

Global Civil Society Instead of Global Civil War

Democracy as an Alternative to Neo-Liberalism and Neo-Conservative Nationalism

Mark Ritchie
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This social forum is looking at three specific dimensions of the world we are trying to create.

First, the individual and collective citizenry—our roles and responsibilities in sustainable human development.

Second, the question of how we produce and make available the goods we need for living—keeping in mind others with whom we must share this planet now and in the future.

I have been asked to focus on a third aspect, the key elements of relations between and among nation states, international institutions and people. My specific assignment is to address the new situation and challenges after Cancún, especially in light of the growing threats from unilateralism, mercantilism, neo-conservative nationalism and militarization.

What can be said in a short paper on such huge subjects is, of course, limited. My goal in these minutes with you is simply to start a debate by focusing on just one of the key elements of the international order—trade and the key institution of trade policymaking, the World Trade Organization (WTO). Using the WTO as an example, I will explore some of the emerging thinking in civil society about ways to reshape our global system so that both nation states and international agencies can better assist us in our collective task of building socially, economically, ecologically and politically sustainable human development.

As a preface to my remarks, let me state my general views on trade, the World Trade Organization and on the broader system of trade law and policy. First, I am in favor of developing and protecting local cultures, communities and economies to the greatest extent possible. Creating and defending a very high degree of economic, social, cultural, artistic, political and biological diversity is a matter of basic human rights, quality of life and of human survival. I feel more strongly about this as I have become increasingly alarmed at the largely unknowable risks associated with the currently dominant form of hydrocarbon-centered industrial life.

At the same time, I am addicted to coffee and live in a cold, non-mountainous climate where we cannot produce this marvelous drug. This means I need to be very friendly with the people who live in Brazil and other coffee-producing countries so that I can meet my caffeine addiction on a daily basis and do so on an affordable basis. Furthermore, I need to be producing something that the farmers and workers who are supplying me with coffee want in exchange—otherwise I am dependent on their charity that may be, in the case of Brazilians, exceedingly generous but certainly not without limit. The exchange of something that I produce or provide for my coffee must be economically, ecologically and socially sustainable for both of us—otherwise it will not last. Terms of trade that are exploitative of people and/or our planet cannot last forever.

Given my twin objectives—supporting local commerce while enjoying the benefits of exchanging goods and services over long distances—I am always looking for the ways to balance both. A good example of this balance, from my perspective, is the system of certified fair trade used for a number of products and commodities, ranging from soccer balls to coffee. Another example is the Convention on Biological Diversity that spells out conditions of trade to protect our genetic heritage. A third example is the Bolsa Amazônia that supports commerce that specifically protects the ecology in the Amazon river basin. What is common to each of these fair trade arrangements is a set of written rules of commerce that are agreed. I strongly believe that trade can and must be organized to advance human sustainable development and that the key to this is importing and exporting on the basis of monitored and enforced written rules.

Since trade is done largely by companies—and not by governments—the key to getting good rules written and then enforced must be a combination of forces—including enlightened businesses, conscious consumers, progressive national governments and international agencies/institutions. Given the current imbalances at the world level in terms of economic and military power, I believe that these agreements have to be crafted and pursued at all levels and in a variety of combinations in order to protect the local and to promote economic, ecological and social sustainability. Good trade rules are also important for addressing some intra-country economic conflicts, like the fight between Iraq and Kuwait that led to the first Gulf War.

I believe that we do know how to organize trade to be sustainable but it will not happen by accident or by the magic of invisible hands or velvet-gloved fists. Trade, like all other commerce, needs to be managed for sustainability—fair prices, profits and wages for everyone making a contribution to the final product. Sustainable trade includes continuous progress in terms of producing higher quality goods at lower environmental impact—and therefore lower ultimate costs for consumers and for society as a whole. I also believe that we know how to organize international regimes, institutions and dispute settlement processes that can help reduce the number of times that nation choose the path of armed conflict in economic disputes.

Given this perspective, how do I view the WTO and trade policy in general in the coming period?

I am optimistic about the next period, for five main reasons.

