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► **To cite this version:**

Amandine Bled. Organising Interests: International Business Coalitions in Environmental Governance. 50th Annual ISA Convention, panel "Conceptualising the Firm as a Political Actor in Global Governance", Feb 2009, New York, United States. halshs-00385771

HAL Id: halshs-00385771

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-00385771>

Submitted on 2 Jul 2024

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**ISA 2009 conference, panel on “Conceptualizing Business in Global Governance”,
February 18 2009.**

Organizing Interests: International Business Coalitions in Environmental Governance

Abstract

The issue of the privatization of governance systems is at the core of current studies in international relations in general and environmental studies in particular. On the one hand, there is a risk to see environmental regulations being bypassed by “business as usual” practices. On the other hand, private sector actors seem more and more to be part of the solution towards sustainable development. In these interactions between environmental regulations and private actors’ interests, international business coalitions are meant to play an important role. This paper therefore analyses, using a sociological approach, the functioning of two international business coalitions: the *Global Industry Coalition* (GIC), which is participating in biosafety negotiations, and the *International Chamber of Commerce* (ICC), which is involved in biodiversity governance. Both cases demonstrate the difficulty for industry members to organize their interests at the international level. This difficulty is bypassed by particular strategies in both cases: the concentration of decision making power for the GIC and the restriction to information coordination for the ICC.

Keywords

International environmental negotiations, international business coalitions, Global Industry Coalition, International Chamber of Commerce.

Acronyms

CBD	Convention on Biological Diversity
ENGO	Environmental non Governmental Organizations
GIC	Global Industry Coalition
GM	Genetically modified organisms
ICC	International Chamber of Commerce

Introduction

The issue of the privatization of governance is at the core of current studies in international relations in general and environmental studies in particular. On the one hand, there is a risk to see environmental regulations being bypassed by “business as usual” practices hostile to the environment (Clapp, 2003). On the other hand, private sector actors are thought to be more and more part of the solution towards sustainable development (Falkner, 2008, pp.49-94). In these interactions between environmental regulations and private actors’ interests, international business coalitions involved in environmental governance are meant to play an important role by bridging business interests with international environmental regulations. However, few studies concentrate on the way international business coalitions interact with international environmental regulations. This is even more surprising considering that international environmental non governmental organizations (ENGOs) have already been studied by scholars interested in environmental governance (Doherty, 2006; Compagnon, 2005). Moreover, while ENGOs’ actions have been scrutinized using a broad range of theoretical approaches, studies of business actors have mainly given deterministic and structural accounts of business influence in environmental governance. These last approaches underline the importance of business power at the international level represented by its organizational, financial and discursive components. Though, these accounts fail to capture the mechanisms at stake in the increasing development of environmental standards affecting private companies.

In order to fill this gap, this paper proposes a sociological approach to the study of international business coalitions in environmental governance. The analysis relies on the analysis of the two most active international business coalitions taking part to the international negotiations on biodiversity. These two international business coalitions are the Global Industry Coalition (GIC) and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC). The first one is participating to the international negotiations of the Cartagena protocol on biosafety, defined as the risks related to biotechnology applications. The second one has been very active in the international negotiations of the Convention on Biodiversity related to access to natural genetic resources for commercial applications. By developing these examples, we demonstrate that transnational business collective action is not given per se to business coalitions but is the result of internal bargaining processes and organizational adjustments between firms.

This paper is organized as follows. A first part details the recent development of the international Convention on Biodiversity explaining its role in the field of biotechnology and

genetic resources regulation. This section is meant to illustrate how the biodiversity treaty increasingly interferes with corporate activities in these fields. A second part of the article details the theoretical frameworks usually employed in order to study business in environmental governance. We show the limits of such frameworks and propose a sociological approach to the study of international business coalitions in environmental governance. Part 3 and part 4 of the paper then detail the case studies chosen to apply the proposed sociological approach. These examples aim at understanding the way the Global Industry Coalition and the International Chamber of Commerce elaborate their positions and actions in international biodiversity negotiations. The main results evidenced by the study are then summarized in the conclusion. Both case studies demonstrate the difficulty for industry members to organize at the international level. This difficulty has been bypassed by particular strategies in both cases: the concentration of decision making power for the GIC and the restriction to information coordination for the ICC.

