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## **The Blue Mountain Project: Converging Agriculture, Environment and Human Rights Networks**

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The Blue Mountain Project brought together a mix of activists and policy specialists working toward democracy, accountability and participation of the international institutions. Its challenge, as well as its success, was its comprehensive approach to strengthen the role of the United Nations and to question the ways in which international financial institutions and the WTO undermine the protection of human rights and environment. The project sought to provide more strategic ways to deal with agriculture, trade, human rights, development, security and the environment. This case study offers some reflection on what was learned and what could be done in the future.

### **The Evolving Political Context**

Over the last 15 years, civil society has been heavily engaged in global governance debates relating to strengthening the UN and multilateral treaties. There were numerous opportunities, including the anniversaries of the UN conferences and the UN Bretton Woods System. At the 1999 “Battle of Seattle,” civil society groups organized around the WTO ministerial to publically criticize the impacts of trade liberalization. In 2000, the UN General Assembly organized the Millennium Summit out of which the eight Millennium Development Goals were adopted, including those related to hunger and poverty, health, education, gender equality, environmental sustainability, HIV/AIDs and global partnerships to achieve measureable results. The UNGA evaluated progress towards the MDGs in 2005 (and is also set to review them in September 2010). In 2003, at the UN “Financing for Development” conference, governments committed to better coordination among the different multilateral agencies and governments to meet development goals. These political moments have created important windows for civil society groups to better engage in global governance debates.

At the same time, other events and processes altered the political landscape that shaped those discussions. In 2001, the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City resulted in a shift to security and anti-terrorism efforts that continue to frame U.S. policy and that of the much of the rest of the world. The geopolitical landscape also shifted with emerging players such as Brazil, India, South Africa and China playing a more prominent role in global governance. New negotiating blocs formed at the UN and global trade negotiations have stalled as developing countries have sought different ways to gain leverage for different purposes. Numerous regional and global civil society networks formed alongside these trends.

## **Creating the Blue Mountain Network**

In the late 1990s the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) began working more closely with key partners such as the Forum International de Montreal (FIM), the African Women's Development and Communications Network (FEMNET), the Instituto Brasileiro de Analises Sociais e Economicas (IBASE), Rights & Democracy (R&D) and the North-South Institute (NSI). Together, the groups began to plan for a campaign to redress the imbalance in governance resulting in the undermining of the UN and a strengthening of the WTO. In May of 2000, IATP met with these groups and others in Bellagio, Italy to brainstorm around how to build a peoples' movement for democratic global governance. As part of that brainstorm, groups organized different thematic clusters. One group reviewed human rights, international law and institutions. Another focused on the UN versus the Bretton Woods institutions to flesh out the conflict between the international human rights framework and economic policy. Another reviewed the notion of individual rights versus community rights. Participants discussed civil society's lack of access to information and transparent economic policies as an underlying theme. They also considered global financial architecture and ways to strengthen corporate accountability and market checks and balances. They reviewed the mechanisms for global governance, including multilateral negotiations with dispute settlement bodies, international courts and high level summits, as well as political arrangements that have a direct impact on human rights and environmental concerns.

In 2002, FIM organized "Global Governance 2002," an international conference that brought participants from diverse spheres, including officials from governments and international institutions, as well as civil society groups, to discuss what democratic global governance should resemble. It included 450 participants from over 70 countries. This international space solidified initial thinking toward the need to have different networks working together to effect change.

In 2003, IATP, FIM, IBASE and NSI planned a retreat at the Blue Mountain Center in the Adirondack Mountains in New York. The purpose of the retreat was to map out a campaign to restore the precedence of international human rights law over international trade and finance policies. The vision was broad, and participants invited to the retreat brought varying levels of expertise. They included specialists on trade and investment reform, the WTO, the international financial institutions, as well as other engaged in international development, labor, gender, human rights, peace and security. Out of the retreat the "Blue Mountain Global Governance Network" was born with three primary objectives:

- Seek transparency, accountability and enforcement of democratic voice and voting structures in all processes and institutions
- Defend the right to sovereignty (i.e., that one size does not fit all) and
- Emphasize the social and economic opportunity costs of militarism

