

The Impact of Transnational Civil Society

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I AM GOING TO tell you a story. From it, I will draw a number of lessons about transnational civil society and its role in governance.

The story is that of the international campaign to ban land mines. In December 1997, one hundred and twenty-two government delegations met in Ottawa to sign a treaty that banned the production, use, stockpiling, and transfer of antipersonnel land mines. Based solely on its potential humanitarian impact, this treaty represents a momentous achievement. Currently, there are approximately one hundred million land mines in the ground, responsible for killing or maiming about twenty-six thousand people a year. The vast majority of these victims are women and children. The other striking thing about this treaty is that civil society took the lead on it, not governments. In fact, this treaty came about despite the vehement objections of some of the world's major military powers. It establishes a new global norm, which admittedly is limited in extent by the fact that some of the major powers have not signed it. Nonetheless, the treaty's very existence is a major accomplishment. Standing beside the government delegations at the Ottawa conference were those of some three hundred nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). This partnership may represent something new. I would like now to talk about how this partnership came about and whether it does in fact represent something new.

In the early 1990s, members of the international NGO community, particularly the Vietnam Veterans of America Foundation, Medico

International in Germany, and Human Rights Watch, started getting together to talk about a campaign to coordinate the actions of NGOs to advocate a total ban of antipersonnel land mines. From this handful of organizations, the campaign spread to more than 1,000 such organizations in over sixty countries. The explanations for why the campaign took off the way it did are numerous: the end of the cold war loosened the international system and made it easier for organizations other than nation-states to speak and be heard; the fact that antipersonnel land mines are such repulsive instruments made it relatively easy to make a dramatic case against them; the wave of democratization that swept through the world in the early 1990s made civil society easier to organize across the board. Key to it all was the technology of the information revolution. Using the speed and convenience of e-mail, campaigners were able to transmit information instantaneously and coordinate their efforts globally. Some people involved say that this would have been impossible five years earlier because of the absence of e-mail then.

It took a combination of international coordination and local grassroots action to make this campaign work. Let me give you an example of what was happening on the ground in Japan. A leading anti-land mine NGO called the Association to Aid Refugees was the first of the Japanese civil society organizations to work under the umbrella of the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines. It published a picture book called *Give Me Not Land Mines, but Flowers*, which sold over 200,000 copies in Japan. As well, it opened a local office in Cambodia in October 1996 and sponsored a concert that raised enough money to remove eighty land mines from the School for the Blind in Sarajevo.

While these and similar activities were going on in dozens of countries, coordinated by e-mail, negotiations at the state level were getting nowhere. The fact that unanimous consent was required from all participating countries did not help. Frustrated with the stalled efforts, Canada, led by its Foreign Minister Lloyd Axworthy, called for the launching of a fast-track negotiation, which drew on the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines. Because it was not at that point a state-led negotiation, Axworthy and the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines were able to engage in some creative diplomacy. They launched a highly effective public relations campaign, and in October 1996 they sponsored a meeting in Ottawa at which they expected twenty-five governments to participate. Most of the world's major military powers were not supporters at this point. China, Japan, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the United States were all opposed

to the treaty. Nonetheless, seventy-five countries showed up. The meeting in October 1996 confirmed that NGO activity had become linked to nation-state involvement. Governments became involved, and NGOs provided the public relations support that encouraged more governments to become involved.

The campaign got a big boost from a couple of developments beyond its control. The first was the death of Princess Diana, who was renowned as a major supporter. The other was the 1997 Nobel Peace Prize, which was awarded two months before the treaty was signed.

Finally, one hundred and twenty-two governments got together from December 2 to 4, 1997, and signed the treaty. China, Russia, and the United States are still not parties; Japan is. Even though these major countries are not parties—and obviously this is a serious limitation on the effectiveness of the treaty—they have agreed to work with the treaty and with the international campaign on demining, the rehabilitation of victims, and other such steps. And it is by no means clear that they will not eventually become parties.

What's next? It is a remarkable achievement that transnational civil society was able to organize an international security treaty over the objections of the major military powers. This is not something that has happened before. Although the treaty is not yet in force, it will go into force when forty nations ratify it, which is very likely to happen. But it will only be effective if all the countries that ratify it live up to its terms.

What is going on now is a very messy process of figuring out how to ensure that the treaty becomes effective. Already there are reports of competing agendas and disagreements within the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines, the umbrella organization. One unanswered big question concerns who ought to be responsible for implementing the treaty. Should it be done by national governments? Should it be done in part by transnational civil society? Should it be coordinated by the United Nations? Because no one has yet figured this out, a series of meetings sponsored by the campaign and by Canada will be held.