1. The rise of biodiversity governance

The Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) has been one of the most dynamic regimes in the environmental field since its adoption in 1992 at the Summit of Rio. Conceived initially as an international treaty to preserve the world natural heritage, the CBD currently addresses issues that range from ecosystems to the exploitation of genetic resources, from conservation to international property rights and justice, from trade to responsibilities towards biotechnological innovations. The CBD can therefore be considered as “the first true sustainable development convention” (Le Prestre, 2002: 1). To address all these different issues, the Convention developed into two related international agreements: the Cartagena protocol on biosafety and the international Bonn guidelines on access to genetic resources and benefit sharing.

In 2001, the Parties to the Convention adopted the Cartagena protocol on biosafety to regulate the transboundary movements of genetically modified organisms (GMOs)¹ obtained from biotechnology manipulations. The protocol secures the international trade in modified seeds by establishing the precautionary principle as a basis for imports and national regulations. Its procedure recognizes that genetically modified organisms may have adverse effects on the conservation and sustainable use of biological diversity and reverses the burden of risk assessment on the exporter country. The protocol has served as the basis for the

¹ Genetically modified organisms are produced thanks to biotechnology applications defined by the CBD as any technological application that uses biological systems, living organisms, or derivatives thereof, to make or modify products or processes for specific use.

elaboration of several national legislations on biosafety in countries such as Mexico, China or South Africa (Gupta & Falkner, 2006). Interestingly, the protocol replaces the former principles of substantial equivalence, sound science assessment and free trade of the World Trade Organization (Andrée, 2005). The developments of the Cartagena protocol also have had a strong impact on biotechnology companies, grain traders and food retailers worldwide (see among others Andrée, 2005; Falkner, 2008).

In 2002, the Parties to the Biodiversity Convention adopted some international guidelines on access to genetic resources and benefit sharing in order to regulate international bioprospecting activities². The guidelines recognize the sovereignty of nation states over their natural resources and aim at balancing the conditions of access to biological diversity with the profits made with genetic resources by-products. It consequently puts an end to the former “common heritage principle” that, before 1992, stated that genetic resources were free of access for any users (Raustiala & Victor, 2004). Moreover, current CBD negotiations concentrate on the establishment of an international binding regime to replace the guidelines by 2010. The regime considers the use of an international certificate to identify the genetic resources used in intellectual property rights applications. The principles of the Convention on Biodiversity regarding the access to genetic resources and benefit sharing have served as a basis for the development of national legislations in Latin America –Costa-Rica or the Andean countries–, India and Brazil (Miller, 2006). Brazil and India also established national legislations on access to biodiversity asking for the disclosure of the origin of genetic resources in patents’ applications. Just as for the biotechnology case, the positions adopted by these countries aim at changing the rules established by previous international organizations and linked to bioprospecting practices. Together with Norway, Brazil and India are joined by a coalition of developing countries to ask for an amendment of the agreement on Trade Related aspects of Intellectual Property Rights in favor of patents’ disclosure. The European Union, Norway and Switzerland have asked the World Intellectual Property Organization to analyze the potential for an international harmonization for genetic resources disclosure requirements (Bled, 2008: 7).

These developments, as well as their impact on trade and intellectual property rights’ issues, increase the visibility of the CBD at the international level of policymaking (Rosendal, 2006). The importance of the biodiversity treaty in global governance raises the question of

² Genetic resources refer to specific characteristics of plants or seeds that can be the initial basis for a broad range of traded goods at the international level. This is the case of traditional plants and seeds, genetically modified agricultural goods, plant extracts, natural products, cosmetics and pharmaceuticals. Bioprospecting relates to the activities of collecting and analyzing natural genetic resources for research and/or commercial purposes.

the basis for such a success. Conventional explanations of environmental governance successes rely on the study of environmental non governmental organizations' influence on international policymaking. On the contrary, we argue that the functioning of international business coalitions is another key element to understand the successes and limits of private sector actors' political influence at the international level. The next section exposes the theoretical basis to support such a claim.

