

Social Movements and Economic Integration in the Americas

by Beverly Bell, Center for Economic Justice | Nov. 1, 2002

Editor's Introduction:

In the Americas, the forces of globalization are presenting communities with a number of serious and pressing challenges—propagation of unsustainable development strategies, exploitation in the workplace, environmental degradation, consolidation of wealth in the hands of a few, cuts to social services and education spending. But alongside the challenges that economic integration has presented in the Americas, it has also helped foster the creation of new spaces and mechanisms for civil engagement with policy and in politics.

The objective of this discussion paper is to examine in broad terms the emergence of a hemispheric movement—or collection of movements—opposed to the currently dominant plan for deepened economic integration in the Americas, including the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) as well as regional arrangements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), Plan Puebla-Panama (PPP), and United States-Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA).

The underlying assumption is that across the Western Hemisphere, activists, community groups, nonprofits, and other nontraditional actors—what many call “civil society”—are playing an increasingly important role in responding to the challenges of globalization, protecting the environment, working for human rights and equitable development, and more. As governments in the Americas struggle to meet the challenges of economic integration, such citizen movements—both national and transnational—are helping to chart a new course for public policy, international cooperation, and economic integration in the region. The Americas Program at the Interhemispheric Resource Center is distributing this discussion paper with the aim of prompting reflection and strategic thinking about the work being conducted by these organizations—reflection and thinking that can help enhance the positive impacts they are having.

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A New Context

The growth of crossborder social movements throughout the Americas reflects a new logic based in a new political moment. The long-term, historic struggles waged by social movements in the region—for sovereignty, human rights, control over natural resources, and participation in government—are still alive today. Yet the context has changed. Today's context is one of booming economic globalization, which is causing seismic shifts—in social relations, in forms of governance, in relations between civil society and polity and between labor and capital, in business and agricultural practices, in natural resource use, and in environmental policy. For poor and marginalized communities in the Americas, these changes are often negative ones, aggravating their absolute and relative disempowerment.

Environmental degradation; diminished local control over land, agriculture, and seeds; deregulation of the markets; dwindling power of national governments to create their own trade policies; diminished local production; destabilization of entire economies; and increasing inequality—these negative byproducts of globalization are, increasingly, affecting the lives of citizens throughout the Americas. Economic globalization is, therefore, also central to the political agendas of civil society actors in the Americas.

This new context has led to a new historical moment. The 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s saw the ascendance of national liberation movements throughout Latin America and the Caribbean, with popular movements focusing on the nation-state as the target of their struggle. However, the accelera-



tion of worldwide economic integration has, since the mid-1990s, resulted in a shift both in the focus and the form of organizing efforts in the region.

The most notable of these shifts—the primary target for advocacy and organizing work is transitioning from a sole focus on national governments to include international financial institutions (IFIs) and transnational corporations (TNCs). Even progressive, populist governments have become largely ineffective at addressing the roots of poverty and marginalization in the face of the growing power of these institutions and the policies of G7 governments that reinforce that power. This context has rendered formerly dominant forms of organizing inadequate. Since the state is no longer the primary focus of political demand making, the role of political parties is less central. Since domestic matters are no longer the primary unit of analysis, national social movements have generally become too weak to stand alone. As a result, the past five years or so have witnessed a tremendous growth in a new model of

organizing: cross-border alliance building and campaigning among popular social movements.

Definitions, Assumptions, Clarifications

For the purposes of this paper, social movements are identified as mass-based, popular movements that strive to make systemic-level change through political action. They are composed of individuals and groups who are directly impacted by the problems they address. Often, but not invariably, these are dispossessed people. An explicit and coherent identity is an important element of a movement; even if participants do not all employ the same name, they all claim membership in it. Another element is shared overarching objectives, agenda, and set of priorities among members. The ideology, strategy, tactics, and organizing culture of the constituents are similar, though there may be variances amongst them. Social movements must be large in scope, extending beyond the local community to a

Profile: Grito de los Excluidos

Grito de los Excluidos was founded by progressive elements of the Catholic Church in 1995 in Brazil, where it remains headquartered today. Its membership comprises members of Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC), members of the Frente Continental de Organizaciones Comunes (FCOC), and numerous church bodies. Its member countries include Argentina, Belize, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Paraguay, and Peru.

