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08

Civil Society and Regional Multilateralism

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Introduction and Message from the FIM President

FIM Forum 2008 was held in Montréal, Québec on February 8 and 9. Thirty-two invited participants from twenty-four countries, the majority from civil society organizations and including four academics contributed to a rich and enriching two days of dialogue, brainstorming, and fortification of the FIM network.

The focus of this year's Forum was civil society and regional multilateralism. In its deliberations, the FIM Board realized that there is a growing tendency within international civil society to concentrate on regional multilateral bodies, a group which, until recently, has often been ignored. As a result, it was observed that virtually no analysis of the success or failure of these efforts has been undertaken to date. Thus, early in 2007, we commissioned two practitioner case studies that reflected the advocacy efforts of two regional groupings of civil society organizations.

These case studies set the stage for the Forum. Alma Espino, Director of the Economics Institute, Faculty of Economics and Administration at the Republic University, Uruguay presented her study entitled: Impacting *MERCOSUR's Gender Policies: Experiences, Lessons Learned, and the Ongoing Work of Civil Society in Latin America*. Alma examined the impact of activities of the women's movement, NGOs, and unionist women in the Latin American region on gender policies of the Southern Common Market (MERCOSUR).

Marlene Ramirez, Secretary General of the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia (AsiaDHRRA) presented her study: *AsiaDHRRA and ASEAN: A Case Study on the Process of Civil Society Engagement with a Regional Intergovernmental Organization*. Marlene's case study explored the experiences of AsiaDHRRA in engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in pro-poor policy advocacy and program cooperation. The strategies employed, constraints, gains, challenges faced, and lessons learned illustrated in these two excellent case examples brought to life the critical issue of how CSOs can more effectively engage with regional multilateral bodies.

In addition to the case studies presentations were made by: Mohammed Tahseen, Executive Director, South-Asian Partnership, Pakistan on the project *Building Bridges: Engaging Civil Society from Muslim countries and communities with the multilateral sphere*; Ezra Mbogori, former Executive Director of MWENGO, Zimbabwe on Civil Society and a Pan Africa Parliament; and Wore Gana Seck, President of CONGAD, Senegal who described the creation and purposes of REPAOC (the Network of NGO Platforms in Central and West Africa).

I invite you to read our Forum report prepared by esteemed Rapporteur General, Cyril Ritchie of FIIG, Geneva. Cyril captures the richness of the discussion and the dedication and enthusiasm of Forum participants. Most critically, in my view, was the sense that civil society practitioners, now, more than ever, need a place and a space to reflect, to dream, to restore and regenerate. We have all now returned to various parts of our, ever shrinking, globe taking home in our hearts and minds new ideas, fresh visions, and a strengthened solidarity. Indeed Forum 2008 has inspired new FIM projects designed to help build the capacity of civil society to impact the multilateral system as we work together toward democratization of global governance.

Nigel Martin
May 20, 2008
Montréal, Canada

FIM FORUM 2008

« CIVIL SOCIETY AND REGIONAL MULTILATERALISM »

Cyril Ritchie, Rapporteur General

1. The Forum International de Montréal (FIM) has been constituted since 1998 as a rather unusual type of institution. It is non-governmental; it is a think-tank; it is intellectually entrepreneurial; it is widely international; and it is not only committed to but practices ethical and political precepts of cultural diversity and gender equality. It is also proudly modest, thanks in large part to the exemplary tone set by its Chairman Rajesh TANDON, and its President Nigel Martin.

2. Since FIM first made its international mark, by serving as the executive secretariat of the World Civil Society Conference (WOCSOC, Montreal 1999), it has gained recognition for the quality and pertinence of its analyses of international relations as far as concerns interactions between non-governmental and intergovernmental institutions and constituencies. It has positively influenced the international institutional ballet, wherein CSOs/NGOs valiantly make two steps forward, and governments – oblivious to their own higher interest, in the view of this observer – impose one step back (and two back if they can get away with it!)

3. FIM'S record of more-or-less-annual Forums thus gave it good grounding for expanding its 2008 version well beyond the more usual UN circles to encompass a range of lesser-known, or more circumscribed, international but particularly regional multilateral institutions. The 2008 Forum also had the « temerity » to ask itself « What are the priority issues/arenas/processes within which we can collectively make measurable advances in the next 12 to 18 months. » To judge the results : read on !

