

The state of the anti-globalization movement: Challenges ahead

THE DYNAMICS OF THE ANTI-GLOBALIZATION MOVEMENT

Three important inter-related processes are key for determining the dynamics of the anti-globalization movement. While there are of course many others, these three are “recognition, accommodation, and challenges.” These processes and their inter-relationships shed light on the changing political understandings within the anti-globalization movement on different issues, institutions and processes. Furthermore, an analysis of these processes helps to evaluate the activity of the anti-globalization movement on the maturity curve and provides critical inputs to identify impending challenges.

THE PROCESS OF “RECOGNITION”

The process of “recognition” has two important dimensions that are relevant to the anti-globalization movement. The “internal” dimension can be linked to the growing recognition within the movement of the political gains associated with particular avenues of mobilization. Some of these internal “recognitions” include acknowledging the importance of understanding and relating to issues, institutions, and processes on various planes. For example, many groups increasingly realize the importance of challenging the value framework governing neoliberalism while institutions like the World Bank (WB), the IMF, and the WTO continue to proliferate these values.

They have also come to recognize the importance of articulating clear positions with respect to the “anti-globalization” movement’s opposition to terrorism of any form as well as to “militarized globalization,” especially in the wake of the September 11 crisis. As well, they recognize the advantage of carrying out “alternative” research that not only questions the value framework governing the politics of implementation but also the

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politics of existence with respect to institutions and processes.

The movement has also recognized the necessity of forming coalitions at various levels, which accommodate the concerns of different interest groups in order to build alternative perspectives to the neoliberal framework and further deepen outreach. These coalitions and mass movements create awareness of the heterogeneity of the anti-globalization movement.

THE EXTERNAL DIMENSION OF RECOGNITION

The “external” dimension of the process of “recognition” is linked to the way in which the anti-globalization movement is perceived by different sections of society, the media, and most importantly, by other social movements—for example, student movements, trade union movements, the human rights movement, and the women’s rights movement.

Anti-globalization forces are perceived differently in developing and developed countries and within countries. In India, the middle and the upper-middle classes are not very vocal

against globalization because it has not affected their disposable incomes, employment opportunities, or the price of essentials. In the United States, on the other hand, the middle class is increasingly vocal as a growing number of pink slips are handed to employees as the result of mergers or the drive to make firms globally competitive. It is also interesting to note, at least in the Indian context, that middle- and upper-middle-class families, who have been negatively affected by neoliberal globalization, are not critiquing the value framework governing the phenomenon.

The mainstream media, who used to aggressively equate “anti-globalizers” to “anarchists” are becoming more balanced in their presentation of the issues raised by the movement. The established press no longer treat organizations and individuals seeking a reversal of globalization as “cranks.” This change in the media’s perception could be considered a reaction to the US stance after September 11, especially in context of the Doha Ministerial Conference, the collapse of Argentina’s economy, coupled with the Enron debacle and other events that have exposed the crisis of legitimacy in institutions like the WB, IMF, WTO, and the US Treasury.

The participatory nature of demonstrations at the Seattle Ministerial Conference (1999) and at subsequent events of the WB, IMF, Asian Development Bank, and the G8 have shown that other movements do recognize the strategic importance of being a part of an “anti-globalization movement.” This brings us to the process of “accommodation.”

THE PROCESS OF “ACCOMMODATION”

The endorsement of “Our World Is Not For Sale” (OWINFS), a statement against the current form of globalization being pushed by institutions like the IMF, WB,

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and the WTO, by social movements, civil society organizations, NGOs, academic institutions, and others worldwide clearly shows that a process of “accommodation” if not “integration” has begun.

Another striking example of the growing level of accommodation, at least among the “left” within the anti-globalization movement is reflected in the level of participation the World Social Forum (WSF) has witnessed since its creation two years ago. The WSF has attracted a “wide spectrum of political views within the left: from the reform agenda, to abolitionists and even between.” As Melanie Gillbank notes in her article, “Other worlds are possible, 60,000 can’t be wrong.”

In spite of these growing successes, it would be premature to say that the process of accommodation has come of age. But, it would not be wrong to say that statements like the OWINFS or events like the WSF go a long way with respect to infusing confidence among organizations and movements opposed to neoliberalism to discuss their differences on specific issues more constructively.

DEVELOPING AN ALTERNATIVE AGENDA

It is important to increase the pace of these constructive discussions for three reasons. First, with the endorsement of the Doha Declaration of the Fourth Ministerial Conference of the WTO, the “linkage between trade and environment,” an issue that had remained on the sidelines of the WTO, is now going to be on the mainstream agenda. This mainstreaming of environmental concerns could be used by factions of civil society, especially the right-wing trade liberalizers, as well as by certain governments to re-ignite the debate on “environment protection” versus “environment protectionism.”

Second, the linking of trade liberalization to labour standards continues to reappear if not in the mainstream at least in the sideline discussions of the WTO ministerials. It is, therefore, very impor-

tant for organizations and movements to have a range of opinions on these issues and to start understanding each other’s concerns in a more constructive manner before any harmful language gets inserted into the official WTO text on these issues. Some efforts are already being made in this direction. In 2001, Focus on the Global South and Friedrich Ebert Stiftung organized a roundtable for trade unions to discuss their differing positions on linking trade liberalization at the WTO to labour standards and to create a better understanding of the implications for development of such a formal linkage.