Grito's literature defines its focus as addressing the challenge of "social inequalities, concentration of income and wealth, policies to privatize public services and structural adjustment policies imposed by multinational institutions such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO)."

This focus finds expression through three main programs. One is popular education and conscientization among its base members and others. A second is organizing, uniting organizations and civil society in order to oppose trade and financial policies, which Grito sees as promulgating exclusion. Among other endeavors, Grito sponsors national meetings in member countries against the FTAA, the World Bank, and the IMF. The central organizing endeavor of each year is around the occasion of October 12. Formally celebrated by nations as Columbus Day, this date has been claimed by Grito and others as Day of Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance. Grito takes the lead throughout Latin America in organizing cross-border protests for the occasion, which is simultaneously a celebration of marginalized and excluded peoples.

The third programmatic element is advocacy around specific IFIs and their policies. This advocacy entails: collaborating with the international campaign against the debt; participating in international activities to oppose the Plan Puebla Panama; participating in the campaign for food sovereignty led by Via Campesina, of which Grito is a member; and participating in the Americas-wide actions against the FTAA.

Like other movements, in addition to opposing problems Grito's work is also focused on constructing positive alternatives—in this case, more equitable and democratic relationship between civil society and the national and international bodies which govern political and economic policy.

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Profile: Convergence of Movements of Peoples of the Americas (COMPA)

COMPA was founded in 1999 on the premise that “alternatives to corporate globalization” must be constructed via collaboration that cuts across multiple sectors, borders, and issues. Thus, instead of focusing on one sector or one focus area, COMPA represents a space where various movements and networks may come together. COMPA strives to bring together, from throughout the Americas, organizations and movements working on the following six issues: indigenous peoples and lands, including sovereignty and biotechnology; women; FTAA; rural development; peace and militarization; and foreign debt, including questions of structural adjustment. Currently, information sharing and coordinating is done primarily through national and regional COMPA gatherings that are held every other year, and through international gatherings in the off years.

One current COMPA project is empowering indigenous communities as they oppose environmentally and socially destructive projects of the World Bank and PPP. The project involves research of World Bank-, PPP-, and corporate-funded programs in indigenous areas; popular research of the impacts of those projects; mass education around those findings; and coordinated grassroots opposition.

COMPA's members include base organizations and NGOs throughout the Americas. With a secretariat and one paid staff person in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, COMPA is run by ten elected coordinators, who are dispersed across North America, Central America, the Caribbean, and South America.

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national, regional, and/or international level and commanding the support of huge numbers of constituents. They are owned collectively, extending beyond the control of one individual or organization. The groups' analysis and proposed solutions typically surge up from the bottom, from the members' own experiences.

Social movements have traditionally organized around geography (e.g., the Caribbean), sector or identity (e.g., indigenous peoples), or focus area (e.g., land rights). Today, these movements are finding common ground in what they perceive as fundamental to their poverty and related social problems: unjust trade policies in global and regional agreements, and an inequitable development model imposed by IFIs. More and more people are joining together across regions, social groupings, and issues to address economic policy and organization in an ever more integrated world. The foci include both trade and transnational capital. They integrate global policy and the local impacts of those policies.

While the organizing of these international movements is frequently characterized as “anti-globalization,” a survey of their positions and programs shows that they are as engaged in working for alternatives as against poverty, exclusion, and oppression. The alternatives being advocated transcend general principles for more participatory, rights-

based, and autonomously controlled local and national economies. Many of the coalitions and networks articulate specific, detailed policy positions regarding new forms of international economic organization. These range from taxing speculative flows of capital (so-called “hot money”), to supplanting debt service payments from impoverished countries with payment of reparations for failed development projects to impoverished countries.

