



Alternative Trade Policies from Latin America

A Response to the European Union Free Trade Agenda
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Introduction

In recent years, there has been growing criticism of free-market policies that led to the current international economic crisis. From different ideological viewpoints and different countries, calls to change both domestic policies and the framework of the relationship between countries have been made. A wide range of alternative proposals to the dominant neoliberal regime have come from Latin America; in fact no other part of the world has produced such a range of proposals in so short a time. This paper will look at some of these alternative proposals and contrast them with the dominant free market policies. The paper will first explore the current debate taking place in the region on different development models, especially on what type of insertion in the world economy will best serve Latin America. Secondly, the paper will examine concrete alternative proposals being tested in the region. It concludes by urging the EU to seriously consider these alternative proposals in support of a better future.

A. THE PROCESS OF CHANGE IN A DIVIDED CONTINENT

In the last 13 years, after what has been labelled the lost decade, Latin America has gone through a process of important changes. The so called lost decade was characterised by a massive increase of external debt, hyper-inflation, and financial instability, caused by the terrible debt crisis of the 1980s. "Lending was massive. Between 1975 and 1982 the external debt in Latin America almost quadrupled, from \$45,200 million to \$176,400 million. If short-term borrowing and International Monetary Fund credits are added, in 1982 the total debt was \$333,000 million" (Yerguin and Stalislav, 1998).

In response to this situation, the 1990s were marked with widespread economic adjustment, import liberalisation, labour market flexibility and privatisations. However, in spite of the promises of an improving situation contained in the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) 1998 document "Panorama Social de America Latina" [The Social Situation in Latin America], it was recognised that in 1980, 35% of households were living in poverty; in 1990, this figure increased to 41%, and by 1997 it stabilised at 36%. That is, at the end of the 1990s, and after a period of deep neoliberal reform, poverty was still at the level of 1980s (Brieger, 2002).

A shift to the left

From the heart of numerous countries and their social movements, some alternatives to the predominant neoliberal trade policies have been born, such as the ALBA¹, the new orientation of MERCOSUR, the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR) and, finally, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC).

Indeed, as a reaction to the poverty and inequality caused by years of neoliberal policies in 1999, a process of change was unleashed in Latin America starting with Hugo Chavez becoming president of Venezuela after a period of political instability and social mobilisation. The same year, a serious political crisis in Paraguay took place with the assassination of vice-president Luis María Argaña. In Argentina the political crisis became more acute after 2000, with a series of general strikes. 2002 saw more political and economic instability and riots in both Argentina and Paraguay. In October 2002,

¹ Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas. This was a proposal of Hugo Chavez back in 2001, which became effective in December 2004. It is a political alliance of 9 countries around principles of solidarity and integration, an alliance to favour the people.

Luis Ignacio “Lula” da Silva became president of Brazil. In 2003, Néstor Kirchner became Argentina’s president, and in 2004 Tabaré Ramón Vázquez Rosas became president of Uruguay. The following year, Evo Morales became president of Bolivia, and on 28th April 2006, at a meeting that gave birth to ALBA, he launched a proposal for a People’s Trade Agreement (PTA) in opposition to Free Trade Agreements (FTAs). In April 2008 the Centre-Left Coalition of Paraguay, led by Fernando Lugo, defeated the ruling Partido Colorado at the ballot box.

In Central America the winds of change were also blowing, though with less intensity than further South. In 2006, Daniel Ortega won the elections in Nicaragua, and in January 2007, after a protracted period of political instability and mass mobilisation, Rafael Correa became president of Ecuador. In 2009, a coalition led by the Frente Farabundo Martí won the elections in El Salvador, thus making the journalist Mauricio Funes the new president.

All of these governments emerged out of complex social dynamics and had enormous differences with one another. But all of them also shared some common features such as their links to social movements, their attempts to establish sovereign policies over natural resources, their aim at strengthening the capacity of the state to intervene in the economy, their moves to expand their internal markets in order to raise the living standard of the population, looking after social

rights gained in the past, devoting an important part of their budgets to social spending, their drive to diversify international relations, and their rejection of free trade schemes promoted by the US, the EU, and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

Other countries consolidate a free market approach

On the other hand, another group of countries followed a different course. Colombia, Mexico, Peru and Chile and the majority of Central American countries (Panama, Guatemala, Costa Rica) kept strengthening the predominant outlook of the 1990s based on free market policies. These countries have implemented Free Trade Agreements (FTA), Bilateral Investment Agreements (BIT) and generally speaking, an insertion in the world economy based on the acceptance of the international financial framework led by the WTO, World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF).

