

COMMON CANADA
FRONTIERS



"Our Americas: Towards A Peoples' Vision The Hemisphere"

Americas FTAA Civil Society Forum

Toronto, Canada

November 1-5, 1999

- final report -

Introduction

During the week of November 1 to 5, 1999 the "Our Americas: Towards a Peoples' Vision of the Hemisphere" event, including the *Americas Civil Society Forum*, took place in Toronto, Canada. The organization of this week of events was scheduled to coincide with the fifth Trade Ministerial on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

Delegates from across the hemisphere, including 20 countries of Latin America and the Caribbean, Canada and the United States participated in a host of meetings and events, including a Women's Forum, a Hemispheric Social Alliance (ASC) Council meeting and a locally-organized Cultural Festival. The focus of the week was the *Americas Civil Society Forum*, during which delegates debated and reached consensus on a variety of issues, which they were then able to present in person to Trade Ministers from 22 countries of the Americas < see open letter to ministers: www.web.ca/comfront/lett >.

The "Our Americas" week was organized by a the "Canadian organizing committee" coordinated by the multi-sectoral coalition Common Frontiers on behalf of the Hemispheric Social Alliance.

Canadian organizing committee:

- Canadian Labour Congress (CLC)
- Canadian Council for International Cooperation (CCIC)

- Canadian Environmental Law Association (CELA)
- Ecumenical Council for Economic Justice (ECEJ)
- International Centre for Human Rights and Democratic Development (ICHRDD)
- Low Income Families Together (LIFT)
- Quebec Network on Continental Integration (RQIC)

Hemispheric Social Alliance coordinating committee:

- Alliance for Responsible Trade, United States (ART)
- Brazilian Network for a Peoples Integration (REBRIP)
- Civil Society Initiative on Central American Integration (ICIC)
- Common Frontiers, Canada
- Inter-American Regional Organization of Workers (ORIT)
- Latin American Congress of Rural Organizations (CLOC)
- Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC)
- Quebec Network on Continental Integration (RQIC)

Background

In March 1998 at the Second Summit of the Americas in Chile, Canada was selected to chair the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) negotiations for an 18-month period. In addition, during this period Canada was chair of the FTAA Government Committee on Civil Society, which was the body designated to deal with questions of civil society participation. This responsibility came at a time when civil society engagement with trade agreements had been put squarely on the agenda. Indeed, the FTAA Ministerial Declaration of San José, formulated at the Costa Rica Ministerial, noted that "business and other sectors of production, labour, and environmental and academic groups have been particularly active in this matter". These and other sectors of civil society were encouraged to "present their views on trade matters in a constructive manner". Speaking before the Parliamentary Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and International Trade, Canada's then Trade Minister Sergio Marchi again referred to the participation of civil society in the following manner: ".....the last area of challenge would be that the participation of the entire civil society needs to remain a priority. From our perspective, it is crucial that we conduct these negotiations in an engaged, open, and inclusive way".

Common Frontiers and its member organizations took advantage of Canada's role to press for effective civil society engagement around the FTAA, both in Canada, through DFAIT, and at a hemispheric level through the Government Committee on Civil Society. The *Civil Society Forum* organized in Toronto was an opportunity to present a higher profile for civil society in relation to the FTAA, to present an alternative vision, to demonstrate unity among civil society organizations across the hemisphere and to demand a response from the official process. It was in this environment, then, that Canada hosted the fifth FTAA Trade Ministers meeting in Toronto in November, 1999 to review the advances made by the negotiating groups and specific issue committees which had been meeting for eighteen months.

As with previous Ministerial meetings, the Canadian government decided to also facilitate and host a *Business Forum of the Americas*, just prior to the Trade Ministers' meeting, on November 2-3, 1999 to provide an opportunity for business organizations from the hemisphere to consult broadly in order to ensure that the outcomes of negotiations reflect the needs and interests of business facilitation throughout the hemisphere. Since business is only one of the civil society sectors defined by the hemisphere's trade leaders in Costa Rica, the *Americas Civil Society Forum* also provided an opportunity to move forward the hemispheric agenda of promoting transparency, participation and engagement of civil society, broadly defined, in the trade negotiating process.

