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Pathways of transnational activism: A conceptual framework

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MPIfG Discussion Paper 14/5

Pathways of Transnational Activism
A Conceptual Framework

Sabrina Zajak



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Abstract

This paper presents a novel analytical framework to study transnational activism in the context of today's international governance architecture. While there is a considerable amount of literature on the emergence, development, and effects of transnational activism in specific transnational governance arrangements or within a specific local context, an integrated framework that analyzes the dynamic interplay between activism, transnational institutions, and domestic contexts is still lacking. The framework of transnational pathways of influence intends to help close this gap. It integrates insights from social movement research on transnational collective action and insights from institutional theorists on institutional interactions. The framework consists of three major concepts: the concept of intra-pathway dynamics captures the relationship of mobilization and institutional chance within one path; the concept of inter-pathway dynamics encompasses institutional interactions and interdependencies between activism across paths; and the concept of the global–local link characterizes the relationship of activism within each path to local actors, the domestic context, and the political regime. The paper outlines this framework and exemplifies it by taking the case of transnational labor-rights activism targeting labor-rights violations in a strong and nondemocratic state: the People's Republic of China. It shows that the study of activism across different transnational pathways over time is necessary to understand the combined effects of activist interventions, institutional co-evolution and interaction as an explanation of the process of selective convergence between global norms and local practices.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag präsentiert einen neuen Ansatz zur Analyse transnationalen Mehrebenenaktivismus in der globalen Governance-Architektur. Der besondere Fokus liegt auf dem Zusammenspiel zwischen Aktivisten, multiplen transnationalen Institutionen und dem lokalen Kontext. Kern des Analyserahmens bilden drei Konzepte: Intra-Pfad-Entwicklungen beschreiben die Interaktion zwischen Mobilisierung und institutionellem Wandel innerhalb eines Pfades; Inter-Pfad-Dynamiken umfassen institutionelle Interaktionen und Interdependenzen zwischen Aktivismus in verschiedenen Pfaden; und der global-lokale Link erklärt das Verhältnis von Aktivisten in den einzelnen Pfaden zu lokalen Akteuren, dem lokalen Kontext und dem politischen Regime. Der Analyserahmen wird anhand des Beispiels von transnationalem Arbeitsrechtsaktivismus, der gegen schlechte Arbeitsbedingungen in chinesischen Lieferbetrieben mobilisiert, erörtert. Es zeigt sich, dass die Analyse von transnationalem Aktivismus entlang verschiedener Pfade und im Zeitverlauf nötig ist, um die Wirkung des Zusammenspiels verschiedener Effekte – transnationale Interventionen, institutionelle Ko-Evolution und Interaktion – zu verstehen: Nur in ihrem Wechselspiel führen diese Prozesse zu einer selektiven Konvergenz zwischen globalen Normen, nationalen Rechten und lokalen Praktiken.

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Pathways of Transnational Activism: A Conceptual Framework

1 Introduction

Can multilevel mobilization contribute to the establishment of international rights and regulations, or does neoliberal globalization render such attempts void? Can transnational activism support the introduction of rights into strong and nondemocratic states, or do such states have enough repressive measures and defense mechanisms to block any attempt at transnational influence? Until now, theories on social movement research and global governance have been unable to answer these questions. Indeed, both questions might appear at first to be altogether separate ones. On the contrary, this paper shows that both aspects – social movements producing global regulatory change and a change in local practices – are interconnected. But we have not yet developed analytical tools that help us conceptualize the interconnectedness of transnational episodes of mobilization and global and local processes of change. Today's global governance architecture is characterized by multiple layers of regulation, complex interdependencies, and both hard and soft forms of steering. In addition, governance arrangements, modes of regulation, and actor constellations vary between issue fields. Transnational activists apply multiple strategies, address state and private actors, and operate outside but also within governance arrangements.

Until now, the literature has left us to speculate in two different directions: while some authors argue that, under conditions of regime complexity, the combined power of multinational corporations and nondemocratic states systematically disadvantages nonresourceful actors (Guidry et al. 2000), others have suggested that the multilayered nature of the existing governance architecture also provides opportunities for transnational mobilization (della Porta/Tarrow 2005b). Empirical research findings to date remain inconclusive at best, not least because they focus all too often on specific episodes of contention in selected institutional environments and particular geographic contexts.

This paper intends to start overcoming these limitations by developing an analytical framework to analyze and explore multilevel activism within the current global governance architecture and its local effects. In order to gain a comprehensive understanding of the effects of transnational activism, the paper proposes that different pathways of

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transnational influence and their interplay with domestic factors need to be considered. It develops an analytical framework of “pathways of transnational influence” that: first, conceptualizes transnational activism in different institutional arenas as interlinked phenomena; second, develops a longitudinal approach that includes recursive episodes of contention; and third, takes into account the interactions between transnational institutions, cross-border mobilization, and responses of state and private actors in the targeted country. The main argument is that such a longitudinal, multidimensional, and dynamic approach to the study of transnational activism is necessary in order to reveal that transnational activism operates in the context of fluid, multilayered, and interactive governance arrangements and is simultaneously influenced by the responses of the target. With that, the framework allows the assessment of often neglected synergies and the combined outcomes of different forms of transnational activism and highlights interactions between activism and the responses of targets in different settings.

