAdam, refer to the “myopically domestic” focus of movement theorists, and call for greater attention to the emergence of transnational movements, particularly through more interdisciplinary work—such as between social movement and international relations theory (Khagram et al., 2002, pp. 5–6). Even McAdam’s theory of political process (McAdam, 1982), which at least acknowledges both political environment and organizing capacity as essential to movements, does not account for the way in which some movements—such as the ones examined later in this paper—*create* a political ambiance. The slum-dwellers movement in Mumbai gained strength and became a national movement at a time when the political environment was particularly hostile to the claims of slum dwellers. They helped change government policy toward the resettlement rights of pavement dwellers at a time when the regime in power had an unbroken record of antipathy and subtle violence toward slum dwellers. As Sheller (2000) engagingly argues, “fluid metaphors operate in relation to social movements,” and there is a need to put the “movement” back into social movement theory—to view and understand movements in more fluid, mobile ways.

There is thus a need to build new frameworks out of the experience of the range of global movements that emerged in the past 20 years, and given the growing phenomenon of grassroots-based movements. The search for fresh theoretical and analytical constructs will have to address several issues, including the following: the causal, structural, and strategic distinctions between grassroots movements (such as of the urban poor, home-based workers, poor grassroots women, the Roma) and other types of movements (e.g., the landmines campaign, antiglobalization); the new forms of homogeneity and heterogeneity that coexist within movements (e.g., geographically and culturally dispersed groups like slum dwellers or indigenous people forming associations and new identities across borders); the differences in organizing and advocacy strategies principles between domestic (Chiapas) and transnational (landmines or freedom from debt) movements; characteristics of short-term (campaigns against nuclear installations) and long-term struggles for change (disarmament, rights of informal sector workers) and between single-issue (reproductive rights) versus more broad-based transformation-type movements (antiglobalization); and the phenomenon of participation in multiple movements—that is, the fluidity and mobility that makes the boundaries between movements more porous than in the past.

**Proposition 4.** *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 structures to sustain their movements. They are challenging the rights of nongrassroots organizations to lead and represent them, especially in the public policy arena at both national and international levels.*

For all the reasons cited earlier, there are a growing number of grassroots, direct-stakeholder, as well as ascriptive or identity based associations that have emerged as global entities—home-based workers, child workers, self-employed women, small and marginal farmers, fish workers, shack/slum dwellers, grassroots women, indigenous people, dalits, and other racially, ethnically, or religiously based associations. More important, many are critically questioning 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 global actors—some could be far more militant (such as Latin American peasant movements or the Narmada Bachao Andolan), and others far more pragmatic and less “ideological” (such as the home-based workers and slum dwellers) than their counterparts would like.

Transnational grassroots movements are struggling with several ironies: the resistance to resourcing them from funders who have pigeonholed 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. 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.<sup>5</sup> 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 (Batiwala, 2001). 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 with state and private sector actors to sharpen their engagement with public policy processes at both national and transnational levels.

## GOING GLOBAL

Although there are many effective transnational grassroots movements, the following two case studies relating to Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing (WIEGO) and Slum/Shack Dwellers International (SDI) best illustrate the power and potential of grassroots movements that go global.

<sup>5</sup>Personal communication with A. Jockin, President of the National Slum Dwellers Federation of India, and cofounder of Slum/Shack Dwellers International.

### The Case of WIEGO

In 1994, unions of home-based workers in both developed and developing countries, led by SEWA (Self Employed Women's Association) 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, who had not been welcomed by existing national or international trade union federations. Their aims were to build an international network for home-based workers and their organizations, as well as allies from among NGOs, cooperatives, trade unions, researchers, and women's groups who were committed to improving the conditions of such workers; to coordinate an international campaign for the improvement of working conditions for home-based workers at national, regional, and international levels; and to strengthen home-based workers themselves through information and technical assistance.