Working Within and Across Borders to Articulate Alternatives

Despite their best efforts, civil society in the Americas (this is less the case in Canada and the U.S.) continues to be largely excluded from political processes, such as lobbying, in which advocacy can lead to change. With the ascendance of liberal democracy in the region throughout the 1980s, a few citizens' groups in various Latin American and Caribbean countries have developed strategies for governmental advocacy but, for the most part, opportunities for direct engagement with government do not exist in the region. Accordingly, the principle emphases in organizing, whether at the national or crossborder level, remain popular education, grassroots mobilization, and coordinated action.

One example of how people with little institutional power attempt to change economic policy is a sit-in

Profile: Coordinadora Latinoamericana de Organizaciones del Campo (CLOC)

CLOC was born in 1992 out of the Brazilian-based mobilizing for the Indigenous, Black, and Popular Resistance campaign against the 500th anniversary of Columbus' arrival in the Americas. Like Via Campesina, its members are farmers. CLOC is active in all the countries of Central America, many countries of the Caribbean (Haiti, the Dominican Republic, Cuba, St. Vincent, Martinique, Guadalupe, and Grenada and the Grenadines), and in various parts of South America (Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Peru, Colombia, Ecuador, and Bolivia). It is currently headquartered in Guatemala, where the Coordinadora Nacional Indígena y Campesina (CONIC) serves as the convening group.

Currently, CLOC has three primary campaigns: resisting the FTAA, promoting agrarian reform, and protecting and strengthening food sovereignty. Like its relative Via Campesina, CLOC is very explicit in its stances via the IFIs. CLOC is highly active in the "WTO out of agriculture" movement, and in opposition to the World Bank's market-based land reform program. CLOC's work against the FTAA takes numerous forms. It participates in major meetings and mobilizations around the FTAA, such as the First Hemispheric Conference against the FTAA in Cuba last November. It has been integrally involved in the development of the Continental Campaign of Struggle against the FTAA. CLOC is also conducting education and consciousness-raising amongst its members regarding the proposed hemispheric trade agreement. Each year on April 17, World Day of Campesino Struggle, CLOC hosts major events, mobilizations, and demonstrations in each of its member countries regarding land tenure and agrarian reform. More recently, the focus has been expanded to include questions of biotechnology.

CLOC's political program is implemented through numerous forms, including: international meetings and forums, informal meetings, lobbying, popular education, protests, mass mobilizations, international campaigns, and international tours.

Finally, CLOC serves on the coordinating body of the Hemispheric Social Alliance and of Grito de los Excluidos.

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in front of the National Palace in Haiti, in which a group of women and men hold empty cooking pots in their laps in protest of a structural adjustment program. A second example is indigenous farmers in Honduras cutting up the roads leading to Tegucigalpa so that no agricultural products can reach the capital, to protest free trade policies leading to more imported food. Organizing a popular, non-binding referendum on the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) among the citizens of most nations in the Americas, notifying those governments of mass citizen discontent with the proposed pact, is another illustration.

From the point of view of a U.S. observer, these tactics may seem too diffuse and too inconsequential to make any difference. Without doubt, the power that these networks are able to amass, and their ability to change policy, is limited. That is integral to the nature of grassroots movements, which are primarily composed of poor and marginalized people, who are working principally from outsider positions. Yet, as the political scientist James Scott notes, "Under the appropriate conditions, the accumulation of

petty acts [of resistance] can, rather like snowflakes on a steep mountainside, set off an avalanche."¹

Indeed, a collection of factors have converged to begin to shift institutional power. These include the growth in the size and strength of the movements, as evidenced by the turn-out of 50,000 to 60,000 people, from every part of the world, at this past February's World Social Forum. Other factors include widening access to the Internet, where previously isolated people now connect to each other and to an abundance of information. They include the first-ever mass involvement of citizens of industrialized nations, since the WTO meetings in Seattle in November 1999, in protesting global trade and financial policies that many believe put profit over human need. And they include for the first time, as mentioned, substantial organizing by people across borders.

