

The CADTM: 20 years of struggle for the oppressed

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Concluding report of the CADTM's 20th anniversary celebration, organized in Brussels on 27th November, 2010. This version has been reviewed and edited by the author.

1. The Committee for the Abolition of Third World Debt (CADTM www.cadtm.org) has been active for 20 years in its combat against debt, which is a powerful instrument of domination used by creditors to extract money from the poor. Focusing on this intrinsic issue, the CADTM has tirelessly forged links with the worldwide struggles on various themes, in order to make an overall analysis of the capitalist system and propose alternatives [1]. 20 years after its creation, today the CADTM is an international horizontal network present in more than 30 countries spanning 4 continents [2]

2. The CADTM is convinced that there will not be any global revolutionary change without numerous local struggles. Therefore, local struggles (in the neighborhood, city, region ...) are essential, but to be effective must be systematically linked to the international one.

3. Since its inception, the CADTM has made it a point of honor to invite representatives of movements from the four corners of the world to public events, to foster convergence. Thus it has invited striking factory workers from Belgium (for example, steelworkers from the Clabecq Steel Mill who engaged in an exemplary and difficult strike), representatives of the Zapatista movement from Mexico, Rosario Ibarra, a Mexican human rights activist, Vandana Shiva, a feminist from India at the forefront of the ecologist movement, representatives of the indigenous movement from Ecuador, representatives of the Landless Workers Movement from Brazil, a great number of activists from Africa, Lidy Nacpil (the Philippines), and Beverly Keene (Argentina) of Jubilee South, Adolfo Perez Esquivel (Argentina)- Nobel Peace prize winner, René Dumont- agronomist, activist and environmentalist, Bishop Jacques Gaillot, who was dealt a blow by the Vatican for his radical struggle for the oppressed, the geneticist Albert Jacquard, Abraham Serfaty from Morocco, Michel Chossudovsky from Canada, Alejandro Olmos from Argentina, and many other representatives of the movements for another world.

4. On the basis of its analysis of debt and a conviction that a powerful movement for alternative globalization needed to be strengthened, the CADTM had participated very actively in the creation of the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre in Brazil in 2001. It helped to strengthen the world assembly of social movements, participated in the foundation of the Belgian Social Forum (and member organizations of the CADTM international network did the same in their respective countries) and the European Social Forum. Its goal was to build tools for transforming the world. In this respect, our record is very worthy, although much remains to be done. We must continue to fight tirelessly and enthusiastically.

5. The CADTM is an international social movement, which explains why its programs and objectives are different than other NGOs. The financing of NGOs depends on their action plan. So, many NGOs regularly change the themes of their action plan, for example, from decent working conditions to

food sovereignty, third world debt to climate change...

The CADTM wants to develop a thematic continuity while actively supporting others in their combats. It has tried to participate in a number of struggles, constantly drawing others' attention to the fundamental importance of debt. The CADTM's challenge has been that other movements, such as the World March of Women (WMW), incorporate the issue of debt in their analyses and actions. At the same time, the CADTM has integrated the feminist struggle in its own analysis, daily practice, and action plan. This is just one example – we could mention many others – such as the participation in the struggle for climate justice, promotion of human rights (political, civil, economic, social, and cultural, which are indivisible), food sovereignty, demilitarization ... and many others equally important that I have forgotten to mention.

6. After all these years spent struggling for debt cancellation, today we can see that the central issue in European countries is public debt, in the sense that all social and economic policies adopted by governments are based on the excuse of the recent explosion of public debt. This is an attempt to impose real structural adjustment plans, accompanied by systematic violations of fundamental social rights. Whether we are in Belgium, Romania, France, Spain, Greece, Poland, Great Britain, or Ireland, public debt has become a crucial issue in the EU and beyond. Debt is a vital concern for people in developing countries of the world, and it has also come to the forefront in the North. In the present context, our approach, which brought together the struggles in the North and South, has gained in legitimacy.

7. The CADTM has gained the expertise required to help social movements. Many think-tanks, research bureaus (even politically leftwing ones) prioritize lobbying in order to influence governments, ministers, parliamentarians, and directors of institutions like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. They provide research and advocacy targeting major players, such as governments and directors of powerful institutions.

Our option was to take sides with the social movements, to produce a meaningful analysis, and to provide it to citizens in grassroots organizations and associations: the “civil society from below” as Francois Houtart would say. This has a ‘multiplier effect,’ because if this analysis is really taken into account by social movements and by civil society from below, then it percolates into the seats of power, because a power relationship is formed. This becomes a theme that is a focus of public opinion, a theme of grassroots mobilization in the streets. Then political authorities are forced to take note.

