

UNFINISHED DIALOGUE

One has to realise the advanced state of philosophical, religious and cultural development that was already achieved in these countries to understand the extent of ignorance and the extension of the tragedy of not entering into true and open dialogue.

DUSSEL makes a considerable effort to explain the state of thought the indigenous cultures had in the Americas, and he rightly describes the change in perspective for Western scholarship from a Eurocentric to a non-Eurocentric view on world history as a *Copernican Revolution*.

It is thanks to him and others that today we can depart from our limited view on the development of culture and understand better different developments independently of our own history.

Whatever the works of SAHAGUN and DURAN kept as historical memories, it was structured through the view of Western European Christians and is only a recollection of a culture already mortally wounded.

At the beginning, the last philosophers of the indigenous people tried to communicate their knowledge and wisdom to the invading priests of the different orders, but those did not understand at all and tried to 'convince' the Indios finally by sending soldiers again to kill whoever might object to their logic.

It was the beginning and at the same time the end of an *unfinished dialogue* in which the gods and thereby the

knowledge and culture of the Native Americans in Central and South America were destroyed. However dominance did not manage to wipe out the differences, as the uprising of the Zapatista Movement and the Messages of Subcomandante Insurgente MARCOS have shown to the world. There is a resistance memory left, from which new cultural developments have risen again.

Suggested Reading

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ESQUIVEL Julia, *Conquered and Violated Women*. In BOFF Leonardo – ELIZONDO Virgil (eds.), *1492–1992: The Voice of the Victims*. Concilium 1990/5. 68–77.

Shades of Tender Fury – The Letters and Communiqués of Subcomandante MARCOS and the Zapatista Army of Liberation; Translated by Frank Bardacke et al., New York 1995.

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Europe, Central America and Development Aid Cooperation

Central America's contacts with Europe began 500 years ago, when the Spanish conquistadors came over the Atlantic to plunder and conquer. For 500 years the relationship between the two regions has gone through many changes, but always remained unequal. The most visible sign of this inequality today is the European "development cooperation" with Central America.

DEVELOPMENT COOPERATION: AN INTERPRETATION

The positive interpretation of the term "development cooperation" is to see it as an ambition to move away from the 500 years of inequality. A more pessimistic interpreter would say that the term makes invisible the basic power inequality in the whole development cooperation industry, which still means that one powerful donor gives something, in this case aid, to a much less powerful receiver.

Guatemala, Belize, Honduras, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Costa Rica and Panama, seven small countries, are since long major receivers of European aid or "development cooperation". Though the region is often called the backyard of the United States, the combined European money transfers to the region by far surpass the money donated by the region's wealthy neighbour in the North.

This article tries to understand development cooperation between the two regions in relation to the political development in Central America, the geopolitical priorities and development of European commercial and foreign policy, and recent development aid trends, theory and practices.

Relations between Central America and Europe must obviously not be reduced to development aid transfers from benevolent European donors to thankful Central American beneficiaries. To understand the cooperation between the two regions, we must see it as one component in a wider historical and political context.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

For 300 years Central America was a Spanish colony administered from Madrid and the colonial capital in Guatemala. The Spanish managed to exterminate most of the indigenous people living in the region, with Guatemala as the main exception, and constructed a colonial economy based on agriculture export.

The land was confiscated from the indigenous people and large landholdings were created to produce for the world market, exploiting the remaining indigenous populations as cheap plantation labour.

Political power has been shifted over the years from Spain to the region's national elites in the independence struggles of XIXth century and economic domination has been passed on to Great Britain first and later to the United States.

The colonial structure of the economy, however, still remains. The region is the most unequal in the world; small elites and foreign multinational corporations are making money exporting agriculture and clothes, produced in *maquiladora* factories or "sweat shops".

THE ROLE OF THE UNITED STATES

The eventual Spanish or other European comeback in Central America will, however, for a long time be overshadowed by the United States, carefully monitoring and protecting her interests in their backyard.

In all relations of domination there is also resistance and the relation between the United States and her backyard is no exception to this rule. Resistance, often dressed in nationalist independence struggles, has in Central American history almost always confronted the United States and the national elites that benefit from her protection and support.

