

TESTIMONIAL

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The First Indian 'Globalised' NGO

My first interaction with CUTS dates back to 1996, at the time of the UNCTAD IX, which was being held at Midrand, South Africa. I was invited to deliver the Raul Prebisch lecture. Pradeep Mehta asked me an interesting question from the audience. I followed up with a conversation during the coffee break and discovered in him an immensely engaging and dedicated NGO leader who was not simply an "activist" but a thoughtful person. Little did I know then that I would wind up working with him on CUTS' activities.

In fact, he later persuaded me to Chair the Advisory Board of the CUTS Centre for International Trade, Economics & Environment (CUTS CITEE) that CUTS was launching in 1996. Later, in November 1997, for the first time, I attended a meeting organised by the Centre on WTO issues in Geneva and that was when the first meeting of the Advisory Board was held. Over the years, my association has grown in many ways.

CUTS has developed from a modest NGO, addressing mainly domestic consumer issues, to a pre-eminent position as an international NGO, dealing with issues relating to the world trading system and related issues. Under Pradeep's remarkable leadership, and with the assistance of his brilliant and dedicated young associates, CUTS is now on the frontline of research and advocacy on global trade issues.

It also brings to the NGO policy space a distinct and independent developing-country perspective, which does not mirror simply what the rich-country NGOs and governments want done. This is necessary as we have to have our own and independent NGOs instead of relying on the hugely-financed mega NGOs headquartered in the rich countries and whose perspectives are inevitably influenced by the political and cultural constraints that history and geography impose on each of us.

I might add a vignette which reflects on Pradeep's high integrity. Given my forthright views on economic reforms and the benefits that outward orientation brings in shape of both economic prosperity and poverty reduction, I once wondered whether the difficulties that CUTS was facing in getting a grant from a New York based Foundation with a branch in New Delhi were due to my being associated with CUTS.

So, I offered to resign my Chairmanship and to help CUTS informally in all ways, given my great admiration for CUTS and for Pradeep. At which point, Pradeep said: I would rather have you than the grant. In the end, the grant did come through! The strength of CUTS lies in its outreach. In order to conduct effective outreach among the trade community around the world, the organisation has, over the years, strengthened its research and advocacy capability. Without a minimum research capability, it is hard to do outreach: you would not be able to decide wisely what to reach out with!

CUTS has done a commendable job with research on a variety of issues such as child labour and competition policy. Its outreach publications like *Economiquity*, a newsletter of CUTS CITEE, also offer an excellent overview of ongoing WTO and NGO developments in the area of trading system issues. They play an important role in informing the public and in shaping the debate on trade policy in all its dimensions today.

In this context, CUTS' decision to open an office in London is also welcome. There are several instances when NGOs from the rich world are opening centres in the poor countries, but this is the only example of a reverse initiative that I know. And it should help in providing a better dissemination of developing-country perspectives that are often missing sorely from the Western media and Western policymakers' perceptions.