2. Towards a Sociological Approach to the Analysis of International Business Coalitions in Environmental Governance

Few studies have questioned the emergence and functioning of business coalitions in environmental governance generally and biodiversity governance in particular. Scholars have indeed favored structural arguments on business preferences rather than a precise scrutiny of private sector collective action processes. In such accounts, industries have been predominantly considered as a unified group of actors opposed to biodiversity governance, especially when facing the threat of potential regulations (Burgiel, 2007; Clapp, 2007). Therefore, this literature often makes the methodological choice to centre on a limited number of business coalitions in order to picture the trends, positions and strategies of the entire business community (Andrée, 2005; Clapp, 2007; Burgiel, 2007). By doing so, these studies also signal that the organizational structure of business at the international level is highly integrated and fundamentally opposed to environmental measures. They present private sector actors as obvious political actors and ignore collective action issues. The only nuances to such a united portrait are the possible differences of lobbying styles that are sometimes mentioned in studies of lobbying at the European level (Coen, 2005). However, concerning lobbying activities at the international level, these lobbying styles differences are nearly never evoked. On the contrary, the literature often prefers to analyze the way the conflicts inside business coalitions are resolved instead of considering the way they affect international politics (Steffenhagen, 2001).

The link between conflicts among business actors and lobbying results has only been developed recently, in research on business conflicts and power in environmental governance (Falkner, 2008). However, while underlying the importance of unity as a political advantage, such studies centre on the conflicts between diverse business groups but neglect to open the black boxes of international business coalitions to scrutinize the way they construct their political positions. In order to do such an analysis, we argue that a sociological approach to the functioning of international business coalitions is needed. Instead of studying only the

political consequences of business positions and lobbying activities, a sociological framework aims at answering several research questions linked to the way business organizes regarding international environmental negotiations. These questions are related to the decision making processes inside business groups, power relations among coalitions' members, institutional functioning of business groups, etc. When looking at the evolution of the biodiversity treaty, our hypothesis is that the difficulty business actors encounter while organizing at the international level explains part of their failure to influence the policy process.

In order to apply our conceptual choice -to use a sociological approach to international business coalitions studies-, we choose to develop the example of the two most active business coalitions in the CBD negotiations: the Global Industry Coalition (GIC) that follows the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety and the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) that is interested in issues of access to genetic resources. Choosing to study business through a sociological scrutiny implies a particular methodology grounded on field research. The study of the two examples presented in this paper relies on an extended literature review on the topic, CBD documentation, fieldwork observations during several working groups of the CBD including the third and the fourth Conference of the Parties to the Cartagena Protocol, interviews with key actors of the negotiation and implementation processes and archival material on the negotiation period.

3. Power Struggles inside Business Coalitions: the Example of the Global Industry Coalition

Industry representatives were mainly absent during the agenda-setting period of the Cartagena protocol. This fact is confirmed by an analysis of the lists of participants to the negotiations as well as several interviews. For example, Laura M. Reifschneider, the only private sector representative to have attended the protocol meetings from the negotiation of the mandate in 1995 to the adoption of the agreement, remembers about the private sector's state of organization in 1995, "a handful of individuals showed up [...] It quickly became obvious that the self-selected assembly of people gathered under the banner of the 'private sector' had little in common and, moreover, did not begin to represent the range of potentially interested parties" (Reifschneider, 2002: 273). Several explanations for the low level of business involvement at the beginning of the negotiations can be found. First of all, very few business representatives knew about the CBD and its negotiations (interview with ICC representative, 30/01/2006). Secondly, few industry members believed that the protocol would become a binding international agreement (Reifschneider, 2002: 273). Thirdly, at that

time, business representatives were quite close to their own government's representatives and did not see any real need to intervene directly in the negotiations (Steffenhagen, 2001: 43).

