

International NGOs and Southern Advocacy:

Case studies of two Oxfam campaigns in South Asia



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Executive Summary

From 2002 till 2006, the international development agency Oxfam ran a major global advocacy campaign called “Make Trade Fair”. This report looks at two aspects of that campaign that took place in the South, in Sri Lanka and India respectively, as case studies. From them it draws lessons about advocacy in the South in general, and about the role of international non-government organizations like Oxfam in particular.

Chapter One sets the scene by introducing Oxfam International and the international ‘Make Trade Fair’ campaign - its aims, objectives and strategies. It then focuses on two of the international sub-campaigns within ‘Make Trade Fair’, on the garment trade and on agricultural trade, of which these two case studies were part.

Chapter Two sets out the first of the case study - a campaign on the garment trade in Sri Lanka that involved the formation of a coalition of unions and NGOs fighting to protect the rights of garment workers as the industry went through a major restructuring that involved job losses. The campaign also aimed to improve working and living conditions for those workers and to pressure for them to be paid a ‘living wage’.

The second case study is described in Chapter Three. This was a campaign in India on agricultural trade, whose aim was to lobby the Indian Government to hold to its position in trade negotiations in the World Trade Organization (WTO), in the lead up to a Ministerial Meeting of the WTO in December 2005.

The report looks at what was and was not achieved in each of those two case study campaigns, and identifies the factors that contributed to or limited success in each case.

Chapter Four draws all this together by looking at the role of international non-government organizations like Oxfam that become actively involved in advocacy in the South. It highlights some of the strengths and potential dangers of such involvement, and concludes with a set of recommendations.

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October 2007.

The author is a staff member of Oxfam Australia. However the views expressed in this report are his alone, and do not necessarily represent those of Oxfam Australia or Oxfam International, nor of the University of London, Institute of Commonwealth Studies.

Chapter One

Advocacy in Oxfam - the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign

Oxfam International is a confederation of 13 non-government development organizations based in 12 countries around the world, that all carry the name 'Oxfam' as part of their title.¹ Most are based in the North, particularly in Europe, but there are a few emerging Southern Oxfams, including an Oxfam India, which although embryonic at the time of these case studies, will eventually take over all the programs in India of the other Oxfams.² These Oxfam affiliates work with over 3,000 partner organizations in more than 100 developing countries with the aim of finding "lasting solutions to poverty, suffering and injustice".³

As many of the causes of poverty and injustice are global in nature, the 13 Oxfam affiliates believe they can achieve greater impact through working together as an international confederation. Hence they try to do advocacy jointly. One manifestation of this is the large coordinated international campaigns that they run from time to time on a particular issue of concern - campaigns in which all affiliates and field offices around the world are saying the same thing at the same time, via the media, popular campaigning, lobbying, etc to the same targets. This means it is necessary for them to have agreed policies and public positions on issues, shared campaigning and advocacy strategies, coordinated media activities, and so on.



In April 2002, the largest of these joint campaigns was launched in 25 countries around the world, under the slogan "Make Trade Fair". Its message was that trade has the potential to lift millions out of chronic poverty, but that potential is not being realised because the rules and practices of trade are rigged in the interests of the richer and more powerful nations and their trading companies, and to the disadvantage of the poor. But trade is a big and multifarious subject and the issues involved quite complex, and so in order to make the campaign more concrete and accessible, it was decided to highlight certain examples of trade that illustrated the central

message. The examples chosen were the international trade in pharmaceuticals, coffee beans, ready-made garments and agricultural products. Hence within the overall 'Make Trade Fair' campaign there were these sub-campaigns, on particular illustrative aspects of trade.

The design and overall supervision of the campaign was in the hands of a Trade Campaign Project Group, which consisted of representatives of Oxfam affiliates and

regions as well as specialist such as media and popular campaigning people. In the beginning when all the key decisions were being made, individual regions such as South Asia had no direct representation on this group. There was just one person on the Project Group representing them all. Eventually however each region including South Asia had its own representative.

The popular campaigning aspect focused on the gathering of millions of signatures from people all over the world to a massive international petition. This was called the 'Big Noise' petition as it was supposed to represent a loud and forceful cry from the peoples of the world for the rules and practices of trade to be made fairer. This was taken up in scores of countries around the world and by December 2005 had gathered nearly 18 million signatures.

Sub-campaign on the garment trade.

In the lead-up to the sub-campaign on the garment trade OI conducted surveys in eight countries⁴ of the situation of women workers in the garment industry. This research, which involved interviewing over 1000 workers, factory owners, managers, importers, union and government officials, revealed a pattern of abuses of these workers across countries:

- Low wages, often not enough to provide workers with proper nutrition or housing.
- Long hours, excessive amounts of overtime, often compulsory, often unpaid.
- Workers subjected to ever more demanding production targets.
- Precarious employment, unreliable income, short-term or no contracts, people hired and fired at will.
- Verbal abuse and harassment in the workplace.
- No unions allowed, no collective bargaining, organisers harassed or worse.

The potential of these garment industry jobs to lift people out of poverty, and in particular to give women economic and social independence, was not being realised because of poor working conditions. Governments in developing countries who see cheap and compliant labour as their only comparative advantage in an increasingly competitive trading environment, are weakening or failing to enforce laws that are meant to protect workers and their basic rights. As a result, millions of workers are losing out on their fair share of the potential benefits of a globalised garment trade.

A major factor in this is the way the garment industry is structured - with many hundreds of small and large manufacturers of ready-made garments in a variety of developing countries, but only a relatively small number of buyers who can retail these products in richer countries. Because of this, the large retailers and brand-name companies hold all the negotiating power. As one manufacturer in a developing country once said: "You do not tell Walmart the price. Walmart tells you". Manufacturers who cannot afford to lose Walmart, or Marks and Spencer, or Nike or whoever, as a customer are forced to accept whatever is on offer. They then adjust to the low price offered by squeezing workers' wages.

Buyers for these international companies are able to pit country against country for their orders and the income and jobs they bring, supplier against supplier, worker against worker. They are able to squeeze their suppliers for the lowest price and the shortest delivery time. This latter is particularly important in the fashion industry that

works on the principle of keeping stocks to a minimum and uses 'just in time' delivery. This pressure is passed on to workers in the form of low wages and long hours of overtime to meet tight delivery times. Long hours are also the result of very low pay rates per hour, which create the need for women to put in long hours, so that total income per week is enough to live on. The industry is able to push costs and risk down the supply chain and onto vulnerable workers, who are least able to resist and defend themselves. This is a global business model that thrives when workers are denied the right to organise.

Brand-name garment companies that have a reputation to protect are able to distance themselves from any exploitation of labour by the fact that they do not actually employ the workers. They merely buy from suppliers who do. Most brand-name companies will have 'codes of practice' for their suppliers that say that they will not buy from manufacturers who exploit their workers, use child labour, demand excessive working hours, etc. But then their Buying Departments undermine their own codes through their aggressive and ruthless purchasing practices, and demands for lower prices and shorter delivery times.

In taking up this issue as part of the Make Trade Fair campaign, Oxfam was keen to focus on women workers in particular, whom it felt were doubly exploited – as workers in this exploitative supply chain, and as a socially disadvantaged group within their own societies. Women are the 'backbone' of the international garment industry. Some 70 percent of the workforce in Economic Processing Zones (where garment manufacturing mainly happens) are women, usually young, unmarried and from a rural background. But they are usually regarded as expendable, secondary workers who are not the major bread-winners for their families (often not true) and who will only work for a few years before returning to the village. Supporters of this industry promote the myth that they are providing work for these otherwise unemployed women, ignoring the women's former role in agricultural production and informal services, not to mention caring and domestic work – and the fact that in many cases they are the main bread-winner for their children and families.



Many women workers value the economic independence and social status that these jobs give them. For the years they are employed in these export industries, they often enjoy higher than average wages. But for these short-term gains, they will often trade away the longer term health and welfare of themselves, their children if they are mothers, and their families. Often on

their return home to rural areas former workers find themselves in ill-health, impoverished, and stigmatised for having lived by themselves in a city.

Labour legislation in developing countries and company 'codes of conduct' usually ignore the particular concerns of women workers and the trend in the industry towards precarious female employment. As women workers are often not considered to be permanent workers or the 'real' providers for their families, their social insurance, leave time and rights are most likely to be neglected. Temporary, part time, seasonal and home workers are often not protected under national labour legislation, and their employment is increasingly precarious.

All these issues were summarized in a publication released by Oxfam in February 2004 called "Trading Away Our Rights. Women Working in Global Supply Chains": The report called for a number of things, including:

- Companies – retailers and brands – to make respect for labour rights integral to their supply-chain business strategies, especially by addressing the impacts of their own sourcing and purchasing practices on the way that producers hire and treat their workers.
- Producers and suppliers worldwide to provide decent jobs for their employees, including respect for workers' right to join trade unions and bargain collectively, and eliminating discrimination against women workers.
- National governments, South and North, to stop trading away workers' rights in law and in practice, and to enforce international labour standards in order to promote decent employment for poverty reduction, gender equality and development.⁵

In deciding to campaign on an issue of workers rights, Oxfam naturally sought and formed alliances with the international union movement, and in particular with the International Confederation of Free Trade Unions (ICFTU). This involved considerable discussion between the Brussels based ICFTU and Oxfam over policy and Oxfam's position, but was eventually resolved and an alliance formed. However some aspects of the joint policies positions of the campaign and what could or could not be said - for example on labour rights in China, given that Oxfam had a program there that could be endangered – continued to be negotiated right up to the last minute.

Oxfam was also keen to form an alliance with an organization that had an on-going campaign on garment workers' rights, and which would be able to carry on the campaign after Oxfam withdrew. The essence of these sub-campaigns within the overall Make Trade Fair campaign was that they were short-term, one of a series of illustrations of the general theme about trade. But the problem with short-term campaigns is that they have to be dropped before anything substantial has been achieved, which is often not very sensible and not generally acceptable to supporters of the campaign. This was a lessons learnt at the end of the sub-campaign on coffee. Having generated much concern about the plight of coffee farmers amongst its supporters, Oxfam was in effect having to tell them to now forget about coffee farmers and become concerned about the plight of garment workers. But campaigns simply do not work like that. Those who were concerned about coffee farmers will continue to be, but will have nowhere to go with their concerns. To overcome this, Oxfam decided on a different approach with the garments sub-campaign. Rather than starting a campaign and then after a few months dropping it, Oxfam would instead find a long-term on-going campaign and simply come in and support it for a

few months to give it a short-term boost. Any supporters that this generated would then continue to support the on-going organization and its campaign.

In this Oxfam was lucky enough to find the ideal organization - a European based group with extensive networks in the developing world called the "Clean Clothes Campaign" (CCC) that had been campaigning for many years on the rights of garment workers. Even better was the fact that CCC had a short-term campaign in mind that would be ideally suited to the short-term support that Oxfam envisaged. This was a campaign to use the forthcoming Olympic Games in Athens and the public interest this was going to attract to highlight the issues of women workers in the sportswear industry. The campaign would contrast the values for which the Olympic Movement stands (fairness, human dignity, etc) with the situation of the women who make the sportswear and uniforms worn at the Games. It was to be called the Olympics Campaign and would run for the months leading up to the Athens Olympics in August 2004.

Its strategy was to focus attention and exert consumer pressure on half-a-dozen or so brand-name sportswear companies - not the major ones like Nike that were the usual targets of such 'sweatshop campaigns' but second-level companies such as Umbro, Asics, Puma, etc that had up till now escaped attention. The campaign would also focus on the international and national Olympics Committees, asking them to put in place measures to ensure that any garment that bore the Olympic logo was made under fair conditions. Its specific objectives included the following:

- Sportswear companies should develop and implement credible labour-practice policies which ensure that their suppliers respect internationally recognised labour standards, including the right to a living wage based on a regular working week that does not exceed 48 hours; humane working hours with no forced overtime; a safe and healthy workplace free from harassment; and legal employment, with labour and social protection.
- Sportswear companies should change their purchasing practices to ensure that they do not lead to the exploitation of workers. They should negotiate appropriate delivery times, as well as fair prices, which allow factory managers to meet orders and meet labour standards.
- Sportswear companies should implement their codes of conduct on labour practices in ways that deliver sustainable improvements to working conditions.Further requirements are investment in appropriate inspection systems, which place workers at the centre of the process; increased training for workers on their rights and related issues; and ensuring safe complaint mechanisms.
- The sportswear industry should make the effort to address these problems collectively, given that they are endemic in the industry, by jointly developing a sector-wide approach.
- Sportswear suppliers should provide decent jobs for their employees by complying with international labour standards and national labour laws. In particular, they should ensure that workers are allowed to exercise their rights to join trade unions and bargain collectively.

- The Olympics movement should make a serious commitment to respect workers' rights in the sportswear industry. Through the International Olympics Committee (IOC), the National Olympics Committees, and the Organising Committees it should be insisting that the industry must meet international labour standards in its operations. The IOC should make a public commitment to this in its charter and should reform its rules on licensing, sponsorship, and marketing agreements to ensure that commitments on workers' rights are included in these contracts.⁶

CCC already had extensive contacts with the ICFTU, and hence it was a relatively easy matter to form a three-way alliance between Oxfam, CCC and ICFTU to run the Olympics Campaign. The campaign slogan chosen was "Play Fair at the Olympics. Respect Workers Rights in the Sportswear Industry". A joint report called "Play Fair At The Olympics" was released in early March 2004, based on research done by all three agencies into sportswear manufacturers in six countries⁷ and under the logos of the three agencies – Oxfam/Make Trade Fair, Clean Clothes Campaign and the ICFTU/Global Unions.

So now there were two rival sub-campaigns on garment workers – an Oxfam only one ("Trading Away Our Rights") with its emphasis on purchasing practices, women workers and precarious employment - and a joint one ("Olympics Campaign") with its emphasis on sportswear companies, the Olympic Movement, and basic labour rights such as the right to organise. The former, "Trading Away Our Rights", was a "bottom up" type of campaign that built on and supported a number of national level labour campaigns in a variety of countries – whereas the "Olympics Campaign" was "top down", centrally organized and globally unified, and therefore much more in line with the Make Trade Fair model. Hence it was the Olympics Campaign that won out and became the focus for Oxfam, while "Trading Away Our Rights" continued in the background, doing excellent work supporting the national level campaigns with which it had become involved, but a little disconnected from the mainstream campaign.



The international campaign reached its peak in the lead up to and during the Athens Olympic Games in August 2004 – and then faded away when the Games were over. The photo (left) shows a stunt performed by the campaign in Athens during the Olympics, with the Parthenon in the background. By the time it was over, the sub-campaign and its constituent organizations had generated an estimated 500 local events.

Hundreds of organizations and many top athletes had participated in over 35 countries, and more than half a million signatures had been collected in support of

the campaign. The European Parliament and the British Parliament both passed resolutions supporting the campaign aims; and a bill entitled “Play Fair at the Olympics” was introduced in the US Congress requiring the US Olympics Committee to ensure that its garment suppliers met basic labour standards. Many members of several national parliaments also actively supported the campaign.

The campaign succeeded in bringing seven major sportswear companies around the table with the International Labour Organization (ILO) to discuss a proposed “programme of work” designed to bring an end to ongoing labour abuses in the sportswear industry. The World Federation of the Sporting Goods Industries in July 2004 established a new committee on “corporate social responsibility” which discussed this proposal. But it did not respond in any meaningful way, and did not give any indication on how it would address the failure of most of its members to follow their own basic codes of practice. Some of the individual companies that were targeted made improvements in their supply chains, and resolution of some on-going disputes at particular factories were facilitated. But by-and-large there was no real sustainable progress on the ground.⁸ Stories of worker abuse and exploitation linked to every sports brand continued to emerge. As the campaign website said: “They’ve jumped off the starting block, but are nowhere near the finishing line, which they will need to reach if workers lives are to improve by Beijing 2008”.

Many national Olympic Committees and several athletes supported the campaign call for an end to the abuse and exploitation of workers in the sportswear industry. But the International Olympic Committee (IOC) categorically refused to take any responsibility for workers’ rights in the Olympics sponsorship and licensing programmes. While making misleading statements in the media about the campaign, the IOC ignored any attempts to move the dialogue forward, and refused to accept the signatures of half a million campaign supporters around the world calling for change across the sportswear sector.

After the Athens Games, Oxfam withdrew from the Olympic Campaign, which then continued in reduced form under the leadership of the Clean Clothes Campaign. Oxfam did however continue to support the national level campaigns that it had generated, including the one in Sri Lanka.

Sub-campaign on agricultural trade.

Perhaps the most important of the sub-campaigns within the Make Trade Fair campaign was that on the trade in agricultural products. Not only did it very clearly illustrate its central message about trade rules being rigged in favour of the rich and powerful, but also it was an aspect of trade of particular importance to poverty reduction. More than 80 percent of the world’s poor people live in rural areas, and ensuring that agriculture works for them must be at the heart of the international trade agenda.

- Two-thirds of the world’s poor populations, some 2.5 billion people, depend on agriculture for a living.
- 98 percent of the world’s farmers live in developing countries. One in every four farmers is Indian.

- Of the 1.2 billion people who live on US\$1 or less a day, most are farm workers and rural poor, struggling to send their children to school, or to buy medicines and enough food.

But the drive towards the liberalisation of trade by the World Trade Organization⁹ and other international bodies is putting more or more peasant farmers into direct competition with imports produced by farmers in rich countries ('the North') who have access to capital, machinery, hi-tech inputs and government subsidies. The result could be millions of poor farmers in the developing world ('the South') being unable to compete in their domestic markets and being forced to leave their land for uncertain futures in ever more crowded urban slums.

Exacerbating the problem is the dumping of subsidised agricultural products by the Europeans and Americans onto export markets. The European Union (EU) and United States (US) governments heavily subsidise their agricultural producers, and this has led to agricultural surpluses, which have traditionally been disposed of by exporting them – at artificially low prices. This undermines exporters from other countries, including Southern exporters, who do not (or cannot) subsidise their farmers, by lowering world prices and unfairly taking export markets. And because of trade liberalisation and the opening up of markets, these subsidised goods are increasingly able to be imported into Southern countries, undermining local farmers who are trying to sell their products on the domestic market.

Cheap imports do of course mean cheaper food for consumers, both urban and rural, but this is more than offset by the potential undermining of rural economies on which the majority of the population depend. Displaced farmers and destitute rural people are not going to be able to buy food no matter how cheap it is. Also liberalization can leave countries such as these dependent on other countries for their most basic of needs – food. And it requires them to spend more of their precious foreign currency on buying food. The Least Developed Countries already spend about half of their foreign exchange earnings on food imports. If a country's export earnings are not secure, its ability to buy imported food could be at risk, which would leave it very vulnerable. Many poor countries suffer from macroeconomic imbalances (export revenue and exchange rate instability) and are over-indebted. Relying heavily on imports would be a risky strategy should economic conditions change. Countries could be faced with problems such as rising food import bills, diminishing foreign currency reserves and unsustainable indebtedness. They could also face urban unrest and political destabilization if prices to consumers sharply increased.

There is a danger of Southern countries being forced to open their markets to agricultural imports before alternative livelihoods have been found for their large populations of vulnerable farmers. The argument that Southern governments are increasingly using is that they should be allowed to retain control over how far and how fast they open their markets to agricultural imports. But they are under considerable pressure from Northern agricultural exporting countries to do the opposite, to give up inefficient protectionist policies and liberalize their agricultural markets as far and as fast as possible.

The rules that governments follow with respect to international trade (on tariffs, quotas, etc) are set via a process of inter-governmental negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO). Most of these take place at the government official level

at the WTO headquarters in Geneva. But every two years the politicians become involved when Trade Ministers of the WTO member countries meet together at a Ministerial Conference. It is at these conferences that new agreements are concluded and signed. There are now around 150 countries that are members of the WTO, the majority of them Southern countries, big and small. But the negotiations tend to be dominated by a few bigger trading nations, which until recently meant the US, EU, Japan and a few other Northern countries. However this is now changing as larger Southern countries such as Brazil, India and China begin to exert their influence. At the 2003 Ministerial Conference a significant development took place when a group of Southern countries got together to form what was called the 'Group of Twenty' or G20 and lobbied jointly.¹⁰ This was a group that could to some extent match the influence of the US and EU, and its appearance changed the balance of negotiating power within the WTO.

In 2004 and 2005, Oxfam's sub-campaign on agriculture was focused on the WTO negotiations of an Agreement on Agriculture, and in particular on the all-important Ministerial Conference that was coming up in December 2005 in Hong Kong. Its main policy calls were for a new WTO Agreement on Agriculture to be signed in Hong Kong that included the following:

- A sentence in the preamble to clarify that, 'Nothing in this agreement shall prevent developing countries from promoting development goals, poverty reduction, food security, and livelihood concerns.'
- A tariff reduction formula that allows developing countries to cut tariffs in a way that does not undermine their development strategies. This should include the use of a flexible formula with lower percentage reductions for developing countries, as well as longer implementation periods. Least Developed Countries should remain exempted from any tariff reductions.
- The full exemption from tariff reductions of food security crops – food that people depend on for their lives (for example rice in Indonesia, corn in Mexico). These 'Special Products' should be self-selected by developing countries on the basis of the agreed criteria of food security, livelihood security, and rural development needs.
- A 'Special Safeguard Mechanism' for all developing countries, without product limitation, to smooth out excessive fluctuations in domestic price and volumes of imports.
- A self-defence mechanism to respond to potential dumping practices. The WTO secretariat should each year compute costs of production and export prices for agricultural products receiving subsidies. On the basis of that information, developing countries should be allowed to add a percentage tariff equivalent to the dumping margin to their bound tariff levels.

Its campaign strategies focused on:

- Highlighting the 'rigged rules' that allowed the US and EU to continue to subsidise their producers and dump agricultural surpluses on export markets,

and the hypocrisy of Northern governments that insisted that Southern countries open their markets while resisting the opening of their own.

- Producing and launching in the media a number of briefing papers that documented these abuses.
- Encouraging the assertiveness of Southern countries in the WTO by providing them with documented examples of unfair rules and practices by Northern countries and the arguments to counter their negotiating positions.
- Collecting millions of signatures in the North and South on the 'Big Noise' petition, to be presented to world leaders at the Hong Kong ministerial meeting.



In the event the WTO Ministerial Conference in Hong Kong in December 2005 was inconclusive – although in principle the idea of 'Special Products' and of a 'Special Safeguard Mechanism' were accepted. The photo (left) shows an Oxfam media stunt in Hong Kong during the Ministerial Conference. Staff wearing papier-mache heads represent world leaders who are closing their ears to the cries of the world's poor farmers. Notice the martial arts performers in the foreground wearing Make Trade Fair tee-shirts.

Oxfam in South Asia

It was expected that the Make Trade Fair campaign and its various sub-campaigns would be taken up not only by the 13 Oxfam affiliates but also by their various regional offices in the Southern countries in which they operated. Taken as a whole, the 13 affiliates had development assistance programs in more than 100 countries spread over every continent. For administrative purposes these were divided into regions, of which 'South Asia' is one. The Oxfam 'South Asia' region consists of Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka.