Context

The prospect of a Free Trade Area of the Americas has attracted a great deal of attention from civil society organizations throughout the hemisphere, notably from the following sectors: labour, environment, ecumenical, human rights, environmental, women's, social justice, development, indigenous rights, anti-poverty and parliamentary. Groups representing these concerns have convened on several occasions, including at a *Social/Labour Forum* held parallel to the May 1997 FTAA Ministerial in Belo Horizonte, Brazil, and at the April 1998 *Summit of the Peoples' of the Americas* attended by over 2000 men and women in Santiago, Chile prior to the Second Summit of the Americas. In Belo Horizonte, social action groups formed an formal alliance (the Hemispheric Social Alliance) made up of like minded organizations from throughout the hemisphere and jointly made commitments to advocate for multilateral socially responsible policies in the free trade negotiations in the Americas. This commitment was reflected in the implementation of the *Peoples' Summit* in Santiago and was central to the implementation of the *Americas Civil Society Forum* in Toronto.

A dozen Canadian representatives attended the civil society meeting in Belo Horizonte and over 60 attended the *People's Summit* in Santiago, Chile. More than three times as many participated in the Forum of November 1999 in Toronto.

Goals and Objectives

- To enrich both the discussion between trade ministers, cooperation among civil society groups in the Americas, as well as the quality of the public debate in Canada and throughout the hemisphere.
- To strengthen the Hemispheric Social Alliance.
- To provide an opportunity for civil society groups from throughout the hemisphere to prepare recommendations that will guide the ministers on social and labour issues related to trade negotiations. This would provide an opportunity for participant organizations to have an impact on policies in Canada and in the Americas.

- To ensure that policy makers in the Americas had access to the views of civil society in a manner equitable to that of the business community.

Outcomes

The goals and objectives above were met through delegate participation in the "Our Americas" events: the Americas Civil Society Forum, the Hemispheric Social Alliance Council Meeting, and the Women's Meeting.

Americas Civil Society Forum

The Forum opened the evening of November 1 with a public event in the auditorium of the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education. It was attended by approximately 500 members of the local community and delegates. The evening's programme was made up of speakers representing different regions and sectors of civil society in the Americas.

The Forum continued all day November 2 and 3rd, with 187 registered delegates (registration had been capped at 200). The breakdown of the attending delegates were as follows: Canada 88, Quebec 22, United States 24, Mexico 17, Peru 12, Argentina 2, Brazil 6, Chile 5, Colombia 5, Costa Rica 4, Dominican Republic 1, El Salvador 3, Guyana 1, Guatemala 3, Honduras 1, Jamaica 1, Nicaragua 5, Panama 2, Paraguay 1, Uruguay 2, Venezuela 2, Unidentified 2. Twenty six delegates received subsidies, of these twenty three came from Latin America and the other three from North American anti-poverty organizations. The breadth of representation was much broader sectorally and geographically than in previous ASC gatherings.

The two day forum was a working meeting revolving around the two themes/papers. It was organized in the traditional conference style with panels and plenary discussions, with simultaneous translation into English, French, Portuguese and Spanish. The first day began with a discussion on the "Investment, Finance and Debt" theme. In the afternoon the topic was "Social Exclusion, Jobs and Poverty". The moderators were chosen with a view to representing the different sectors within the HSA. Panelists were chosen on the basis of expertise and geographic representation. On the plenary floor the participants discussed concrete recommendations for the two analytical papers. These papers had been drafted and re-drafted, circulated and discussed hemispherically, electronically, in a process that lasted 4 months and concluded at the Forum.

Theme 1: Investment, Finance And Debt

International investment agreements have been compared to constitutions because they determine what nominally sovereign states can and cannot do to regulate foreign investment. What is at stake is the struggle between the ambition of transnational corporations to be free of state controls and the capacity of citizens and their governments to decide their own destinies. Foreign investment can play a positive role when it is invested in productive rather than speculative activities, when it transfers appropriate technology and creates employment. It can also have negative effects when it absorbs local savings, disrupts local industries and only creates low-wage jobs in export enclaves disconnected from the national economy. Our alternatives involve enhancing the ability of sovereign states to regulate foreign investment through the use of performance requirements and capital controls and to adjudicate disputes under national laws. Our alternatives also involve international measures such as a Currency Transaction Tax and an Arbitration Tribunal for the cancellation of illegitimate foreign debts without structural adjustment conditions.