First, thanks to a fortunate convergence of many factors, including important leadership by the Brazilian government, the WTO has begun the transition from being merely an extension of the post World War II neo-colonial arrangements—where a few countries dictated to the many—towards a new way of operating that could help it become a truly international economic institution. The WTO ministerial meeting in Cancún was, in my opinion, the first time in the history of these trade talks—going all the way back to the Havana Conference in 1947—that trade negotiations came close to being truly global. On the two most important issues under discussion, agriculture and the proposed Singapore issues, nearly 100 countries of the developing world engaged in real debate and serious negotiations with the roughly two dozen industrialized countries that make up the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). As a part of the global United Nations system, the trading policymaking institutions, like the original International Trade Organization, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and even the preamble of the World Trade Organization have contained some of the most advanced thinking and rhetoric. Unfortunately, the reality has never lived up to the progressive mission of global full employment, fairness and democratic process.

Second, the WTO has become the international economic institution about which civil society and individual citizens are the most informed and on which their advocacy is having the greatest effect. The highly secretive and antidemocratic nature of the WTO's predecessor institution, the GATT, and the very negative consequences for farmers, workers and the environment that resulted from earlier negotiations combined to make the WTO the focus of perhaps the largest global movement since the Viet Nam war.

Both through organized direct advocacy and through expanded participation by our elected parliamentarians, citizens all over the world are helping to both set the agenda and to influence the process itself. We are only now beginning to understand the process of global lobbying and advocacy and surely we are very weak in many regards but the WTO process is the most advanced in all of global citizen advocacy at the moment. Lessons from other key global citizen initiatives, like the Nestlé Boycott, the Landmines Treaty and the Convention on Biological Diversity are beginning to mix and blend with nearly 20 years of WTO and GATT citizen advocacy into a framework for effective citizen advocacy at the global level. This framework is not the same as global democracy, but it is important nonetheless.

Third, the structure of the WTO, where consensus is needed in many areas to move forward makes it an ideal institution for building truly global agreements—ones that are good for both the North and the South. India stood nearly alone at the previous WTO ministerial in Doha, Qatar, on the Singapore issues. In Cancún, India was part of a huge coalition. Citizen activism on these issues was crucial to getting governments to see what was at stake and to understand the possibility of resisting but this resistance would have been for naught if India has not stood firmly in Doha. While the pressure and abuse that countries feel who exercise the right to say no to the U.S. and the EU remains extremely high—unbearable to some—nonetheless the Cancún meeting showed that some governments, especially when they can work together in a broad coalition, can exert their rights within this consensus model.

Fourth, the general assault on the international system by some in the United States government includes calls by some to either abolish or to just ignore the World Trade Organization. The overall threat to the United Nations system, including the economic, social, human rights and environmental treaties, institutions and agencies is the most serious and dangerous in my lifetime. This threat to the very survival of the WTO has created a climate where substantive WTO reform conversations can take place for the first time.

Fifth, there is a very high level of global understanding, solidarity and active cooperation at present—North, South, East and West. We can see this in relation to both civil society and in some developments in relations among governments as well. We now have the opportunity to draw on the lessons, experiences, encouragement, strengths, wisdom, information and resources of colleagues from all over the planet on literally a moments notice and we are increasingly doing this to advance sustainable human development and human rights. I have never felt so encouraged by this aspect in my entire political life.

I have called Cancún a success. This view has been criticized by some of my friends who believe that Cancún was a failure because governments missed a chance to make progress on some key issues of concern to the developing world. Whether Cancún turns out to be truly a new beginning or merely another missed opportunity will be better judged five or ten years from now. What is important, however, is that those of us who believe in the multilateral system must step through the doorway that has been created by Cancún, using the momentum that has been generated to advance sustainable human development. History will judge us not on what we did in Cancún but on what did afterwards to take advantage of the opportunities that were created.

But what does this mean in concrete terms for citizens and social movements? I think there are six major tasks in front of us.

First, we have to maintain the overall direction of making the trade negotiations truly global. This means supporting any and all efforts to more fully engage all WTO member nations into active participation in the key debates. This may require the development of technical advice from NGOs and even the development of training and educational programs and materials. For example, if U.S. federal farm policies are to be such a key topic then training sessions for negotiators and their key staff on the actual content and performance of these policies would be much better than the empty and often misinformed rhetoric on farm policy that we so often get from NGOs and governments alike.

