Challenging Free Trade, Challenging the Law of Gravity? Transnational Campaigns around EU Pro-development Free Trade Agreements

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Campaigns on trade liberalisation have gradually started to focus on bilateral agreements rather than on multilateral negotiations (Ngaire, 2007). Development NGOs have joined these campaigns on their own initiative and on the request of their partners. Though not new, advocacy has become an important intervention strategy for Development NGOs. This phenomena occurs in the context of a) the debate on aid effectiveness which has led to more pressure by donors and the public on NGOs to demonstrate results, including those of advocacy and b), the debate on accountability: if NGOs are powerful, to whom do they account? Who do they represent? Development NGOs face then multiple challenges: they search to increase the effectiveness of their advocacy and they deal with complex accountability demands in relation to the many stakeholders they relate to both as ‘principals’ (citizens) and ‘agents’ (implementers of ODA) (Alnoor and Weisband, 2007).

This paper examines the transnational activism around the negotiations of the Economic Partnership Agreements (“EPAs”) and Association Agreements (“AdAs”) between the EU and ACP countries, and Central America respectively, and into the role that Development NGOs have played in them. This paper focuses primarily on the effectiveness debate and the challenge of evaluating advocacy in contexts where the definition of ‘results’ is subject of contention (How to evaluate such transnational campaigns? Who evaluates and sets the criteria?) Findings have also implications for discussions on civil society as a way to address the ‘democratic deficit’ in multi-layered governance.

NGO advocacy in trade policy has been studied from basically two perspectives: a) as interest-groups of ‘diffuse interests’ who have access to policy makers but limited influence on outcomes (e.g. on EPAs: Dür and De Briève, 2007) and b) as part of transnational advocacy networks and as examples of ‘New Rights Advocacy’ which seek more ‘policy space’ to help Southern governments secure ESC rights and put more responsibilities on the side of powerful governments and international institutions (Nelson and Dorsey, 2007). These last studies place advocacy within a broader ‘economic justice’ movement and highlight contributions to changes in processes and challenges to the neoliberal free trade discourse (Icaza, 2004; Newell and Tussie, 2006). Studies on transnational activism note that ‘insider’ and ‘outsider’ strategies are combined more and more in the same campaigns (Della Porta and Tarrow, 2005). Advocates lobby and participate in consultation processes and they engage in or facilitate (via funding or information) contentious activism. This is why neither of these approaches on its own can be sufficient to understand the effects of these campaigns. The research questions are: what kind of effects do campaigns have on these negotiations given that they are bi-regional multi-sectoral transnational coalitions and use dual strategies? What role to Development NGOs play in these campaigns?

Two campaigns are chosen as case studies: the Stop EPAs campaign (2004-2008) with a focus on West Africa and the advocacy activities around the negotiation of an Association Agreement with Central America (2007-2009) with an emphasis of activities of CIFCA. These two campaigns have been chosen for comparison as they share basic characteristics (similar political analysis by groups involved, EU trade and development policies) but also differ considerably (size, level of investments in terms of human and financial resources, political motivations and historic relations of the two regions with the EU).

The concept of power is used to analyse the different kinds of effects at play. It is therefore conceptualised in four interrelated dimensions: power as prestige and centrality in the policy network (Anheier and Katz, 2005; Wasserman and Faust, 1994), power as capacity to affect outcomes (Betsill and Correll, 2001; Dür and De Briève, 2007), power as capacity to affect processes (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962), and power as capacity to affect discourses and underlying paradigms on the relationship between trade and development and consequently, models of development (Cox, 1999; De Sousa Santos, 2003; Kiely, 2007; Mittlin, et al 2007; van Dijk, 1993; Zepeda, 2006). These dimensions of ‘results’ are qualitatively different but interconnected.
A case-study and interactive research methodological design was chosen. Data gathering tools were interviews (87) with members of the governmental negotiating teams, parliamentarians and with different sectors of civil society as well as participant observations of internal campaign meetings and public events in the period of April 2008-October 2009. An interactive approach was implemented to do joint analysis with the involved campaigners. Key official and campaign documents were also analysed. Data analysis included social network analysis (e.g. ‘in-degree’, ‘in-betweeness’); “triangulation” to assess observed effects (claimed vs. confirmed influence, with emphasis on contributions rather than attribution) and finally, critical discourse analysis to study the qualitative changes in discourses of governments and organisations involved.

It is argued in this paper that the campaigns are examples of “New Rights Activism” which have sought to strengthen the assertiveness of Southern governments in the negotiations and demanded the EU more flexibility and acknowledgement of the economic asymmetries. Though the negotiations are not over, influence on official positions and final decisions appears limited, the campaigns challenged the mainstream trade and development discourse underpinning the negotiations arguing for more ‘policy space’ for Southern governments. Within the campaign Development NGOs have played a role of articulation of bi-regional transnational networks and creation of debate and dialogue spaces seeking to involve marginalised sectors, though government officials would argue these were unbalanced. In both cases, NGOs were key information nodes, funders of research and shapers of the debate by putting emphasis on the centrality of the development aims of the agreements.

References


