

## **Adding Economic Ideas to the Transnational ‘Rights’ Discourse: A Study of the Maquila Solidarity Network.**

**Julien Vallée**

[julien.vallee@umontreal.ca](mailto:julien.vallee@umontreal.ca)

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### **Abstract**

Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) is a labour and women’s rights organization based in Toronto, active in Mexico, Central America and parts of Asia. While the impact of economic ideas has been studied in comparative politics (Hall 1989, Blyth 2002) and in IR with the epistemic communities approach (Chwieroth 2007) the literature on transnational advocacy networks is often silent about the “material” side of advocacy. How are economic ideas used by transnational alterglobalist networks? A contingent, case-specific answer is given by retracing and analysing the economic ideas present in MSN’s advocacy material. I will show that those ideas, while seldom at the forefront of the rights discourse, are strategically deployed by MSN to produce a “two-pronged attack”: on one side engaging with the garment industry, and on the other advocating alternative policies. In all cases, economic ideas are added to the “rights discourse”, stressing the efficient side of the normatively desirable human rights, such as the living wage. These results are a significant departure from the standard studies of advocacy networks focusing on symbolic frame resonance (ie Keck and Sikkink, 1998).

**Julien Vallée** is a PhD Candidate in political science at Université de Montréal, member of the Canada Research Chair in Citizenship and Governance and REDTAC (Réseau d’étude des dynamiques transnationales et de l’action collective).

In the literature on social movements and transnational relations, many studies have stressed normative ideas and framing processes, often at the expense of “cognitive” or programmatic ideas. A research bias on “sexier” New Social Movements addressing rights and identities instead of material issues may be part of the explanation. As a matter of fact, Keck and Sikkink (1998) argue that framing in terms of human rights, particularly when the integrity of the human body is shown to be at stake<sup>1</sup>, leads to more successful campaigns. Success simply draws more attention, not just from the public, but also from researchers. Faced with this relative neglect, the starting point of this paper is to take seriously not only the norms, values and symbols, but also the economic ideas of transnational advocacy networks.

Maquila Solidarity Network (MSN) is a feminist labour rights organization, based in Canada with a secondary office in Mexico. MSN supports local worker organizations in Latin America and South or South-East Asia, engaging with the garment industry, helping with legal issues, disclosing factory information and funding seminars to help local organizations share information, debate and build alliances<sup>2</sup>. MSN’s advocacy thus touches upon a large range of issues, from worker safety to freedom of association and gender equality. Moreover, in my own reading of MSN’s material, all those issues are usually framed in a language that could be called the “transnational rights discourse”<sup>3</sup>.

While such an observation might be considered trivial, the ideas that do underpin such a discourse are worthy of attention. Accordingly, a short theoretical discussion about ideas in advocacy will follow this introduction. My own focus in this study will be on economic ideas, but I must stress that I do not consider economic ideas to be more important than any other type of ideas: there will be no economism here. As a matter of fact, economics isn’t pertinent to many crucial issues in MSN’s agenda; worker rights advocacy in terms of political freedom or workplace safety has little reason to deploy an economic reasoning. There is, however, an important space for economics in at least one specific struggle: the right for a living wage. What I will try to demonstrate in this paper is that economic ideas are added by MSN to the typical transnational right discourse and characterize advocacy in a way that models relying on frame resonance cannot show.

Now one could ask why Maquila Solidarity in particular represents an intriguing or important case study. First, MSN is an important organisation due to its central position inside the Ethical Trading Action Group (ETAG) and its role as a broker in the Fair Labour Association (FLA)<sup>4</sup>. Second, there are very few existing studies that directly

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<sup>1</sup> Among other examples, Keck and Sikkink (1998) describe the campaign against genital mutilation. The words mutilation (or cutting), elicited a much stronger emotional response from the general public, compared with medical terms like “excision”, or a complacent expression like “female circumcision”.

<sup>2</sup> According to MSN annual report 2008. See MSN’s website for more information: <http://en.maquilasolidarity.org/>

<sup>3</sup> See Rajagopal (2003) for a general overview of the transnational rights discourse.

