

«Until today the MERCOSUR (Southern Cone Common Market) has been a space in the hands of the elite, but it is a valid space which we will not give up on easily and in which we are going to work from our democratic perspective.»

Hebert de Souza (Betinho), Director-Founder of IBASE, Rio de Janeiro, June 1996.

Once the work for the Social Summit in Copenhagen and the International Conference on Women in Beijing was over, the question that remained in the heads of those who had spent their time and energy in bringing them was about: how to get the agreements transferred into the real world of governmental policies?

A large part of considering the implications and consequences of the Social Summit and the IV Conference is related to their possible positive effects on regional integration initiatives in the world today.

The Copenhagen and Beijing commitments could be useful tools in setting the bases in the formulation of regional policies. Latin America in particular has several different scenes of regional integration, where the implementation of a regional social policy could reinforce the achievement of equity and a greater participation in social development. The most important question is: how have the various actors, governments and civil societies assumed the Copenhagen and Beijing commitments in the light of the current situations and regional integration processes?

THE SEVERAL SCENES OF INTEGRATION

In a world characterised by the end of the cold war and the emergence of large economic blocks organised in relation to the United States, the European Community and Japan, Latin America is advancing towards regional integration and the formation of large economic spaces which allow for its insertion into the world economy, attracting foreign investment by extending the size of the markets while acting as an answer to the political and economic vulnerability of the region. The MERCOSUR, made up of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay since 1991 (with member-

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ship agreements signed with Chile and Bolivia in 1996); the Central American Common Market of Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua and Costa Rica – now revitalised by the Central American Integration System; the currently crisis-ridden Andean Pact of Venezuela, Colombia, Ecuador, Peru and Bolivia; and the NAFTA, of Canada, Mexico and the United States, with a probable radius of influence which will extend to Central America, the Caribbean, Venezuela and Colombia, are the main contemporary scenes of Latin American integration. Copenhagen and Beijing announced measures which go against social exclusion, which improve the quality of life of the inhabitants of all the world, and offer greater participation in the process of social development to civil society and women in particular. It is worth answering a central question: up to what point, dependent on how they are conceived, will the integration processes contribute to these ends, and how will they serve to improve the quality of life of the people, and are they really a new opening for citizen participation? To what extent will they positively or negatively affect the achievement of broad-based and equitable sustainable economic development? Every time Latin American regional development is spoken about, the common denominator known as «trade opportunities» takes the floor. The process negotiators, the press in general, both within the region and beyond, the deliberately created institutions appear to be interested only in the exclusively trade and economic part: we often hear talk of the common market, the customs union, the zero rate tariff, the tariff barriers. But very little of the social impact implied by the integration models themselves and whose application has inevitable consequences in the social areas, affecting employment, education, culture and migration.

Organisations from the four countries have tried to start studying the MERCOSUR phenomenon from a different angle, the angle of the people and the problems which concern them. These organisations believe that, given the MERCOSUR is a reality, the integration process must not be limited to an agreement between governments or to mere trade conventions if what is proposed is to be a vehicle to improve the future for the inhabitants of the region, including their living conditions and quality of life. Active citizen participation is the factor which could assure success and the humanisation of both the MERCOSUR and the other inte-

gration processes already underway. From another point of view these groups understand the MERCOSUR process will demonstrate advances in the quest for fairer societies for its population if citizen participation is guaranteed, and if the civil society is capable of carrying out constant monitoring and surveillance of the integrating process, guaranteeing its transparency and contributing the social development agenda.

A LITTLE HISTORY

On March 1991, the governments of Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay signed a treaty in Asuncion which served as a framework to the process of integration between the four countries, with the aim of constructing a Common Market. But unlike other hegemonic blocs of the world, the MERCOSUR was made up of four underdeveloped countries, presenting specific challenges for the integration building process. «This great country» known as the MERCOSUR, with the four countries that created it, includes 42% of the population and 58% of the surface of Latin America, more than 55% of the regional GDP, over 40% of the regional exports and more than 70% of the intraregional trade, with a potential market of more than 190 million people and average per capita income of US\$ 2,500. Since 1991, «this great country» has been living through a negotiating process with many ups and downs; deep down it has not overcome the commercial stage, and the process has not managed to mobilise the political and social structures and the bulk of the citizenry in the four countries.