Second, we have to significantly expand our efforts to elevate the awareness, critical analysis and capacity to develop alternative proposals among individuals and organizations. In some sectors, like farming, many people are already skilled in these areas but more is needed before people can become effective innovators and advocates in these global arenas. This needs to be pursued at all levels—both grassroots (e.g., one church group at a time) and in the mass media—using all means available. As part of this effort, we must bring more of our democratically elected officials, especially parliamentarians, into the trade policymaking process. The presence, for the first time, of a large number of well informed members of national and provincial parliaments in Cancún had perhaps even more impact on the outcome of the meetings than the NGOs.

Third, we need to use this moment in WTO history—when there seems to be openness to new thinking and reform—to push for major structural reforms in how the institution operates. For example, an open and public process of review of potential candidates for the Director General position would be a good place to start, along with written rules of negotiating procedure that are monitored and enforced. The trend towards “informal” negotiating sessions with limited member participation and no record of the positions taken by the negotiators makes the negotiating process nontransparent. Enforcing procedural reforms, such as those proposed by several member countries prior to Cancún can reverse this trend.

Fourth, we need to clarify the role of a wide range of global and regional institutions in relation to trade policy and bring some coherence to this cluster. For example, most of the “hot button” issues raised by Third World governments in Cancún, like the disastrous problems facing coffee and cotton farmers in the developing world, are commodity-related issues that would normally be dealt with within the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD). By the way, UNCTAD is in São Paulo next June for their 11th Ministerial Conference. A central focus of this meeting will be the supply side of trade. All across the globe there are a number of serious people, including very conservative leaders like former Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, calling for a Second San Francisco Conference, referring to the founding of the UN in San Francisco nearly 60 years ago. UN Secretary General Kofi Annan is already conducting a comprehensive review of the UN system that could form the basis of a serious reform of the entire Bretton Woods System.

Fifth, we need to tackle some of the most pressing global trade problems that governments seem incapable of addressing right now. For example, the persistently low global prices in cotton, coffee and other commodities continue to impede sustainable trade and development. The dramatic nature of the interventions by West African governments, who find themselves dangerously dependent on world cotton prices that they have no control over whatsoever, was a highlight of the Cancún meeting. Small farmers from the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca spoke eloquently about the desperate situation of coffee producers all over the world. We have enough experience to be able to put forward real solutions that can be implemented with or without government support.

Sixth, we must find a way to help advance the overall reform of the international system in ways that counter the attacks by neo-conservatives and others on the United Nations system as a whole. While we may have many specific criticisms of decisions made by the WTO we must find avenues of constructive engagement that does not result in our criticisms providing aid to those working to replace the UN system with some form of superpower-ruled world. I believe this is one the most important areas for global cooperation and must be done with a fully integrated North-South-East-West approach.

These Matters and More

If I am right, then the WTO has begun to shift in composition and focus away from just being a means to impose a U.S. and EU arrangement towards a place where trade policies are judged and negotiated to realize development objectives.

There are dozens of issues that surfaced before and during Cancún that demand solid proposals and global campaigning towards implementation. What is missing is the global process for taking the best of the ideas that

are bubbling up and shaping these into concrete and perhaps competing proposals that then move through social, commercial and governmental channels and processes towards global consensus. With the emergence of the World Social Forum, we are beginning to move toward a process for consensus making on the social side—creating the real possibility of someday moving towards a truly global process.

However, my optimistic interpretation of the results of the Cancún ministerial and the opportunity for global advancement from what might be called the “Cancún moment” is not the only interpretation of the ministerial. Those who favor unilateralism, mercantilism and the rule of force over the rule of law are drawing different lessons from Cancún.

There are four broad classifications of views on the role of trade in foreign policy inside the U.S. First, there are those now in power who favor unilateralism as the most efficient and effective way of exercising U.S. power to maintain privileged access to raw materials, markets and strategic locations for advanced placement of military power. There are plenty of members of the U.S. Congress and high-level staff in the White House that would take the U.S. out of the United Nations and the World Trade Organization right now if they could get away with it.

