South-American Integration: 
UNASUR and ALBA - Alternative Integration processes.

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International trade has changed profoundly during the current decade, especially after the failure of the 4th Ministerial Meeting of the World Trade Organization – WTO, held in Cancun - Mexico in 2003. The meeting ended with no real progress, fundamentally due to the “revolution of the poor”, as it was named the attitude of countries that decide to bring negotiations to a halt by not approving the final declaration proposal which in little changed the situation of Northern market access for developing countries, since it maintained the historical high levels of agricultural subsidies specially for the European Union and the United States. From then on there has been very little progress in this area and the Doha Round, which started in 2001, is still paralysed, specially after the G4 failure (USA, EU, India and Brazil) gathered in Potsdam, June 2007, in a meeting that despite all official efforts and appeal did not manage to re-gear the negotiating agenda.

In this context, much has been discussed with regard to the processes of regional integration which are frequently perceived as new or alternative forms for Southern countries and regions to face their insertion into a globalised economy which has deepened even more North/ South inequalities during the international negotiations of the GATT – General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, and also since 1995 with the WTO.

Many of the integration processes of developing national economies or impoverished countries have also emerged as a way of facing bilateral or regional forms of FTAs (Free Trade Agreements) that replicate existing asymmetries and tensions in the global arena, which quite frequently represent WTO plus negotiations.

In Latin America, particularly in the South, important political shifts have taken place, which have provoked the emergence of proposals regarded as “alternatives” to the hegemonic neo-liberal vision in order to deal with economic and the commercial exchange and in consequence with the development of countries and regions.

Hence, based on these electoral changes that provoked new political situations, emerged some alternative proposals in relation to international and regional trade as a necessary tool for countries’ development, although taking into account that this is not the only and main tool to propel development and that, in diverse situations, it can even hinder or harm it.

The South American Union of Nations (UNASUL) and the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas (ALBA) are proposals that emerged opening diverse paths or alternative ways to

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3 “Plus” – name given to agreements that go beyond the comercial liberalization already agreed upon in the WTO.
4 During the 1st South American Energy Summit, which happened on the 16th and 17th of April 2007, in the Margarita Island (Venezuela), the South American governments decided that the South American Community of Nations (SACN)
lead the regional integration of South America with reflections on the neighbouring regions of the Caribbean and Central America. It can be affirmed that both processes have emerged with distinct objectives and this is essential to understand their difference. And although currently their perspectives have been intertwined, their purposes are not identical.

These proposals will be better explained in the following section, so that subsequently we can concentrate on the political and social context from which they have evolved generating consequences for the population and challenging civil society and organized social movements from the region to seriously debate such processes and establish dialogues with these proposals.

For the women’s movement, in particular, there is an evident need to formulate political proposals that permit progress in relation to the overcoming of gender inequalities existent in all the countries of the region. Specially those inequalities linked to the female labour market, deepened by the current export-led productive regional model, as well as resultant from the everyday domestic tasks still commonly carried out by women. Both aspects are strong and impact each other, through the international division of labour and through the economic definitions of the privatisation of public services, erosion of food sovereignty in countries and regions, energy matrix priorities, among others.

The South American Union of Nations - UNASUL

South America possesses great wealth of fertile land, fresh water, immense biodiversity that extends from the Amazon to Patagonia, as well as a great variety of energy sources, as petrol, gas and hydroelectric power, all of which are now added to an extensive agro-fuel production that has come to diversify even more the current energy matrix. All this potential confers the region interesting characteristics for its incorporation into the global market, as a provider of natural resources increasingly more demanded by industrialized countries. Thus, the investments of transnational companies in the region have particularly occurred benefiting from the exportation of such natural resources and the production mainly of raw materials, whilst at the same time their insertion into the global market continues to happen in a traditional manner, subordinated to the needs of developed countries’ markets.

The initial proposal that would eventually evolve into the creation of UNASUL was born during the 1st Summit of South American Presidents held in Brasilia (Brazil) in 2000, sponsored by the neo-liberal government of Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Back then Brazil searched for a way of leading the incorporation process of South America into the globalised market and at the same time extend its companies activities in an accelerated growth rate and with strong expansion interests in the region. However, and despite it being a proposal pushed by the Brazilian Government, the development of this integration process did not count with a full support from the Brazilian diplomacy, which conducted the project with scarce formal or institutional conviction, even though in practice it was facilitated by the vigour of Brazilian companies under great expansion in the region.

would be denominated as South American Nations Union (UNASUL) and that a permanent secretariat would be created in the city of Quito – Ecuador.
The 2nd summit of South American Presidents held in Guayaquil – Ecuador in 2002, gave continuity to the integrating process although without defining a clearer path or its institutionalisation.

