

Interviewee: Mark Ritchie
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Date of Interview: November 21, 2000

Interview Summary:

Mark Ritchie of the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) says his organization attended the WTO ministerial to push for more transparency, citizen participation, and open dialogue among interest groups, opinion leaders, and policy makers. The IATP created an International Media Center that provided computers, communications equipment, and press conference space for journalists and non-profit representatives from around the world. Though the IATP focuses on farmers, Ritchie notes that a variety of organizations, including labor unions, used the facilities. He discusses disagreements over protest strategies and tensions between national and local groups, but says the Seattle protests successfully stopped a destructive round of a new round of negotiations and resulted in “empowered participation by developing country governments.”



JD Hello Mark, can you tell me a little bit about how you, personally, or how your organization, The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, got involved in WTO mobilizations?

MR In 1986 I started a newsletter called *Gatt Scan* – that was in '85, and in 1986 I started tracking on a daily basis the launching of the new round, the Uruguay Round. Then in 1987, I went to Europe to begin closely monitoring the round of negotiations, and our organization, The Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy, started publishing a daily electronic and fax newsletter, *The Trade News*, which then tracked the negotiations, more or less on a daily basis, up through the Marrakech completion, and then beyond. I happen to also sit on the U.S. Trade Representatives' Trade and Environment Policy Advisory Committee, and as part of that responsibility, I was on the U.S. delegation to the founding of the WTO and to the ministerial meeting there in Seattle as part of the U.S., the non-government part of the U.S. official delegation.

JD What did your organization do to mobilize its members?

MR We created an International Media Center, which was located in the Town Hall Building, which was created to provide computers and communications equipment for journalists from around the world, and to provide press

conference space operating in many different languages for non-profits and for other organizations who were participating in the event in Seattle. At the same time, we created an Internet website in a partnership with Real Networks, a company based there in Seattle, called wtowatch, and introduced in addition to providing full documentation and all of that, we also used that site to live broadcast over the Internet all the different events, the press conferences, some of the street action, a whole lot of different things that were going on during that time.

JD About how many people do you think were mobilized?

MR Well, hundreds used the media center, and that media center also included the use of a town hall auditorium, and that auditorium was used by people, like United Steelworkers and others, during the week for rallies. I don't know how big that hall is, but it was over-full.

JD What kind of resources have you committed to the WTO protest campaign?

MR Well, I think it would be false to say that we were participating in the WTO protest campaign, and so maybe there's a misunderstanding. Maybe we shouldn't really be part of this history project. It's a kind of a narrow definition that doesn't really fit our tactical concerns. In fact, I would think that a whole lot of people who were there would not be very happy to be stereotyped, and sort of put down, in using that terminology. That's kind of, I think, a misstatement in a way. Our organization was there because we believed that this process deserved citizen input, citizen participating and transparency, and I think a whole lot of people feel the same way. I think it's a very limited definition.

JD Thank you, I appreciate that. So you would not consider yourself to be an organization...your whole force would be to have people become more educated and understanding for themselves?

MR Participating directly in the process as we expect citizens to participate in any governmental process that affected their lives. That means having access to documents and information. It means having full ability to comment. It means participating in the setting of policy long before it's sort of being negotiated. It means commenting on proposals that are being made. It means a whole lot of back and forth communications where various interest groups, opinion leaders, experts, so on and so forth, comment on the process. I think it means what we come to expect as the standard for our domestic political process. So, for example, we have an administrative procedure act that requires that decisions that are going to be made by the government that affect the people, have to be published in the Federal Register and open to comment, things like that. It's quite different than just kind of informing people, but rather being in the process so that people can participate.

JD I understand. It's more in a dialogue.

MR

Right.

JD

And in a democracy.

MR

Right.

JD

What was your relationship to the labor unions during this process?

MR

We provided space for different events. There were a couple of trade unions who did press conferences in our facility. We were working closely with journalists from labor and union-related publications from other parts of the world.

JD

Can you expand on that? What parts of the world were you in contact with?

MR

I think we had registered 80 countries. Much more limited from Africa, but heavily Europe, Latin America and Asia.

JD

Did you have any youth or students that played roles in what you did?

MR

It depends a little bit on youth and student definition. One of the things that we took responsibility for as part of our work there was the Food and Agriculture Day, which was one of the days. Our lead organizer for that, Minskavince Sovern is a young person, and she was very active with a lot of the other young people that were there. That day, which opened with a breakfast provided by farmers from the region and then included a lot of speakers over at the church – I think the Methodist Church – and then a rally down at the Farmers Market in support of the Farmers Market, and then workshops in the afternoon, there were a whole lot of young people who were a part of those – staff or volunteers or participants. But it wasn't a specific focus that we had. Our focus maybe was more on farmers if you had say that we had a specific focus.