The few industry representatives attending the meetings were organized in regional associations that were already following questions of interest to their members mainly at the national level³. Differences among these groups were significant and sensitive. The origin of the firms was a first factor of division. American companies were much more aggressive than their European counterparts (Tapper, 2002: 271). The position of the companies along the supply chain was a second determinant factor. Biotechnology firms were initially opposed to any sort of binding obligations while preferring voluntary international guidelines. On the contrary, grain traders were more sensitive to consumers' pressure and expressed interest in segregation and labeling solutions for GMOs (Dufault, 2006: 141). The difference in the initial regulatory systems in place in the United States and the European Union was a third factor of division among the business community. The Americans were considering a product-based approach recognizing substantial equivalence between GMO and non GMOs. The Europeans were advocating a process-based approach linked to the precautionary principle (interview with European industry representative, 24/03/2006). Consecutively to these divisions, firms were generally advocating for their national regulation systems as a policy option.

Though, in 1998, several private sector members launched a strong international initiative under the auspices of the Global Industry Coalition. From then on the GIC representing "over 2,200 firms in 130 countries worldwide" (Global Industry Coalition, 1999) was producing common statements for a large number of industry associations and grasped the microphone during plenary sessions to voice the collective interests of the business sector. The GIC soon became the most visible business association in the biosafety negotiations. Its general aim was to insure a "workable" and "realistic" protocol dealing only with the conservation of biodiversity⁴.

Some of the reasons for the private sector to get organized under the same banner are rooted in the context of the negotiations. The creation of the GIC is a response to the global increase of participants to the negotiation process. Being organized as a group is indeed a way

³ Such as the Canadian biotechnology companies association (BIOTECCanada), the Green Industry Biotechnology Platform, the European biotechnology companies association (EuropaBio), the Biotechnology Industry Organization and the Canadian Corn Growers Association.

⁴ The GIC recognized the need for a particular procedure for GMOs destined for direct introduction into the environment but did not want any other category of GMO to be subjected to the same process. The GIC insisted that the protocol should not be a barrier to trade, innovation and research activities, so that all countries would benefit from biotechnologies.

to ensure that people are more aware of industry's needs and give more attention to industry's discourses⁵. Moreover, the international discussions were evolving towards the adoption of a binding agreement which was not favorable to industry representatives. Another series of reasons stemmed from the American and Canadian industry groups' growing concern towards the content and nature of the future text as well as the pressure they exerted on other private sector members to create the GIC. In this respect it is interesting to note that a European industry group, the Green Industry Biotechnology Platform, disappeared at about the same time the GIC was formed because of pressures exerted by American companies. The GIC developed a stronger lobbying approach whereas the Green Industry Biotechnology Platform was an organization mainly oriented towards dialogue and information sharing (interview with European industry representative, 04/07/2005). At the time, the American and Canadian firms, organized in a group chaired by the Biotechnology Industry Organization, were particularly worried about the possible resistance in the European Union to the acceptance of biotechnology and began to organize coordinated action. North American lobbying subsequently intensified and one European delegate confirmed being approached mainly by American and Canadian companies during the negotiations of the protocol (Steffenhagen, 2001: 43). Despite its claim to be a global coalition, the GIC was actually a networking effort steered by a few representatives of the North American private sector (interview with GIC member, 02/02/2006).

Nowadays, several former members of the GIC recognize nevertheless that the coalition was facing important organizational problems before the adoption of the protocol. Steering was done only by a few persons, always the same ones, and the coalition even had financial problems (interview with GIC member, 24/03/2006). Moreover, the leadership of North American companies happened to be only partially efficient in ironing out the numerous divides among business representatives. Interestingly and partly as a consequence to its lack of organizational capacities, the GIC failed to accomplish its principal mission: to stop the international process for a binding protocol on biosafety. The Cartagena protocol was indeed signed in 2001 and entered into force in 2003.

In reaction to this failure and to find concrete solutions to its lack of influence, the most active and powerful members of the GIC⁶ recently put in place a steering committee giving them a favorable position to control the activities of the coalition. Small companies are

⁵ Non-state actors can register as observers to international negotiations. This status allows them to be present during the discussions and make statements at the beginning of negotiations sessions and to distribute material outside the negotiation room.