<sup>4</sup> MSN co-founder Lynda Yanz sits on the FLA board of directors, while MSN is also the secretariat of ETAG, which includes the following groups: Canadian Autoworkers Union; Canadian Council for International Cooperation; Canadian Labour Congress; Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE); Kairos; Canadian Ecumenical Justice Initiatives; Maquila Solidarity Network; Ontario Secondary School Teachers' Federation; Oxfam Canada; Steelworkers Humanity Fund; and UNITE-HERE (from MSN’s website).

study MSN<sup>5</sup>, while this organisation has been part of the picture for more than 15 years. Luckily for us, the recent economic conjuncture has permitted MSN to articulate its economics ideas in numerous publications. Methodologically, I looked at all primary sources - publications and grey literature- that were available from MSN for a period of roughly ten years (1999-2010). Since there are a few methodological issues about interviewing people over the content of their own ideas<sup>6</sup>, written sources were privileged over interviews, although for additional information an interview was conducted with Kevin Thomas, MSN's director of advocacy, in October 2009.

Before looking at the specific usages of economic ideas in the "rights discourse" of MSN, I will start with a brief, condensed theoretical discussion on the role of ideas in transnational advocacy.

### **Ideas, advocacy and policymaking**

What exactly *are* ideas? Formally, ideas are mental constructions or representations that may or may not relate to the real world. Ideas can take many forms, from images to abstract concepts. Ideas are important in political theory and praxis because they shape possibilities and can be translated into policy. Since NGOs do not hold any "veto power" over policy changes, their role as policy entrepreneurs (Dolowitz and Marsh 1996) aim at persuading actors, diffusing ideas and generally expanding the "world of the possible" that is taken as given by policymakers. Following the earlier work of Nicklas Luhnmann, Alexander Wendt calls this process "steering": "Rather than determining particular events, the objective could be only to influence broad, developmental tendencies. It is a more modest conception of human agency" (Wendt 2001: 211). By steering policies -or often just the debate *about* policies- economic ideas have a non-negligible impact, which has already been well documented in comparative politics (Blyth 2002) or in IR with the epistemic communities approach (Chwieroth 2007).

For the clarity of the present argument, a distinction has to be drawn between ideas, values and norms. Following Lindvall (2009) ideas are different from other "ideational elements" such as values and norms because their underlying mechanisms in the policymaking process are somewhat different. For him, values (ie. equity, justice) determine priorities while norms (ie. freedom of association, a living wage) describe actions to be taken or, in our case, policy objectives and results. Ideas "are intellectual tools that political decision makers use to predict the likely effects of the policy alternatives" (Lindvall 2009: 705). At this point I want to distance myself a bit from Lindvall on the independence of ideas and norms/values. As a matter of fact, I do not think it is possible to look at economic ideas as being independent from value judgements. Once we have a broad objective such as the right to a living wage, it is simply not true that *any* economic program could serve a priori to implement such

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<sup>5</sup> One important exception is Noel Patten's 2003 MA thesis, *Border-Crossing: The Transnational Activism of Women in an Era of Globalization*. University of Calgary.

<sup>6</sup> We can think of selection bias and revisionism. For example, an interviewee could say "I'm pretty sure I always thought the way that I'm thinking right now".

objective. Conversely, our economic ideas and “intellectual” causal beliefs always carry a heavy normative or ideological baggage<sup>7</sup>.

Moving on, Campbell (1998) draws a further distinction between ideas as programs and ideas as frames. We could say that the first typifies means-ends logic, while the latter corresponds to the logic of appropriateness. Programs, according to Campbell, are prescriptions directed at policymakers – not *policytakers*. Frames, on the other hand, serve as concepts and symbols to help legitimize policies to the public (Campbell 1998: 385). Again, from a critical point of view, it makes little sense to draw a rigid line between programs and norms, since we not only ask *emancipation from?* but also *emancipation to?* A discourse on “where we want to go” will inevitably include a normative aspect (Wendt 2001). Another problem with this typology is that the power of symbols -instrumentally produced or not- is confined to the broad public and, conversely, that programs seem to be the exclusive *chasse-gardée* of policymakers.

To this somewhat elitist perspective on economic ideas, a more “gramscian” point of view is to be preferred, in which every citizen (or activist!) is to some extent an intellectual, although not everyone serves the social function of being an intellectual. In this perspective, a counter-hegemonic movement – including anti/alter-globalism (Evans 2000) – develops its own “organic intellectuals” who can translate and articulate ideas into policy programs. Those ideas are then diffused in the public space by various processes and mechanisms, including imitation, persuasion and social learning (Risse 2002; Dobbin et al, 2007).

