

TNC's and The Ecumenical Movement: What Relationship?

The first question is whether and why TNC's are of direct concern to Christians, churches and the ecumenical movement. Why did the Nairobi Assembly call for a programme on TNC's leading to a worldwide series of regional consultations and a November 1981 global consultation at Bad Boll whose report was received by the July Central Committee meeting?

The answer lies in the ecumenical movement's commitment to the struggle for a just, participatory and sustainable society. Justice both in its aspect of equitable distribution and its broader aspect of the pattern of relationships among human beings is necessarily affected by TNC's because they are the largest and most powerful economic units in the present world economy. Participation is affected just as much - economic decisions on what to produce, for whom, how and on the nature of workplace structures or relationships are central to meaningful participation. Sustainability - both in the sense of stewardship of God's creation and in that of human acceptability of social and economic structures - is to a large extent determined by questions of economic management and organisation.

These are not theoretical points. TNC's directly or indirectly control over half of all international trade and also about half of economic activity in capitalist industrial economies as well as a substantial proportion in Third World economies. They are the major developers and users of applied technology. By their own institutional logic they are concerned with corporate profit and accumulation (investment), survival and growth. Structurally they are hierarchical and operationally they are often effectively accountable only to their own executives and major shareholders - not to their workers and consumers nor to those affected by their decisions.

One reason for lack of effective accountability is the sheer size of TNC's - individually and as a group. Another is

their transnationality - unlike states and organised labour, their scope is across national boundaries; in the cases of the largest their reach is global.

Quite clearly TNC's do affect both the lives of human beings and the nature of society. Equally clearly social justice, participation and ecological or social sustainability are not and cannot be central to their internal goals and decisions. As a result, they often exploit workers and consumers; exclude former small scale producers; the unemployed and indigenous minorities; oppress either directly or by their support for national security states.

Certainly TNC's are not the only agents of oppression, exclusion and exploitation. They are neither the oldest nor the only powers and principalities of this world. Equally, economic and technological power is both necessary and has potential for human benefit. However, they are a major reality directly and indirectly affecting the lives of hundreds of millions of human beings including a majority of Christians. Their power is today largely non-accountable, therefore always subject to abuses. Indeed the logic of the gospel and scriptures surely is that power which is non-accountable is in itself an abuse.

What is the expertise, the duty of Christians, churches and the ecumenical movement in relation to TNC's? The formulation of political economic models, the drafting of economic plans and the operation of economic management are not areas of any special competence. Indeed to engage in them as centres of secular power is more likely to turn churches and the ecumenical movement from witnesses to the Lord's purpose and critics of human institutions' failure to abide by it than to create anything even faintly resembling the new Jerusalem.

Our expertise lies in our relations with human beings. The experience of the TNC programme is that the witness and stories of people - in many cases our fellow Christians - tells a great deal about TNC's not only at the level of individual operations and abuses but at that of basic nature, organisation and exercise of power. While the duty of solidarity with the poor requires that churches and the ecumenical movement seek out and listen to them first, the fact that many TNC middle level and managerial workers are Christians gives access to a broader array of perceptions and also to possibilities of dialogue and perhaps exercise of some countervailing influence on decisions.

The ecumenical movement is - unlike states, and organised labour - integrally and inherently transnational. Therefore, it is potentially in a position to bring together people's experiences and needs and to act in solidarity with victims of TNC's and those seeking redress from abuse, the creation of countervailing power and accountability to society or the construction of different most just and participatory patterns of economic organisation. Different contexts require different means. Dialogue is appropriate - but first and foremost dialogue with workers, peasants, national minorities and their organisations, not merely with TNC's and political elites. Pastoral care is appropriate - but pastoral care in solidarity with the poor and pastoral care to challenge Christians who are TNC decision makers not a laying on of hands to bless the present institutional holders of economic power.

Therefore the commitment to God's will and to its temporal embodiment in a more just, participatory and sustainable society requires - in the words of the Bad Boll TNC consultation - that:

"The relationship between these two visions of transnationality is basically one of struggle and of conflict. TNC's cannot be converted to ecumenicism. Their

economistic, exclusive and hierarchical logic makes this impossible. The ecumenical movement cannot compromise its commitment to a holistic, human centered approach to development and its prime commitment to the poor except at the price of its own soul. That requirement makes heavy demands on churches and Christians - both those who benefit from and are domesticated into TNC's and their logic, and those for whom bearing witness and struggling carries great risks to their livelihoods, positions, personal security and even lives. It is not the ecumenical movement as such but the Gospel of Our Lord and His Kingdom which enjoins Christians to accept such demands in the service of the struggle for justice in history in solidarity with the poor".

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