It soon became apparent, however, that these goals could work against each other—for instance, 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 important, for the purpose of the analysis here, they realized that research and enumeration, macroeconomic 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. HomeNet also began to recognize 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—to become the international research and advocacy platform for women in informal employment. Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing strives to improve the status of women in informal employment “through compiling better statistics, conducting research and developing [enabling] programmes and policies” ([www.wiego.org](http://www.wiego.org)). Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing'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 (the United Nations Development Fund for Women). Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing's research and advocacy agendas are generated and monitored through annual meetings in which 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 Labor Organization (ILO) of a new Convention on Home Work in June 1996. Now, WIEGO works closely with allies within ILO to improve and strengthen the basic framework of the convention—such as sharpening definitions of home-based work—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 one region—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 policymakers to address their issues, WIEGO has made great strides in four short years. It has developed a close working relationship with the United Nations Statistics Division and the ILO Bureau of Statistics so as 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). 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 ILO to prepare a booklet of all existing statistics on the informal economy worldwide. Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing's uniqueness lies in having created a single space in which a diverse range of actors, with different capacities and interests, can work together to improve the situation of informal workers—statisticians, economists, activists and organizers, policy analysts, and academics from different disciplines.

### **The Case of SDI**

Slum/Shack Dwellers International was the outcome of a process of lateral learning and strategic planning processes undertaken from 1988 to 1996 between organizations of slum and shack dwellers and their partner NGOs in Asia and Africa. These included the NGO SPARC (Society for Promotion of Area Resource Centres), the National Slum Dwellers Federation (NSDF) and Mahila Milan<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup>Mahila Milan is a network of poor urban women and works closely with NSDF but maintains a separate identity to ensure that women's priorities are protected and expressed.

(literally, “women together”) in India, 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. Slum/Shack Dwellers International was founded in 1996 and formally registered in 1999, and comprises federations representing over one million urban poor in 11 countries. The network is interesting because while federations of the urban poor—such as the NSDF 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 instance, they are typically involved in monitoring and analyzing public policy developments, opening spaces for the urban poor federations with local, national, and international policy bodies, in managing the formidable database generated by the federations through their settlement surveys, and in fund-raising. 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.

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 savings and credit groups to provide consumption loans, build their creditworthiness for future housing loans, and develop 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 than 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. (Patel et al., 2001, p. 47)

Slum/Shack Dwellers International’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 to each other. Slum/Shack Dwellers International also uses successful partnerships with state actors such as local bureaucrats and elected officials in one of its areas of operation to leverage similar support or cut through red tape in other countries and cities. 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, to gain legitimacy for slum census data generated by its member federations as the basis for official resettlement policy rather than government data, to secure 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 to enable affected communities to select their resettlement sites (from an approved menu of choices) in cases where existing settlements are to be cleared.

At the international level, too, SDI has begun to change 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. The United Nations Habitat Program sought out SDI as its partner in launching its Secure Urban Tenure Campaign in 2000. Most recently, SDI was asked to design and convene the Urban Poverty Forum in Nairobi (May 2002), which ran alongside the Urban Forum, an outcome of the Habitat Conferences. 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-led, and 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 works. 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.

### IMPLICATIONS FOR GLOBAL CIVIL SOCIETY

These two cases bring out several critical elements that go to the heart of current debates about global civil society—particularly regarding its legitimacy, accountability, and right to have both a voice and a vote in global policy. These are also the elements that have made these movements particularly successful in terms of policy impact. These elements are considered in turn.

*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. As organizations, they did not mobilize a constituency, their constituents created them. When SDI or WIEGO leaders represent their movement in any forum, it is clear to all concerned that hundreds of thousands of their members are standing behind them. This has

enormous impact, particularly in their capacity to engage and negotiate with formal institutions.

*They are women-centered and have evolved a genuinely “gendered” approach.* Although WIEGO’s founding networks are women driven, they do not exclude men, because obviously, men also form a substantial segment of informal workers. Their priority areas for research and action reflect this—the emphasis on social security measures, for instance, rather than on wage issues. Slum/Shack Dwellers International’s organizing strategies at the community and federation levels 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 is a cofounder of SDI. Consequently, their approaches to informal work and the urban poor are deeply and fundamentally gendered. This is an important feature, given the fact that many of the more visible and articulate transnational advocacy groups are often either blind or weak in their gender analysis (Dhanraj et al., 2002).

