Regionalism, social policy and social development: Findings and policy lessons from the Alternative Regionalisms research programme

“Integration for and from the People is necessary and possible!”

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First draft for discussion
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Abstract:

The challenge of articulating and constructing development alternatives to the current neo-liberal globalisation paradigm has become a central concern on the agenda of social movements and civil society organisations in recent years. A number of factors have contributed to this: the deepening crisis of neoliberal globalisation; major economic crises (Argentina, Russia, Asia), and increasing challenges to the multilateral Institutions - World Trade Organisation (WTO), World Bank (WB) and the International Monetary Fund Fund (IMF); increasing poverty globally, generated by aggressive policies of trade liberalisation and investment, privatisation and structural adjustment and military unilateralism of the US.

While aggressively pursuing global integration through the WTO, both the US and EU are simultaneously pursuing this through regional strategies - e.g through the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) or the proposed Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA) created by the US. At the same time European governments and business corporations are focused on the enlargement of the European Union (EU) itself, and pursuing several Free Trade Agreements or so-called Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) across the regions of the South.

In the simultaneously globalised-and-regionalised world economy, South regional blocs such as MERCOSUR are revitalising and strengthening their existing regional formations to resist the Northern imposed ‘regionalisation’ (e.g MERCOSUR in relation to the US’ FTAA) and as a survival imperative in an increasingly competitive and hostile global environment. Others, such as SADC and ASEAN seem to have accommodated to the neo-liberal policies being pushed by their aid and trade ‘partners’ in the North. At the same time, new South-South inter-governmental initiatives are developing e.g. ALBA, the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas and the IBSA cooperation between India, Brazil and South Africa.

All these developments are adding urgency and greater impetus to the need for developing joint responses from civil society actors. Can these regional formations be moved beyond a too narrow focus on trade and economic growth, and become instead part of the shaping of comprehensive alternative development paradigms? What role can social movements and other civil society organizations play in democratising and re-shaping the substantive policy re-orientation of these and other potential regional formations?

This paper will address these questions from the perspective of inter-regional programmes of comparative regional research/analysis and interactive political engagements through innovative South-South and South-North Peoples’ Dialogues.
Introduction

It has long been recognised by governments and civil society organisations (CSOs)\(^1\) in the countries of the South that the regrouping of their countries into larger economic units is an important basis for effective and sustainable development. However more recently there is a re-examination of the significance and potential of South regionalisms. This re-emergence of South regionalisms on the international political agenda has been influenced by a number of factors:

- Delegitimation of the policies and institutions of global economic governance – the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and World Trade Organisation (WTO) – by successive economic and financial crises (Asia, Russia and Argentina) and statistics on increasing world poverty.

- From Cancun to Hong Kong, both the United States (US) and the European Union (EU) have given strong emphasis to inter-regional strategies and to bi-lateral and inter-regional trade agreements while at the same time unrelentingly pursuing negotiations at the multilateral level in the WTO.

- Across the South, governments and societies are facing the contradictory options posed by the growing tension between current global governance and regional governance. The most crucial choices for many countries is between either strengthening regional agreements and the social dimensions attached to them – such as MERCOSUR – or dissolving regional frameworks of governance in favour of joining wider market-driven trading blocks – such as the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA) or for some of the countries in the Southern African Development Community (SADC), joining the Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) being pushed by the EU. (Keet, 2004).

- Southern countries have been facing fierce competition between the two major economic and political players in the global arena: the US and the EU. Despite the fact that a) the EU integration project claimed, from the outset, to forge a middle ground between the US model of capitalism across the Atlantic and the authoritarian socialism to the East, and that b) the EU has been perceived in the South as a model of a socially regulated region, it is important to recognise that Europe is pursuing policies as aggressive and damaging to Latin America (LA), Asia and Africa as the ones pushed by the US. EU policies have been predicated on the extractive and exploitative relationship, which replaced Europe’s old colonial relationship in the global areas – in Latin America, Africa and Asia. Furthermore, Europe was and is a major player together with the US in the global institutions (WB, IMF and WTO), which are the dominant engines of the neoliberal globalalist economic project.