4. In his opening remarks, Rajesh Tandon (Chair of the FIM Board) recalled the exceptional character of FIM as a rallying point and focus of analysis of civil society. Today's changing economic and political trends placed new emphasis on regional cooperation and its simultaneously national and global implications. This 2008 FIM Forum marked ten years of fruitful encounters among practitioners and academics committed to the promotion of multilateralism and this year's deliberations would certainly add a new dimension to what was clearly a valuable civil society arena, open and participative.

5. In further opening remarks, Nigel Martin (President and CEO of FIM) outlined the objectives of the Forum. In addition to the focus on links between civil society and regional intergovernmental processes, there would be a look ahead at what issues would face global and regional civil society over the next 12-18 months, and what approaches might be prioritized to cope with major upcoming problems. He asked for optimum interchange among the participants, given the high levels of competence and experience around the table.

6. After participants had presented themselves, a first series of workshops considered what could be the major challenges requiring civil society action in the short term. Highlights emerging from these were (in no order of priority)

- There are unnecessary feelings of competition among CSOs, including for finance, partially based on absence of common language or understanding

- Capacity development is essential, notably to learn from good and bad practices throughout the diverse civil society community ; and also to better coordinate our responses to global and regional issues

- There is need to increase the understanding of governments of the complexity and competence of civil society, to enhance civil society cooperation with multilateral institutions

- Mechanisms are needed to link civil society actions from the local to the national to the regional to the global level

- Can civil society influence US unilateralism?

- How can civil society demonstrate its legitimacy and accountability, particularly faced with criticism from some governments and business entities?

- Climate change is a future – indeed present – area of global crisis and cannot be dealt with by governments alone without greater involvement of civil society organizations

- Only if civil society is fully involved in the Monterrey Financing for Development process will it be possible to move more firmly towards implementation of the MDGs

- Can civil society have an influence on the Olympic Movement to ensure that democratic principles are applied in and around the hosting of each successive Olympic Games?

- Is civil society in the North adequately supporting civil society in the South as it strives to achieve higher levels of democracy and social justice

- How can civil society have greater access to the regional and global economic policy decision-making processes?

7. **Marlene Ramirez** (Executive Director, Asian Partnership for the Development of Human Resources in Rural Asia – Asia DHRRA) presented a case study (full text available on the FIM website) on engaging the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) in pro-poor policy advocacy and programme cooperation. CS interaction with ASEAN was described as thorny, since ASEAN was and remains an association of predominantly autocratic governments, little versed in interaction with development and advocacy organizations. Although established in 1967, the first official recognition by ASEAN of a formal CSO platform only took place in 2005. The long slow process of engagement had certainly enhanced Asian civil society solidarity, though there were problems of keeping every interested organization informed and participating. There were many Asian CSO networks dealing with specific themes but many could come together to engage ASEAN on issues of concern to their particular constituency. Of course ASEAN governments varied

widely in their openness to – even understanding of – CSOs, and the various regional CSO platforms were working with national CSOs to boost their visibility.

8. **Alma Espino** (Director of the Economics Institute, Republic University, Uruguay) presented a case study (full text available on the FIM website) on the impact of CSOs, notably trade union and women's organizations, on gender policies of MERCOSUR. Men and women are not equally affected by trade integration agreements such as MERCOSUR, because of traditional hierarchical gender patterns. CSOs were promoting concern for social relations and the issues of everyday family life in the macropolitical decision-making process. MERCOSUR was created in 1991 and it was only in 2005 that formal rules were adopted to enable CS participation in meetings and in agenda formulation. There was evident progress in advancing women's interest and cohesion, but still a very long way to go to overcome weaknesses - organizational and conceptual – in women's organizations and government attitudes. Women's and other social movements were increasingly effective as change agents, and would continue to focus on the full democratization of multilateral decision making.

9. Both case studies echoed and illustrated concerns raised in the earlier discussion on major challenges, for example

- The techniques used to bring together the diverse trends and sectors of civil society to make common cause, going beyond any one set of interests

- The often-despairing slowness of the change of attitude of government officials and (self -) important politicians, who see CSOs as « interfering » rather than bringing competent input to the process

- The growing awareness in civil society of the interlinkage of social, economic and political issues and therefore the need to confront/challenge/assist governments as they deal with the choices facing society

- The need to share among CSOs the results of both good and bad practices, *and to learn from them.*

10. **Mohammed Tahseen** (Executive Director, South-Asian Partnership, Pakistan) presented a project entitled « Building Bridges: Engaging Civil Society from Muslim countries and communities with the multilateral sphere ». The project had been born at the 2007 FIM conference, when it was pointed out that the Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) - a body of 56 governments – did not have a civil society constituency. Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iraq and Iran are the main funders of the OIC. OIC groups extremely rich and extremely poor countries, and its mandate includes povery eradication, though it is not clear if adequate consequential strategies have been adopted.