At this point we can consider how ideas are nested inside discourses. Vivian Schmidt (2008) defines discourse as the interactive process of conveying ideas. As a definition, it doesn’t tell us much, but it does draw attention to both relational and dynamic aspects of a discourse. Discourse isn’t limited to the substantive content of ideas (although I would argue that it does matter a lot) but is also about the manner in which they are conveyed. In Schmidt’s words, discourse is not just “text”; it is also “context” (Schmidt 2008:305). Schmidt goes on to distinguish the coordinating discourse used among policy actors and the communicative discourse used in the political/public sphere. In a way, Schmidt’s categories replicate the problem found in Campbell: knowledgeable actors coordinate policy using programmatic ideas while public discourse serves merely to introduce and legitimize ideas to the general public. This way of presenting discourse, especially political or economic discourse, occludes the very contentious (and often divisive) nature this process. Coercion, persuasion and learning are at work in all discourses, but those mechanisms might recombine in a different manner depending on both text and context.

Nonetheless, Schmidt’s insight about the possibility of double discourse, one among insiders and a second between insiders and outsiders could be useful way to characterize the rights discourse of transnational networks. After retracing the actual use of economic ideas, I will show that this “double discourse” is not so much differentiated by its structure, as postulated by Schmidt, but rather by the actual content of its ideas.

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<sup>7</sup> For example, Guerrien (2007) showed how neoclassical economics’ methodological individualism is inherently conservative

## The Maquila Solidarity Network

Synthesizing ‘old’ and ‘new’ trends in social movements with a focus on both labour and women’s rights, Maquila Solidarity Network has had its share of punctual successes such as its campaign against Gildan, a T-shirt manufacturer (MSN 2003b). But at the macroeconomic level, the end of the import quotas in the textile industry, combined with the recent economic crisis, has created substantial new challenges for MSN.

Following the implementation of NAFTA, many NGOs had to change their focus from It was in this particular context in the mid-nineties that MSN was created. The organization originates from the meeting of two pre-existing networks, Solidarity Works and *Mujer a Mujer* (Woman to Woman). Of the founding members, Linda Yanz came from *Mujer a Mujer* and Bob Jeffcott from Solidarity Works. Kevin Thomas, the current director of advocacy, was hired four years later. Today, those individuals continue to form the core of MSN, and the overall structure of the organization has stayed stable over time<sup>8</sup>.

Maquila Solidarity today remains a relatively small organization. It employs five full-time and three part-time employees, who for the most part work in a house turned into office space in a residential part of Toronto. A second office is situated in Mexico City, where only one person works full-time. An English-Spanish translator also works part-time from Argentina. MSN’s annual revenue stands at approximately 600,000\$, coming in greater part from US and European foundations, as well as labour funds, churches and individual donations. MSN receives very little assistance to none at all from the government of Canada (MSN Annual report 2008). According to recent annual reports, about 85% of MSN’s revenue is employed towards its “Southern Program”, research, education and communication.

MSN’s main activities can be divided in three branches: organizing forums and facilitating exchanges, in-depth research and market analysis, monitoring and disseminating information about work conditions and human rights abuses. Among those activities, it is the twin role of “facilitator” and “educator” that draws most of MSN’s energy and resources, supporting local labour or women’s rights organizations and helping them effectively engage with the brands, manufacturers and governments. According to Noel Patten:

MSN works to promote [...] exchanges, produces reports and facilitates follow-up discussion. Grassroots groups working with maquila workers in Mexico and Central America are not yet familiar with current research on North American trends in the apparel industry. MSN can play a valuable role in interpreting critiquing and popularizing industry analysis of those trends from a worker’s perspective (Patten 2003:74)

Pooling resources to help local organizations meet and exchange information is complemented by a more general, political and macroeconomic analysis of the global

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<sup>8</sup>Although Bob Jeffcott is in the process of retiring (interview with K. Thomas, October 2009).

conjunction affecting workers: “By analysing the global context of garment workers during current economic and political restructuring, the MSN is able to identify challenges as well as coordinate and mobilize others in similar situation” (Patten 2003: 75). This is the aspect of MSN’s work that is the most relevant for our purposes and will be our focus of interest in the next section.