The pioneer of this neoliberal block was Mexico which signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 with the US and Canada. In 1997 Mexico finished the negotiation of a FTA with the EU. Many evaluations of these agreements have been done, but it is important to point out that both Mexico and Chile, which signed an FTA with the EU in 2004, are also the countries which remain outside of the alternative integration process in Latin America. The cases of Mexico and Chile are further discussed in Boxes 1 and 2.

BOX 1: THE MEXICAN CASE

The Mexican case was the first of these free trade agreements, and therefore gives us a long period of time to assess its impacts. Thanks to this FTA, the trade deficit of Mexico increased, investments were concentrated (particularly through privatisation and investment in manufacturing and finance) and Mexico was used by EU companies as a platform to enter into the US market. Regional inequalities worsened, as the economic model based on privatisation, de-nationalisation of production, loss of food self-sufficiency and dependence on external capital influx was reinforced. At the same time, Mexico expressed hostility towards integration alternatives based on the idea of Latin American unity. The clause on cooperation on human rights and democracy of the EU-Mexico FTA has proved completely meaningless: social conditions have worsened and violence has increased and become ubiquitous over the last years. No attention has been paid to those promises of the respect of human rights and civil society participation – the latter was absent from the negotiation process and even more absent from the implementation of the agreement, despite promises of “political dialogue”. Similarly, the cooperation programmes have privileged the implementation of the FTA without paying any attention to poverty eradication and environmental protection¹.

¹ For more details on the Mexico’s experience with the agreement with the EU, see Aguirre, 2007; Arroyo, 2007; Aguirre, 2008; Castañeda. 2008; Arroyo, Villarreal et al., 2008.

BOX 2: THE CHILEAN EXPERIENCE

Chile had a similar experience to Mexico, although its starting point was entirely different as it was marked by the violent imposition of open market policies since 1973. Since then, Chile quit the Andean Community (CAN) and started reducing its custom duties steadily, signing FTAs with Canada, Korea, Mexico, and Central America, among others, during the 1990s. The FTA with the EU came into effect in 2003. Even though it had a significant impact on the increase in investment flow, it has to be stated that 90% of its increase in exports is due to mining exports, while GDP grew at a lower rate than the previous decade (Cortés & Flores, 2009). At the same time, Chile is among the 15 countries with the worst income distribution in the world, while the economy is based on the export of primary products and is quite vulnerable to world crises because of its open market orientation and dependency on external financial flows. In the meantime, multinational corporations enormously increased their profits.

B. THE EU VS. REGIONAL INTEGRATION

The EU has been giving increasing importance to its relations with Latin America, as illustrated by the EU-LAC (EU-Latin American and Caribbean) Summits. In May 2012, Chile will be the host for the 7th EU-LAC Summit. During the six previous summits, starting in 1999, an idea of a strategic association between the two regions has been fostered, but the global economic crisis, together with the recent evolution of Latin America and the rest of the world require revisiting the terms of this “association”. The crisis has raised many questions about the “social model” of European integration and has revealed its deep inequality; the fact is that the EU process of integration is on shaky ground, plagued with asymmetries, dominated by financial capital where the upper hand is held by France and Germany over countries with relatively weaker economies. The solution the EU has devised to come out of the crisis is to create even more inequality and to dismantle all of the welfare system which, until recently, was its pride. The slow growth of the EU’s economy, which some experts claim will improve only by 2020, coupled with its loss in the share of global trade, brings into question strategies based on the belief that there is an unlimited availability of capital for export and that markets are on permanent expansion. The drop in the trade flow, the drop of remittances, the loss of dynamism in investment and the decrease in funds available for cooperation, among other factors, has made it all too clear that Latin America and Caribbean countries (LAC) cannot hope to develop out of this type of relationship with the EU.