Different point persons were identified to monitor different processes at the international level and to share information with the rest of the network. Other regional point persons were also identified from Africa, Latin America, Asia-Pacific, Europe and North America to share strategic information and build capacity on the ground with government officials, other CSOs and the media. The five thematic areas identified to advance mutual objectives included the intersection of financial institution policies; trade policy; human rights law; the regulation of TNCs; and disarmament, counter-terrorism and security. A defining factor for the vision of the network was that it would "ensure the information or political opportunity is cross-cutting across legal/institutional regimes and has 'transformative' potential."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Proceedings of the retreat on global governance at Blue Mountain Center, New York. November 20-23, 2003.

Another main component of the network was that it would develop legal strategies and interventions in intergovernmental processes. Researchers were identified to consider questions including:

1. What legal mechanisms exist to give precedence to human rights, labor, health and environmental protection?
2. Is there an ideal case to bring before an international court?
3. Does the Optional Protocol on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights have effective implementation mechanisms?
4. What treaties establish effective regimes in which trade and financial conditionalities are not invoked?
5. Which treaties ensure a role for civil society in their implementation?
6. What are strategic moments within official dialogues?
7. How can the social costs of the Washington Consensus be quantified and captured?
8. What alternative models for governance can be envisioned?
9. How can the role that TNCs play inside treaty negotiations and other international policymaking institutions be documented?
10. How have voluntary codes of conduct affected social and environmental conditions and are criminal sanctions available to punish corporate wrong-doing?

In 2004, IATP published an online Treaty Database to provide more information on the different global treaties and also to monitor U.S. participation in global affairs. In the same year, IATP, IBASE and FIM submitted a joint proposal to the Ford Foundation to develop new models and instruments to support good governance and collective action. The funding also supported “Global Democracy 2005, Civil Society Visions and Strategies,” which was organized by FIM (headed by Nigel Martin), working with the Blue Mountain Global Governance Network (facilitated by Kristin Dawkins at IATP). Participants met at McGill University to deepen their understanding of democratic global governance.

They also explored the potential for a “winnable” legal strategy to give the UN authority over economic institutions, giving priority to human rights, social development, environmental protection and peace. One day prior to that conference, a legal symposium was organized by the Blue Mountain Network. The symposium was entitled “The Hierarchy of International Law.” Again, the discussion centered on a) fundamental conflicts between trade and financial regimes versus human rights and economic agreements; b) legal mandates and institutional relationships; and c) subsidiarity versus sovereignty, the implications for national, regional local authorities and legal recourse for civil society when their rights are being violated. This symposium and the Global Governance 2005 conference were organized in part to feed into the September 2005 UN Millennium Summit, at which the UN General Assembly was to meet to review the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In 2006, IATP received funding from the Ford Foundation to continue with this initiative, with more attention being given to written outputs. At that time, however, project lead Kristin Dawkins left IATP. The original vision of the Blue Mountain Global Governance Network shifted a bit with her departure. First, the name of the project morphed into “Rebalancing Global Norms: A Project of Political and Legal Reform of the Multilateral System.” Second, its goals shifted to identify and build on experiences from NGO and social movement campaigns that successfully linked trade with other areas of policy and to support (rather than create) a cross-sectoral campaign for normative, institutional reform. A steering committee formed including IBASE, NSI, the Geneva office of the Institute for Governance and Sustainable Development in conjunction with the Graduate Institute of International Studies (GIIS). This group was identified to focus the project with some concrete outputs and strategies. FIM stayed connected but was not active in the last iteration of the steering committee at that time. Regular calls took place over the course of the next year.