JD

Well, that would certainly makes sense. How successful was it?

MR

We consider it a huge success. From the point of view of creating an environment where international media could very comfortably have access to instantaneous communication, it was very successful. The web page was a huge success. Huge numbers of people using it, and a very complicated process.

The Food and Ag Day was by far the best organized and the best kind of run and our rally was huge. There were 5,000 people there a day down at the Pike Place Market. I think, all in all, we feel it was very successful.

The agricultural proposals that were being made in the course of the negotiations weren't very good, and so we were very happy that they kind of died on the vine. But on agriculture itself, the talks were already scheduled,

were actually already taking place, because agriculture is built in, so the fact that the conference did not conclude with a launching of a new round of negotiations didn't really affect agriculture very much, because the agriculture negotiations were already in motion and already planned.

So the real proof, so to speak, is in the quality of the agricultural agreements that are eventually made, and whether there's a political and democratic process that deals like, one that generates ownership and respect for those agreements at the other end, and it's way too early to know, because the jury is still out on that.

JD Is there any idea about when there might be a decision?

MR Oh, years.

JD Years.

MR Yes, I think they have two years, even, before there's a deadline.

JD How do you see this impacting farmers around the world?

MR Right now, of course, the impacts as articulated by all the different farm representatives who were there in Seattle have been very, very negative. That's been reinforced at a lot of different official meetings of the UN, the United Nations. The UN Commission on Human Rights even declared the intellectual property part and other aspects of GATT as human rights violations, so it's been quite negative up until now. Whether it can be negotiated in a positive way, I don't know.

JD Do you see any weaknesses on either side as far as not being able to negotiate?

MR Which are the two sides you are referring to, the U.S. and Europe?

JD Yes.

MR No. I mean, I can't see the forest for the trees, because this is what I do day in and day out, but, for example, the great pronouncements that the last round of negotiations, which are the rules we are currently living under, would somehow...in farm subsidies, the U.S. has tripled farm subsidies since the conclusion of that round. So there's such a giant disconnect between the rhetoric and the reality that it's either, dishonesty or it's disconnection at a level that's a little hard to imagine.

So there are many things that have to do with the internal contradictions of these agreements that are probably more important than the United States and Europe, who basically have the same general position.

The WTO has been noted in many circumstances and many places as having a lot more to do with internal domestic political economic battles more than it has to do with actual trade relations between countries. I think in agriculture, that's definitely the case. It's definitely the case, also, in China where I just got back from.

So, I know this is kind of a long answer to your question, and maybe not that helpful, but I feel like if the United States and Europe weren't using the WTO as part of internal political debates that they could very easily find an external agreement. They're mostly part of internal fights at the moment. It's not likely that the U.S. and Europe will spend much time trying to work out their kind of minor differences.

JD This is really interesting, but I am going to move on. What organizations or constituencies do you see vital for the continuation of what you're working on?

MR Farmers, consumers, environmentalists, trade unions, journalists, people who are working specifically in the health area, human health, animal health...at least those areas.

JD Are there any particular organizations that you could see would be vital to you to make a coalition?

MR At the global level, the associations of the farm organizations via encompassing the International Federation of Agricultural Producers.

JD Going off of that, why are these coalitions important?

MR They are the coalitions of the family farm organizations themselves. It's important to have both individual farm organizations and also the associations of those farm organizations. These happen to be the two major associations of those farm organizations.

JD Do you see any tension between the national level NGOs and movement organizations, local groups, or campaigns?

MR Well, compared to what? I mean, not as much as the tension between, let's say, the civil disobedience crowd and the symbolic violence crowd, and perhaps not as much as the difference between the civil disobedience crowd and the permitted protest marching crowd, so the national/local split, which is common and nothing real unusual about that. But it doesn't seem nearly as pressing in this as some of the other splits.

JD I was reading in the IATP publication of a few years ago where you actually have a quote from Margaret Mead that sits on your desk, or hangs on your wall, close to it anyway. So, you feel strongly about grassroots organizations?

MR Yes. Farmers are most powerfully organized that way for sure.

JD So farmers organized under some other organization, like, say, for instance...I can't think of one off the top of my head.

MR Like the National Farmers Union.

JD Yes, the Farmers Union.

