



## **Editorial**

### *From Seattle to Geneva*

WENDY HARCOURT

Who would say that eradication of poverty, promotion of full employment, social integration and social services for all are not among their priorities? In 1995, 117 heads of State and Government and ministerial delegations from 69 countries adopted 10 commitments of the World Summit for Social Development that were to pave the way for national and international social development. Yet five years later as we prepare for another global event, Geneva 2000, the resource constraints, political machinations, conflicts and natural disasters seem to have maintained business as usual. The rich get richer, the poor poorer, governments struggle while global business thrives. It seems the commendable commitments have remained on paper. Nothing has changed. Or has it?

The civil society campaigns around debt relief, the collapse of the MAI, the civil society presence in G7 meetings in Birmingham, Cologne and Seattle suggest that civil society is pushing to make that change. The G7 and the World Trade Organisation can no longer ignore the civil society demand for openness, accountability and democracy and the very different opinions on how to redress trade imbalances and to address the needs of the poor in the South.

The 1990s, ending up with 'the battle of Seattle' in November 1999 can be seen as one of the 'rites of passage' to the transnation state. The major shift in this passage has been civil society's move from a single issue focus to much more hard line confrontations with economic and financial institutions. Several years of global and local interactions have produced a spirited analysis delving into the core of social injustice linked to sophisticated national and international lobbying and policy watching. As a result, the cultural, social and economic trends of globalization are understood well by civil society. Civil society-led campaigns over debt forgiveness, human rights, gender equity, environment, conflict and reproductive rights along with civil society's networking on the web has produced a richness of knowledge and ideas combined with a new form of

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political action which is pushing for tough institutional changes in financial trade and economic arenas.

But we cannot afford to be completely celebratory. There are some unsettling questions that linger around 'the battle of Seattle'. Was Seattle a success? Or did it deflect attention away from the real issues? Is civil society itself becoming instrumentalized in the media hype around Seattle? Why did Seattle receive such attention both on the web and in the media? Why is trade now so 'sexy' as the British based weekly *The Economist* put it and why is Geneva 2000 plugging away at poverty, employment social integration not the subject of such feisty struggles? Is there a civil society movement that is really affecting change in a serious process or is there just lip service being paid? And what exactly IS civil society. Can we afford to see it as a vast single movement? Or rather is it a conglomerate of different groups with diverse even contradictory agendas that need to be teased out and understood.

These are critical questions to be asked around the review of social development in Geneva 2000. It is time for civil society to take stock of how it is evolving institutionally with its appropriate response(s) to globalization. How is civil society responding to the changes in the UN mandate? What autonomy does civil society have given its dependence on governments – does it still chase the donor agenda? Who is representing who? Many northern NGOs continue to speak for the South – what are the differences between these agendas – is the South still the objects of representation of other groups? Where does civil society's ownership and legitimacy lie? What are the methods and behaviours evolving that are enabling successful civil society coalitions and partnerships. If we pause to take an audit of civil society 'true' collaboration what are the gaps we would find, what is the price civil society pays for the increasing competition over funds, for the increasing need to prove credibility, to maintain identity to work cooperatively with donors?

In preparing for the UNGASS and Geneva 2000 Forum the two events scheduled in June 2000 these and other ambivalences are being expressed among civil society groups. There are often unstated fears that:

- the promises and commitments of the UN global conferences continue to be flatly contradicted by the international financial institutions' policies and behaviour;
- civil society has strategically misplayed the field by focusing on the WTO, World Bank and IMF as the key players in determining international development cooperation and in so doing helping to empty UN development agencies and states of meaning;
- global companies that are driving globalization seem to be not only irresponsible but unreachable and ungovernable and therefore untouched by any state agreements;
- the apparent difficulty of mobilizing resources and sustained commitment combined with a general sense of UN weakening and global conference burn out would lead to just one more talk shop with very little to show for it.

We can try to tackle these concerns in the knowledge that civil society has reached a maturity that allows for contradictions and problems to be faced and solved in multiple strategic ways. Globalization is being crafted by many groups at different local actual and virtual sites. Through the horizontal linking of these spaces for political change, in an almost Foucauldian way, civil society is being empowered at different local sites and in joining together, challenging vertical strata of power. One clear signal of this is how UN agencies are welcoming and trying to shift their institutional operations to be in closer alliance with civil society.

The big challenge is for civil society to build on the momentum of the 1990s which Seattle symbolized, without being deflected from the major issues. Civil society groups can build on the synergy and alliances being proffered by the UN. The +5 review process could be moments to continue to maintain pressure for the necessary institutional reforms and shifts in policy goals towards a people-centred development. The Beijing +5 review process with its strong support from women's movements, impressive organization and information flows around the world needs to be thoroughly part of the civil society agenda. Such a path also needs to encompass a critical review of how civil society itself is operating – how it can

work collectively, acknowledging and smoothing out the competitiveness, and sorting out the issues around representation and legitimacy. Civil society cannot avoid applying the same scrutiny it turns on other global institutions.

This journal issue is specially produced for the five year review of the World Summit on Social Development (variously referred to in the journal as Copenhagen +5, Geneva 2000, WSSD +5). In putting together the issue and at first thinking we needed to overcome a perceived malaise around the Copenhagen agreements, we asked civil society actors and their allies to share with readers social development as they practiced it and the role Copenhagen played. Spontaneously many added the importance of Seattle for the vision informing their work. Whether the authors are focusing on employment, poverty, gender equity, food security, finance, debt or health, what emerges as a common theme is the need for: a people-centred development; major institutional reform; and a much more participatory and

responsible engagement by all actors. Also in common the authors herald the 1990s as critical period of political struggle. It is now no longer possible to argue that the path to social development resides in structural adjustment, economic growth and globalization, in big scale projects and a narrow political vision that rides on promises and ignores the problems of debt, financial crisis, deeply ingrained poverty and the machinations of the development industry. And equally importantly, almost all recognize that the paths to social development are diverse depending on the culture, history and political expectations of the age, ethnicity and gender of the people involved.

Somewhat ironically the failures of the trade talks in Seattle hold out a promise to Geneva 2000 as an event in the process that could truly chart the strategic pathways and alliances that are needed to bring about eradication of poverty, promotion of full employment, social integration and social services for all.