

## Transnational Activist Groups

Concept: Transnational Activist Groups

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Description Transnational activist groups are important building blocks of global civil society. These are voluntary associations formed for the explicit purpose of promoting some social and/or political change. Prominent examples include groups such as Amnesty International, Greenpeace, and Friends of the Earth. Transnational activist groups are made up of people from at least two, and generally more than two, countries. While transnational activist groups might devote a substantial amount of their energies to providing services, such as development or relief aid, and to promoting public education, they are also involved in efforts to change policies at local, national, and/or international levels. This political mission distinguishes activist groups from other actors in civil society.

Statistics from the *Yearbook of International Associations* for 1953 through 2003 show that the number of transnational activist groups has expanded dramatically in recent decades from around one hundred groups in the early 1960s to well over a thousand today (Smith 2004). This growth is largely seen as a response to the broader context of globalization, as citizens groups take advantage of new technologies to enhance transnational organizing and as they respond to the policies of supranational institutions. Transnational activist groups are not simply reacting to globalization, they are also seen as shaping its course by challenging government- and corporate-defined notions about how the world should be governed and by advancing particular norms to guide the actions of states, transnational corporations, and other actors. In this sense, transnational activist groups help mobilize autonomous civil society interests (such as those not organized within formal governmental or private-sector spaces) into global policy arenas. Many see them as incorporating progressive social concerns like human rights, peace, and equality into global policy debates that tend to emphasize traditional notions of military security and national sovereignty (see, for example, O'Brien et al. 2000). Most, but not all such groups seek progressive social change, and we do find some transnational advocacy groups organizing around aims such as limiting women's freedoms or reducing government interventions in public health and safety.

Transnational activist groups tend to have far less money, staff, and expertise than many other political actors, such as governments and corporations. Often they form alliances with other national and international groups if they hope to gain attention and legitimacy for their claims and thereby impact policy changes. Such alliances can take the form of networks, and some analysts speak of "transnational advocacy networks"

as key players in contemporary global politics (see, for example, Keck and Sikkink 1998). Networks of transnational activist groups vary in their breadth as well as in the density and formality of their ties, but key features of these networks are some minimum commitment to shared values or norms, routine communications among network members, and a focus on particular policy changes or campaigns (such as the international campaign to ban land mines). Most transnational advocacy networks include non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that are not explicitly devoted to political advocacy work, such as recreational and religious organizations that may become interested in some of the aims of an advocacy campaign. They also include individuals and organizations outside civil society, such as governmental or United Nations officials or corporations. Such network diversity can increase activists' access to different publics as well as to information and policy-making processes and thereby enhance the political impacts of their efforts.

Because they are formed for the explicit purpose of promoting social change, we often find transnational activist groups playing key roles to shape global policies. The implications of their interventions in global politics and the extent of their influence are subject to ongoing debate. Nevertheless, most observers would agree that understanding global change processes requires attention to how transnational activist groups work to shape global public opinion, organize civil society, mobilize public participation in politics, and build transnational alliances to support particular change goals. In short, they are important players involved in defending autonomy by contesting and shaping the course of globalization.

Work Cited: **Keck, Margaret and Kathryn Sikkink.** 1998. *Activists beyond borders*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.

**O'Brien, Robert, Anne Marie Goetz, Jan Aart Scholte, and Marc Williams.** 2000. *Contesting global governance: Multilateral economic institutions and global social movements*. Cambridge, UK and New York: Cambridge University Press.

**Smith, Jackie.** 2004. Exploring connections between global integration and political mobilization. *Journal of World Systems Research* 10 (x): 255-85. (accessed 22 November 2005)