

Building bridges or alliances?

– Critics of globalisation and trade unions continue their dialogue –

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Kurzberichte aus der internationalen Entwicklungszusammenarbeit



- The label “opponents of globalisation” is coming to cover an increasingly broad mixture of political and social groups. They include NGOs and new social movements, but also a growing number of traditional social organisations like trade unions and churches. They are all linked by their criticism of globalisation in its present form. On the other hand, there are great differences between them when it comes to the search for alternatives and thus the political demands made by the various groups.
- Despite all the diversity, various forums are bringing the trade unions and “traditional” opponents of globalisation (such as Attac, for example) closer together. This is true both of the German and of the international scene. One of these forums is the “Bangkok Roundtable”, which convened for the second time in July 2002 and is organised by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and “Focus on the Global South”. This report summarises the results of the forum:
- What the trade unions and the NGOs have in common is their criticism of the neoliberal face of globalisation. Both the trade unions and the groups critical of globalisation reject a policy based on liberalisation, privatisation and deregulation. They are also unanimous in criticising the existing international institutions and organisations as undemocratic and lacking in transparency. Furthermore, they deplore the two-faced stance taken by the North against the South in the field of agricultural policy. They largely dismiss the existing system of EU and US subsidies.
- The trade unions and the NGOs differ on their assessment of the capacity of international organisations to reform. Whereas many NGOs and some trade unions from the South see no chance of fair global rules, given the current economic imbalances, and therefore call for the abolition of the IMF, the WTO and the World Bank, the trade unions and some NGOs from the North advocate more, and particularly a better form of, global governance. The differences in the assessment of international trade are similar. Many NGOs openly call for a reduction in the existing economic ties and for a future of independent and self-reliant national economic systems, but the trade unions believe a better world is possible even against the background of today's interlinked economies.

Strength in unity?

The international trade union movement and the critics of globalisation are like **two unequal brothers**. On the one hand, they belong to the same family – the world-wide social movement which takes a critical view of the globalisation process. On the other hand – and this is particularly true of the trade unions of the North – they have, when they reflect on their different origins, history and interests, a feeling of not belonging together. This became clear three years ago, when the first major “family gathering” took place in Seattle. The third WTO ministerial meeting created a feeling of “being united against something”, but also showed the level of distrust and the lack of understanding on both sides. The stumbling block was the call by the trade unions for a linkage between trade and social standards – regarded by many WTO opponents as renewed proof of the hidden protectionist agenda of the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU).

Dialogue in Bangkok

This was the starting point for an attempt to “build a bridge” between the two groups, organised in Bangkok in March 2001 by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation and “Focus on the Global South”, the international NGO which is critical of globalisation. The 50 or so participants at the “Roundtable” started by trying to improve the atmosphere between the two groups, to exchange positions and priorities, and thus to establish a common basis for the assessment of processes of economic globalisation.

To many people’s surprise, some of these goals were actually achieved. The NGOs and the new social movements were able to demonstrate that their concepts involve not only blocking tactics, but also alternatives. And the international trade union movement was able to show that it is not a “single-issue” organisation, but takes a

development-oriented approach which aims to shape globalisation and which corresponds to the positions of NGOs and social movements in many respects. The result was a joint, albeit very general, final declaration supported by both groups. In the following months, the trade unions and the movement critical of globalisation acted together at least on some issues at international events like the WTO ministerial conference in Doha or the second World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

Basically, therefore, the willingness to engage in dialogue has grown markedly. But does this amount to a foundation for viable, strategic alliances? This question was focused on by the second “Bangkok Roundtable”, which took place in July 2002 and mostly involved the same participants.

How do these two groups assess the results of the Doha WTO conference, and what objectives and strategies are they pursuing with a view to the next ministerial conference in Mexico in 2003? In particular, how can the human right to food be brought into line with the WTO negotiations on an agricultural agreement? And what approach should be taken on the international financial institutions, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank? Is the strategy one of “critical dialogue and reform”, or should a joint campaign aim at the abolition of these institutions?

