

Civil society

post Cancun

*A conference organised by the **Friedrich Ebert Stiftung** (FES) brought together representatives from several Southern African civil society organisations to explore the future of the WTO system post Cancun and to determine the role civil society can play in the region. The **Labour Bulletin** reports...*

In focusing on the post Cancun period, key interventions and presentations at the conference were devoted to the position of the Southern African countries in relation to the implementation of the agreement on Agriculture, Trade in Services (GATS) and the new or so-called Singapore issues. The presentations revealed the formation of new alliances to oppose the EU-US position on agriculture at Cancun. These alliances include the G20 (including three Southern African countries – Tanzania, SA and Zimbabwe); the G33, the G10 and the G90 (AU, LDCs and ACP).

Rangarirai Machedze of the Zimbabwe-based SEATINI said the victory of Cancun, was the unity amongst developing countries while the formation of the G90 and G33 showed the emergence of strong opposition from the countries of the South. During discussion however, some delegates raised concerns about the extent to which unity really exists in the region as countries belong to more than one grouping. How do you reconcile the divergences which exist at the Southern African level? A delegate said: 'We pretend that we have a united front in the region. Our negotiators exploit this because they know that

there are unresolved issues. A representative of the FES in Zimbabwe Dr Medicine Masiwa said developing countries might be strong in numbers but 'our position is weakened by the lack of governance. The EU does not waive on its position because it is built on a democratic process. African countries go into negotiations without that kind of backing.'

Another delegate said that the issue of alliances should be considered in the context of the question of the state of regional blocs such as SADC. Another delegate said there is fragmentation in economic groupings and no coherence on trade policies. 'Fragmentation is going to kill us at some point,' the delegate said.

Some interesting discussions emerged around positions of the countries in the region around GATS. Dr Frans Kekana of the Development Institute argued that GATS was being used as an instrument by multinational corporations to access new markets. He said the liberalisation of services could not be viewed in isolation of privatisation. This paved the way for some discussion on privatisation initiatives in Africa and the disconnect which existed between the official positions of African countries in

relation to privatisation and what was happening on the ground. Whilst various delegates raised concerns about the functioning of institutions such as the WTO one delegate said civil society too needs to look at how it organises and operates. As the delegate stated: 'are we democratic ourselves?'

This led to a discussion about the role of civil society organisations in the post Cancun period and the need for them to empower themselves around trade negotiations. Delegates highlighted the following:

- The need to ensure trade negotiations are more democratic.
- The need for civil society organisations to popularise issues around trade not just ensuring that such information is accessible to an 'elite' within civil society.
- Ensuring proper preparation ahead of trade talks.
- Begin to focus debate on the benefits or otherwise of the various new alliances and the consequences of entering into bilateral agreements.

The conference entitled Post Cancun Multilateral Trade Negotiations was organised by FES in Zimbabwe.