

A new issue of Development Dialogue

Fighting an Old Battle in a New World

How IBFAN Monitors the Baby Food Market

by Annelies Allain

This issue of Development Dialogue is entirely devoted to the work of the International Baby Food Action Network (IBFAN), which celebrated its 25th anniversary in Oct. 2004. It is written by Annelies Allain who has spent all those years serving the network. Her story is a tribute to not just the survival, but the flourishing of a people's organisation of great importance and expresses a firm belief in the combined strength of ordinary citizens, organised in groups and networks, supporting a common cause.

Annelies Allain gives vivid descriptions of the network's struggles locally, nationally and internationally and insights into the obstacles encountered while trying to move an apathetic international bureaucracy to uphold the spirit of decisions made by its own governing body in the face of persistent corporate lobbying.

The example of IBFAN invites reflections on what NGOs are capable of doing and what governments and international organisations apparently are not capable of, or interested in, doing. The prevailing conventional picture is that NGO's should be part of international negotiations to secure a broad participation but should not be directly involved in decision-making. Thus, NGOs may become hostages rather than full members of the international process.

It is time to fully acknowledge the work of organisations and networks such as IBFAN, the ETC Group or the PCIJ (Philippine Center for Investigative Journalism) - to mention a few examples- and to realise their unique contribution over the past 25 years. It is time to give organisations such as IBFAN the right and the opportunities to make their voices heard in national and international conferences, but just as important to listen to them in their own contexts, whether it be the World Social Forum or the People's Health Assembly or other fora of that kind. Surely they have unique experiences of the world and its people that governments and corporations are not aware of.

The struggle continues. While the outcome is not at all clear, IBFAN provides an excellent example of what an NGO can do and offers hope for the future. It is an inspiration for people's organisations around the world battling for justice and solutions to longstanding problems.

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