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for Responsible Trade

A National Coalition for Just and Sustainable Trade Policies

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March 31, 1999

Chairman
Committee of Government Representatives
on Civil Society Participation
United Nations Economic Commission
for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)
1825 K Street, NW, Suite 1120
Washington, DC 20006

Public

FTAA.soc/w/18/add.1
14 April, 1999

Dear Sir or Madam:

We write to you as representatives of U.S. labor, environmental, human-rights, religious, women's, family-farm, development and public-policy organizations to convey our concerns regarding the public invitation extended to civil society to submit comments related to the proposed Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA).

Many of our organizations have strong ties to similar civil-society groups in Latin America and the Caribbean. We share our colleagues' concerns that the current FTAA negotiations focus almost exclusively on expanding trade and investment opportunities in our hemisphere. Expanded trade and investment should serve as tools for sustainable development, not as ends in themselves. While the public declarations issued after the meeting of the hemisphere's trade ministers in San Jose, Costa Rica last February and the Summit of the Americas in April expressed the governments' commitment to developing trade agreements that serve to raise living standards, improve working conditions and better protect the environment throughout the Americas, we have seen little evidence of that commitment in the current FTAA negotiations.

Perhaps our concerns about the social and environmental impacts of trade and investment are, in fact, being addressed in some way in those negotiations. Under the current secretive and exclusionary process, however, it is impossible for us to know if that is the case.

Many of us were cautiously optimistic at the announcement of the formation of the Committee of Governmental Representatives on Civil Society Participation (CGR) last year. This optimism, however, was short-lived, as it became clear at meetings of the hemisphere's vice-ministers for trade that many governments oppose the notion that this committee could serve to promote active participation by civil society in the FTAA negotiations. Several of our organizations sent letters to our own government and to the Committee raising the following points:

1) That the CGR's report to the trade ministers must accurately and impartially reflect the views of civil-society groups, not the committee's own interpretations of the input received from those groups. Those comments should also be shared directly with the appropriate negotiating groups.

2) That the governments provide timely and necessary information on all matters discussed in the negotiating process in order to enable informed and meaningful participation by civil-society organizations in the consultation process.

3) That the Business Forum cease to have privileged access to the trade ministers and the negotiating groups. If the CGR is to be the conduit for non-governmental input into the FTAA process, all civil-society organizations, including businesses, should use that channel.

4) That the CGR's report on the input received by civil society be made public, with an opportunity for public comment before its is passed on to the trade ministers at their meeting in Toronto this November.

5) That the CGR serve as a stepping stone towards the establishment of a negotiating group that will work to address labor, environmental and other social concerns within the FTAA process.

None of these points have yet been included in the operations of the CGR. It appears that the Committee has merely become a kind of suggestion box. Civil-society organizations do not have any opportunity to ensure that the comments they submit are even transmitted to appropriate decisionmakers, much less that they are actually taken seriously in the FTAA negotiations.

It is clear to us that we cannot wait for the CGR to become a meaningful conduit for interaction between civil society and the FTAA process. We will continue to utilize all possible means to educate the public, Members of Congress, FTAA negotiators on our concerns and those of our colleagues in Latin America and the Caribbean.

Sincerely,



Stephen Hellinger
President
The Development GAP

on behalf of:

*Bruce Allen
1st Vice-President
St. Catharines & District Labour Council