The Nicaraguan example can illustrate this point. In the mid XIXth century William WALKER, a North American adventurer, occupied Nicaragua two times with the aim of integrating the country into the United States and re-establishing slavery.

After a short liberal nationalist period at the turn of the century, U.S. Marines occupied the country again. In the thirties, the first Latin American guerrilla warrior, Cesar Augusto SANDINO, however, caused the Marines so much damage that they had to leave the country.

SANDINO was later betrayed and murdered during the peace talks. The author of the crime was SOMOZA, the chief of the National Guard the Marines had created to substitute for themselves and look after U.S. interests when they had to leave.

SOMOZA soon assumed power and his family's dictatorship came to be one of the longest lasting in the history of Latin America, and losing its U.S. support only when the revolution was inevitable.

The Sandinista Revolution finally overthrew Somoza in 1979. Bad luck for the Nicaraguans: they gained democracy and independence from the United States almost exactly at the same time as the recently deceased U.S. president Ronald REAGAN assumed power.

REAGAN made the struggle against the Sandinista democracy and social experiment one of his most serious personal political commitments. The United States armed, funded and logistically supported an invasion force called the Contras operating from Honduras and Costa Rica.

The then not-so-famous senator John F. KERRY found out and made public that the Reagan administration and the CIA was funding the Contras' war against the Nicaraguan government by importing drugs from Colombia and selling them in the United States.

What was considered worse, they also sold arms to the U.S. enemy No. 1 in the Middle East, Iran (at war with Iraq and

the U.S.-supported Saddam HUSSEIN) and financed the Contras with the money they got from the Iranians. The Nicaraguans did not gain peace before the Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990.

The history is not very different in many other Central American states. In Guatemala a democratically elected president was overthrown in a CIA-orchestrated coup in 1954 which then put an end to the still-unrealised land reforms and propelled a conflict between U.S.-supported military regimes and left-wing insurgent groups until 1996, when the peace accords were signed.

IDEOLOGICAL POLARISATION

In such a context, the Europeans have been quite able to play a role in Central America as a progressive alternative to U.S. foreign policy. In the ideologically polarised Central American conflicts of the eighties, U.S.-supported regimes stood against left-wing insurgents (FMLN in El Salvador, URNG in Guatemala, FSLN in Nicaragua).

European stands against military dictators and U.S. imperialist policy were necessarily a support for groups with a very radical agenda, often more radical than the one practiced by the European Social or Christian Democrat governments that provided the aid.

The ideological nature of the Central American conflicts in the eighties and the popular revolutionary-dedicated spirit of its people no doubt fascinated and inspired many Europeans tired of the neoliberal winds that blew on their own continent.

Various solidarity movements were growing all over the old continent. Brigades were sent to support the popular struggles; Europeans were picking coffee, building schools and kindergartens.

Some were even taking up arms together with revolutionary Central Americans. People with similar experiences today often have a big say in their respective countries' development aid industries.

When Great Britain's development aid agency withdrew its activities from Central America last year, only a representative in Nicaragua remained. An explanation for why Nicaragua was made an exception is that the British minister of development picked coffee in Nicaragua in the eighties.

THE EU AND THE PEACE PROCESS

European governments and the European Union (EU) have played an active role in the Central American peace processes as well as in the reconstruction work after hurricane Mitch, which devastated extensive parts of the region in 1998. European agencies took the lead to use this tragic event as an opportunity to transform Central America.

The institutionalised dialogue in San José between Central America and the EU is the longest sustained foreign policy dialogue the EU has maintained and it goes back all the way to 1981.

Especially when the important breakthrough was made in the Central American peace processes, the European Union, the San José Dialogue and major European development agencies played an active and important role.

The peace talks were initiated through the *Esquipulas Process*, which got its name from the Guatemalan town close to the border of Honduras where Central



American presidential meetings were held. The United States was here partly sidestepped and the Nicaraguan Sandinista government was recognised by the other Central American presidents.

