

From free trade to the basics: Cross-border civil society cooperation in Canada and Mexico

Over the past decade, Canadian and Mexican civil society organizations have experienced a flowering of cross-border cooperation. From only sporadic interactions before 1990, labour, women's, human rights, church, environmental, indigenous, and student groups from the two countries have forged mutually rewarding bonds that appear to grow stronger as time passes. Along the way, a plethora of unique, non-traditional forms of cooperation have been born, from Canadian solidarity groups for the *Zapatistas* and indigenous people of Chiapas to Canadian campus organizations sympathetic to the recent student strikers at the National Autonomous University of Mexico.

FROM NAFTA TO THE FTAA

The trigger and target of course of much of this bonding was the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). In the early days of opposition to NAFTA, Canadian member organizations of the Pro-Canada Network (PCN) established lasting links with their Mexican counterparts. In fact, the PCN served as a model for the creation in April 1991 of a similar Mexican umbrella organization, the Mexican Action Network on Free Trade (RMALC). NAFTA also had the effect of focusing Canadian attention on other related issues during the early 1990s. This includes the Mexican government's record on human rights, democracy, and the environment. Canadian groups lent their support to such causes as combating the dismal working conditions in northern Mexico's *maquiladoras*, the *Zapatista* struggle for social justice, and the Mexican Civic Alliance's efforts for free and fair elections.

Just as trade has driven the official bilateral agenda between Canada and Mexico since 1990, it has also been the

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catalyst behind deepening cross-border civil society cooperation. No sooner was the ink dry from signing the NAFTA than the Canadian and American governments were at the forefront of new efforts, captured in the Miami Declaration of December 1994, to negotiate a hemispheric free trade area of the Americas (FTAA) by 2005. Working in unison, Canadian and Mexican social organizations have been at the vanguard of resistance to the proposed agreement. The diverse membership of the Canadian umbrella organizations Common Frontiers and the Americas Policy Group together with RMALC were among the founders of an Americas-wide opposition movement to the FTAA in 1997, the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA). RMALC provides the secretariat for the HSA. At the recent Quebec Summit of the Americas, Canadian and Mexican

partners in the HSA figured prominently as organizers and participants in a parallel event, the People's Summit, and as protesters on the streets. "Another Americas Is Possible!" became their rallying cry.

CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION

Despite fruitful relations, cross-border cooperation has had plenty of challenges. First, one might ask how much Canadian and Mexican civil society partners have in common. Through fact-finding missions, international events, and cross-cultural exchanges, the ongoing struggle against free trade has certainly helped hone a set of common positions and values: fair trade, women's empowerment, economic justice, direct democracy and accountability, and environmental sustainability.

On the flip side, significant differences in experience exist. For example, in Canada much of the current policy debate centres on how to maintain existing living standards and social indicators of development from deterioration, while in Mexico the concern is how to improve these. Notwithstanding its own problems of child and indigenous poverty, gender inequality, affordable housing, and regional disparities, Canada scores much higher than Mexico in terms of human development. To some degree, then, bread-and-butter economic issues do not necessarily equate in the two countries. Canada is experiencing the aging of its population while Mexico has a markedly younger age structure. Similarly, Canada's civil society and political society (formal political institutions and political parties) are at a different historical point from Mexico's. That is, whereas Canadian unions, religions, and political parties all appear to be in decline, recent democratization

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has coincided with an effervescence of Mexican civil society and a newly competitive party system. Voter alienation may suggest that liberal democracy may be in crisis in Canada but the verdict is still out on Mexico's brand-new democracy.

THE CHALLENGES OF CIVIL SOCIETY PARTICIPATION

Second, there are a host of questions raised by the overarching pattern of Canada–Mexico civil society cooperation. On the whole, political protest and resistance have been the mainstays of combined collective action against free trade, the former Mexican dictatorship, neo-liberalism, and globalization. The contentious, political nature of this struggle creates some formidable challenges.

One has to do with forging a positive public image and winning popular support in an ongoing public relations battle with authorities. As illustrated at the Quebec Summit, while these Canadian and Mexican social actors remain undaunted, they must fight an uphill battle against stereotypes that they are economically illiterate and ill-informed, extremist, destructive, confrontational, offensive, and negative. Pointing to what they consider to be a profound crisis of representation underpinning the “undemocratic” FTAA negotiations, protesters struggle to present themselves as the “people” and as the representatives of the underrepresented. Yet they are criticized by many for their own alleged lack of democratic credentials (who elected the protesters?). Furthermore, after winning the first democratic election in 71 years, Mexico's president is acutely sensitive to charges that he and other leaders at the Summit are undemocratic.

Given the fact that protests such as Quebec City draw a disproportionate number of relatively privileged white, educated, middle-class protesters, Fox and others also seriously questioned how representative they are of the masses they claim to represent: “It's very easy to come and protest in Quebec City when you have a full belly.”

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Another challenge for Canada–Mexico civil society cooperation concerns getting the message out. On the one hand, while the anti-FTAA or anti-globalization frame seems to distill the issues for protesters in terms of justice, fairness, and dignity, the question is whether it does so for the broader public. While former single-issue struggles against the Vietnam War or apartheid galvanized support, the multi-issue, nebulous nature of the FTAA or globalization is extremely difficult to articulate meaningfully for popular consumption. On the other hand, getting the message out is compounded by the diffuse, heterogeneous, and informal mobilizing structure of transnational social movement formation. If there is such a thing as an anti-globalization or anti-FTAA movement, it does not have a clear leader, or centre, or even an accepted name.

TRANSNATIONAL COALITION BUILDING

A further challenge is that as Mexican and Canadian civil society efforts turn from bilateral or trilateral concerns to transnational coalition building in the Americas against the FTAA, the object of their collective action becomes less clear. While local and national struggles have the advantage of focusing a sustained attack on a visible, tangible objective, the transnational arena is more vague. Given that the typical goal of social movements has historically been to disrupt public order, attract sympathetic media attention, and thereby compel authorities to negotiate, the multiple levels of transnational struggle may lead to the HSA scattering its shots. Moreover, authorities traditionally bow to *sustained* pressure from social movements. The event orientation of transnational protests in the Americas

such as Santiago, Seattle, Windsor, or Quebec City means that heads of state or international bureaucrats do not have to endure protest for long.

IS THIS THE ONLY WAY TO FIGHT NEO-LIBERALISM AND GLOBALIZATION?

Ultimately, these challenges facing Canadian and Mexican civil society partners call into question their chosen battleground—hemispheric free trade. Is this the only way to fight neo-liberalism and globalization? Is the battle against the FTAA the best use of their precious resources and skills?

Instead of jet-setting to the next parallel summit location, perhaps Canada's and Mexico's civil society leaders and organizations might better invest their energies and resources in a return to the basics—that is, they might consider greater cooperation in localized grassroots or community initiatives. In Mexico, for example, after years of dictatorship, the social forms of intermediation between state and society must be completely recreated, from the local to the national level. Workers, farmers, and indigenous people all require new, autonomous interlocutors to represent their interests before the state. Mexico's ruling National Action Party (PAN) has very weak organizational links with the majority of the Mexican population, leaving the latter potentially underrepresented. At the same time, democratic consolidation is an ongoing process that will benefit from the further strengthening of Mexican civil society. While the struggle against the FTAA and strengthening Mexican civil society and democracy are not mutually exclusive, both are equally valid areas for future cooperation among Canadian and Mexican social organizations. 