Economic integration and human rights

In their discussions on economic integration, governments, the trade sector and financial institutions have excluded the critical link between trade and human rights. Their focus is on the flow of capital in common markets, neglecting to take up the citizenship rights for the people experiencing the process of regional and global integration.

Activists and representatives of civil society, in contrast, stress that 'this debate cannot and should not remain restricted to discussions on the inclusion or non-inclusion of the so-called ‘social clauses’ in trade agreements. The free trade-based developmental model is itself in check. Themes such as poverty, social disparities and the environment must be at the heart of discussions' (Roque, 2001).

During the 1990s, civil society organizations played a fundamental role in raising such issues in domestic public policies. Internationally they have lobbied for greater awareness of citizenship rights in treaties, agreements, and various programmes involving UN member countries. Their concern has been to reverse social exclusion and to decrease poverty.

The role of civil society

In recent meetings of international trade institutions, which took place in 1998 and 1999, in Montreal, Seattle and Davos, as well as in the World Bank meeting...
in Washington (April, 2000), the joint meeting of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank in Prague (September, 2000), and recently the Third Summit of the Americas (Quebec, April, 2001) and the Genoa’s G8 meeting, civil society organizations have advocated the need to change the social debate on the future of the global governance. The final reports of the civil society organizations call for a different paradigm, which would place values of social solidarity, racial, gender and social equality and environmental protection above the narrow vision of economic efficiency. The World Social Forum, held in Porto Alegre in January, 2001 and February, 2002, is a major step ahead in the formulation, by civil society, of alternatives and strategies at a continental and world level.

The political agenda of civil society organizations goes further. The documents adopted by the United Nations and ratified by most countries have been strategic tools in the fight for human rights at both a national and international level. There is a general consensus among civil society organizations that the distribution of income and wealth in countries has to be integral to economic integration. Acceptable standards in terms of labour legislation are necessary to ensure rights already sanctioned by all countries.

**Human rights as a condition for an alternative world order**

Civil society has been playing a fundamental role in expanding the concept of human rights by means of political action in UN conferences, particularly during the 1990s. In the UN Conferences on Environment and Development (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), Human Rights (Vienna, 1993), Population and Development (Cairo, 1994), Social Development (Copenhagen, 1995), Habitat (Istanbul, 1996) and the Women’s Conference (Beijing, 1995), the platform of human rights has been widened and redefined, thanks largely to the action of NGOs, to include issues such as health, domestic violence, reproduction, gender, race and ethnicity, and the environment. These new social actors have formed well-structured national, regional and international networks, and in spite of the diversity existing among them, have succeeded in drawing up international strategies based on common ground (Sikkink, 2000).

The inclusion of human rights as a central point of the development community indicates the deep changes this concept has undergone since the *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* in 1948. Restricted at first to civil and political rights and later to social rights, during the last decades and as a result of the political action of various agents, particularly women’s movements, the language of human rights is being expanded to include new historical subjects and dimensions of life (Pitanguy, 1998).

There is a gap between the international human rights language, the governmental rhetoric, and the actual protection of these rights. The size of this gap is related to social inequalities, power and politics, and results from tensions, struggles and alliances between national and international agents. Therefore, a discussion of human rights has to refer to the historical process that enables the declaration and the consolidation of such rights. They begin to exist from a social standpoint once they are stated in national laws and international conventions, thus shaping the scope of formal citizenship, which does not always coincide with its effective exercise. The borderline between both spaces, formal and effective, is delineated by political action and therefore subject to both progress and recession.

**Human rights in Mercosur**

Mercosur was established in 1991, under the Treaty of Asunción, based on free trade agreements involving Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay. Subsequently, Chile and Bolivia were incorporated as expanded members. Mercosur is the most important commercial initiative of Latin America. The countries that make up this market bring together an economy of approximately US$1 trillion and a population of around 230 million. This market is intended to eliminate customs tariffs, ensure the free circulation of production factors (capital and labour) and to establish a common commercial policy in the south of the continent.