Civil Society and Regional Multilateralism
Background to FIM Forum 2008

FIM Forum 2008 will be held in Montréal, Québec on February 8 and 9. It will bring together 39 invited participants, the majority from civil society organizations and including approximately 8 academics. Forum participants also come from other sectors, including donor governments, foundations and multilateral agencies. The focus of the Forum is civil society and regional multilateralism. Each FIM Forum has two primary objectives.

The first Forum objective is to present case studies that reflect civil society efforts to influence governance in a sector or issue determined by the FIM Board to be of special interest and/or importance. Each case study is written from a practitioner’s perspective and attempts to identify lessons that might be of importance to other CSOs engaged in influencing governance. This year, for the first time, FIM has introduced a participatory peer review process to ensure high quality in each case study.

The issue identified for FIM Forum 2008 is the impact of civil society on regional multilateral bodies. In its deliberations, the FIM Board realized that there is a growing tendency within international civil society to concentrate on regional multilateral bodies, a group which, until recently, has often been ignored. As a result, it was observed that virtually no analysis of the success or failure of these efforts has been undertaken to date.

Two interesting and, we believe, excellent case studies will be presented. They reflect the advocacy efforts of two regional groupings of civil society organizations on a multilateral organization within their respective region: a) the Asian Partnership for the Development of Human resources in Rural Asia (AsiaDHRRA) advocating for pro-poor policies within ASEAN, authored and to be presented by Marlene Ramirez of the Philippines and b) a coalition of Latin American women’s groups, including NGOs and unionists advocating for effective gender policies within MERCOSUR, authored and to be presented by Alma Espino of Uruguay.

In addition to the case studies there will be two other presentations. The first, by Ezra Mbogori of Kenya, will examine the role of African civil society in the ongoing governmental negotiations to create a Pan-African parliament, and the second, by Mohammed Tahseen of Pakistan, will be an overview of efforts to influence the Organization of Islamic Conference (OIC) by civil society organizations from within OIC member states.

The second Forum objective is to facilitate dialogue and brainstorming on improving civil society’s engagement with multilateralism. FIM Forum 2008 participants will have the opportunity to share and apply their knowledge, experience, and lessons learned and to identify priority issues requiring possible civil society action in the upcoming 12-18 months. To help us achieve this objective, Diane Demers, consultant and professor
of Applied Human Sciences at Concordia University will facilitate the two days of discussion.

Participation at the Forum is by invitation and FIM’s criteria, include regional and gender balance. Traditionally we have succeeded in attracting activists who bring extensive first-hand experience of advocacy with multilateral organizations and/or in dealing with issues of civil society and global governance. This year is no exception.

Increasingly, FIM is inviting scholars to our Forum. Within academia there is a growing interest in, and knowledge of, the activities of international civil society that affect governance. There is also a growing tendency and need to integrate theory and practice for more effective civil society action. Amongst civil society organizations there is a growing capacity to engage in and/or directly influence knowledge and research. FIM feels it is essential for the activist community and academia to understand, and to benefit from, each other’s respective strengths.

In all cases we stress that participants attend in their individual capacity. This year we are especially pleased to have strong involvement of both activists and scholars within Organization of the Islamic Conference (OIC) member states.

The FIM Forum Report 2008 will be prepared by Cyril Ritchie of FIIG, Geneva. In addition to General Rapporteur, Cyril will be an active participant. The Forum Report, case studies, and presentations will be distributed to all participants and highlighted on the FIM web site.

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