For the past ten to fifteen years, the focus of globalization protests by Latin American peoples was World Bank- and IMF-backed structural adjustment programs. Today, competing with structural adjustment programs for attention is the proposed FTAA;

indeed, there is a consensus amongst international social movements in this hemisphere that the FTAA must be the target of advocacy and mobilization in the coming two years. In southern Mexico and Central America, the Plan Puebla-Panama vies for a close runner-up in dominating the agenda. While the newness of this plan renders the current level of transnational activity low, this is quickly changing as people become aware of the project.

Some popular groupings have moved beyond protest to initiate concrete actions that put alternative paradigms into practice. One example is the establishment of grassroots trade networks between and among producers and consumers in the Caribbean, skirting intervention by intermediary speculators and corporations; this has increased small-scale producers' profits, reduced consumers' costs, and shifted control in marketing and pricing decisions.

Similarly, the more than half-million members of the Landless Workers Movement (MST, by its Portuguese acronym) in Brazil have reclaimed hundreds of thousands of hectares of formerly unproductive land from corporate, state, or latifundia ownership. A broad-based Brazilian movement also succeeded in changing the national constitution to mandate transfers of unproductive land, under certain conditions, to landless people. This wholly new program of land tenure and redistribution serves as a concrete model to which national and international movements throughout the Americas aspire.

As innovative or effective as their practice may appear, on-the-ground alternative economic projects are often finding that their victories remain insufficient if not coupled with advocacy for macroeconomic change. For example, peasant growers in Central America who are producing coffee for fair trade

Profile: Jubilee South

Jubilee South is a network of more than 85 national campaigns, movements, organizations, and regional networks in over 40 countries in Africa, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and the Caribbean that is working on issues related to debt and economic justice. According to its materials, Jubilee South's mission is to "confront the historical roots and structural causes of the debt problem, and to promote lasting alternatives of economic, social, and ecological justice."

The network was founded in 1999 as a response to the need for a stronger and more cohesive Southern voice on issues of debt cancellation. At the time, the Northern campaigns for debt cancellation—especially in the UK—were getting much publicity and media attention, while many groups in the South—who frequently had a different agenda—felt that they were becoming increasingly marginalized in the global campaign agenda for debt cancellation. The formation of Jubilee South represents an effort to shift control over debt cancellation and other economic agendas back to the countries directly affected by the debt crisis. (It should be noted that a new incarnation of Jubilee 2000 USA, the Jubilee USA Network, is very respectful of Southern positions, and works in close consultation and collaboration with its Southern colleagues.)

A focus of Jubilee South is to redefine the way that debt is discussed and understood. Rather than calling for debt "forgiveness," which implies a charitable act, Jubilee South advocates that global South countries repudiate their debts, charging that the debt is largely illegitimate. The network produces educational and research materials that provide analyses and case studies on what the network claims is the illegitimacy of the debt.

Beyond the debt issue, Jubilee South is committed to projecting Southern perspectives and analyses into international economic policymaking.

Recent activities and work undertaken by Jubilee South include: participating in events around the Third Summit of the Americas in Quebec City and joining with other networks in opposition to the FTAA; organizing a Pan African Workshop on the Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) in Kampala, Uganda in May, 2002; coordinating the Global Week of Protest against Debt from July 15-21, 2001 during mobilizations in Genoa, Italy; and participating in major mobilizations around the meetings of the IMF/World Bank. Notably, in February 2002 in Porto Alegre, Jubilee South organized the International People's Tribunal on the Debt. The tribunal brought together thousands of representatives of movements from across the globe to consider the implications of the debt crisis. The judgment from that tribunal was rendered in Washington in April, at the time of the mobilizations against the World Bank and IMF meetings.