In this South Asia region there were, at the time of these case studies, three Oxfam affiliates operating – Oxfam Great Britain, NOVIB (the Netherlands Oxfam) and Oxfam Australia.¹¹ Oxfam GB had the largest presence, with programs in all six countries and a number of offices, staffed mainly by locals, spread throughout them. NOVIB on the other hand had no offices in the region. It had a large program in terms of funds dispersed, supporting the work of around 90 organizations, but administered from its headquarters in The Hague, assisted by frequent field visits to the region by staff. Oxfam Australia had the smallest program, focussed on North-east India, South-east India and Sri Lanka, with an office in each of these.¹² In contrast to NOVIB, Oxfam Australia tended to focus its support on smaller organizations. There was also a new and somewhat embryonic local Oxfam in the region, which was known as the Oxfam India Trust (but has since become Oxfam India). As the name implies, it operated in only one country in the region and was headquartered in New

Delhi. The aim is that it will eventually grow and take over the programs of the 'foreign' Oxfams to become the sole Oxfam in India.

Overseeing all the Oxfam programs in the region, and with a mandate to bring them together as far as possible into one harmonized program (and to nurture the growth of Oxfam India) is a body known as the Regional Strategic Team (RST). This consists of representatives from each of the affiliates operating in the region, with one of these representatives being appointed as Lead Regional Manager.¹³ The task of bringing together and harmonising the development assistance programs of the three affiliates in South Asia has been slow and has not proceeded very far – due to the difficulty of bringing about such a fundamental change to long established programs. Advocacy on the other hand has been a very different story. None of the Oxfams was involved in advocacy in South Asia until the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign came along, and hence there were no pre-existing programs that had to be encouraged to change. The Make Trade Fair campaign internationally was a joint affiliate activity and when the RST decided to take it up in South Asia, it seemed perfectly natural to do it jointly in South Asia as well.

The South Asia RST took some time to take up the campaign. In 2003, one year after Make Trade Fair had been launched internationally, the emphasis at an international level was on preparing for the sub-campaign on the trade in ready-made garments. This sparked some interest in South Asia. There was already considerable interest in the garment industry and garment workers amongst Oxfam staff in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh - because of recent changes in World Trade Organization rules that meant that the industry in these two countries was under threat of disappearing, with the consequent loss of many jobs. Oxfam Australia's office in Sri Lanka and Oxfam GB's office in Bangladesh were already working with labour organizations to raise awareness of, and prepare for, the potentially disastrous changes that were about to hit the garment industry in those countries.

At its meeting in Colombo in July 2003, the RST decided that it was appropriate to turn this work into a regional campaign (or more precisely a two-country campaign) on the trade in garments and the rights of garment workers and that this would be their contribution to the international Make Trade Fair campaign. It would be funded jointly by the three affiliates operating in the region, and managed by a campaign group answerable to the RST, to be known as the South Asia Labour and Trade (SALT) team.

Later, in 2004, with the work on garment workers proceeding smoothly, the RST decided to become involved in the sub-campaign on agriculture as well. This was in a sense inevitable given the importance of the role of the Indian Government in the WTO negotiations. Once again the RST decided that this sub-campaign would focus on two countries only, India and Bangladesh, and to be funded jointly by the three affiliates. Another campaign group answerable to the RST was formed called the South Asia Trade and Agriculture group, for which the acronym STAR was somewhat dubiously contrived.

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- ¹ Oxfam America, Oxfam Canada, Oxfam Quebec, Oxfam Ireland, Oxfam GB, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands), Oxfam Belgium, Oxfam Intermon (Spain), Oxfam Germany, Oxfam Japan, Oxfam Hong Kong, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam New Zealand.
- ² Oxfam India will eventually build up a funding base in India, and will use the money raised from the public there to fund programs in other countries and continents, as well as a domestic program in India.
- ³ Oxfam International website www.oxfaminternational.org
- ⁴ Morocco, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, China, Honduras, UK.
- ⁵ Oxfam International. *Trading Away Our Rights. Women Working in Global Supply Chains*. Oxford, 2004, p.8.
- ⁶ Oxfam/MTF, Clean Clothes Campaign, Global Unions. *Play Fair at the Olympics*, Oxford, 2004, pages 9-10.
- ⁷ Bulgaria, Turkey, China, Thailand, Cambodia, Indonesia.
- ⁸ Merk, Jeroen. *Response of target companies to the Play Fair at the Olympics campaign*. Clean Clothes Campaign, August 2004.
- ⁹ That is, the removing of all 'barriers to trade' such as tariffs and quotas, which in the past have been used by governments to protect their local producers.
- ¹⁰ Its membership varies a little from time to time, but basically consists of Argentina, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, China, Cuba, Egypt, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Nigeria, Pakistan, Paraguay, Philippines, South Africa, Tanzania, Thailand, Venezuela and Zimbabwe.
- ¹¹ Oxfam Hong Kong and Intermon (the Spanish Oxfam) also had very small programs there, but were not involved in campaigns or advocacy in the region.
- ¹² Its program in South-east India has since been closed.
- ¹³ The author was one of the two representatives of Oxfam Australia on the RST.

Chapter Two

Campaign on garment workers in Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka's labour markets have been radically transformed over the last two decades as the result of a policy of privatization and investment liberalization by the government. There has been an increased emphasis on attracting foreign direct investment, and on manufacturing labour-intensive goods for export. One of the manifestations of this has been the establishing of areas of concentrated foreign investment, known as Free Trade Zones (FTZs) or Export Processing Zones (EPZs). The three largest EPZs were established in 1978, 1984, and 1991 respectively in Katunayaka, Biyagama, and Koggala. In 1992, the entire country was declared an Export Processing Zone. The major industry in the EPZs is the manufacture of ready-made garments for export. Because of its relatively cheap labour, well-educated workforce, and good access into European and American markets via preferential quotas (see below) Sri Lanka has become a major supplier of garments to the world market.

By 2002 there were an estimated 300,000 workers employed in the garment industry in Sri Lanka, including 100,000 or so in the EPZs, the overwhelming majority of them being women.¹ While women constitute some 35 percent of the overall work force in Sri Lanka as a whole, in the garment industry they make up some 85 percent, concentrated in the unskilled work categories. The majority of them are young, single rural women who have few alternative employment opportunities. The employment structure in the EPZs is highly gendered, with the majority of men employed as executives or technicians, and the majority of women working in low-skilled positions. Employers in the EPZs seem to prefer employing unmarried women as they are seen as more flexible, easier to manage and less likely to demand their rights. "In some factories once a female worker gets married she is deprived of promotions and subtly discouraged from continuing work," says Padmini Weerasuriya of the Women's Centre, an NGO working with EPZ workers.

The working conditions inside the EPZ factories are not good. Some of the more prominent problems include:

- Forced overtime, of up to 60 or 90 hours per month.
- Excessive fines and penalties, including for not reaching production targets.
- Poor or non-existent occupational health and safety practices.
- Precarious work with little job security.
- Repression of the right to organize, to form a union or bargain collectively.
- Harassment of women workers in the factory and where they live.

Health hazards include industrial accidents resulting from inadequate training on how to use protective gear and handle machinery, the removal of safety guards, and defective machines. In addition, ventilation and sanitation systems are often sub-standard. It is not uncommon for managers to limit the number of visits that can be



made to the toilet during working hours, and workers in some factories have been banned from drinking water during working hours. Workers can be required to meet unreasonable production targets (60 collars, pockets or hems per hour, when most can only sew 45), and have reported physical punishments for failure to meet these targets. Women often complain of sexual harassment both within the factories and on the streets and public transport on the way to and from work.

Lodgings for workers in boarding houses are generally crowded, unsafe, and unsanitary. In the housing complexes near the Zones, it is common to have 10 or 12 women sharing the one room, and 30 sharing the one toilet. Transport can be a problem especially at night. A Colombo newspaper describes the situation:

[A]fter being made to work overtime, these women return to their lodgings late, which means they have to buy food from the little shops run by the boarding homes, where prices are higher than market prices. Fish and 'mellum' leaves cannot be washed on the premises. A fee is levied for using the grinding stone. Lights are switched off at 10pm so that cooking becomes impossible. They have to wake up early in the mornings to take turns using the single toilet, shared by 20 to 80 women in a single boarding house. A single room goes for 1,200 to 1,500 rupees and can be shared by any number of girls. This NGO said that the women take whatever savings they have when they go home and return with groceries, so there is no savings. Running boarding houses has become big business for the residents within the Zone.²

A working paper by the International Labour Organization (ILO) on EPZs in Sri Lanka found that "more than 80 percent of workers in the three EPZs indicated that if it were possible, they would leave their jobs to become self-employed or work in other occupations. Their sentiments in that regard may be attributed to the difficulties in getting leave, the long hours of work, low wages and health problems".

Prior to 2002 the labour laws of Sri Lanka specified that workers were not allowed to work more than 100 hours of overtime per year. Although workers regularly exceeded this limit prior to the amendment, it was voluntary and they had some means of redress if they were fired for refusing to work the extra hours. But in 2002 this limit was lifted, presumably under pressure from foreign investors, and replaced by a new limit of 60 hours per month (720 hours per year). However the new law does not specify that overtime must be voluntary. Hence workers are unable to refuse overtime, unless they have already worked the maximum 60 hours in that

month. This is a heavy imposition, but particularly so for women with families who also have domestic obligations that they are expected to meet outside working hours.

A recent study of the 200 garment factories revealed that 60 to 70 percent of the workers interviewed felt that “the worst thing for them in their current employment was the long working hours, with wages which were not commensurate with these work hours”. A key factor here is the low hourly rate paid to EPZ workers, which means they must work many hours of overtime in order to bring their total income up to a reasonable living wage. If the wages they received for a normal day’s work without overtime was enough to live on, which it generally is not, they would be less willing to work long hours. But this would not be in the interests of the factory owner who need flexibility in working hours when they have rush orders to fill and a short deadline to meet.

Workers in the garment sector are in a weak position. Their general level of awareness in terms of their rights is often low, and their ability to agitate for improvements without being fired is yet to be demonstrated. The Constitution in Sri Lanka recognises the right of workers to organise and form unions and to bargain collectively. But this right has traditionally been severely restricted. A 1999 amendment to the Industrial Disputes Act made it compulsory for employers to recognise a union that can demonstrate that it represent 40 percent or more of the workers. As a result, workers from the three EPZs at Katunayake, Biyagama and Koggala successfully formed one union, the Free Trade Zones Workers Union of Sri Lanka (FTZWU), on 23 January 2000. By June 2000, the FTZWU had grown to seven factory branches and over 2,000 members. Unlike many other trade unions in Sri Lanka, the FTZWU is not linked to any particular political party.

Dialogue over phase-out of MFA

Despite these numerous problems, the EPZs do provide hundreds of thousands of workers in Sri Lanka with employment and a means of earning an income. Although working conditions need to be dramatically improved, it is in nobody’s interest to see the industry and the jobs it creates disappear entirely. But this is what appeared to be about to happen in 2002, as a result of the phase out of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA).

The Multi-Fibre Agreement was a protectionist device introduced many decades ago by the United States and European Union to limit the importation of cheap garments from developing countries and to protect domestic jobs. The limiting was done primarily by allocating import quotas to individual countries for products made from cotton, wool or synthetic fibres. In this process Sri Lanka actually did quite well, as it was given generous quotas. In fact it was these attractive quotas into Northern markets that encouraged the Sri Lankan garment industry to grow in the first place. But the MFA did not meet the non-discrimination rules of the World Trade Organization (WTO), which stipulate that a benefit extended by a WTO member country to one of its trading partners must be extended to all. The MFA gave better treatment to some countries than to others, via differing quotas. Under a WTO agreement reached in 1994, the MFA was to be phased out over a ten-year period from 1995 to 2005.

For Sri Lanka this meant that it would lose the advantage it had long enjoyed over other garment exporting countries of a preferential and generous access into lucrative Northern markets. When the MFA and its quota system were phased out, it would have to compete on equal terms with all other garment exporting countries, some of which were more competitive in terms of labour costs or delivery times. For while labour costs in Sri Lanka are low, they are nowhere near as low as in some other countries. The fear was that buyers would abandon Sri Lanka and take their orders and contracts to countries where labour was cheaper (e.g. China) or where productivity and turn-around times were better (e.g. India). The advantage that India has over Sri Lanka is that it produces its own cotton and textiles, whereas Sri Lanka has to import this basic raw material. The industry in Sri Lanka would then lose large numbers of jobs as the orders dried up and factories closed. It appeared that the country's garment industry, which accounted for more than half of Sri Lanka's export earnings, was under serious threat from foreign competition, and that up to 100,000 jobs could be lost in the industry.

While the MFA was supposed to be phased out in stages over the ten-year period, so that countries like Sri Lanka would have time to adjust, in practice the Northern countries procrastinated so that by 2002, eight years into the process, very little had happened. The prospect was that when the 2005 deadline was reached, there would be a sudden loss of market access, and loss of jobs. But because nothing much had happened in terms of reduced quotas at that point the Sri Lankan government and garment industry were very complacent and had done nothing to prepare. What was urgently needed was a plan of action by government and industry that would minimize the loss of jobs by, for example, improving the productivity and efficiency of the industry, provide training and assistance with redeployment for those workers who were forced out of the garment industry, and so on. Also urgently needed were measures to ensure that those workers who did become unemployed received the wages and other statutory payments due to them, and ideally also a redundancy package.

For the unions in Sri Lanka the situation was a delicate one. On the one hand they needed to extract better wages and conditions from employers and factory owners, but not to the extent that it would drive buyers away or led to the closure of factories. One line that was taken was that Sri Lanka should compete for orders not on the basis of its labour being the cheapest, which it never could be, but on the basis of it having better labour conditions than its competitors and therefore being more attractive to buyers who had codes of conduct and who wanted to avoid 'sweatshop' scandals. The General Secretary of the FTZWU put it thus:

In the wake of the emerging trend towards ethical consumption and trade in the West the demand for adherence of core labour standards is constantly on the rise. Tapping this niche market would certainly require strict compliance with labour standards - and the regional competitors are far behind Sri Lanka in gearing for this.....Sri Lanka should project itself to the world-market and to prospective investors as a country maintaining good labour standards in order to harness the competitive advantage of the emerging trend of Ethical Trade in the West.³

In response to the threat of massive job losses, Oxfam in Sri Lanka as early as 2002 decided on a campaign to raise awareness of the phase-out and motivate the government and garment industry to start preparing for it.⁴ Earlier, as part of the Make Trade Fair campaign, there had been an Oxfam-funded consultation process and report in Bangladesh of the effects of MFA phase-out in that country, which was in a similar position of Sri Lanka in terms of losing preferential quota access to Northern markets. It was decided to undertake a similar consultation process in Sri Lanka - a multi-stakeholder dialogue on preparing for and mitigating the likely impacts of the phase-out.⁵ The dialogue process was seen as being in stages:

1. An initial two day workshop on MFA phase-out with trade unions and NGOs involved in labour issues, to build consensus (August 2002).
2. Using the consensus position, draw others in and build a coalition.
3. Establish a research team.
4. Seminar with government and business groups (November 2002).
5. Bring all these groups together for a joint seminar to discuss the draft research (January 2003).
6. Final seminar to present the research findings and agree on proposals for action (March 2003).

This process was to be led by Oxfam, which provided office space and a coordinator (Arjuna Parakrama). As planned, an initial two-day workshop was held outside Colombo in August 2002 with trade union and NGO representatives, and as a result consensus arrived at on the following:

- Workers in the EPZs should be paid a 'living wage'. How that should be defined and how much it would be in practice should be the subject of Oxfam initiated research.
- If workers are retrenched as a result of the MFA phase-out they should be paid compensation and provided with retraining. Responsibility for paying for this compensation and retraining should lie with those that have profited over the years from the low wages, including manufacturers and buyers.⁶

To take this process forward, an informal Core Advisory Group was established consisting of the leading figures from the key unions and worker-oriented NGOs. Apart from the research into what constituted a 'living wage', it was also decided to research the following:

1. How to increase the competitiveness of the Sri Lankan garment industry.
2. Which factories are most vulnerable in the phase-out, and how many workers might be affected by the closure of these factories.
3. What compensation retrenched workers should receive.
4. Who should pay for severance pay and retraining of workers who lose their jobs.
5. What future do workers want? What alternative livelihoods could be developed.

Terms of reference for this research, and a funding proposal to the three Oxfam affiliates working in Sri Lanka, were in the process of being finalized when in early 2003 the two key people driving this initiative became unavailable, and the process ground to a halt for a while. The coordinator Arjuna Parakrama and consultant with Oxfam Novib, Maggie Burns, were both people with a number of other outside involvements, and at this point these took them away for some time.

Relationship with 'Make Trade Fair' campaign

While all this was happening in Sri Lanka, at the international level Oxfam was about to embark on the sub-campaign on labour rights and the trade in garments as part of the international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign. The emphasis was to be on women workers in the industry, and on sportswear in particular in order to capitalise on interest in the forthcoming Athens Olympic Games in August 2004. So the question arose of how the international campaign with its focus on labour rights in the sportswear industry would fit into this local campaign on the loss of jobs due to the MFA phase-out. When the question of becoming part of the international sub-campaign was raised at the August 2002 workshop, the idea was well received by union and worker representatives and Oxfam staff. The feeling was that while the work on MFA phase-out would continue to be their main focus, work on labour rights would compliment that quite well. They would take part in, and hopefully gain benefits from being part of, the large Oxfam international campaign - but without the focus on sportswear and the Athens Olympic Games.



In late 2002 a request came from the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign for research and documentation on the garment industry in Sri Lanka for use in the international campaign. A local research organization, the Centre for Policy Alternatives (CPA), was commissioned to produce a report based on interviews with workers, employers and

government officials. The idea was that, together with research from 11 other countries, it would be the basis for a major Oxfam report on labour conditions in the garment industry, ("Trading Away Our Rights") to be released in early 2004. It was not clear at this point how the program of research decided upon at the August 2002 workshop as part of the MFA phase-out work would fit in with this research to be done by CPA. Added to this were concerns by the unions and labour NGO in the Core Advisory Group that Oxfam had established about why these young graduates from CPA, who knew nothing of the struggle for labour rights and had no involvement in the sector, were being paid good money to put together information that the unions and labour NGO people already knew. The counter argument given was that, although the union etc people had much of the information, they were notoriously bad at putting it down on paper in a usable form. They were so busy with the day-to-day struggle for workers rights that it would be foolish to rely on them to produce the written material that the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign needed in the time required.

As a compromise, two decisions were taken. First, in order to ensure that the experience and views of the Core Advisory Group were fully taken into account in the research, it was decided (at a consultation in April 2003) that the latter should act as

an advisory group to the CPA researchers as well. They would meet with the CPA researchers on a regular basis and provide information and comments on the research. Second, if one of the labour unions or organizations in the Core Advisory Group wanted to do some of the research themselves, they should submit a proposal, which would be discussed by the Core Advisory Group as a whole and by Oxfam, and, if thought feasible and useful, funded by Oxfam.⁷

When the CPA researchers presented their initial findings to the Core Advisory Group at their first consultative meeting, the feeling was that the picture they were presenting of the industry was far too rosy and positive. Perhaps they had been too influenced by the managers and officials with whom they had been talking? The CPA researchers on the other hand felt that unions had too negative a picture of the industry because they only dealt with situations where there were serious problems. In the end a compromise was reached and the research report submitted to Oxfam International for use as a resource in its global campaign.

In July 2003, a key meeting of Oxfam staff involved in the trade and labour sub-campaign in South Asia (both Sri Lanka and Bangladesh) took place in Colombo. Its aim was to bring together the two aspects of the work in the two countries - MFA phase-out and labour rights in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka - into a unified regional campaign, and to set up the organizational structure to run it. It was agreed that the unified campaign could be run under the heading of the "Impact of Restructuring on the Global Garment Industry in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh". It was to be funded jointly by three affiliates, Oxfam Australia, Oxfam Great Britain and Oxfam Novib, and managed by a joint campaign group answerable to the Regional Strategic Team (RST) for South Asia, to be known as the South Asia Labour and Trade (SALT) team. This latter included staff members working in Sri Lanka and Bangladesh, and in Oxfam affiliate offices in Europe and Australia, who could share with each other what was happening with the campaign at both a local and international level.

There was also a decision to appoint a Project Coordinator in Sri Lanka, who would work with the Core Advisory Group to decide what needed to be done to take both the MFA dialogue and labour rights campaign forward – and hopefully also facilitate the building of an extended Core Advisory Group. The Coordinator would be assisted by a Project Officer, and both positions would be based in the Colombo office of Oxfam Australia, who would be the 'lead affiliate' for this work, and would manage the joint funding being provided by the three affiliates.⁸ A Project Coordinator was subsequently appointed (Gowthaman) who took up his position in September 2003 and a Project Officer (Kalani Subasinghe).

In the meantime, the process begun in August 2002, of a multi-stakeholder dialogue on the impact of the MFA phase-out continued. The second round of consultation meetings was held in September 2003 over a period of three days - the first day being with manufacturers, the second with government, and the third day with manufacturers, government and buyers together.

Establishment of ALaRM

When Oxfam began its work on labour rights in the garment industry in Sri Lanka it was faced with a group of potential partners and allies – trade unions, labour NGOs

and women's groups - who were disunited and, by their own admission, not operating in a cooperative or strategic manner. There were many possible reasons for this, including capacity differences, turf wars and personality clashes between and within the organizations. Also there was an atmosphere of competition, generated by the need that each organization felt to impress the international donor organizations on whom it relied in order to obtain further funding. It was clear that if progress was to be made in a situation in which employer groups were strong and influential, and the government focused on maximising investment and exports, these potential allies needed to be brought together into a cohesive, effective and sustainable coalition that could campaign over a long period. Oxfam invested heavily in turning the Core Advisory Group, whose members only came together when Oxfam asked them to, into such an effective campaigning alliance. There had long been a recognition among those in the Core Advisory Group that this level of cooperation and coordination was desirable, even essential, and so they were not unwilling participants in this process.

In the second half of 2003, the Core Advisory Group was brought together a number of times in order to identify clear common objectives and activities for a joint labour campaign that they could undertake over the coming months - which would then be funded and supported by Oxfam. The participants, after much discussion of rival proposals, setting down of stricter criteria for selection, and further discussion, were still unable to reduce the list of priorities. Each organization's representatives had an issue they felt passionate about, and they simply advocated that it be the issue to be worked on. While each pushed their own issue, none was willing to openly criticize the issues being pushed by the others. And so what was emerging was not so much an agreement on collective action, as an aggregation of each partner's priority issue. Eventually however compromises were made and four issues were identified that everyone could agree on. These were:

Compensation. Making sure that the adverse impacts of industry restructuring on workers due to the phase-out of the MFA were mitigated. Ensuring that a comprehensive and adequate compensation package with transparent processes was put in place for workers who lose their jobs due to MFA induced closures. Also lobbying of international buyers and 'brand name' companies to act responsibly during the phase-out. For this they looked to Oxfam to provide the necessary international links, profile and possibly direct campaigning in the North on their behalf.⁹

Living wage. Bringing to the national agenda the concept of a 'living wage', a social wage that recognizes hidden costs and is enough to fulfil basic needs without overtime – and which is recognized by the government and employers as a legitimate basis for setting wage levels.