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\(^{1}\) CSOs is used in this context as a generic term to refer to a wide range of social movements and civil society networks and organisations both sectoral (labour, women, farmers, indigenous peoples) and thematic (human, economic, social, cultural and political rights, trade, environment, peace, development).
Meanwhile, the EU is currently experiencing its most major political crisis. As the EU has enlarged, the democratic deficit in its structures has not been adequately addressed. The European Parliament is almost powerless on all crucial policy issues and is marginalised by the powerful European Commission. Increasingly, European Transnational Corporations (TNCs) have positioned themselves as powerful political actors in EU policy making (Balanya et al., 2000). This democratic deficit together with an increasingly neo-liberal economic policy (Lisbon Agenda, 2000), growing unemployment and substantive down-sizing of the social dimension resulted in the shock No Referendum on the EU Constitution in France and the Netherlands in 2005. In rejecting the proposed EU Constitution, citizens were not rejecting regional integration per se but insisting that a viable EU regional integration needed “to include on the one hand a widening of the strategic scope to include with equal weight economic, social and ecological perspectives, and to establish a real – as opposed to rhetoric - balance between the economic, social, and ecological dimensions of social life and European integration” (Euro Memorandum Group, 2005: 3).

These developments in the South as well as in the North, have led social movements and civil society organisations to give renewed attention to Regionalisms – as part of what Walden Bello calls ‘de-globalistion’ and also as key components in developing a more plural and multi-polar system of global governance, democratisation and development. Social Movements and civil society networks over the last decade have not only deepened their critique of the neo-liberal paradigm of globalisation but have, in the past five years, developed a global economic justice and peace movement (what the New York Times reporter Patrick Tyler (2003) called “the other super power”). They have also engaged in building development alternatives from below at local, national, regional and international level, including the World Social Forum process.

But, it is not only the social movements and civil society organisations who have responded to this changing reality in the international arena, but the Southern governments have also initiated the creation of alternative regional strategies and projects. These reactions are mainly intending to respond to the challenges pose by the North and to strengthen their position in the structure of global governance. The most significant of the Southern government initiatives are:

- Southern governments, as in the G20 and G90, have constituted themselves within the WTO (successfully in Cancun) as asserting South interests against an aggressive US and EU led trade liberalisation and privatisation agenda and held the potential of changing the balance of forces in the global trade regime.

- Other inter-governmental South-South initiatives, which have emerged in recent years, are: the India-Brazil-South Africa Forum (IBSA), the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) and the South American Community of Nations within Latin America.
• Key governments in MERCOSUR, SADC, and ASEAN\(^2\) have also taken significant initiatives to strengthen regional integration as a response to the growing power and assertiveness of regional groupings created by the richest and most powerful countries in the world, namely the North American Free Trade Area (NAFTA) created by the US, and the development of the EU and its enlargement to the East as well as countering the FTAA or the EPAs.

The Alternative Regionalisms project (in its first phase of implementation) is framed in the context of a social movement and civil society based commitment and search for Alternative regional development strategies addressing the current neo-liberal paradigm of globalisation and regionalisation. While emerging out of the broad social movement and civil society engagement with ‘building another world’, the project addresses the issues of alternative development strategies at the regional level. Social movements and civil society organisations in the MERCOSUR and SADC regions, in consultation with counterparts in Asia and Europe have initiated this project in late 2004.

This Paper drawing extensively from the key common documents of the Project (Peoples’ Dialogue Reference Group, 2004a,b), will examine the current economic and political conjuncture; the responses of both North and South regional strategies; the emergence of new South-South strategies and formations; the role of civil society actors in the current era of globalisation and regionalisation and the strategic aims of the Peoples’ Alternative Regionalisms Research/Advocacy project – its methodologies, initial outcomes and insights\(^3\).

Social Movement and Civil Society actors in an era of globalisation

In the current context of international relations, the twin processes of globalisation and regionalisation have modified and changed the dynamics implicit in the constitution of stakeholders. In the current conjuncture, it is now possible to talk of a *global* or *regional civil society*, which no longer has the nation state as the only point of reference (Pearce, 2000).

Besides governments, there are now other significant stakeholders in the policy making arenas. Non-state actors playing a significant in the current phase of globalisation include diverse social movements and civil society organisations - community-based organisations, human rights groups, development organisations, policy research institutes,

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\(^{2}\) MERCOSUR denotes the Market of the Southern Cone, encompassing Brasil, Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay, and associate members Chile & Bolivia with Secretariat in Uruguay. SADC refers to the Southern African Development Community now encompassing 14 countries – Angola, Botswana, Democratic Republic of Congo, Lesotho, Malawi, Mauritius, Mozambique, Namibia, Seychelles, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Zambia, Zimbabwe with Secretariat in Botswana. ASEAN stands for Association of Southeast Asian Nations, now grouping 10 countries: Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand, Brunei Darussalam, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia and Myanmar.