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markets know that at any moment their businesses might be ruled illegal under the rules of the World Trade Organization. For them, therefore, adding their voices to the international call against so-called “race to the bottom” trade has become an explicit, integral aspect of their development projects.²

Beyond Policy: Principles of Organizing

The new spate of cross-border organizing represents not only a challenge to the political and economic policies of the dominant trade and financial institutions. It also represents an attempt at new models of social organization, premised on new forms of power.

Profile: Via Campesina / Peasants' Way

Via Campesina is the largest movement of campesinos in the world. Its members include landless workers, migrant farmworkers, small producers, rural women, and indigenous peoples. Born in 1993 at a campesino forum to coordinate challenges to free trade policies in Nicaragua, Via Campesina is now active in dozens of countries throughout the world. The secretariat is currently in Honduras, though the location rotates on a periodic basis. Globally, the network is organized into the following regions: Eastern Europe, Western Europe, North America, Central America, the Caribbean, South America, Africa, Northeast Asia, and Southeast Asia.

Via Campesina is involved in leading campaigns and coordinating the land and agricultural advocacy that peasants and farmers are doing within and between countries. This movement is, in the language of Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, the head of Via Campesina-Haiti, “a struggle for the defense of peasant life and agriculture.”⁶⁵ The principles of Via Campesina include that the food that people consume must be produced in or close to their communities. Production must involve healthy food, possession of land, and cultural integrity. Peasants must remain owners of their own land. They must control their own seeds.

Via Campesina takes strong positions regarding the IFIs and the policies they promote. The group opposes any intervention of the World Bank, IMF, and WTO regarding national food and land-tenure policies. According to Rafael Alegría, Executive Secretary of Via Campesina, the group is committed to “delegitimizing the WTO and World Bank as organizations that control and regulate food and agriculture.”⁶⁶ Representatives are present at all the major mobilizations against the World Bank, IMF, and WTO.

Via Campesina takes strong positions on biotechnology, and opposes systems, policies, and trade pacts promoting biotechnology and genetically modified organisms. Via Campesina is outspoken in its denunciation of the impacts of WTO policies on peasants' ownership of their local seeds and life forms, the management of natural resources, and the use of GMOs. “WTO out of agriculture,” is a rallying cry of this movement.

Via Campesina has launched a global campaign against “structural adjustment programs and neoliberal agrarian policies [that] have caused agrarian reform to be largely replaced by implantation or deepening of the land market”—to quote from the group's literature. The group is vocal in challenging the World Bank's market-based approach to land reform, in which the Bank is taking the lead in promoting, and in some cases financing, comprehensive reforms of land tenure.

Via Campesina is leading the grassroots charge for food sovereignty, with members adamant that countries need to move beyond food security. Among other initiatives toward this end, Via Campesina sponsored a global meeting for food sovereignty in Cuba in September 2001.

The movement's work for food sovereignty brings it to a strong position of opposition to free trade. Via Campesina members oppose U.S. dumping of surplus food, and the broader penetration of the food of wealthy countries in the Third World. Via Campesina is also very engaged in the mobilization against the FTAA. For the Americas, Via Campesina has a complex hemispheric plan; in this it coordinates closely with the Hemispheric Social Alliance. Via Campesina is involved in direct action, public education, grassroots mobilization in each country, and international demonstrations at prominent venues. A few of these in 2002 include the United Nations International Conference on Financing for Development in Monterrey on March 18-22, the Food and Agriculture Organization meeting in Rome in June, and the launch of the Continental Campaign of Struggle Against the FTAA in Porto Alegre on February 4. Each of its member countries will be involved in the FTAA plebiscite from October 2002 – March 2003.

For each critique of international trade and financial policies, the group advocates specific alternatives. Its members are engaged in asserting concrete policy proposals regarding the international economy and agriculture, and in mobilizing across borders for the adoption and implementation of those proposals.