### **Economic ideas in the ‘rights’ discourse**

Economic crises can be devastating for vulnerable, non unionized workers, especially for women who often have to support their entire families on a single wage. Poor growth prospects in the garment industry are translated by additional downward pressure on workers wages. This difficulty is compounded by the fact that in harsher economic times, big brands stand to lose a part of its market share to the lower-cost, generic apparel producers. Because renowned brands are subjected to better scrutiny by the industry watchdogs, the ensuing restructuring in favour of generic clothes is a further source of deterioration of workers rights (MSN 2009c).

This is where the living wage, presented as a general norm and a legitimate human right, can help fight wage depression and deteriorating working conditions: you simply don’t negotiate fundamental rights even in harsh times. The living wage is usually understood as the amount necessary to support a worker’s family basic needs (food, shelter and clothing) including a little extra for leisure, albeit this depends on the definition employed. MSN makes abundant use of this concept in its various publications but, to the best of my knowledge, never gives it a strict definition. Thus, for MSN, the living wage serves more as a symbol and a rhetorical tool than a precise guide for policy elaboration. However, what gives the living wage its persuasive character is its economic rationale, and the ideas underlying such a discourse. As intellectual tools, economic ideas can be classified along a few dimensions, which are often simplified in dichotomies<sup>9</sup> such as orthodox/heterodox, macro/micro, prescriptive/descriptive, etc. What I have tried to achieve in this research was to retrace MSN’s ideas in all their available publications, which include MSN’s newsletter “Maquila Solidary Update” and e-bulletin “The Wire”, the Codes Memos, Annual Reports, Discussion Papers and especially the special publications addressing the 2008-09 economic crisis. The following tables will summarize the results of my research.

The first general observation that can be made regarding MSN’s economic discourse is that it is clearly divided between what we could call “insider dialogue” and the “public sphere discourse”. This double discourse is used by MSN to engage with two types of “clientele”, the apparel industry/fair labour community and the general public conceived as citizens/consumers.

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<sup>9</sup> Those dichotomies are heuristic idealtypes. For example, prescriptive and descriptive ideas are more realistically seen as fuzzy, overlapping sets. What is prescribed depends on what one chooses to see, and vice-versa. Economists may hold somewhat heterodox ideas and still be part of the mainstream (Krugman, Stiglitz, etc.). Macroeconomic ideas may be built exclusively on microeconomic « fundamentals ».

Table 1: “Insider” economic dialogue

Form	Content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Professional, “business-like”</li> <li>-Use of graphs</li> <li>-Precise economic indicators</li> <li>-Detailed analysis of the market’s evolution</li> <li>-Shows in-depth knowledge of industry</li> <li>-Pragmatic, “reasonable” tone</li> <li>-Rights discourse toned down</li> <li>-Dialogue over contention</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Orthodox economic ideas</li> <li>-Analysis of sales, market shares, global positioning.</li> <li>-Importance of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)</li> <li>-Sophisticated understanding of complex ideas (such as the performativity of economics)</li> <li>-Advocacy of a floor wage</li> <li>-Globalisation leads to a “Race to the Bottom” (RTB)</li> <li>-“Higher road” out of the recession; betting on quality and worker productivity.</li> <li>-Improved wages lead to social stability</li> </ul>

*Economic discourse as insider dialogue*

In this first part of MSN’s “two-pronged attack”, economic ideas are employed in a somewhat conservative way to engage in a pragmatic, “realist” dialogue with the apparel industry. I have noted that most documents prepared by MSN in response to the recent economic crisis have been written in this perspective, and could very well represent MSN’s priorities: are economics to be discussed first and foremost among industry insiders?

About the content of this first type of economic discourse, the ideas developed are generally orthodox neoclassic economics, with a dash of Keynesian demand-side understanding of economic growth. Instead of discussions about policy reforms, what is often put forward is a pragmatic “business-like” analysis of the economic conjecture, complete with reflections on the state of the industry, analysis of sales trends and prospects for the future.

Moreover, the professionalism of MSN economic discourse is showed by its sophisticated comprehension of social processes, such of the “performative” nature of some economic beliefs (Callon 2007). For example, MSN explains that in the start of a recession, inexpensive brands are only *believed* to do better, and this belief pre-emptively

drops the price of luxury brands, making the economic belief a self-fulfilling prophecy (MSN 2009e).

