

Towards a Forum of the Americas and Europe?

A feasible itinerary

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Global problems need an articulated global public opinion to tackle them. The time of large scale conferences dealing with the world's problems is over. These may have been good to map the problems, they have not brought us much closer to solving them. Global public opinion is left unimpressed by the results. The main global problem is the uncontrolled growth of disparities in well-being. It can only be solved by new forms of international cooperation between peoples. Civil society networks can be helpful in generating platforms to articulate public opinion and stimulate governments to take the international action needed. A Forum of the Americas and Europe is proposed; it could hold its constitutive meeting in Rio de Janeiro in mid 1999.

The issue: globalization of problems

The 1990's are the decade of globalization. The World Conferences sponsored by the UN have outlined the great problems faced, be they environmental decline, gender inequality or increasing poverty. Civil society played an active role in the preparation of these conferences; much less so in their aftermath.

The **Human Development Report 1998** argues that disparities in income and well-being have increased dramatically over the past decade. A recent path-breaking document of the World Bank, **Assessing Aid**, finds that public aid can do something to tackle poverty provided accountable organizations set the right policies. The **Reality of Aid 1998-1999** concludes nevertheless that a seminal trend exists to lower public outlays for international cooperation.

We conclude that the global problems sketched by the Human Development Report need an enlightened public opinion which says: enough is enough. Basta ya.

The approach: articulate civil society networks

We need to learn from this decade of globalization. If speculative private capital can flow unhindered around this world, why cannot we do the same for speculative public ideas? If relatively small endeavours by civil society groups went against all odds and won a battle for public opinion, why not draw the conclusions from them? After all, the battle against the Multilateral Agreement was won even though the rich countries were ready to have it signed. After all, the Convention against Landmines will be ratified in March 1999, since Burkina Faso has ratified. After all,

Shell Company has changed its policies in the face of a global public outcry. Three examples of speculative ideas about the public good which made the day. They were speculative in that very few people in positions of public power were willing to take them seriously when first proposed. Yet when governments or big companies adapt themselves to these ideas through a global articulation of public opinion, we are a step ahead.

In each case public opinion was shaped through a concerted action of locally based organisations through global networks. Civil society showed its teeth. That is a lesson we can draw from the past decade. It means: link local concerns in global fora. These fora may be totally different from the ones created by our governments after World War 2. They respect different rules and are governed by different constituencies.

The line: an inclusive strategy to reach public opinion

If the issue is indeed one of articulating global public opinion against growing poverty and decline in life-chances, and if the approach of generated global fora is the right one, we need to reflect on the How.

In each of the three cases mentioned one notes the importance of existing local groups, using new and old information media to reach clear targets in public action. In the case of the MAI labour unions worked together with intellectuals; Le Monde Diplomatique worked together with a new internet based action group called ATTAC. New coalitions were shaped, involving even parts of the private sector. It was an inclusive strategy.

The lesson is therefore: set clear targets, don't exclude but include, and use the net in conjunction with traditional media. Generate a global forum which informs public debate and guides public action. In Brazil, experience exists through the monthly Jornal da Cidadania (edition: 53.000), co-sponsored through the think tank for civil society Ibase.

In Europe, the new approach led to an internet cooperative Euforic (500.000 hits monthly) which boasts an increasing membership among civil society organisations committed to international cooperation. Neither Ibase nor Euforic exclude the state or public agencies: both followed an inclusive strategy. Ibase works with state-governments; Euforic works with public officials representing states in Africa, the Caribbean, the Pacific and Europe.

The proposal: towards a forum for international cooperation

Development cooperation has had its time. Poor countries are not willing to put up with it. Rich countries are not willing to put money into it. This is deplorable, but the trend is clear. So a new approach is needed. Let us try to reverse the trend, by reversing the notions underlying the conventional forms of cooperation.

Traditional development cooperation was characterized by government-to-government financial aid from rich to poor. Why not conceive a form of international cooperation which is grounded in civil society collaboration? And why not conceive of common interests between the poor and the rich, instead of exacerbating their differences? While we are at it: why not de-monetarizing cooperation in favour of common action for common purposes? We all know that traditional development cooperation has led to the mushrooming of corruption in state and non-state agencies.

The time has come for real partnership. Not the type championed by aid agencies which use 'partnerships' to impose their own priorities. Rather the type foreseen by members of the European Parliament when they called for a decentralized cooperation involving civil society and local government. The European Union is presently shaping a policy for decentralized cooperation. The present proposal could be linked to this policy.

We propose an *itinerary*, not a blue-print. We know where we wish to get, yet the options on how to get there are many. Our aim is to strengthen global public opinion supporting international cooperation. Our approach is to follow an inclusive strategy, linking public interest groups in the Americas and in Europe. We do not exclude (local) governments, but stress the articulation of civil society.

Our *suggestion* is as follows:

- create a *cooperative* venture among a small number of independent civil society organisations in the Americas. It could aim at making information available to partners and the general public through conventional media and the internet. One option is to learn from the Euforic experience: start small, think big. Depend on participant funding first, only then grow.
- hold a *constituent meeting* among the founders of the cooperative and set some practical targets which reflect common concerns. This could be held in May 1999 in Rio de Janeiro.
- announce the venture at the *Americas-Europe summit* as a concrete proposal and indication that cooperative ventures make sense.
- start *activities* on the internet towards the end of 1999 in collaboration with other global networks aiming at international cooperation like OneWorld
- join a *virtual Forum* for international cooperation in the year 2000 in conjunction with the initiatives taken by UN Secretary General Kofi Annan.

Please send your reactions. We can be reached by electronic mail and regular mail. We welcome your views and will react to each one of them.

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