Living conditions. Ensuring dignified living and working conditions by creating a healthy and secure environment for women workers.

Freedom of Association. Creating an environment that affirms the internationally recognized right of workers to form unions and bargain collectively.

It took a long while for a sense of working together on a joint campaign to develop. But it did eventually develop, due in no small part to the persistence of the Project Coordinator (Gowthaman) and Project Officer (Kalani) in facilitating the process. A significant event in this regard was the adoption in December 2003 of a name for the joint group. What had been the 'Core Advisory Group' took on a public identity as the "Apparel-industry Labour Rights Movement" or ALaRM for short. In February 2004 ALaRM received its first public exposure at a major media event in Colombo at which Oxfam launched its "Trading Away Our Rights" report.

Launch of Oxfam report and workers campaign

When ALaRM members realized that there was to be a worldwide launch in a number of countries of an Oxfam report on the rights of women garment workers ("Trading Away Our Rights"), it was suggested that the report be launched in Colombo as well. It was envisaged as primarily a media event to which government officials, business leaders, foreign embassies and others would be invited. The question arose of whether it should be an Oxfam event or an ALaRM one. Normally in a situation like this, Oxfam would stay in the background and support its local partner organizations and allies to take the front running. But on this occasion the feeling on the part of ALaRM members was that the event and the issues would gain more attention from the government and industry if it was done in the name of an internationally reputable organization like Oxfam than if it was done by local unions and organizations. And besides the report being launched was an Oxfam one, not an ALaRM one.

And so on 18 February 2004, an official launch and media briefing was held at the World Trade Centre in Colombo. The key message was that, despite being the backbone of the country's economy, the 300,000 workers in the garment industry, 85 percent of them women, were working under very poor conditions. At a time when the industry was facing major restructuring due to the MFA phase-out, the report aimed to "set the standard for responsible business practices that respects the rights of women workers" – and to show what was necessary if the benefits of trade were to reach the poor.¹⁰

The launch was a spectacular success, with around 120 people attending, including representatives from the Labour Department, Board of Investment, garment manufacturers associations, trade unions, foreign embassies, the World Bank and other international donor agencies. Print and electronic journalists from all three local language media (Singhala, Tamil, English) attended and media coverage was extensive. Most of the major newspapers carried the story, and several TV channels in Colombo featured the event in their evening news. Five radio channels included items in their news bulletins on the day, and on succeeding days, including follow-up interviews with Oxfam spokespersons. As a result a number of organizations sought meetings with Oxfam and ALaRM representatives.

A few days after the media launch there was a mass campaign launch for workers organized by ALaRM. The aim of this was to raise awareness among the workers themselves of the potential impact of the MFA phase-out, to introduce ALaRM as a credible and accessible workers' representative, and to explain the four issues that it was going to work on. The event was a popular one in that it featured song and

dance items and an alternative fashion show demonstrating the hidden talents of the workers. About a thousand workers attended. Prior to this, there had been a training session for 100 selected workers on the issues of the campaign, to ensure that there were at least a core of workers at the popular launch who knew what it was all about and were not there just for the entertainment. It was envisaged that this group would eventually become key resource people for activities in the future. Although the turnout for the event was good, it is unclear how much of the message got through. The workers were more interested in the drama and music rather than the issues being highlighted.

ILO Task Force

Following the launch, pressure from ALaRM and Oxfam resulted in the local representatives of the International Labor Organization (ILO)¹¹ taking up the issue of the MFA phase-out. On 21 July 2004 it hosted a multi-stakeholder conference to highlight and discuss issues arising from the phase-out. The ALaRM campaign Coordinator, Gowthaman, gave a key presentation based on an analysis of the industry and a brief survey that had been done of buyers to determine their purchasing forecasts post 2005. One outcome of the conference was the formation of a high-powered Task Force on the MFA under ILO sponsorship, whose members included the Secretary to the Minister of Labour, the Commissioner of Labour, Secretary General of the Joint Apparel Associations Forum (JAAF), the Industrial Relations Officer of the Board of Investment (BOI) and representatives from the Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Trade and Ministry of Industries. It also included five members of ALaRM, and an Oxfam representative. The presence of the latter and of the NGO members of ALaRM was unusual and was challenged by some. ILO activities normally only involve representative from government, business and labour unions, and not NGOs.

The Task Force met on a regular basis during the rest of the year. For the union members of ALaRM this was a new experience, working in cooperation with rather than in opposition to, employer and government representatives. At an international level, union representatives are used to meeting with employer representatives in ILO meetings, but in Sri Lanka it rarely happened. In the end, the Task Force produced a comprehensive position paper and action plan with a number of recommendations - including constructive dialogue between worker representatives and employers, activating government and other stakeholders to ensure the payment of compensation and other entitlements, retraining and placement of workers, and job saving mechanisms. However the employers groups and the Board of Investment, who were never very keen on the Task Force process, were not happy with its report and recommendations and, it has been alleged, tried to delay or prevent its release.¹²

Then on Boxing Day 2004, Sri Lanka was hit by a disastrous tsunami and the Task Force and everything else was forgotten for many weeks and months as everyone's attention focused on responding to the disaster. When the worst was over and things had started to return to normal, ALaRM tried to revive interest in the Task Force report. But by this time the ILO, in the face of the opposition from business groups and government, was not willing to push it. The result was that the report was shelved and no action was ever taken.

Factory survey

The Department of Labour, which is responsible for conditions in factories in Sri Lanka, had also become interested in the possible effects of the MFA phase-out. Amongst other things it agreed to set up 'Help Desks' in the various Economic Processing Zones to assist workers who lost their jobs and to ensure that they receives the wages and other payments that were due to them. But the human resources to staff these Help Desks were not made available, and the initiative came to nothing.



The Department also decided, as a result of the Task Force, to conduct a survey of garment factories in the country. It had realized that it was not able to estimate the effect of the phase-out or determine appropriate measures, as it did not have accurate information about the industry. It did not know exactly how many garment factories there were in the country, where they were located, how many workers they employed, etc. As a result, and with the encouragement and assistance of Oxfam, it undertook a large-scale survey of all the garment factories in Sri Lanka. It had the capacity to do this because of its country wide network of offices. Oxfam provided the required technical input and financial assistance. 150 Labour officers selected by the Department to carry out the survey were given a one-day training by Oxfam on the reason for the survey, research methodology and interviewing techniques. The survey involved them visiting every garment factory in their area of responsibility and filling out a questionnaire (jointly designed by the Department and Oxfam) about each enterprise and its structure, production process, workers, who it manufactured for, etc. As a result, some 745 factories were surveyed in October 2004. The results were analysed and tabulated by Oxfam using a computer software program designed for the purpose, and the results handed over to the Department. In an interview in July 2007, the Assistant Commissioner of Labour said that this data was of great use to the Department, and had been widely distributed and used. She herself uses it regularly in her presentations. She added that managers and owners of factories have also been asking for copies. The total cost of the survey – the training of officers, payments to them per factory, and data processing - estimated to be approximately 600,000 rupees (AUD 7,000) was born by Oxfam.

A repeat survey of all garment factories was carried out two years later in 2006, in order to obtain accurate information on what had happened in the intervening period. The final phase-out of the MFA internationally occurred at the end of 2004, so the data from this survey will provide a picture of the actual impact two years after the phase-out. From a campaigning point of view, these surveys have had three important benefits:

- A comparison of the details of the 2004 and 2006 surveys will enable those factories that have closed in that period to be identified, including their location and who owned them.
- They mean that Oxfam is now influencing the way in which the Department of Labour gathers information about factories.
- They have meant that local Labour Officers have had to visit every garment factory in their district twice, which did not always happen in the past, and determine the basic situation in each.

Building capacity of ALaRM

While all this was happening in 2004, the member organizations of ALaRM continued to meet to share information and plan future activities. Each member organization was requested to send two representatives to these meetings, at least one of whom should be a woman. Some members, particularly the trade unions had difficulty meeting this requirement as their leadership was predominantly male. It was quickly realized that there were wide differences in the level of awareness, information and understanding of those at the meetings – ranging from worker activists who had little knowledge of the national or international situation through to a few leading figures who regularly attended national and international meetings and had their own networks. To mitigate this difference, it was decided as a first step to provide background notes and technical reading in Sinhala to enable those with less understanding of technical issues to come prepared to the meetings. For the more knowledgeable people within ALaRM a series of ‘Learning Sessions’ were organized in which an expert would come and talk to the group about an issue of interest or importance. Seven of these sessions were held over the three year period from 2004 to 2006.

At a latter stage, training programs were initiated for ‘second level’ activists within the ALaRM member organizations, to build their capacity to become more involved as active leaders. Several of the ALaRM organizations are built around a single dynamic individual, and the absence of a second level leadership in these organizations is a key problem. These training courses were at least in part an attempt to do something about that, to train up promising young people from the ranks, usually workers or former workers, who could eventually take up leadership roles.

At a meeting of ALaRM in May 2004, a significant development occurred. Members discussed in depth how they would conduct training programs and awareness raising among workers. The discussion brought out the differences in methods and principles currently used by individual organizations, which were critically analysed. Eventually some general principles were agreed upon to be adopted by all members conducting training programs. The programs could be conducted by members individually or collectively, but they would use joint manuals and share resource

persons and trainees so as to complement each other and encourage the cross-fertilisation of ideas. This was something of a breakthrough in that sufficient trust had now been built up that members felt comfortable constructively criticising and being criticized and discussing one another's different approaches. It was also the first time that they had agreed to use a common approach (to training in this case) rather than pursue their own individual approaches.

The first few months of 2005 was more or less a write-off as far as campaign activities were concerned, as all resources and attention at that stage were focused on the emergency response to the catastrophic tsunami that had hit the country on 26 December 2004. However by March this situation had eased. During the relief response Oxfam and ALaRM members had been involved in assisting organizations with whom they had contacts in the eastern and southern coastal areas of Sri Lanka that had borne the brunt of the tsunami.

This experience had highlighted the fact that the work and influence of ALaRM members was largely confined to the belt of EPZs around Colombo. But garment factories had by this stage sprung up all over the country and were scattered in all parts of the island. Many workers in these factories outside the EPZ's were in dire need of assistance due to sudden factory closures, non-payment of money that they were entitled to, etc. But there were no organizations in those areas to represent them and fight for their rights. Hence it was decided to conduct initial awareness raising programs in localities outside the EPZs, but where Oxfam had contacts through its long-standing development program.¹³ The aim was to raise awareness about worker rights and hopefully build a team of activists in each area who would be able to address routine infringement of rights and bring complaints to the relevant authorities. It was hoped to use the Oxfam field offices and partner organizations in these areas and their contacts to support this work, but this proved difficult as the staff were exceptionally busy with their own work.¹⁴ However as a result of the awareness raising program in one district (Hambanthota), an ALaRM member organization was able to intervene to represent workers in a factory that had closed. As a result the factory was eventually re-opened after six months, and measures taken by the management and local Labour Office to ensure that all overdue statutory payments were paid. (This success was not entirely due to ALaRM as the factory was in the home town of Sri Lanka's President and some political pressure was applied as well).

When it was first formed, the membership of ALaRM was predominantly male. As mentioned above, some organizations had difficulty sending along at least one female representative to meetings, due to the fact that most of their staff were male. Those women that did come to meetings were at first rather quiet. Part of the problem was a difference in levels of understanding, as the male members of the group were comparatively more knowledgeable. Steps were taken to overcome this, including providing background notes in Sinhala on the issues that were to be discussed, and giving support to female members to express their views and opinions. The tactics used for this varied with the circumstances. At times, women were specifically invited to express their views in meetings. At other times, in informal conversations outside the meetings (for example, while walking) women were encouraged to talk about a particular issue and then gently urged to express those views within the meeting. In the end, some of their views were heard. The reason

that 'living conditions' was included as a campaign issue for ALaRM is due to the insistence of the women's organizations in the group. (Amongst the NGO members of ALaRM there are several organization run by women). Similarly they brought a distinct gender perspective to both the compensation and 'living wage' issues. The situation within ALaRM is now much more equitable. About two-thirds of those who come to the coalition meetings are females, and all interviewees agreed that they are very actively and vocally involved in the discussions and decision making.

Request to OI for assistance

As mentioned above, the campaign in Sri Lanka was always seen by Oxfam as part of its large international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign, in particular the sub-campaign on trade and labour, and from time to time the international campaign made requests of those in Sri Lanka for information, research, case studies, etc – such as the CPA research. These requests were always responded to positively, even though they were a distraction from the campaign priorities in Sri Lanka. In return the Sri Lanka campaign sometimes made requests of the international campaign – which were not always responded to in the same generous way.

For example in 2004, the SALT team made a request to the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign organizers in Europe for assistance in lobbying the European Commission for greater market access for Sri Lankan and Bangladesh garments. The issue was the European Union's 'rules of origin'. Some garment exports from Sri Lanka were being excluded from the benefits of the preferential quotas on the basis that they could not really be classed as Sri Lankan exports. The issue was - to what extent could ready-made garments coming from Sri Lanka be regarded as Sri Lankan manufactured goods and therefore eligible for entry under that country's low tariff quotas, when the textiles were manufactured elsewhere (Japan, India, etc) and all that was done in Sri Lanka was cutting and sewing. Most of the value of the produce was in the manufacture of the textiles, and the cutting and sewing in Sri Lanka only added a small amount to its value. According to the European Union's 'rules of origin' this meant that they could not be classed as manufactured in Sri Lanka and therefore could not come in under that country's low tariff. These rules, it was felt, were unfairly restrictive and needed to be relaxed. Oxfam GB made a submission on this to the European Commission in March 2004, and some lobbying was done in Brussels. But little effort could be devoted to this by the international campaign, as it was an issue for only one or two countries.

Other activities in 2004 and 2005

AlaRM was by now undertaking a range of campaign activities. In 2004 and 2005 these included the following:

- A press briefing was convened by AlaRM in July 2004 to raise awareness amongst journalists, and create a group of friendly and supportive media people through whom publicity could be obtained for MFA related issues. This group of 15 or so journalists then tended to call the AlaRM members for clarification whenever relevant issues arose.
- Many lobby meetings were held with international donors and government ministries on the changes in policy and practice needed.

- A preliminary survey was conducted in May-June 2004, of 14 buyers operating in Sri Lanka, to determine their purchasing trends, plans and strategies for the post MFA era. The second phase of the survey was carried out in October-November 2004 covering 21 buyers and buying agents.
- In October 2004, an advertisement with ALaRM member hotlines was published in national newspaper for those workers who required advice or support on retrenchment.¹⁵ This was repeated the following year in September-October 2005; three press advertisements in tabloids and six radio advertisements during a prime time Sinhala program were used to raise awareness about the threat of factory closures and the existence and availability of ALaRM to provide assistance and legal aid.¹⁶
- Several ALaRM members opted to run awareness raising programs for their target workers. For example many boarding house discussions were organized, in which various issues were raised and discussed amongst workers, such as statutory payments, compensation packages, freedom of association, their living conditions, etc.
- In 2004 one ALaRM member managed to initiate a trade union in one particular garment factory in the Katunayake EPZ, which despite not being recognized by the employer, gained a membership of about 1,000 workers out of a total workforce of 1,500.¹⁷

In Sri Lanka as in many countries, May Day, the first of May, is a day of celebration for organized labour. Garment workers in Sri Lanka who were members of a trade union normally celebrated it by engaging in street rallies and other activities with their respective unions. But the majority of the workers are not unionized and thus would not normally take part in such events – which in any case are seen as very political and therefore a little threatening by the majority of women workers who feared repercussions. To overcome this, ALaRM members decided to celebrate May Day 2005 in a non-traditional way. Instead of the usual rally with banners and slogan shouting, they held a non-traditional procession with music and cultural events in the Katunayake EPZ. The aim was to introduce ALaRM to more workers, to overcome the fear of participating in union events, and to hopefully encourage more participation in future events.

During the months of June and July 2005, one of the ALaRM member organizations, Dabindu Collective, that runs a centre for workers near the Katunayake EPZ, conducted a survey of about 100 boarding houses in the area to gather information about the poor living conditions faced by workers. This was in order to have evidence to take to the local authorities - the Public Health Officer, Police, Municipal Council and the Board of Investment (BOI) that has responsibility for the EPZ - to demand that they do something to improve sanitary conditions and security in the area. Problems that the survey revealed ranged from unhygienic conditions in boarding houses to poor street lighting, robberies and men exposing themselves to the women in the streets at night. Two meetings were held with the BOI, police and others to discuss what could be done, and a generally positive response was received. The public health authority took some steps to improve conditions in the boarding houses and the police to improve security on the streets. By the initiative was not followed up and as a result there have been no permanent changes.¹⁸

What happened to jobs in the first year after phase-out

The MFA officially came to an end on 31 December 2004. Over the next twelve months, Oxfam and AlaRM monitored the effect on garment exports from Sri Lanka, and on factory closures and jobs. The result was a report released by AlaRM in December 2005.¹⁹ This found that, although it was too early to assess the eventual impact, the threat of widespread closure and large-scale unemployment had not materialized, at least not yet. Although there were over 3,000 jobs lost during the period, the Sri Lankan apparel industry had survived its entry into full-blooded global competition, but with mixed results. Export statistics up to September 2005 indicate that the country had increased its garment export to US, its biggest export market, in value terms while sustaining a slight reduction in volume. In the UK, Sri Lanka had lost market share both in volume and value terms. In Sri Lanka:

- 15 factories employing over 3,000 workers had closed during the year.
- Less than four factories had paid any form of compensation to workers who lost their jobs.
- 14 out of the 15 were in rural areas, where the workers would be hard pressed to find any alternative paid employment.
- Apparel workers had been denied the private sector salary increase provided as an interim relief measure by the Government.

Fifteen garment factories close, 3,000 lose jobs

Sunitha Kumudini was a sewing machine operator of A.J. Milton Company, a medium scale garment factory. When she went to work on June 27 morning, a notice on the factory gate said that the company has been closed until further notice. The company closed without paying the employees salaries and wages. Kumudini, a 40-year old skilled worker in the garment sector says that today she can't find a similar job on account of her age. A mother of two children, she was the only income earner of the family, and after she lost her job the family is facing severe hardship.

Badrika Chandani's story is also similar. She was working at Cadillac Garments in the Katunayaka Free Trade Zone. The company closed down in May 2004 as it did not get enough quotas. Employees organized and protested, but the management assaulted them using thugs. Chandani, 37, also faces the same problem in finding a job. She is unmarried but her whole family depends on her income. This is the sad story of garment employees, mainly females, who lost their jobs after the phase out of the Multi Fibre Agreement (MFA) by the end of last year.

(Gamini Warushamana, *Sunday Observer*, Colombo, 18 Dec 2005).

A draft analysis of the research was released at a press briefing and gathering of stakeholders on the 14 December 2005 in Colombo. The report called on employers and government to fulfil their responsibility towards workers by putting in place mechanisms to help them face the restructuring. The research results were supported by having at the press briefing women who had lost their jobs and who could give personal testimonies. This combination attracted a lot of attention and coverage by the media was extensive. The event was attended by about 70 participants including government officials, employers, buyers, trade union representatives and others. There was media coverage on four television channels

and press coverage in all three languages in about 14 newspapers. A sample newspaper story is given in the box above.

By mid 2006, the Department of Labour was reporting that some 50 factories had closed down in the post MFA period, and approximately 10,000 workers had been retrenched. As the economic situation became tighter for the smaller factories in particular, wages and working conditions for those workers who remained had deteriorated. Overall the value of Sri Lanka's apparel had increased, as there was a trend towards the more high value added niche market products. It was mainly the larger factories who were equipped to enter this market, and hence they were gaining and expanding, while the smaller factories were struggling to survive and many were closing.²⁰

Signature campaign

In 2006 ALaRM members organized a signature campaign to demand that the government grant to garment workers the raise that it had given to other private sector employees. In 2004 the government had given public servant a pay increment of 2,500 rupees as a 'budgetary relief allowance' to help them cope with the rapidly rising cost of living. In August 2005 it was persuaded to authorise similar relief payments for private sector employees, but only 1,000 rupees. However the garment industry persuaded it to defer payment for garment workers for five months, using as an excuse the negative impact on their industry of the MFA phase-out, and to have the 1,000 rupees reduced by the amount of any increments granted within that year. In response, ALaRM initiated a signature campaign against this injustice, demanding that garment workers also receive the full increment and receive it immediately. A prominent magazine (*Just Style*) described the campaign:

More than 24,000 Sri Lankan garment workers have signed a wage petition which has been handed over to President Mahinda Rajapakse. Sri Lanka's US\$2.7 billion export garment industry directly employs around 200,000 people – mostly women from rural parts of the island where alternate employment is scarce. The basic minimum wage of a garment worker is 4,300 rupees (US\$43). Trade unions want garment factory workers to be given the same salary increase as public sector employees, to meet increasing costs of living. "The minimum salary in the public sector is 11,630 rupees (US\$116.30) compared to the 4,300 rupees paid to a garment worker," said Anton Marcus, the joint secretary of the Free Trade Zones and General Services Employees Union. The government increased public sector salaries by 3,500 rupees over the last two years and increased the garment industry minimum wage by 1,000 rupees from January 2006, through a new law. But trade unions say the wage increase can be set off against annual salary increments, making it inadequate, and are asking for the same salary increase as government workers.²¹

The way in which ALaRM approached this campaign was innovative. Instead of the usual very discrete method of collecting signatures by going around to boarding houses, it was done very publicly as a way of encouraging workers to be more confident in protesting openly. A central feature of the campaign were six musical events that were staged in the three main EPZs. The aim was to attract workers by providing entertainment but also to provide an opportunity to explain the issues and collect signatures. In all a total of just under 25,000 signatures were collected from private sector workers, including apparel workers, and handed over to the Presidential representative on 8 March 2006 (Womens Day).

Research on a 'Living Wage'

One of the four issues that ALaRM had decided to work on back in 2003 was the promotion of the idea of a 'living wage' as a basis for determining wage rates in the garment sector. This was defined as "a social wage that recognizes hidden costs and is adequate to fulfil the basic needs of a worker from an eight-hour working day".



As a first step it was necessary to determine what constituted a 'living wage' for garment workers in different circumstances (in rural or urban areas, with and without children to support, etc). For this it was necessary to obtain from a representative sample of garment workers information on just how much they did actually spend on basic necessities, what was the minimum income that they

needed in order to pay for the basics such as food, accommodation and transport. At first it was decided to do this in a very participatory way, by asking selected workers to record their daily expenditure in a notebook over a period of a month. But this proved to be unsatisfactory as the recording was not consistent enough. Tired workers returning to their boarding houses at the end of a long shift were not always in the mood to write down all the details of their expenditure that day. Eventually after this false start, it was decided to use a more conventional approach. Staff from ALaRM member organizations and worker activists were recruited to go out to boarding houses and interview workers about their expenditure. The collecting of data was done in September-October 2005 and covered approximately 850 apparel industry workers from nine districts.

