

Catching up with the Slowest

NGO Accreditation at the WTO

By Mark Halle

One thing can be said for globalization: nothing stays the same for very long. Nations rise and fall, form and break apart. Companies start up, grow and go out of business. Atmospheric carbon accumulates, temperatures go up a click, sea level rises, glaciers recede, hurricanes rage and the locusts return to devastate the crops. Children somehow make it to adulthood as one generation replaces another. Change, as one wag had it, is today the only constant.

This wag was clearly unfamiliar with the WTO. Early in its history the first regular Director General, Renato

Ruggiero, decided to fill in the moat that surrounded the GATT, to open a few breaches in the fortress walls and to lock the drawbridge in down position. He decided not to assume that NGOs were, by virtue of their status alone, necessarily the enemy. The NGOs, after all, represent a legitimate set of constituencies, some of them actually understand trade and might even hold the key to eliminating some of the obstacles to trade openness that currently impede progress. Ruggiero began work on a system for accrediting NGOs for whom the rules of trade were a central concern.

That was in 1996, a scant two years after the Rwandan genocide, a year before Tony Blair—who just celebrated 10 years in office—came to power. It predated the first WTO ministerial conference in Singapore, though the sixth of these conferences is receding into distant memory. And yet the WTO has so far made not one inch of progress in accrediting even the NGOs with whom they interact every day, not to speak of those grumbling from behind the barricades.

Lack of progress in the WTO is not, of course, confined to NGO relations. Little progress is being made with the core business of breaking down trade barriers. The best brains still struggle with formulae, co-efficients, scenarios and the other arcane calculus of trade liberalization. No wonder! If the challenge of coming up with an acceptable system to accredit NGOs continues to stymie the WTO Secretariat, how can they ever hope to work out a system of special and differential treatment, or figure out an equitable approach to special products? How can we feel confident when an issue that the UN figured out years ago still throws the WTO Secretariat for a loop?



The Geneva-based NGOs are on a first-name basis with a high proportion of WTO staff, observes Halle, “and yet, every time we come to WTO Headquarters we suffer the indignity of being directed to the service entrance.”
(Photo courtesy of the WTO)

Advanced political science theory holds that some problems are better ducked than confronted, especially if the problem itself generates no real negative fallout. But it might be better to turn that nostrum on its head. What value does the WTO gain by stubbornly refusing to address this relatively simple problem and how can that value be thought to be more important than the frustration felt by NGOs and by WTO's own staff?

The Geneva-based, trade-related NGO communities regularly camp out at the WTO. They wander the dark halls of the Secretariat as if they were fitting them for curtains. They are on a first-name basis with a high proportion of WTO staff. And yet, every time we come to WTO Headquarters we suffer the indignity of being directed to the service entrance. There, we wait patiently while a member of the WTO staff interrupts his or her work and treks down to the entrance to sanction our admission to the Valhalla of trade negotiation. The time wasted on both sides is, cumulatively, staggering. And to what end?

It is not security since the WTO sits in a public park, about as impenetrable as the Geneva train station. NGO representatives are admitted if a single WTO staffer agrees and thereafter have unlimited access to every part of the building. Indeed, some NGOs—tired of tramping over to the second class gate—have long since obtained press badges, or simply declare they are headed for the library to look up some obscure reference in the literature.

It is not protecting confidential information, since most WTO staff and virtually every delegate are not only prepared but eager to share their insights on negotiations down to the last detail. Indeed, most information of any importance can be found on the WTO Web site or, if not, will be in *Bridges* within a few days. Obtaining inside information from WTO is, frankly, no longer a challenge.

Nor can it be the fear of infecting vulnerable trade diplomats with un-liberal ideas concerning trade since many of the most radical objections to the current negotiating texts stem from the WTO Members themselves.

Instead, NGOs seem to be suffering from the same problem that bedevils the talks themselves—lack of political courage. The Director General has built up a library of public statements extolling the importance of environment, development,

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Modern change theory suggests that instead of designing new systems from scratch, it is often more successful to start with simple, incremental changes; demonstrate that change is, after all, possible; and, in this way, build a “momentum of success.” Maybe it is time for this—the fifth—DG to throw caution to the winds and issue badges to the NGOs that follow trade.

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This article originally appeared in Bridges Monthly, a publication of the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (<http://www.ictsd.org>).