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Any review of 20 years of UNCTAD's work and activities would be incomplete without reference to the contribution non-governmental organisations (NGOs) have made towards the achievement of its aims.

In this context the term NGO applies to the great variety of private organisations, national and international, located mostly in the developed countries, whose *raison d'être* is development support in the widest sense. It refers to organisations which mobilise funds for projects in developing countries and to organisations specialising in development education in the developed countries, which they often carry out in a creative and sometimes even provocative way. Used in this context, the term NGO does not include business associations, which would more accurately be classified as interest groups, and organisations whose interest in development — considerable though it may be — is peripheral to their major goals, as is the case, for example, with trade unions.

Traditionally, development oriented NGOs as described above have shown a great interest in UNCTAD's work and have supported its activities to a considerable degree, mainly because UNCTAD has been the major forum for the North-South dialogue. They have played a particularly active rôle in the area of public information and what is usually referred to as 'mobilisation of public opinion'; in the political arena, where they have tried to influence national policy responses to issues being negotiated within UNCTAD; and at full UNCTAD Conferences where NGOs have often played a visible rôle, monitoring national delegations and commenting on Conference proceedings.

Information Policies

Many NGOs in the developed countries have regarded it as one of their major tasks to increase the basic understanding in their countries of development problems and to highlight the urgency of appropriate

action. They are the only organised groups which advocate systematically the Third World cause in the industrialised countries and lobby governments in favour of the developing countries, whose problems are all too easily forgotten in the daily preoccupation with domestic issues.

In this rôle they have explained developed concepts to a general audience, bringing to life facts and statistics hidden in UN and UNCTAD documents written essentially for experts and specialists, explaining them in terms and concepts meaningful for the layman.

As regards UNCTAD issues, NGOs have been particularly imaginative in highlighting commodity issues. In many commodity campaigns they have explained the problems of the small farmer in developing countries to the citizen of developed countries, for whom the instability of tea, cocoa or jute prices is a problem far removed from his concerns. It was then only a logical step to campaign for the Common Fund for Commodities, a project which has attracted particularly enthusiastic support from NGOs. But NGOs have also interested themselves in a broad range of other development issues including, as regards the UNCTAD agenda, problems of protectionism and structural adjustment, monetary reform and international finance, development assistance, transfer of technology and the least developed countries.

NGOs have not only espoused particular issues on UNCTAD's agenda but have used UNCTAD Conferences as a focus for their information activities. Under the leadership of a national NGO well versed in the traditional UNCTAD issues, a number of like-minded NGOs have usually got together for the purpose of organising a variety of events under the umbrella of an 'UNCTAD campaign' that led up to each session of the Conference. Examples are the campaigns which were conducted in the Federal Republic of Germany before UNCTAD III, IV and V, and the campaign in the UK led by the World

Development Movement. The various national campaigns usually cooperated with each other, benefiting from the co-ordination of national activities effected by the Brussels-based International Coalition for Development Action (ICDA).

Lobbying Governments

NGOs have not relied solely on mobilising public opinion but have tried to influence the decision-making process in a more direct way. Their more politically active and alert representatives have established contacts with government officials and politicians of all shades of opinion to discuss with them concepts and proposals emanating from UNCTAD. This approach has been particularly effective in small countries where NGOs tend to have easier access to government officials. As a result, the representatives of these countries at UNCTAD meetings were often particularly well briefed on the merit and drawbacks of certain UNCTAD proposals, and more inclined to support initiatives of the Group of 77.

It is indeed noteworthy that the small OECD countries have often played a particularly active and positive rôle in UNCTAD negotiations, especially as regards the Common Fund, a key concern of the NGO community. In this context it would be interesting to explore the question of how far the NGOs were instrumental in the formation of the group of like-minded countries which became operational at the time of the Common Fund negotiations and which played an active rôle in the long-drawn-out negotiations on this project. The four Scandinavian countries, as well as Holland, Belgium, France, Austria, Canada and Switzerland, which were members of this informal group, were all countries in which NGOs were effectively lobbying for the establishment of the Common Fund.

NGO Activities at UNCTAD Conferences

UNCTAD Conferences have always attracted NGOs in great number, notwithstanding the fact that most of them were well aware that by the time the Conference started national positions were determined and could not easily be changed. But world conferences of the UNCTAD type have their own dynamics and often take unexpected turnings. NGOs were determined to take advantage of this. Usually they have mounted two types of operation at UNCTAD Conferences:

- the monitoring and surveillance of positions and attitudes of national delegations towards Conference issues;
- the publishing of an NGO newspaper.

In monitoring the attitudes of developed country governments, the NGOs constituted an important pressure group, constantly pushing and prodding these governments to take a more positive stand. At each Conference, moreover, the NGOs built up sophisticated arrangements for channelling information on day-to-day developments to their home countries, keeping the media, parliamentarians and officials informed on difficulties in the negotiations, and persuading their contacts to use their influence to elicit a more positive and flexible position.

As a result of the NGO presence at the Conferences, the delegations from OECD countries knew that they were being watched, and that marked deviations from publicly pronounced policies on development co-operation would provoke questions and criticism.

The newspapers published by the NGOs were probably the most spectacular activities at the last three UNCTAD Conferences. *Cosmos* at UNCTAD IV, *Libra* at UNCTAD V and *Take Six* at UNCTAD VI filled a gap in conference information, even for official delegations, by reporting in detail what happened in the conference committees, public and private, and by exposing conference issues in depth and in outspoken political terms.

Conclusion

What did all these efforts achieve? Did the NGOs succeed in promoting a more favourable public attitude towards issues in the North-South dialogue and did they make an impact on the outcome of UNCTAD Conferences?

Judging by the present paralysis of the North-South dialogue one is tempted to conclude that NGO activities did not make much difference. But political action is always difficult to evaluate. Without NGOs the public would be even less aware today of the demands of the developing countries and of the stakes involved in the North-South dialogue. If this dialogue is accepted by public opinion in the North this is at least partly due to the incessant efforts of NGOs to highlight the need for it. While NGOs have not constituted a commensurate counterbalance to well-organised and financed interest groups, they have created an environment more conducive to the conduct of the North-South dialogue by constantly reminding the world of its wider dimensions.

As regards their influence on the outcome of UNCTAD Conferences, a judgement is even more difficult, due to the complexities of North-South negotiations. It has been widely agreed that NGO pressures were crucial in getting the resolution on the Common Fund adopted at UNCTAD IV. However,

in a forum like UNCTAD Conferences so many actors are involved that no one of them can exercise decisive influence. This is a cause of constant frustration both for individual countries and NGOs. Governments have shown an inclination to retreat to bilateralism

while NGOs show a tendency today to move away from multifaceted issues, which they associate with UNCTAD, to tackle more clear-cut questions (food, pharmaceuticals, generic resources, etc) where results can be more easily achieved and measured.