Theme 2: Social Exclusion, Jobs and Poverty

This paper describes the concerns held by unions, church groups, environmentalists and social justice non-governmental organizations over the fact that a large proportion of the population of the hemisphere is excluded from the benefits of globalization, and the fact that globalization itself is not producing a sustainable future for all. The paper analyzes the relationship between liberalized trade and investment and social development in our hemisphere, taking as a reference point the broad goals of the FTAA as well as international social development targets and standards such as those set by the World Summit on Social Development, the ILO (International Labour Organization) conventions on fundamental worker's rights, and regional human rights agreements of the Organization of American States (OAS). Examples from throughout the hemisphere illustrate the phenomena of growing poverty and inequality, poor quality of employment, rising challenges faced by women workers, and the limitations on our governments' abilities to promote social development and environmental sustainability.

The result of the plenary discussions of these two themes were concrete sets of recommendations that, it is hoped, will guide the ministers on social and labour issues related to trade negotiations. These recommendations and the documents themselves were presented - in English, French and Spanish - to a 22 member delegation of Trade Ministers on the morning of November 3, 1999. Delegates to the Forum viewed this meeting as a positive step towards civil societies increased, active engagement with the FTAA process.

Hemispheric Social Alliance

The Hemispheric Social Alliance (ASC) took the opportunity to organize a two day **council** meeting directly following the Civil Society Forum. Approximately 100 participants representing over 40 member organizations participated. The Toronto encounter provided an important space for information sharing, developing strategy and formulating campaign ideas. The *council* meetings are important in that they provide broad political direction for the ASC. The ASC coordinating committee in turn operationalizes these decisions in between *council* meetings.

Highlights of decisions taken at the council meeting: to create a permanent Secretariat (rotating); to develop a political strategy and action plan towards the Summit of the Americas to be held in Quebec City in April of 2001; to develop a fundraising strategy; to support the development of regional and subregional ASC bodies as well as working groups: Social Agenda, Alternatives for the Americas document, monitoring of the FTAA working groups and committees, amongst others.

On Monday, November 1, a full day **women's forum** was held. Of the 38 women present, the majority in attendance were Latin American women from the variety of countries named above. There was also noted Canadian representation, with two 'National Action Committee on the Status of Women' delegates in attendance.

The focus of the Forum was discuss how to broaden and extend the perspective of gender and economy in hemispheric trade negotiations, specifically in the context of the ongoing increase in the impoverishment of women globally, not in small part due to the current form free trade agreements take. Joint campaigns discussed include participation in the World Women's March of 2000.

The forum was successful in continuing to develop this hemispheric network of women, a most significant sector of civil society.

Evaluation

The success of the Forum in meeting its objectives was evaluated in several ways. Direct feedback from participants was solicited. Participation across the hemisphere and media coverage was also means of evaluating the event's success in raising public awareness of the social implications of trade integration in the Americas. The reaction of governments in terms of their consideration of the submissions will also be a means of evaluating the Forum's success in influencing policy. The ability of Hemispheric Social Alliance members to reach agreements and consolidate their work, as well as their willingness to meet again, will be a further indication of the success of the event.

Conclusion

One of the principles informing civil society's dialogue around trade policy discussions is that business cannot be the only constituency represented in consultations or to have privileged access to ministers and policy makers. In order for government to balance the views of different sectors of society, there must be representation from all areas. The unbalanced nature of the governments' consultation process led to enormous legitimacy problems with regards to APEC and negotiations around the Multilateral Agreement on Investment, and it stands in marked contrast to structures developing around trade agreements such as MERCOSUR. Canada's position as Chair of the first 18 months of negotiations for the FTAA, and its stated commitment to expand civil society's involvement, has made this an opportune time for concrete progress in this area.

However, although it is important for civil society to be able to make itself heard in international negotiations, we are of the opinion that "consultation" with civil society at the top must not be seen as

a substitute to the democratic process at a national level, and must not undermine the responsibility and accountability of democratically elected governments towards all of the citizens in whose name and interest they govern.

The lack of visibility of the negotiation of trade agreements is often blamed for leading to public indifference and presenting few opportunities for civil society stakeholders to effect change or influence decisions which greatly affect their lives. Therefore, need for the Americas Civil Society Forum in the hemispheric trade process was two-fold. On one hand, the integration of civil society's views into the negotiation process is required in order to enrich discourse related to a possible hemispheric trade agreement. On the other hand, public opinions regarding an agreement which holds the potential to greatly affect social dynamics in Canada and abroad must receive at least as much attention as those of corporate actors. The Americas Civil Society Forum in Toronto was an appropriate venue to give meaning and legitimacy to the movement for "democracy, openness and transparency" in trade negotiations.