The analysis of the data took nearly a year. But in September 2006, ALaRM was able to release its report on a 'living wage' for garment workers at a presentation and media briefing in Colombo. Its basic message was that for the average female garment worker to meet her basic necessities, including proper nutrition, she needed to earn about 12,000 rupees per month if working in an EPZ, and about 10,000 if outside. But in practice the average basic wage was only around 5,000 rupees, which workers could increase to around 7,500 rupees by working long hours of overtime. The result was widespread poor nutrition and over-work, which was taking a heavy human toll. The event received good media publicity, in 10 newspapers, one radio station and two TV channels. The response of the industry was as expected. A buyers representative (from Walmart) who was present at the release of the report was quoted in the media as saying that, in a situation of increased competition from other cheaper labour countries, Sri Lankan manufacturers had to keep production costs as cheap as possible, and that while employers would like to pay a little more,

they were precluded from doing so by cost factors.²² The Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) was also quoted as saying that the industry cannot afford to pay this 'living wage' as their profits were already reduced due to the MFA phase-out, and this would wipe them out entirely.²³ But ALaRM spokesperson Gowthaman responded that: "As the industry stakes its claim for a guilt-free label, for it to be taken seriously, it has to match its claim with meaningful action".²⁴

The report was released in September in the hope that the 'living wage' concept would influence the review of national minimum wages by the Wages Board, and the determination by the Board of Investment (BoI) of annual salary increments, which occur every November. But this did not happen. The concept was not taken into consideration by either of these bodies. However ALaRM member organizations did use the figures to support their demands for wage increases.

Tensions over Workers Councils

Two ALaRM organizations, Right to Life and Dabindu Collective, had long felt the need to establish a core group of factory-floor worker activists who are well aware of the ALaRM campaign issues and able to take part in campaign activities with a sense of ownership and understanding – and who could provide the organizations with a consultative and accountable link to workers. Following a series of training programs with over 100 participants, each of these organizations created a Workers Committee consisting of interested, dedicated worker activists. These people now constructively engage in ALaRM campaigns, conduct boarding house discussions, and have become the focal point in these organizations for ALaRM activities.

As a result of their awareness raising programs, these two NGOs have been able to mobilize a group of about 45 workers who are attached to the Workers Councils in eight different factories. Workers Councils are organizations that are promoted by the government and industry as an alternative to unions. Their members are appointed and not democratically elected by the workers. These 45 activists are now quite enthusiastic and actively involved in ALaRM campaign activities. However, this close involvement with Worker Councils has not been well received by the trade unions members of ALaRM and has created some tensions and differences of opinion within the coalition. The trade unions are of the opinion that these activities by the NGOs are legitimising Worker Councils and undermining the basic right of workers to form unions. The NGOs on the other hand are saying that as very few garment factories have unions and this is unlikely to change in the foreseeable future, surely it is better to have some contact with and ability to raise awareness with workers via a functioning Workers Council than none at all - that some contact and influence is better than none. A compromise position is being proposed, but not yet agreed, that in a situation in which workers have no recourse to unions, it is acceptable to use (but not promote) Workers' Councils as an entry point to reach workers.

In the meantime the situation of the garment industry in Sri Lanka and of the workers who rely on it, remains precarious. In 2007, more than two year after the MFA was phased out, the industry in Sri Lanka is still restructuring. Overall the export market for Sri Lankan apparel has not shrunk markedly, but the feeling is that more adjustment is still to come as the restrictions that are still in place on China and its

garment exports are eventually removed. Many factories, mainly smaller ones outside the EPZs, are closing down, usually without notice to the workers and without the firm's statutory payments to the Employees Provident Fund etc having been made. The economic impact of the phase-out is being used by employers to push for a weakening of worker protections and poorer conditions for those who remain – increased daily production targets, longer hours of overtime, cut-backs in benefits, suppressed wages and social security payments, delays in the payment of salaries, and on-going anti-union activities.²⁵

What the campaign achieved

The overall aim of this campaign was to “mitigate the adverse impact on garment workers who will be affected by global and local industry restructuring as a result of the MFA phase-out, and to ensure that an appropriate and effective living wage, working condition and the right to organize are enjoyed by the workers”. Under this, five specific objectives were identified:²⁶

1. To build the capacity of AlaRM, and trade union / NGO alliances and networks to more effectively raise awareness and campaign on workers issues, during and after the industry restructuring (locally and Internationally).
2. To mitigate the effects of MFA phase-out:
 - a. Ensuring adequate legislative, institutional and policy protection at national and international level for vulnerable workers.
 - b. Ensuring effective and comprehensive enforcement of workers' rights during the phase out – especially proper compensation, notice period and statutory payments.
 - c. Getting in place social programs and safety nets to support retrenched workers, and to enable vulnerable workers to face the transition.
 - d. Getting identified buyers to become involved in discussing and adopting responsible sourcing and phase-out strategies that respect workers and local communities.
 - e. Increasing market access for Sri Lankan apparel in Northern countries in order to minimize job losses.
 - f. Raising awareness amongst workers about their rights and entitlements, most particularly with those who will remain in the workforce post reconstruction, who will face a greater squeeze on their rights and conditions.
3. Living Wage. To bring to the national agenda “living wage”- a social wage that recognizes hidden costs and is adequate to fulfill basic needs of a worker from an eight-hour working day.
4. Living Conditions. To ensure dignified living condition, by creating a healthy and secure environment for women workers.

5. Freedom of Association. To create a suitable environment which affirms the concept of freedom of association as a basic legal right of the workers. To explain employers' responsibility and build a shared industry consensus on this issue.

Note that the campaign did not aim to improve the working conditions of garment workers in general. Such an objective was seen as too broad and ambitious, and in the current situation in Sri Lanka probably unrealistic and unachievable. Also it is the view of the trade unions that the only way to improve conditions is through workers organizing, forming unions and gaining the bargaining power to demand them. From the unionists' point of view, this coalition with NGOs could take some steps along the way, by promoting the right to Freedom of Association, but that was all. The rest was up to the unions and the workers.

Of the objectives above, the campaign was able to achieve 1, in the sense that it created an effective coalition where before there was just a collection of disunited organizations – and this coalition was then able to establish itself as a credible civil-society voice of garment workers and to help change the terms of debate about the MFA phase-out by injecting a workers' perspective. The campaign partially achieved objective 2f in terms of raising awareness among workers – and objective 3 in that it produced and launched the 'living wage' report, which also helped change the terms of debate about garment workers and the wage levels they received. These achievements are elaborated on in more detail below.

Effective coalition formed

When this campaign began, the NGOs and unions working with garment workers in Sri Lanka were separate organization that had their own programs and approaches and for a variety of reasons did not work together. The first step in the process of becoming a coalition was in 2003 when they were still just a Core Advisory Group for Oxfam, and agreement was reached on the four issues on which they would work jointly. Subsequent steps along the path include giving a name to the coalition (ALaRM), and agreeing to adopt a common approach to training. Since then the members of ALaRM have successfully worked on a number of joint activities, for example the signature campaign and the 'living wage' research, and have become a functioning and effective coalition that is now widely recognised in Sri Lanka as the voice of garment workers.

There are however pressures tending to undermine the cohesion of the coalition, the most obvious being the tensions over Workers Councils. In a sense this is a manifestation of more serious on-going tensions - between unions and NGOs, and between individuals. However when asked about the positive achievements of ALaRM, many members said that the fact that it had stayed together for so long, despite the tensions, and was still functioning effectively was a major achievement.²⁷ The factors tending to split it apart are, at the moment, outweighed by the advantages of staying together, which include:

- The high profile that they have acquired as ALaRM that most of them never had as individual organizations.
- The increased access that they have acquired as ALaRM to government and to a lesser extent to industry.

- The networking and sharing of information that they get when they meet together.
- The access to Oxfam and its funding, its international networks and its research capacity.

ALaRM has now acquired the capacity to produce and launch influential reports such as the 'living wage' report that are taken note of by the government and industry, even if they do not agree with their recommendation. And they are able to organize large-scale joint activities such as the 2006 signature campaign. Many of ALaRM's activities are innovative in the sense that they are things that these organizations have never done before. Examples include the cultural events and concerts organized to attract workers, and the strategic use of media including running briefings for journalists and paying for spots on radio and TV and in the press. ALaRM's level of activity goes up and down from time to time, but is high compared with any other similar coalition in the country.²⁸

Civil society group accepted as credible voice

The launch of ALaRM and of the global Oxfam report on women workers in the garment industry in February 2004 and the media coverage that it generated brought the coalition to public attention. Subsequent activities including campaigns and the launching of other reports have reinforced this, and established ALaRM as a credible voice on issues facing garment workers in Sri Lanka. This is evidenced by its inclusion in the ILO Task Force, and the attention, both favourable and unfavourable, that its activities generate from the media, government and industry.

In achieving this status, it has also helped open up the 'democratic space' in Sri Lanka for civil society groups in general, by demonstrating that such groups can and do have useful things to say that need to be listened to, whether or not you agree with them – in this case, a workers' perspective on issues of importance, such as the effects of the quota phase-out.

Terms of debate changed

In 2004 when ALaRM was launched there was little awareness or discussion in Sri Lanka of the potential impacts of the quota phase-out on the country's garment industry. What discussion there was centred on increasing market access by improving the industry's competitiveness or concluding free trade agreements with countries like the United States. Into this situation, first Oxfam (in 2002-2004) and then ALaRM (in 2004-2007) created a public awareness that the implications of the phase-out could be much more serious in terms of job losses, and that it required more attention. This was picked up by the ILO, which established a Task Force and involved the government and industry in serious discussions. In other words, Oxfam and then ALaRM were able to bring to public attention an important issue that was being neglected, and to inject into the debate a perspective that was not being heard, namely that of the workers who were going to be negatively affected.

This process of introducing new perspectives continued over subsequent years as ALaRM released other reports that received wide publicity, such as the December 2005 report on factory closures, and the 'living wage' report. The latter in particular

changed the terms of debate in that it introduced the idea of wages being determined by what a worker needed in order to meet basic needs, rather than by what the economy or business could afford or was willing to pay. The concept of a 'living wage' has now become well established in Sri Lanka in the sense that the term is now increasingly used by different stakeholders, even if they do not accept it as a practical idea. One of the secondary objectives of the 'living wage' report was to change public attitudes towards women workers, to identify them in the public mind as primary wage earners, and to make the point that the income they receive is not just a supplement to that of the main family income earner, who is presumed to be a male, but in many cases is the primary or sole income of a family – which is why it must be enough to meet basic needs. Whether or not there has been such a change in image is not clear - there is no evidence one way or the other.

Challenges, limitations and failures

In terms of the five objectives listed above, the campaign achieved little in terms of mitigating the effects of the MFA phase-out (objective 2). It was unable to significantly influence either the government or the employers in this regard, nor ensure that workers who lost their jobs were treated fairly. It partially achieved objective 3 in that it was able to launch the 'living wage' report - but was not able to use it to influence the setting of minimum wages and increments by government. Objective 4 received almost no attention in the campaign, and objective 5 proved to be too difficult in the current environment in Sri Lanka. These failures are elaborated on in more detail below.

Influencing government

ALaRM had the opportunity to influence the policy and response of the government to the MFA phase-out through the dialogue process established by Oxfam in which its members participated in 2002-2003, and through the ILO Task Force in which it was an official participant. However this latter came to nothing when the report and recommendations were shelved by the government and ignored by the industry. The government remains unconcerned about the MFA phase-out saying that in the situation of increased competition without a quota system, Sri Lankan garment exports will still do well. What the basis is for this optimism is not clear.

Oxfam in its role as a member of ALaRM had some influence on the Department of Labour, encouraging it to set up Help Desks (which were then rendered ineffective by denying them resources) and to carry out two comprehensive factory surveys, supplying the funds and technical expertise to support these. The surveys meant that Department officials had to visit every factory in their area twice to gather data – which probably would not have happened otherwise - and that the way in which the Department gathered such data was influenced by Oxfam / ALaRM. But it has not been able to influence the Department in terms of effectively following up on factory closures to make sure workers received their full entitlements.

Likewise at the political level, there is no evidence that ALaRM has been able to influence relevant Ministers. The only partial exception was in December 2005 when the publicity generated by the release of an ALaRM report on factory closures in the first 12 months after the phase-out prompted the Minister of Labour to instruct his

department to check the veracity of the reports. Apart from this and the limited initiatives by the Department of Labour, the campaign has not been able to persuade the government to do anything of significance to deal with the impact of the phase-out on workers.

Influencing employers and the industry

There is no evidence that ALaRM through its joint activities has been able to influence the behaviour of owners, managers, and buyers. Members have very little contact with such people, apart from hostile contacts during disputes at particular factories. The only exception was in 2004 when some surveying was done of buyers and their intentions post phase-out, and during the ILO Task Force process. However while there is little direct contact, and apparently little influence, industry groups appear to be well aware of what ALaRM is saying and doing, even if they do not agree with or accept it. In 2006, for example, a researcher for an Oxfam study interviewed a representative of the Joint Apparel Association Forum (JAAF) and was pleased to find that he not only had a copy of the recently released ALaRM campaign leaflet, but had read it.²⁹ Nothing has improved in terms of the industry's response to the quota phase-out. Factories are still closing without proper notice to workers and there continues to be large scale defaulting on the payments due to workers who lose their jobs. There have been a number of reports of sudden overnight closures, of workers turning up on a Monday to find the factory gates locked and the owners gone, leaving them with no way of recovering the wages and other monies owed to them. Employers have been successful in shutting out worker representation from various decision making forums that deal with productivity improvement, image building, de-regulating labour standards etc.

One interviewee with good contacts within the industry maintains that manufacturers, particularly the larger and more established ones with long-standing relationships with particular buyers and brands, are not concerned about the MFA phase-out. In fact, this person says, many are doing quite well and are happy to see the quota system go as it means that they no longer have to deal with government involvement through the allocation of quotas to particular companies. They feel they are competitive enough to survive quite well in a situation of open competition, even without the advantage of allocated quotas into the US or Europe.³⁰

Ensuring workers who lose jobs are treated fairly

The large scale closures and loss of jobs predicted back in 2002 have not occurred, at least not yet, and may never occur depending on what happens when the current restrictions that the US and others have imposed on China's garment exports are lifted. Nevertheless there have been a significant number of garment factories going out of business and thousands have lost their job. A preliminary comparison of the 2004 and 2006 factory surveys indicates that up to 130 may have closed in that period with the loss of some 35,000 jobs. Most of the closures are happening outside the EPZs, scattered in more remote locations where ALaRM members do not have good contacts or networks. Hence they often do not hear of the closures, and by the time they do, the workers have dispersed to the various areas from which they came and are uncontactable. This has meant that the monitoring and following up to make

sure that workers have been treated properly has been very patchy. Only about 10 cases have been followed up by ALaRM members.

There is a danger that the emphasis on closures will mean that insufficient attention is given to the workers who remain in employment. In many cases their wages and conditions have deteriorated, particularly those in small factories or outside the established EPZs. While individual cases of factories where there is a problem are taken up by individual ALaRM members, there has been no systematic follow-up on what is happening to working conditions since the phase-out.

Using 'living wage' to influence wage levels

When the 'living wage' report was released in September 2006 one of the aims, as mentioned above, was to have it influence the annual review of national wages by the Wages Board and Board of Investment. In this however it was not successful at least in 2006. Whether this will change in the future depends in part on how successfully ALaRM campaigns on the issue over the next few years. However several ALaRM members³¹ have said that, for workers involved in collective bargaining with employers over wages, the figures from the report have been or will be used in their arguments. Now for the first time, they have evidence and figures to counter the economic figures that employers use in these negotiations. It should be added however that in practice not many collective bargaining negotiations take place in the Sri Lanka garment industry, as there are not many workplaces where the workers are organized.

Improve living conditions for workers

Apart from some limited efforts by one member organization (Dabindu Collective), ALaRM did not take any significant action to improve the poor living conditions of garment workers. Of the four issues that the coalition agreed in 2003 to be their joint priorities, this is the one that received the least attention. This may be because it was seen as an NGO-type social issue, not a workplace one, and therefore not of interest to the trade unions within ALaRM. It was pushed by the women's organizations within the coalition and some NGOs, but not by the trade unions. Hence nothing was achieved.

Recognition of right to Freedom of Association

Many of the events and activities organized by ALaRM had as a key element awareness raising amongst garment workers of their rights, including their right to form a union. Education about such basic rights also formed a key part of the training provided by ALaRM members individually and collectively to their worker activists. This is not to say that knowledge of these rights is widespread among garment workers. The large number of workers involved in the industry and the rapid turn-over means that this is a massive and never-ending task. To what extent the workforce in general is aware of their basic labour rights is not clear.

It is still difficult and even dangerous for workers to try and organize and form a union in Sri Lanka. There are cases where key organizers, once identified by management, are given extra work so that they are so busy and so tired that organizing is

neglected. In other cases, organizers have been threatened and/or fired. There have been several cases in which workers in a particular factory have, with the support of an ALaRM member, successfully organized and formed a union. But nevertheless it is fair to say that the workforce in the Sri Lankan garment industry is still largely unorganized.

Factors that contributed to success

Working as a coalition

One of the more remarkable achievements of this campaign has been that a disparate set of organizations working with garment workers have, despite their differences, been able to hold together for four years and speak with one authoritative voice about the problems facing workers in the garment sector. Instead of being preoccupied with rivalry, bickering and ‘turf wars’ which so often dissipates advocacy effectiveness, this group have acted in cooperation and cohesion, with the same objectives and the same messages to the same targets at the same time.

Not only that but they have increased that unified authoritative voice by attracting new members to the ALaRM coalition, including some of the larger national trade unions. When it was originally formed in 2003-2004 there were six member organizations, but by 2007 this had increased to ten, with two more seeking membership, which would mean a doubling in size within four years. Among the new members are two large national level trade unions that cover many sectors apart from garment workers: Sri Lanka Nidahas Sevaka Sangamaya (SLNSS), and the All Ceylon Federation of Free Trade Unions.

Credible evidence well presented

A key factor in ALaRM's success has been its ability to produce, with support from Oxfam, well-researched authoritative reports that command attention and change the terms of debate, such as the December 2005 report on the effects of the phase-out, and the ‘living wage’ report. This has been a major factor in establishing its reputation as the credible voice of garment workers in Sri Lanka, and to inject a workers perspective into the public debate.

But this would not have happened without the involvement of Oxfam. The first of these authoritative reports released in Sri Lanka (“Trading Away Our Rights”) was actually an Oxfam one, written and produced in Great Britain on the basis of research done in a dozen different countries by various Oxfam offices. For subsequent locally produced reports, the data was collected by ALaRM members, but was processed and analysed by Oxfam in Colombo, using the skills of its academically trained staff. While the staff of trade unions and labour NGOs have many skills, particularly political and campaigning ones, the ability to analyse research data is not usually one of them. Oxfam on the other hand had such people, or it had the funds to hire them. What Oxfam did not have was the people to collect the data; these were provided by ALaRM members making these reports a truly collaborative effort. It was the combination of the human resources and credibility of ALaRM and the skills and funding of Oxfam that was the key to success.

Effective use of the media

But producing good documented evidence and reports is by itself not enough. They have to be publicised and popularised so that their messages are heard and taken note of. In this, ALaRM's ability to generate media publicity has been a crucial factor. Generally speaking the coverage of its report launches and campaign events in both the print and electronic media and in all three languages, has been good. A range of innovative approaches have been used, including running briefing sessions for journalists, and taking out paid ads in newspapers and on radio.

Use of Oxfam's name and reputation

Oxfam's name and international reputation was used to good effect in the campaign, particularly in the early stages. In 2004 when ALaRM's name was unknown, the launch of the first report was done in Oxfam's name, which appeared to be a major factor in the considerable interest it attracted from a range of stakeholders and the media. Subsequently Oxfam was able to play the role of intermediary between the trade unions and labour NGOs on the one hand, and the government, industry, ILO, etc on the other. For example the Department of Labour, which has an ambivalent attitude to unions, based on past conflicts³² was perfectly happy to work with Oxfam (rather than ALaRM) on the two factory surveys and to take Oxfam money to enable them to happen.

Factors that limited success

Lack of political clout

While ALaRM can generate attention to issues through the media, it has not been able to significantly alter the policies and practices of either the government or the industry. It has gained a voice in the public arena, but not yet developed sufficient political clout to change policies. It was not for example able to prevent the shelving of the ILO Task Force report in 2004 nor to influence the Wages Board in 2006. It is working in a very difficult political situation in Sri Lanka, with a government that is more interested in ensuring the country is attractive to investors than in protecting the rights of workers. The garment manufacturers are well organized, strongly opposed to trade unions, and supported in this by a sympathetic government. Many employers are unscrupulous as evidenced by the number that have closed their factories prematurely and fled without making the payments that they are legally obliged to make to workers and their pension funds. The Labour Department that is supposed to police this is weak and lacks the resources and will to properly enforce labour regulations.

In a situation like this, the unions and other organizations representing workers need to be politically strong and effective. This political strength, if it is to ever develop, will probably have to come through workers organizing and demanding their rights in the streets. But on present indications this is a long way off. As in many other developing countries, the workforce is by-and-large unorganized. Why garment workers in Sri Lanka generally speaking do not join unions is not clear. Reasons commonly given are that they are wary of political activities, or scared of being sacked, or too tired after a long day's work to go to meetings, or not identifying strongly as workers as

they only intend to be in the workforce for a few years before returning to the village. All of these assertions need to be tested and on the basis of the findings, a new and innovative strategy put in place for recruiting workers.

Limitations of and tensions within the coalition

ALaRM has stayed together as a coalition and has grown in size over the years. But there are factors limiting its effectiveness that need to be addressed. One is its lack of reach into areas outside the belt of established EPZs near Colombo. All the ALaRM organizations are based in and around Colombo and the nearby EPZs, and with few exceptions have not been able to establish substantial contacts in the rest of the country where an increasing number of garment factories are now located. Many of the recent closures have been in these dispersed areas outside the EPZs and this has been a major reason why ALaRM has not been able to properly monitor closures nor follow up to ensure that retrenched workers receive all their entitlements. ALaRM members need to extend their networks beyond the EPZs and into those other parts of the country where garment factories are now located. Oxfam has contacts in some of these areas and should give serious thought to what assistance it could provide in this regard, without detracting from its on-going development work in those areas. The analysis of the 2004 and 2006 factory surveys will assist in identifying which factories have closed in the last two years and where they are, but will not tell us how the workers were treated during closure, nor where they are now. Advertisements in local newspapers could perhaps help in this regard and enable some cases to be identified and followed up.

Another factor limiting ALaRM's effectiveness is of course the on-going tensions within the coalition, particularly between the unions and the NGOs. The current manifestation of this, the disagreement over working with Workers' Councils, needs to be resolved. A compromise position has been put on paper and now needs to be seriously discussed by all members, so that agreement on approach can be reached.

Opportunities have been missed because of lack of vigorous follow-up by ALaRM members to campaign activities. For example, there was no follow-up advocacy when the report of the ILO Task Force was shelved. The opportunity presented by the release of the Living Wage report will be lost unless there is a vigorous follow-up campaign to make sure that workers know about it and use it in wage bargaining, and the Wages Board are pressured to take it into account.