The most important question is whether this example sets a precedent or represents an aberration. The one indisputable lesson of the land mines campaign is that civil society, with the help of one medium-sized power, Canada, was able to bring about an international treaty to which many major powers objected. Is this a one-of-a-kind occurrence? Or does this kind of role for transnational civil society represent the wave of the future?

There are a number of reasons for skepticism regarding whether this is going to be the wave of the future. Chief among these is the fact that antipersonnel land mines are particularly repulsive because they mostly kill entirely innocent civilians, and because they lie dormant in the ground for years after they are planted, frequently forgotten, only to be discovered when they kill a child. Accordingly, land mines were a fairly easy issue around which to launch a public relations campaign.

Nonetheless, the campaign may well be a model for transnational civil society to organize itself in the future and is thus worth thinking about. Not very many people in the 1990s thought this campaign would get anywhere. The NGOs that participated in it learned a great deal about how to mobilize public opinion, as well as about how to deal with, or avoid dealing with, governments. They proved that it is possible to mobilize a transnational grass-roots coalition that can have a major political impact.

We can draw several lessons. First, civil societies, especially transnational civil societies, are not just formal organizations and formal institutions. They are also networks and informal kinds of links that can be fairly temporary, like this campaign, yet highly effective. Second, the information technology that makes it possible for these networks to form is of utmost importance and is getting cheaper and more accessible all the time. Despite the current situation in which developing countries are left out of the information revolution, within ten years or so this will not be the case, thanks to dropping costs and the rapid diffusion of the technologies around the world. Third, the role of transnational civil society comprises much more than agenda setting and simply telling governments what ought to concern them. In this case, transnational civil society also did a lot of the negotiating, and it may be playing a role in the implementation. It will certainly be playing a role in the monitoring of compliance with the treaty.

All of these lessons apply to a host of other cases involving transnational civil society. If you look at the human rights movement and the environmental movement, to name just two, these same kinds of lessons apply. In this regard, this campaign is in fact an indication of the role that transnational civil society will play in the future.

Now, a few quick speculations for the future. First, the growing gap between the number of transnational problems and the capacity of states to deal with them implies an increasing need for transnational civil society to play this kind of ambitious role. Second, the size of transnational civil society is also increasing thanks to cheaper and more accessible information technology and to the growing number of middle-class people

who can participate in it. Third, in the future transnational cooperation in many cases will not take the traditional form of agreement among states. Yesterday, Richard Haass mentioned codes of conduct as one way of solving transnational problems; indeed, that kind of approach is emerging everywhere. This is particularly true in the environmental area, where firms agree to standards that are not set by governments, and in many cases compliance with such codes of conduct is monitored not by governments but by civil society organizations. In fact, what is emerging is a great deal of governance that excludes governments altogether. Frequently, the only enforcement tool in such cases is the threat of adverse publicity arising when NGOs point out that firms are in fact not in compliance with agreed-upon codes of conduct.

The final point is the most speculative of all. One of the things that NGOs do, in addition to these fairly specific substantive roles, is to serve as a conduit for norms and values. We may be witnessing the creation of a global polity—not a global government, but rather a global set of standards on what governance is and how it ought to be carried out. But there is one real problem with this. Notice who accepted the Nobel Peace Prize for the International Campaign to Ban Land Mines: an American, Jody Williams, who in fact was awarded her own Nobel alongside the one that went to the campaign. Civil society, especially the transnational networking that I have been talking about, is largely a Western phenomenon. Westerners provide the money as well as the organizational infrastructure. For the most part, they also provide the intellectual leadership. But this is not surprising, as Westerners invented the concept of civil society and have a lot of experience in dealing with it. That Westerners should so thoroughly dominate this development is not good, however. If civil society is more than a means to solving problems, if it is in fact also a means of creating a global system of values, then it is important to encourage the development of civil society in all parts of the world. A global system of values about what problems matter in the world is being created, and this should be a value system that reflects the best of what all the world has to offer. If Asian perspectives are to be given voice, Asia has to have its own strong and vigorous civil society participating in this movement. Otherwise, Westerners will decide which transnational problems will be solved and how they will be solved. I am not advocating a competition among civil societies and norms, but rather a real dialogue leading to global governance that has the potential to broadly represent the interests and values of all the world's people.