Latin America has an integration and social development agenda of its own, including focusing on internal development, diversification of international relations, giving priority to South-South relations, and moving beyond a model based on the export of raw materials. The type of insertion in the world economy proposed by the EU, however, consists in the export of raw materials and dependency on speculative capital, thus increasing

the vulnerability of the region in the face of the global crisis.

The LAC agenda has to be strengthened on issues such as autonomous regional integration, modification of productive models beyond extractivism, and more South to South relations. It is impossible to create a new international economic framework with those who want to keep intact the present one.

The EU’s nefarious role in regional integration

The EU has contributed to weakening the regional integration processes in Latin America. The EU’s nefarious role in the region is best demonstrated by its special relationship with Chile and Mexico – the least interested countries in regional integration; its agreement with Central America which prioritises free trade over sub-regional integration agreements (by including Panama in the agreement, for instance, which has not taken part in the integration process); its agreement with the Caribbean countries and its safeguard of its neo-colonial role, while attempting to divide the Caribbean from the rest of the continent; and its support for the fragmentation of the Andean Community (CAN).

C. LATIN AMERICAN ALTERNATIVES

There are a wide range of alternatives which are growing slowly in Latin America. Some have yet to be fully implemented, so their full potential remains to be seen.

During the Free Trade Area for the Americas (FTAA) negotiations a number of proposals were made by the social movements. The most important one of them was the document *An Alternative for the Americas*, from the Hemispheric Social Alliance (HSA)². This document summarises the response of the social movements to the FTAA proposal. It was the product of collective work by social movements and intellectuals, who agreed by consensus to an alternative form of integration. They outlined not only a proposal on how different Latin American states should relate to one another, but most importantly, how a new type of society could look in the region. Its starting point was that trade agreements, export and capital flows do not guarantee development. Therefore, instead of looking for an alternative based on trade agreements, it was proposed to build a new form of integration where international agreements are based on reciprocity, mutual benefit, national sovereignty, the protection of the internal markets and respect for the basic rights of the people. The explicit objective of this document was to outline an alternative proposal for integration, defined as “an integral proposal for an alternative sustainable and equitable development of our societies” (HSA, 2002: 4).

Besides the long term objectives aiming at deep social change and the transformation of the state, immediate demands were incorporated, as well as demands to governments and other daily demands of our people.

The proposals dealt both with issues related to free trade agreements (investment, intellectual property, settlement of disputes, communications, access to markets, agriculture, services and rules of origin) and social issues which are not (gender, sustainability, human rights, education, immigration, role of the state, international finance), and also suggested radically different themes such as the environment and labour. These proposals are further discussed in Box 3.

² The Hemispheric Social Alliance is a grand coalition of social movements, born in 1997 in Belo Horizonte; between 1998 and 2005 it led the struggles against the FTAA through mass protests and the development of alternatives.

BOX 3: SOME PROPOSALS OF THE HEMISPHERIC SOCIAL ALLIANCE

General Principles: Trade and investment should not be ends in themselves, but instruments towards a fair and sustainable form of development. Citizens should have a right to participate in the design, implementation and evaluation of continental social and economic policies. The main goals of these policies should be the promotion of economic sovereignty, social welfare, and the reduction of all forms of inequality.

Human Rights: A common agenda on human rights should be the main body, inclusive of all other continental policies, and should include mechanisms and institutions to guarantee its full implementation. It should promote the broadest possible definition of human rights, covering civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental rights, gender equality and those rights related to indigenous communities and people.

Environment: Governments should subordinate trade and investment to policies prioritising sustainable development and environmental protection. They should also have the capacity to channel investment towards environmentally sustainable activities, reject privatisation of natural resources, and policies that subsidise or promote fossil fuel energy.

Labour: Hemispheric policies should guarantee workers their basic rights, create a fund to compensate workers and communities affected by unemployment and promote the improvement of labour and life standards for workers and their families.

Immigration: Governments should subscribe to international treaties on the rights of migrants, to guarantee labour rights to all workers without discriminating because of their origin, and to punish those who violate these rights; to grant amnesty to all workers without papers in their borders, to demilitarise their borders, to support international subsidies for regions who import large quantities of labour.

The role of the State: Hemispheric policies should not be detrimental to the capacity of a nation-state to look after the social and economic needs of its citizens. Nation-states have a right to maintain the public sector companies and production policies that contribute to their plans of national development. The goal of having national regulation of the private sector should be to guarantee economic activities that promote a fair and sustainable development.

