Nielsen March 8th Reading Commentary

11.363: Civil Society and Environment
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Advocating for the Environment
In this article, Rodrigues explicitly acknowledges the documented impact and accomplishments of transnational environmental advocacy networks including the 'greening' of development banks and international treaties. However, she seriously questions the effectiveness of transnational environmental activism at the local level, both in terms of protecting ecosystems and institutionalizing the 'movement'. Through the explication of three different transnational network case studies, Rodrigues concludes that despite major international environmental 'victories' the "record at the local level was less striking". She argues that inclusion of the 'local' within a transnational advocacy network is crucial, however, often the local is left out of the transnational equation because of weak voice, lack of financial prowess, incompatible goals, or low levels of technical capacity. Therefore the actions of transnational networks can tend to focus on the national and/or international arenas rather than on the interests and realities of the grassroots. These assertions are all very true, but certainly in no way surprising to me. What I find interesting is that within the context of my presentation last week on the Nu River transnational advocacy network, the 'local' grassroots 'green' NGOs in China, although not necessary as financially or politically as powerful as some of their international partners, have in no apparent way been subordinated by 'external' organizations such as Oxfam America or IRN. Food for thought.

Activists Beyond Borders (Chapter 1 and 4)
In Chapter One, Keck and Sikkink introduce the concept of a transnational advocacy network stating they are "networks of activists, distinguishable largely by the centrality of principled ideas or values motivating their formation". They argue, supported by previous articles by Wapner, these networks often not only seek to influence policy change, but also move beyond instigating change at the governmental level, and also focus on other 'layers' by instigating "changes in the institutional and principled basis of international interactions". These activist networks not only attempt to influence 'official' policy outcomes, but also seek to "transform the terms and nature of the debate".

In Chapter Four, Keck and Sikkink specifically discuss transnational environmental advocacy networks (in contrast to, for example, human rights advocacy networks). One key feature the authors highlight, specially in contrast to a human rights network, is that although environmental networks have strong ethical dimensions in terms of what is, for example, considered responsible stewardship, they are not considered as 'principled' as human rights networks. Environmentalism does not enjoy a set of agreed upon norms, whereas, for example, the UN Declaration on Human Rights clearly articulates well defined 'universals' such as the right to freedom and justice. Transnational environmental networks began to emerge in the mid 1980's given i) a greater global attention to environmental issues ii) growing international connections among all actors including non-state groups iii) growing democratization of political institutions iv) a growing understanding of the relationship between environment and development and v) to a lesser extent improved forms of international communication. The authors also argue that environmental advocacy networks, as opposed to epistemic communities, seek to identify multiple leverage points beyond the state. Environmental advocacy networks help to "broaden the definition of which information and whose knowledge should shape the agenda". Keck and Sikkink overview two key types of environmental advocacy networks – dealing with dams and deforestation – two of the most common networks given they both involve harm – a distinctive feature of advocacy networks.

	A Global Network? Transnational Cooperation among Environmental Groups Rohrschneider and Dalton argue that although there is a rich literature that likely signals the emergence of a global civil society and a dense collection of 'green' organizations with close connections between OECD nations and developing countries, the patterns of exchange among these groups raises serious questions. For example, "participation in transnational networks is largely an extension of the factors that encourage political action" and "power inequities and value differences" may limit the transnational cooperation among environmental groups. Their empirical research seeks to understand factors that either facilitate or limit participation in transnational networks. Two key areas drive their research; the first model, drawing on social movement literature and practices of globalization, that argues such factors as democratic openness or participation in the international sphere are responsible for influencing the actions of 'green' actors. The second model argues that resources and ideology – a groups characteristics – drive environmental NGOs transnational action. Their conclusions are complex and lengthy. Key (simplified) conclusions state that ENGOs do have a strong incentive to search for like-minded allies and create a transnational network (if feasible). International coordination can provide a way for ENGOs to influence national policies and influence the formation of international policy regimes. One potential problem with the quantitative study the authors conducted was their data (collection or response rate?), although gathered from five continents, was extremely weak in Asia (4 countries) and essentially non-existent in Africa (only South Africa).