Here, the idea of a living wage is often defended without naming it, (or without naming *too* often). Worker well-being is emphasized in relation to labour productivity. Typical arguments include: “Happy workers are efficient workers” or “Higher wages mean lower turnover and lower training costs”. At its best, MSN’s discourse with the industry is both cunning and sophisticated, developing a Keynesian type of economic rationale appealing to the industry inherent conservatism and penchant for stability, with a slight touch of economic populism:

Paying workers decent wages would be the best stimulus for an economic recovery, since workers spend their incomes locally and don’t hide their money in off-shore bank accounts or gamble it on the stock market. Improved wages for women maquila workers would also contribute to social stability, since women use their incomes to support their families and to invest in their children’s future (MSN 2009d: 5).

One recurring economic idea that is present not only in the “insider dialogue” but also in the “public sphere discourse”, is that international competition for foreign investment lead to a “race to the bottom” (RTB). Faced with this problem, industries are enjoined to take the “high road” out of the recession, to bet on quality apparel and higher worker productivity. Companies in the Americas are thus encouraged to develop a specific branding of clean clothes that could get a better market positioning versus the cheaper apparel made in Asia.

In conclusion, MSN’s engagement with the industry does lead to a type of “steering” (as seen in the theoretical part), but at the business level, not at the public policy level. In a certain manner, the advocacy is less about economic arguments and more about “selling” an alternative business plan, a business plan that would also happen to be in the best interests of the workers. Unfortunately, MSN recently admitted, these efforts to steer the industry toward the desired “higher road” have not been successful (MSN 2009b).

Table 2: Public sphere discourse

Form	Content
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Less emphasis on abstract reasoning</li> <li>-Use of concrete examples, life stories.</li> <li>-Living wage nested in a “package” of other rights (freedom of association, safety, etc.)</li> <li>-Tone is contentious, occasionally populist</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>-Pragmatic protectionism: first priority is job security</li> <li>-Keynesian redistribution as solution to the crisis.</li> <li>-Globalisation leads to race to the bottom (RTB)</li> <li>-Wage coordination at the regional level as a solution to RTB.</li> <li>-Scepticism towards fair trade</li> </ul>

*Economic discourse towards citizens/consumers*

What characterizes the economic “public sphere discourse” of MSN is its reliance on more concrete examples and even on some life stories of women workers. Expert or abstract economic reasoning is deemphasized and the living wage is placed on the same standing as other rights such as freedom of association or workplace safety.

But this doesn’t mean that economic ideas are absent from the public sphere discourse. Similarly to the “insider dialogue”, the right to a living wage is also justified with the help of Keynesian demand-side redistribution and its attendant multiplier effect, but the living wage is also portrayed in a package of linked human rights, political, economic and environmental. What MSN looks for in this second side of its two-pronged attack is an active citizenry that can be mobilized to lobby municipal and national governments in a host of different issues and separate campaigns.

Because these publications aren’t directed at the apparel industry or at “mixed” forums such as the FLA, MSN can drop its business-like analysis of sales trends (which were helpful to gain legitimacy with the industry) and engage in more radical proposals for change. What characterizes its economic proposals is first of all what I call “pragmatic protectionism” which means that distortions to free trade are ok as long as they are used to protect MSN’s priority clientele, the apparel workers in Mexico/Central America. Populist economic reasoning is also present: “contrary to capitalists, workers don’t speculate on financial markets but spend locally”, etc. Some slightly more radical policy alternatives are also presented, such as global floor wages or wage coordination at the regional level, a solution take could put a brake on the race to the bottom (MSN 2009f).

To address the growing popularity of the “fair trade movement”, MSN has produced a number of papers about the issue. For example, Bob Jeffcott argues in the *New*

*Internationalist* that an active citizenry may be preferable to ethical consumers. One problem with Fairtrade Cotton is that while the certification informs us about the conditions under which it was grown, it offers no guarantees about the working conditions of the workers in the rest of the production chain:

Isn't it a little presumptuous of us to think that we can end sweatshop abuses by just changing our individual buying habits? [...] We should worry a little less about our shopping decisions, and a bit more about what we can do to support the young women and girls who labour behind the labels. Pressure schools, municipalities to adopt ethical purchasing policies that require apparel suppliers to disclose factory location and working conditions (Jeffcott 2007).