Between 1991 and Jan 1, 1995, the date set for a zero-rate tariff to be reached on the majority of their products, various stages were gone through, and the initial instrument, the Asuncion treaty, was updated. The MERCOSUR is unanimously recognised as an irreversible process from different ambits and there are many voices auguring new impetus and impulse for the road institutionalised from December 1994 with the signing of the Ouro Preto Protocol. Finally, just a few months ago, on June 5, 1996, in San Luis, Argentina, the tenth MERCOSUR Presidential Summit formally received Chile into its midst and Bolivia signed a commitment backing its formal integration with the full operation of the free trade zone from Jan 1, 1997. The MERCOSUR, was now made up of six South American countries, including more than 220 million inhabitants/consumers and with a Gross Community Product of 880 million dollars.

In the days of the Presidential Summit in San Luis, the press throughout the region announced was transforming the «backward and incapable Latin American south» into the fourth most powerful bloc in the world. In the MERCOSUR press of June 1996, the San Luis Summit represented not only the formal integration of Chile and the preparation for the entry of Bolivia to the MERCOSUR, but it qualitatively changed the process by producing political facts.

Two new partners entered, both of whom are high priorities in Latin American social reform, presenting an opportunity for the debate on issues related to the confrontation of poverty to

be deepened. This fact, as well as the explicit condition imposed in San Luis (the functioning of the democratic institutions in each of the member nations is an «essential condition for the co-operation of the group») could be seen as signs of a positive tendency. But if the predominant reports are analysed on whether the new structures are effectively helping to create new citizen participation bodies, the answer has to be that this has not been satisfactory up until now. In the same way, if investigations are made into the contribution made to date by the integration process in neutralising national hegemonies resulting from differences in size and power between the participant nations, not too many voices are heard insisting on how successfully this is happening.

THE MERCOSUR AND CITIZEN PARTICIPATION

The MERCOSUR as an integrating process could reduce the vulnerability of the democratic structures and even lead to their strengthening, creating new instances for citizen participation, inasmuch as new structures of physical articulation, communication and information networks, flows of goods, services and people, necessarily lead to the participation of the various social actors; –the many faced character of the integration process marks the limits of the techno-bureaucratic ambit and makes the participation of various political, economic, cultural, educational, social, and technological ambits obligatory; – integration works on the principle of subsidiarity whereby no superior administrative entity acts in anything that another inferior ranking administration can do better – when the time comes to apply the programmes, the regional administrations are forced to delegate to the local administrations implied; – integration has to involve a process of institutionalisation which assures transparency, solidity and efficiency to the process and an adequate functional distribution, which brings with it demands for the participation of the lesser territorial entities and the corresponding public support.

On these bases, the Copenhagen and Beijing commitments related to the promotion of citizen participation, and in particular the marginal sectors, in the organisational structures of society and in the decision-making process, should encounter very fertile ground to grow in. However, various analyses lead us to observe three major deficits in the MERCOSUR integration process.

THE LACK OF PARTICIPATION IN INTEGRATION STRUCTURES

The 1991 Treaty of Asuncion, defined regional institutional structures for the new integration process which the signing of the Treaty inaugurated: the Common Market Council and the Common Market Group were established as two regional intergovernmental organs of the highest authority in the instrumentation of the new process.

Later, the signing of the Additional Protocol to the Treaty of Asuncion in Ouro Preto in December 1994, granted greater complexity to the institutional structure of the MERCOSUR. Ouro Preto reconfirmed previous structures (the Market Council and Group and the MERCOSUR Trade Commission), and added parliamentary participation in the form of a Joint Parliamentary Commission (JPC) and an Economic–Social Consultative Forum (ESCF), an organ to represent the social and economic sectors. Even if Ouro Preto advanced in the institutionalisation of the MERCOSUR, it maintained the fundamental characteristic of trade being pre–eminent. The parliaments and social sectors were able to participate in only the most tenuous manner.

