

The Public Eye on Davos Forum

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The Center of Concern participated in an intense (January 25-28) independent international conference in Davos, Switzerland, which drew academics and NGO experts from the North and the South, who provided analysis of current globalization policies and presented propositions for more equitable and sustainable economic policies. The event, **The Public Eye on Davos**, was held parallel to, and as a counterpoint to, the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2001. Maria Riley, Director of COC's Women's Project and Coordinator of the International Gender and Trade Network, and Mariama Williams, Research Coordinator for the Network, both addressed international trade issues: Riley on the role of the U.S. concerning the WTO, and Williams on the WTO and Gender in the Macroeconomic Environments. Mariama also participated in a telephone link-up between the Public Eye meeting in Davos and Porto Alegre (the World Social Forum being held in Brazil). Maria took part in the first public assessment of the "Public Eye Davos and the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2001."

The Public Eye on Davos, initiated in 1999 in response to the calls by civil society to end the secretive operations of the WEF and to examine the impacts of its initiatives and deliberations on global governance and international economic decision making, is sponsored by the Berne Declaration, the Asociación Latinoamericana de Organizaciones de Promoción, Focus on the Global South, Pro Natura/ Friends of the Earth International, and the Network Women in Development Europe. The WEF, with its membership of 2000 large corporations, has increasingly moved into the limelight as a private club for discussion and negotiations among the world's political and business elite, setting the agenda for the international public affairs. In the last five years its annual meetings have taken on the tone of global UN conferences with the attendance of major political leaders (this year 23 Presidents and Prime Ministers). The WEF has, in the words of Peter Bosshard, Director of the Berne Declaration, "shifted from a facilitator to a more active role as a catalyst for the global agenda especially in the area of globalization and multilateral trade system."

Given its predominance in global economic decision making (this year the heads of the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, the World Trade Organization and the UN Secretary General were all reported to be in attendance), it is not surprising that the WEF is a target of public protests. NGOs have decried the WEF for its secrecy and lack of transparency for many years but the series of street protests—the legacy of Geneva 1998, Seattle 1999 and Prague 2000—have

also erupted around WEF since 2000. This year's WEF's meeting occurred behind a massive wall of security to prevent much of civil society's involvement.

The World Economic Forum has adopted a Forum Plus strategy focused on global governance, which has led to the launching of a number of initiatives to help shape new approaches and new solutions to some priority issues on the global agenda. Such activities include an initiative to "make the global system work better," which monitors the performance of international institutions and existing international public/private partnerships, including a global governance index. The question for many NGOs is whether these initiatives offer a balanced perspective on the issues. Not surprisingly, the Public Eye on Davos had panels on topics such as "Global Governance: How and By Whom?" and "Who is in Control: Making Global Corporations Accountable." At the 2001 WEF, an environmental sustainability index was launched but was immediately challenged by environmentalists.

However, with the growing global protest movement in the background and the presence of the Public Eye, which received a great deal of media coverage, and other NGOs, some of whom were invited guests of the WEF, there has been some shifts in the attitude and tone of the Forum. Not only were more NGOs invited (civil society invitees such as Third World Network, Public Citizen, Greenpeace were reported to number about fifteen), but the WEF is also now speaking about "responsible globalization," warning about the dangers of "unfettered globalization" and the "growing divide between 'the haves' and the 'haves nots'" (Klaus Schwab, founder of the WEF). This year's World Economic Forum's motto was "Bridging the Divides: Creating a Roadmap for the Global Future," a recognition of the challenges of the global economy. ■

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