The paper first discusses how insights of research on transnational institutions can contribute to the study of transnational activism. It then elaborates the framework of transnational pathways of influence and how to operationalize and study it by using the example of transnational activism targeting labor rights violations in the strong and nondemocratic state of the People’s Republic of China. The conclusion discusses the implication of this framework for future studies in different issue fields and in relation to different countries.

2 The problem of multiple institutional contexts and their impact on transnational activism

The rise of transnational social-movement and activist networks has contributed to a new research field at the intersection of international relations, political sociology, and international political economy: the study of transnational activism. Transnational activists are defined as “people and groups who are rooted in specific national contexts, but who engage in contentious political activities that involve them in transnational networks and contacts” (Tarrow 2005: 29). The term *activism* describes political activities which are based on a conflict of interests, challenge (or support) existing power structures, and take place, at least in part, outside formal political institutions (Piper/Uhlin 2009).

Scholars of transnational activism have analyzed how globalization processes transform activism and explained why and how social movements shift scales and organize across borders (della Porta et al. 1999; della Porta/Tarrow 2005b; Piper/Uhlin 2009; Smith et al. 1997; Tarrow/McAdam 2005; Tarrow 2005). Other research has shown that transnational mobilization has sometimes contributed to the transformation of the global governance architecture or increased states’ compliance with international norms (Kha-gram et al. 2002; Price 2003; Sikink 2002; Silva 2007; Smith 2012; Wu 2007). This line

of research increasingly acknowledges that transnational activists operate in a context of “complex internationalism,” characterized by fragmented institutions that provide differentiated opportunities to external actors (della Porta 2011: 203).

Yet the concept of complex internationalism remains somehow vague considering its implications for transnational mobilization and its consequences. This paper puts forward the idea that social movement scholars can profit from the integrating insights of transnational institutional scholars, who have paid close attention to the interconnectedness of the different layers of regulation and their specific relationship to the domestic context. With that, it responds to recent calls by some scholars for research on both transnational activism and institutions. For example, Rodriguez-Garavito argues:

Social movement research has yet to systematically theorize and document the profound transformations of political and legal arrangements that mark the advent of a post-Westphalian world in which increased transnational connections create supranational political and regulatory fields that contest the primacy of the nation state. Specifically with regards to political opportunities, we have to develop the analytical tools for understanding the contemporary structure of openings and threats to national and transnational mobilization in a post-Westphalian world. (Rodriguez-Garavito 2007: 167)

The concept of transnational pathways goes beyond a static and one-dimensional understanding of transnational opportunities.

According to Risse, global governance can broadly be understood as “creating political order in the absence of a state with a legitimate monopoly over the use of force and the capacity to authoritatively enforce the law and other rules” (Risse 2006: 2). As an empirical phenomenon, it characterizes multiple co-existing and overlapping bodies of regulation, inter- and intra-organizational networks of autonomous but interdependent actors with multiple sources of power and enforcement mechanisms (van Kersbergen/van Warden 2004). These layers of regulation include national and international law, transnational and private rules, and local conventions which take the form of social practices (Bartley 2011; Schuppert 2006; Snyder 2010; Tamanaha 2008). Global governance is no theory as such. It can be viewed through the lenses of institutional theories that look at the concomitant processes of global economic and regulatory integration. An institutional perspective stresses that the emergence of global markets brought about the transformation of domestic institutions and went hand in hand with the expansion of transnational rules and global institutions (Braithwaite et al. 2007; Djelic/Quack 2003b; Djelic/Sahlin-Andersson 2006b). Thus economic globalization is as much about changing the national rules of the economic game as it is about building new institutions between and across spaces (Djelic/Quack 2003c). Djelic and Quack state that “globalization appears to be a multilevel and multi-layered historical process, which is socially constructed and locally contested and reveals coexisting, competing and conflicting actors and logics” (Djelic/Quack 2003a: 303). The concept of transnational pathways of influence discussed in the next section aims at integrating the idea of multiplicity and interconnectedness of transnational governance arrangements into social movement

research. Insights from institutional theory help us to more completely understand the structuration of the institutional settings, the relationship between different settings, and their interaction with the local context.

The concept of transnational pathways of influence also goes beyond the governance concept because it integrates mobilization and contestation (civil society as extra-institutional actors). This is important as the governance concept tends to focus on civil society actors as an integral part of the governance concept (rule-makers, rule-takers, and rule-enforcers); it tends to depoliticize political processes by neglecting conflict of interests and collective action outside the governance structures (Offe 2008). However, claiming rights on the grassroots level, building a civil society, and taking transnational collective action are important to establish and exercise rights on the ground. The pathway framework further clarifies how activism is shaped by, and shapes the current global governance architecture and at the same time uses those channels to produce domestic change. Hence, the framework helps situate transnational labor-rights activism and its outcomes within macrolevel changes in the global political-economic system and in the domestic structure of the targeted state.

