

Presentation
Free Trade and Democracy:
European trade policy making and the voice of civil society
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My name is Barbara Specht and I'm working with WIDE.

WIDE is a European network of women's organizations working on gender- trade and development issues. The WIDE network consist of **11 national platforms** in European countries and **one regional platform** based in Poland which covers Eastern European as well as some Central Asian countries. WIDE has a secretariat, which is based in Brussels, in Belgium- literally speaking close to the EU institutions; DG trade, the EU institution that actually executes European trade policy is about 10 minutes away by foot from our office.

As said, WIDE is a European network, but we have strong **links to international partners**, we are for example the European chapter of the International gender and trade network, a southern-led network on those issues.

One of **WIDE's key activities is to monitor and influence European policies in the area of trade and development from a gender and social justice perspective**. In addition our **advocacy and awareness raising** work we also do **capacity building** around gender-trade and development issues.

The question of **trade policy making and democracy** is a question that is very dear to our hearts and issues such as **transparency, accountability, participation – voice and agency** - figure prominently on WIDE's agenda.

In my presentation I'll focus on **European trade policy making and civil society engagement**. I hope my input might also contribute to the strategy session we have later this afternoon.

Corporate capture of EU trade policies

One of the **big issues** in relation to trade is the **undue influence and the privileged access of European business to policy making**. The **corporate capture of the EU trade agenda leads**, as we have seen over the last two days, **to policies which center around profit-making** and the interest of corporations. We have had many examples that showed that **those policies do not work for the majority of the people; and especially not for women** given their lack of access to and control over resources, including land, water, credit, women's lack of access to decision-making and education and training, the existing gendered roles and stereo-types as well as the unfair division of labour, including the artificial separation between productive and reproductive work.

WIDE strategies for democratizing trade policies

Accordingly, one of WIDE's **strategy** to make EU trade policy more democratic is to **expose the undemocratic process** around trade policy making and to **challenge the corporate capture** of EU trade policy. To give you just one example how we do this: As part of the Seattle to Brussels network, a European network of development, environment, farmers

organization and trade unions, we have published a study that collects evidence how DG trade's negotiation position at WTO reflected almost in its entirety the interests of Europe's largest multinationals. The study is on the web-site of S2B and is a very interesting reading.

Another strategy WIDE is applying is **bringing women's voices and concerns to the center of the debates on economic and social development**. We do this by **empowering women's organisations and women's rights activists to engage in trade policy making on their own terms**; and by **creating space** for them to voice their concerns and claim their rights. Hereby **capacity building** plays an important role; other activities include for example the organisation of workshops and debates with trade, development and women's rights policy makers to raise our concerns and positions.

The issue of **engaging in trade policy making on our own terms** is a key issue for us also in the light of the fact that the **European Commission has established certain mechanisms to engage with civil society**. Dev Sharma has already explained those and I would like to quickly comment on it.

First of all I think it is important to understand the **context** in which those mechanisms were established: The current modus operandi was formalised by DG Trade in 2000/2001. At that time **DG Trade found itself forced to engage with CS due to the resistance it experienced**: We were in the **aftermath to Seattle and the collapse of the OECD M.A.I. negotiations**. DG trade had for the first time found itself confronted with **growing opposition among civil society**. The EC had been the target of much criticism and needed to respond to the **allegations on secrecy, in-transparency and democratic deficit of trade policy making**.

So DG trade established basically **two** -what the Commission would call- "**civil society consultation**" **mechanisms**. These two mechanisms were on the one hand the "**civil society dialogue**" and on the other hand the "**Sustainability impact assessments**".

Without going much into details I just would like to comment that both these mechanisms set up by DG trade **are widely criticized by NGOs** for various reasons including

- The **failure** of the CSD and the SIAs **to bear any substantial impact on trade policy making**
- The **impossibility to address** through those mechanisms **ideological issues** and actually **question the adequacy of trade liberalization itself as the way to achieve development**. The mechanisms demand a **high level of technical involvement** and knowledge and there is simply **no space for political debates**. However, the examination of all potential policy options – including heterodox and feminist economic proposals – as alternatives to the neo-liberal approach is imperative to define trade policies that truly contribute to sustainable development and gender and social justice.
- **Lack of transparency and accountability** of DG trade's policy making process (hereby I'm referring to transparency in the meaning of DG trade not acknowledging CS different positions; and accountability in the meaning of DG trade might listening to CS perspectives and but is not at all acting upon these concerns).

So basically often NGOs label these mechanisms as **PR exercises of DG trade to educate the public about their policies** or as mechanisms **that cover the privileged access business has to decision makers**: for example through its special advisors, the expert groups, high

level working groups, through conferences of business groups that actually take place at EC premises, or the 'Revolving doors' principle (employees cycle between roles in an industry and roles in governments which are influenced by that industry) – to name just a few examples.

Another strategy of WIDE is to hold **trade policy makers accountable on** how the Commissions negotiating position and demands **are going to fulfil the EU's broader international commitments** and especially those commitments given in relation to women's rights, gender equality and sustainable development. (30th anniversary of CEDAW this year).

Last but not least we are trying to **create public debate on trade policies, its purpose and aims**, be it through the **media** or through engaging in processes **furthering outreach** such as the following one started earlier this year:

On the European level several NGOs and social movements felt a **need to initiate a joint debate on alternatives to the current unsustainable and unjust trade model**, and to link up our debates to other already ongoing discussions on these issues. We therefore set up a group to draft and discuss an **"alternative trade mandate"** which lays down certain principles which we consider important for social and gender just and sustainable trade policies. We consider this process on the one hand as a **tool to promote alternative thinking** and on the other hand as a good opportunity **to deepen our engagement with other allies for changes** such as trade unions, or members of the European Parliament. Only together we can shape a trade policy that has at its centre the well-being of all people and that bring social and economic development concerns together.