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A Review of the SNR (Stop the New Round) Case Study

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THE AUTHOR MAKES THE CASE THAT STOP THE NEW Round Coalition-Philippines or SNR was an 'enterprise' or a project authored and run by "political entrepreneurs" who knew the WTO stuff well enough and were steeped in spotting, creating and seizing opportunities amid many challenges to achieve a specific objective.

I think the author had made an excellent narrative and examination of this success story of "political enterprise and entrepreneurship". The lay of the land, as it were, had been solidly established. I'm particularly impressed with the nuanced analysis of outcomes and impact.

Entrepreneurship, to me, means at least two things: risk-taking and innovation. It may be discerned from the author's narrative and analysis that SNR in fact bore and demonstrated these two qualities.

The enterprise or project was a dedicated, time-bound one. The campaign intended to help derail the new round

of negotiations around new and contentious issues at the 4th WTO Ministerial Conference in Cancun. The derailing or stopping the round scenario hoped for was much in the fashion of the 1999 Seattle fiasco. The SNR, the institutional vehicle created for that purpose was a campaign coalition whose life would end with the Cancun round.

The “political entrepreneurs,” led by Walden Bello, were a group of mostly seasoned and committed leftwing activists. Despite their varying knowledge of trade issues and extent of involvement in campaigns against the WTO, both at the global and domestic levels, the convening members of this group may be said to be adequately armed, had a good reading of contexts and the possibilities they offered, and had the ability to devise effective strategies for mounting a successful campaign.

The use of the name SNR itself suggested risk of being judged a failure, even if unfairly, had Cancun outcome turned otherwise. As the author rightly pointed out, it would be wrong to base the success or failure of SNR on whether the Cancun round would be stopped or not. For one the outcome had many parents and SNR can only account for its own inputs. For another, that would be investing SNR with bigger than life role.

In any case, it seemed the “political entrepreneurs” were smart enough to gamble on the likelihood of Cancun turning out the way it did. They rightly read the moment and saw what was coming. The Seattle momentum was continuing. The rich-poor divide was widening. Disillusion and frustrations with promised benefits from opening up were widespread. The evidence many sectors were hurting instead of benefiting have been piling up. Demand for review and assessment was increasing. Many developing member-countries were up in arms, as it were. Anti-WTO sentiments and the alliances built around them were getting stronger. In short, you got most of the ingredients favoring the collapse.

About innovation, the key informants themselves said the SNR strategies and tactics were pretty standard stuff. Perhaps, credit was due SNR as to how in such a short time it succeeded in radicalizing the trade discourse and getting public acceptance and media mileage for its radical positions on trade and trade-related issues.

The author cited some new things related to managing coalition dynamics. There was this so-called shift away from bloc politics that SNR’s founding members had been used to. There was the harmonization of the “junk the WTO’, reform, and pragmatic positions



within the coalition. All these were adequately handled by the author in the analysis of SNR membership and in the section on compromises and constructive ambiguities.

That said, I still think some questions need clarification.

1. Should it not be stated more explicitly that SNR was mainly Walden's idea, or to be proper about it, a project driven by the Focus on the Global South? Was it fair to say that SNR was triggered by global activism seeking a more defined national base?

Despite the hype and superlatives about the Seattle campaign, the so-called 'anti-globalization' movement (the other post Cold War 'superpower', according to The New York Times) has been dogged by criticism of being rootless. Meaning, that the movement is being driven by a privileged corps of jetsetting activists with little or hardly any accountability to any local constituency. The criticism was neither new nor unique to the Seattle case. It's also unfair. We have been hearing this criticism much earlier on during UN summits and IMF-WB annual gatherings, and elsewhere.

I see nothing wrong if the formation of SNR was also intended to address that vulnerability. It's a perfectly legitimate motive.

2. The shades of positions at the global level might be as much due to real differences in perspective and vision (eg, reform or dismantle the WTO) as other factors, like tactics (eg, engagement by confrontation or by lobbying), historical dynamics, personality differences, leadership, competition over scarce resources, and so on.

The two streams cited in the case, represented by the Trade Justice Movement (TJM) and Our World is Not for Sale (OWINFS), share a common concern for trade justice. Both their leadership structures and constituencies are populated by leftists seeking radical changes not only in the global trading system but also in their own societies. Some of the personalities in both have been involved as early as the mid 1980s during the Uruguay round all through the cycle of UN summits in the 1990s. They had been trade activists first and sustainable development activists later. They had consistently brought in the trade justice issue on the table and in every conceivable global

platform, whether the main agenda of the conference was poverty, environment, human rights or gender.

Global alliances might be shifting at times due to complex and dense interactions but the ones you saw in the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio have basically remained intact till Cancun.

Though not always clear cut, global alliances are affected by local dynamics and vice versa.

3. Tracing the history of trade activism in the Philippines cannot miss out on the movement represented by the National Economic Protectionism Movement (NEPA). This might be relevant in discussing the stream represented by the Fair Trade Alliance (FTA) organized two years ahead of SNR.
4. To my knowledge, SNR couldn't care less how the Philippine Government would conduct itself in the negotiations, at least not in the beginning. And perhaps, not as much as other alliances, for example, FTA, would put premium to it. SNR had its eye fixed on derailing Cancun mainly through global mass mobilization ala Seattle. In the first place, in 2003 the prevailing view among the organizers and members of SNR was that the GMA regime was a hopeless case considering the experience in the WTO treaty accession debate in 1995 and the unilateral and indiscriminate liberalization process that followed. To expect the Philippines to break the WTO consensus would be a marginal concern even among those SNR members who knew that on paper it takes only one opposing country to break a consensus in the WTO.
5. The broadness of SNR must be qualified. For one, the mainstream radical left which had its own local and international campaign against the WTO was not part of the coalition. As well, none of the industry sectors were in and there were no deliberate efforts to draw them in. The members of SNR are mostly kindred spirits in ideological perspective and strategy despite the shades of differences among themselves. I think SNR membership base is a pretty homogenous lot. And certainly, I would hesitate to use the word polarization to describe differences of positions in SNR.





About the author

Isagani R. Serrano is Senior Vice President and Board Member of the Philippine Rural Reconstruction Movement (PRRM). He's written for CIVICUS the following: *Civil Society in the Asia-Pacific*, 1994; *Humanity In Trouble But Hopeful* in CITIZENS, 1995; *Profile: Philippines* for CIVIC INDEX, 1997; *Coming Apart, Coming Together* in Civil Society at the Turn of the Millennium, 1999; *A Global Citizens' Commitment*, 1999. A community organizer, educator, writer, guitarist, 'farmer', and political prisoner for seven years during martial law in the Philippines. Trained in education and literature, community organization and development management. Holds a Master of Science in Environment & Development Education (MSc in EE/DE) from the South Bank University-London.

