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In late November, Seattle is likely to be the scene of a big test for global capitalism. That's when more than 1,000 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) are planning to disrupt the kickoff of a new round of global trade negotiations. The NGOs' collective claim is that unfettered commerce hurts workers, consumers, and the environment, and that it is being propelled by an arrogant World Trade Organization unaccountable to ordinary citizens. With the very real possibility that the trade talks will be derailed, the question is whether the strategy of Washington and the business community is as lame as it looks.

Of course, not all NGOs have a political agenda and many, such as the Red Cross or the International Rescue Committee, provide unique critical services. But the gathering in Seattle will be dominated by NGOs that take strong public-policy stands, such as Human Rights Watch, United Students Against Sweatshops, and the Sierra Club. While these organizations are supporting important causes, their public-spirited missions shouldn't obscure their intention to retard the momentum for a more open world economy--the best hope, even with its flaws, for a better life for billions of people.

JOINING FORCES. Today's NGOs are not the ragtag protesters of the 1960s. They are well-organized and amply funded and have become a powerful new force on the global scene. They have skillfully exploited the void between shrinking governments unable to cushion the impact of change on ordinary citizens and multinational companies that are the agents of that change. They have gained influence by joining forces across borders, aggregating power under broad umbrella groups such as Consumers International, and building alliances with unions such as the AFL-CIO. They have harnessed the Internet to build huge global coalitions and to coordinate lobbying in multiple capitals. While governments and chief executives bore the public and the media with sterile abstractions about free markets, NGOs are sending more nuanced messages sensitive to the anxieties of local communities around the world. At the same time, they are preparing sophisticated strategies to influence television networks, newspapers, and magazines.

There is plenty of evidence of NGOs' growing clout. In recent years, they have changed the policies of global corporations such as Nike (over treatment of workers abroad), Monsanto (over genetically engineered products), and Royal Dutch Shell (over environmental issues). In 1997 more than 600 NGOs, representing 70 countries, caused the collapse of international governmental negotiations to create global rules for foreign investment.

If Washington and Corporate America don't move decisively, NGOs could dominate public opinion on global trade and finance. In the first instance, government officials and business leaders should mount a much better campaign to explain the benefits of globalization. They should also promote more effective policies to help people adjust to changing trade patterns--such as education, professional training, and portable health and pension benefits. Third, the Administration should also apply intense pressure to the WTO to make its goals and its work more visible and understandable to people around the world, and to open up effective channels of communications to public interest groups everywhere.

Beyond that, Washington and business should challenge the NGO community to practice what they preach. Every organization that calls itself an NGO shouldn't be granted a free ride to influence. Governments and business associations should demand that NGOs part the curtain on their own activities--including disclosing exactly who their members are and how they are financed. The media should be continually prompted to scrutinize the accuracy of the facts that underlie NGOs' arguments against globalization. They should treat the situation as if it were a hotly contested long-term political campaign for public opinion--which it is.

NGOs can play an indispensable role in bridging the responsibilities of the public and private sectors. But if they are allowed to hijack the WTO talks, it will be a dangerous precedent that every government and every global company will regret long after the protests in Seattle. It's important to broadcast the message that a global market economy can promote not only growth but individual freedom as well a cleaner environment. Warning for President Bill Clinton, the Business Round Table, and their counterparts in Europe and Japan: There is less than a month to get your act together. You

are already in deep trouble.

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