The key organizations in ALaRM are led by strong individuals, and in many cases there is no obvious second level leadership. This is being addressed by some in the form of training up promising young people from within their organizations. But it nevertheless remains a serious potential problem if and when the current leadership is no longer there. The various training programs conducted jointly or by individual members are now starting to create a significant group of well-informed worker activists. The more capable ones now need to be trusted with real responsibility by the leaders within their organizations so that they can gain the leadership experience they need.

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- ¹ Central Bank of Sri Lanka, Annual Report 2002 at 103. Board of Investment, Sri Lanka, website “Performance Highlights 2002”.
- ² “AlaRM bells ring”, *Sunday Standard*, Colombo, 22 October 2006
- ³ Anton Marcus, General Secretary, Free Trade Zone and General Services Employees’ Union. Memo to Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair meeting, Brussels, July 2003.
- ⁴ In this chapter the name ‘Oxfam’ is used to refer to any and all of the Oxfam affiliates. In fact most of the work referred to was done by Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, which later became Oxfam Australia. But it was done in the name of, and with substantial financial support from, two other affiliates, Oxfam Great Britain and Novib (later Oxfam Novib), under the auspices of the Oxfam International Regional Strategic Team for South Asia.
- ⁵ Burns, M. *Proposal for a Multi-stakeholder dialogue in Sri Lanka on the preparation for and likely impact of the phasing out of the MFA*. Oxfam. August 2002.
- ⁶ Atkinson, J. *Labour Rights in Sri Lanka. Report for OI Trade Campaign, Labour Wedge Team, of findings of field visit by Jeff Atkinson, 24-28 August 2002*. Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, August 2002.
- ⁷ Atkinson, J. *Report of consultation on Trade Campaign and the MFA phase-out in Sri Lanka. Colombo, 7 April 2003*. Oxfam International, April 2003.
- ⁸ Oxfam International. *Report of Make Trade Fair campaign joint meeting of Oxfam GB, Oxfam CAA and Novib on Sri Lanka and Bangladesh. 30 June to 2 July 2003 at Renuka Hotel, Colombo, Sri Lanka*.
- ⁹ Oxfam International. South Asia Labour and Trade (SALT) Report to RST Meeting, 15-16 December 2003.
- ¹⁰ Oxfam International. Invitation letter to the launch, 10 February 2004.
- ¹¹ The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the tripartite UN agency that brings together governments, employers and workers of its member states in common action to promote decent work throughout the world.
- ¹² Interviews with ALaRM members, Colombo, July 2007. Gowthaman, Kalani, Palitha Atukorale and Anton Marcus.
- ¹³ These were in the districts of Anuradhapura, Polonnaruwa and Hambanthota.
- ¹⁴ Oxfam International. *Labour rights support and multi-stakeholder dialogue, Sri Lanka. Integrated financial and narrative report, 1 May 2005 – 30 June 2006*. Colombo, 2006, page 5.
- ¹⁵ SALT report to Oxfam South Asia Regional Strategic Team, January 2005.
- ¹⁶ Oxfam International. *Labour rights support and multi-stakeholder dialogue, Sri Lanka. Integrated financial and narrative report, 1 May 2005 – 30 June 2006*. Colombo, 2006, page 9.
- ¹⁷ Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, report by Colombo office, March 2005.
- ¹⁸ Interview with Dabindu Collective, Katunayake, July 2007.
- ¹⁹ Prasanna and Gowthaman. *The impact of phasing out the Multi Fibre Arrangement on Sri Lanka apparel industry*. AlaRM, Colombo, Dec 2005.
- ²⁰ Report by SALT team to Oxfam’s South Asia Regional Strategic Team, June 2006.
- ²¹ Dilshani Samaraweera. “Garment workers ask President for wage hike”. *Just Style*, 9 March 2006.

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- ²² Quintus Perera, *Asian Tribune*, 9 October 2006.
- ²³ Dilshani Samaraweera, *Financial Times on Sunday*, 1 October 2006.
- ²⁴ Channa Kasturisinghe, *Daily News*, 28 September 2006.
- ²⁵ Report from SALT team to Oxfam's South Asia Regional Strategic Team, February 2007.
- ²⁶ Oxfam International. *South Asia Regional Strategy, May 2005 to April 2007, Labour Rights Support and Facing the Phase-Out*. Delhi, 2005.
- ²⁷ Interviews by the author of members of ALaRM organizations, Colombo, July 2007.
- ²⁸ Interview with Oxfam Country Manager, Gowthaman, Colombo, July 2007.
- ²⁹ Interview with Oxfam Country Manager, Gowthaman, Colombo, July 2007.
- ³⁰ Interview with Ms. Sunali Gunasekara, Coordinator, Ethical Trading Initiative, Colombo, July 2007.
- ³¹ JSS, FTZWU, Progress Union, Friendship House.
- ³² Interview with Ms. Nadeeka Wataliyadda, Assistant Commissioner of Labour, Colombo, July 2007.

Chapter Three

Campaign on trade and agriculture in India

Given the important role that agriculture plays in the economic, social and cultural life of India, it was inevitable that the sub-campaign on agriculture in the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign would be taken up by the Oxfam affiliates operating in India.

In terms of providing livelihoods and employment agriculture is among the most important sectors in the Indian economy. While it has declined as a percentage of Gross National Product (GDP) in recent years, it still accounted for approximately 23 percent of India's GDP in 2002.¹ Agriculture currently employs about two-thirds of the nation's entire workforce, some 270 million people, and it is estimated that around 65 percent of the Indian population are directly or indirectly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood.² When the livelihoods of such a large majority of people accounts for such a negligible share of GDP, it is easy to imagine the state of poverty in which farming communities live. The average landholding in India is only 1.5 hectares.³ But these small patches of land are for millions of people the basis of their food and income security. Despite a dramatic improvement in the availability of food grain in recent years, India is still home to a very large number of hungry people. 29 percent of all the chronically hungry people in the world live in India. Per capita calorie intake in rural India has fallen dramatically, with 77 percent of the rural population consuming less than or equal to the poverty line norm of 2400 calories per day (1999-2000 figures).⁴ Per capita availability of cereals and pulses, key indicators of nutritional security, dropped to pre-World War Two levels in 2001.⁵ Noted Oxford-based economist Amartya Sen has calculated that protein energy malnutrition is higher in South Asia than in Sub-Saharan Africa.⁶

There is a pressing need to guarantee the right of the rural poor in India to food security and a sustainable livelihood. Given the huge numbers involved, it is unlikely that alternative forms of employment can be found in the short to medium term for the millions who are currently dependent on small-scale agriculture. India is, and is likely to continue to be, predominantly rural and agrarian, which means that the right to food and livelihoods can only be realized if small marginal farmers and landless farm workers can continue to practise sustainable small-scale agriculture. But India is under intense pressure, via the WTO negotiations, to liberalize agricultural trade and open up its markets to an unrestricted flow of agricultural imports. This has created a danger of its markets being flooded with cheap (and in some cases highly subsidised) agricultural imports, and the livelihoods of millions of small and marginal farmers being put under threat. India is not a major exporter of agricultural goods. Its interest in the international rules of trade is not to open markets for its exports, but to make sure that imports from other countries do not undermine the livelihoods of its farmers. The WTO Agreement on Agriculture, once it is finalised, will mean that it must lower tariffs and other restrictions on agricultural imports. This will leave it with

limited policy choices in terms of trade measures to help protect its vulnerable rural populations, develop domestic agriculture, attain food security and promote economic growth.

Of course trade policy alone cannot adequately address all the problems faced by small-scale farmers and rural communities. An effective solution also involves addressing such things as lack of infrastructure, lack of credit, underdeveloped markets, the high cost of inputs, chronically low farm-gate prices and the weak bargaining position of farmers and agricultural workers due to the concentration of buying power in few hands. However, appropriate trade policies can support the efforts to overcome them, and inappropriate policies can make things a lot worse.



An emerging phenomenon in Indian agriculture (as in many other countries) is that of 'contract farming'. This refers to a system whereby a farmer enters into a contract with a buyer (e.g. for an international supermarket chain) to supply a pre-agreed quantity of a certain variety and quality of crop, at a pre-agreed price and time. The buyer in turn may agree to provide certain inputs

(seeds, fertiliser, etc). Through these contracts, agribusiness firms and supermarket chains are playing an increasingly direct role in Indian agriculture. There are diverse views about the advantages and disadvantages of this type of arrangement. Some farmers prefer it because it provides certainty about the price they will receive, and access to new technology and inputs. On the other hand the producers often lack the bargaining power to negotiate the contract properly and can end up on the losing side of the bargain. The problem is not the contract farming system itself, but the nature of the contract, which is often detrimental to the interests of the small farmer. It can be argued that, if they were properly regulated by state governments so as to protect the interests of farmers, the system could be beneficial. But so far in India this has not happened.

Consultations with local organizations

In deciding to take up a campaign on trade and agriculture in India and Bangladesh, Oxfam was faced with a myriad of particular issues that it could focus on under this general heading. The question was - how could it best focus this campaign in ways that would add to the international campaign and at the same time be of benefit to farmers in those two countries? What was the particular contribution that Oxfam as a foreign-based organization could make, given that there were hundreds of local organizations already supporting small farmers in various ways? To answer these questions, Oxfam did what it usually does in such circumstances – consulted with the

partner organizations that it had long been supporting and others in the region who were already working in this field.⁷

Case study: cotton farmers in India

India has an estimated four million cotton farmers, and some 60 million people depend on cotton and the textile industry to make a living. However the cotton economy is in a bad state. Cotton farmer suicide reports are testimony to this fact. In the first few decades after independence, there was a substantial increase in cotton production, but in the last nearly five years both production and productivity seem to have shown signs of stagnation. India, which has traditionally been an exporter of cotton and was one until recently, is now the third largest importer in the world.

What is putting India's cotton farmer out of business and driving them to suicide? The highly subsidized cotton from the US and China being imported into India is the answer. In 2001-02, US cotton exports to India more than tripled to over one million bales, and the US share of total Indian imports rose from 20 percent to 60 percent. India became the third largest foreign destination for US cotton. Also in the same year, the 25,000 cotton growers in the US received roughly US\$ 3.9 billion in subsidy payments for producing a cotton crop that was worth only US\$ 3 billion at world market price. This is also more than the gross domestic product of several African countries, and three times the amount the US spends on aid to half a billion Africans living in poverty.

(From the Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair booklet "Agriculture at Stake")

In late 2004 Oxfam offices in the two countries organized a series of one-day consultation workshops to which were invited representatives from relevant partner organizations, research institutions and farmers' organizations. Four such consultations took place in India (in Bhubaneswar, Lucknow, Bangalore and Ahmedbad), and one in Bangladesh, and culminated in a regional conference covering both India and Bangladesh in Dhaka in January 2005. Each of the consultations involved enthusiastic and often spirited discussion. In India the issues raised tended to be local ones about the policies and practices of state and federal governments and their support (or lack of) for small-scale farmers, rather than about international trade. Because the emphasis in India from the time of Ghandi has been on national self-sufficiency, international trade has not, until recently, received much attention from Indian NGOs. For many of these it was a new issue whose relevance to their rural development work was only now becoming evident. While some were well aware of what was happening in the WTO and its relevance, many were not. Despite this however some issues did emerge from the consultations that were related to trade, for example:

- the fall in the world prices for agricultural commodities;
- domestic and export subsidies provided by some Northern countries to their farmers;
- Regional Trade Agreements that could have significant negative impacts on the livelihoods of South Asian farmers;
- new ingenious non-tariff barriers that were emerging in the North to replace tariffs, such as quality standards that South Asian farmers were unable to meet;
- 'contract farming' and the increasing role of transnational corporations in agricultural supply chains.

To round off the consultation process and come up with some final recommendations on the focus for the Oxfam campaign, a regional consultation was held at the Asia Pacific Hotel in Dhaka, Bangladesh, on 17-18 January 2005. Select participants from the national-level consultations were invited to participate, as well as resource persons from both countries. Because this was preparation for a campaign on trade, discussion was confined to those issues that were related to international trade and its impact on farmers and rural communities. After some extensive and often animated discussions the result was a decision to focus the Oxfam campaign on two issues - Power to Decide, and Contract Farming.⁸ The term “power to decide” is short-hand for reform of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture that would allow developing countries the power to decide the pace and extent of liberalization, and to use mechanisms such as Special Products and Special Safeguard Mechanisms (see chapter 1) to protect their local producers against imports. This was an issue of key interest to the international Make Trade Fair campaign. Clearly the decision was not just a reflection of the priorities emerging from the consultation process, but also of the priorities of the international campaign, for which Power to Decide was a key issue.

The need for additional research to support the campaign had long been identified and a program of research had already been initiated. The Center for Trade and Development (CENTAD), a Delhi based organization originally established by Oxfam Great Britain but now independent, commissioned and published a working paper on the theory and practice in Contract Farming in India, which received a positive response. Also Oxfam commissioned several crop-specific pieces of research in India and Bangladesh. To advise on this work, a Research and Advocacy team (READ team) was formed, consisting of eminent academicians from universities or independent research institutes in the two countries. In April as part of a ‘Week of Action’ organised by a broad coalition of groups in India, Oxfam launched a briefing paper on ‘Power to Decide’ at a press conference in Delhi. Two of the Indian case studies (cotton and poultry farming) were also distributed to the media at the launch.

Parallel to this, an ambitious program of popular campaigning was being designed and planned, involving such possible activities as:

- Photo shoots of local film stars or other celebrities who support the campaign, and using their popularity to get their images, and supporting campaign messages, into magazines and newspapers with a mass readership.
- Tours and concerts by these local celebrities in rural areas. Possibly also a tour by an international celebrity who supports the campaign and who is known locally.
- A bus or truck tour, covering major cities and surrounding areas of Bangladesh and India, timed to reach the capital city at a particular moment, in order to generate media interest and signatures for Oxfam’s international ‘Big Noise’ petition. In remote rural areas different mode of vehicle, such as bullock carts, boats, bicycles could be used as a media stunt and to generate mass sign-ups.
- A campaigning tool kit for students and young people, including say a T-shirt, video, posters of the celebrities, scripts, farmers stories, media work guidelines, Big Noise petition forms, etc.⁹

Pressure from the international level

In the meantime there was increasing pressure from the organizers of 'Make Trade Fair' at the international level for South Asia to support the global sub-campaign to influence the WTO negotiations. The main aims at this global level were (i) to have the US and EU reduce their subsidies and dumping and open their markets to agricultural imports from the South, and (ii) for flexibility to be allowed in the WTO Agreement on Agriculture so that developing countries could retain the power to decide the extent and pace of opening up their agricultural markets. The two basic strategies being used were

- Lobbying and pressuring the US and EU by highlighting the 'rigged rules' that allowed them to continue to subsidise their producers and dump agricultural surpluses on export markets, and the hypocrisy of insisting that Southern countries open their markets while resisting the opening of their own.
- Encouraging the assertiveness of Southern countries in the WTO by providing them with documented examples of unfair rules and practices by Northern countries, and the arguments to counter the latter's negotiating positions.

In terms of this latter strategy, the role of India was vital as it was a leading member of the Group of 20 (G20), a caucus of developing countries in the WTO with considerable influence, particularly in the negotiations on agriculture. It was inevitable therefore that the campaign would want to work with the Indian Government at the national level in Delhi, to make sure that it maintained its negotiating stance of insisting on measures that protected small farmers.

From time to time the Trade Ministers of the G20 meet together to work out common positions and strategies. In March 2005 (two months after the Dhaka regional consultation, and nine months before the crucial Hong Kong WTO Ministerial Conference) a key G20 meeting was held in Delhi hosted by the Indian Government. This was important enough for Oxfam International to send one of its key Geneva-based lobbyists to Delhi to assist the local team. This was Celine Charveriat, the person with overall responsibility for the global campaign's policy and strategy, who had unique knowledge of the WTO negotiation process through her network of contacts in Geneva. Working with her at the G20 meeting was another key advocate, Delhi-based Dr. Samar Verma, head of Oxfam trade advocacy in South Asia.

The Indian Government had not provided any facilities or opportunities for civil society groups to interact with the G20 ministers or their advisors, so Oxfam rented office space in the official venue, the Maurya Sheraton Hotel, so as to facilitate access to the delegations on an informal basis. However there appeared to be a reluctance on the part of the G20 governments, and especially the Indian Government, to formally acknowledge the NGO presence and interaction. Before the meeting the Oxfam lobbyists briefed journalists present, many of whom were not well informed on the issues being discussed - which helped establish the organization's credibility with the media. As a result Oxfam and its message obtained good coverage - several stories in the Indian press on the first day, and three TV interviews on the second day, including coverage on the evening news. Oxfam's response to the Ministerial Statement issued at the end of the meeting also received wide coverage in the local media.

Immediately before the G20 ministerial meeting, Oxfam and another international NGO, Action Aid International, had circulated a joint statement urging G20 ministers to resist the tactics of rich countries of demanding major market access commitments in exchange for insignificant “concessions” on agricultural subsidies. This statement was then endorsed by 14 civil society organizations and academic institutions from across Bangladesh, India, Nepal and Pakistan, and received substantial coverage in the India print and electronic media. Oxfam and Action Aid were practically the only organizations lobbying and doing media work around the meeting, in spite of the invitations extended to partner organizations to participate. The latter’s response was generally to ask Oxfam to lead on this, which was indicative of their relative lack of capacity on trade issues. After the ministerial meeting, Oxfam organised a meeting of the Indian and Bangladeshi allies who had signed the Joint Statement, to brief them on the possible outcomes of the ministerial meeting, potential sources of splits within the G20, and negotiating options for developing countries in the lead-up to the Hong Kong Ministerial. Some of the organizations in turn raised questions about Oxfam’s position on trade issues, and about the Make Trade Fair campaign in general.

The Oxfam advocacy staff in India took the opportunity of Charveriat’s presence in Delhi to sit down with her and map out a detailed work-plan for the campaign in India up until the Hong Kong Ministerial. An ‘Action Plan for India’ subsequently drawn up by her said:

As demonstrated by its role during the G20 ministerial in New Delhi, India is a key player in the WTO negotiations. It is expected to play a key leadership role on the issue of market access, supporting the ‘power to decide’ for developing countries. [It] is key for Oxfam to contribute by (1) providing good research to highlight possible impact on livelihoods, (2) educating the press on WTO, trade and development, (3) contributing to popular mobilization in India. The MTF campaign (as well as Executive Directors) made India a key country for MTF this year. This means that Oxfams in India are expected to collaborate strategically to make an important contribution to the campaign this year. So far, the role of India in the campaign has been limited by capacity constraints as well as the development of the long term objective of a trade and agricultural campaign in South Asia This problem of capacity needs to be addressed urgently if India is to deliver for the MTF campaign in the run up to the Hong Kong ministerial.¹⁰

Charveriat stressed that the international Make Trade Fair campaign needed several key research products from India:

- An overall analysis of what the WTO negotiations could mean for India – some dramatic facts that could be used in briefing the media.
- Case studies of crops vulnerable to WTO market access opening - to be used in lobbying, media and popular campaigning.
- An analysis of the tariff reduction formula being proposed in the negotiations and its possible impact on agricultural livelihoods in India.

She also stressed in her Action Plan that there was a need for local staff in India to be lobbying the government in New Delhi, and gathering intelligence on a regular basis from government officials and key industrial lobby groups, in order to inform the global campaigning plans. Also there needed to be at least one major popular campaigning event in India in the run-up the WTO Ministerial meeting that would

capture public attention and generate media attention locally, nationally and hopefully internationally.

The resultant plan

In a telephone hook-up on 3 May 2005, the team running the campaign in South Asia considered its previous strategy and the work-plan proposed by Charveriat - and took the decision to go with the latter because of its importance internationally, and to postpone the longer term campaign and the work on Contract Farming for the time being (except for some of the longer term research, which the READ group would continue to do). Given the very limited time before the Hong Kong meeting, and the relative lack of capacity among civil society groups, it was decided that the campaign would be an Oxfam-led initiative, although "in the long-run we should bring in other civil society groups".¹¹ The pressure to produce results within the remaining seven months was determining the shape and form, priorities and approach of the campaign.

A concrete campaign plan for 2005 was now in place, focused exclusively on the forthcoming WTO Ministerial meeting and the role of the Indian Government. Its specific policy 'asks' of the government were:

- to hold to its position on the 'power to decide';
- to maintain the unity and increase the assertiveness of the G20;
- to lead by example by allowing market access to imports from Least Developed Countries (e.g. Bangladesh).¹²

The public campaign was to be branded "Make Trade Fair", not Oxfam, and its activities would include:

- A photo exhibition on the lives of farmers, to be launched in October 2005 along with the four case studies, on cotton, sugar, oilseed and dairy products.
- Several 'traveling road-shows', three in India culminating in a jamboree in Delhi in December, and one in Bangladesh.
- A regional 'Make Trade Fair' website.
- TV spots and especially composed songs.
- 'White Band Day' in December, a special day of action coinciding with an international day in which as many people as possible would wear a white arm band with the slogan "Make Poverty History".

This was a variation of the popular campaigning plan as originally envisaged, and it was to vary again over the following months as certain activities were dropped and others modified.

A central feature of the popular campaign was to be the traveling 'road-shows'. But because Oxfam in India had no experience of such activities, it was decided to sub-contract the running of the 'road-shows' to Indian NGOs that had a mass base and experience of this type of popular campaigning at a grassroots level. Exploratory discussions were begun with India's largest civil society network, the Voluntary Action Network of India (VANI), but it declined to be involved. One NGO approached also declined because of a fundamental disagreement with Oxfam's reformist views on the WTO. Eventually four were selected:

- Centre for Community Economics and Development Consultants Society (CECOEDECON), based in Rajasthan.

- Youth for Unity and Voluntary Action (YUVA) a development NGO that works in Maharashtra, Gujarat and Madhya Pradesh..
 - Covenant Centre for Development (CCD) based in Tamil Nadu.
 - Ekta Parishad, a Gandhian organisation that works in eight different states.
- Oxfam also hired the Delhi-based Centre for Advocacy and Research to do the media work around the road-shows and other events.

It was felt that the campaign needed some human-interest stories from the field with photographs and video footage, to capture the farmers experience and give the campaign a human face. Hence it was decided to send a team of two people to the field for a couple of days to gather these, and to make a short documentary film out of the footage it collected for wide circulation among different groups.

By this stage some of the activities originally planned, such as the celebrity photo shoot and the MTF website, had been abandoned, while others had been added. The main popular campaign activities were now:

- Travelling road shows in four states, Tamil Nadu, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Maharashtra.
- A mass rally, photo exhibition and press conference in New Delhi on World Food Day 16 October, at which the case studies would be launched.
- A big open-air concert in late November, where eminent personalities will be invited to publicly support the Make Trade Fair Campaign.

This latter, the open air concert, was a late decision. The reasons for it were stated as: brand building of Oxfam and the Make Trade Fair campaign; publicity for Oxfam and the campaign in the media; engaging celebrities in the concert for Oxfam's cause; mobilising youth; collecting signatures. Organizing a major concert was well outside the experience of Oxfam staff, and so an event managing company was hired. A company named Seher was chosen, that had previously been involved in imaginative initiatives in the sphere of painting, sculpture, art, music, literature and cinema, and had a team experienced in organizing big events in India and abroad. Most importantly it had links with students in various colleges and universities in Delhi, with celebrities and artists, and with the various government authorities in Delhi from whom permission was required to stage the concert.