\(^{3}\) The author acknowledges the substantive theoretical work of the partner organisations (AIDC, IBASE, Focus on the Global South, RMALC, HSA) in both the conceptualisation and implementation of the Project and the contributions of TNI colleagues Pietje Vervest and Cecilia Olivet in the preparation of the paper.
environmental organisations, consumers associations, peasant and farmers’ organisations, trade unions and other labour-related bodies, women’s organisations, indigenous peoples organisations, and many others.

These non-state actors have been forming international networks in their respective fields and within their different regions and across regions. These dynamic movements have arisen in response to the need to deepen democratisation, engage governments and challenge trade agreements as instruments of the current market-led restructuring of global economic institutions and policies as well as oppose the militarised unilateralism of the US.

Currently, non-state social and economic actors have weak access to regional decision-making processes, and participate mostly indirectly in regional governance through the pressures they are able to bring to bear on their respective governments. Despite the limited possibilities for civic engagement offered by institutional spaces within regional agreements, the only actors to occupy a seat in official negotiation tables are the national governments. Citizens’ participation in these processes is generally channelled through a segmented and not fully representative delegation of ‘civil society’, based on the traditional tripartite corporatist model (organised labour, organised business and government).

The departure point of this Alternative Regionalisms initiative is that social movements and civil society organisations can effectively influence policy-making within regional integration processes, based on knowledge, concrete and viable proposals, and effective campaigning.

**Towards a Peoples’ Alternative Regionalisms**

The above government-to-government, country-to-country and region-to-region interactions carry significant implications for the lives of the peoples of these countries and regions and demand equivalent people-to-people interactions, sharing of information and experiences, and building of solidarity and cooperative relations between themselves in all sectors and at all levels.

Whether promoted by the governments of the North or the South, the recent developments in regional and inter-regional initiatives have given urgency and greater impetus to social movement analysts and activists to develop common strategies and programs. These many changes and challenges are also:

- reinforcing the importance of political cooperation through cross-border initiatives between civil society organisations, themselves, for direct people-driven processes in all these spheres in their regions;
- as well as raising more acutely the challenges posed in relation to the official inter-governmental regionalisation processes and the official structures that have been created over the years - but which are being targeted (by the US, the EU,
business elites and corporations) to become further instruments of neo-liberal globalisation.

Identifying Strategic Questions

In this context, the Alternative Regionalism Project proposes to build on popular contacts and organisational relations already existing within and between the MERCOSUR and SADC and Asian regions and bring together a range of civil society organisations in a series of *Peoples’ Dialogues* to pose and discuss key strategic questions facing them, their governments, their countries and regions. These challenging questions include:

- Taking as reference the political and economic aspects involved, what policies and programs could make these regions effective frameworks for different intra-regional development programs and relations that are balanced in terms of race and gender and equitable, democratic, social and sustainable?
- What are the necessary political and economic policies and programs to develop different inter-regional South-South political and economic relations that are equitable and sustainable and that do not replicate the currently dominant international economic relations?
- What are the necessary political and economic strategies to make these regions and inter-regional agreements effective strategic bases from which to challenge and change, or incrementally undermine the currently dominant global system and regime?
- How do social movements and peoples organisations create the necessary political will and commitment by the governments concerned within their countries and within their regions - or, if necessary create different governments - to actively build and effectively use these regions economically and politically?
- How can the respective peoples organisations cooperate to develop the necessary civil society political capacities in all sectors and at all levels to strengthen their own independent role, and to achieve government programmes that genuinely answer to peoples needs and rights?
- How do popular organisations in these regions develop the economic, environmental, social, cultural, security and political peoples alternatives in analyses – and in concrete practice to create the alternatives to be directly implemented on the ground and to be implemented by governments?

Articulating Methodologies & Principles

The Project methodology, which encompasses differentiated and various types of interlinked activities, is conceived in the form of a networked *Peoples’ Dialogue* within and between regions, among different movements and sectors spreading outwards as new actors join and participate in the dialogue.

The *Peoples’ Dialogue* is animated by fundamental and motivating principles (Peoples’ Dialogue Reference Group, 2004a,b) and a commitment to:
• Citizens' democratic participation, respect for diversity, and solidarity among peoples
• The centrality of people's rights and human rights, the right to gender equity and inclusion for all, human security;
• Environmental and economic sustainability and social justice

The Peoples Dialogue, while drawing on a diversity of methods identifies three key areas of common work:

**The Construction of Collective Knowledge**

In order to make the dialogue itself possible, one first requirement is to organise ways to exchange experience and, together, seek a collective understanding of ongoing processes. This entails firstly an effort to construct a shared analysis, which from the outset raises the political problem of "translation". The categories that each movement or organisation, each network or coalition, applies in its analysis and action embody socio-cultural identities and political specifics that have to be mutually understood in order to be shared.