However, as from 2003 with the government of Luis Inácio Lula da Silva, the proposal for a South American integration process entered a new phase, strongly modifying its initial purpose, methodology, and its forms of searching for consolidation. For the current government even though this process may still make sense in what it relates to a better insertion into the international market, it also has in itself a regional objective of construction of a market which amplifies national spheres and potentialises the region’s productive capacity, allowing for Brazil to maintain its leadership.

So, at the 3rd Presidents Summit held in Cuzco – Peru, on the 8th of December 2004, the South American Union of Nations is constituted. This is reflected in the Cuzco Declaration, which expressed that: “The presidents of the countries of South America, united in the city of Cuzco, (...) interpreting the aspirations and desires of their peoples in favour of integration, unity, and a common future, have decided to create the South American Union of Nations”.

And it continues, “Political and philosophical thought born within its traditions, in recognizing the pre-eminence of human beings, of their dignity and rights, the plurality of peoples and cultures, have consolidated a shared South American identity and set of common values, such as: democracy, solidarity, human rights, freedom, social justice, respect for territorial integrity, diversity, non-discrimination and the affirmation of its autonomy, the equal sovereignty of its states and the pacific solution for controversies;”

Also Amongst the SACN definitions (current UNASUL) it is to be found the creation of a Latin American parliament. All these definitions have given the bloc a character of political articulation, including an explicit objective of deepening democracy in a region that until today carries open wounds from the military dictatorships of the 70s and 80s.

Hence, analysing the Cuzco Declaration it can be said that the basis of this agreement surpass the economic sphere to take form on a strong political and social emphasis. This has been somehow interpreted as an option of having an agreement based on politics, given the existing difficulties of deepening commercial agreements on attributed tariffs, since the situation of the different countries in relation to commercial liberalisation is quite diverse. In this sense, it is said that the difference of the European Union is that before engaging in a political union it established a process of economic convergence, while UNASUL intended to follow an inverse path with an initial political and territorial predominance that could allow for commercial and economic agreements.

**The UNASUL’s Composition**

The UNASUL is constituted by twelve South American countries, including in its configuration those countries from MERCOSUR (Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay, Uruguay,
with Venezuela in the process of adhesion\(^5\) and those from the Andean Community of Nations – CAN (formed by Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru) and also Chile, Guyana and Surinam.

In turn, between the sub-regional blocs MERCOSUR and CAN, there are several agreements, the oldest and deepest one from a commercial point of view being the MERCOSUR-Bolivia, country that currently sustains a process of incorporation into the Mercosur. Additionally, Ecuador’s new president, Rafael Correa, has also expressed his interest in taking part in the Mercosur. Chile on the other hand, does not form part of any of these blocs but has integration agreements with each country, with the exception of Guyana and Surinam. In fact, these two countries have very limited relationship with the rest and in the contrary maintain deep ties with their ex-colonial rulers, England and Holland respectively, and integrate the Caribbean Community – CARICOM, a Caribbean integration process.

From this web of bilateral and regional negotiations and agreements, it is important to emphasise that the “UNASUL seeks, explicitly, to advance its commercial integration utilising as its base already existing agreements”\(^6\). However, it is necessary to point out that intra-regional trade is still relatively small\(^7\) and the region shows scarce integration, at the same time as it reproduces the type of traditional insertion of its countries into the international market, since the products that circulate around the regions are basically agricultural and mineral. (See appendix, charts 1 and 2).

On the other hand, the exporting profile directed to markets outside the region is strongly oriented towards the USA in the case of CAN, whilst MERCOSUR’s presents greater diversification with regard to the destinations of its exports. This diversity of destination markets has recently grown including China, India and some African and Arabic countries, apart from the traditional European and American markets.

**Main UNASUL themes:**

From the point of view of negotiation themes and agreements, the UNASUL possesses a wide agenda that comprises aspects of political and physical integration of the continent, and its declarations have given emphasis to themes of culture and integration of member country peoples, although they also include economic and commercial themes. However, and despite all the rhetoric, the themes that present more concrete studies and progress are the ones linked to the physical infrastructure of the region and to the debate around the energy matrix of the sub-continent.

