Alternative Regionalisms: Why and How?
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*Global Social Policy* 2007; 7; 255
DOI: 10.1177/14680181070070030202

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The new alternative regionalisms being promoted by social movements are ‘alternative’ to the increasingly neoliberal directions being taken, and the regional trade and investment liberalization programmes being adopted or reinforced in the existing regional groupings of countries of the South. Social movement strategies for alternative regionalisms are also designed to counter the so-called ‘regional support’ plans containing contradictory conditionalities set by foreign governments, particularly the USA and the EU; by international institutions, particularly the International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank (WB) and the World Trade Organization (WTO); and by transnational corporate interests.

Thus, the alternative regionalisms being promoted are alternatives to what governments of the South are currently doing, or not doing, but should be doing; as well as being alternatives to what the governments of the North and other agencies are trying to impose on the regions of the South. However, the new ideas and debates on alternative regionalisms are also expressed in the plural because of the perception among movement analysts and activists that:

• they are still in the phase of exploring a variety of possible socio-economic and economic alternatives reflecting different political and ideological perspectives and cultural modalities within their respective countries and regions;
• there are other new economic and environmental perspectives and challenges emerging within their organizations and communities, countries and regions, and in relation to the planetary eco-system that have yet to be fully explored; and
• despite the many common aims and concerns within and between the respective regional initiatives, the eventual outcomes of consultative regional processes between social movements themselves, and engagements between them and their governments, separately or together, will not be exactly the same for the different regional groupings emerging in the South.

There are, however, growing interchanges and mutual learning and a number of commonalities within the debates and the proposals emerging from the regional and inter-regional interactions between social movements in regard to alternative regionalisms.
• The first and overriding imperative is that the policies and programmes within the emerging regions of the South cannot and must not be dictated by external agencies, such as the IMF/WB. They must not be constrained by blanket terms and conditions and the tight a priori time-frames set by the WTO. These integration projects must not be shaped to suit the aims and interests of powerful foreign governments and ‘donor agencies’, or international investors and exporters, production or service companies, etc. These historic regionalization processes must be shaped and driven by processes internal to these regions, between peoples’ organizations, as such, and between them and their governments.

• The second requirement relates to the extreme complexities of creating regional programmes and inclusive regional institutions, and policy instruments that reflect and accommodate the very different circumstances and diverse domestic interests within the participating countries. Thus, all such regional arrangements must emerge through inclusive democratic negotiations for the creation of mutually acceptable and appropriate policies and programmes within these regions. This is all the more essential in the context in which a number of these regions of the South are characterized by huge imbalances in size and levels of development between their many small developing and least developed (LDC) member states and the larger economies within such regions. It is only through their own joint engagements with the respective dominant governmental and entrepreneurial forces within regional negotiations, and according to agreed criteria and principles, that the smaller or economically weaker countries and communities would be able to create more favourable terms and equitable outcomes in their regional relations.

• The directly associated premise to ensure corrective and equitable regional arrangements that would address the challenges of uneven development within and between the participating countries, is that cross-border economic programmes must counter the laissez faire or unregulated operations of ‘market forces’. The very raison d’etre of business ventures is to seek out and take advantage of or exploit the disparate levels of development, the unequal economic and technological capacities, the uneven labour and health and safety regulations, etc. in the different countries within each region. Under conditions of extensive liberalization in these countries such ‘free market’ forces and cross-border ventures inevitably reinforce these imbalances.

• Such exploitative strategies have to be countered by public institutions and regulations but there are many forms of political, technical and other weaknesses in the existing governments in the countries of the South, most of which are also under the sway of neoliberal forces from within and without. Thus, such regional policies and programmes cannot be left to largely inaccessible remote inter-governmental negotiations, and ‘top-down’ processes. Intergovernmental agreements and joint programmes are intrinsic to regional development programmes but, in order to ensure full information and effective public inputs
towards the creation of appropriate regional development programmes, these have to be built through ‘bottom-up’ processes of cross-border popular cooperation, participation and formal regional decision-shaping engagements.

- The emergent regional entities will also have to be created gradually and built incrementally. This must include ‘special and differential’ terms to accommodate the diversities and different levels of capacity and preparedness of various economies and communities. Such flexibilities would also allow for sub-regional programmes within real geo-economic regions that straddle borders, and which have been artificially divided by political frontiers. These ‘real’ regions often include the same natural resources, the same ecological/topographical features, and the same peoples/communities that have been arbitrarily cut up by the boundaries drawn by colonialism. Thus, regional groupings should more appropriately be conceived of as the (re)groupment of communities and local peoples, as well as the nations in which they are situated. Such communities of nations should be (re)conceived as multifaceted processes rather than as simple unitary integrated economic or political entities.

In this context, one of the vital aims of regionalization programmes is actually to restructure much of their production and strategically redirect much of their trade towards their own local, national and regional markets. On the one hand, this will reduce such countries’ external dependencies and excessive exposure to external shocks. On the other hand, the reconceptualization of the role, and the reduction of international trade, altogether, is increasingly being recognized throughout the world as a strategic imperative in the circumstances of looming global environmental catastrophe.

ALTERNATIVE REGIONS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE WORLD

Global theorists and the promoters of economic globalization depict the ‘breaking up’ of the single integrated global economy as boding ill for the world. They paint scenarios of growing competition, increasing conflicts and deepening global divisions and poverty. Whereas it is precisely to the contrary, it is the imposition of one set of ‘global’ rules, and one dominant paradigm favouring the stronger economies and their corporations, that has created the increasing polarization across the world today between the rich and the poor, between the strong and the weak. It is the economic globalization promoted by neoliberal theorists and institutions – and the governments and corporations behind them – that is deepening the poverty of billions of people in the world, in favour of small minorities, and creating the conditions for increasing tensions and conflicts in the world today. The reality is that ‘neo-mercantilist’ trade wars are already underway between the largest powers and in their own respective regions, against each other, in each other’s ‘sphere of influence’, and against the emerging regional communities of the South.

The creation of regional communities of nations and peoples that are gradually being taken up by social movements, and even some of the more
progressive and visionary governments of the South, hold out the opposite to what crude globalization forces demand and foster. It is, in large measure, the reconfiguration of global relations through the creation of alternative regional strategies shaped by different, equitable and sustainable development paradigms that will contribute to essential processes of deglobalization. These would create a range of more varied regional and continental socio-economic, ecological and political communities within which diverse and appropriate policies and programmes can be democratically developed and applied. This could incrementally erode the single dominant global economy and misconceived neoliberal paradigm. Such alternatives to neoliberal globalization would not only change people–people and South–South relations and situations, but also South–North relations and interactions, and this would be to the benefit of all of humanity and our common planetary home.

NOTE
1. Such as Brazil within MERCOSUR (Common Market of the Southern Cone), India within the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) or South Africa within the Southern African Development Community (SADC).

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In the resistance to the process of globalization, which seeks to submit territories, economies and governments to the interests of accumulation of large economic and financial corporations, schemes of regional and sub-regional integration are emerging as a possibility for the peoples of the South. The risk, however, is that the dominant trade agenda of North–South relations will eventually contaminate proposals and policies at the regional level, impeding the elaboration of genuine alternatives for democratic and sustainable human development.

Despite inheriting the great political drive of the governments of democratic transition in Brazil and Argentina opposed to the return of authoritarian military logic to the region, MERCOSUR (Common Market of the Southern Cone) evolved over the last decade of the 20th century to become predominantly an area of sub-regional free trade, also involving Uruguay and