In 2006 and 2007, IATP undertook a mapping exercise to show more concretely the tensions between global economic norms and other norms related to human rights, the environment and other areas of public interest. Plans were made to organize a meeting of legal experts, which took place in Geneva in March, 2007. For that meeting the mapping exercise included a series of short case studies to highlight norms in conflict. These norms ranged from water, health, information, food, biodiversity and other aspects of the environment. Participants included a mix of officials and civil society activists. Representatives of the International Commission of Jurists, OHCHR, UNEP, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, as well as the Bolivian ambassador to the WTO and the UN, were present. Civil society groups engaged in trade, investment and human rights advocacy also participated. These included IATP and the steering committee members, Public Services International, Amnesty International, IISD, the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance and the South African Human Rights NGO Network. Participants shared a common expertise relating to international law and common concerns to curtail the power of economic rules over social and environmental norms in different fields.

After the meeting, the Steering Committee also took some time to discuss future directions. One concern was flagged regarding the name of the project. This is due to the fact that “rebalancing” implies that the trade and investment rules embody norms. Even if they do, the title could imply that they are equal to the norms embodied in human rights and environmental agreements and this is the opposite assertion of the project. The other concern was that the project still had no mega-narrative to describe its context and purpose. The group agreed to work toward this with three short publications to highlight successful advocacy strategies (written by Maria Julia Oliva<sup>2</sup>); frame the RGN project (written by John Foster<sup>3</sup>); and explain how trade, investment and finance rules can undermine the environmental and human rights regimes (written by André du Plessis<sup>4</sup>). At that time the steering committee also hoped to develop a case study in a emerging thematic area such as biofuels, to show how a more balanced approach to development could create binding norms that would be supported by trade and investment rules. Unfortunately, due to lack of funding and capacity, this case study was never written.

In 2007, the Steering Committee met periodically to discuss a second legal experts meeting. In this process, the RGN project (formerly the Blue Mountain Global Governance Network) evolved again. Upon completing the publication of the different documents, IATP decided that in order to continue with the project, it would have to be more focused on food and agriculture and it would need to have a stronger advocacy component. The steering committee disbanded in 2007, and IATP began framing the project as “The Global Contract on Food and Agriculture.” The idea was not to create a new convention on food and agriculture, although that concept was briefly explored and dismissed, but to frame a new vision for global governance that would connect analysis and advocacy using food and agriculture as a lens. The premise was that trade and investment institutions are unable to respond appropriately to the food crisis and improve the global food system. Governments need to mark a radical departure from the way the world has been doing business and civil society needs to help pave the way. To build on this concept, IATP organized a meeting in New York City at the Ford Foundation in July, 2008 during the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. The organization disseminated copies of the research that had been done to date to a broad mix of people, many of whom had been actively engaged in the Blue Mountain Network, as well as others who were relatively new to the dialogue.

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<sup>2</sup> María Julia Oliva, “[New Global Contract: Promoting Human Rights and the Environment in Trade and Finance Rules](#),” IATP June 2008.

<sup>3</sup> John Foster, “[New Global Contract: A Framework for Rebalancing Global Norms](#),” IATP, June 2008.

<sup>4</sup> André de Plessis, “[New Global Contract: Values in Conflict: How Trade and Finance Rules Curtail Our Rights](#),” IATP, June 2008.

Participants concluded that some aspects of the global dynamic seemed to create new opportunities for thinking and advocacy across sectors in support of a new global contract in food and agriculture, including:

1. The coverage of international crises in the news;
2. The growing critique of the neoliberal model of globalization;
3. That economic power is no longer concentrated in rich countries (the emergence of China, Brazil, India, South Africa, as well as “dissident” states such as Bolivia, whose government is experimenting with a different economic approach);
4. Countries from the South are better informed about trade and investment negotiations. They have more alliances and groupings, smarter strategies;
5. Whereas they were largely absent before, rural development, health, employment, food security and climate are coming to the foreground as issues for consideration in economic policymaking;
6. New questions regarding the compatibility of WTO agreements and other multilateral obligations have emerged (e.g., IPCC and Copenhagen Protocol; language in the Rome Declaration on the food crisis) which open the door to better link international norms and macroeconomic policy;
7. In some cases, though not all, civil society has more ability to work with their governments and within institutional processes.