8. When international financial institutions (WB, IMF) invite NGOs and other components of civil society, they just want to pose before the cameras to make us believe that they are participating in a genuine dialogue. Representatives of the IFIs adopt a hollow and loud rhetoric. They want to give us the impression that they have understood their mistakes. They perform their act of contrition and assure us that they are changing their modus operandi, but in reality they apply the same completely market- and export-oriented neoliberal logic. The CADTM is willing to engage in public debates with these institutions, especially in order to make them accountable and to improve public knowledge through these exchanges. However, the CADTM refuses to sit on their permanent consultation bodies, because the CADTM refuses to be manipulated.

9. The CADTM has tried to establish unity among organizations working on the same issue, even if they have different points of view. This applies to Jubilee South, whose work we have supported since its inception in 1999. This also applies to Eurodad, a Brussels-based organization, which prioritizes lobbying. This applies to Latindadd, a Latin American network based in Peru. This applies to all movements striving for a solution to the debt problem. Since 2007, we have been contributing to a permanent coordination among all movements working on the debt issue in developing

countries. We have also succeeded in holding together an annual Global Week of Action against Debt and IFIs.

Although we do not have exactly the same approach in terms of the content or our analysis and demands, although our strategies differ, this has never prevented us from trying to work together, because it is the best way to achieve results. Our opponents seek to divide us in order to win the battle. That is why we must strive for unity. Not at any price, of course; however, we must make an extremely important effort to achieve unity among different movements working on the same issue.

10. It is also essential to find convergence among organizations working on different themes and organized differently (Via Campesina, labor unions, ATTAC). There must be a convergence among the men and women who place their priority on issues such as human rights and women's liberation. Left-wing political parties, social movements, civic organizations, and NGOs must work together to bring about change. In that perspective, we convened a meeting on 29 September 2010 in Brussels. It was a meeting of all social movements, citizens and political parties who are ready to protest in Europe against the use of public debt as an excuse for implementing austerity plans. Political parties and social movements with different opinions met around the table, especially to convene a major European conference in 2011 against debt and austerity policies. There should also be unity among the people in the North and South. That is an essential aspect of our approach. The CADTM exerts a great deal of energy in order to make the North hear the voices of the South- The Other Voices of the Planet.

11. In this globalized capitalist world, there is a host of people whose moral compass, life values, and world view do not revolve around the market, private property, and the accumulation of personal wealth. They have made themselves heard through their activities towards rejecting capitalism and bloodletting neoliberal policies. This is particularly true of the indigenous peoples, for example those in Latin America.

In the North, some communities have also maintained another type of lifestyle vis-à-vis the capitalist mindset. Sectors of the population, especially among the youth, are trying to break with the productivist logic of capitalism through their struggles and lifestyles. We could also mention the networks of solidarity economy and trade in services. The other world towards which we are striving is partially based on that. Of course, in order to make that other world come true, we need a true revolution in all areas.

12. Has our work really been useful in any way beyond simply raising consciousness? The answer is yes. We contributed solidly to the implementation of the Ecuadorian debt audit in 2007-2008, from the moment the government of that country decided to take unilateral and sovereign action to work towards solving the problem of debt repayment, which at that time represented 38% of the state budget. In that sense, our work has been very useful, since part of Ecuador's debt was eliminated (\$3.2 billion, plus the interest which was due until 2030). We have contributed, albeit modestly, to the fact that Ecuador's new Constitution contains a series of articles aimed to prevent any future dependence on government debt. Just before this audit, we had contributed to Paraguay's decision for repudiating in 2005 an illegal debt owed to Swiss banks.

The CADTM has also provided its advice regarding the establishment of a Bank of the South for 7 Latin American countries (Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Ecuador, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Venezuela) whose activity should commence shortly. The fact is, when progressive governments have asked for our assistance, we have been ready to assume our responsibilities. That has never prevented us from criticizing them. Furthermore, the CADTM has developed expertise on debt and its alternatives, and can provide effective tools to any organization or government willing to genuinely confront debt issues.

13. The CADTM has a moral compass and a guiding principle: to be at the sides of the exploited or oppressed whenever and wherever it is required. In all our activities, including when we plan to support certain leftist governments as is the case in Latin America, our basic criterion is: have we helped exploited men and women to make some progress towards their emancipation? If the answer is yes, then we immediately come to their aid!

Eric Toussaint