Thus, the project denominated as Initiative for the Integration of the South American Regional Infrastructure – IIRSA, presented at the 1st South American Presidents Summit,

\(^5\) Venezuela abandoned SACN in April 2006 and in May 2006 signed the MERCOSUR Adhesion protocol, in which it indicates that this country will gradually be part of the bloc until 2014. However, recently conflicts have emerged in relation to the Venezuelan adhesion, fundamentally due to the interests of right-wing sectors expressed in the Brazilian and Paraguayan Parliaments.

\(^6\) Lalane, Alvaro, Ob cit.

\(^7\) Lalane, A. Ob cit. “In 2004, South American countries bought in the region only 27% of the total of imports and placed 18% of their exports”.
hence disconnected from the UNASUL that was only to be later created, have currently become an extremely important part of this negotiation. This is an investment programme that intends to interlink communication and infrastructure in the region, specially the integration of roads, waterways, ports and airports, proposals that are visibly aimed at transportation of agricultural products and natural resources (wood, minerals, etc) aimed at exportation.

On the other hand the energy matrix of the region is under a heated debate, given the diverging interests between UNASUL’s country members. On one hand, countries that are main producers of petrol and gas as Venezuela, Bolivia and now Ecuador confront specially the Brazilian and also the Argentinean initiatives, countries which are also producers of petrol in a smaller scale but that have recently shown interest in diversifying their energy sources, in particular as an intensive production of sugar cane agro-fuels and also those derived from other products such as, soya, palm, mamona etc.

Both types of fuel (fossil and agro) will still be for a long time part of the energy production of the region, but represent however different matrices and form part of a regional dispute increasingly harsher. Which also include conflicts for the use of hydroelectric energy sources (specially in the cases of the Yaciretá hydroelectric between Paraguay and Argentina and the Itaipú Hydroelectric built between Paraguay and Brazil; and also in the case of Bolivia with Brazil due to the construction of dams in the Madeira River).

The recent 1st South American Energy Summit which happened on the 16th and 17th of April in the Margarita Island – Venezuela, illustrated exactly the extreme priority given to the themes of physical and energy integration within the South American integration process, for which there are concrete proposals, such as the South American Energy Ring, Southern Gas Pipeline, among others.

In fact, the theme of the energy matrix is tangled with that of the region’s productive model, given that it is not about development proposals or alternatives, but of a regional matrix which transnational corporations have been designing. And this is surely the most important element of the current UNASUL dispute. The rupture or not of neo-liberal principles for regional integration is currently a dividing line between governments of the region.

As Sader exposes “The general dividing line that crosses the continent is not between a supposedly “good left” and “evil left”. This is a right-wing vision that seeks to split the progressive arena of the continent to try and co-opt moderate governments. The fundamental dividing line is that which separates those countries which signed free trade agreements with the European Union – Mexico, Chile, apart from the agreements set forth by Colombia and Peru, which jeopardise their future and any possibility of regulating what goes on in the countries, in a radically unequal relation with the main imperial power of the world, and those countries that give privileges to regional integration. Among these are those which, despite this option, maintain the neo-liberal economic model – as it’s the case of Brazil, Argentina, Uruguay – and those that are situated beyond that: Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador. This is a second divisor, in the context of a process of alliances that generates a space not only for integration – centred around the
MERCOSUR -, but also that contributes to the generation of a multi-polar world that weakens the unilateral hegemony of the United States.”

This perspective could possibly allow us to understand the existing political complexity of the region in which the important electoral changes do not exclusively determine the regional games of power or even less define for themselves the path for the dispute of possible “development models” for the region.

**Gender Aspects**

Despite the Cuzco Declaration and official documents referring in general terms to social rights, it does not mention specifically women's rights, and the UNASUL has still not entered with much emphasis into the themes that denominate the “integration of peoples”.

As we have previously signalled the themes that have advanced in this process are relatively few and fitting almost exclusively into the aspects of integration of the productive infrastructure.

Specifically among the social themes, it has been mentioned the issues of migration and its problems as one of the priority aspects to be faced in the debate, including its labour and gender aspects.

The recent creation of a permanent Secretariat for agreements and of specific working groups that have been proposed, including an energy working group, could be regarded as an opportunity for progress in dealing with these specific themes.

On the other hand, it has already been set the debate to define the creation of institutional mechanisms for the participation of civil society in this integration process, which can represent an important opportunity to advance in interesting social movements’ proposals, which are at the moment accepting the challenge of participation.

**Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas - ALBA**

ALBA, project lead by Venezuela, emerges in direct opposition to the FTAA - Free Trade Area of the Americas, and hence has quite distinct characteristics to those of the UNASUL. Thus, since the start, ALBA has a very clear intention to overcome the logic of “free trade” agreements, including aspects of culture, solidarity and complementarities between countries part of the agreement, more so than commercial themes. That is to say

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8 Sader, Emir. “ALBA: from dream to reality” article in Carta Maior, 07/05/2007.
10 Bolivarian refers to the leader of the Venezuelan independency that sought with profound perseverance Latin American integration and dedicated military efforts to guarantee the independence of Venezuela from Spain and collaborated in the independence processes of other countries in America as well as with the political processes of integration between Andean countries.
11 FTAA - Free Trade Area of the Americas was a proposal promoted by the USA in 1994 for the creation of a unified area of trade with the 32 American countries with the exception of Cuba.
that it is not about agreements that seek progressive liberalisation of trade and investments but its objectives are fundamentally political as well as economic.

This proposal can be better understood from a historical analysis of its creation. Initially it was designed as a result of the process of resistance towards the FTAA, lead both by governments of the region, in particular countries of the Mercosur and Venezuela, as well as movements and campaigns organised by hemispheric social movements. The strong tension provoked due to the positioning of Mercosur’s governments, to which the government of Venezuela joined during the negotiations of the FTAA Ministerial Summit held in Miami in 2003, played a part in the paralisation of the FTAA, which was definitely confirmed at the Summit of Mar del Plata in November 2005. At the same time, the change that occurred within the WTO during the Cancun Ministerial in the previous months to the negotiations, created a favourable political frame in South America for the confrontation of USA’s pressures to reach a final agreement in 2005, setting a tone of hope and transformation for the regional political conjuncture.

From then on a need to search for integration alternatives which had different bases to those that guided the FTAA emerged with certain vigour. This political moment that encouraged new paths for negotiation coincided with political changes that configured progressive tendencies, which were later to be consolidated in diverse countries (Argentina, Uruguay and later on Bolivia and Ecuador) and with the strong growth of social movements, specially the continental campaign against the FTAA, which in diverse countries carried out plebiscites, consultations and other forms of social mobilisation against the negotiating process homogenised by the USA.

Within this context, in 2004, the Venezuelan Government\(^\text{12}\), which had been increasingly rehearsing more intense ways of confronting the USA, launches the ALBA proposal. It emerges based on the inspiration and formulation of social movements of resistance to the FTAA, and in particular from contributions from the HSC – Hemispheric Social Alliance. This hemispheric articulation of diverse social movements that had been leading resistance fights in relation to these free trade agreements, elaborated the document “Alternatives for the Americas”. This document and its criticisms towards the commercial liberalisation model, was an inspiration and in this sense had great influence in the initial formulation of ALBA, an initially symbolic part that later became planned within the successive processes and concrete agreements. In this way, ALBA gained form as an agreement of exchange of products and services between the signing countries in a system that prioritises solidarity and cooperation against the market logic.

With these characteristics, it was signed in 2004 the first agreement between ALBA, Venezuela and Cuba. Later on more agreements were signed within the framework of the first one and expanding it, to include the participation of Bolivia (2006). Later on, in January 2007, an agreement was signed with Nicaragua also in the spirit of this proposal.

Other elements that are part of the ALBA agenda are being partially negotiated with diverse countries of the region, meaning outside the agreements that can be characterised as ALBA. A good example is the negotiation of the Bank of the South, proposal propelled

\(^{12}\) The Venezuelan Government left strengthened in its socialist and anti-imperialist positioning in relation to the USA, after the failed attempt of a military coup in 2002.
by the Venezuelan Government inside ALBA, which was initially housed by the Government of Argentina in bilateral cooperation agreements, although not exactly characterised as ALBA. On the other hand, ALBA agreements comprise negotiations with other actors other than those solely from national governments and are extended to cooperation agreements with municipal and state governments, social organisations and movements, among others.

Thus, the diverse forms of the ALBA negotiations illustrate the characteristics of the proposal, that in fact do not seek negotiations within traditional commercial agreements, but rather it is a project of overcoming the neo-liberal model. All from formulations in the economic-commercial field, but also with principles of solidarity between peoples, fortifying the role of national states and prioritising political, social and cultural agreements that strengthen the Latin American and Caribbean integration. The ALBA agreements comprise, among its most important aspects, as well the themes of energy, finance, support for education and health, science and technology and communication.