The campaign gets under way

In the first week of October, Oxfam and the Make Trade Fair campaign in India were major participants in a jointly organized People's Solidarity Forum for Fair Trade that featured a handicrafts fair, film show, photographic exhibition, traditional folk songs, popular theatre and solidarity speeches. Then on 18 October Oxfam held a media conference in the Regal Room of the Hotel Intercontinental the Grand in New Delhi to mark the official launch of the Make Trade Fair Campaign in India (with only two months left before the Hong Kong Ministerial). At the same time, the four new case studies were launched, accompanied by a photo exhibition on cotton farmers in Andhra Pradesh and a short documentary film. The photo exhibition was later shown at a number of places around the city.

At about this time, the road-shows were also getting under way in various parts of the country. In Rajasthan on 16 October, sixty Make Trade Fair campaigners and

volunteers from CECOEDCON left Banswara in Rajasthan, to set off through the desert in a procession of camels, visiting villages as they went to raise awareness. As they travelled, they used village level meetings (*chaupal*) as a means of getting the message across to rural people. People took these meetings seriously and the presence of village level functionaries gave the volunteers as well as the issues a sense of credibility. The first few meetings were small affairs - but as the word spread, subsequent meetings attracted larger groups of people including women.¹³ A big attraction for the farmers and their families was the Make Trade Fair street theatre, whose satirical entertainment the audiences enjoyed immensely, as they heard about such things as the difference in subsidies given to farmers in rich countries compared to farmers in India. Although rural people in a drought-prone state like Rajasthan do not necessarily understand issues of global trade, they are very aware of the impact that government policies have on their situation. During the course of the road-show about 6,000 people in Rajasthan signed up to the Big Noise petition calling on governments to make trade fair.¹⁴



October 16 also saw the launch of the Tamil Nadu road-show, in the village of Soranamu where the first of the series of rallies was held, together with a ten-kilometre bicycle rally. CCD, the Make Trade Fair partner in Tamil Nadu and Orissa, went on to organise a range of similar events involving bicycles, foot marches and bull-cart rallies. For example in Nainarpattai, a village of 500 farmers, mainly

sugarcane and cotton producers in Madurai, some 250 village people (mostly women) assembled early in the morning of 15 November and set off in a cavalcade of bull-carts to raise awareness about the plight of farmers (photo above). The 46 bull-carts caused quite a stir as it moved from communities to community through 18 villages in the districts of Sivagangai and Virudhunagar in Madurai. Slogans that said “*Viyuparathai Niyayamakku!*” the Tamil version of Make Trade Fair and “Let’s Make Trade Work for the Poor” were prominently displayed, while drum and trumpet players joined in the festive procession. Through these activities the campaigners were able to collect hundreds of thousands of signatures to the Big Noise petition. The campaign in Tamil Nadu culminated on 17 November when some 1,500 Tamil farmers assembled in Natham, Madurai.¹⁵

In Madhya Pradesh, under the guidance of Ekta Parishad, ten days’ of rallying went from city to city and finally to the state capital, Bhopal, which saw one of the biggest rallies of all. On the morning of 24 November, hundreds of farmers and their families were in the streets demanding a fairer deal for the crops they produced. Jai Singh Yadav, District Co-ordinator of Ekta Parishad, was quoted as saying: “People in the

village are no longer ignorant about WTO. Even poor farmers know that something bigger is interfering with their lives and their livelihoods". When asked what she had learned from the Make Trade Fair campaign, Shradha, the State Convenor of Ekta Parishad said: "Farmers are now more vigilant. When we go to the villages and inform them of what is happening in world trade, they start asking so what can we do now? They now understand that they can be part of a process, that they can do something". Through the streets of Bhopal, the procession of men, women and children carried a silent but strong messages to the government of India and the WTO with placards that said:

"WTO stop interfering with Indian farm policies!"

"It's our land, our crop so the decision should be ours!"

"Farmers of India unite against WTO!"

Some 900 people marched in Bhopal that day, and about 100,000 signed the Big Noise petition.¹⁶

Quotes from the road-shows

Vimla, a Make Trade Fair volunteer who took part in the procession in Rajasthan and organized the talks in each village, was impressed by the farmers' interest. She explains, "This is a crucial period for farmers, as it is the sowing season. They usually stay in their fields throughout this period and do not even go back home. So, it is quite an achievement to see hundreds of farmers leaving their farms and assembling for the Make Trade Fair road show."

In the small village of Janglu in Rajasthan, farmers listened closely to the talks about agriculture and trade, and eagerly signed up to The Big Noise. Sharan Ram, farmer, said he joined the Make Trade Fair campaign because he believes there is a strong need for change. All the farmers felt the same and thought that the campaign was a good means of bringing about that change.

Mela, women farmer-volunteer for MTF said: "Women farmers in India are the most vulnerable in this unfair trading practices. We produce as much as we can but with the low farm gate prices and lack of transportation facilities to deliver our produce to the [sugar] mills, we can't possibly compete with farmers in other countries".

Bhanu Pratap Singh, a 38 year old farmer from Katri in Madhya Pradesh shared his reasons for joining the campaign: "I am here in the rally to build the pressure on the government so they can exercise utmost caution before signing anything in the WTO agreements pertaining to agriculture".

Leela Bai, a mother of five, with her son Yuvraj Singh, participated in several Make Trade Fair rallies in Madhya Pradesh covering about 17 kilometres. She lamented: "There is nothing more painful for a mother then to see her children going hungry. I do not know who is responsible for this but if it is someone from outside the country then I am very afraid. However, I believe that if we gather in big numbers to tell our troubles, the government will listen to us".

The messages that Oxfam hoped to convey during these road-shows were both simple and complex. The simple message was summed up in the "make trade fair" slogan - farmers should get a fair deal from the sale and trade of their produce. This was easily understood by all and readily taken up. The more complex message, about WTO rules and the need for governments to be allowed to retain the power to decide the pace and extent to which agricultural imports should be let in, was not

always readily understood by farmers, and indeed in some cases not understood by the partner organizations either.

The culmination of the popular campaign was the open-air concert at Hamswadhani theatre in Delhi, featuring celebrity singer Lucky Ali. Organised by Oxfam and the Make Trade Fair campaign in conjunction with a Delhi University college and event organisers Seher, it was originally scheduled for late November but had to be postponed for security reasons. Road closures by the police meant that the venue was inaccessible. After much frantic re-organising, it was held instead on 10 December. Braving the winter chill, nearly 10,000 eager fans turned up to hear Lucky Ali and filled every available place. When the spaces in front of the stage were full, they crammed into the aisles and on the stairs.



The concert was introduced by a Make Trade Fair film, 'On the road to Hong Kong', which received a good reaction from the crowd. Then Lucky's brother, Manzoor, opened the concert with a few songs. When Lucky Ali came on stage, he talked about the Make Trade Fair campaign, explaining that he is also a farmer and knows how difficult it is to compete with imported produce – and then urged the cheering audience to sign up to the Big Noise. He then started singing one of his hits, and the crowd went wild. For the next two hours, the audience

was enthralled by his songs and performance, which included inviting members of the audience to come up and sign with him on the stage.¹⁷

A four-page handout produced for the concert summarised Oxfam's position and the message it was trying to get across to this young urban audience:

Make Trade Fair is a global campaign run by Oxfam International and its partners in over 40 countries around the world. Oxfam believes that world trade could be a powerful motor for reducing poverty, as well as driving economic growth, but that potential is being lost. The rules of world trade are rigged in favour of rich countries and big companies. Out of every Rs.100 earned by trade, only Rs.3 is earned by developing countries, and Rs.97 is earned by exporters from developed countries. Therefore Oxfam is calling on world leaders, who are meeting at the WTO in Hong Kong, to change the rules and Make Trade Fair. Rich countries are pushing poor countries to agree to open their markets. This is exposing the world's poorest farmers to competition from abroad before they are ready to compete. Millions of poor farmers and labourers in South Asia are being pushed out of the market and are in danger of losing their livelihoods. Over 10 million people around the world have raised their voices against these unjust

trade rules. In South Asia itself, over six million people have supported the campaign by signing the petition, which will be handed over to world leaders at the WTO Ministerial in Hong Kong in December 2005. We must keep up the pressure, calling for a fair and just trading system, demanding a pro-poor position from our government – until world leaders show the political will to make it happen.

WTO Ministerial Meeting, Hong Kong

By this stage the campaign was clearly having an impact on government. At one point just before they left for Hong Kong, the entire trade negotiation section from the Ministry of Commerce spent a full day at a conference on trade organized by Oxfam and CENTAD. This was unprecedented and represented a whole new attitude by government officials towards NGOs and what they had to say.

A few days after the concert, a meeting was organized with Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, the political head of India's trade negotiators, just before he left for Hong Kong. At the meeting he was presented with the Big Noise petition with over six million signatures on it from all over India. The petition asked the Indian Government to influence decision-makers at the WTO to make trade fair for millions of farmers in India who are badly affected by post-liberalization policies, and for millions more people who depend on agriculture worldwide. It was handed over in the form of a placard by Ramakrishna Choudhary, a farmer from Rajasthan. The Minister in his response assured him that the interests of small and marginal farmers were of prime importance to the country, and under no circumstances would they be compromised. He added that he is aware that Indian farmers are not in a position to compete with the governments of the US, who hugely subsidizes their agriculture.

From 13 to 18 December 2005, trade ministers from 150 countries met in Hong Kong to thrash out a series of agreements on how the trade in various types of goods, including agricultural goods, will be conducted. As well as the official government delegations from these countries there were thousands of people from civil society groups around the world, including a large number from Hong Kong itself, who were busy lobbying, talking to the media, and demonstrating in the streets. Among them was a large delegation of staff from the various Oxfams around the world, including a



small number from India. There were also three people from Ekta Parishad and CCD, who were involved in the activities in the streets of Hong Kong. At a meeting of 90 Southern governments during the Ministerial the full Big Noise petition (photo left) with 17.8 million signatures gathered from countries all around the world, was presented to Pascal Lamy, the Director General of the WTO.¹⁸ The Oxfam delegation, which included lobbyists, policy experts and media liaison people, worked extensively behind the scenes with a range of Southern

governments to strengthen their influence in the negotiations. At the same time it used its media spokespersons (of various nationalities and languages) to try and get its message across to a wide audience – and worked with a broad network of partners and allies to bring civil society pressure on participating governments.

In the event, the negotiations in Hong Kong failed to deliver much for farmers or for developing countries. The latter had to fight a rear-guard action simply to keep some of their issues on the table. In the end they were put in an impossible position of either accepting a deal that was seriously flawed, or being blamed for the failure of the negotiations. Small progress on some aspects of the Agreement on Agriculture was more than offset by damaging proposals on trade in manufactured goods and services. On agriculture, there was a welcome commitment to the principle that developing countries should have the right to protect products of vital importance to poor farmers (Special Products) and that these should be self-designated by the developing country. There was a pledge by the US and EU to eliminate their export subsidies and equivalent payments by 2013, but this only applied to export subsidies and not the other more damaging forms of subsidy. In the EU for example, export subsidies account for only 3 or 4 percent of its overall agricultural support.

On his return from Hong Kong, Kamal Nath found himself having to deny charges by leftist political parties that India had failed to protect the interests of farmers, and had not supported other members of the G20 on the issue of fixing a date for developed countries to end export subsidies. "This is not true. We fought to the last," he said. He maintained that India had not made any compromise, and had managed to protect its interests in the two crucial areas of agriculture and industry.¹⁹

After Hong Kong

In the aftermath of Hong Kong, the Make Trade Fair campaign in India wound down somewhat. The months leading up to Hong Kong had been a time of enormous effort and stress for the Oxfam advocacy and campaigning staff in India who had never done anything like that before. But once it was over, and they had recovered a little from their state of exhaustion, thoughts began to turn to the longer term campaign and to tackling some of the more pressing local priorities around agriculture. But apart from commissioning some more research, not a great deal happened.

This period of review and reorganizing was interrupted in April 2006 when the Director General of the WTO, Pascal Lamy, visited Delhi to attend a conference on "WTO and the Doha Round: The Way Forward". It was decided to organize with the help of partner organizations, a small farmers' demonstration outside the conference venue, and to once again use Lucky Ali to



popularize it. So while Lamy and Commerce Minister Kamal Nath were inside the venue arguing over what constituted fair trade rules for a country like India, a hundred or so farmers who had traveled from Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra were demonstrating outside, waving slogans and placards to the accompaniment of the beating of huge drums. A ten-headed puppet of demon king Ravana was carried by the demonstrators, symbolizing the rich nations, the WTO and Monsieur Lamy. Lucky Ali, representing the Make Trade Fair campaign, was able to meet with Lamy and urge the WTO to be sensitive towards the plight of the millions of Indian farmers. He said that the "human face" must not be lost in these WTO talks and Lamy, as the head of WTO, should take into account the worsening conditions of Indian men and women who have a 7000-year old dependence on agriculture. Responding to Lucky Ali, Lamy said, "Farmers need to negotiate better and strengthen their voices so that trade is fairer. How do you do that? You sit around the table and talk. The WTO is that platform. If you like what you are being offered you take it and if you don't, you reject it".²⁰

What the campaign achieved

The Indian Government held firm at the WTO

The central aim of the campaign in the lead up to the Hong Kong meeting was that the Indian Government should hold firm to its position and resist pressure from the US, EU and other export oriented countries to prematurely open up its markets to agricultural imports. This was achieved. India and other developing countries held firm during the Hong Kong negotiations, and a bad deal was avoided. No agreement on agriculture was signed, but there was a commitment that when it is, it will recognise the right of developing countries to protect products of vital importance to poor farmers (Special Products) and that these would be self-designated by the developing country. Provided the Indian Government chooses crops that are important to the poor this could be a major 'win'. The idea of a Special Safeguard Mechanism for developing countries was also accepted.

To what extent the Indian Government's resolve in Hong Kong was due to the Oxfam-led campaign, or would have happened anyway, is not clear. Attribution is always difficult in this type of advocacy campaign. In late 2006 as part of an internal review of the campaign, staff in India were asked their views of the campaign and the results were compiled into one document. To a question on whether the campaign had any impact on government decision makers, the Indian staff said this:

The Commerce Minister has acknowledged the role of Oxfam in awareness generation both in print and electronic media. Moreover, the official language of the Ministry on public forums has changed to include words like fair trade, livelihood security and even the Big Noise signature campaign.....The fact that farmers are knowledgeable about issues of importance (to them) and are becoming more assertive in their demands for fair trade and change in policies in their favour has perhaps led the government to at least re-think its stand on these issues. Farmers coming together on such a large scale has made the policy makers sit up and listen. As the Commerce Minister put it in Hong Kong, "We cannot trade the livelihoods of millions of poor farmers of our country for commerce".²¹

More open attitude by government and think-tanks to NGOs

Oxfam's Regional Trade Advisor in India, Palash Kanti Das, who played a key role in the campaign believes that the government felt sufficient pressure from the campaign to wish to talk to the NGOs involved, including Oxfam, and since then, has been keen to have a government representative invited to any NGO seminar on trade.²² In the longer term, he believes that Oxfam in particular has gained credibility and influence with the government and business groups. This is supported by Dr Samar Verma, the person with overall responsibility for the campaign, who says that as a result of the reputation it established, Oxfam also began to be consulted by the media as an informed commentator on issues to do with trade and development. It was to Oxfam that journalists increasingly turned for quotes and comments and explanations of technical issues. It became widely and frequently quoted in the media, first on international issues and then on national ones to do with trade and agriculture.²³

Evidence of Oxfam's reputation with the Commerce Minister, Kamal Nath, came in early 2007 when he invited Oxfam International and another local NGO (CUTS) to be co-organizers with the government of a conference on the future of the WTO negotiations. During the conference, Oxfam policy advisors were given the unprecedented opportunity to meet with and discuss negotiating strategy with the Indian Government's trade negotiators and the Trade Minister of South Africa. This is not something that governments normally do with NGOs. Overall the conference was successful, but it resulted in Oxfam being seen by some as too close to the Indian Government and too supportive of the WTO.

It was not only Oxfam that gained a new recognition from government. The research organization CENTAD also did. Although established by Oxfam, it is not part of Oxfam having become independent some years ago. CENTAD has gained a strong reputation with both the government and business groups (chambers of commerce, industry associations, etc). Both are interested in what it has to say, and its researchers are now often asked by them to give talks and seminars.²⁴ A seminar in early 2007 organized by CENTAD to launch their South Asia Yearbook was attended by both the current and former chief trade negotiator – and during it, the former chief negotiator remarked that he wished there had been organizations like CENTAD around at the time of the earlier rounds of WTO negotiations as the outcomes then might had been different.²⁵

Other partner NGOs have also benefited. There appears to have been a general opening up of the space for NGOs in India to dialogue with relevant parts of government on issues related to trade and development. This is the view of Oxfam policy advisor Dr. Samar Verma, who believes that the solid research, analysis and political understanding that this campaign displayed has helped to break down the old view that government held of NGOs as being shallow and ideology driven. As the in-country staff review said: "The partners felt that local government bodies now sympathize with their cause, but do not openly support due to the nature of their job".

Changed discourse by NGOs on trade

One of the other achievements of the campaign was that it brought to the development debate in India an analysis of how international trade and development were connected. For many NGOs, the impact of international trade was a relatively new issue, for until recently the country had striven for self-sufficiency and trade had not been particularly significant. But with globalization and liberalization this has all changed. Regional Trade Advisor, Palash Kanti Das, expresses it thus: Before the campaign most Indian NGOs were more-or-less aware of the WTO and its impact on farmers, but were vague on the details of how that impact was manifested locally. In a sense Oxfam helped bring that perspective into clear focus, which was of considerable interest to them. Many were energized by the simple 'make trade fair' message and the slogan really caught on.²⁶

This idea that the campaign helped change the views of local NGOs about trade was shared by other Oxfam staff members in India, who felt that it moderated an essentially abolitionist view towards the WTO with a reformist one: "Different sections of civil society are coming together now to talk on trade-related issues. The 'reform WTO' angle taken up by Oxfam is an important contribution to civil society stance on trade, which earlier were either pro or anti WTO".²⁷

Awareness at grassroots level

It is not possible to say what effect the campaign had on public opinion and popular awareness in general. It did manage to persuade six million people in India to sign the 'Big Noise' petition, but in a country of 1,100 million, this constitutes only a half of one percent of the population. Given the size of the country and its population, it is safe to assume that any effect was small, and confined to the limited geographic areas in which the popular campaigning took place. According to the internal staff review, the volunteers from the partner organizations and Oxfam who ran the popular campaigning activities certainly increased their awareness and understanding, as did many of the people they talked to:

Shivdayal, a college student summarized the feelings of the youth thus: "Today we know our future is at stake and why. It is due to these awareness campaigns. If we do not act now and wait until tomorrow, when we take on the reigns of agriculture from our fathers, it will be too late to act as the policies would have been made and enacted....."

Both staff and volunteers gained a better understanding of the issues surrounding WTO and Make Trade Fair. Local issues became highlighted as well both for the people and in the media. This made the issue more approachable and more meaningful. Awareness level increased manifold.....

Women signatories confessed to gaining a sense of social importance and solidarity due to their involvement in the Big Noise campaign. The constant flow of information through the campaign was welcomed by all, especially women who were traditionally thought unfit for consumption of information related to issues of policy, matters of agriculture produce (men control the produce in most areas even though women work in all aspects of agriculture), etc. Some of the

volunteers and signatories stated that the sense of helplessness regarding the current 'agricultural crisis' is waning as women become more aware as to why they and their families are facing such competitive markets and government apathy.....

The best part of the campaign has been the awareness generation at grass-root level. From being just a signature drive in its initial phase, Big Noise is now all about informed signatures.²⁸

The staff also maintained that the campaign generated some extra advocacy by local organizations:

Farmer leaders are coming out in support of the campaign since it became visible. M.S. Tikait, a leader with extensive following among farmers has asked farmers to join the campaign. Also Rajasthan now boasts of active participation and mobilisation by *Kisan Seva Samiti Mahasangh* at state level. This organisation gained momentum and strength on issues of agriculture related trade only after the impetus provided by the Big Noise campaign. Earlier they worked for the betterment of farmers but in a disjointed and haphazard manner. Other organisational tie-ups have resulted in taking the campaign to the grass root level in Rajasthan, in the very interiors of the state.

Factors that contributed to success

One of the reasons for the successes of this campaign was that it set itself a central objective that was not hard to achieve – to pressure the Indian Government to hold to its existing position. This is the easiest kind of advocacy campaign, where you are not opposing the target's position or trying to change its policies or practices but merely supporting it in its existing position.



Another factor contributing to the successes was its ability to generate popular support in the form of the Big Noise petition with its six million signatures. Farmer Ramakrishan who was a part of the team that handed over the signatures to Commerce Minister Kamal Nath, in December 2005 said he felt that the number of

signatures represented the strength of the campaign and that this made the Minister notice the plight of farmers.²⁹

But perhaps the most important factor in the success of this campaign was its ability to provide the government with well-researched documentation, evidence and arguments that its trade negotiators could use to support their position at the WTO. These included a series of several dozen Briefing Papers that were produced by Oxfam International during this period on the various aspects of the WTO negotiations, and which analysed the impact on the poor of what was being proposed by the EU, US and others in the negotiations. The analysis in these Briefing Papers drew on Oxfam's understanding of development and on its knowledge of the tactics being used in the negotiations gleaned from its network of contacts in Geneva, Brussels, Washington and other capitals. This combination of political intelligence and ability to analyse negotiation proposals in terms of their impact on the poor was a powerful combination. Because of this and because the positions that Oxfam argued for in these documents was in line with that of the Indian Government, the latter embraced these materials with enthusiasm, and this led to a good relationship between the two. It can be surmised that the government's attitude towards Oxfam was also influenced by the fact that it was an organization with a popular support base in the countries whose governments were trying to pressure it, that it could supposedly influence public opinion in Europe and the United States.³⁰

These Oxfam International Briefing Papers were produced in Europe mainly and were intended for a global audience. They were not specific to India. But similar materials that were specific to India, written from a local perspective about local issues, were produced by CENTAD in Delhi. These were also well received by the government and its trade negotiators.

Challenges, limitations and failures

No direct benefits to farmers

The campaign was all about influencing the agreement on agriculture at the WTO. No serious thought was given to how this would translate into benefits for farmers – and the result was that there were no perceivable benefits for farmers. All that could be said is that, in preventing a WTO agreement that would have prematurely opened India up to subsidized agricultural imports, the campaign prevented the situation becoming worse. It has to be recognised in any advocacy campaign that for benefits to reach the poor many steps are needed. In this case, a 'win' at the WTO would need to be accompanied by a number of changes of policy and practice by the Indian federal government and various state governments and Agricultural Ministries, so that farmers were able to benefit from the trade regime. This campaign was not built on the need to solve a local problem that was harming farmers but the need to support an international campaign. This was not so much a local campaign as the local part of a global campaign.