RECEIVERS OF DEVELOPMENT AID

A lot of aid money is today increasingly channelled away from Latin America to the war on terrorism in Asia and to Africa, where GDP rates are lower. In spite of this, the American backyard is likely to remain a major receiver of European aid at least in the near future. The European Commission is presently staffing a new decentralised regional office in Managua with more than one hundred employees.

Honduras and Nicaragua are still considered sufficiently poor as to qualify for cooperation in most European development aid strategies. Based on historical experiences there is some hope that a Europe with a more active common foreign policy could play an important role as a global counterweight to the United States.

Historical experiences in Central America can to some extent be seen as examples that reinforce and justify such European ambitions and self-image. It must, however, be questioned whether the EU today acts as a counterweight to the United States in Central America.

The peace processes in the region gave way to political democracies and much of the ideological tension has been reduced. The elections have, with few exceptions, been won by political parties representing the traditional national elites.

Though progress has been made on political rights, the redistribution of wealth has been non-existent and the gap between the poor and the rich continues to increase in the already most unequal region of the world.

STRUCTURAL ROOT CAUSES

Some of the major structural causes for the violent conflicts have hence not been sufficiently addressed and the weak government institutions and policies can not sufficiently respond to increasing social protests and public discontent of today.

The neoliberal policies of Central American governments have, despite their failures, generally been praised by the major international multilateral institutions: the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank (WB) and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB).

The European Union as well as the United States and all other major donors condition their aid on the successful implementation of IMF structural adjustment policies. With the implementation of electoral democracy, European policy has moved from a focus on human rights to trade as the answer to the region's problems.

Further cooperation with the region is also conditioned by the success in the Doha development round of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), where the United States and the EU have met much resistance from developing countries lately.

Central America finished her negotiations on a free trade treaty with the United States, which will probably start working in the beginning of 2005. The EU has promised her own free trade agreement with Central America, but this will probably not start before 2006. If there is rivalry between the EU and the United States in Central America today, it is much less about ideology and much more about trade.

CIVIL SOCIETY

Development cooperation is, however, not only about official state development agencies, money transfers and politics of national security. It is also about social movements and NGOs trying to promote solidarity between the regions and building bridges between people.

About 5 per cent of the European development cooperation is administered by different NGOs, churches and solidarity organisations, working closely with the Central American civil society.

These organisations have an important role in monitoring their governments' policies and development cooperation together with their counterparts, and in general they do provide harsh criticism of the role of international financial institutions such as the IMF and WB in the region.

The NGO development cooperation has, however, also gone through important changes in the last twenty years. The demand from their financiers in Europe for efficiency and professionalism has increased.

If typical solidarity or development aid workers in NGOs in the eighties lived out in the bush and picked coffee or built stoves or schools with their own hands, they now sit in offices and administer projects or write reports.

A challenge for civil society cooperation is how to keep the mystique and the solidarity, the ideological indignation that personal encounter with social injustice should provoke, with an increased efficiency and transparency.

MUTUAL SOLIDARITY AND COOPERATION

A further challenge to the NGO solidarity movement is given by globalisation, which gives the word "cooperation" a new meaning and importance. If globalisation increases the awareness that we all sit in the same boat and are affected by the same global processes, the need for a globalised civil society increases.

Mutual dependence gives way for real mutual solidarity. Some NGO development organisations in Central America have understood this and struggle to link civil society organisations in the two regions to a common struggle, for example through participation and support to the social forum processes.

Many development cooperation NGOs, both older and more recent ones, are, however, little interested in leaving their charity-based methodology and vision of benevolent Europeans providing aid to Central Americans in need.

Fundraising campaigns in Europe often reproduce this image of Central American victims, a strategy which has proven effective for fundraising, but at the same time risks hiding the structural causes of Central American poverty and exclusion and reproduces a colonial and racist European understanding of her own position in the world.

Such "development cooperation" definitely does not deserve the name. The future will show which one of these present trends within development cooperation will be dominating — if real development cooperation is possible, or whether structural power inequalities between the two regions will remain for another 500 years.

Suggested Reading

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