*They take an empowered stance.* Neither of these movements suffers from the “poor me” syndrome, nor positions 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 see themselves as populations playing vital roles in both macro- and microeconomic contexts, providing critical services to their cities, and to the local, national, and global economies. 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. It is also dramatically different from how they are often represented by those advocating on their behalf.

*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 awareness building and developing people-centered solutions, has been a fundamental strategy of both WIEGO and SDI. Data are used not only to increase visibility, but as the basis of both contestation and partnership with state and multilateral actors.<sup>7</sup> They hire or otherwise acquire the necessary research expertise, but the data are owned and controlled by the movement, and used strategically by its leaders—not by remote researchers or outside institutions. This contests the assumption that grassroots actors are incapable of engaging sophisticated, complex policy debates without

<sup>7</sup>In India, local federations discovered early that government data about slums was highly inaccurate and biased toward underenumeration. They demonstrated this through their own census of India’s largest slum in Mumbai, 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. Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing has demonstrated similar undercounting of informal workers in virtually all national economic surveys.

experts interceding for them in this capacity. And in both cases, they do not allow access to or manipulation of their data by outside researchers to build their professional profiles or out of academic interest, unless these activities bring strong and clear benefits to the movement.

*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.

*These partnerships with high-caliber expertise, combined with a solid grassroots base, have 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 policies, 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.

*They come to the table with concrete strategies, not with problems. They demonstrate that sustainable solutions are possible only through partnership with them.* Both these movements have been extremely creative in the way they develop solutions and strategies in specific locations, and use these to push for changes at other locations and levels. For instance, at national and city levels, SDI's members have proved that sustainable solutions to slum rehabilitation are possible only when slum dwellers are actively involved in designing and implementing the solutions.<sup>8</sup> Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing'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.

*They have changed definitions, debates, and policy dialogues about their constituents.* Women in the Informal Economy Globalizing and Organizing has helped transform the earlier very narrow, economic definition of informal employment, and gained endorsement for a broader definition from an international body like ILO. Slum/Shack Dwellers International has changed definitions of the urban poor, altered urban infrastructure construction and tendering norms, and pushed through

<sup>8</sup>Slum/Shack Dwellers International'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 Mumbai's railway tracks and roads. More important, 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.

policies such as joint housing tenure for men and women that have far-reaching transformative implications.

*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, and 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.

*Size and spread matters.* The experience of both these movements seems to demonstrate that institutions like the World Bank or multilateral agencies like ILO take them very seriously largely because they represent serious numbers, across a significant number of countries and regions. It is doubtful if they could have had the same access, voice, or negotiating space without these two attributes. This again distinguishes them from a number of the transnational NGO networks.

## CONCLUSION

Transnational grassroots movements are an emerging force in the global arena. It is clear that some—such as the two examples presented here—have developed equal or even greater capacity (than their more “elite” counterparts) to influence public policy at the international level. There is evidence that more such movements are on the rise. Together, they are breaking the stereotype that grassroots movements are locally or domestically focused, or concerned only with building local alliances that strengthen their membership and agenda. These actors are forging links across borders, making common cause with their counterparts regardless of the cultural and context differences that were once thought to be barriers to such associations. They demonstrate the capacity to have visions, agendas, and identities that are transnational and even global in every sense.

More important, they are “different from most other transnational citizen networks [because] 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” (Edwards, 2001, p. 145). Thus, while both SDI and WIEGO are undoubtedly strengthened by the presence of such NGOs in the partnership, the priorities and agendas are generated by the grassroots member organizations and their leaders, such as the South African Homeless People’s Federation, the National Slum Dwellers Federation, HomeNet, and StreetNet.

