

ResIST World Regional Meeting

Rio de Janeiro, 18-20 January 2007

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In 1991, a memo for restricted circulation among staff of the World Bank included the following statement: “Just among us, shouldn’t the World Bank give more incentives to the migration of polluting industries to less developed countries?”

The author of the memo was Lawrence Summers, chief economist of the World Bank. He put forward three reasons for turning peripheral countries into the destination of the environmentally more harmful industrial branches:

1. First, the environment was an “aesthetic” concern, typical of the wealthier social classes;
2. Secondly, most of the poor people do not live long enough to suffer the effects of environmental pollution;
3. and, thirdly, according to economic logic, deaths in impoverished countries may be regarded as having a lower cost than those in rich countries, since residence in the former get lower wages.

This memo, which came to be known as *Summers memo*, ended up circulating beyond the World Bank and had a profoundly negative impact on the institution. The latter tried to deny its environmentally perverse intentions against the poor, explaining that it had been intended as an exercise in provocation. Regardless of the attempt at bearing witness of the institution’s good intentions, the production of the memo assumes and reflects a really existing picture of deep inequality as far as the environmental protection in the planet is concerned.

- Most of the economic initiatives which are most harmful in environmental terms are being directed to poor regions.
- Phenomena of desertification, absence of investment in infrastructures for sewage, absence of policies aimed at controlling the dumping of toxic waste, among other aspects related to harmful environmental conditions, are concentrated in the areas of greatest social and economic deprivation, or in areas inhabited by marginalized ethnic groups.

The term environmental injustice became a key concept to describe the disproportionate imposition of environmental risks on populations with less financial, political and informational resources. The concept was created to counter the representation, which dominated the discourse of the environmental movement for a long time, according to which the ecological crises was global and affected everyone equally. It emerged from the actions of the North American black movement.

In Brazil, the model of development does not only generate inequality; inequality is an essential component of it. In our country, too, there are investments in productive activities which generate perverse socio-environmental impacts. It is not difficult to

understand that workers and the marginalized social groups with lower incomes are those most subject to environmental risks, either because they live in more degraded or polluted areas, or because they are denied access to the natural resources they depend on for a living. Clear examples of this are the many populations who live close to dumping sites for toxic waste or polluting industrial plants or the hundreds of communities expelled from their neighborhoods because of the construction of large hydroelectric projects, large plantations of soya or eucalyptus, for mineral extraction and for extraction of timber.

The perception of these issues was at the origin, in 2001, of the Brazilian Network for Environmental justice. The network now includes environmentalist entities, academic researchers, urban trade unions, neighborhood movements, indigenous organizations and NGO's. Its objective has been to denounce the logic of unequal distribution of environmental impacts, which is the outcome of the discrimination or omission by governments, multilateral agencies and companies, forged by a model of development which does not take into account the social uses of environmental resources and the different meanings they have for each community.

This means that at the origin of the actions promoted or carried out by the network is the understanding that whereas different social groups or communities will endow the environment with different uses and meanings – a river, for instance, has a very different meaning for indigenous communities and for companies which produce electricity -, these will be disregarded when the time comes to decide on the implementation of a project, due to current power relations in society. Non-capitalist forms of production, other possible development projects (such as diversified family farming, community production projects, areas for collective access, reserves protected against extraction) will be pushed to the margins of the so-called development process, or are regarded, at best, as residual projects, which tend to be overcome as obstacle to a development model which has proved to be predatory on the environment and socially exclusionary.

This is why the actions of the network have been based on the denouncing of the unequal distribution of socioenvironmental impacts. We believe that environmental conflicts and social struggles involving environmental issues can be very important for changes in the distribution of power in society, for they claim the recognition and valuing of different ways of living, of organizing, of producing and of relating. Through these struggles, we have a chance of changing the distribution of power and of revising the very model of development, putting into question what we should produce, how, for whom and for what, and thus make sure that other values will guide political choices for the country's development.

We know that sustainability is a social construction and thus an object of political struggle. The dispute for the appropriation of natural resources and for its uses is carried out at the local, national, regional and international levels and within a relationship involving social actors with a greater or lesser capacity to build for themselves social legitimacy. The resources for building that legitimacy are, to be sure, unequal. It is thus indispensable to build alliances in society which allow for the accumulation of forces aimed at changing the terms of the struggle in favour of excluded populations, in order to ensure the hegemony of a more sustainable and democratic project of society.

Alliances with academic sectors whose "competent discourse" entails an enormous capacity for challenging the meanings of development thus appear to us as strategic. The power of technical discourse and of economic growth as a basic condition for

overcoming poetry and inequality contributes to the disqualification of the discourses and arguments of the population who suffer the direct impacts of projects which lead to their displacement and to the privatization of their territories.