The simple answer is: whilst there are not many differences between the NGOs and the trade unions on their criticisms of the present situation, their long-term objectives are still worlds apart. At the same time, the differences cut right across both camps and, not least, are characterised by differing interests in the North and the South.

What unites...

There is a lot of agreement about the criticism of the **neoliberal model**. A globalisation based on

liberalisation, deregulation and privatisation is uniformly rejected. An excessive emphasis on monetary and fiscal objectives for developing and emerging economies is also dismissed. Both the NGOs and the trade unions oppose the implementation of fundamental neoliberal approaches, as expressed for example in the policy of capital market opening for developing countries.

The two groups also agree on the assessment of the political processes in international organisations. The NGOs and trade unions unanimously criticise the **democratic deficit** in the World Bank, the IMF and the WTO, and call for greater transparency and participation. The criticism focuses on the negotiation processes at the WTO, as recently experienced once again in Doha. The trade unions and the NGOs believe that the insufficient inclusion of players from civil society and the manner in which the governments of the South were “brought into line” cast a question mark over the political legitimacy of these institutions.

Like the neoliberal model of globalisation, the **protectionism on the agricultural markets** practised by the EU and the USA is also rejected. In the view of the trade unions and the NGOs, the two-faced approach – policies of neoliberal market liberalisation on the one hand and protectionism on the agricultural markets on the other – is the prime example of the political imbalances between North and South.

...and what divides

The divergences start as soon as it comes to the search for alternatives and to political demands. Here, different interests and orientations manifest themselves both within the trade union movement and in the NGOs and social movements.

This is particularly true of the stance on international organisations and the question of whether they should be **reformed or abolished**. Whereas trade unions and some Northern NGOs believe that the system can basically be reformed and therefore advocate a better and enhanced form of global governance, many Southern NGOs and parts of the trade union movement in the South criticise the current global power structures. As long as these remain in place, it is argued, the existing global order will be exploited by “the powerful”, to the disadvantage of marginalised players. From this perspective the World Bank’s attempts at reform – e.g. the “Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers” – are anything but a “step in the right direction”, being nothing much more than a decoy sent out by an institution in which no genuine reforms are possible due to the way the votes are divided up. The representatives of this camp therefore call for “no global governance” and are logically in favour of abolishing the WTO, IMF and World Bank. In contrast, the trade unions – at least, those from the North – rely on a critical but constructive dialogue with these institutions. They believe that a different approach to globalisation is certainly possible, via a reform of the existing institutions and the policies they pursue.

There is also a contentious debate about reforms in the field of the **agriculture markets**. Whereas the trade unions largely support calls for a fair trade regime for agricultural products and in principle welcome the discussion about a WTO Agreement on Agriculture, many NGOs take an entirely different approach. Poor countries should first be put in a position to feed their own population (“food sovereignty”). They therefore reject greater inclusion of agricultural producers from developing countries in the international division of labour. This, they say, only exacerbates the existing monocultures, benefits the large corporations and is of little benefit to the undernourished population. This camp’s call is therefore: “Agriculture out of WTO”.

The views taken of **international trade** also differ. Trade unions from major industrial countries, which are fundamentally interested in safeguarding jobs in the export industry, cannot and have no desire to question the current world economic system. Trade unions in the South and many NGOs, on the other hand, are fundamentally critical of the export-driven development model. As with the agriculture markets, they believe that economic decoupling and sovereignty, and thus the unwinding of the spiral of globalisation, is a feasible way forward.

Despite this: the two sides are continuing to come closer together

Despite all the differences which undoubtedly exist, one thing is clear: the Bangkok process has brought the two “brothers” closer together. The dialogue is viable, and alliances are not only feasible, but probable. In the coming months and years, trade unions and NGOs will be pulling in the same direction on many issues and at many events when it comes to calls for a new approach to globalisation. The “Rio+10” summit at the end of August in Johannesburg or the fifth WTO ministerial conference in Cancun will offer opportunities for joint mobilisation. The next World Social Forum in Porto Alegre at the beginning of 2003 is to see the Bangkok Process being placed on a broader basis, and the practical agreements on this have already been put in place. “A different world is possible” – perhaps trade unions and social movements will together manage to define how it should look.

The authors

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