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The late 1960s ushered in an expansion of the scope and terms of struggles for justice across the globe. The voices of so-called national liberation and identity struggles had long been suppressed by socialist and social democratic movements; the latter insisted that once they consolidated their power within a nation-state, political space would then exist for other demands to be addressed. Unwilling, finally, to have their agendas deferred, in the late 1960s organized women, indigenous, people of color, and other groupings asserted themselves into the program for change.

A similar phenomenon is occurring today. Ana Esther Ceceña, a professor at the National Autonomous University of Mexico who writes frequently on the Zapatista movement, says, “Space that we weren’t able to claim for humanity with centralized socialist movements, we are attempting to claim now.”³ Today’s cross-border movements are expanding the focus and the modalities of organizing vis-à-vis local society and the movement itself, as well as vis-à-vis global spheres of political and economic power.

The objectives of today’s international movement-building—much of which is negotiated around globalization—go beyond changing the policies and programs of dominant trade, financial, and political powers. The objectives go beyond lessening poverty and redistributing income. They include transforming the nature and application of power. Political and social organizing among grassroots movements today strives to redefine power between people,

place, state, class, and social groups—what it is, how it is shared, and how it is used. New modes of organizing incorporate the belief that money and realpolitik are not the only units of analyses; morality and dignity must be integrated into the new paradigm. Leadership must be decentralized, and based on the idea of direct—as opposed to representative—democracy.

According to Walden Bello, executive director of Focus on the Global South, “how we organize reflects our goal.”⁴ Dominant modes of organizing in the 1960s though 1980s reflected the goal of accessing state power—usually without a simultaneous commitment to transforming power. The principles of organizing did indeed reflect the goal and the characteristics of the groupings that dominated progressive civil society agendas: political parties and labor unions. Movements were primarily based on centralized authority and decisionmaking. Organizational structures were largely vertical. Leadership was often concentrated among men, intellectuals, and members of ethnic majorities.

Today, social movements think, look, and act differently, as they work toward different goals. The new movement against the dominant paradigm of economic integration, and for equitable and locally controlled economic alternatives, is based on: new models of leadership and self-organization, a strong commitment to moralism with a central cluster of values, and new organizing practices.

New Principles Guiding Social Movements in the Americas

New models of leadership and self-organization

- Decentralized leadership and decisionmaking
- Direct, participatory democracy
- Diversity and plurality, aimed at integrating and empowering those most often marginalized: women, indigenous peoples, people of color, members of minority ethnic groups

A strong commitment to moralism, with a central cluster of values

- Internationalism
- Equity
- Community
- Dignity
- Sustainability, reflecting the delicate balance between people and the earth
- Opposition to all forms of alienation

New organizing practices

- Flexibility and fluidity
- Subsidiarity, with a bias toward the most local level of organization available
- An abundance of creativity and popular art
- Common activity
- Networking, as opposed to competition

About the Author

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Endnotes

- ¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University, 1990), p. 192.
- ² Author's interview with Yolette Etienne, Director, Oxfam UKI/Haiti, April 2002.
- ³ Ana Esther Ceceña, from a presentation at "Movimientos Sociales y Alternativas" at the World Social Forum, Feb. 2, 2002, Porto Alegre, Brazil.
- ⁴ Walden Bello, from a presentation at "Movimientos Sociales y Alternativas" at the World Social Forum, Feb. 2, 2002, Porto Alegre, Brazil.
- ⁵ Author's interview with Chavannes Jean-Baptiste, February 2002.
- ⁶ Author's interview with Rafael Alegria, February 2002.

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Recommended citation:

Beverly Bell. "Social Movements and Economic Integration in the Americas," Americas Program Discussion Paper. (Silver City, NM: Interhemispheric Resource Center, November 1, 2002)

Web location:

<http://www.americaspolicy.org/reports/2002/0211soc-mov.html>