

Lee Bensted, Program Director at Co-Development Canada, a development NGO working in Central and Latin America spoke, accompanied by a slide presentation, about how free trade has impacted grass roots communities within the region. She gave an overview of the failed free trade zones (FTZ) set up in the 1970s and the brutal campaigns of terror in Central America during the 1980s. During the past 15 years neo-liberal economic reforms and resulting economic integration have changed the economic and physical landscape of the region. Economic restructuring is largely driven by SAPs (Structural Adjustment Programs) designed to eliminate debt and stimulate economic growth by promoting FTZs (special zones to manufacture export goods) but with few spin-offs to the local economy. Today, 90% of exports from FTZs in Central America go to the United States. 75% of the workers in FTZs are women.

Lee Bensted then linked trade agreements to the Maquila factories and workers in Central America. She showed how structural adjustment programs were directly linked to increasing poverty in the region – especially amongst women, children, indigenous groups and the elderly. Trade liberalization policies, like those tied to structural adjustment and found in the FTAA, have increased poverty and forced people, especially young women, into insecure, poorly paid or unsafe work. Agricultural policies found in trade agreements have destroyed agricultural livelihoods and increased the workload of women and children as men migrate to find work. Infrequent compliance to laws has resulted in lack of respect for or enforcement of international human rights, labour and environmental laws. She traced ways people in the South are organizing and pressuring for changes. In 1997 thousands of women were involved in drafting a code of ethics (see Appendix IV) which included the principles of economic, labour, individual and political rights. Their struggle for dignity, safety and fair wages continues.

EMERGING THEMES AND KEY POINTS:

Themes emerging during the panel presentations included the need for a fundamental shift in the ideology driving the trade agenda and that negotiations of international trade agreements should be open, transparent and inclusive of those who are impacted by, or required to implement, these trade policies.

During the afternoon session participants were tasked in small groups to identify ideas, policy options and ways the Canadian government could promote the three principles of democracy, sustainability and poverty reduction. The following are some of the key points supported by roundtable participants:

Strengthening of Democracy: “raise the floor – to a higher standard of democracy”

Re-think and restructure trade negotiation processes and conflict resolution practices: There needs to be a re-thinking of how trade negotiations currently take place. Ideas to change, improve and include democratic principles need to be introduced to the existing trade negotiating structures. Dispute resolution in the FTAA is essentially voluntary compliance and lacks the teeth to be taken seriously. It needs a new structure. Studying Canadian courts and Canadian organizations that specialize in skills training in conflict resolution could improve dispute resolution. Any interpretation through dispute resolution should be guided by the language of civil society values such as respect, fairness, justice and accountability.

Transparent, Participatory and Inclusive: Trade negotiations should be open and consultative and provide opportunities for civil society, not just business, to be heard. Information should be available to the broader public – especially to those who wish to discuss issues in more depth and who need more time for analysis and deeper study to develop alternatives and ideas.

Access and Control: Municipal, provincial and federal governments should retain their autonomy rather than moving to greater control of the global agenda by corporations. There should be public control of economies and devolution of powers to municipalities to look after themselves and have the final say on issues that impact the