

# The Challenge of Globalization Civil Society in Latin America and Canada

Delia Montero\*  
José Sosa\*\*

In recent years, the study of local, regional and international citizens' movements and organized civil society in Latin America and Canada vis-à-vis globalization from the viewpoint of different disciplines has taken on importance.<sup>1</sup> This process has been characterized by the robust development of computer sciences and communications, which has made it possible to analyze society's problems without being isolated and has given civil society the opportunity of knowing what is happening on the other side of the world. Latin American and Canadian civil societies have been no exception to this.

From the perspective of the Canadian government, international relations must be reconstructed to make sure that they are guided by democratic processes respectful of human rights that make economic development, the fight against poverty and the improvement of the environment possible and that promote the participation of civil society. To achieve this, citizens' pro-

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posals must be taken to international summits and citizens themselves must participate in negotiating international free trade agreements, but not as mere tokens. Up until now there has been no real dialogue with society. Governments have listened, but not opened up dialogue or they have put forward arguments without coming to any consensus, as was clear in Seattle and Prague last year. This is one of the tasks that the Canadian government will promote during the Summit of the Americas this year in Quebec. The summit's aim is to establish an agenda that would include the promotion of democratic processes and economic development for Latin America, as well as the participation of civil society in the discussion of these issues.

DEMOCRACY, CIVIL SOCIETY  
AND GLOBALIZATION

Processes like the organization and mobilization of civil society and democracy in the Western Hemisphere have intensified in different sectoral and geographical fields. Multi-sectoral networks have been formed with the participation of social and civic organizations like unions, peasant groups, indigenous peoples, the popular urban movement, environmentalists, human rights fighters and women's and intellectuals' organizations.

The participation of organized civil society in the hemisphere is very dynamic vis-à-vis the signing of different free trade agreements. We find, for example, the Trilateral Network on the North American Free Trade Agreement and the Continental Social Alliance created to answer the current negotiations for the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). The objectives of these networks include fostering actions based on common strategies and respect for diversity. Today, the general coordination has fallen to the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC) until the Quebec summit. RMALC was founded in 1991 as part of the process that led to the creation of the trilateral network among

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\* President of the Canadian Association of Latin American and Caribbean Studies (CALACS), Mexico chapter. del@xanum.uam.mx

\*\* Vice president of CALACS, Mexico chapter. ppsosa@colmex.mx

Mexico, the United States and Canada and later the continental alliance that was born at the Santiago de Chile People's Summit in April 1998. At that meeting, organizations' representatives from the entire hemisphere came together at the same time that the presidents and prime ministers were meeting to discuss the FTAA. Both these networks are multi-sectoral.

These organizations' aim is to have an impact on the negotiations in an attempt to concretize a globalization in the interests of the different peoples involved. In that sense, the alliances have been pro-active, organized to work for the rights of peoples expressed in terms of an alternative globalization, including the establishment of an alternate agenda, independent of governments and world trade and the definition of a strategic agenda that makes effective coordination possible.

A great deal has been advanced in consensus-making hemisphere-wide, but the discussion continues among pluri-sectoral and multinational organizations that are working to achieve consensus maintaining respect for every organization's and country's full autonomy. The discussion about the role of civic and citizen's movements is expressed not only in the undoubtedly important process of trade and economic integration of the hemisphere. Their own origin, linked to the fight for civil and human rights continues to offer a much broader panorama.

On the one hand, continuing deficient democracy and political participation in broad spheres of public policy make it absolutely necessary that the social sectors directly and indirectly affected by health, housing and educational programs make contributions to change the course of government action,

which suffers from a strong dose of financial paralysis imposed by the neo-liberal stage. In that sense, it is not sufficient that the experience accumulated by civic organizations over recent decades be transferred to public institutions to broaden out their vision and give them more elements on which to base their public decisions. What is required is that public perspectives about the main problems and social needs be formulated taking into considera-

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tion the new democratic values that permeate the majority of the population. Principles like self-government, subsidiarity and community organization must be fully incorporated into policies and programs.

On the other hand, the fact that a citizens' movement cannot remain isolated from the influence of other national and international actors poses the challenge of ensuring the creation of a globalized regimen of living together and trading with stable, reciprocal bases. It is not simply a matter of the extensively discussed question of global regimens of governability but, in essence, the formulation of institutional and non-institutional bases for interaction among social movements within a country and among distant nations

and regions linked by common regional and global problems.

The fundamental ingredient of this "social governability" is, as seems obvious, the practice of democracy. As contradictory as it seems, it is one of the main courses along which the formation of pluri-sectoral and multinational coalitions and fronts are being formed. While the plural, participatory essence of these networks is not under discussion, procedural questions and the need to create safeguards for smaller or less closely meshed groups and sectors absorbs an important part of the time and resources available. This means that there is still a long road to travel before we can consider the global sphere of action of civic and citizens' groups completely formed.

#### POVERTY, SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AND LOCAL MANAGEMENT

The reduction of inequality and economic polarization, intensified in the last 15 years, is vital because it will permit the full participation of all citizens in public life. As long as these problems are not resolved, any action by civil society, whether it be international, regional or local, will have little chance of success.

Latin America's excessive debt, particularly of its poorest countries, is a brake on any initiative for redistributing wealth given the disadvantageous situation of the debtor countries in the renegotiation of what they owe international financial organizations. Civil society has organized important actions worldwide proposing the total cancellation of the poorest countries' debts. However, international financial organizations like the World Bank and the

International Monetary Fund together with the countries of the Group of Seven have renegotiated these debts imposing severe adjustment programs that, far from benefitting the population, have impoverished it even more.

Until today, civil society's actions have not had sufficient impact to dissuade either the governments who have negotiated or the international institutions from imposing so many restrictions when they renegotiate debts. As long as the problem of excessive indebtedness is not resolved, the fruits of development will not be enjoyed by the populace, and everything will remain good intentions.

In this context, Canada's role is interesting: as a member of the G-7, it is in solidarity with World Bank and IMF policies, but on the other hand, Canadian NGOs work decisively to fight poverty in Latin American countries.

Citizens' movements have also worked arduously in solving problems common to all countries, such as the degradation of the environment and poverty—both intimately linked—and for that reason their proposals aim to attack them jointly. These issues began to be studied in the 1970s as the result of worldwide concern over what was perceived as an ongoing environmental crisis that was destroying the ecological bases for sustainability, particularly given chemical, bacteriological and biological warfare and the irrational privatization of natural resources.

In the 1970s, Latin America suffered the first impacts of the dominant economic development model characterized by unregulated industrial growth that caused high levels of air, water and soil pollution, deforestation, damage to biodiversity, erosion, desertification and the loss of fertility in the soil due to the

use of techniques that wore out agricultural land.

Environmental problems have become a concern for civil society and international organizations like the United Nations Environmental Program, leading them to try to find alternatives for sustainable development in the context of increasing social and environmental deterioration. They have made proposals of two kinds: first, that conditions and potential for sustainable ecosys-

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tems be generated along with economic development. This obviously would imply a change in the world's economy that would mean changing the way the main highly polluting companies produce. This seems quite difficult to achieve given free-market, competitive market conditions.

Secondly, it is necessary to change people's vision of environmental problems so that they become part of their day-to-day activities. Civil society also has an important role to play in creating awareness and educating the public about this.

As the Canadian experience has shown, the effective application of environmental laws requires not only the organization and participation of local communities and environmental groups, but also a broad dissemination of ideas and understanding of the problems involved.

Undoubtedly, new technologies are a very important issue as well as a characteristic trait of globalization. But they become particularly important when we look at the way young people experience the effects of their use. Nevertheless, young people's massive use of the computer sciences has not been sufficiently studied, nor have the enormous changes that they imply for future generations in matters of employment, education, etc.

In Latin America, this takes on particular importance because access to training in new technologies is not available to everyone; even the use of personal computers and Internet access is still quite limited. On the other hand, the incorporation of new technologies into work reduces the number of jobs available.