In conclusion, why is there so much difference in the actual content of the economic ideas included in both categories of publications? The evidence points at some instrumental, deliberate use of ideas, and not simply at a confused contradiction. Practical proposals to steer policy in that direction have to develop the economic rationale, the cognitive justification of the desired policy goal. And this rationale is adapted depending on the audience. It can be done either in an orthodox, conservative "management/marketing" discourse with industry insiders, but success would imply actually "selling" those ideas to the industry. The other side of MSN's two-pronged attack is the public sphere discourse, which allows for slightly more radical proposals, such as floor wages at the regional level or strong international labour regulations, which doesn't appeal to our role as passive consumers, but as active citizens.

## **Discussion**

Rights such as freedom of association, a safe workplace or freedom from gender discrimination (such as mandatory pregnancy tests) are dominant in the discourse of MSN, although not all rights can be scrutinized under economists' lenses. One particular right, encompassing most "material demands" is called the living wage. In MSN's discourse, the living wage serves as a powerful symbol, but it often remains vague about the mechanics of the idea, and perhaps purposefully so. To convince sceptics, a broad policy objective has to develop programmatic ideas. In turn, a symbol remains needed, at least in part because it is hard to feel as excited about import restrictions or Keynesian demand management as we can feel about human dignity.

Looking back at our two tables, the methodological individualism implied by ideas centering on (voluntary) codes of conduct in the "coordinating discourse" among insiders can be put in contrast to the strong objections relating to fair trade, and the limits of consumer power underlined in "communicative discourse". Yet, for all the criticism directed at ethical consumerism, or the repeated calls for a renewed citizen voice, there are very few demands made directly to the state. MSN's action thus largely falls outside

conventional contentious politics<sup>10</sup>. Seen in this light, their work fits most closely the “World Civic Politics” framework that Wapner (1995) sketched out: civil society organizations as policy entrepreneurs are political actors (and not just pressure groups) who engage and make demands with other non-state actors. However, while such strategies focussing on consumer power have had their share of well-publicized successes, they also show their limits when we look at steering policies in a coherent or efficient way, because their discourse and field of action are constrained to piecemeal and/or defensive campaign (Bronfenbrenner 2007).

When looking at the timeframe of MSN’s publication, there are many elements that suggest that economic ideas may be co-constituted to a perceived (or presumed) structure of opportunity. For example, the language used in some past publications<sup>11</sup> is much more assertive and imaginative about possible government policies that could link trade to compliance with codes of conduct. Even more, beyond said codes of conduct, MSN imagined how Canadian direct foreign investment could be linked to labour standards. As the years went by, many of the more radical demands (including most demands made at the state) were dropped from the rights discourse.

Finally, our case study shows some evidence in partial support of Vivian Schmidt’s categorisation of discourse. On the one hand, the coordinating discourse with the apparel industry and fair labour organizations is well developed and exhibits very little contentious language. MSN openly discusses the pro and cons of the economic *arguments* behind their call for a living wage. Moreover, the communicative discourse with the general public deploys less market analysis and puts more emphasis on workers rights, with a definitely more contentious language. On the other hand, *both* discourses employ economic ideas to some extent which refutes the hypothesis that programmatic ideas are used predominantly in the coordinating discourse. Ideas, and not just norms and symbols, are needed to persuade governments and citizens: the presence of explicit policy alternatives thus serves to challenge the legitimacy of the status quo. What differs, apart from the general “redistributive Keynesian” paradigm, is not just the tone but also the actual content of the economic ideas exposed in both types of publications.

The double strategy of MSN thus leads to a contradictory discourse on economic policy, especially in the domain of international trade: when engaging with the apparel industry, for example in the context of the Fair Labour Association (FLA), MSN seems to engage in auto-censorship over some of its propositions. We can take for example the idea about the establishment of a uniform regional wage<sup>12</sup> for garment workers, or more generally any “protectionist” position about trade policy. Any policy alternatives that would limit the free movement of capital are obviously not well regarded by the garment

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<sup>10</sup> According to McAdam, Tilly and Tarrow (2000), contentious politics by definition include the state as subject of claims by social actors.

<sup>11</sup> See Yanz (1999), contrast with any 2009 publication by MSN.

<sup>12</sup> Adjusted by factory productivity.

industry and that includes forums such as the FLA where the industry participates in partnership with worker rights organizations<sup>13</sup>.

