

Global Civil Society and Canadian NGO Challenges to APEC

Civil society is a complex, abstract and sometimes controversial term, with differing definitions and interpretations in popular and academic literature on international development. "Civil society," according to one analyst, describes peoples and organizations cooperating on processes which actively promote citizenship, good governance, equity and democracy within and among nations "for the common good and social benefit."³ The civil society concept has grown within the international development donor community, ostensibly implying more support for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and grassroots communities recognizing that large scale industrial aid or direct funding to governments alone is inadequate. One study commissioned by APEC Senior Officials for their 1997 meetings referred to "civil society organizations" (CSOs) comparing the APEC process with civil society roles in the UN and other organizations including business and professional associations as CSOs.⁴ Most NGOs in preparing for APEC, however, adopted a narrower definition, referring to civil society as only non-profit, public interest, community-based and socially-oriented groups distinct from government and business or industry actors with direct or indirect profit motives.

A policy working group of the Canadian Organizing Network for the APEC People's Summit defined civil society "to be voluntarily organized associations of people, autonomous of the state and operating outside of the marketplace, that wish to participate collectively in the political, economic and social lives of their communities, nations and regions. Civil society thus includes community development organizations, NGOs, religious organizations, women's groups, trade unions and professional groups."⁵ The

³ From Linda Moffat's review article on "Strengthening Civil Society: Progressive Strategy of Smokescreen?" in *SAPLink: A Newsletter of South Asia Partnership* (Fall 1997), pp.1-2, discussing a recent workshop series of the same theme which debated the idea.

⁴ See the study "Engagement with Civil Society Organizations by Multilateral Organizations," written by the North South Institute, and commissioned by the APEC SOM Chair Office, 18 August 1997, pp. 1-2

⁵ See p. 2 of "Canada and APEC: Perspectives from Civil Society, a Discussion Paper" by the Policy Working Group of the Canadian Organizing Network for the 1997 People's Summit on APEC, July 30, 1997, prepared at the request of Canada's Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT).