

“Cuidate Bolivia, que alguien te U.S.A.”
[Translation: Take care Bolivia, because someone (U.S.A.) is using you]
-Spray painted on a brick wall in Santa Cruz, Bolivia, 2000

I used to pass this graffitied message every morning. In the Bolivia of just a few years ago, it was reasonable of me to shrug it off and attribute it to a group of radical youths or social deviants. But in the Bolivia we see today, this has grown to become the popular discontent of a whole nation. The majority of Bolivians now want to rally behind an extreme left-wing cocaine grower who would blaspheme the name of Che Guevara before he would export newly discovered natural gas reserves to the U.S. The global community presumes that trade inevitably leads to economic growth and development, but can one really say that Evo Morales's primary goal is to drive his homeland into further poverty? Or is this an extreme case of the same defiance a number of developing (Southern) countries exhibited during the Cancun WTO talks?

We cannot assume that free trade will miraculously lift the world's 60 poorest countries out of poverty without a concentrated effort to erect, as President Chavez suggested recently at the Americas Summit, "a new moral architecture...favoring the weakest." Determining the appropriate amount of attention devoted to trade in the promotion of development is entirely dependent on how effective trade proves to be in improving the quality of life in the South. It is important to deconstruct the current dynamics in order to provide a clear indication of what (or who) is determining policy, and ultimately, why development is not likely to be facilitated in the international trade structure as it exists today.

In the past, international trade has only served to aggravate the ever-burgeoning gap between countries of haves and have-nots, but it has the capacity to alleviate that divide in the future. The construct with which we approach trade has to transform dramatically in order for it to have a significant positive impact on the development of the world's poorest countries. As it currently stands, far more attention needs to be devoted, not solely to bringing more countries into the fold, but specifically to how trade can be a more effective tool to promote development. Development is not an automatic side effect of trade; it has to be placed at the head of the agenda, and at the heart of

trade policy. Even tools with the sole purpose of promoting development—such as foreign aid—are ineffective until a country's priorities and objectives are reoriented around development.

In the current international policy environment, the developed countries and their private sectors virtually always reign victorious. The developed countries' (Northern) governments act as representatives and advocates for their citizens. In contrast, Southern governments are often not representative, and if they are, are not afforded the luxury of being advocates for their people. They are regularly strong-armed by the North into abandoning their original priorities and the interests of their citizens—who continue to suffer as a result of trade policy. CAFTA is an example of how poorer countries are relegated to a significantly weaker negotiating position, and therefore cannot effectively influence the process to the degree that it results in meaningful change.

Furthermore, Northern countries often dictate the rules before any other players have come to the table. The U.S., for example, is exceedingly protective of its agricultural sector while insisting that poor nations, in the words of President Toledo, “play ball in the free trade court.” On another contentious front, the U.S. exiles Cuba to the economic periphery by automatically excluding it from the FTAA and the Americas Summit despite Cuba's generally positive relations with other countries in the region. Trade is probably the most significant forum in which the economic emancipation of the world's disenfranchised can take place, but it is also the weapon that can deal the most lethal blow to those countries already on the global fringe, even to the point of counteracting their development initiative. The exclusion of Cuba from the FTAA, an agreement famous for its flexibility and “menu” approach, is a promotion of systematic marginalization where there could be cooperation--driving the prospect of development further out of the island's grasp. Countries and agencies that are committed to seeing trade foster development should redefine progress as the elimination of extremes in economic inequality. In this role, trade has the potential to effect positive change to an unprecedented extent.

The vast economic disparity between the North and the South is the driver of the discrepancy in power in trade negotiations. As a result, the history and propulsion of trade has resulted in a net flow of wealth to the North. The most that the South can currently accomplish is to band together to

amass enough economic leverage to halt trade talks, as in Cancun. In order to guarantee that every country's voice is heard, extreme disparities between rich and poor must be eliminated. This is not going to happen on its own; a framework must be put in place to maximize the contribution of trade to development.

The first step towards a balanced international economy is to assign a more equitable degree of political clout to all participating members. The international perspective is clearly skewed when it considers the South's ability to merely halt the Cancun talks--not even to get its agenda on the table--a victory. When the South immediately thereafter observes its Northern EU counterparts entitled to an economic arsenal in the "steel wars" with the United States, its "victory" signifies little. Considering that the world has one integrated economic system, it is actually in the best interest of the North to promote the long-term prosperity of its less-developed trade partners. As such, both sides should have the necessary political agency to achieve their respective current trade objectives. An effective yet radical solution at this stage would be to allow all developing countries to erect whatever protectionist trade barriers they deem necessary, and to insist that the North drop theirs. The fact that trade discussions are focused by the North on the other end of the spectrum is an indication that trade is not intended to promote development and only drives either side of the economic gap even further apart.

The three most essential components of development are a unified vision for development; a selfless, wholehearted commitment to that vision; and the presence of moral leadership to execute that vision. When considering trade as a catalyst for development, it is essential for the North to adopt, and for the South to utilize, these instruments. One important lesson I learned from my experience in Bolivia is this: until trust can be established between the North and the South, the development that truly free trade can offer will be hindered by the Southern perception that they are the only ones consistently called on to sacrifice at the negotiating table--securing their position at the other end of the global economic gap--and that globalization is merely a euphemism for letting the North stick more fingers in their pockets.