A second group includes those who believe that the most efficient way to maintain U.S. power in the world is to express it through multilateralism and thorough global institutions like the United Nations system, which includes the WTO. Since I believe that the world’s resources need to be shared more equitably and that this will require a redressing of the current balance of world power, I reject this assumption that the multilateral system should be used to maintain the status quo. However, I do believe that I can work with people who think along these lines in tactical alliances.

The third broad grouping, and in this I include myself, believe in global cooperation and multilateralism as a means towards sustainable human development, human rights, justice and equality. This puts us in a difficult position at times, since we find ourselves both battling the unilateralists who would replace the global system with fiat from Washington and those who support multilateralism, but who do so primarily to preserve the unacceptable status quo.

This is a terrible dilemma for those of us who believe strongly in multilateralism and global cooperation. It requires us to strongly criticize many of the actions of these institutions when we believe they are motivated primarily by the desire to maintain the status quo. Yet our criticism must be delivered in such a way as to distinguish ourselves from those who attack the UN and the WTO for the purpose of undermining the entire idea of an international system. We have to make it clear that we support the global system but not many of the actions of major institutions. Our criticism must be accompanied by suggestions of reforms that would strengthen rather than weaken the overall system.

A key component of this stream of thinking is the advancement of ideas on ways to reduce the power and scope of global institutions that have over-stepped their mandates and competencies or that are clearly unable to provide leadership. Key demands of many of the most vocal critics of globalization reflect the need for radical reform, including the proposal that governments “shrink it or sink it” in terms of the scope of the WTO. A corollary demand is that of the global farmers movement to “take the WTO out of agriculture” as a way to address the many injustices and problems related to food sovereignty and food security that are due, in part, to the current WTO Agreement on Agriculture.

There is a fourth view shared by many friends and allies who believe that the institutions have been so captured by special interests and so compromised by a half-century of cold war maneuvering and other elements of global geopolitical struggle that many global institutions must simply be closed. This is a view that is also shared by some of the original founders of key global institutions.

Ten years ago my organization gathered the surviving founders of the Bretton Woods institutions to discuss their dreams and their reflections on the 50th anniversary of the founding of the World Bank and IMF. I sat through a number of late night discussions where some of these founders argued among themselves about which of these institutions had strayed the farthest from their original mission and which should be shut down first. The vehemence of their criticisms and the urgency they expressed for fundamental reform or the abolishing of these two institutions was much stronger than I have heard at the World Social Forum and other gatherings.

There is a great danger that these third and fourth streams—with our strong criticisms of many of the actions of the multilateral system—may be used by some in the Bush administration to build the case for continued U.S. withdrawal from global affairs and for advancing the unilateralist agenda. I believe that gatherings like these Social Forums can play a critical role in making sure that our criticisms cannot be hijacked and used to destroy the overall system.

What Should a Post Neo-Liberal/Neo-Conservative Agenda Look Like?

While most of the global rules overseen by the WTO were negotiated at a time when the neo-liberal agenda was preeminent we are in a new era now—a time where a neo-conservative agenda in foreign and military affairs is being married with the neo-liberal policies in business and economic affairs. While the disastrous effects of this can be seen in every village on the planet, the opportunities for change as a result of this devastating marriage are equally dramatic. I would argue that without the grim results of the neo-conservative trade and military synergy, the pulling together by the Brazilian government of the G-20 in Cancún would not have been possible. The combination of continued insistence on mercantilists trade policies (you must buy from us but we will avoid buying from you if at all possible) and on “global hegemony” through a militarized foreign policy has created a nearly impossible political situation for the U.S.

It has weakened the partnership of the U.S. and Europe in dramatic ways—making it impossible for them to present a coherent front in Cancún. It meant the U.S. ignored the desperate pleas from countries with no place to turn, like the cotton-dependent nations of West Africa, who made it perfectly clear that without some relief, they had no reason to agree to anything. On top of these specific elements of policy, there was also the arrogance and blindness that comes from ideological motivation. Many in the U.S. delegation, both from the government and from commercial sectors, were quite pleased with the outcome in Cancún. They saw it as an opportunity to argue their case for further abandonment of the multilateral process and for using bi-lateral and regional negotiations, like the FTAA, as the place for the U.S. to get everything it wants without having to give up anything more than best endeavor promises.

