

The Development GAP and the Struggle for Economic Justice

A Message from the Board of Directors' Southern Members June 2004

Those of us who live and work for social change in the Third World, or the South, have been profoundly sobered by the nature and intensification of the role that the United States has been playing in the world during this era of rapid globalization. Though always affected by American policy, we have seen, especially over the past year, that the United States is willing to accept few limits on the use of its power to achieve its economic objectives.

The increased alienation and instability that spawned the events of 9/11 and that have intensified as a result of subsequent U.S. actions have made frighteningly clear the continued failure of American political institutions to grasp the pervasive anger and resentment that the U.S. policy agenda has engendered around the world. Never has it been more important for us to work, in the context of South-North collaboration, with our U.S. brethren to confront these realities in the struggle for economic justice and for our own development.

Over the past quarter century, no U.S. organization has worked more respectfully and effectively, nor more extensively and creatively, with civil-society organizations and networks across Latin America, the Caribbean, Africa and Asia than The Development GAP. Most pointedly, it has helped us in our attempt to overcome the formidable obstacles to our economic and political self-determination. While it is generally expected today that Northern NGOs will involve, if not defer to, organizations in the South in representing their economic development agenda, The Development GAP began setting precedents and standards for the NGO community as far back as the 1970s through its injection of Southern civil-society participation, input, realities and priorities into Northern aid programs and policymaking. Indeed, the need to fill this knowledge and advocacy gap in the North was the very basis for the creation of the organization.

Since its inception in 1976, The Development GAP has been in the vanguard in the non-governmental community in the United States in the development, implementation, demonstration and promotion of new modes of collaboration with, and support for, Southern counterparts. By forging these partnerships, by engaging and creating access to official institutions, by directing resources -- by now in the tens of millions of dollars -- to Southern civil-society endeavors and by creating new institutions that foster Southern-defined development, help build Southern civil-society capacity, provide platforms for Southern advocacy, and hold Northern official institutions accountable, The Development GAP has continually made innovative and lasting contributions to our common endeavor to democratize Southern development and national and global economic policymaking.

In the 1970s, for example, it broke new ground as advocacy consultants at the World Bank by developing projects with, and channeling millions of dollars to, civil-society organizations in Latin America. By creating a new government corporation, the African Development Foundation, through the U.S. Congress, The Development GAP also enabled the flow of additional millions every year to grassroots development initiatives. In the early 1980s, it began

its ten-year defense of the grant-making independence of the ADF's Latin America counterpart, the Inter-American Foundation, from political attack. It also extended to Africa and the Middle East its success in integrating grassroots and other non-governmental organizations in official aid programming. In the process, it helped build Southern institutional capacity, most notably in the role it played in laying the groundwork for the people's financial institution, the Kenyan Rural Enterprise Programme (K-REP).

When the Reagan Administration began more than 20 years ago to link foreign aid and official lending to economic-policy conditions and to launch major free-trade and investment initiatives, The Development GAP, in consultation with its Southern partners, made a fundamental shift in its modus operandi to respond to this globalization thrust by the United States and the international institutions it dominates. Due to its close relationships with Southern organizations, it was years ahead of most other Northern organizations in recognizing and warning about the threat of structural adjustment and in advocating and facilitating the extensions of popular participation to economic policymaking. It democratized trade policymaking by involving a myriad of Caribbean sectors with the U.S. Congress in public fora in the region on the Caribbean Basin Initiative and in the drafting of new policy measures, as well as by supporting the launch of the Caribbean Policy Development Centre.

In the 1990s, The Development GAP extended its participatory trade work to a trilateral citizens' challenge to NAFTA. As coordinator of the U.S. Alliance for Responsible Trade, it helped facilitate a uniquely effective collaboration with civil-society networks in Mexico and Canada. It has since helped expand that trilateral collaboration to the Americas as a whole in the form of the Hemispheric Social Alliance, in which it has played a key cooperative role in the development and promotion of broad-based alternative proposals. At the same time, The Development GAP parlayed its launching of the 50 Years Is Enough Campaign into SAPRI, a global investigation into the impact of World Bank-prescribed economic policies, and into the creation of the Structural Adjustment Participatory Review International Network (SAPRIN), which includes between 100 and 700 organizations from virtually all economic and social sectors in each of ten countries on four continents. In our view, SAPRIN, the HSA and its Mexico-U.S.-Canada predecessor have been exemplary models of South-North networking.

For there to be economic justice, there must be concerted action in the South and North. For all the progress that we have made in the South in establishing the capacity to mobilize and advocate on our own behalf, we need, now more than ever, partners in the North capable of understanding and supporting us in this endeavor by working respectfully in tandem with us and intelligently and aggressively vis-a-vis Northern institutions to address the constraints to our self-determination that lie in the corridors of global power. For this reason, The Development GAP is so important to us in the South. It is unique in the extensive grassroots experience and sensitivity of its founding directors and other staff and in their equally extensive experience with, and understanding of, the multilateral development banks, U.N. organizations, U.S. government agencies, the U.S. Congress and other power centers. Just as importantly, it has been a conscience in the field of international development for a quarter century, and we can count on it and its staff never to compromise their integrity or to forsake us in the South.

We look upon our service on The Development GAP's Board, therefore, as both an important responsibility and as an indication of the organization's commitment to represent and advance, first and foremost, the interests of the people of the South in every endeavor that it undertakes. The four of us have experienced this dedication first hand as members of the staff and/or as close project partners of The Development GAP, and we have all been enriched by the experience, just as citizens' organizations across the South have been enriched by, and continue to benefit from, their involvement with The Development GAP in their quest for economic justice.

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