3 Specifying the framework: Transnational activism against labor-rights violations in a strong and nondemocratic state

What exactly do we study when we study activism in transnational pathways? As mentioned before, global governance arrangements vary between issue areas. Thus, to study activism in transnational pathways, the first step is to select an issue area to help specify the specific governance settings and their dynamics. For illustrative purposes, this paper takes the example of activism within the global labor governance architecture. The conclusion then discusses the possibilities to transfer the framework to other issue areas. The second step is to specify the country where ultimately change should take place. One key claim of this paper is that the nature of the target (the state and private actors within the state) affects not only local outcomes, but also how transnational activism plays out within the global governance landscape. This paper uses the case of a both internally and externally strong and nondemocratic country, namely the People's Republic of China.

Why labor?

Labor is a good issue area if we wish to study transnational activism in a number of overlapping normative arenas, because the labor movement is one of the quintessential movements that addresses a variety of public and private targets (state, companies, and business organizations alike) in order to advance workers' rights (Turner 2005; Van

Dyke et al. 2005). Thus I see the following characteristics as core features of transnational labor rights activism: (a) cooperation (and sometimes conflict) between trade unions and NGOs; (b) a combination of insider and outsider strategies (institutionalized and non-institutionalized politics); (c) multiple targets and complex boomerang patterns.

As the roles of both the state and private actors were transformed by the global spread of markets, labor developed new international strategies that complement local organizing (Evans 2010; Taylor 2009). These international strategies used, transformed, or created new transnational governance arrangements. This includes the examples of trade unions targeting transnational companies and their sourcing practices in cooperation with newly emerging labor NGOs and other social movement organizations (Baringhorst et al. 2007; Seidman 2007; Zajak 2009); or trade unions and labor-rights NGOs targeting international organizations and nation states during the establishment of trade regimes such as the WTO, NAFTA, or other bilateral agreements (Anner 2001; Hertel 2006; Kay 2005). The concept of transnational pathways of influence integrates these different forms of activism within one framework. But transnational labor rights activism also goes beyond the mobilization and contestation of global rule making. Labor-rights organizations often support and interact with domestic trade unions in countries where trade union rights are severely violated (Caraway 2006). Such civil society interactions and their implication for transnational mobilization and its local outcomes have to be integrated into the analytical framework as well.

Why nondemocratic and strong states?

One of the major flaws in the study of transnational activism is that it either focuses on how global change is brought about or treats global institutions as rather stable open or closed opportunities that activists use to produce domestic change. One of the most prominent models, the boomerang effect model, states that local human-rights activists who cannot achieve their goals in the domestic arena because they face repression or blockage, connect with activists beyond their borders in order to promote domestic change (Keck/Sikkink 1998). The boomerang effect model suggests that closed domestic opportunities are an important precondition for the initiation of transnational activism. Thus, domestic blockage induces local actors to go transnational. This model and its follow-ups are based on two assumptions. First, domestic actors are willing and able to make claims, to forge alliances, and to activate international resources; second, the targeted state is either materially, economically, or normatively vulnerable to external pressure from foreign governments or international organizations mobilized by advocacy coalitions. States, which are not very susceptible to external accusations or do not have domestic actors able to go transnational, are largely left out of the analysis (for valuable exceptions, see Fleay 2006; Schroeder 2008; Wu 2005). This also holds true when looking at research on transnational labor activism, which focuses on regions where freedom of association is granted, because the presence of domestic unions or

independent worker representation is crucial for any such transnational dynamics that aim at changing working conditions (Armbruster-Sandoval 2005; Rodriguez-Garavito 2007). Thus, we know little about the way nondemocratic and internationally strong states block, undermine, or transform transnational activism and its consequences. There are multiple mechanisms by which strong states can affect transnational activism, for example, by transforming existing transnational opportunities or by undermining local actors who seek to go transnational.

Overall, the framework can be applied to all kind of states. What has to be taken into account, however, is whether the violation of rights are addressed in a weak or a strong state (as states have different capabilities for undermining or supporting activism) and the kind of political regime, be it democratic or nondemocratic (as this helps explain whether a state uses its power in favor or against transnational activists).

4 Defining pathways of influence

This section develops the idea of transnational pathways of influence. It integrates two major insights provided by transnational institutional scholars: first, multiple co-existing and overlapping bodies of regulation characterize today's global governance architecture. Each governance arrangement is defined by a particular institutional setting, a particular set of rules, procedures, and actors engaged in rule making and rule enforcement, which present a specific environment for activism with particular opportunities and hindrances. Second, each of these institutional settings has a specific link to the domestic context. This is important for transnational mobilization because – even if activists are relatively successful at the transnational level (the proximate target) – it does not mean that change is actually produced at the local level (ultimate target).