For so, to understand the reach and objectives of ALBA it is necessary to undergo a political analysis of the Latin American context, given that the proposal underwent changes and now offers new perspectives and concrete projects as a reflection of the changes in political circumstances that occurred. Such new perspectives include the creation of a petrol company (Petrosur), a Latin American TV channel (Telesur) and currently the Bank of the South, counting as well with a number of programmes and missions of support towards literacy programmes, medical ophthalmological assistance, technical support in the areas of energy, agriculture, the military, among others.

However, and despite the fact that the so-called Guiding Principles of ALBA award “crucial importance to human, labour and women’s rights, to the protection of the environment and to physical integration”, gender aspects are not explicitly dealt with in the signed agreements. In fact, it has no references, and neither does the UNASUL texts, regarding measures that have as an objective equality between men and women or that consider the overcoming of gender inequality.

UNASUL and ALBA: Alternative processes of regional integration?

It is hard to answer such question since it can be said that they are - or can be - two very distinct proposals that carry in themselves numerous contradictions, at the same time as they are encompassed in the heart of societies with strong interests for a “development model” to be implemented in the region.

When we talk about processes of integration it can be in reference to the sphere of “free trade” or on the contrary, in relation to processes that intend to straighten ties between countries on different basis to those of commercial liberalisation although not rejecting completely the commercial base, but that does not include other instruments that allow for an improvement of the international insertion of these countries.

This is the type of integration that is referred to when discussing the current South American conjuncture. One that has shown political will to formulate such integration proposals, which are regarded as alternatives to or against the hegemonic process of
deepening of the neo-liberal model propelled by the USA and multilateral organisms since the 80s and 90s in the region.

The agro-exporting model of natural resources and agricultural products of long history in the region has been deepened in the last years by a harsher and more impetuous liberalism. Such exporting matrix, supposedly a promoter of economic growth that would bring the much-awaited development, sustains itself with exportation of natural resources, scarce technology and use of cheap and low qualified labour.

At the same time, measures implemented to open for foreign investments via the liberalisation of capital markets, together with the reduction of the role of the state, set the tone of the 90s. Both processes complemented each other in the well-known formula of privatisation of public services that placed a vast patrimony, built along decades by national states, in the hands of private companies.

This policy alignment taken on by Latin American countries in the last decades, changing the so-called import substitution model, took these economies to a state of deregulation and deterioration.

The route to economic opening and incorporation of recommendations suggested by the Washington Consensus, articulated fundamentally by multilateral financing institutions as the IMF and WB and taken aboard by governments, took national economies to a intensification of their foreign dependency.

The result was the weakening of internal markets, scarce generation of employment together with the emergence of precarious jobs, the loss of national patrimony; processes that were facilitated by the lack of incentives for local industries, with the exception of extensive agriculture and agro-industries for exportation, at the cost of agriculture for internal consumption.

The opening of financial markets and the impulse towards a model of agro-industrial exports or aimed at the extraction of wood and minerals, and in some regions, even aimed at small textile and electronic industries have brought strong impacts to the deterioration of labour, especially female labour, and also environmental degradation.

In this process, transnational companies have had a fundamental role and among them particularly European companies with strong investments in the sectors of mining, fishing, electric power, telecommunications, banking, etc., to mention the most important ones. The liberalisation of services, especially public services of health, education, water distribution and sanitation, energy, etc., many of them tied to European transnationals, has affected and penalised specially women who keep replacing the absence of such services and the lack of public policies from these "minimal" States with more work.

We can thus state that the region finds itself with serious problems that result from years of implementation of neo-liberal policies, with debilitated States and at the same time with countries competing for the exportation of the same agricultural products and natural resources, with insufficient protection and control legislations and with a productive structure resultant from competition instead of based on productive complementation.
It is based on the productive model designed fundamentally by transnational companies, with strong interests therefore in disputing the integration model, that alternative proposals specified by most governments of the region have to be created and implemented upon.

Evidently contradictions and tensions are quite present, including strong differences in the political orientation of governments, some few with conservative tendencies and several with diverse degrees of political will for substantial transformations.

The dispute for the route of regional integration is the crucial point of South America’s current political moment. Nevertheless, the "alternative" character or not of these proposals will have to emerge from the conflicts in dispute when designing the productive regional matrix, which up to the moment continues to be orientated towards the exportation of primary products.

Geopolitical Context

In spite of the differences between the UNASUL and ALBA proposals, both are currently expanding as a way of building alternatives to the idle FTAA, but at the same time trying to go further.