Local priorities not taken up

After going through a lengthy consultation process, which took up a lot of people's time, to determine what local organizations felt should be the priorities for this campaign, their views were left aside in favour of a priority that did not come from them at all but from Oxfam. This was not good for relations between Oxfam and its partner organizations and potential allies, who would be quite justified in thinking that

their time had been wasted and their input and advice discounted. However this was not entirely true. It would be more accurate to say that their experience and advice was taken on board and used, but at a later stage. In 2005 pressure from Oxfam's international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign prevailed, and its issues were inserted and took over the campaign for a year or so leading up to the WTO Ministerial.

Unfortunately this tended to reinforce the view held by many grassroots organizations in India that Oxfam has no 'staying power', that it jumps from issue to issue. According to Dr Samar Verma there is a view that "Oxfam hits on a new idea, comes around and gathers people with all kinds of promises, and then a few years down the line, they change track, pick up something new and drop the old issues regardless of the impact or change - leaving partners in a difficult dilemma".³¹

Did Oxfam distort partners' priorities?

In approaching these organizations and offering money for them to do this popular mobilisation, did Oxfam distort their organizational priorities? The view of Regional Trade Advisor, Palash Kanti Das, is that it probably did, but they were interested anyway and excited by the 'Make Trade Fair' message and perspectives, and enthusiastic to take it up. According to Das, Oxfam paid them because no matter how interested they were in the issues and the campaign, without the extra funds they would not be able to do anything. It was seen as a joint effort – Oxfam provided the funds and the ideas, and they provided the people and local expertise to put them into practice.³² Dr Samar Verma, who led the campaign for Oxfam agrees. He says Oxfam changed their priorities rather than distorted them and that the change was a positive one. The fact that they shared Oxfam's analysis indicates that it fitted with their experience. If it had been inconsistent with their grassroots experience they would not have accepted it.³³

Did Big Noise signatories understand what they were signing?

There is no way of knowing to what extent the six million people who signed the Big Noise petition knew what they were signing. No doubt some did and some did not.



According to the internal review of the campaign, staff felt that "though very few people signed without directly questioning the purpose of the signatures and its implications, there have been cases when women signed up because their husband or peer group is a signatory". They also felt that "from being just a signature drive in its initial phase, Big Noise is now all about informed signatures". Das related that in January 2004, he started collecting Big Noise signatures at the India Social Forum in

Mumbai, but found it difficult to explain the usefulness of the petition to the various groups represented there – labour unions, farmers associations, women’s groups, etc. – because the one petition was being used for a whole variety of different issues.

Factors that limited success

A major factor limiting the success of the campaign in terms of outreach and generating the level of popular support that was hoped for was the sheer lack of time. The campaign did not effectively get underway until well into 2005, and it all had to be finished before the Commerce Minister and his team departed for Hong Kong in December of that year. Initially Oxfam had no staff or structures in place to run such a large campaign. Suitable people had to be recruited and trained at short notice, and new organizational systems put into place to cope with this new set of activities. The result was a frantic effort over a few months that exhausted the staff.



Also the popular campaigning had to be done by others, which meant that Oxfam did not have complete control over the process. When Oxfam in India agreed to run a popular campaign, it did so on the basis of almost no experience of running such activities. Staff in India were used to doing research, a bit of lobbying and running a program of development assistance, but had no experience of mobilise large numbers of people onto the streets. However they did have program partners who were able to do that, and so it made sense to turn to them for assistance, and to sub-contract them to do the popular campaigning. But this meant that Oxfam was running this part of the campaign at one-step removed, and giving a certain amount of responsibility to those organizations, including responsibility for

what was said in the name of the campaign. This led to some distortions. In December 2005, just after the road-shows had commenced, a staff member from the Oxfam office in Delhi reported that the messages being conveyed by these partner-run activities were not always in line with the messages that Oxfam wanted to convey:

In my recent visit to a rally in Madhya Pradesh I observed that, though the umbrella framework is of course ‘Make Trade Fair’ and the spirit behind the slogans and the demand of the farmers is indeed Power to Decide, in letters or a popular slogan uniformity seems to be missing. Rather ‘Agriculture at Stake’ or *Kheti Kisani Khatre Mein* seems to be picking up. We need to be watchful on this and must ensure through research efforts and the popular activities that the essence of Power to Decide remain intact. Also, state rallies suggests as if the campaign is anti-WTO and for trade without the WTO.³⁴

With so many diverse groups and individuals involved in the popular campaigning, who may or may not have followed (or even understood) the Oxfam message about the WTO, it was always going to be difficult to keep everyone 'on message'. It is not surprising then that the road-shows' message was turned by some into an anti-WTO message, which was not the Oxfam position at all.

¹ UN Food and Agriculture Organization. Food and Agricultural Indicators, 2004.

² Jaitley, Arun. *Will we step out and drive at Cancun?* <http://www.economicstimes.com> (August 29, 2003).

³ Jaitley, Arun. *Will we step out and drive at Cancun?* <http://www.economicstimes.com> (August 29, 2003).

⁴ Swaminathan, Madhura, Tehelka, 7 August 2004.

⁵ Patnaik, Utsa. *Food Stocks and Hunger in India*. http://www.macrosan.org/pol/aug02/pdf/Food_Stocks.pdf

⁶ Sen, A. The Little Magazine, Vol II : Issue 6, 2003.

⁷ Because this campaign was run jointly by the Oxfam affiliates operating in India, I have in this chapter used the name "Oxfam" to refer to them jointly. In fact most of the work of this campaign was done by the India-based staff of Oxfam Great Britain, assisted by Oxfam India, both of which are based in Delhi. But it was done in the name of, and with substantial financial support from, the two other affiliates that operate in India, Oxfam Novib (Netherlands) and Oxfam Australia, under the overall direction of the Oxfam Regional Strategic Team for South Asia.

⁸ Oxfam International. *Small-scale agriculture in the era of globalisation. Regional consultation on trade and agriculture, Dhaka, Bangladesh, 17-18 January 2005*. New Delhi, January 2005.

⁹ Oxfam International. *Make Trade Fair Pop Mob Strategy for South Asia, time line Nov 04-Oct 05*. New Delhi, August 2004.

¹⁰ Oxfam International. *WTO Action Plan for India. Proposal by Celine Charveriat, head of research and policy in MTF*. March 2005.

¹¹ Oxfam International. Report of the STAR Teleconference, 3 May 2005.

¹² Atkinson, J. *'Make Trade Fair' Campaign on Trade and Agriculture in India and Bangladesh*. Oxfam Australia, Melbourne, July 2005.

¹³ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

¹⁴ Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair website www.maketradefair.org

¹⁵ Oxfam International. Media story *Even bulls rallied for Make Trade Fair Campaign in India*. Delhi. November 2005.

¹⁶ Oxfam International. Media story, *Bhopal flooded with criticisms on and demands for fairer WTO policies*. Delhi. November 2005.

¹⁷ Oxfam International, Make Trade Fair website www.maketradefair.org

¹⁸ Of all the countries in which signatures were gathered, India topped the list with over six million signatures.

¹⁹ The Hindu, 21 December 2005.

²⁰ Oxfam India website.

²¹ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

²² Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

²³ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, personal correspondence with the author, 19 September 2007.

²⁴ Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

²⁵ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, interview May 2007.

²⁶ Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.

²⁷ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

²⁸ Oxfam International. Oxfam Big Noise Review. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.

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- ²⁹ Oxfam International. *Oxfam Big Noise Review*. In-country staff interview form completed by Supriya Singh on behalf of the staff, New Delhi, 2006.
- ³⁰ This was certainly the case in Australia where the government's attitude towards Oxfam and its campaign on the WTO Agreement on Agriculture was strongly influenced by the fact that Oxfam could supposedly influence public opinion in the EU and US, whose government Australia wished to convince to eliminate their agricultural subsidies.
- ³¹ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, personal correspondence with the author, 19 September 2007.
- ³² Palash Kanti Das, Regional Trade Advisor, Oxfam GB, New Delhi, interviewed February 2007.
- ³³ Dr Samar Verma, former Oxfam Regional Policy Advisor, South Asia, interview May 2007.
- ³⁴ Kumar Gautam, Oxfam GB, Research Coordinator, Trade and Agriculture campaign in South Asia. *The report on the progress and the problems*. New Delhi, Dec 2005.

Chapter Four

The role of international NGOs in Southern advocacy

Any discussion of the role of international non-government organizations (INGOs) in advocacy in the South has to start with the question of mandate. By what right do foreign-based organizations like Oxfam attempt to influence the domestic policies of countries like India and Sri Lanka?

First of all it is not always domestic policies that they are trying to influence. In the Indian case considered here for example it was the position of the government in an international process of negotiation in the World Trade Organization (WTO). The position taken by the Indian and other governments in those negotiations affects farmers in Britain, France, USA, Australia, etc just as much as it does farmers in India. In general, development NGOs like Oxfam would claim to be advocating for the rights of the world's poor in a range of countries, based on their long experience working with such people. But while their experience may give them a perspective and some credibility, it does not give them a mandate. They do not speak on behalf of the world's poor. They merely present a view that they believe is in the interests of the poor.

On issues of domestic policies, such as the Sri Lanka case, INGOs do not normally advocate directly. Their approach is to support local organizations who are advocating. Of course the INGO will choose to support those organizations that share its views. But if there are no such organizations in that particular country, then it is powerless to act. Its mandate comes from the allies and partners with whom it works – in this case the Sri Lankan unions and labour NGOs with whom it worked for the rights of garment workers.

The role of Oxfam in the two case studies

In each of the two case studies under consideration here Oxfam's role was different. In the campaign on garment workers in Sri Lanka, it played a number of roles at the same time – facilitator, funder and member of the coalition. It was Oxfam that first brought the members of the ALaRM coalition together in 2002, and it has been Oxfam staff in Colombo who have continued to devote large amounts of time and energy to nurturing it. It has been Oxfam's technical ability to analyse survey data for the various reports that ALaRM has launched that have largely contributed to the latter's reputation and credibility. In the case of the campaign in India, Oxfam's role was quite different. Rather than facilitating a coalition of local organization, it ran this campaign itself in its own name, only involving local organizations from time to time as allies or partners. For this was not so much an Indian campaign as part of an international Oxfam campaign that was being carried out in India.

But it is the aspects of Oxfam's role common to both campaigns that are the most significant. For a start, in both cases it was the source of funding. This has advantages in that a Southern campaign in which the funder is directly involved will tend to be more financially secure than one in which there is merely an external grant-giver who simply receives periodic reports. A campaign in which the funder is directly involved will also (one would hope) produce periodic reports and reviews to justify the on-going funding, but it is more likely to be funded on a long term basis until its objectives are achieved. The campaign on labour rights in Sri Lanka, for example, has been funded by Oxfam since 2002 and there are at this stage no plans to stop funding it.

But while Oxfam funding has given ALaRM a certain degree of financial security, it has also left it financially dependent on the international organization, and open to accusations of being foreign influenced. If Oxfam did stop funding ALaRM, the campaign would probably collapse. There are no moves afoot to diversify its funding sources or to make it in any way less dependent. On the contrary, the tendency is in the other direction. Some member organization who suddenly lost their funding from another international donor have now become dependent on Oxfam funding, not just for ALaRM activities, but for their core programs. This is an undesirable trend.

There are other aspects of Oxfam's role that are common to both campaigns. In both cases it brought an international perspective and the benefits of international research and political intelligence to the campaign – as well as an international reputation that 'opened doors' to government and others. It enabled authoritative reports to be made available, which changed the terms of debate and opened space for civil society. These aspects are considered in more detail below.

Access to an international perspective

It was Oxfam's international perspective, and in particular its knowledge of the Multi-Fibre Agreement (MFA) and how the United States and European Union were dealing with its phase-out, that led to the campaign in Sri Lanka in the first place. The original objective was to raise awareness of the impact that the sudden phase-out would have on jobs in the garment industry and on workers. But then the campaign was broadened to include working conditions in the industry, and Oxfam was once again able to bring an international perspective. When the campaign in Sri Lanka was formerly launched in February 2004 it was the release of the Oxfam International report "Trading Away Our Rights" that was its focus and which brought attention to ALaRM and the campaign. This report was based on research by OI into the working conditions in the garment industry in eight countries¹ and involved interviews with over 1000 workers, factory owners, managers of international companies, importers, union and government officials. This revealed a consistent pattern of abuses of garment workers across all these countries, which had resonance in Sri Lanka.

Potentially at least, Oxfam could have also assisted the campaign with information about what the international buyers were intending to do once the MFA was phased out. Because Oxfam has a presence in the North as well as the South it could, in theory at least, have obtained information about buyers intentions after the phase-out, whether they intended moving their orders to China or elsewhere, whether they

were going to do this gradually or suddenly, and so on. But Oxfam's connections with such people in the industry are not as good as they might be, and this did not happen.

In the case of the India campaign, it was once again Oxfam's international perspective that was the reason the campaign happened in the first place. It was its knowledge of the negotiation process in the World Trade Organization (WTO) that was happening in Geneva and other Northern capitals, and of the need for India to hold firm in the face of pressure from the US and EU, that led to the campaign in India. But more importantly it was its understanding of the potential impact that premature trade liberalization could have on small-scale farmers and rural communities, and the many reports and briefing papers it had produced on this that gave it credibility in the eyes of the Indian Government and the arguments and evidence that the latter needed.

As we know, many of the factors that affect the lives of farmers, workers and others in the South are international in origin. It is the actions of players such as transnational companies, international financial institutions and Northern governments, and what happens in international negotiating forums such as the WTO, that so often determines what happens at the national and local level. The unique contribution that international NGOs such as Oxfam can make to Southern advocacy is to bring this 'big picture' to the Southern campaigners, to provide them with information about what Northern institutions or governments are saying or doing, what is happening in international negotiations and forums, and what is happening in other Southern countries that are in a similar situation.

When the campaign in India was just getting underway and local NGOs were being consulted on what their priority issues were, and how Oxfam could best help, the response was (to quote the report) that Oxfam should:

- Build the capacity of stakeholders to understand and analyze the impact of globalization on small-scale agriculture.
- Facilitate sharing of information on local, national and global issues relating to trade and agriculture.
- Mobilize stakeholders and carry out advocacy at various levels. Help stakeholders link grass-root realities with international trends.
- Support and carry out research and documentation on the impact of globalization on agriculture.²

Three out of these four points are about Oxfam bringing its global or international perspective to the campaign. For these partners and allies at least, this was what they wanted from Oxfam.

Reports that change the terms of debate

A key aspect of both campaigns was the ability to provide authoritative reports that set out clear and forceful evidence for why things must change – and how they should change. Some of these reports were from Oxfam's international sources and others were produced locally with its assistance. In the case of Sri Lanka they included the "Trading Away Our Rights" report mentioned above, reports on factory closures in Sri Lanka and the "Living Wage" report. In India there were the Oxfam International briefing papers on the various aspects of the WTO negotiations and

their implications for the poor, and those produced by CENTAD. They were sometimes released publicly with as much media coverage as possible, and at other times just made available to the government or whoever wanted it.

These reports were in both cases instrumental in changing the terms of debate. In Sri Lanka they brought a workers' perspective into discussions around the MFA phase-out – and introduced the concept of a 'living wage' into wage setting. In India they brought into sharp focus the relationship between international trade negotiations and the plight of small-scale farmers - by analysing the potential impact on them of what was being proposed in the WTO negotiations, including the effect of removal of tariffs and quotas and the increased competition from imported agricultural products that it would bring. These briefing papers also set out the motives and tactics of the US, EU and other Northern governments in trying to open up the Indian and other Southern markets. This is not to say that Indian NGOs were not aware of these issues. Many were – but many were not. Their focus traditionally was on the policies and practices of the Indian federal and state governments and how these affected farmers. Because India was traditionally more or less self-sufficient in agricultural products, international trade had not been a major factor in their consideration. The campaign was able to change the terms of debate in the sense of articulating the links between international trade and development. It did this in a very public way, and popularised the slogan "make trade fair".

What was true of the campaigns in Sri Lanka and India was also true of the 'Make Trade Fair' (MTF) campaign in general. An overall evaluation of the campaign, carried out in 2005 found that: "The most frequently mentioned outcome of the MTF campaign is that it has 'changed the terms of debate'. Certainly media coverage and pronouncements by an extremely wide range of public officials indicate that Oxfam helped get both 'fairness' and 'development' front-and-centre in the debates on trade. The issues Oxfam has prioritised.... significantly raised their profile and coverage indicates that Oxfam analysis is shaping the debate".³

Of course changing the terms of debate is not the same thing as changing policies and practices. Clear articulated evidence (as in these reports) that there is a problem that needs to be addressed is by itself not usually enough to change the practices of a government or company. Governments in particular operate on the basis of political necessity, and if they are benefiting from the existing situation and there is no political pressure for them to change, they can and will ignore the evidence and arguments no matter how forceful or articulate they are. If on the other hand they are neutral or have no strong views on an issue, evidence and arguments can be decisive. Without them, nothing happens no matter what the position of the government. They are a necessary but not a sufficient condition for a successful campaign.

A study of Oxfam advocacy campaigns in Peru came to a similar conclusion. These were campaigns to obtain justice for communities located near large foreign-owned mining operations, who had lost their land, had their rivers polluted by the mine, etc.

In most cases, communities and their allies had to demonstrate with convincing evidence that there were problems and that extractive industries operations were the source of those problems, because the initial reactions of both government

and companies was to deny the existence of such problems, suggest that the protesters had other, usually political, motives and attribute the problems to causes other than the companies' activities. Convincing evidence and documentation were also needed to attract potential allies and influence policy and decision makers. This information and analysis also laid the ground work for preparing alternative proposals and solutions.⁴

Relative to the previous point about the usefulness of international NGOs in bringing international information to a campaign, this report also says: "Forming, maintaining and making effective use of alliances - whether local, national or international – enabled local communities to access resources, information, skills and influence that, in some instances, enabled them to do end-runs around their competitors for influence".

Another benefit of these authoritative reports was that, coming from civil society organizations (CSOs), they helped change the perception of the latter in the eyes of government and others. By producing well-documented and well-presented arguments and evidence in the form of reports, they demonstrated that CSOs were not the shallow and ideology-driven organizations that governments often supposed them to be, and that they can and do have things to say that are worth listening to – even if you do not agree with them – that are based on evidence, not rhetoric. This can help open up democratic space for CSOs to present their views and have them listened to, to an extent they were not previously.

The problem is however that not all CSOs are capable of researching and producing such evidence and arguments. The people involved are often very skilled - but their skills may lie in the areas of mobilizing, campaigning and leadership, rather than research and analysis. In the case of the Sri Lanka campaign, for example, the unions and worker oriented NGOs that made up the ALaRM coalition have to engaged in day-to-day struggles, and do not have the time or the inclination to sit back and do surveys and research. This is where Oxfam, which had such skills and ability, proved useful. A 2006 report by the Overseas Development Institute, London, of 18 recent advocacy campaigns in the South came to the same conclusion: "The move from service delivery to policy influence of many Southern CSOs has not been accompanied by the development of the capacities and skills to research and use evidence in policy processes".⁵

In a country like India there is an ample supply of people with research and analytical skills, but they are generally speaking not in the CSO / NGO sector. It is difficult for NGOs in the South to recruit and to hold such people because they are much sought after by governments, international institutions and the private sector, all of whom can pay much more than NGOs. Those dedicated souls who do offer their skills to CSOs or NGOs are so much sought after they are spread very thinly.

International NGOs like Oxfam have a key role to play here. They can supply such research and analysis from their international resources. Or more usefully they can help develop such research and analysis capacity for Southern NGOs – by commissioning academics in the South to produce relevant material, or by facilitating the establishment of research NGOs such as CENTAD.

Use of an international name and reputation

Public advocacy by an international non-government organization (INGO) in the South in its own name, as against quietly supporting local advocacy organizations, is a controversial thing. On the one hand, the use of its name and international reputation can 'open doors' and be a strength that significantly assists a campaign – or on the other hand, it can be a disadvantage and have negative effects.

It was for example used to good effect in the Sri Lanka campaign, particularly in the early stages. In February 2004 when ALaRM's name was unknown, the launch of the first report was done in Oxfam's name, and this appeared to be a major factor in the considerable interest it attracted. Its allies and partners in ALaRM had asked Oxfam to take the leading public role on the basis that the government and industry would not listen to them but would listen to Oxfam. The use of the Oxfam name and reputation helped to 'open doors' in Colombo. For example the Department of Labour, which had an ambivalent attitude towards unions, based on past conflicts⁶ was perfectly happy to work with Oxfam (rather than ALaRM) on factory surveys and to take Oxfam money to enable them to happen. Oxfam was able to play an intermediary's role between the trade unions and labour NGOs on the one hand, and the government, industry and local representatives of the ILO, World Bank, etc on the other.

Its reputation also opened doors in India. Oxfam had by then established an international reputation as an authoritative NGO commentator on the WTO negotiations and their implications for Southern countries, and so the Indian Government was receptive to what it had to say. And of course Oxfam's supposed ability to influence public opinion in Europe and the US would also have been a significant factor for the government.

Public advocacy in the South by an INGO can also have negative effects on a campaign. The governments of India and Sri Lanka were open to what an international organization like Oxfam had to say, even if in the case of Sri Lanka they did not agree with it. But many governments are not, and some are deeply wary of foreign intervention in their internal affairs. In such countries the involvement of an INGO in local campaigns can, for example, leave allies open to accusations of being manipulated by, or a front for, foreign neo-colonial interests, which is what happened in the case of the mining campaigns in Peru mentioned above. It can also endanger the INGO's development assistance program in that country, if it has one. It is not unknown for an INGO that antagonizes a Southern government to be thrown out of a country, and its programs closed down.

Also, because INGOs are generally large well-resourced and well-connected organizations, any advocacy or campaigning that they do can tend to push aside less-confident local advocacy NGOs. The role of an organization like Oxfam should be to encourage and support effective advocacy and campaigning by local actors, not swamp them or displace them. Hence in most cases it is not appropriate for an INGO to be doing advocacy or campaigning in the South in a public way. The more appropriate role is to stay quietly in the background and support local NGOs to do it. However there can be exceptions to this general principle, as happened in the Sri

Lanka campaign in 2004. Oxfam's official position was set down in 2003 by the Executive Directors and Board of Oxfam International:

Oxfam will seek to support partners and allies in their advocacy and campaigns strategies because they have primary legitimacy in their own countries, and because we believe that this will have most impact in terms of promoting long-term, sustainable change. When we support, rather than lead in this way, we will subsume our own brand unless there is a justification for not doing so.