The transnational pathways are derived from core layers of the global governance architecture. In general, the global governance landscape consists of international institutions, bilateral treaties, international meetings, hybrid (public and private) forms of governance, and private governance (Djelic/Sahlin-Andersson 2006a). Bernstein and Cashore introduced the concept of different pathways of international influence by differentiating between four distinct paths: global markets, international rules, international norms, and domestic infiltration of transnational actors (Bernstein/Cashore 2000). While they focused on transnational actors and institutions as a source of domestic change (one-way relationship), I focus on the interactions between transnational labor activists, transnational institutions, and the domestic context in order to capture global and local changes (two-way relationship).

In the field of labor, the current global labor governance is the starting point for selecting different paths. It is possible to differentiate between four major pathways of influ-

ence. Activists can try to mobilize from within or target international organizations (the international-organizational pathway), other states or regions (the bilateral pathway), or transnational companies and private regulatory arrangements (the market pathway). Still, it is not enough to look at the major regulatory layers in order to capture all forms of transnational influence. As the governance concept tends to neglect outside actors without access, there is one form of transnational influence which is overlooked when only the institutional infrastructure is examined: the transnational support of domestic civil society organizations. This is an important path of influence for two reasons. First, empowering local civil society actors (e.g., workers, trade unions, NGOs, and social movements) could strengthen their capacity to claim and realize their rights. Second, the engagement of local actors in transnational networks can impact local outcomes in each path.

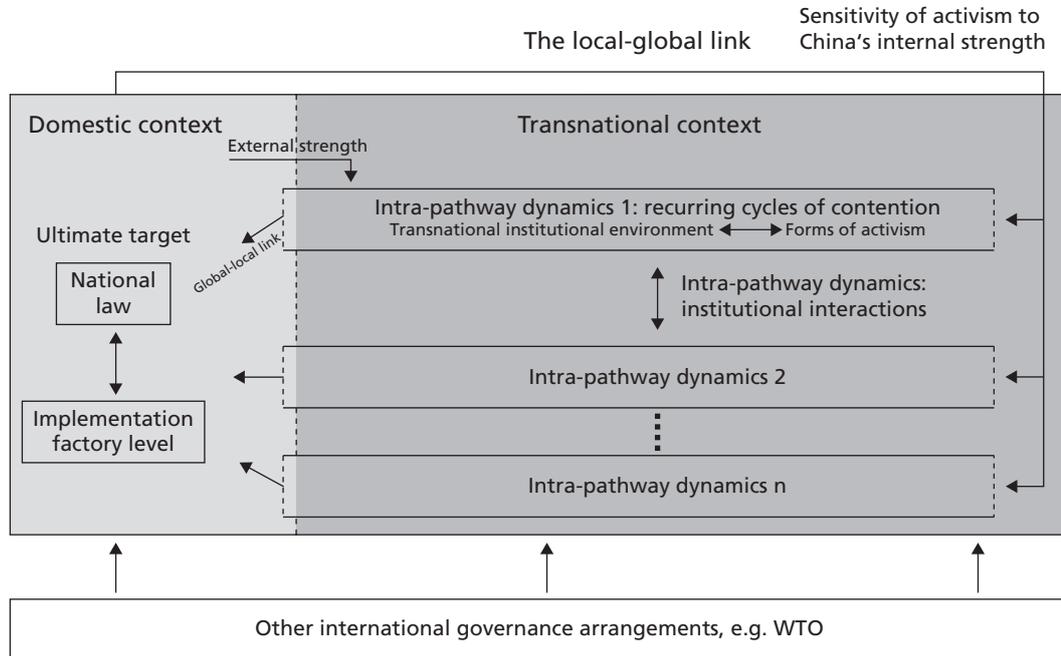
This differentiation already suggests that activists sometimes target or try to mobilize intermediaries such as international organizations, other states, companies, or domestic organizations for leveraging change in labor law and practices. This implies that activism within each pathway has a specific final or ultimate target. The first two pathways can be used to target the government to reform the labor law and its implementation by mobilizing within an international organization (e.g., using an existing complaint channel) or by trying to convince another state to exert economic or political pressure (e.g., via trade relations). Activism in the next two pathways is different because the ultimate target is not the state, but domestic actors (factories, workers, and labor NGO's). Integrating both state and private actors as ultimate targets in the analysis of transnational activism also goes beyond prominent concepts such as the boomerang model or the spiral model, which only focus on the state as the primary target.

Next, it is necessary to discuss the term transnational pathways of influence before specifying its core components: namely, activism within one path (intra-pathway dynamics), the implications of interaction between paths for activism (inter-pathway dynamics), and the relationship of the transnational to the local (global-local link). Figure 1 offers an overview of the relationship of the concepts.

Transnational pathways of influence

The term *pathways* indicates that activists mobilize within a certain context (“travel a certain path”) in order to achieve a certain outcome, which can be broadly defined as improving working conditions in factories at the production site. However, the paths are not always clear, paved, or well defined, and activists often alter their course while traveling. The concept of multiple paths and the concept of multilevel opportunity structures share the idea that there are multiple environments that shape transnational activism. The idea of multilevel opportunity structures is based on the concept of political opportunity structure, which was developed in the context of the political process theory in the United States (Tilly 1984). Political opportunities can be broadly defined

Figure 1 Framework for studying activism in transnational pathways of influence



as the set of characteristics of political institutions that determine the relative ability of (outside) groups to influence decision making within that institution. They are “consistent but not necessarily formal, permanent, or national signals to social or political actors which either encourage or discourage them to use their internal resources to form social movements” (Tarrow 1996: 54). From this perspective, the larger structural context that is defined by the target of activism (the state and other institutions) determines patterns of collective action and shapes strategies and repertoires of social movements (Walker et al. 2008). However, there are also significant differences between these concepts.

