

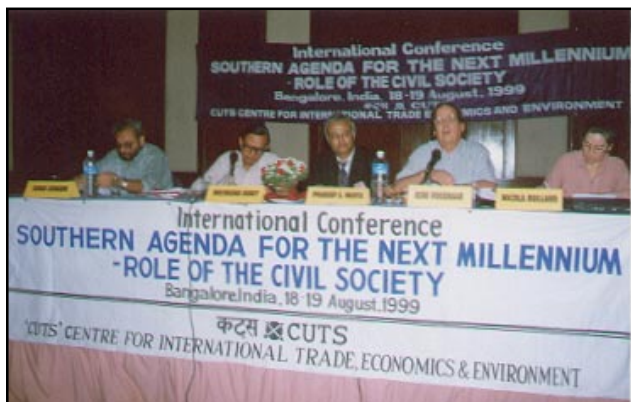
**INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
SOUTHERN AGENDA FOR THE NEXT MILLENNIUM
— ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY
BANGALORE, 18-19 AUGUST 1999
A BRIEF REPORT**

Civil society organisations from G-15 and other developing countries urged their governments to involve them in a meaningful way while preparing official positions for the forthcoming ministerial conference of the World Trade Organisation in November at Seattle, USA.

This was the central message, which came out at a 2-day NGO conference at Bangalore on 18-19 August. The conference: “Southern Agenda for the next Millennium—Role of the Civil Society” was organised by the Jaipur-based CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment, a leading NGO working on international trade issues, and striving for social justice and economic equity within and across borders. The conference was organised with the support of The John D and Catherine T MacArthur Foundation, Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, HIVOS, the Swedish Society for Nature Conservation, UNCTAD etc.



This conference brought together delegates from several NGOs and research institutions of the G-15 and other developing countries to discuss the contribution that civil society organizations could make to the Seattle Round deliberations, to safeguard the interests of citizens in these, and other developing countries. Two international organisations: Consumers International and International South Group Network also participated.



The event was organised close on the heels of an official G-15 trade ministers meeting in Bangalore, which could not arrive at common positions on several contentious issues. They were meeting to consider a common negotiating strategy to be adopted at the Seattle Round talks later this year.

In the deliberations, there was a general agreement that the WTO in its current form was far from

servicing the best interests of the citizens of developing countries. Based on the theoretical foundation that free trade benefits all those who participate in it, the reality of the system since it was initiated five years ago suggests that countries who advocate free trade rarely practice it. More so instead of evolving into an organization based on principle, it had become one in which every agreement was the result of intense conflict between countries or groups of countries, which eventually concluded on the basis of the bargaining power of countries concerned. In fact this is a process, which has put the developing countries as a group at an inherent disadvantage.



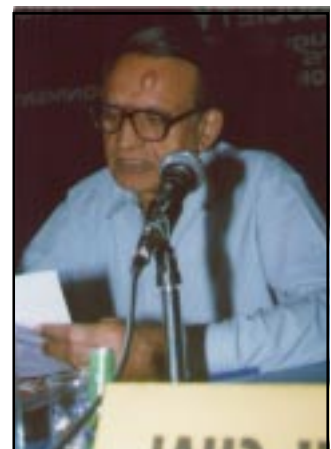
Questions were raised about the merits of holding a new round while this unequal bargaining situation prevailed. However, there was agreement that abstinence was worse than participation, and the best way to go about it was by a process of strategic coordination between developing countries. It was for developing countries to seek out their common interests and stand firm as a group to assert those interests in the new round. To make strategic coordination effective, the effort needs to be made at two levels. The governments of these countries should work together with some perception of national interest in mind. This would need to be complemented by collaborations with civil society organizations, who would add the elements

pertaining to equity and social justice. This combination would then be in a position to formulate a strategic positive agenda that could be put forward at the Seattle Round.

One factor in favour of this approach is that the WTO itself is still an evolving organization. Historically speaking, it has been shaped by the conflicts between members and their subsequent resolution. Given this, the concerted efforts of a large group of developing countries should bear fruit in terms of agreements based on these efforts being absorbed by the organization. The great challenge facing governments and civil society organizations is to find sufficient commonality of interests, and develop mutually acceptable and consistent positions on the various agenda items in Seattle.

“The civil society is now in the mainstream of international economic policy making, and is a powerful force in the developed world. Thus, if the southern governments ignore their own civil society, it would only deprive them of an opportunity of garnering the necessary political backing for their official agenda,” said Pradeep S Mehta, Secretary General of Consumer Unity & Trust Society (CUTS).

Former Foreign Secretary of India, Muchkund Dubey, who chaired the opening session, noted that the people had a right to protect their interests and called for flexibility in the negotiating processes to allow for the same.



Yash Tandon of the International South Group Network, an international NGO with offices in Harare, Manila and elsewhere, called for a complete relook of the existing iniquitous agreements. “The acceptance of divergent development strategies is crucial, because development cannot be viewed in simple terms of per capita income,” said Tandon.

“TRIPs does not allow countries to seek a share of benefits from patented biodiversity since there was no provision requiring patentees to disclose country of origin of any biological materials,” said Suman Sahai, Executive Director of Gene Campaign a Delhi-based NGO.



In a message to the Conference on the issue of linkages between trade and social as well as environmental issues, the noted trade theorist Prof. Jagdish Bhagwati elaborated, “It is time to raise our voices and call a spade a spade. The WTO is not for the developed countries’ agendas, for them to put into it whatever they choose for their own self-serving or misdirected altruism, by pretending that whatever they do is somehow “trade-related.” Enough is enough.”

The Summary of the Conference has also noted that the experience with the Agreement on Agriculture has been in virtual contradiction to the expectations of southern countries. It has, in effect,



forced them to stop supporting their own farmers, while opening up their markets to the heavily subsidised producers from the north. This is of particular concern for countries threatened with food shortages, because food aid programmes are declining in significance.

R. P. Agarwal, Joint Secretary, Ministry of Commerce, Government of India in his dinner speech emphasised how developing countries were being denied their legitimate rights of “special and differential treatment”. To add salt to the injury he added that the developed countries were also backtracking on their own commitments by finding loopholes in instruments in the area of agriculture, textiles and clothing, antidumping, etc. He congratulated the civil society for coming together at this crucial juncture and for affirming their support to the stand of developing countries.



“It was very encouraging to hear that the Government of India believes in working with the civil society in India on trade policy issues, and that it will like to support them concretely”, noted Jayen Chellum, General Secretary, ACIM, Mauritius and Executive Committee member of Consumers International, London.

Pledging support to the views expressed at this Conference, Consumers International, an



international federation of 247 consumer organisations in 111 countries of the world, launched a campaign saying: “No to a new round before an assessment of the existing WTO accords.”

The Conference summary has been endorsed by around 24 organisations and is being widely disseminated for gathering further support. This Summary has been put for endorsement on: www.cuts-india.org, the web site of CUTS.