The challenge they represent, however, to other transnational civil society actors is that they enjoy a greater degree of legitimacy in the eyes of policymakers and multilateral institutions because of their grassroots base. As Edwards would have it, they have gained the right to participate in global and local decision-making by having met their obligation to derive this right from a concrete base of grassroots

constituents (Edwards, 2001, p. 145). This in turn is because 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 nongrassroots 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 (Edwards, 2001, p. 146).

Other transnational civil society actors—particularly those involved in global and regional policy advocacy—must consider the implications of these grassroots movements for their own strategies. 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 advocacy and global advocacy build strong and accountable relationships with grassroots constituencies—and with grassroots organizations and movements wherever they do exist.

Sundaramma, a grassroots women's leader, told me more than a decade ago that to empower the voices of the poor in policy-making, outside activists must reposition their leadership roles over time. She said, "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."<sup>9</sup> Clearly, there are a growing number of transnational grassroots movements that are already walking in front.

## REFERENCES

- Q2 Appadurai, A. (2002). Deep democracy: Urban governmentality and the horizon of politics. *Public Cult.* 14(1).
- Q3 Batiwala, S. (1987). Women and housing. *Lokayan Bull.* July.
- Batiwala, S. (2001). Acting for change: Trends and challenges in citizen movements. Background paper for CIVICUS General Assembly, Vancouver, Canada. [www.civicassembly.org](http://www.civicassembly.org)
- Bawiskar, A. (2001). Red in tooth and claw: Looking for class in struggles over nature. Department of Sociology, University of Delhi. [www.cals.cornell.edu/polson/papers](http://www.cals.cornell.edu/polson/papers)

<sup>9</sup>Personal communication with Sundaramma, Mahila Samakhya Sangha (women's collective) leader of Bagdal village, Bidar District, Karnataka State in South India, in February 1991.

**Grassroots Movements****409**

- Bruno, K. (February 6, 2002). The whole world was watching: New York stages a peaceful protest against the World Economic Forum. *CorpWatch*. [www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)
- Dhanraj, D., Batliwala, S., and Misra, G. (2002). A South Asian perspective on future challenges for the global women's movement. Paper presented at the Ninth AWID (Association for Women's Rights in Development) Forum, October 3–6, 2002, Guadalajara, Mexico. Forthcoming publication of AWID and Mama Cash, online: [www.awid.org](http://www.awid.org)
- Edwards, M. (2000). *NGO Rights and Responsibilities: A New Deal for Global Governance*, The Foreign Policy Centre, London.
- Q4 Edwards, M. (2001). Global civil society and community exchanges: A different form of movement. *Environ. Urban*. **13**(2): 145–149.
- Florini, A. M. (2000). *The Third Force: The Rise of Transnational Civil Society*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC/Japan Center for International Exchange, Tokyo.
- Guha, R. (2000). *Environmentalism: A Global History*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, India.
- Karliner, J. (February 6, 2002). Porto Allegre: Globalizing hope. *CorpWatch*. [www.corpwatch.org](http://www.corpwatch.org)
- Khagram, S., Riker, J. V., and Sikkink, K. (eds.) (2002). *Restructuring World Politics: Transnational Social Movements, Networks and Norms*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis.
- McAdam, D. (1982). *Political Process and the Development of Black Insurgency 1930–1970*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- Q5 Patel, S., Burra, S., and D'Cruz, C. (2001). Slum/Shack Dwellers International: From foundations to treetops. *Environ. Urban*. **13**(2): 45–59.
- Sheller, M. (2000). The mechanisms of mobility and liquidity: Rethinking the movement in social movement theory. [www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc076ms.html](http://www.comp.lancs.ac.uk/sociology/soc076ms.html)

### QUERY

- Q1. "World Development Report (2000)" is not in the reference list. Please correct the citation, add the reference to the list, or delete the citation.
- Q2. Please supply page range of article.
- Q3. Please supply page range of article.
- Q4. Medline indexes "Environ. Urban." but cannot find a listing for the reference "Edwards, 2001." Please check the reference for accuracy.
- Q5. Medline indexes "Environ. Urban." but cannot find a listing for the reference "Patel, Burra, D'Cruz, 2001." Please check the reference for accuracy.