First, instead of defining static environmental conditions, the concept of transnational pathways follows Pierson and Skocpol’s call to “hypothesize about the combined effects of institutions and processes rather than examining just one institution or process at a time” (Pierson/Skocpol 2002: 694). Rather than focusing on a single short-term campaign, the concept covers a range of activities in various pathways over time. I take a longitudinal perspective and assume that networked actors are embedded in a multiplicity of institutions and contexts, which shape their activities but also get shaped by them. Strategies and aims of transnational labor advocates do not remain constant but adapt to changes within transnational institutions and the domestic context. I thus depart from assumptions of stable opportunity structures, which more or less determine the choices of activists (Meyer/Minkoff 2003), since the institutional environment can also change when activists travel along the path in recurrent cycles of contention. It is therefore necessary to study developments over a period of time. The long-term effects only then become apparent.

Second, we know very little about the relationship of domestic and international opportunities. Sikkink has developed a “dynamic multilevel governance” model (Sikkink 2005) to define this relationship. She built on the two-level game theories on the relationship of domestic and international political structures in international relations (Mo 1995; Putnam 1988). Four different patterns of relationships between national and international opportunities are possible: if only the international is open, local actors can seek external support; if only the local context is open, there is no need to go transnational; if both national and international opportunities are closed, activism will be almost absent; if both are open, combined domestic and international activism takes place in insider-outsider coalitions. This is an important contribution to the study of transnational activism, as it constitutes an interactive theory of transnational mobilization by understanding opportunity structure in terms of relative openness (understood as access to institutions) of national and international institutions. This should explain the probability of domestic and international activism, the type and focus of activism and the effectiveness (Sikkink 2005: 158).

Sikkink’s model is dynamic because activists change how they combine international with domestic resources depending on the specific situation. However, this model underestimates the various transnational options that activists have, some of which are open while, at the same time, others are closed. Activists can try to assert their claims in international organizations, use international complain channels, mobilize other states to exert influence, target transnational companies to exert local influence, or support domestic organizations in their attempt to trigger change. In addition, there are multiple opportunities and threats within one path. In 2005, Tarrow and della Porta argued that international opportunities are rather closed, given the democratic deficit of global governance arrangements (della Porta/Tarrow 2005a: 13). In contrast, the pathway approach portrays a much more nuanced picture on transnational opportunities and hindrances.

Third and most importantly, I do not consider the transnational pathways as independent of each other. Opportunities and obstacles in one arena and the strategic decisions of activists in one context might impact developments in others. Each path also varies in the type of leverage that can be mobilized, in its regulatory scope and depth, and thus how it affects the domestic context. I therefore take a *dynamic and interactive perspective on movement environments*. Three concepts are at the center of the analytical framework used to analyze activism within the different pathways of influence: (1) the concept of intra-pathway dynamics; (2) the concept of inter-pathway dynamics; and (3) the global-local link.

Intra-pathway dynamics

First, the most important building block is the concept of *intra-pathway developments*, as this reflects the interplay between forms and repertoires of activism within a specific transnational institutional setting. Each of the transnational institutional arrangements

can constitute a particular environment for labor activism that provides specific opportunities and constraints. This context shapes transnational activism but could also be shaped by it. In other words, while advocates for labor travel certain paths with the aim to produce domestic change, they also engage in struggles over the transnational regulation and their enforcement mechanisms. For example, labor advocates might campaign against a transnational company (proximate target) in order to improve working conditions in its supply chains (ultimate target). The company might agree to set up new rules (institution building) or become a member of existing multistakeholder regulation. Another example: activists can demand the inclusion of a social clause or a complaint channel in bilateral or international trade agreements (proximate target), which should affect state regulation and business behavior (ultimate target). In this way, activists change their immediate transnational environment while traveling certain paths. I call the interaction of activists with their environment over time *intra-institutional dynamic*.

However, it is not sufficient to look only at intra-pathway dynamics to understand the development and outcomes of labor-rights activism because this could distort the picture of the contribution of labor-rights activism. What happens within one path is also influenced by two other processes: developments in other transnational settings and the domestic context. This is why the other two building blocks have to be included in the analysis.

Inter-pathway dynamics

Labor advocates are merely one type of actor contributing to transnational institutional changes. Given its polycentric nature, transnational labor governance institutions evolve in rather unplanned and uncoordinated ways. Hassel points out that “no single actor has been in control of designing the institution-building process or the process as a whole” (Hassel 2008: 233). The analytic framework needs to conceptualize the relationship of and interaction between the different regulatory layers. Developments in one pathway can influence developments in another. Labor advocates might change their behavior depending on what has happened in other pathways. Two different sources of change can impact transnational labor-rights activism within each path in the following way.