MR At the state level or wherever it is.

JD Or the other one that is kind of like the Democrats/ Republicans of the farm groups, Farm Bureau?

MR Yes, but there's a thousand of them, because they're people organized by crop, by state, by what they want to do – direct market or whatever. But in any case, we certainly see that as a critical question, but grassroots organizing for what is a more common topic. We assume that you have to organize at the grassroots, at the global and everything in-between. The question is, what are you doing? And for the kind of issues that we are talking about, what are you doing is trying to influence policymaking. And so you have policymaking at the local and the national and at the global levels and you have to pay attention to all of them in a way.

JD So you really feel though that grassroots organizations can have an impact on what is decided at the WTO?

MR Yes, and it had a pretty big impact in Seattle, at least.

JD Yes. Is there anything important happening right now that we may not be able to see?

MR I think the most important thing that happened in Seattle was the decision by the developing countries that they could kind of say no to the United States and to Europe. The night when Barshefsky and Moore announced they were suspending the talks, I was sitting at the table with the delegation from Thailand. It was pretty clear to me that the fact that there was protest and objection and demands for democracy outside empowered and emboldened people to demand the same inside.

I think that has gone on a month later at the Montreal negotiations of the bio-safety protocol. The Third World hung firm and forced the U.S. to back down, and pushed to a very, very historic kind of agreement. Since that time, in many different places, you can see the Third World becoming a real active, strong participant in the WTO and other global processes.

I would say that is a gigantic, positive outcome from Seattle. It makes Seattle a giant success, because Seattle not only stopped a very ill-prepared and ill-

conceived and potentially very, very destructive launching of a new round of negotiations, what the Seattle action did was to launch a new round of, sort of, empowered participation by developing country governments, particularly at the global level, and by especially young people, but not only young people, at the grassroots level in this country and in other countries. So you have quite a bit that comes out of one little tiny event.

JD

Yes. It was really a wonderful event to be a part of.

MR

And I think people do see Seattle as kind of a surprise and a first and a starting point. I think for people who have been active, it was 13 years in the making, and so both of those are totally legitimate perspectives, but the more important question is in the making towards what, an event to what end? Those are short-term and very long-term questions.

So a lot of the conversations now that you probably can't see are the conversations about where do we go with global government? Where do we go with grassroots to global communication and coordination of consensus building? Where do we go with rule-making and rule enforcement and rule alteration in trade investment in other arenas? Where do we go in terms of putting people and the environment in a more prominent position over orderly returns or a handful of shareholders and other, much more limiting, limited stakeholder control? Kind of more fundamental questions than the ones being debated now.

JD

From what you're saying, it sounds like that other people are at the grassroots level even Third World countries are organizing.

MR

Big time. And there will be a huge global social forum in southern Brazil the end of January, where all the people from all these different movements will come together. There is also a European gathering of all the different campaigns, I think, January 6th. So in early January, at least, a lot of the European campaigns will come together...in late January, globally, people will come together down in Brazil.

JD

That's so exciting.

MR

It will be interesting to see where it goes.

JD

Yes, it will be. So do you have an idea about where it might be headed?

MR

No. I have very specific ideas about what kind of rules would be good rules for agricultural trade, which is not an insignificant part of the question, but it's just a little, tiny corner of it. I think the bigger question about where it goes has something to do with redressing the North/South imbalance and the social, economic and ecological sustainability challenges.

If the process can be aimed at helping redress imbalances between regions and within countries and cities and towns and regions and, simultaneously, to address what we know about economic, social and environmental sustainability, that would be a pretty big swath. Certainly not as monumental as what the previous generation did in terms of the Second World War and the creation of an international system out of that war, it would be pretty good.

JD What I heard from you say earlier was that Seattle was a pivotal point...for some it was the beginning of a new process but on the other hand, for some it was in the middle of a process?

MR Right.

JD So the process is continuing. How many years do you think we're looking down the road before we actually see some real improvement in farm policy and environmental things going on farms and economic sustainability?

MR Well, it took from about 1920 to 1937 the last time we were in this cycle. That was 17 years. I think people started getting clear about this in about 1985, so it's probably going to take to about 2005, something like that.

JD You think the family farmers of the United States and around the globe have that much time left?

MR That's the big problem. I would say many of them do not. I've just had a meeting in China where they were discussing what do you do when you move 300 million farmers off the land in China, move them to town and put them to work in factories?

JD It's a large societal problem. It just impacts everything. Thanks Mark for your time.

MR Thank you.

End of Interview

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