

Environment Gains More Attention than Labor under NAFTA

Although much maligned, the participatory mechanisms of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) warrant consideration in the search for means to integrate civil society participation. Recently, the environmental component of the NAFTA side agreement has shown some vitality.

The Commission for Environmental Cooperation (CEC) is an international organization created by Canada, Mexico and the United States under the North American Agreement on Environmental Cooperation (NAAEC). The CEC was established to address regional environmental concerns, help prevent potential trade and environmental conflicts, and promote the effective enforcement of environmental law under NAAEC, which complements NAFTA's environmental provisions.

The CEC sponsored an informal workshop of experts in December 1999. The meeting's final report criticized the lack of leadership in "building policy integration between trade and environmental policies." Clearly, six years after NAFTA was enacted, the CEC has not met the expectations of the environmental community. Still, environmentalists are attempting to use it as an example for setting an environmental agenda in the WTO and FTAA. In contrast, the North American Commission on Labor Cooperation (NACLC), created by the labor side agreement of NAFTA, has made no attempt to become directly involved with the question of the impact of trade on labor rights. Specific violations have been discussed, but few NACLC initiatives have attracted any positive attention from labor and other civil society groups. These groups seem to agree that the NACLC is better than nothing, but no more.

An example of the more positive reception of the CEC is the fact that the Latin American Environmental List Serve, sponsored by the Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social (CLAES), is encouraging participation in the CEC's North American Symposium on Understanding the Linkages Between Trade and Environment. The conference will be held at the World Bank in Washington, D.C., in October. For details, see the [CEC website](#). The meeting will allow for another evaluation of the effectiveness of the CEC in focusing the debates for more linkages and transparency at the FTAA and WTO levels.

The environmental theme has been just as controversial as workers' rights in many multilateral forums, yet it appears that the environment enjoys more formal consideration by official institutions. Part of the CEC's acceptance may be due to the fact that NAAEC clearly recognizes the legitimacy of the link between trade and environment. Despite some criticisms, the environmental community appears to be more willing to support the CEC than labor has the NAALC.