⁶ These companies are Bayer Cropscience, BASF, Dow Agrosiences, Monsanto, Syngenta and Dupont.

enrolled⁷ in the activities of the international business coalition without being rewarded by the possibility to express their views. In that case, the difficulties of transnational collective action have been solved by the leadership and control of a handful of powerful multinational companies over the whole coalition's positions.

4. Business Coalitions as Information Platforms: the International Chamber of Commerce

A second international business coalition is following the negotiations of the Convention on Biodiversity and more precisely its provisions on access to genetic resources: the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)⁸ (Tully, 2003: 84 & 88; Frein and Meyer, 2005: 123). The ICC is a senior business coalition aiming at representing the voice of the business community at the international level and in that sense is often and legitimately pointed as a reference in term of industry representation (Kelly, 2005). In the negotiations on access to genetic resources, the ICC has put in place in 2006 the first attempt to gather all industry interests under the same banner. Such an objective consists in the organization and chairing of "industry group" meetings which gather all interested business representatives taking part to the CBD negotiations on access to genetic resources⁹. It also includes speaking in the name of the "industry group" during the negotiation sessions. When developing this initiative, the initial aim of the ICC was to unify business positions and "correct" the differences among industry representatives (interview with ICC representative, 31/01/2006). However, an analysis of the positions expressed by the ICC in the name of the "industry group" reveals that most of its claims concern some very general points or procedural issues¹⁰. Moreover, several business organizations continue to propose individually their own statement during the negotiations. It is relevant to note that the ICC itself often fails to find consensus for the drafting of its position papers on the issue (ICC, 2005a: 1). This problem finds its origin in the diversity of the members of the international business coalition: "due to the different positions of ISF (*International Seed Federation*) and BIO (*Biotechnology*

⁷ The GIC leading members often approach non GIC private sector companies before the negotiations explaining them that being part of an international business coalition is an obligatory prerequisite in order to be registered as observers to the negotiations. This strategy enables them to keep an eye on new comers to the negotiations.

⁸ The ICC is an international business coalition grouping firms from different sectors with the aim to represent the voice of "World business". It is one of the world broader business coalitions.

⁹ Representatives from the International Seed Federation, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, the Biotechnology Industry Organization and the American BioIndustry Alliance.

¹⁰ In its first statement the ICC reminded that several private sectors are concerned about the access and benefit sharing issue linked to genetic resources and that one approach would not fit all interests. The ICC therefore asked for international guidelines but national tools. In a second statement the organization asked to have one representative of the private sector attending the next contact group on disclosure of genetic resources.

Industry Organization), the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) was unable to publish a common position on disclosure of origin and prior informed consent” (Smolders, 2005: 3).

The diversity of the industry representatives is also a crucial factor explaining the limits of the ICC initiative to speak as one voice for business during the CBD negotiations. All industry representatives taking part to the ICC initiative recognized that their businesses had sometimes different interests and positions. Three parameters interfere in determining the political positioning of the industries following the issue of access to genetic resources. The first one is related to the sector of activity of the firms. Seed companies have indeed a more flexible position than pharmaceutical companies on the issue of the disclosure of the origin of genetic resources used in patents applications. Secondly, these differences are reinforced by the differences between the sizes of companies. Notably, inside the seed industry bigger companies use the patent system as a reference for the protection of innovation while smaller ones prefer the system proposed by the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (Smolders, 2005: 4). As a consequence, smaller companies are more inclined to accept disclosure. Thirdly, the origin of the firms is another crucial factor in defining their political behaviors. The difference in lobbying styles across the Atlantic was indeed very clear during the “industry group” meetings. When facing difficulties, American groups usually express strongly their opposition to any proposal that do not meet their expectations. On the contrary, European representatives try to analyze the proposal and elaborate a new text as an answer. One example of such a transatlantic difference dividing the “industry group” was apparent during the communication by the African group of its draft for an international binding regime on access to genetic resources. The proposal, elaborated by the Ethiopian government in collaboration with the Third World Network, was meant to serve as a basis for the elaboration of the international regime¹¹. In that case, the analysis of the proposal was crucial for all participants, industry representatives included. The different sensitivity of business representatives taking part to the ICC initiative turned such an analysis into a difficult task. The American representatives thought the text was a pretty dead proposal, nearly a joke, whereas the Europeans perceived it as a threat. The first ones were not even considering answering to the text while the European representatives wanted to elaborate an industry proposal to counter the African group draft¹². Moreover, they expressed doubts

¹¹ Proposing a text is critical as it pushes the negotiations forward and permits to the authors of the proposal to control the discussions.

