

## Regionalisms Futures: the Challenges for Civil Society

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movements was undertaken. The high point of this process was the experience of the *Social Summit for the Integration of Peoples*, which took place in December 2006 in Cochabamba, Bolivia at the same time as the Summit of the South American Community of Nations (SACN). The Cochabamba Social Summit provided an opportunity to further consolidate proposals – previously discussed in virtual forums during the preceding year. The fact that these proposals were discussed with governments that will undoubtedly address the demand in a number of fora throughout the Social Summit will undoubtedly set a new pattern of relations with civil society.

The challenge for movements now is to consolidate the experiences of over eight years of campaigning (since 1997) against the FTAA, and utilize what has been learnt to participate in negotiations on integration. There is a clear awareness that even ‘friendly’ governments can be susceptible to pressures from concentrated segments of the economy and that they can be influenced by development models that are neither socially nor environmentally sustainable. It is necessary, that social movements be present so that these pitfalls are avoided. There is a common assessment regarding the favourable political situation described at the beginning of this article: that the integration of peoples will only be possible if the people themselves are direct actors in the construction of these new economic regions.

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### *Regionalisms Futures: The Challenges for Civil Society*

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A profound process of de-legitimation of the structures and key institutions of the current neoliberal model of economic globalization has marked the last years of the 20th century and the beginning of the new millennium. Parallel with this, we have also witnessed the intense search for alternatives, highlighted in the World Social Forum process and concretized in the actual emerging alternatives, at the local, national and global level. It is in this context that the most promising alternative regionalisms are emerging, with social movements and civil society organizations (CSOs) as key protagonists.

Sustained popular mobilization against free trade and investment regimes being imposed by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and bi-lateral Free

Trade Agreements, combined with the resistance of South governments has led to the stalemate at the WTO. Decades of failure of International Monetary Fund (IMF) dictated Structural Adjustment programmes and World Bank (WB) policies coupled with stock market meltdown and repeated financial crisis in Asia and Latin America have led to a deep crisis of legitimacy of these global institutions and of the neoliberal model of development. In the Latin America and Caribbean (LAC) region for instance, these policies have not brought prosperity or contributed to the eradication of poverty. According to the World Bank's own figures, a quarter of the LAC population survive on less than US\$2 a day. Access to basic services and social provisions, including education and health, remains highly unequal (World Bank, 2006).

Within the WTO, a number of new South–South intergovernmental alliances have emerged to defend their interests and challenge the bias of the current global trade and investment regime. These include the G-22 of large agricultural exporters, focused on contesting Northern protectionism; the G-33, which defends small farmers against dumping by the North; and the largest grouping of governments in the WTO, mainly African, the G-90, which insists on special and differential treatment for the least developed countries and a moratorium on new negotiations. The impasse in the current negotiations of the WTO's Doha 'Development' Round is due in large part to countries of the global South standing up to the USA and the EU demands.

Parallel with these developments, civil society movements have also been engaged at the regional level in both resisting neoliberal policies and in challenging their governments to move away from 'open regionalism', which brings ever deeper integration subservient to Northern corporate interests. In particular, the LAC region has been the arena of popular protests to halt privatization and reverse neoliberal policies. Social mobilizations against the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) organized in the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) as well as protests to stop the privatization of essential public services and the commercialization of natural resources have been instrumental in creating a new social and political reality. This has also contributed significantly to the electoral rise of progressive political forces in several countries.

These popular struggles over the right to a dignified existence has sharpened the reluctance of LAC governments to lock their countries into the global framework at the subordinate level of producers of primary goods. The new governmental and intergovernmental initiatives being developed within the LAC region are intended to reclaim control over natural resources and to redesign inter-regional and international relations. Foremost among these are Venezuela's initiative, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) – originally inspired by the Alternatives for the Americas, HSA's counter proposal to the FTAA – and Bolivia's proposals for a Trade Treaty of the Peoples (TCP). These alternative proposals are framed in a discourse of rejection of the regressive outcomes of over two decades of neoliberal policies in the LAC region and

strongly affirm a people-based instead of profit-driven development, poverty reduction, defence of human rights and environmental protection. Others, such as the initiative for the formation of a South American Community of Nations (SACN), are less radical in their approach and even though SACN presents a new opportunity for a different kind of regional integration in Latin America, the overriding aim of the SACN initiative, at least in its founding Summit in Cusco in 2004, appears to be to develop regional integration as a strategy to face the challenges of the new global economic and political conjuncture, rather than to offer a genuine alternative to neoliberal globalization.

A distinctive characteristic of all these current initiatives is that they are proposals towards the realization of an alternative regional integration, which is distancing from and breaking with 'open regionalisms'. These new regional integration alternatives also envisage a new alliance of many countries capable of resisting the pressures from the global institutions of free trade and the big powers, whose business interests and transnational corporations will be strongly impacted by these alternative regional formations.

Above all, these alternatives reflect the efforts of some governments to begin the collective initiative of recovering sovereignty over development and integration processes. As Eduardo Gudynas, from the Latin American Center for Social Ecology (CLAES, Uruguay) comments, the recuperation of autonomy of nations undermined by neoliberalism is a necessary step for effective regional coordination (of politics, production and macro economy), which also strengthens negotiating capacity at international level.

Nevertheless, these governmental alternatives (ALBA, TCP and SACN) are still embryonic, and the countries leading the regional process are strongly contested by opposition forces within their own countries – Venezuela, Bolivia and Ecuador. Meanwhile the earlier generation of 'regionalisms' (Community of Andean Nations – CAN, MERCOSUR [Southern Common Market] and Central America – CA) also continue to coexist as models of 'open regionalism', even as they are being reconfigured, with Venezuela moving from CAN to MERCOSUR, and Mexico and Chile remaining outside these regional integration dynamics.

But even as the social movements and civil society organizations have played a pioneering role in the articulation and acceleration of the development of alternatives, both at national and regional levels, they are faced with more demanding challenges in the face of the current actual regionalisms. These movements represent not only diverse social forces, they also reflect diversity in political approaches and in their analysis of the current regional alternatives. These sometimes contradictory approaches are playing themselves out in the current economic, political and social realities of the LAC continent and in the daily struggles for sustainable livelihoods, food sovereignty, equality of human rights and active participation in shaping and democratizing the current and future trajectories of regional integration. The Social Summit for a Peoples' Integration held in Cochabamba last December was a defining moment

representing the convergence of social movements and signifying their engagement with these government initiatives for alternative regionalisms.

In addressing the complex challenges of transformation that face the peoples of the LAC continent, it is likely that the strategies that have defined the social movement mobilizations until now – strategies combining resistance to neoliberal globalization with accumulating political power and developing alternatives in all the democratic spaces available – will be intensified in the coming years. It is this perspective that defines the current strategies of civil society's intervention in the challenges of shaping 'another regional integration' – a perspective that will sustain strategies of resistance while forging alternatives and that will engage constructively with governments and regional formations while insisting on movement autonomy. This was the main trajectory on the future of regionalisms outlined in Cochabamba, with a strong affirmation of the crucial role of social movements and CSOs as main protagonists of this new regionalism and integration of the Peoples.

#### REFERENCE

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