It may be exceedingly optimistic to say this, but my guess is that we have an opportunity to replace both neo-liberal and neo-conservative dominance precisely because they are now merged. Until now the separation of these agendas—for example, in the prior administration—made it nearly impossible to rally enough power both inside and outside of the U.S. to mount a serious challenge to either one. Today, however, we can celebrate both the beginning of real trade negotiations inside the WTO —thanks largely to the efforts of Brazil and the G-20 in Cancún—and we are now engaged in a real debate at the global level on the role of the United Nations, military power and unilateralism.

Perhaps as important as the elevation of these issues to the global level has been the simultaneous elevation of these issues inside the United States. I won't presume to review all the details of this far-flung debate today, but let me say that in my entire life there has not been a time of greater political danger in the U.S.—and that includes Richard Nixon and others—and there has not been a time of greater public debate over the role of the government in domestic and international affairs and the role of the U.S. specifically in global affairs. As a nation, we were split down the middle on the war waged by the Bush administration on Iraq and we remain deeply divided today. What is important, however, is not the polling numbers on the war policy, but the level, depth and scope of the debate that we are engaged in. Much of the society—much, much more that I ever remember—is

engaged in debating key issues of economy, trade, human rights, war and peace. This debate will intensify as we go into next year's elections.

Our foreign and domestic policy agenda after neo-liberalism and neo-conservatism must be a return to democracy and the rule of law. And there must be a special emphasis on making sure that we are all, through democratic procedures and human rights—able to participate in the creation of the laws that will govern us.

I live in a country where race issues are the defining element of public life. Still today, despite years of hard work, sacrifice and great strides, one race, and largely the ruling class within that race, makes most of the laws and others must follow. We know that government by elites for elites does not really work at the local and national level. It is not hard to understand that at the global level, it cannot be the purview of a few to make rules that advance only the interests of a very few. The post neo-liberal agenda must be democracy at all levels—the details will be filled in by those who come behind us but if and only if we are successful in replacing the rule of the few that is enforced with weapons of mass destruction. Until we do replace this current system we will continue to be terrorized by civil war at the global scale.

We must reject any options that continue us down the road towards global civil war. It is a future too terrible to imagine. We must counter this with the path to democracy, repeatedly defended through nonviolence. This must be our post neo-liberal and post neo-conservative agenda.

Nine years ago, we gathered the surviving founders of the major post Second World War economic institutions—including the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade and the International Monetary Fund. The occasion was the 50th anniversary of the Bretton Woods Conference where these institutions were created. I learned a lot of things at that gathering, but by far the most important was a new understanding about the central goal of Lord John Maynard Keynes, the central figure in the creation of this entire global system. Keynes saw this system as the only way to end the cycle of worldwide war—believing that they could ensure economic, social and political justice through a democratic, global system design to bring economic prosperity and justice to all.

This dream of a democratic future, where war could be avoided by ensure economic, social and political security for all, has of course not yet been achieved. But the basic premise of Lord Keynes, that the only path to peace is justice, has not changed. We have to return to this task that Lord Keynes and others began nearly 60 years ago with a new energy, new focus and new urgency. When they gathered in Bretton Woods, the wars were mostly between states and with conventional weapons. Today the wars are between states and non-states and they are waged with weapons of mass destruction that can be made in a bathtub for practically no cost.

Perhaps the post neo-liberal agenda for many of us is really the same as before. We must continue to use assertive, even aggressive, nonviolence to struggle for security, sustainability and for a sense of community within a global context. We must oppose civil war at the local, national and global level by fighting for the continued expansion of democratic civil society and human rights into the international arena.

We must work day and night to win over both those who have chosen global civil war as a way to defend their privilege and those who have chosen this path as a way to fight against exploitation.

Democracy at all levels—in the workplace, in our cities and nations and in the global arena must be won, then re-won and then re-won again.

We must do this for ourselves and for those we will never know. We must do this for today and for times we shall never see.

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