¹² The European representatives were in particular remembering that the first draft for the biosafety protocol had precisely been put forward by several developing countries helped by the Third World Network. According to them, industry had consequently to answer to the Ethiopian proposal in order to avoid the elaboration of a binding agreement similar to the biosafety protocol in the domain of access to genetic resources.

concerning the positions of the European Union towards the text, while American representatives were quite sure it was not going to be endorsed by any developed country. In the end, a consensus proposal was reached for industry to produce a position paper about the text, but industry did not present its own proposal for an international regime¹³.

The combination of sector, size and lobbying styles differences among industry members interested in access to genetic resources has a consequence on the political role of the ICC as a coordinator for industry. When asked about their lobbying activities, all industry representatives answered that they were all principally lobbying for their own companies. One representative of a European seed company declared to summarize the situation: “The ICC is trying to play a coordination role but it is totally unofficial” (interview with European seed company representative, 31/01/2006). Nevertheless, all industry members attended the “industry group” meetings which they considered a good occasion to exchange information. In that sense, the goals of the meetings were to get to know each other, to organize and decide who will do what, to see what industry does agree on –for example to ask to participate in contact and friends of the chair groups is a consensus position among all industry members- and express the common messages (interview with American pharmaceutical company representative and European seed industry representative, 12/10/2007). Moreover, all industry members taking part to the “industry group” meetings have a common feeling that gives sense to their common coordination: the issue of access to genetic resources is going to have an impact on their activities. As a consequence, the main channel of influence for industry lobbying groups is still located at the level of their national delegations. However, their participation to the ICC coordination meetings makes sense as it has a positive impact on their lobbying activities. In the difficult context of the international negotiations of the issue of genetic resources, this complement of information is more than welcome. The initial aim of the ICC to unify business position and “correct” the differences among industry representatives is consequently only partly achieved.

Conclusion

The way international business coalitions work is the central question of this research paper. In order to analyze the mechanisms at stake for business transnational collective action we propose to adopt a sociological approach to the functioning of business coalitions. The two case studies developed demonstrate two distinct dynamics inside the most important business coalitions following the CBD negotiations. The Global Industry Coalition, created during the

¹³ Observation data during the “industry group” meeting following the African group proposal.

negotiations on biosafety, has reinforced its organizational structure by putting in place a steering committee. On the one hand, this committee aims at resolving former slowness in the decision making processes as well as secretariat duties. On the other hand, the concentration of power in the hands of a small number of companies limits the access to decisions by companies outside the steering committee. The International Chamber of Commerce recently decided to launch an initiative to gather under the same banner all the industry members following the issue of access to genetic resources. In that case, differences of positions and lobbying styles among the firms involved in the initiative turn it into an information platform rather than an integrated political instrument. Both cases demonstrate the difficulty for industry members to organize at the international level. The diversity of sizes, sectors, origins and lobbying styles of companies creates several antagonistic dynamics inside international business coalitions. The difficulty to gather such diverse interests is bypassed by particular strategies in both cases: the concentration of decision making power in the case of the GIC and the limitation to information and coordination duties for the ICC. The obstacles for business transnational political action partially explain the failure of industries to influence the international negotiation process of the CBD.

Finally, the results of our study tend to demonstrate the artificial character of the distinction usually built by scholars between the capacities of ENGOs and business actors to organize at the international level. On the contrary, both categories may encounter some difficulty to enter the international level of policy making. In practice, the ICC signaled that “industry is as difficult to organize as NGOs, even worse” (interview with ICC representative, 30/01/2006). This assumption should be more systematically integrated in the studies of firms as international political actors.

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