Thematic workshops and exchange visits are the main in constructing such collective knowledge.

**Formulation of Alternative Proposals**

This set of activities is central to the Peoples' Dialogue. Exchange and mutual understanding are necessary, but not sufficient, conditions. The bases have to be laid for agreement among the participants in the dialogue as to the alternatives for regionalisms and regional development to confront dominant capitalist globalisation. Three modalities of activity will initially guide the implementation of the Peoples Dialogue:

**Commissioned Research for the following specific studies:**

a) The recent developments in key regions are selected as the initial focus for this programme, namely MERCOSUR in South America, SADC in Southern Africa and ASEAN in South-East Asia, with a view to evaluating their potential for addressing the current challenges of regional development. In addition to more focused economic analyses and discussion of alternative economic policies and programs this evaluation will consider key issues such as:

• the internal dynamics, leading actors, hegemonic proposals and disputes present in the regional blocs' formative processes;
• the blocs' relationships with the dominant initiatives led by the International Financial Institutions (IFIs) and the WTO;
• the regional blocs negotiations with the US and the EU and the formation of free trade areas
• the human and geo-political (in)security and militarisation index within the respective regions
b) This project intends to include the recent developments in broader South-South cooperation and integration initiatives embracing the above regions - but broader than them in their territorial coverage, economic scale and transformative potential in terms of the global balance of economic and political power. The most significant of these broader initiatives are:

- the formation of the India, Brazil and South Africa (IBSA) cooperation dialogue with projects in many spheres;
- the transformation of the Organisation for African Unity into the African Union aiming towards an eventual full integrated community and political union in Africa;
- the creation of a similar continental process with the Comunidad Sudamericana de Naciones signed in Ayacucho, Peru in December 2004;
- the launching of the ALBA (Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas) by President Chavez during the II Summit of the Americas in QUEBEC (2001);
- the forging of the China-ASEAN and India-ASEAN Agreements.

All these (sub)regional, regional and continental initiatives will be assessed in terms of:
- the potential for new South-South economic and political strategies/initiatives
- the opening up a new space and scope for the exercise of citizens' participation

**Participatory action research**

Complementary to the commissioned Research is the *Participatory Action Research* by the movements, organisations, networks and coalitions involved in the *Peoples Dialogue*. The research action is focused on mapping the main movements and peoples’ organisations developing regional networks, strategies and alternative proposals as well as documenting the significant development alternatives being built on the ground. This mapping will be systematized in regional and cross-regional Seminars scheduled for formulating comprehensive alternatives and defining intermediate and longer term strategies.

It is intended to identify consensus and divergence among the participants in the dialogue in order to define a platform of citizens' action.

**Construction of Political Strategies for Action & Promoting Public Debate**

The *Peoples' Dialogue* is strongly committed to action to achieve change and to strengthen a peoples' perspective in the definition of alternative models of development with equity and sustainability. For that purpose, the whole process of the dialogue entails a permanent concern to intervene in public debate with advocacy and lobbying directed to governments and organizations, particularly at intra- and inter-regional negotiation events and at those led by multilateral organisations. These activities can be set out as follows:

- *Communication strategy*. The Project is formulating and implementing a communication strategy, both to facilitate dialogue, availing itself of the new
information and communication technologies, and to socialize the accumulated gains of the dialogue process among the widest possible range of civil society organisations, among politicians, governments and regional bodies, among multilateral organisations and among the general public.

- Giving visibility to the advances in the dialogue at local, regional and world events such as the World Social Forum. The movements and organizations participating in the dialogue will be encouraged to take an active part in the various moments of the World Social Forum in order to make the dialogue and what it proposes in terms of alternatives more widely known and to increasingly involve new civil actors in the dialogue process itself.

- Intervention in official negotiation processes. Whether by taking advantage of opportunities to participate in one way or another in the negotiating process of regional agreements (MERCOSUR, SADC, ASEAN, SAARC), or of agreements to set up free trade areas, of the WTO, the IBSA or the ALBA, or by organising parallel events and taking part in public lobbying rallies, the Peoples’ Dialogue seeks to be recognised and heard at the official and inter-governmental forums. Negotiating and expanding the political and institutional space for civil society-government inter-face and dialogue is one of the strategic goals of the project.

Specific Priorities on the Research Agenda

In the context of a project, such as this, aimed at delineating comprehensive alternative development strategies, it was agreed that the project would, at the outset, be based on the two main 'dimensions' - the rural and the urban - of the economies involved, and the complex sets of related issues and challenges entailed in each.

