

BRUNCH
“Activism at the UN”
June 2003

After a brief introduction to the Wisdom at Work project and a round of introductions, the following are highlights of the interventions made:

Jem Bendell, Consultant at UNRISD and part-time activist, spoke on his experience in activism. He stressed in particular the value of direct action versus the increasingly media-oriented protests and "protest tourism" which characterise recent demonstrations.

Brunch participants noted that it was not useful to conceive of the anti-globalisation movement as a coherent group, since it portrayed such a diversity of interests. It was debated that what perhaps united them was the search for social and economic justice but this was not clearly articulated. Furthermore, the movement was not "anti-globalisation" per se, and in fact globalisation itself gave rise to their being, but rather its negative effects, and this was not stressed.

Kai Lashley, Consultant with WHO and part-time activist, noted that media interest had tended to focus on the violence attendant on the protests, while sidelining substantive concerns. He also bemoaned the fact that many protestors themselves were in fact ill-informed about the substantive issues at stake for the events at which they demonstrated, and suggested that information sessions for protestors and general awareness building should constitute a fundamental component of any attempt to make the movement effective.

Hamish Jenkins, Programme Officer at the UN Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS), shared his insights on some of the trends in the anti-globalisation movement, and how this has fed into the UN. He asserted that indeed the movement was not united which meant that their power as a force for change was compromised, and many meaningful causes did not get the attention they deserved, such as that for taxing investment flows. In contrast, the international network of institutions and businesses adhering to the Washington Consensus model of socio-economic policy making made for a formidable target of change, and so far impacts had not meaningfully penetrated. He suggested that it was perhaps now time to step back and reflect on the future of the movement, and what strategy could be effective. While some of the movement's recommendations for alternative approaches had been well received by some parts of the UN, many other parts of the system, notably at the senior management level, remained resistant to incorporating elements which could threaten the status quo.

Some of the group posited that the movement could have no impact in so far as it was not making any concrete proposals to the organisations with which it allegedly had grievances, such as the WTO, and that progress could be made if specific constructive propositions were made. Others emphasised that the movement essentially sought policy change, and in that sense fundamentally sought to appeal to or confront the state system in so far as policy-making rested with the state.

The relative weakness of the UN compared to particular state powers was pointed out as evident in some instances, and the part to be played by the UN questioned. One participant shared with the group that she was working on a paper which posited that the UN could only serve as an interlocutor between the state system and the global community, and that its powers and thus impact regarding peacekeeping and other functions were limited. This assertion was refuted by others in the group who noted that this was not inherently the role of the UN but one which it had perhaps de facto assumed over time - the WaW project was one attempt to get back to the principles of its work. Bernice invited participants and others to contribute to her paper on this issue.