Investment: Investment should lead to high quality employment, sustainable production, and economic stability. Governments should have a right to reject forms of investment that do not contribute to development, particularly speculative capital. Citizens and all government institutions should have a right to demand redress from investors who violate rules of investment.

Finances: The total of the debts of low income countries and the illegitimate debt of middle income countries should be cancelled. Structural adjustment programmes of the World Bank and the IMF have to be abandoned. These institutions should be radically changed or replaced by others. Countries should be allowed to have control over capital flows, and speculation should be regulated through a multiparty mechanism. Governments should have the capacity to adopt their own monetary and financial policies, thus resisting efforts to “dollarise” their economies.

Intellectual Property: Governments should have the capacity to set their own rules on intellectual property that reflect their social, cultural and economic reality. This should include the right to access certain essential drugs and protection of biodiversity, indigenous and traditional knowledge. There should be no patent on any life form.

Agriculture: In order to guarantee food security, countries should have a right to protect or exclude basic staples from trade agreements. Hemispheric policies should promote growing harmonisation of financial assistance for agriculture (such as a percentage of the GDP), protection for agricultural workers and the traditional rights of indigenous people living in their ancestral territory.

Gender: International agreements on women’s rights should be vital to all hemispheric policies. Women should have more opportunities to participate in policy design. Governments should have national laws to guarantee access to facilities for child care and to stop sexual harassment at the workplace.

Services: Basic services such as education, health, water and others should be available to all people in the Hemisphere. Governments should promote national development and prioritise environmental and other concerns over the efficient allocation of resources.

Source: (HSA, 2002: 5-7)

D. ALBA

In November 2000 the first Hemispheric Summit against the FTAA took place in Havana, Cuba, and in December 10th 2001, during the III Summit of Heads of State of the Association of Caribbean States in Margarita Island, Chávez launched the proposal of ALBA, Bolivarian Alternatives for the Americas and the Caribbean. In its initial form, this proposal contained the ideas which the Hemispheric Social Alliance had put forward in opposition to the FTAA (HSA, 2002).

The ALBA was proposed once again in Havana, in December 2004, as an agreement between Cuba and Venezuela, but it was only in April 2006 that it was officially launched as a formal agreement between States, including Bolivia this time. Today, its members also include Nicaragua, Antigua and Barbuda, Dominica, St. Vincent and the Grenadines and Ecuador.

More than a mere integration process, ALBA is a political alliance built on strong ideological grounds and a common attitude towards certain global problems. Its potential lies in its firm decision to preserve its autonomy and its clear rejection of neoliberal policies, giving priority to social welfare. Its weakness lies in its dependence on the political situation in Venezuela, the economic weakness of its ties and its small population. Also its pronounced ideological edge makes it difficult for other countries such as Brazil and Argentina to become members.

A good deal of the importance of ALBA is due to the fact that it highlighted the potential for Latin American integration and in its reference to traditional views in the region, such as Latin American unity, anti-imperialism, defence of national sovereignty, primacy of solidarity, attention towards the welfare of the population, and primacy of politics over economics.

ALBA, in opposition to the dominance of multinational corporations, has put forward a proposal for the creation of joint public companies among its member States, called Greater-Nation Projects. Some of these projects are more advanced than others, such as the ALBA Bank, ALBA Cultural, ALBAMED, the Greater-Nation Project of Literacy and Post-Literacy, the construction of food companies, companies to distribute pharmaceutical products, ALBA shops, social tourism, telecommunication companies, and a cultural fund. There are thus a whole range of areas where initiatives from the people in the region can develop. More than being a mere institutional agreement, it is an umbrella under which a multitude of bilateral agreements take place.