The Rural

The one 'way in' towards providing alternative perspectives on development would be through engagement on and within the rural dimension. This would include

- the nature of agricultural production (large-scale, medium and small; market-orientated or subsistence, internally-focused or internationally oriented etc) and what could be the local, national and regional alternatives - already in practice on the ground, or proposed - particularly in relation to family/community and national/regional food security and sovereignty;
- the nature and distribution of land-ownership (state/public, private, family, cooperative, or community/communal) and what are the alternatives being proposed or put into practice, and what are the social movements emerging and acting on land rights, land usage and land protection, as well as general rural development/transformation at local, national and regional levels;
- the nature and distribution of, and access to water, forestry, fisheries and related resources, and the local, national and cross-border/regional organisations and popular movements active in these areas, particularly in relation to livelihood needs and in the context of environmental sustainability and equity;
- the nature and distribution of other forms of rural employment (over and above those engaged in small scale independent/family agricultural production) such as
on private farms/plantations, or public wildlife, forest or wetlands conservation, tourist, transport, cultural and other services.

The Urban
The second ‘way in’ towards creating alternative development strategies is through engagement on and within the urban dimension. This would include:

- the nature and location of industrial production (manufacturing, mining and related; internally or externally oriented; labour or capital intensive etc etc) and what could be the local, national and cross-border alternatives for complementary or combined cross-border regional production strategies and trade;
- the nature and sources of financial resources and investment (state/public or private, domestic or foreign, FDI or other forms of capital movements etc) and what could be the alternative national and regional policies on mobilising and orientating financial resources;
- the scale and distribution of urban employment/unemployment (in production and services, formal or informal, local/stable or migrant/transitory etc) and what are the perspectives on private/corporate, state/public, local/independent, political economic and social agencies in employment creation and worker rights at workplace, local, national and regional levels;
- the nature and distribution of labour organisation, trade union and related bodies, and their role in and in relation to proposed alternatives on all the above.

It is envisaged that these two main entry points or approaches or 'ways in' towards alternative development strategies entail:

- analyses or overviews of the main features and key issues in the broad rural or urban sectors in each country or region overall;
- the mapping of existing alternatives in strategic sectors – e.g. in reclaiming Public Water; energy and natural resources;
- the identification and engagement of some key research bodies and popular activist organisations involved in these areas and on these issues;
- the development of innovative methods of 'translation' of the respective experiences and a creative new methodology of dialogue and solidarity approaches.

While the Research is on-going, (now in the first phase of implementation in the MERCOSUR and SADC), the process of Peoples’ Dialogues is being simultaneously constructed along two axis:

The South-South Peoples’ Dialogue: Social movements, trade unions and civil society organisations within and between MERCOSUR and SADC are already implementing the first phase of the Research. Regional networks, such as CUT, REBRIP in MERCOSUR and SATUCC and SAPSN in SADC, are working towards the creation of a dynamic Peoples’ Dialogue on regional development options and strategic possibilities for these regions to become an economic and political base to deal with local, national and inter-regional development challenges and to deal more effectively with the currently dominant neo-liberal global economy. The Asian dimension of the People’s Dialogue is
still being explored – with consultations being held in Hong Kong in December 2005 and in Mumbai, February 2006. Across Asia, and within its sub-regions ASEAN, or ASEAN plus 3, and SAARC, there is a dense and dynamic civil society and spectrum of social movements as was demonstrated at the WSF 4 in Mumbai (2004) and in Hong Kong at the 6th WTO Ministerial in December 2005.

**The South-North People’s Dialogue:** the Latin America-Europe dimension of this has been initiated in Guadalajara in May 2004 as an *Enlazando Alternativas* bi-regional network challenging the role of neo-liberal corporate rule both in Europe and in Latin America and the current unjust Trade Agreements between the EU and the regions of LA. Drawing lessons from the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA) and its successful campaign on the FTAA, the *Enlazando Alternativas* network is likewise asserting that “Another integration is necessary and possible” (III People’s Summit, 2005) and committed to contributing to the construction of a new era of equitable economic and political relations between Europe and LA. Similarly the *Asia-Europe People’s Forum*, has been contesting the corporate driven relations between EU and Asia as mediated in the ASEM and demanding the transformation of the ASEM agenda as well as the recognition of autonomous civil society and social movements as essential partners in alternative development.

As I indicated at the outset, this challenging project is taking place in a context of unprecedented dynamism of social movements and civil society probably most highly visible at the World and Regional Social Forums. The *Peoples’ Dialogue* on “Alternative Regionalisms” aims to accompany this process and to strengthen it.
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