UNASUL is undergoing a process of institutionalisation although for the moment it is rather a declarative project lacking explicit progress, which grows from existing and reasonably consolidated processes like the MERCOSUR and CAN. It is an articulation that negotiates with a wide and supranational character that seeks the global insertion of the region as a bloc and the development of an integrated infrastructure.

In the ALBA sphere, although it is a more specific or limited agreement, agreements have been signed between Cuba and Venezuela, complemented by the TAP - Trade Agreements between Peoples proposed by Bolivia, which proceed very clearly with an aim of endogenous development and with an anti-imperialistic character, based on strong political and ideological consensuses.

We can thus affirm that these projects are not incompatible, they are slowly advancing though evidently "implicitly compete in the game of regional diplomacy ". And this can be pointed out as a political risk that could generate competition, gaps or obstacles for integration. In this sense, an example to be mentioned is the proposal of the Bank of the South, an initiative of the government of Venezuela with support from Argentina and Bolivia that is being questioned in its format by the Brazilian government, in dispute for its regional leadership.

Examples of this kind of competition exercise for the leadership of processes in the region are not few. Thus, from situations like this, it is possible to infer that proposals emerged unilaterally are increasingly creating conflicts and could eventually defy the diplomatic capacity of countries to accept certain “impositions” or “demands” from some over others.

Even, some times, with measures that can be characterised as anti-capitalist.
questioning also personal leaderships, in the traditional patriarchal style, exposing the vices and the democratic fragilities of the region.

"Both have serious limitations that determine their future possibilities. ALBA seems to be limited to the possibilities of international influence of Venezuela and the SACN is limited by strategies of international insertion of it members, which are very dissimilar."\(^{14}\)

Concluding these comparisons, it is interesting to mention that although both integration processes do not explicitly incorporate several specific questions, and especially those of gender, precedents exist to advance in this perspective. We must emphasize that the construction of the UNASUL is based, to a great extent, on existing agreements between Mercosur and CAN, and these already included a historical debate and certain institutionalisms.

In this respect, the South American Community outsets with an accumulated level of gender perspective, specially in Mercosur, which includes the subject matter in several agreements and institutional work groups (Health, Work and Employment, Education, among others) as it also specifically counts with REM (which in Spanish stands for: Specialized Women's Meeting), an official organ that assembles diverse mechanisms of Public Policies for Women (Departments, Councils or other forms) in the countries where this agreement exists, and that includes the participation of civil society. This institutional space was created inside the Mercosur in 1998 by pressure of women's movements in the region and has recently grown and extended the participation of social movements which permanently pressure for a major incorporation of their topics in the agenda of this integration process.

**Social movements and regional integration**

Up to the moment, we have argued that the processes of creation of the UNASUL and ALBA are considered to be alternatives, given that they were formulated and grew from the confrontation, although in distinct levels, against the neo-liberal model, and particularly against the negotiations towards the creation of the FTAA - Free Trade Area of the Americas. Nevertheless, if the resistance towards these negotiations counted with a consistent performance from several governments, in essence it was based on some popular movements that transformed themselves into extremely defined fights and actions to understand the paths taken by the processes of the region.

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It is evident that the resistance struggles that grew in the region provoked even the most
important electoral changes that modified the region’s political panorama with its
progressive tendencies. Popular rejection towards the neo-liberal model in force in the 90s
set the tone to the electoral processes of the current decade in many countries of Latin
America. Hence, it can be said that the struggle against the FTAA’s negotiations, was what
set the political frame for the unification of resistance struggles.

It is important to understand the last few years as a period that will contrast the failure of
the neo-liberal model (despite it still being the model in force) against a time that counts
with numerous forms of resistance, signifying the exercise of new forms of power by social
movements. Nevertheless, these fights were carried out based on a different political
"model" of organization of resistance, which implied in rather new processes.

One of the characteristics of the neo-liberal thought in the last years has been the denial of
politics. Differently, and within the transformations that Latin America currently goes
through, we are now facing a process that could be viewed as a resumption of “politics”
and a renewal of the democratic project, now based on a different comprehension of the
notions of diversity and plurality as the bases and essence of democracy.

Hence we understand that organized social movements, which emerged from diverse
reasons and specific struggles, now appear as extremely important actors in the debate
and definition of possible routes for the political situation and regional integration of the
Americas. “During the last decades Latin America has undergone paradoxical processes of
weakening of democracy and deterioration of the state, parallel to a formidable civil
society dynamics and an organizational renovation of social movements.”

