



CENTER OF CONCERN

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Chairperson
Committee of Government Representatives on Civil Society Participation
C/o Tripartite Committee (ref: Civil Society)
ECLAC
1825 K Street, NW, Suite 1120
Washington, DC. 20006

Dear Sir/Madam,

Thank you for the opportunity to offer comments to the Committee of Government Representatives on Civil Society Participation in the FTAA.

The Center of Concern is a Washington, DC-based non-governmental organization which promotes social analysis, theological reflection, policy advocacy and public education on issues of global development, its domestic/global links, and just international policies on finances and trade. The Center has consultative status with ECOSOC at the United Nations and has been accredited to WTO Ministerial Meetings in Singapore and Geneva.

In addressing the Committee of Government Representatives on Civil Society Participation in the FTAA we will focus on three issues: the process of FTAA trade negotiations, trade and development, and social, gender and environmental impact assessments.

Process of FTAA Trade Negotiations

The Center of Concern strongly advocates a democratic and accountable process for negotiating trade and investment agreements in the United States and throughout the hemisphere. We endorse three key principles to govern civil society's relationship to the FTAA process:

1. Need for transparency (the right to know);
2. Need for public involvement (the right to be heard); and
3. Need for public involvement in the dispute settlement mechanisms (access to justice).

While, in general, we have supported the Committee of Government Representatives on Civil Society, its mandate and performance to date are not encouraging. Specifically, we are concerned that there seems to be limited support among many governments for this committee. What does this say regarding its longevity and effectiveness.

Secondly, we are concerned about the general nature of its mandate and therefore its ability to adequately represent the views of civil society groups to trade negotiators. Nor is it clear that the committee can impartially reflect the views of civil society groups, which, due to the diversity of groups and opinions, can be conflicting. How will the committee be accountable to civil society groups?

Furthermore, it is not clear how this committee will operate in relation to the Business Forum which currently has privileged access to trade ministers and negotiating groups. Why does one sector of civil society maintain privileged and independent access to trade ministers while all other sectors are lumped into a government-directed committee? This imbalance and injustice must be corrected.

Finally, if the Committee is to be truly accessible to all sectors of civil society, it must ensure that governments provide timely and necessary information on all matters discussed in negotiating processes to enable informed and meaningful participation by civil-society organizations in a consultative process. Special initiative will need to be directed to marginalized or oppressed social groups, including women, to guarantee them access to the trade debates.

Trade and Development

The San Jose Ministerial Declaration reiterates "that the negotiation of the FTAA shall take into account the broad social and economic agenda contained in the Miami Declaration of Principles and Plan of Action with a view to contributing to raising living standards, to improving the working conditions of all people in the Americas and to better protecting the environment." However, to date current FTAA negotiations seemed to be focused almost exclusively in expanding trade and investment opportunities in the hemisphere.

Increased trade and investment cannot be ends in themselves, nor do they automatically trigger social progress and environmental sustainability. Trade and investment must be negotiated within the wider and integrated goals of just and sustainable development for all of the countries in the hemisphere and their peoples. Such an integrated approach will require attention to food security, social development, debt relief, increased foreign aid to smaller and weaker economies and cooperation with other institutions which address these issues. If such integrated work is indeed in process, it is not evident in the FTAA process. Without this integrated approach, the promise of "raising living standards," "improving working conditions of all people," and "better protecting the environment" cannot be realized.

Social, Gender and Environment Impact Assessments

The need for assessments of current trade regimes is increasing as we witness the growing poverty gap and continuing environmental deterioration. NGOs in Mexico, Canada and the U.S. have made assessments of the impact of NAFTA in their respective countries, but official country-based assessments need to be instituted as part of trading regimes.

Social assessments should address the health, education and well-being of all citizens and communities, especially the most marginalized and vulnerable. All social assessments need to have a defined gender focus. Although trade agreements claim gender neutrality, it is a proven fact that all macroeconomic policy has a differential impact on women and men due to social standing, role expectation and discrimination. Whereas, trade and investment are not expected to solve all issues, an impact assessment could be the basis for governments to initiate compensatory and alternative mechanisms to address those sectors of society that will be adversely affected by new trade and investment agreements.

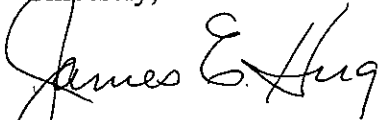
Environmental assessment could ensure that necessary mechanisms are put in place to direct trade policy toward sustainability and healthy environments for societies.

Finally we recommend that the Committee on Government Representatives on Civil Society Participation work toward the establishment of a negotiating group with the mandate to address labor, environment, social development and gender concerns within the FTAA process.

With the future and the mandate of the Committee so unclear, it is obvious that members of civil society cannot wait to become active in the FTAA process. The Center of Concern in collaboration with our colleagues throughout the hemisphere will continue to educate the public and seek ways to be engaged in the FTAA negotiating process through interaction with Members of Congress, the State Department and FTAA negotiators to move our concerns forward.

Thank you for the invitation to address the committee.

Sincerely,



James E. Hug, SJ
President

cc

Bryan Samuel, U.S. Representative to the CGR and Deputy Assistant Secretary of State
Peter Allgeier, Associate U.S. Trade Representative for the Western Hemisphere