First, developments in other pathways can impact opportunities or hindrances for labor advocates within a path. Several researchers stress the complexity and density of global governance arrangements – the term *regime complexes* indicates a “collective of partially-overlapping regimes” (see also Keohane/Victor 2011; Raustiala/Victor 2004: 277). Between those overlapping regimes, institutional interactions can be a major source of transnational change (Brosig 2011; Gehring/Oberthür 2009; Keohane/Victor 2011). The concept of inter-pathway dynamics captures how interactions also impact labor ac-

tivism because new opportunities and hindrances might arise precisely at the intersection of different pathways. For example, the agreement on core labor standards within the ILO, which are universally valid independent of their degree of ratification, creates new opportunities within other governance arenas, such as the European Union, which presents itself as an international promoter of core labor standards. A similar development could be observed in the market path, where discursive vulnerability of companies increased as core labor standards became accepted stabilized as a global norm. The closing of opportunities can also lead to a shift in strategy to another arena. For example, until the “battle of Seattle” against WTO negotiations, activists fought to include labor standards within WTO regulations and failed. This failure has contributed to a “shift” in targets. Activists increasingly started to target companies directly (Bartley 2005).

Second, the strategizing of activists in one path can impact strategizing in another path. This is a common phenomenon given the networked character of transnational mobilization, which takes place across different contexts simultaneously. This is important because it means that strategizing cannot be explained by the actors’ aims and context within one path. Instead, strategizing within one context can require changing strategies in another setting. I call the combination of both aspects *inter-pathway dynamics*.

Global-local link

The framework has to integrate analytical assumptions on the relationship of the pathways to the domestic context. I refer to it as the *global-local link of each pathway*. “Global” refers to actors and institutions outside the targeted country, while “local” covers actors and institutions within a country. This global-local link can work top-down (the local effects of transnational mobilization) and bottom-up (the feedback of local actors, including the target) into transnational pathways. It is also important to note that in each path the global-local link plays out differently. Both types of links are illustrated in the following.

Two kinds of links are relevant for the *bottom-up local-global link*: the link between local activists and transnational ones and the target’s feedback into the global governance architecture. The targeted state can use its international power to influence the transnational institutional context – an observation which has been stressed repeatedly by institutional scholars (Campbell 2004; Djelic/Quack 2003b; Halliday/Carruthers 2007). Yet it has not been integrated into social movement research. If and how a targeted country is able to influence the opportunities and constraints for activism depends very much on the institutional configurations of the transnational governance arrangement. For example, international unions can use the ILO complaints procedure, and the targeted state cannot prevent them from doing so because access cannot be blocked. Other opportunities are more sensitive to the external strength of a certain political regime.

For example, if and how trade unions and NGOs are able to influence bilateral trade relations depends on both negotiating partners; delegates can use their power to influence transnational settings and negotiation results. The empirical analysis has to take into account that activism in different pathways can be sensitive to the interventions from the targeted state to various degrees.

There is also another way in which the targeted state can undermine transnational activism. Each type of transnational activism needs some kind of relationship to the local level. In order for activists to engage in transnational politics they need, at the minimum, some form of information or demand for support from the local level. Put differently, the level of openness of a targeted country affects different types of activism in distinct ways (Caraway 2006: 279). Authoritarian regimes can also repress domestic organizations to prevent them going transnational – which is often a necessary condition for transnational activism to emerge. Therefore, the nondemocratic regime can prevent certain forms of activism from evolving despite existing transnational opportunities. An interesting example is the market path. It has been argued that targeting private companies is a way to circumvent the repressive capacity of the targeted state. Yet empirical research indicates that a strong involvement of local actors is necessary in order to trigger meaningful change within factories (Zajak 2012). I call both forms of bottom-up local-global links *sensitivity of activism within each path* towards the targeted state's internal and external strength.

The *top-down global-local link* conceptualizes the local outcomes of each path. Transnational institutions vary in their regulatory depth and mechanism, which activists intend to leverage. Even if activists are successful transnationally, it does not automatically mean that change is produced locally. Transnational influence can be blocked or transformed by local actors (Malets/Zajak 2014). For example, the ILO complaint procedure might trigger positive responses by the targeted state. Yet to admit wrongdoings might not necessarily contribute to a change in actual workplace conditions. Even if a transnational company has been targeted successfully, it might not automatically be successful in improving working conditions in its factories (Locke 2013). Given that local actors (activists, managers, and state agencies) are embedded in the domestic political-economic context, it is important to take into account factors such as existing regulation, the system of industrial relations, informal practices, or repressive measures of the political regime. Overall it means that changes in the strategies and aims of activists in the recurrent contestations over the enforcement of labor rights are as much a result of the political and institutional environment where these struggles took place as they are about understanding and (re-)interpreting the situation on the ground.

