

REPORT: Roundtable on Canada and Trade in the Americas

Identifying Practices that Support the Outlined Principles of the Free Trade Area of the Americas draft agreement

April 6, 2001

Vancouver, British Columbia

On April 6, 2001, the British Columbia Council for International Cooperation (BCCIC) organized a roundtable discussion on Canada and the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA). Just weeks away from the Summit of the Americas hosted by Canada in Quebec City, this was a timely and important piece in the growing dialogue around the FTAA. Representatives from different sectors within civil society and government came together at Simon Fraser University at Harbourside in downtown Vancouver to discuss trade agreements and the integration of the global economy. They wrestled with ways the FTAA supports or constrains the three fundamental principles of "strengthening democracy, eradicating poverty and guaranteeing sustainable development" introduced at the Miami Conference in 1994. Lawyers, students, academics, non-governmental organizations involved in humanitarian and sustainable development, seniors, labour leaders, municipal and provincial government representatives, community activists, the Vancouver Board of Trade, cooperatives and socially responsible businesses were heard during the roundtable. Some thought trade agreements should be banned and others had ideas for reforming what presently exists. The following account is a summary report of themes, concerns and issues raised during the introductory panel, small group discussions and final plenary session.

PREPARATION AND SETTING THE CONTEXT:

In order to prepare participants for the roundtable discussions several advance documents were distributed as part of the agenda package. These documents included: A speech on the FTAA by Pierre Pettigrew, Minister for International Trade; a summary of "Inside the Fortress: What's Going on at the FTAA Negotiations" by Marc Lee, Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives; and "Canada and the FTAA: the Hemispheric Bloc Temptation" by Jean Daudelin and Mareen Molot of the North-South Institute and the Norman Patterson School for International Affairs. Copies of these documents are attached with this report (see Appendix IV).

The objective of the roundtable was to discuss the kinds of policies the federal government should be pursuing in order to promote the three fundamental principles of "strengthening democracy, eradicating poverty and guaranteeing sustainable development". This was an opportunity to put forward concerns and issues from western Canada, identify some policy options and new ideas from civil society and emphasize cross-cutting and key themes. The results will be sent to the Canadian Centre for Foreign Policy Development based at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade in Ottawa.

To set the context and stimulate discussion at the roundtable, four panelists made presentations on topics such as the history of free trade, the current status of free trade discussions, issues of concern to the provincial government and the impact of free trade on Latin America and those at the community level.

Marc Lee, research economist with the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (BC office) gave an overview of how free trade has been arrived at as of today and outlined some of the major issues confronting the current negotiations. Nine negotiating groups, whose work has mainly been accomplished by civil servants, have been meeting regularly since 1998. The FTAA draft text to date is heavily bracketed and civil society and the general public has not had access to the content of the negotiations. The upcoming Quebec Summit will provide a high level endorsement to a very complex trade agreement. Marc Lee explained the current discussions have given more power and privilege to business and corporations, especially in such areas as intellectual property rights, and that citizens haven't had an opportunity to express or make their own choices during this process.