Thus the emergence of new or different kinds of social movements is noticeable, many
which emerged during the conflicts against the implementation of the neo-liberal model,
and specially privatisations that resulted in specific fights. Among them, those related to
water access, construction of dams, electric power supplies, involving not only workers of
these productive sectors but also and specially, citizens, consumers of privatised public
services. The participation of women in these fights was expressed in diverse and new
social protests such as the blocking of streets and roads, occupation of land, defence of
rivers and water access, as it was seen in numerous occasions even leading such processes
in diverse countries of the region. These fights bestowed a new dimension to the
construction of regional democracy and have been penetrating and influencing political
processes in South America.

This is another element that has made of these projects (UNASUL and ALBA) alternative
proposals, since they are being built within a political framework of dispute for a
development paradigm and regional integration model by public actors bearers of plural
and diverse social interests, now actively present.

The scenario created by regional integration in relation to economic and political aspects
has been building in counterpart a response from social movements that trespasses
national borders and has advanced in terms of political articulation in a new way. An

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to the economy and politics from a gender vision”. REPEM/DAWN/IFC. 2006. Uruguay.
example of this is the creation of the HSA - Hemispherical Social Alliance – an articulation that nowadays combines the continuity of resistance fights against “free trade” with the construction of alternatives in a hemispherical scale and that for this reason work with proposals in relation to negotiations in course16.

Women’s movements

The women’s and feminist movements of Latin America are part of these diverse networks and articulations that have recently confronted the diversity of themes that political and economic processes have been presenting, besides all the issues we have faced historically.

Feminist meetings and the experience that came from the preparatory process for the Beijing Conference as well as some global articulations (as the United Nations Conferences or recently the Feminist Dialogues in the framework of the World Social Forum of the Americas), have undoubtedly marked the last decade and defined paths for the integration of women in the region. And also for the advancement of national and regional public policy proposals for women in these countries.

Current processes of regional economic integration are redesigning the meeting spaces and forms of articulation of women and feminists. Thus, proposals were constructed based on different places and experiences including different approaches and problems in topics related to development, poverty and trade. New alliances have also been established, within the continental HSA with the creation of the Women's Committee of the Alliance in the resistance fights against free trade and the neo-liberal agenda.

In this respect, it is also necessary to admit that feminism brought a very important contribution for the construction of this plural vision of democracy, from a new way of "thinking" and "doing" politics, incorporating the idea that diversity is not only a set of differences, but also a value that enriches life and is desirable to have it recognized. In this sense they have qualified the political process of strengthening democracy. Hence, women's organized struggles were fundamental in the amplification of democratic processes in the region and in traditional fights against racism, for education, for health and sexual and reproductive rights, among others. For this reason, women's movements have had noticeable presence in the democratic construction of societies.

Recently however, it has also been playing an important role in the resistance against the neo-liberal model. This can be confirmed by analysing the increasing presence of women in social, union and indigenous movements and in diverse fights for water access, against dams and the privatisation of public services, in a whole range of specific fights that impact the everyday life of paid or unpaid women workers. Hence, women have encouraged proposals and concrete fights, linked to the everyday lives of peoples and that deal with the defence of human rights and in particular collective rights, which form part of the same dispute for an equitable and sustainable development model.

16 www.asc-hsa.org
Nevertheless, women are not yet sufficiently represented in current political processes in the region and their specific issues are not yet adequately reflected in the formal negotiation processes although its visibility has grown. It can be said that although the incorporation of economic themes in the general agenda of feminists and organized women is insipient, consequently their proposals are in the formulation of diverse existing struggles. These struggles are the genuine and adequate framework for the elaboration of proposals and they are being born with specific strength, and each day it is more urgent and decisive to contribute to the articulation of diverse women’s experiences.

**Will these agreements mean real changes?**

Evidently the processes of regional integration are political and in this sense the rhetoric that they present plays an important role as well as the social ideal they mobilize. These agreements carry the load and the ideology of Latin American integration, which counts with centuries of popular adhesion in the region.

At the same time, the processes of economic and social integration are slow and depend on the interests of diverse social sectors, besides the political will of governments and factors even more subjective such as personal leaderships.

Tensions are diverse and - without trying to analyse those deriving from national economic interests or those imposed by global areas and transnational companies - their own contradictions and tensions resultant from diverse visions of the popular sectors, already mean an array of obstacles and challenges to be overcome.