Particularities of the civil society path

So far I have primarily discussed activism in different institutional contexts. Another major point of strategizing is the support of domestic civil society organizations (e.g., with a flow material and ideational resources), which I summarize as the civil society path. This path is somehow special given its high degree of interconnectedness with the other paths. This needs some further clarification. The links to local actors become relevant for the bottom-up and top-down links in several ways. In the long run, the building of a civil society from the bottom up can help establish organizations that are increasingly able to go transnational and engage in transnational collective action. This again can facilitate the mobilization of transnational opportunities, which require a stronger involvement of local organizations (e.g., to make statements in international arenas on labor rights violations). Top-down, local actors are crucial in realizing their rights on the ground (e.g., the fights for freedom of association only becomes meaningful when there are local actors willing and able to organize). For empirical analysis, this means paying particular attention to the inter-pathway dynamics between the civil society paths and the others.

In short, the pathway framework can be summarized in the following way. The concept of intra-pathway dynamics captures the relationship between mobilization and institutional change within one path. However, since reasons located outside a single path influence activism, two other concepts are introduced that help explain the development and outcome of transnational activism. The concept of inter-pathway dynamics encompasses institutional interactions and interdependencies between activism across paths. The concept of the global-local link characterizes the relationship of activism within each path to local actors, the domestic context, and the political regime. With these concepts, the framework captures how transnational labor-rights activism interacts with global and local contextual factors, contributing to transnational and domestic institutional changes.

5 Studying pathways of influence

Having outlined and exemplified the analytical framework, the next important step is to discuss how to study pathways and select cases within a specific field. Field case selection is an important step because not all elements and forms of activism within a specific issue field of transnational governance can be studied over time. Each issue field consists of a variety of possible paths, and within each path multiple organizations and institutions exist. The major criterion for selecting a case is its relevance for transnational labor activism in relation to the ultimate target. The question guiding the case selection is: what transnational strategies have become relevant for transnational activists and why? Answering this question already requires some in-depth knowledge of the

field since blocked, unused opportunities and failed attempts also have to be taken into account. Such a case selection shall be exemplified for the issue area of labor and China.

The empirical case within the *international-organizational pathway* can easily be identified since there is only one dominant international organization in the field of labor: the International Labor Organization (ILO). Several other international organizations have taken up labor-rights issues, including other UN organizations, the World Bank (WB), and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) (for an overview, see Hepple 2005; Pries 2010). Historically, the ILO has been the most important organization for this issue. Developments in the ILO impact the intra-institutional dynamics in all other paths. For example, the ILO's formulation of core labor standards has given activists an international norm to which they can hold businesses and states accountable.

In the *bilateral pathway*, states with political and economic relationships to the targeted state form the case universe. Here it is important to identify the most important players. For example, in the case of China, potential candidates are the United States, Europe, and Australia as a regional power. Other countries, such as Laos or Cambodia, do not play a role as they are unable to affect such a state as strong as China. In this regard, the power relations between states are the central criterion for case selection.

In the *market pathway*, the case universe is defined by all private entities engaged in market-based regulation that could potentially become the target of labor-rights activism. These include individual companies engaged in corporate self-regulation, business associations, and various forms of private regulatory arrangements. As a result, the case universe can be quite big. Here the most important and exemplary cases could be selected. Data bases like that of the Clean Cloth Campaign provide a basis of information on the amount of transnational activism in the market path in relation to different countries. In the case of China, the case universe is quite small, given the repressive capacities of the political regime to block the transnationalization of local organizations in this path.

Finally, the *civil society pathway* can also entail a magnitude of organizational linkages. Instead of studying the broader population, individual cases of local activists or activist organizations can be selected who are representative for their type of transnational relationships and the domestic repertoires they employ. This allows one to examine whether or not the relay of transnational support enables local organizations to engage in local labor struggles more effectively.

In order to provide a thick description, a good way to study transnational pathways of influence is to combine different data sources. These include qualitative interviews, participant observations, websites, and policy documents. The composition of the particular bundle of data sources varies from pathway to pathway.

6 Advantages, contributions, and future research

Applying such a framework has several advantages for the study of transnational activism: it acknowledges complex strategizing in the context of the multiplicity and interconnectedness of transnational governance arrangements; it helps increase our understanding of the way in which multilevel activism contributes to global and domestic institutional change; and it takes into account how various layers and forms of domestic and international opportunities and constraints for transnational activism are interwoven. This is important for five reasons.