Oxfam can also advocate and campaign in the South in its own name where the use of the Oxfam brand significantly increases the impact on poverty, or if it is not safe for partners and allies to do so. We will always determine how and when we use our own voice in consultation with partners, allies, and Oxfam affiliate staff based in the country or region, and will be accountable for such consultation. We will assess any potential risk to the Oxfam name, and to the credibility of the work, partners and allies of other affiliates, as part of determining how and when we use our own voice. Our assessment will also take into account legal registration of Oxfam Field Offices and potential political, security or legal constraints in the country concerned.⁷

The Indian campaign was an example in which “the use of the Oxfam brand significantly increases the impact on poverty”. As an international organization it could increase effectiveness and impact by bring to the campaign international research and political intelligence, a global media presence, and secure funding for activities in India. Also it was advocating, not on a local issue, but about an international one on which it had an established reputation, which no other organization in India had. Dr Samar Verma the overall head of the campaign in India at the time believes that Oxfam had no choice but to run this campaign itself in its own name, as there was no other organization in the country that could do it. As evidence of this he tells of the occasion on which the British Foreign Secretary was visiting India and he pulled together a group of prominent NGO representatives to meet with him in Delhi. None of them felt confident enough to make a presentation to the Foreign Secretary on trade and the WTO negotiations, and asked Oxfam to do all the talking. A similar thing happened in March 2005 at the time of the G20 meeting in Delhi, when two INGOs ended up doing most of the lobbying of Trade Ministers. It was this lack of local capacity in the area of trade that was one of the chief reasons for Oxfam GB establishing the Centre for Trade and Development (CENTAD) in Delhi.

There are however many counter examples of situations in which this type of open advocacy by an international NGO is simply not advisable – particularly in countries where there is strongly felt concern (or paranoia) about foreign influence. Peru is one such example, and in the campaigns on extractive industries mentioned above, it was necessary for Oxfam to keep a low profile. However in this case its involvement was ‘exposed’ by the opposing camp, and Oxfam was attacked in the media. This raises the question of whether it is in fact possible for an organization like Oxfam to keep a low profile, even when it wants to or needs to.

Up to this point the practice had been for Oxfam to provide occasional financial support to partners for advocacy activities, but the understanding was that Oxfam

would not play a public role, which was reserved for staff in their home countries [in the North] who were active in a number of advocacy campaigns there. However, the globalization of campaigning, as a result of Oxfam's own decision to become a global campaigning force, and the globalization of communications, so that activities of Oxfam in the North were reported in the media in the South, and web pages intended for supporters and donors in the North were also being read by partners, allies and opponents in the South, meant that the comfortable distinction between public activism in the North and anonymous support in the South could no longer be maintained.⁸

It is clear that protocols need to be established for what information about advocacy campaigns goes on Oxfam websites when that information can undermine campaigns in the South.

Managing relations with governments

The nature of a government in a particular country will be a major determining factor for how public an INGO can be in its advocacy there, and how confrontational or otherwise it can or should be. In the case of Sri Lanka, the campaign was fairly confrontational in that it opposed the government's position, although there was some engagement. In India it was decidedly cooperative and friendly. Most INGOs would adopt either a cooperative approach to Southern governments or one that is a mixture of cooperation and confrontation - the operative principle being 'engage where you can, and confront where you must'. The 2006 ODI study of advocacy campaigns mentioned above found that: "Most successful examples have included some sort of continuous and long term engagement with the government, rather than outright confrontation. In some cases a mix of confrontation to raise the profile of the issue and engagement to provide solutions has proved to be useful".⁹

But being supportive and getting too close to government can create problems. No government is perfect and being associated with one and its failings or abuses may be seen as supporting those abuses. Also some civil society groups, domestic or international, will inevitably be opposed to the government on some issue, and being seen as close to a government they do not like will have implications for the INGO's relationship with them. Another survey of policy advocacy in the South by ODI said: "There is always a danger that if one CSO is seen to be engaging very closely with policy makers then the other CSOs perceive it to be a 'lackey' of the government. In addition the CSOs themselves feel that if they engage too closely with the government, they run the risk of losing their independence".¹⁰ In the India campaign, Oxfam worked with the Indian Government because of an international strategy of encouraging the assertiveness of Southern governments in the WTO negotiations. India was seen as a key country in that process, one that could lead resistance to US and European pressures, and it was an obvious strategy to support it. But this had implications for Oxfam's relations with civil society organizations, and with the government in Bangladesh, which regarded India as a dominant neighbor and a rival in some areas of trade.

It can also have implications for the INGO's attitude towards the government on domestic issues. An organization that is working closely and cooperatively with a government on some international negotiation is unlikely to want to upset that

relationship by being oppositional on some domestic issue. For example, some felt that the relationship that Oxfam developed with the Indian Government over the WTO trade negotiations meant that it was not willing to publicly criticize it over its own trade policies, for example towards smaller neighboring countries.

As Oxfam becomes more involved in Southern advocacy it will need to give more thought to this question of its relationships with Southern governments. If it decided to become involved in, for example, a campaign to have the Indian Government take a more responsible attitude towards mitigating its greenhouse gas emissions, how will this affect its ability to work with it on international negotiations around climate change? Can it have a confrontational relationship on one issue and a cooperative one on another? The positions that Oxfam takes will have to be a very nuanced one, and the relationship it develops a complex one that will need to be carefully managed.

Ability to advocate in the North

Public activism in the North is now an integral part of the work of many INGOs including Oxfam. While this poses a potential danger of making anonymous or low profile advocacy in the South difficult, it can also provide useful and effective support to Southern campaigns. In the Peru campaigns mentioned above, support for the communities directly impacted by the mining operations was complimented by advocacy in the North directed at the head offices of the mining companies involved, or at the international financial institutions that helped fund their operations. One case in particular proved to be a classic example of the integration of Northern and Southern advocacy. The Tintaya mine in Peru was owned and operated by the Australian-based company, BHP Billiton. Cooperation between the Oxfam America office in Lima and the Oxfam Australia office in Melbourne meant that evidence of abuses at the mine site in Peru could be presented directly to the management of the company at the highest level in Melbourne, and the subsequent negotiation process between the community and the company monitored at both ends. The link via the two Oxfam affiliates meant that poor villagers in the affected areas could in effect present their views to the company's top management – and the involvement of Oxfam with its ability to publicize the situation meant that the company had to listen and do something.

Northern advocacy has often been used to support Southern campaigns on labour rights, particularly campaigns on abuses or problems at a particular factory. There was an example of this in Sri Lanka during the AlaRM campaign, in which the management at a particular garment factory (Jaqalanka Ltd.) were harassing and threatening those workers who were trying to form a union. This was taken up by a Sri Lankan union (a member of AlaRM), which then used its international contacts to have pressure put on the factory managers and owners by consumers, unions and activists in the North, and by the brand-name companies that bought from the factory, to recognise the union in the factory and negotiate with it in good faith.

But apart from this one incident, the potential to use Oxfam's presence in the North to compliment the Sri Lanka campaign with Northern advocacy was not fully utilised. For example Oxfam, with its offices in Europe and the United States where the Northern 'brand name' companies that sourced their products from Sri Lanka are

based, could have mounted campaigns there to pressure those companies to act responsibly and not move their orders prematurely to cheaper countries, and to make sure their suppliers did the right thing by their workers. But this did not happen to any significant extent. There was also at one stage a direct call by the campaign in Sri Lanka for the European-based Oxfams to assist by lobbying the European Commission to modify its 'rules of origin' so as to allow Sri Lankan garment exports better access into Europe. Some effort was devoted to this in Europe, but it was not sustained, mainly because it did not fit in well with the priorities and strategies of the international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign. The need for global coherence in the international campaign meant that it had a limited ability to respond to a call coming from one or two countries only.

The Indian campaign on the other hand was a classic example of coordinated advocacy, North and South. However it was not a case of a Southern campaign being supported by advocacy in the North, but of the reverse, of a Northern campaign being supported by advocacy in the South.

Integrating advocacy campaigns North and South

Even if the Tintaya or Jaqalanka campaigns with their strong North-South links had been completely successful, the success would have been limited to that mine or factory. They would not have brought about any overall changes in the policies of the Peruvian government towards mining, or of the Sri Lankan government towards labour rights. There was a missing level in those two campaigns, the national government level.

The policies and practices of national governments usually have more impact on the lives of the poor than those at any other level, and yet this is the level at which advocacy is often weakest. The strongest campaigns are those that operate effectively at all three levels – local community, national, and international level – with each supporting and being supported by the other. Mobilisation and evidence from the local level can then support the campaign with the national government and in the North and give it credibility – while pressure at the latter two levels can support the grassroots campaign.

The ALaRM campaign in Sri Lanka was focused mainly on the national level, and its links to the factory floor and to the international support were relatively weak. The extent to which it spoke on behalf of the workers can be questioned, given that most of them were not even aware of what it was saying or doing on their behalf. And the potentially useful assistance it could have had at the international level was, as mentioned above, not forthcoming. The Indian campaign on agricultural trade on the other hand was entirely focused on the international level. There was no attempt to influence the government's national policies on agricultural or trade. And its links to the grassroots were weak. This was not a campaign that arose from the demands of farmers in India, but from Oxfam's international analysis and strategies.

As a general rule it could be said that INGOs are good at supporting advocacy at the local grassroots level, and at running campaigns at the international level – but are not good at linking them up - to one another or to the national level. At the 'grassroots' level there is a surprising amount of advocacy happening in the South,

as communities and the organizations that work with them find that to bring about the positive changes they want in a sustainable way, they need to change the policies and practices of government agencies, or the attitudes of certain groups in the community, etc. Hence they take on advocacy activities arising directly out of their grassroots development work. A lot of this local advocacy is supported by INGOs like Oxfam, who at the same time may be running international campaigns, perhaps on the same issue (e.g. the rights of factory workers). There is a danger that the Southern and Northern advocacy on the same issue can be running on parallel tracks with neither being coordinated with the other.

The current foci need to be supplemented by increased emphasis on advocacy at the national level. Typically in a Southern country there are a host of small grassroots NGOs/CSOs campaigning on their local issues, and possibly a few national level ones in the capital lobbying the national government. But links between the two are often poor. This is therefore an area where an INGO can start – supporting local organizations doing advocacy to link with others doing similar work, and with appropriate national level organizations, so as to become an effective voice to government.

There are of course exceptions to this, organizations involved in local advocacy that are well linked into the national level, and even the international level. One typical example is CECOEDECON, an NGO which works with farmers in the drought-prone areas of Rajasthan in northwest India. Its work with these farmers over many years has led it to become involved in lobbying the state government (agriculture is primarily a state matter in India) to improve the way in which its relief measures are provided to vulnerable farmers in times of drought. (See box below).

An example of integrated advocacy

When farmers in the Phagi District of Rajasthan in northern India recently came to sell their grain to the government buyer for the official guaranteed support price, they found that they were being given all sorts of excuses by the buyer as to why he could not purchase their grain. There were no bags available, he said, or the grain was wet. Suspicious, they turned to a local farmers' organisation, the Kisan Seva Samiti or KSS who investigated and unearthed a scam. The government buyer was being paid by local grain merchants to turn away the farmers' grain, so that the merchants could buy it at a lower price. The KSS took the matter to the District level authorities and the official involved was dismissed.

KSS is an organization that supports farmers and rural people in many ways, of which this kind of grassroots advocacy is only one. Its formation was largely supported by a Rajasthan-based NGO called CECOEDECON. This is a multi-faceted organization that has been also involved in advocacy on behalf of farmers, including at a State level. Agriculture in India is a State rather than a federal government matter, and CECOEDECON takes up issues such as the inadequate implementation of the Public Distribution Scheme of cheap food for the chronically poor in the State, or the inadequacies of the government's drought relief schemes. Rajasthan is a particularly drought-prone area, and the employment generating infrastructure projects that the government institutes in

drought affected areas are vital in giving people an income and a means of surviving without having to move away in search of work. Often however they do not reach those who need them most, which is where advocacy comes in.

CECOEDECON is also increasingly becoming involved in advocacy and campaigning at a national and international level, as part of the Food Trade and Nutrition (FTN) coalition. At the national level CECOEDECON and the coalition wants the Indian Government to keep to its current position of supporting an agreement at the World Trade Organization (WTO) that will preserve food security and rural livelihoods. At the international level it wants the European and American governments to stop subsidising their agricultural producers in a way that leads to the 'dumping' of agricultural products on export markets. It advocates on behalf of farmers at the local, state, national and international levels, with its work at each level supporting and being supported by the work at the other levels.

International campaigns

The various sub-campaigns within the international 'Make Trade Fair' campaign (on agricultural trade, garment workers, coffee farmers, access to medicine, etc) could have been examples of well-integrated campaigns. All the affiliates in the North and their offices and programs in various countries in the South were supposed to be working together in an integrated way. But in practice it did not work out that way.

To take the sub-campaign on garment workers as an example, what happened in South Asia was typical of what happened more generally. For a start the Oxfams in India did not take up the sub-campaign at all, as the rights of garment workers was not a high priority in their programs. In Sri Lanka, where the garment industry was much more significant, they took it up, but in their own way. The international campaign, designed largely in Europe, focused on sportswear in particular and used the public interest in the Olympic Games that were coming up in Athens in August 2004 to draw attention to the campaign - and to contrast the situation in garment factories with the ideal of fair play that was supposed to underlie the Olympics. The international targets were a set of sportswear companies that sourced their products from Southern countries where working conditions were bad. In Sri Lanka on the other hand, the emphasis of the campaign was on building a coalition, and hence its priorities and approaches were determined by the coalition members, and not by Oxfam in Europe. The focus was not so much on bad conditions in the factories as on the impact of the phase-out of the quota system. They did not focus on sportswear, but on the garment industry as a whole, and did not link their campaign to the Olympic Games. Their main advocacy target was not the sportswear companies but the Sri Lankan government. And while the international campaign was short term and finished with the Athens Olympics in August 2004, the campaign in Sri Lanka is a long term one that is still underway.

There will always be tensions and differences between a global campaign and its local manifestation in a country like Sri Lanka. The setting of strategies and priorities for a global campaign like 'Make Trade Fair' is determined by aggregating what is happening in all the countries and regions in which it intends to operate, and is

strongly influenced by the advocacy and campaigning opportunities in the North, for example the Athens Olympics, which may or may not apply in the South. The best choice for a global campaign is unlikely to be the best choice in all, or even most, of the Southern countries in which it is intended to operate. The tension is between the need to maximize impact by having all those involved in the international campaign around the world saying the same things to the same targets at the same time, and on the other hand maximizing relevance by allowing Southern countries the flexibility to take up issues in their own way and their own time, with their own emphasis. This raises the question of whether the advocacy priorities in a particular country should be determined by the local situation to ensure relevance and impact, or by the need for international coherence and effectiveness.

Despite attempts to take on board Southern priorities, the 'Make Trade Fair' campaign was seen as being driven by an international and Northern agenda. The internal evaluation of the campaign said this:

Although conceptually the campaign was designed to be vertically aligned with strong regional participation and a role for partners, in practice the campaign was experienced as being very 'top down' and Northern focused. Oxfam staff in many regional and country offices felt that they and their partners, rather than being key protagonists in setting the agenda and pressuring for change, were viewed as supporting players, representing the human face of issues....and contributing to awareness raising by participating in global media-related activities. In effect, in the early stages of the campaign regions had to figure out ways to link-up to the campaign, rather than regions and partners being co-strategists in setting and implementing an agenda.¹¹

The evaluation does however also say that the campaign organizers tried to overcome this and adopt a different approach:

Oxfam made significant progress in moving away from a more centralized, Northern-focused campaigning model, and increasingly took advantage of its assets as a decentralized global organization to innovate, experiment and adjust the campaign in both the North and the South, with promising results on a number of issues in different settings.¹²

But, it concludes:

A recurring issue continues to be the perception that Oxfam imposes its priorities and looks for collaboration with partners and allies, but is not pre-disposed to work on their priorities in turn, even when they have been working on trade for years.... Oxfam has generally adjusted its campaigning to better accommodate the various interests of its partners / allies, but at this stage Oxfam should be more adept at making these accommodations during campaign planning, rather than being negotiated as the campaign unfolds.¹³

For the campaigns in Sri Lanka and India, being part of the international campaign had its benefits and its disadvantages. On the positive side it gave them access to international research reports and briefing papers, perspectives and information, and the use of the Oxfam name and its resources. On the downside however, the

international campaign also made requests of the local one. ALaRM and Oxfam in Sri Lanka were expected to provide local research, information, stories and photos for the international campaign – and if possible to take up the campaign in Sri Lanka with its approaches, emphasis, strategies, timelines, etc, which were not always appropriate locally. Sorting out a compromise between these international priorities and approaches and the local ones took some time and effort.

There is a danger that those running an international campaign will tend to emphasise the help that the local campaign can offer them, rather than the help that they can offer the local campaign. An ‘extractive mentality’ can develop in which the Southern campaign is seen primarily as a source of useful information, evidence, stories etc to support the campaign in the North. If a campaign is to be properly integrated, there has to be a sense of equality, North and South.

Top-down or bottom-up approach.

So the question is - should advocacy priorities in an international campaign be set from the bottom up, or from the top down – by the local situations to ensure relevance and impact, or by the need for international coherence and effectiveness? The simplistic answer is – both, depending on the nature of the campaign.

Some campaigns are by their nature going to be top-down, for example those that aim to influence an international agreement or treaty (such as WTO trade agreements, or an agreement to limit greenhouse gas emissions). In such cases it makes sense for there to be an overall global strategy and for individual country campaigns to fall in line with that, for the sake of impact. Other campaigns are by their nature better designed from the bottom up, even if it means a loss of global coherence. For example, campaigns that are directed towards the policies and practices of national governments will have different emphases and strategies in each country depending on the local political situation (e.g. a campaign to improve the situation of small-scale farmers). From a range of such related but country specific campaigns it may be possible to extract a common element or issue that can form the basis of an international campaign (e.g. the control by transnational agro-chemical companies of the price of agricultural inputs). But there is no guarantee of that. Sometimes global coherence and a unified campaign is simply not possible if a campaign is to take proper account of priorities in the South.

Many issues will lead themselves to a combination of both approaches, with each supporting the other. One example (which Oxfam International is currently formulating) would be a campaign to reduce the vulnerability of poor people to the effects of climate change - to rising sea levels, increased incidence of major weather events, changing ecological zones affecting agriculture, etc. At the local level there could be a number of campaigns to ensure that people are aware of the likely impact of climate change on their situation, and that local authorities were implementing effective programs to protect the vulnerable. The national campaigns would be to have Southern governments put the necessary policies in place to deal with the impacts, and make the necessary resources available to implement them. Out of these country specific campaign might emerge a global campaign - for example to have Northern governments make funds available to pay for adaptation measures, and agree to emission reduction targets.

Recommendations for future campaigns

- There is a need to recognise and stress the particular strengths that an INGO can bring to advocacy in the South, and to facilitate their use. This particularly includes the facilitation of the flow of international information, research and perspectives to Southern allies and partners.
- More effort and resources need to be put into supporting the ability of Southern allies and partners to document evidence and produce authoritative reports – information that can potentially change terms of debate in the Southern country and improve the credibility of CSOs and NGOs in the eyes of those they wish to influence. This may include developing those capabilities within certain NGOs, or facilitating the creation of research and analysis NGOs in the South, as occurred in India with the creation by Oxfam GB of the Centre for Trade and Development (CENTAD).
- The funding of advocacy campaigns in the South by INGOs should be long-term, given that changing policies and practices takes time. Funding that terminates after one or a few years is going to leave Southern allies and partners in difficulties. It must also be recognised that, unlike funding for economic development projects that generate income, funding of advocacy campaigns is never going to lead to financial independence.
- INGOs need to give more thought to managing relations with Southern governments – in particular how to be supportive in terms of advocacy in international forums without precluding their ability to be critical and even confrontational on domestic issues. They need to also be aware that working closely with a government has implications for their relations with allies and other CSOs who may be opposed to it.
- Protocols need to be established for the reporting by INGOs in their magazines, websites, etc of their advocacy activities in the South, given that it is likely to be seen in by opponents in the South and may affect their situation there.
- In designing advocacy campaigns, INGO should ideally have them operate at all three levels – local, national and international – with each level supporting and being supported by the others. The current emphasis of supporting advocacy at the local and international level needs to be supplemented by increased emphasis on the national level. Also work at each of the three levels need to be connected.
- To link the local with national, there should be a focus on supporting grassroots organizations doing advocacy to link with others in the country working on the same issues and with appropriate national level organizations, so as to become an effective and credible voice to government at the national level.
- Linking the national to the international in a global campaign can be done in either of two ways: (1) by building the global campaign from the common elements of a number of national ones (bottom-up), or (2) by designing it

centrally and having national offices and allies take it up (top-down). Both ways are legitimate depending on the nature of the campaign.

- In either case there must be effective input into campaign design from those in the South who will be involved in it. Southern advocates and campaigners must be treated as strategic allies, not as mere 'supporting players' whose primary role is to support the advocacy in the North.
- While globally unified campaigns have their place (particularly if the target is an international agreement), it must also be recognised that the more unified a campaign is internationally, the less likely it is to be relevant in a particular Southern country – because circumstances vary from country to country. Such campaigns must retain as much flexibility as possible, to be willing to sacrifice some global coherence to accommodate national priorities and make the campaign more relevant nationally.
- Global campaigns need to retain some capacity to support the particular needs of individual Southern campaigns for advocacy support in the North, provided that they fit generally within the campaign.

¹ Morocco, Kenya, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, Thailand, China, Honduras, UK.

² Oxfam International, South Asia Region. *Small-scale agriculture in the era of globalisation. Sub-national consultations on trade and agriculture. India Report*. Delhi, December 2004.

³ Roper, L. *'Make Trade Fair' internal evaluation*. Nov 2005, page ii.

⁴ Scurrah, Martin. *From transnational advocacy to sustainable policy development on extractives in Peru*. Paper delivered to international workshop on "The impact of transnational non-governmental public actors (NGPAs) on policy processes and policy outcomes: translating advocacy into sustainable policy engagement". University of London, 11-12 September 2007.

⁵ Mendizabal, E. *Good news for troubled contexts. Lessons learned from case studies on how civil society organizations influence policy processes*. Overseas Development Institute, London, May 2006, page 21.

⁶ Interview with Ms. Nadeeka Wataliyadda, Assistant Commissioner of Labour, Colombo, July 2007.

⁷ Oxfam International. *Oxfam's Southern campaigning and advocacy – key principles*. Communique from Executive Directors and Board Meeting, Dublin, November 2003.

⁸ Scurrah, Martin. *From transnational advocacy to sustainable policy development on extractives in Peru*. Paper delivered to international workshop on "The impact of transnational non-governmental public actors (NGPAs) on policy processes and policy outcomes: translating advocacy into sustainable policy engagement". University of London, 11-12 September 2007.

⁹ Mendizabal, E. *Good news for troubled contexts. Lessons learned from case studies on how civil society organizations influence policy processes*. Overseas Development Institute, London, May 2006, page 22.

¹⁰ Naved Chowdhury, Chelsie Finlay-Notman and Ingie Hovland. *CSO Capacity for Policy Engagement: Lessons Learned from the CSPP Consultations in Africa, Asia and Latin America*. Overseas Development Institute, ODI Working Paper 272, August 2006, page 8.

¹¹ Roper, L. *'Make Trade Fair' internal evaluation*. Nov 2005, page 11.

¹² Roper, L. *'Make Trade Fair' internal evaluation*. Nov 2005, page ix.

¹³ Roper, L. *'Make Trade Fair' internal evaluation*. Nov 2005, page 66.