The takeover of progressive or leftwing governments has meant the appearance of new regional integration strategies. Nevertheless, it is necessary “to evaluate the relation that exists between these governments and the people that sustain them, in terms of democracy and participation; as well as in terms of the construction of real alternatives for development. If leftwing governments trust economic growth as a strategy for the overcoming of poverty issues and continue using natural resources in an intensive and non-sustainable way, as instrument to reach this aim, they are not advancing in the construction of alternatives for their countries and for the region. It is a risk for these governments to continue thinking about the environment as a "peripheral" challenge that "prevents development".17

Also for diverse social actors and especially for many parties and sectors of traditional leftwing Latin America, aspects of gender equity in these societies are "peripheral" or "secondary".

How, on the other hand, will the nationalistic perspective be processed, this which is the most wide spread vision among governments of the region, founding of the ideological hegemonic matrix of Latin America leftwing? In which way will this left be able to be the promoter of a supranational process or inter-nationalities, necessarily yielding a portion of national sovereignty?

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17 Integration and Territories. Sustainable Cono Sur. Mimeo. 2007
Added to these tensions and contradictions are issues of identity and indigenous nationalities, with gender inequalities and conflicts within, more visible every day, which makes the issue even more complex.

These are some of the aspects that make integration processes in the region so complex. However, if they will mean real changes for the people, that will depend on the result of the matrix of present and diverse tensions in the current political context.

Nevertheless, we can be categorical in affirming that it is fundamental to deepen initiatives and articulations that seek “people’s integration”, inside and outside the official processes, for the construction of rights-based, sustainable and equitable alternatives. These are processes under construction that should encourage initiatives such as these, which show that there are alternatives confronting the exhaustion of the neo-liberal model.

APPENDIX

Chart 1- Total and per capita Gross National Product of SACN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>GNP in million U$S</th>
<th>GNP as % of total</th>
<th>GNP per capita (PPP)</th>
<th>GNP per capita in relation to average CASA</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>153,014</td>
<td>13,0</td>
<td>12,468</td>
<td>160,4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>8,421</td>
<td>0,7</td>
<td>2,710</td>
<td>34,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>593,091</td>
<td>50,4</td>
<td>8,049</td>
<td>103,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>94,125</td>
<td>8,0</td>
<td>10,904</td>
<td>140,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>95,666</td>
<td>8,1</td>
<td>6,962</td>
<td>89,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>30,015</td>
<td>2,6</td>
<td>4,083</td>
<td>52,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guyana</td>
<td>778</td>
<td>0,1</td>
<td>4,575</td>
<td>58,9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>7,029</td>
<td>0,6</td>
<td>4,553</td>
<td>58,6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>67,233</td>
<td>5,7</td>
<td>5,556</td>
<td>71,5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Surinam</td>
<td>1,105</td>
<td>0,1</td>
<td>5,539</td>
<td>71,3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>13,215</td>
<td>1,1</td>
<td>9,107</td>
<td>117,2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela</td>
<td>111,958</td>
<td>9,5</td>
<td>5,571</td>
<td>71,7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SACN</td>
<td>1,175,670</td>
<td>100,0</td>
<td>7,772</td>
<td>100,0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

SOURCE: South America and the International Economy. Commercial convergence of South American countries towards the South American Community of Nations. Document prepared by the Secretariat of Organizations of Regional Integration within the framework of the Action Program.

Chart 2: Trade Matrix intra y extra regional of SACN

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year 2004 (in million dollars)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Importer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

15
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>World</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Argentina</td>
<td>6.878</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brazil</td>
<td>9.065</td>
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<tr>
<td>Paraguay</td>
<td>694</td>
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<tr>
<td>Uruguay</td>
<td>811</td>
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<tr>
<td>MERCOSUR</td>
<td>17.447</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bolivia</td>
<td>876</td>
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<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>196</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecuador</td>
<td>139</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peru</td>
<td>393</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venezuela*</td>
<td>264</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CAN</td>
<td>1.867</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chile</td>
<td>1.891</td>
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<tr>
<td>SACN</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rest of the</td>
<td>69.648</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>World</td>
<td>90.853</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As the year of information is 2004, Venezuela still figures as a member of CAN.

SOURCE: South America and the International Economy. Commercial convergence of South American countries towards the South American Community of Nations. Document made by the Secretariats of Organisms of Regional Integration within the framework of the Action Program. It was not counted on data of Guyana and Surinam.