#### HUMAN RIGHTS, CULTURAL DIVERSITY AND INDIGENOUS PEOPLES

The study of human rights would have no reason for being if women were not included. Their rights have gradually been recognized by the international community, but it was not until 1994 that the International Convention to Eradicate Violence against Women was formalized, obliging signatory countries to regularly report back on the concrete actions they were taking with regard to the problem. In Mexico, work has been done to establish legislative reference points, a process that has generated a permanent conflict about how to deal with the dichotomy between the public and the private. For this reason, gender aspects of legislation requires a profound analysis.

Currently there is a broad discussion about culture and development in

the twentieth century, evident in the literature in applied anthropology and in some proposals that have come out of the new global situation. The debate is very important given that migration, new technologies and communications not only change most people's lives very rapidly, particularly those of indigenous peoples, but these changes also advance more rapidly than the implementation of anthropologists' proposals. To analyze all this, highly theoretically and practically experienced international and inter-cultural teams are needed.

Along these same general lines, people have discussed not only the economic and social changes that have come about because of globalization, but also the gap between rich and poor—both within and among countries—that this has caused. Without a doubt, the result is an increasing number of people who are excluded, particularly among indigenous groups, and who continue to be divested of their resources and knowledge.

Globalization has affected them decisively since it thwarts their customs by imposing a lifestyle that counters local traditions, causing cultural and environmental imbalances. The free market sees indigenous peoples as a problem that should be managed intelligently, given that it considers them an obstacle to development. The case of Chiapas is exemplary: Chiapas is a region with enormous natural wealth where indigenous peoples try to defend their territory from invasion and their natural resources from depredation.

In that sense, globalization should be reevaluated and its negative effects and the uncertainty it has generated about the conservation of cultures and indigenous rights halted. Rethinking globalization implies changing its prac-

tices in order to aid in creating positive processes in which the autonomy of these native peoples would obviously have to be respected. This suggests a different world order that would include a new relationship with indigenous peoples, nation-states and corporate elites.

Globalization has not only had negative effects. We should also point out its impact on the communications media, particularly in their dissemination

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of indigenous peoples' demands. The constant struggle of indigenous peoples for their rights is not new. However, alongside globalization there has been a kind of "transnationalization" of indigenous struggles in Latin America and a growth of the number of ethnic demands, which in turn made it possible to create a great network of multicultural cities that are jointly able to demand their rights.

It is paradoxical that when we speak of cultural diversity, we do not refer to the Canadian experience, where an enormous amount of work has been done in favor of indigenous peoples' rights and which has applied a multicultural policy over the last 30 years, one reason it identifies profoundly with Latin America.

Canada has a multicultural policy because of its many waves of immigrants, particularly beginning in the early 1960s.

However, this policy has not been free of controversy. The indigenous question in Canada is part of that multicultural debate, and it is interesting to note that the First Peoples of North America have suffered from a series of political, economic and social disadvantages both before and after the creation of Canadian federalism. This has turned them into a vulnerable group in constant struggle for their rights. These peoples, together with the different groups of immigrants who have gradually come on the scene, are forms of cultural diversity and part of the human assets that have developed Canada. However, their struggle for achieving more equitable political representation vis-à-vis the rest of the population has been difficult. The Canadian experience seems very important to the indigenous peoples of Latin America, not only with regard to their incorporation into daily life, but also with regard to the respect for their customs.

Without a doubt, recently civil society has developed globally and is faced with a great task: the solution of environmental, economic and social problems, among others. Seemingly, its greatest challenge, however, is dynamically keeping up with the problems derived from what we today call globalization. **MM**

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#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> This was the central theme of the seminar "Globalization, Civil Society and Citizens' Movements in Latin America and Canada," jointly organized by the Mexico chapter of CALACS, the Autonomous Metropolitan University, the Canadian Embassy in Mexico and the State of Mexico College in November 2000. This seminar brought together researchers, public officials, social leaders and activists from Latin America and Canada to look at civil society's role given the challenge of globalization from their different perspectives. In this article, we describe some of the main ideas expressed in those working sessions, as well as the most important conclusions.