Among its most resounding successes is the literacy campaign, the noticeable improvement of health standards and the progressive development of its own system of payment, the SUCRE currency, and the creation of the ALBA Bank. The Petrocaribe project supplies Venezuelan oil to partner countries at a lower price than in the international market and at favourable payment conditions. One of the ALBA programmes, called "Operation Miracle", gave free ophthalmologic treatment to 2 million people. The ALBA Bank is funding social projects from its fund of over US\$1 billion. The project ALBA SALUD has allocated more than US\$3.5 million to create a drug company and for the distribution of medicine, including a unitary system for the production and distribution of 489 drugs for the most common illnesses of the poor. The Bank has allocated US\$8 million for energy projects of its member countries. There are also plans to eradicate illiteracy from the Caribbean. In 2010, Cuba, Venezuela, Bolivia and Nicaragua created Albatel to strengthen communications in those countries thanks to the satellite Simón Bolívar. US\$50 million has been allocated to agrarian projects to promote food security. During 2010 and 2011 many transactions were carried in a regional currency, the SUCRE, through a complex accounting system it compares the value of each national currency to avoid using dollars in exchange relations between ALBA member countries.

E. THE PEOPLES' TRADE AGREEMENT

While negotiating within the CAN with the EU, Bolivia made a number of alternative proposals, which were later adopted by ALBA and thus the name ALBA-TCP (People's Trade Treaty). These proposals became the core of Morales' People's Trade Agreement and of the concept of "Buen Vivir" (Good Living), both of which have been widely adopted by indigenous communities and social movements alike for the Principles of a People's Trade Agreement (see Box 4).

These proposals are all linked to the rejection of the very foundations of the Western capitalist model; the proposal of "good living" is a critique of consumerism in the search for a way to restore harmony with nature. It is not just a solution to Bolivia or the region's problems, but a response to the several global crises and a rejection of the energy model based on fossil fuels. It is a critique of excessive industrialisation, mass agro-exports, the waste and privatisation of water, biofuels and of genetically modified organisms. It is a defence of peasant

BOX 4: PRINCIPLES OF A PEOPLES' TRADE AGREEMENT

1. Complementary trade based on solidarity and cooperation, in order to achieve life with dignity and good living.
2. Sovereign trade, without conditioning nor interference in internal affairs of each country.
3. Trade in a spirit of complementarity and solidarity between the people, nations and their companies.
4. Protection in areas of production of national interest, integral development for all the people and nations.
5. Treatment in a spirit of solidarity towards the weakest economies.
6. Recognition of the role of sovereign states in the social and economic development of countries and in the regulation of the economy.
7. Harmony between people and nature, respect for the Rights of Mother Earth and promotion of a type of economic development in harmony with nature.
8. Trade and investment should contribute to strengthening the cultural and historical identity of our people.
9. Preferential treatment to communities, localities, cooperatives, social services companies, small and medium companies.
10. To develop food sovereignty and food security among partner countries in order to guarantee food in sufficient quantity and quality for our children.
11. Trade which adjusts tariff policies according to the requirements of developing countries.
12. Basic services to be protected as human rights in trade agreements.
13. Cooperation in order to develop different service industries.
14. Respect and cooperation through public procurement.
15. Joint investment in trade matters can adopt the form of Greater-Nation Projects.
16. To be partners, not bosses.
17. Trade should respect life.
18. The right to development and health should take priority over intellectual and industrial property.
19. Mechanisms leading towards financial and monetary independence should be adopted.
20. The rights of workers and indigenous peoples should be respected.
21. Trade negotiations should be public so the people can have a participatory and leading role in trade.
22. Social accumulation of quality knowledge to be applied in production, in order to satisfy the social needs of the people.
23. Free movement of the people to be regarded as a human right.

Source: Fundamental Principles of the Peoples' Trade Treaty (2009)

Conclusion

economies, of local markets, and of the rights of Mother Earth. Many social movements around the world have adopted these proposals and have incorporated them as part of their project for social change. The water and gas “wars” in Bolivia, the agrarian struggle against biofuels, the struggle for the nationalisation of natural resources are examples of the mass mobilisation around these issues.

The EU’s trade and investment policy, which prioritises investment and access to markets through trade and/or investment agreements is in stark opposition to the ideas and aspirations of those LAC countries who are members of the ALBA. This has encouraged division among the LAC, posing an obstacle to the very regional integration necessary not only to face the current global economic crisis, but also for future economic development.

In LAC, proposals which aim at strengthening economic and social development, protecting natural resources, reinforcing internal markets and promoting regional integration have emerged which essentially propose a radically different type of insertion in the world economy. This requires rethinking about LAC’s international relationships. If the EU wants to support the prevalent tendencies in LAC, it must think twice about the way it is approaching the region.

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