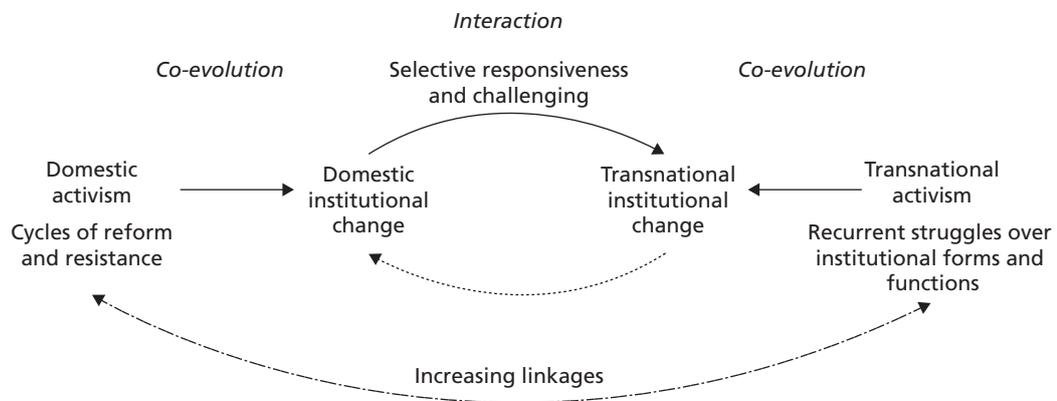
First, by focusing on one particular path and one setting at one particular point in time, we are not fully doing justice to today's transnational activism, which operates in multiple institutional settings, country specific contexts, and actor constellations. Such an approach might lead to an unrepresentative picture of transnational activism and its outcomes by overestimating the impact of a particular form of activism within a certain pathway when other explanatory factors (in particular inter-pathway dynamics and the global-local nexus of each pathway) are not taken into account. Approaches that do not take into account all transnational forces remain incomplete in their analysis and might draw a distorted picture or isolate and overemphasize one specific element. The pathway framework helps pinpoint the relationship between activist interventions and independent and interdependent institutional developments. Only if we place each path in the context of the whole governance field will we understand its weight in relation to the other paths.

Second, prominent theories on transnational activism, such as the boomerang model, the spiral model, or concepts of transnational diffusion and scale shift, tend to focus either on the transnational contribution to domestic change or on how transnational activism triggers global change. This does not do justice to the empirical reality, where both aspects interrelate. The strength of the pathway concept is to conceptualize the relationship between global and domestic changes.

Third, the targeted state can impact transnational activism in various ways, the facets of which have not yet been spelled out completely. As the case of a strong and nondemocratic country (such as China) shows, the target can apply a range of defense mechanisms. In recursive struggles over labor regulation and its enforcement, the targeted state can channel and redirect activists' influence by exercising a variety of counterstrategies, namely, exhibiting selective responsiveness, undermining the establishment of transnational linkages, or engaging in diagnostic struggles trying to reframe international norms.

Fourth, the concept of transnational pathways enables a dynamic and interactive perspective on transnational opportunities. Neither global governance arrangements nor workplace practices in factories are constant. The static and overly structuralist perspective on opportunity structures has already been a major point of criticism (Gold-

Figure 2 Recurrent activist intervention, institutional co-evolution, and interaction



stone 2004). The transnational-pathway framework takes into account that the field of transnational labor governance is constantly changing, interacting, and co-evolving with domestic structural changes and global economic regulatory changes.

In sum, the framework makes it possible to understand combined effects of transnational activism. It helps us get a clearer picture of the outcomes of transnational activism or, more specifically, situate and understand the role and contribution of transnational activism in the context of global and local developments. Figure 2 summarizes the dynamic of change across all pathways. It shows that change is as much a result of activist interventions as it is of institutional co-evolution and interaction. Each factor alone cannot explain why certain standards become established and put into practice. This does not mean that recurrent cycles of contention automatically contribute to continual improvements. On the contrary, success in one arena can be outweighed by failures in others. Domestic actors and institutions can engage strategies of channeling and selective responsiveness. For the case of China, I have shown elsewhere that the effects remain fragmented, partially isolated, sometimes unintended, and contribute to a process of selective convergence (Zajak 2013).

Future studies could use and modify this framework in different transnational governance fields and in relation to other countries. One example could be the case of global environmental governance. There are several parallels between global environmental governance and global labor governance. In both issue areas, there are multiple interconnected layers of governance with different relations of state and non-state actors and enforcement mechanisms. In both issue areas, civil society plays an important role as an actor both inside and outside the governance structures. In both issue areas there are crucial problems to solve: in labor, the violation of basic labor rights with specific local, national, and international roots; in the environmental area, the destruction of international common goods (e.g., deforestation, water and air pollution) which require problem-solving by multiple actors in different countries and on different scales (Walk 2008). However, in contrast to labor relations, where the basic local conflict lies between

management and workers, the cleavages in the issue area of the environment are more complex, and different groups of people (e.g., farmers, indigenous people, local and transnational companies) have different interests in the land. As a consequence, I expect civil society to be a much less coherent bloc than in the issue area of labor, where there is common agreement on the importance of core labor rights. Thus, a different field could help further integrate conflicts of interests and their impact on multilevel strategizing and collective action within the framework of transnational pathways of influence. Another interesting point of comparison is taking into account fields with rather closed opportunities for participation, such as financial regulation or security, which offer far fewer points of direct access than other fields (Tallberg/Uhlin 2011).

Integrating other countries into the framework could also enrich our understanding of the potential of transnational activism. China is not the only country that is currently changing the global governance landscape. Further research on other important, newly industrializing countries, such as India (as the second most important emerging power) or Brazil, is needed in order to understand how the integration of these countries into the global economy affects transnational labor activism striving for the regulation of markets.

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