    A group within FIM had undertaken to explore the possibility of CS relationships with OIC, though there were difficulties in obtaining relevant documentation. FIM had commissioned a study of engagement models, carried out in 2007 by Motoyo Kamiya (study available on the FIM website). The group, now a steering committee, hoped to have some relationship with the OIC Summit in Dakar on March 13-14, 2008, including a pre-summit two-day CSO gathering. Issues that should be on the table could be poverty, justice and democracy. A suggestion was made that OIC, as a

« sub-global » organization, might be brought into dialogue with other sub-globals, such as La Francophonie or the Commonwealth.

11. Some general considerations were advanced by Forum participants in the light of the experiences shared.

a. It was often too easy for a rich regional multilateral organization (including regional development banks) to « out-manœuvre » CSOs by overwhelming their representatives on consultative bodies with information, hospitality or travel favours. This also raised questions of how far CSOs should compromise to obtain some results. It also raises the question as to what constitutes « compromise ».

b. The policies adopted by regional multilateral organizations were often unknown or unrecognized or perhaps just uninteresting to national bureaucrats in the member countries.

c. CSOs might focus more advocacy effort on persuading regional multilaterals to adopt higher standards of transparency and information availability.

d. CSOs should maintain an enduring and consistent pro-active stance in all consultative processes with intergovernmental structures; otherwise the risk was high that our advocacy and realism would become blunted over time by the more permanent IGO bureaucracies. We should never forget that too many world problems required the urgent insistency of committed CSOs if governments were to be moved to action.

12. On the second day of the Forum, a second series of Workshops considered the challenges identified earlier (see paragraph 6), with a view to seeing where priorities would lie. Highlights of these were (in no order of priority) :

- Capacity development of CSOs should focus on communication and coalition building.

- Forthcoming 2008 events that were opportunities for civil society mobilization included the ECOSOC Development Cooperation Forum in July; the Accra Review of Aid Effectiveness in Septembe ; the Doha Conference on the Monterrey FFD process in November/December ; the UNFCCC COP14 in Poznan in December. These will bring to the forefront issues of basic concern to civil society: the MDGs, financing for development, post-Kyoto agreements on climate change.

- Civil society needs to have space created in existing and new multilateral structures, and should build upon existing effective CS coalitions; principles of engagement by CSOs should be elaborated, again building on extensive experience similar to the case studies presented at this forum.

13. It became apparent that there was need for CSOs to seek greater interaction with the many actors of the political process: politicians, bureaucrats, legislators, parties, parliamentary committees on democracy, on accountability, on budgeting. This reinforced the call for capacity development and strengthened coalitions, being constantly proactive on issues. CS coalitions of course need specialists on issues but most certainly also specialists on process. The fact that some issues – gender equity, democracy, reproductive rights – are declared « sensitive » by some

governments should never mean that they therefore be taken off the civil society and political agendas. Indeed, such issues should precisely be given greater focus.

14. An underlying question that surfaced intermittently was the relation between on the one hand, the reasoned engagement process in multilateral events (G8 being a particular example) by organized civil society ; and on the other the civil society elements that choose – or are only interested in – street protests that may encompass violence. In these circumstances, moral and political dilemmas had to be confronted and resolved, for there was the risk – or the expectation? – that the motives of the two different CSO parties were seen by the multilateral organizers as interlinked, even interdependent. Yet the growing « diplomatic » capacity of competent CSOs should not be dissipated or diluted in maelstrom politics. Concomitantly, rural farmers – to take one example – may feel in their hearts that mass street protest is the only way they can gain public recognition of their living conditions of poverty and neglect. Another current acute issue is the acceptance or refusal by ACP countries of the proposed EU Economic Partnership Agreements: some African civil society organizations feel it « right » for their populations to reject the EPAs, while some African governments feel it « right » for their populations to benefit from the EPAs. Does this pose an insoluble dilemma for civil society, which cannot be everything to everybody?

