Recognising the value of Caribbean civil society

At the last count, something like 619 regional trade agreements had been notified to the World Trade Organization (WTO).

It is a number that is set to grow as the global economic balance of power changes, political blocs proliferate, and all countries come to accept that a single agreement of the kind envisaged in the Doha Round is no longer achievable.

In this, the Caribbean, having failed to deepen its regional economic integration process and to make itself a more attractive trade partner, is being left behind.

In contrast to other regions there appears to be no new Caribbean thinking on trade policy, and no desire to involve industries and social partners in developing new common approaches that might spur regional economic growth. Instead, some countries speak darkly about bilateral initiatives with Latin or other partners, or wait to see how a possible Cuba-EU trade relationship might alter the regional balance vis-a-vis the Dominican Republic.

The implication is that regional trade policy is stagnating while the rest of the world is moving on.

In an indication of the type of new international thinking informing such matters, a recent briefing paper from the India-based development organization, CUTS International, addresses the importance of involving fully, representatives of non-state entities in order to develop and deliver the best trade and social outcomes.

The paper demonstrates why stakeholder consultations with a variety of informed actors from businesses, civil society, labor organizations, academia, and others including those who can provide a voice for the most vulnerable, matter. It describes the various mechanisms and processes that countries such as Korea, Japan, the US and others have introduced to ensure that stakeholders’ interests have helped create or balance the broader objectives of trade negotiators.

It suggests that in this way, new benefits and ideas are being brought to governments and negotiating bodies. These include increased transparency, the provision of information not normally previously available, political buy-in for any agreement, protection for the most at risk, and the empowerment of groups who can make use of what is agreed.

The CUTS paper demonstrates why some of the most powerful economies in the world see value in ensuring that civil society is close to the center of trade negotiations and can become genuine partners in future economic growth.

In the Caribbean the centrality of non-state groups to the trade negotiating process or any other deliberations is far from being the case. This is despite plans to establish a more formal structure for civil society in CARICOM and the existence of a mechanism to involve civil society in the EU-CARIFORUM Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA).
Last week in Barbados members of the Caribbean side of the EU-CARIFORUM EPA consultative committee met in preparation for a March meeting with their European counterparts. This is the joint body that brings together 25 civil society organizations from CARIFORUM and 15 from the EU side including employers’ organizations, trade unions, academia, NGOs and other social organizations to discuss and make practical recommendations to officials and ministers related to the implementation of Europe’s trade and development agreement with the region.

The group has according to Mikael Barfod, the EU Ambassador to Barbados and the Eastern Caribbean, a fundamental role as it gives a voice to civil society ensuring what they think is conveyed to Ministers and officials in a ‘loud and clear’ manner so that their views are fully reflected in decision making.

Speaking at the opening of the meeting, he noted that it was CARICOM’s stated intention in its 5 Year Strategy Plan 2015-2019 to establish permanent arrangements for consultation with the regional representatives of private sector and civil society, but suggested that in this respect, and more generally in respect of the Dominican Republic, more needed to be done.

That said, a number of those from Caribbean civil society participating in the meeting express doubts about whether a formal institutional mechanism with CARICOM or CARIFORUM will result in governments or the public sector genuinely considering the views of civil society or helping such groups develop. For example, private sector representatives express concern about the orderly sharing of information by CARICOM with all stakeholders, and its failure to advance initiatives immune from local politics or ‘questionable activities’ in some countries.

This is a pity as if elevated and reinforced, the Caribbean part of the EPA consultative committee is potentially far more important than being just a function of a trade agreement, as it is the only formal regional mechanism that attempts to bring all of civil society together.

Unlike any other groupings or institutions, it involves those who touch the real world, including as it does an array of organizations including increasingly vocal and influential environmental groups; representatives of small and medium sized enterprises; the leaders of the region’s principal economic sectors; NGOs involved the delivery of social programs; and representatives from the Dominican Republic and the French DOM.

Having much first-hand experience of working with the representative bodies of significant regional industries and NGOs it is clear that much greater weight needs to be given to their development and thinking through a structured engagement with governments and regional institutions.

The problem is that for the most part such organizations are weak in terms of funding and capacity.

This is because in the case of the private sector in the Anglophone Caribbean, membership levels are low and voluntary, and in the absence of a threat the cost of maintaining a standing organization is seen as discretionary. This is in contrast to the Francophone Caribbean where involvement is a statutory requirement and associations are well-funded, well-staffed, and speak with authority.

Sustainability for environmental groups, some smaller trades unions and NGOs is also problematic. As an alternative to local funding they have established working ties with like-minded external groups, but like
their private sector counterparts depend to an extraordinary extent on the organizational, political, commercial, and fund raising skills of their full time leadership.

Despite the public sector’s sometimes visceral distrust of the private sector and of campaigning groups like the environmentalists, the Caribbean cannot hope to make significant economic progress unless the capacity of civil society is strengthened within the region, and a new more inclusive model is adopted by governments that allows alternative voices and new thinking to emerge.

While such thoughts clearly worry some in government and the political parties as they are seen as eroding the status quo and the old order that has all but prevailed since independence, the role of and interface with civil society is an issue that the region as a whole needs to address now if it is to ensure sustainable growth and future stability.

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