A striking example is the expansion of the cultivation of soya for export in Brasil. The extensive growing of soya has been constantly encouraged by governmental public policies, and fields covered with vast monocultures of that crop covered, in 2004, 21 million ha, the equivalent to five and a half times the size of the Netherlands (Sclesinger, 2006). In spite of the official discourses on the benefits of the option for export-oriented agriculture, official data show that, between 1999 and 2001, 5.3 million people abandoned the countryside and 941 00 farms, 96% of them with less than 100 ha, were shut down. As a consequence of the expansion of agrobusiness, the number of consulting companies, schools of agronomics and teaching and training programs aimed at responding to the demand for professionals for that sectors is growing. At the same time, however, that the sector is creating new technical specialties, it creates few jobs for professionals, usually highly qualified, thus generating a huge mass of unemployed people in the countryside who won't be able to find any form of work other than informal and ill-paid jobs in towns.

The discourse in support of the trade balance, which justifies a policy of incentives to the production of commodities for export is constructed as well at universities and wrapped in a language that is so inaccessible to lay people, that society will have no choice but to believe that exporting at the cost of rural exodus, increases in poverty and growing violence in towns will generate benefits in the long term.

If social struggle is a crucial way for the deconstruction of that discourse, the alliance with the academy is fundamental in so far as it offers tools for political action. These tools include, among others, a more accessible economic language and the supply of contributions for the deconstruction of technical discourses deployed in conflict situations.

Let us take a concrete example.

For a long time, those working in polluting industries were faced with the difficulty, and many still face it, of mobilizing over environmental issues, due to the threat to their jobs that these mobilizations could entail. Besides the blackmail associated with unemployment, the conditions offered to companies to relocate to areas where they will find more advantages – which often means areas with low levels of environmental and labour regulation – allows them, at the same time, to impose risks on those who are not mobilized to refuse employment at any cost and to demobilize workers and movements struggling against low quality employment, both socially and environmentally. The latter will be charged in the localities where they live to have prevented development and the creation of jobs.

The strong social component found in struggles for environmental justice has brought together these workers and has helped them to become stronger through a process of agenda-building, an agenda of labour and economic issues but a political agenda as well. At the same time, it has allowed social movements to build alliances preventing the attempt, by companies, to transfer their resources and risks.

A particularly interesting case was that of a campaign led by the Network following the denouncing of the intention of the multinational Rhodia of transporting over 3800 tons of waste from the waiting station close to its unit in the state of São Paulo to be incinerated in the state of Bahia.

For Network members, the reason for the transfer of waste was due to the higher standards established by legislation in São Paulo than in Bahia, regarding emissions of toxic substances released by incineration. After having been prevented from incinerating waste in São Paulo, where social movements had achieved tighter laws, Rhodia was trying to get rid of the waste it had produced by sending it to where legislation was less tight and where movements were less mobilized over the issue. Network members launched a campaign directed to governmental bodies and to civil society, which succeeded in mobilizing not just social movements in Bahia, but the Public Prosecutor's Office and local legislative bodies as well. The production of technical advice by independent consultants, some of them professors of local universities in the neighborhood of the Rhodia plant was fundamental to persuade local actors in Bahia and, in particular, public opinion, of the risk they were being exposed to. The result was the blocking of the transportation of waste and of the incineration of part of the waste which was already in place. A further outcome was the creation, within the Network, of a *Permanent Campaign against the transfer of toxic waste between Federation states*.

That permanent campaign now faces a greater challenge. In January 2006, the European Union asked the World Trade Organization to open up an arbitration panel against the decision of the Brazilian government to forbid the import of reformed tyres based on environmental and public health issues. Finding an appropriate destination for that kind of waste is an international problem. On that same year, Europeans were prohibited by an internal directive of the same EU of disposing of their unusable tyres in landfills within the region. They are also expected to reduce the incineration of tyres with the aim of preventing and limiting air pollution, since incineration of this kind of waste releases highly toxic and dangerous gases. These restrictions led the EU to find in the export of its waste the environmentally acceptable solution. The same groups of the Network who had not accepted the waste produced by Rhodia which was in their "backyards" to be sent to another state are now mobilized to prevent the EU from forcing Brazil, through the WTO, to open up its market to the import of used or reformed tyres. In this case, there has been a clear alliance with academic sectors decided to organize a meeting for the regional articulation of movements which are part of national and international networks in order to build a reflection against incineration (one of the destinies of this kind of waste in the country) and, of course, taking a stand against the EU's position. That meeting, held at Fiocruz, produced a document which was sent to the government and has been used as a resource for the political action of the organizations heading the campaign.

These are examples of the relevance of the dialogue, articulation and permanent action of the academia with social movements in order to contribute to the reduction of social inequality. By offering contributions to the stock of alternative proposals, academic sectors put science at the service of democracy and, in turn, feed on to the contributions and reflections brought by the experiences of groups in territories.