15. Another fundamental dilemma for civil society is the limited political space for CSOs in so many countries. Some governments sought to coopt CSOs, some sought to stifle them, some sought to denigrate them. Others simply denied their legitimacy and/or their access to public visibility. These examples underlined the urgency for civil society to be more strategic, more focused, more realistic, leading to a reiteration of the importance of coalitions first and foremost at regional levels, and of a deeper knowledge (including perhaps an updated data bank) on existing principles and practices of engagement.

16. **Ezra Mbogori** (former Executive Director of MWENGO, Zimbabwe) presented a paper on Civil Society and a Pan Africa Parliament, explaining that many African CSOs were concerned with effective entry points to new, or newly reconstructed, African institutions: the African Union, the Pan Africa Parliament, AU.ECOSOCC, NEPAD, the African Peer Review Mechanism. After its construction in 2002, the AU set up the Pan-Africa Parliament as an advisory body which might in due course evolve into an African legislative body. The Parliament is based in Midrand, South Africa, which poses general and local access problems. The Parliament's President, Gertrude Mongella, has demonstrated great openess to civil society. Direct elections to the Parliament are foreseen for 2010, as a *possible* key step towards the formation of an African Union government. The main AU body mandated to relate to civil society is ECOSOCC but it has not yet taken firm shape, which may indicate political reluctance to genuinely open up the AU to civil society input.

    The AU has to contend with, or comprehend, or encompass a very large number of regional, sub-regional or sub-sub-regional economic agreements.

17. **Wore Gana Seck** (President of CONGAD, Senegal) described the creation and purposes of REPAOC (the Network of NGO Platforms in Central and West Africa). Campaigns have been initiated or are planned in such areas as aid effectiveness, the environment, debt, aid, democracy and support for NEPAD. The initiative was generating solidarity, information exchange, local expertise, advocacy tools and non-

governmental diplomacy skills. The tasks are spread among the members on a decentralized basis. More information is available on www.ngo-ong.org.

18. Participants listed some follow up concerns for their own future work :

- codes of conduct for CSOs, with monitoring mechanisms
- codes of conduct for multilateral institutions, with monitoring mechanisms
- principles and practices of CS engagement (and disengagement) with multilateral institutions – practices must include voice, liaison mechanisms, access, self-determination, accountability
- enhancing capacity for non-governmental diplomacy work
- information exchange on multilateral organizations of specific relevance in each region
- cohesive action by African CSOs to activate the AU.ECOSOCC
- priority on CSO capacity development
- solidarity with CSOs in countries subject to ongoing conflict, accompanied by such measures of support as are possible
- bringing the experience of civil society engagement, commitment and competence to the United Nations System, to reinforce the Charter reference to « We the peoples » and to underscore its full meaning
- influencing the public view of government service as a worthy career
- establishing indicators of good governance that would be acceptable to broad areas of civil society
- scrutiny of the practices of major business entities, including those of China and India, in their corporate activities in developing countries
- greater attention to the accountability of CSOs – to whom, in what way, with what results, with what follow up – with better definition of the *demos* that is our constituency.

19. The FIM Board was requested to take all the above points under advisement, in order to consider practical follow up.

20. Thanks were expressed by Nigel Martin to all participants, to Diane Demers as facilitator, to Heather MacKenzie as FIM Programme Consultant, and to Caroline Alcaraz as FIM Office and Programme Administrator.

21. Concluding comments from the Rapporteur General :

    a. Did FIM's 2008 Forum achieve its goals, including those alluded to in paragraph 3 above?

Well, Yes and No.

But more YES than No.

The quality and seriousness of the participants was itself a guarantee that many of the organizers' expectations would be fulfilled. The case studies and other papers circulated will provide solid ground for the drawing up of new reference texts and standards, for putting new capacity-development plans into action, and for demonstrating to even the more recalcitrant government minister or official that « competent civil society policy input enhances competent governmental policy output ».

b. Of course the blasé or the antagonistic observer may simply dismiss all this as just the effluence of yet another word-factory. But no, Vehemently No. If we don't talk, we don't achieve understanding; we don't achieve agreement; we don't achieve results. The talk-shop that is FIM contributes to international good-sense and good-practice, and thus eventually to good international relations, the basis of good policies.

c. FIM Forum 2008 thus represented, in its context and with the practical follow-up determined by the FIM Board, two steps forward, and zero steps back!

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