Let it be clear that I do not consider this double economic discourse to be a “bad thing” in itself. On the contrary, it takes a lot of skill and savvy to engage persuasively both the industry and the general public: it is an asset that has long been recognized in labour studies<sup>14</sup>, but not so much in the literature on transnational advocacy. Worker rights organizations need to employ the optimal pressure in order to steer policies in the desired direction *and* to avoid the industry’s disengagement in the policy dialogue. Nevertheless, one important consequence of this strategic practice, which may be unintended, is a lack of clarity and precision about the economic program that would be better suited to achieve a living wage for all workers.

## Conclusion

The right to a living wage seems to have a strong symbolic frame resonance even at the transnational level and it may be the reason why this concept “sticks” in the worker rights organizations discourse. However, the norm by itself is not sufficient to persuade policymakers, who also want to assess the feasibility of such an objective. Programmatic ideas are also needed and, what this study showed, *are* employed by advocacy networks such as the Maquila Solidarity Network.

All this emphasis on ideas is not meant to create a false hierarchy of ideas over norms or values. On the contrary, authors such as Lindvall (2009) have pointed out that symbols and norms may ultimately hold the upper hand: policy objectives have to be drawn before programs and specific policies. For Lindvall, cognitive or programmatic ideas come second, when the time comes to put a shared norm into practice. However, reality might be more even complex. Ideas and norms could be thought of as co-constituted: norms determine proper actions, while ideas about possible actions influence “reasonable” social goals. Of course, this line of research is outside the scope of this paper. I have more modestly tried to show that economics can shape advocacy in many subtle ways: it can be used instrumentally by activists to persuade decision makers, or as a teaching device to promote social learning. More than anything else, it can empower activists in their dialogue with businesses or the state, legitimizing their proposed policy alternatives. On the other hand, as an unintended consequence, the use of economic language can also limit the range of possibilities by changing perceptions about structures of opportunity.

From this first assessment of MSN’s advocacy, we have seen that its economic ideas tended to lose a bit of their radical character over time. The “two-pronged attack”, pushing for a living wage while engaging with the industry, was shown to be a tricky feat to accomplish. Over and above the intellectual debates, MSN stands in solidarity with the workers, and that includes protecting their jobs and income. What activists want to avoid

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<sup>13</sup> Because such forums run the risk of being co-opted by powerful players, other forums of monitoring, such as the Worker Rights Consortium, do not include participants from the garment industry.

<sup>14</sup> For a pertinent analysis of the double discourse of unions in the global economy, see Burgess (2004).

is the scenario where a business “cuts and leave” in the face of mounting bad publicity and legal challenges. Criticism of the industry was thus balanced with that issue in mind, with MSN playing more often than not the role of the “understanding partner” rather than the “contentious adversary”.

Moreover, it is true that vague or somewhat contradictory proposals allow a broader consensus<sup>15</sup> among actors, but what remains to be studied are their consequences for achieving desired policy change. Of course, we couldn’t expect NGOs to have any sort of “veto power” over key policies. But they can have a positive impact by proposing alternatives and socializing key actors (Béland and Orenstein 2009). However, to correctly assess the effectiveness of any discourse, we have to analyse its “transformative power” (Schmidt 2008: 305). Is this double discourse efficient at steering economic policies towards the desired outcome, viz. a living wage for all workers? Or does it lead to a “soft consensus” that does little to actually improve conditions?

In complement to the literature in the vein of Keck and Sikkink (1998) seminal work, we have seen that economic ideas function through different mechanisms than symbolic frames. Their power is not based on any type of cultural or normative resonance, but stems through their capacity at changing actors’ beliefs about causality. More empirical research at the policy level will be needed to assess the transformative impact of this economic discourse, which is articulated not just by worker rights networks, but also in the broader alter-globalist nebula.

A promising area of research stands at the junction of labour studies and transnational relations. In conclusion to her edited book, *Global Unions*, Kate Bronfenbrenner (2007) called for more strategic scholarship and activism, actions that could step beyond “defensive” campaigns to rethink or challenge the hold that transnational firms have over trade, states and global policies. It is my hope that by taking the economic ideas of transnational advocacy networks seriously, we can begin to see such a long-term, coherent discursive strategy, one that doesn’t have to be rebuilt from the ground up but that is already made manifest in the many distinct, “piecemeal” campaigns.

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<sup>15</sup> For example, Hall (1989) has shown how the Keynesian economic paradigm was helped by its relative imprecision and malleability.

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