

NGO Networks in the Greater Caribbean and North America

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The question of whether we can speak in the short or medium term about an emerging “transnational” civil society in the Greater Caribbean and North America is linked to the unprecedented, ongoing and still very uncertain process of formation and development of networks, particularly of nongovernmental organizations, new social movements and regional and sub-regional associations of professionals and academics, among others, with an international field of action.¹ I am referring here to non-state agencies and social organizations whose creation, existence and roles are associated with functions and objectives that must be carried out beyond the borders of each nation-state, basically on the regional and hemispheric levels.

My thinking centers fundamentally on networks based in the English-speaking Caribbean and in Central America which include the participation of an important number of Mexican networks and work increasingly with social partners and foundations in the United States and Canada.

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Economic and Social Research (CRIES) have emerged from “combinations from below” of pre-existing local and national networks. These new actors’ viability has not yet been sufficiently documented and, without by any means belittling their prospects, it may be premature to qualify them as an emerging “transnational civil society.”²

A decisive part of the factors that have influenced the formation of these networks as “emerging societies” has been their extra-national character.³ Among the exogenous influences are the growing weight of the citizenry in politics, particularly in Central American countries, as well as the support in resources and expertise given by the international community. In the case of the networks mentioned as well as the Greater Caribbean Civil Society Forum, substantial assistance has been forthcoming particularly from social agencies and institutions from the United

States and Canada, such as the Ford Foundation, OXFAM America-Central Office, OXFAM America-Central American Program, the University of the Virgin Islands of the United States, the U.S. Virgin Islands’ Island Resources Foundation, CIVICUS, ESQUEL Group Foundation, OXFAM Canada-Central America and Mexico, the Program for Support to Regional Initiatives-Canadian International Development Agency, Inter Pares, the Canadian University Service Overseas (CUSO), the Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the North-South Institute of Ottawa.

At the different meetings of the Regional Civil Society Forum, different business organizations with headquarters in Washington have been present, such as the Association of American Chambers of Commerce in Latin America, the Caribbean Latin American Action and even some representatives of hemisphere-wide agencies with headquarters in the United States, like the Interamerican Development Bank and the Organization of American States-Unit of Sustainable Development and Environment. Just to give a few examples, the Ford Foundation finances the CRIES’ academic, bilingual, bi-yearly magazine, *Pensamiento Propio* (Our Own Thinking), as well as the Program for Democratic Governableness and Public Security in Central America and the

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CRIES' 2001 publication of country reports by well known academics in the form of essays. Another funding source for this on-going project is the IDRC. CUSO's assistance has allowed the Caribbean Policy Development Centre and other English-speaking Caribbean networks to welcome Canadian volunteers who work on different programs and objectives.

The participation of Mexican networks and institutions has significant weight, particularly in the Regional Coordinating Committee of Economic and Social Research (CRIES) and the regional forum, since the Forum of Mutual Support is part of the executive boards of both organizations. In addition, the UNAM's Center for Latin American Studies, the University of Guadalajara's Department of Iberian and Latin American Studies, Mexico's Caribbean Association and the Mexican Network on Free Trade all belong to CRIES.

It has been interesting to see activist organizations (like NGOs), social movements and academic centers gather together in the same networks.

THE CASE OF CRIES

This network, created in 1982 and originally limited to exchanging and generating information, is made up basically of academic centers, although its membership has grown constantly since the end of the 1990s on the basis of its new strategic aims.⁴ The new objectives state that as a network of both research centers and socially active organizations, CRIES must above all work within the framework of the perspectives and interests of civil society in the Greater Caribbean region. In recent

years, the network has sought to contribute to the development of an alternative integration project in the region, a more democratic and participatory alternative. However, because of its current leadership, the extent of the association's mandate will have to be redefined to go beyond regional limits.

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This may be due to the increasing subordination of Greater Caribbean integration to global and hemispheric processes like the creation of the Free Trade Area of the Americas.⁵

OTHER NETWORKS

The Caribbean People's Development Agency (CARIPEDA), one of the first "transnational" networks of the English-speaking Caribbean with its headquarters in San Vicente, was founded in 1983 as a sub-regional network to answer the needs of information exchange and dissemination and skill and experience development among non-governmental agencies committed to social development.

The Caribbean Network Integrated Rural Development, based in Trinidad and Tobago, was established in December 1985 and officially launched

in Jamaica in March 1988. Its objectives are mainly to promote, support and transform rural development in the Caribbean.

The foundation and development of multinational NGO networks in the English-speaking Caribbean experienced new impetus in the early 1990s. A clear example was the creation in 1991 of the Caribbean Policy Development Centre (CPDC), based in Barbados. The CPDC is probably the farthest reaching network of networks of NGOs, new social movements and academic centers there at the moment. CPDC's membership is made up of regional, sub-regional and national networks or regional institutions from the four main linguistic areas of the Great Caribbean: English, Spanish, French and Dutch.

Generally speaking, the CPDC is oriented to analyzing policies that affect the daily lives of the Caribbean peoples and societies, disseminating that information, contributing to skills development among the Caribbean peoples to have an impact on public policies, in order to support those that are in their interest and change those that are not.

The CPDC has carried out outstandingly diverse and profound actions in the field of policy. Among these actions is its role as the facilitator of the Asian-Caribbean-Pacific (ACP)-Lomé NGO Forum and its participation in the negotiating process of a new post-Lomé accord, as well as in the ministerial assemblies between the ACP and the European Union. Under the leadership of the CPDC Secretariat, progress was made in regrouping the Caribbean Reference Group on External Affairs (CGR), with the participation of CPDC agencies and other civil society organizations from the region like the Ca-

ibbean Community (CARICOM) and the Caribbean Forum (CARIFORO).