Finally, the World Social Forum 2002, organized under the banner of “Another World Is Possible,” has initiated discussions on the various elements that could develop into alternative models to neoliberalism. It is critical that a basic level of understanding is generated among groups on the issues and processes that could be important with respect to defining the value frameworks governing alternative systems.

THE PROCESS OF “CHALLENGE”

One of the most challenging questions for the anti-globalization movement is whether it is against the concept of globalization or against the current form of globalization being pushed within the neoliberal framework.

The argument is often not against trade but against indiscriminate liberalization that destroys the capacity of national economies. Many want managed trade that would allow countries maximum flexibility in dealing with the international market in order to adopt strategies that would allow them to integrate into the international economy in ways that strengthen the capacity of their economies rather than destroy them. Thus, whether to protect or to liberalize is not a doctrinal matter but a decision that is taken with national economic interest in mind.

It is indeed encouraging to note that these different positions are being

discussed at events like the WSF. Understanding the nuances associated with discussions on globalization is significant and will continue to be so as the “anti-globalization movement” initiates the processes of constructing alternatives.

A further challenge for the “anti-globalization movement” is to see how opposition to the neoliberal agenda at the international level is linked to national and local debates. This is important not only for developing a better understanding within the international movement of local issues, but also to generate mass support for the movement and its actions in different regions of the world. In fact, a problem that generally haunts discussions between NGOs, civil society groups and mass movements is that each of the three are discussing the same problem often without providing adequate inputs for strategies of the remaining two.

HOW LONG SHOULD WE KEEP MOBILIZING?

Another intriguing set of questions that is being raised by many grassroots movements is, “How long should we keep on mobilizing?” and “How long should we keep on struggling?” There is a growing feeling at the grassroots level, at least in the Indian context that mobilizations at the national and the international level are not having the desired impact of stopping the “bicycle” of neoliberalism and, more importantly, on preventing its disastrous impacts on their livelihood opportunities. This should not be taken to mean that they are losing interest in the struggles. Rather, what they are losing interest in is finding “democratic” and “peaceful” solutions to their problems.

This raises serious questions with respect to the kind of interventions that actors involved in anti-globalization struggles will make next at national and local levels. Should they only put road-

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ners” and exclude “troublemakers.” For the moment, civil society bodies have ample positive incentives to enhance their credentials, including increased access to and influence on governance institutions, increased support from the wider public, increased backing from funders, and increased internal cohesion within the associations themselves.

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blocks in the path of the neoliberal engine, which in fact is getting its fuel from local polity and bureaucracy? Or should anti-globalization activists be a part of the process in a way that influences the terms of reference defining the movement and pace of the neoliberal engine?

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with enhanced efficiency. A rule-making organization such as the WTO should have more resources, both human and financial, and should be more management driven. It should have mechanisms that allow for routine decisions, both on management and on substance without going through the cumbersome process of the General Council. It should also allow initiatives to be taken by the director general on substantive issues. Last but not least, the organization should be able to take decisions in improving, adapting, and clarifying rules outside a round or a single undertaking.

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global governance is, in all likelihood, bound to grow and intensify. After 9/11, most observers concluded that the movements’ resistance had reached its peak at the G8 meetings in Genoa, in August 2001. But, by March 2002, the movement had rebounded with over 500,000 protestors on the streets of Bar-

THE CHALLENGE

Civil society agitation has grown in recent years to become a prominent feature of the politics of the global economy. Already, this activity has had notable policy impacts, and it could go on to acquire a much more substantial role. If and as this happens, it will be all the more important for the movement to have capacities for critical self-regard

HOPE, JUSTICE, AND EQUITY

It is always difficult to conclude with respect to movements, happenings, and situations in a state of flux. One can offer only an opinion about the level of maturity of this flux, the rate of change, and the type of energy that this change creates. The anti-globalization move-

and proactive self-improvement.

So neither implacable skeptics nor romantic enthusiasts have had it right regarding civil society engagement of global economic governance. This development has considerable positive potentials along with substantial negative possibilities. The challenge will be to maximize the benefits and minimize the harm. ❁

ment and the processes that are significant in defining its dynamics are indeed in a state of flux. What one can conclude from the discussions above is that this flux is indeed maturing and its momentum is spreading positive energies of hope, justice, and equity at local, national, and international levels. ❁

One cannot contemplate WTO reform without addressing the question of external transparency and accountability. Both have to start at home through a greater involvement of civil society and national parliaments in WTO matters, which call nowadays for a much broader constituency than the traditional trade policy community. We need to find the ways and means for a greater involvement of civil society and parliaments in Geneva as well. Otherwise transparency will be limited and accountability will suffer.

We are not likely to get there in the immediate future but we should reflect

on it. The globalization process should be matched by the capacity of the rule-making body to live up to it. At the same time we have to realize that the WTO on its own cannot eradicate poverty, ensure sustainable development, or promote our labour standards. The Doha Declaration usefully reminds us of this.

Other international organizations—Bretton Woods and the UN—will need more coherence and complementarity between themselves and with national governments. Only then can we respond to the challenges of globalization and address the needs of the developing world. ❁

celona at the European Union summit. Despite the anti-terrorist legislation and the concurrent criminalization of dissent that is sweeping across the world, the resistance is escalating, particularly in Europe and parts of the third world. Here, in North America, the events of 9/11 and the anti-terrorism legislation

has, for the time being, cast a cold blanket over this kind of protest activity. Undoubtedly, this will affect the G8 protests in Kananaskis this summer. But, even here, the crisis of legitimacy swirling around the WTO’s global governance will continue to spark new waves of resistance in the future. ❁