THE SOCIAL DEFICIT IN THE INTEGRATION STRUCTURE

The institutional structures and arrangements implemented in the various MERCOSUR member countries from the signing of the Treaty of Asuncion reflect an important social deficit, with very limited participation from interest sectors. It is only the unions or the business sector who have achieved participation or involvement, for example, in the Economic–Social Consultative Forum, both on a regional level as in the various national sections. Only the case of Brazil is different, where the National Section of the Forum –set up in March 1996– is made up of a consumers association as well as the Workers Centre and the National Industry Council, and the case of Argentina, where there has also been active participation from a consumers association. For even though the official texts predict the participation of other groups: «organisations representing sectors of the workers, entrepreneurs, consumers, universities, technology institutes, women and young people», not even the National Sections nor the regional version of the Economic–Social Consultative Forum have recruited women or youth groups. This deficit be the outcome of an official policy which does not promote the social participation planned in the legal documents, or the omission or lack of interest of the sectors themselves. The Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) of the four countries have had only a timid presence in the integration process, despite having been a dynamic factor and generating important proposals at other times in recent Latin American history. In either an individual or isolated form, or on the basis of common thematic interests, some NGOs have generated research results or have formed exchange networks with their peers in other countries. But the MERCOSUR NGOs in their joint forms (as networks or associations), understand explicit or implicitly that it is not their role to represent civil society, whereby, for example, they cannot join the Consultative Forum invoking some delegation or mandate.

We can therefore ask just who is responsible for presenting and promoting the interests, visions and demands of women in these ambits? How can we assure the issues which concern women but which affect all of society are incorporated into the regional agenda? The national and regional structures of the MERCOSUR are an important forum, but they must be modified, allowing for democratisation and the real broadening of their negotiating bases.

THE DEMOCRATIC DEFICIT

The MERCOSUR is suffering from a democratic deficit, as up until now the process has been in the hands of the national elites without mobilising the political and social structures. It has been processed by the superstructures, without reaching the roots of society. The national bases of the debate have been limited to a few sectors and the information on the MERCOSUR must be democratised, must be systematic, visible and accessible to all sectors. At present, the information which exists and is available is fragmentary and dispersed, while it should be visible and systematic. The existing structures have been largely concerned with the systematisation of the official documents, but this language and this message have reached public opinion with sometimes negative consequences. Public opinion on the MERCOSUR is indifferent, at times showing little consciousness and more recently fear and even disagreement.

Public opinion polls carried out no less than in three of the MERCOSUR nations report fears of increased national unemployment, the closing of factories and industries or other sources of work and the belief, in the case of Uruguay, that competition jeopardises this small country.

These data should warn of possible negative developments like the xenophobia and discrimination which could emerge causing important new problems of social exclusion.

FOR A SUPPORTIVE MERCOSUR

The civil society organisations make it necessary to generate sustainability in the construction of «a supportive MERCOSUR». The bases of national debate need to be broadened, alternative proposals and strategies must be generated to introduce this debate in the public agenda. Public opinion must be informed and the agents of change must be influenced (mass media campaigns to future generations, today's children and adolescents) to assure supportive and democratic ways forward for the MERCOSUR structure. The Non Governmental Organisations –as an active part of civil society, which have developed a large amount of knowledge, abilities and relations with the social demands– can contribute creatively to the negotiation processes and the execution of Latin American integration.

The definition of public policies on this issue, for this to be a living process and not a mere agreement between governments, must necessarily be accompanied by the reconciliation of points of view and experiences rooted in society and which are part of the heritage of the NGOs. The articulation of the civil societies can produce a change of direction in the deficits we have seen. The institutional relations must be deepened and common ambits must be generated for the discussion of problems, the exchange of experience and the definition of joint policies and projects. We must contribute the social dimension of the integration processes through political participation, the act of lobbying and technical assessment. But above all, generating information, directing this and making public opinion more sensitive, we must be capable of supporting new forms of active citizen participation.

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THE FOLLOWING PARTICIPATED IN THIS REGIONAL WORK:

- CEDES (Centre of Studies of the State and Society), Argentina, Lucas Rubinich.
- IBASE (Brazilian Association of Social and Economic Analysis), Brazil, Atila Roque.
- ICD (the Institute of Communication and Development), Uruguay, Anabel Cruz and Fernando Barreiro.
- Comunicación y Cultura, Paraguay, Guillermo Sequeira.