Challenges included:

1. Aggressive bilateral and regional trade deals are expanding;
2. Corporations have gained mobility and power;
3. The globalization of capital has gone hand in hand with the loss of institutional and governmental accountability (as well as political repression in certain countries);
4. While there is a growing representation from the Global South within the World Bank, there are still large gaps and uneven goals;
5. Civil society’s focus has been too much on the institutions themselves and not enough on people and the role of democratic governments;
6. The world’s resources are finite;
7. Immediate actions are needed, yet those of pushing for change need to stay focused on what sort of short-term actions will build towards the long-term vision and strategy that are needed.

Part of what came out in the discussion is that groups did not necessarily agree on how to define “global governance.” This, of course, was not resolved at the meeting but was noted as an important sticking point to future collaboration. Participants identified climate change and human rights treaties as two areas to link food and agriculture with strategic networking and collaboration as part of a “global contract” initiative. Potential venues where these issues could be advanced at the international level could include:

- International climate talks
- WTO agricultural negotiations
- National and international debates on regulatory structures and finance (i.e., CDM, Green Bonds, GPFAS, foreign assistance measures)
- Strategic UN meetings: UN FCC, FFD, Interagency Task Force on the Food Crisis, CSD
- Intergovernmental meetings such as the World Water Forum

As one follow-up activity, IATP, working with FIAN and EAA, organized a conference entitled “Confronting the Global Food Challenge” in Geneva in November 2008. The conference included UN and WTO officials, human rights activists, development experts, policy analysts and small-scale farmers from around the world to further the discussion on new approaches to trade and investment that support

the international human rights framework, with particular emphasis on the right to food. Different papers were prepared for that conference as well and a final publication was printed and disseminated in December 2009.<sup>5</sup> The publication itself included cross-cutting themes such as gender, water, and climate, continuing with the comprehensive vision that has been at the core of the Blue Mountain Initiative.

### **The current challenges of a common agenda on food and agriculture**

Although the network made significant progress in defining and expanding the debate on global governance and food systems, the momentum has slowed since 2009. This is the result of two major factors: loss of staff and cuts in funding for international policy work. During the financial crisis, foundations suffered serious losses in their endowments, resulting in cuts to funding portfolios. Many also shifted their priorities away from the governance work that had been developed over the last 15 years. These cuts have had an impact on IATP's own ability to develop this work further. That said, there are different opportunities and reasons to continue with this kind of work. There is great potential with the reform of the UN Committee on Food Security and reason to pay attention to the renewed role of the World Bank relating to food and climate. There is new leadership from the U.S. in governance debates but it is somewhat fragile and needs to be strengthened. There is renewed public attention to such issues as outsourcing food and fuel, water shortages, global health, land struggles, the needs of women in international development. The UN Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food has been a champion of ideas on how to concretize human rights, specifically the right to food, in light of economic and political directions.

The shift from the focus on the Blue Mountain Network to the Global Contract reflected IATP's conclusion that the network needed more clarity. In general, there is a bit of "networking fatigue" and burnout among colleagues who have been engaged in global governance networking. It is a weakness of this project (although not the defining one) and some of the other international networks that have not managed to expand beyond a very small pool of experts. In many cases, the same people have traveled to different global meetings, largely dis-connected from their own national political processes. Ultimately, this limits the long-term effectiveness of any network.

Also during the period since 1995, the UN agencies have lost funding and political support. This has greatly impacted civil society's ability to engage. Some activists have shifted gear to work more nationally and regionally than to engage at the UN level.

Lastly, converging different networks was a challenge in itself. Environmental groups, human rights groups, hunger groups and farm groups all have their way of framing things and in times of short funding, they will naturally choose to narrow rather than expand their focus. Clearly, cross-sectoral networking is critical, particular in light of the multiple crises and they way they are interconnected to the overall model of development that is in great need of reform. Still, networking needs to have a clear purpose and a sense of how it is serving people more concretely. That was and still is the challenge for the goals of the Blue Mountain Network.

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<sup>5</sup> ["The Global Food Challenge: Towards a Human Rights Approach to Trade and Investment Policies,"](#) IATP, FIAN, EAA, December 2009.