The CGR has concentrated on monitoring relations between the ACP countries and the European Union during and after the negotiations following Lomé IV and the Cotonou Accord. In 1999, the CGR hired specialists to lead the studies on these negotiations and civil society's possible impact on them, as well as to evaluate CARICOM's positions, specifically those of the Regional Negotiating Machinery. Supplementary to this, consultations were carried out among different sectors of national civil society in countries like Trinidad and Tobago, the Dominican Republic, Barbados and San Vicente.⁶ The CPCD represents the Caribbean NGOs in the CARICOM's working groups and in its consultation mechanisms (through the Regional Negotiating Machinery), above all with the aim of defining positions about issues like multilateral trade agreements and the Free Trade Area of the Americas.

The CPDC has been coordinating the World Bank's NGO Working Group in the Caribbean and has facilitated its meetings in the area. It has put a priority on women and a gender focus in its cooperation with multilateral NGO networks like Development Alternatives for Women in a New Era (DAWN).

Recently, CPDC's informational work has centered on areas like integration, trade, social development, cultural identity, human rights and institutional development in the Caribbean. In association with the Winward Islands Farmer Association, CPDC has been carrying out a plan for designing alternatives for banana producers in the Eastern Caribbean, given the World Trade Organization's and European Union's policies in this respect. Other studies

coordinated by the CPDC have dealt with problems of local ability to govern and the role of NGOs in the Dominican Republic, Santa Lucía, Trinidad and Tobago and Jamaica. CARICOM has invited CPDC to its yearly summits of heads of state since 1998 to make a

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statement in the name of regional civil society.

As we can see, the networking and cooperation in this sector have broadened out intersocietal integration and that of regional and sub-regional networks of NGOs as international actors. The most recent achievement was the creation of the Greater Caribbean Civil Society Forum, inaugurated in Cartagena de Indias, Colombia, in December 1997.⁷ The forum's technical secretariat is the responsibility of the Caribbean Center for Economic Research Santo Domingo. A fourth conference is planned for 2002.⁸

Lastly, it should be pointed out that in recent years relations between regional and sub-regional networks of NGOs—as umbrella organizations—and intergovernmental institutions, particularly those of the United Nations system, have advanced greatly. For example, in the English-speaking Caribbean, we could point to the growing cooperation

between NGO networks and community-based organizations and UN system agencies like the United Nations Development Program, the Pan American Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization and others on different programs for poverty eradication, sustainable development, the environment and other issues.⁹

BRIEF BALANCE SHEET

Seemingly, the key element of legitimacy and social recognition common to the main “transnational” NGO networks based in the Greater Caribbean is having formed alliances “from below” particularly from the 1980s on, based on community initiatives, projects and social movements, and having experienced significant expansion in the 1990s. This would allow us to explain to a great extent the advances in the sphere of intersocietal integration.¹⁰

The donations of funds, resources and expertise have played a decisive role in the formation, development and staying power of the main networks. An important part of their funding has come from international contributions based in the United States, Canada and Europe, from United Nations agencies and from multilateral and hemispheric organizations like the World Bank and the Interamerican Development Bank, among others.

In general—although there are exceptions—these networks seem to have been able to carry out their activities and programs with a broad margin of autonomy, in accordance with their own objectives and their members' interests. Another common element is that they have managed to retain im-

portant margins of independence with regard both to their governments and donor organizations.

Lastly, seemingly, their transparent methods of accountability have made it possible for the main NGO networks of networks and other social actors of the Greater Caribbean to proceed successfully with the fund raising efforts so key to their existence and development, despite a shrinking number of donors due, among other reasons, to the recent concentration of international cooperation on other areas like Eastern Europe. **MM**

NOTES

¹ Francine Jácome, comp., "La 'otra' integración: procesos intersociales y parlamentos regio-

nales en el Gran Caribe," *Cuadernos del Invesp* 4 (paper read at the First Forum of Greater Caribbean Civil Society held in Caracas, 1998).

² Ibid.

³ Andrés Serbín, "La sociedad civil transnacional y los desafíos de la globalización," Bruno Podestá, Manuel Gómez Galán et al., comps., *Ciudadanía y mundialización. La sociedad civil ante la integración regional* (Madrid: CEFIR-CIDEAL-INVESP, 2000).

⁴ CRIES membership includes 54 academic centers and national, regional and sub-regional NGOs based in 17 countries of the area.

⁵ In 2000, CRIES was officially accepted as a social actor by the Association of Caribbean States, and in 2001, by the Organization of American States.

⁶ Caribbean Policy Development Centre, *Annual Report-Overview* (Bridgetown: CPDC, 1999).

⁷ Francine Jácome, "El Foro Permanente de la Sociedad Civil del Gran Caribe: evaluación preliminar," Francine Jácome, Andrés Serbín and Antonio Romero, comps., *Anuario de la Integración Regional en el Gran Caribe 1* (Caracas: CRIES-INVESP-CIEI-Nueva Sociedad, 2000), pp. 179-198.

⁸ *Primer Foro de la Sociedad Civil del Gran Caribe. Documentos* (Caracas: CRIES-INVESP, 1998); and *Segundo Foro de la Sociedad Civil del Gran Caribe. Documentos* (Caracas: INVESP, 1999).

⁹ See the CPDC's *Annual Reports* 1995, 1996, 1996-1997, 1999 and 2000; and a study on CARICOM integration, "The Role of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs)," commissioned by the CARICOM Secretariat, funded by the UNDP and prepared by consultant Rasleigh Jackson, published in May 1998.

¹⁰ Carrie A. Meyer, *The Economics and Politics of NGOs in Latin America* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1999).