

Is ALBA a New Model of Integration? Reflections on the CARICOM Experience

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This paper is a step towards evaluating the claims of ALBA to be a new model of integration that is superior to neoliberal integration schemes. It draws lessons from the experience of three Caribbean countries which at one and the same time are members of the Caribbean Community (CARICOM); participate in an Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the European Union and are members of ALBA. Simultaneous participation in the three schemes allows identification of the key differences between competing models of integration and evaluation of the advantages and disadvantages of each. This serves to explore issues including the compatibility of simultaneous membership, Special and Differential Treatment, ALBA as 'alternative alignment' vs. 'complementary relationship', opportunistic vs. ideological motivation in participation, asymmetrical vs. non-reciprocal solidarity in cooperation; and sustainability. There are some tentative conclusions and suggestions for further research.

1. ALBA vs. neoliberal integration

1.1 Neoliberal integration schemes

Neoliberal integration schemes provide for reciprocal free trade, the free movement of capital; and binding government policies in 'trade-related' areas including the treatment of investment and services, intellectual property protection and the opening of government procurement markets. Their purpose is to entrench the rights of investors and exporters by removing barriers to trade and investment and prohibiting government policies that discriminate in favour of local firms and local investors. Neoclassical trade theory holds that this will lead to better allocation of resources along the lines of country comparative advantage, more efficient production, more investment, higher employment, higher economic growth and greater poverty reduction. In Latin America and the Caribbean, neoliberal integration schemes have generally taken the form of 'Open Regionalism'. This

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means that trade and investment barriers between the region and the rest of the world are lowered at the same time as they are eliminated within the region (Bulmer-Thomas, 2001). Neoliberal integration schemes and Open Regionalism are closely associated with globalisation and in particular with WTO trade rules.

These schemes have been criticised from a developmental standpoint. The theory's predictions of benign effects only follow under highly restrictive and unrealistic assumptions. Market integration by itself is unlikely to accelerate development among small, undiversified economies with few products to trade among themselves. Between developed and developing economies, neoliberal integration may accentuate, rather than attenuate, differences in development; for the richer partners have a far superior ability to compete and trade; and governments of the poorer partners are deprived of 'development policy space' (Khor 2008). In the EU, it has been necessary to pump huge public resources into the poorer members to modernise their infrastructure and make them more attractive to investors². In Mexico under NAFTA; peasant agriculture has been decimated by cheap imports of subsidised agricultural commodities from the United States; manufacturing has been transformed into a supplier of low-wage low-domestic value added goods to the U.S.; and social and inter-regional disparities have widened³. Similar criticisms are made of other bilateral North-South FTAs in Latin America⁴.

1.2 The CARICOM Single Market and Economy—CSME

The Caribbean Community (CARICOM), launched in 1973, has four integration 'pillars': economic integration, foreign policy coordination, functional cooperation and security. Economic integration consists of the creation of the CARICOM Single Market and Economy (CSME), a neoliberal Open Regionalism integration scheme. The goal was first adopted in 1989 but the CSME is still far from completed. The CARICOM Single Market was formally inaugurated in 2006, but some elements are still not yet in place; and there has been but little progress towards implementing the CARICOM Single Economy (Girvan 2010). This requires a great deal of work in the harmonisation of policies, laws, institutions and regulations. Implementation shortfalls are often attributed to the absence of a supranational element in CARICOM governance. The governments of all 12 CSME participating countries are

² The EU's 'cohesion policy' absorbs roughly one-third of the Community budget. It has been held to be partly responsible for the relatively favourable economic performance of the poorer members of the EU-15 in the 1990s (Oktayer 2007:120-126)

³ Zepeda et. All 2009: 5-16.

⁴For a review, see Trujillo 2007

required to agree on the entire range of measures to be adopted; following which each government is responsible for implementation. This is a formidable task which strains the human and institutional capacities of most member states; which may also be constrained by the perception that there are limited economic benefits to be derived from the arrangement. The CARICOM reality is that intra-regional trade is dominated by a single country—energy-rich Trinidad and Tobago with its strong manufacturing base. The majority of member countries have very little to export to one another and their exports consist mainly of primary products, tourism and international financial services oriented to international markets. Indeed, it has been shown that market integration per se is likely to bring few benefits in regional groupings that consisting of economies that are small and undiversified and have competitive, rather than complementary, structures of production and trade (Brewster and Thomas 1967, Mesquito and Mendoza 2007). The neoliberal model of integration is therefore of limited relevance as a strategy of development for CARICOM.

1.3 The Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) between CARIFORUM and the European Union

In 2008 the 14 CARICOM states together with the Dominican Republic signed an EPA with the EU. 90 percent of all merchandise trade with the EU will be freed over a 25-year period--most within 15 years--with a raft of additional liberalisation and investor-friendly measures. Liberalisation is extended to services, investment and capital movements; policies will be disciplined, 'national treatment'⁵ is entrenched with certain limited exceptions, intellectual property is extended beyond the TRIPS agreement in the WTO, government procurement is subject to strict transparency and bidding procedures, competition policy is included. The Most Favoured Nation Clause entitles the EU to demand the same trade concessions from Caribbean governments as they may give to China, India, MERCOSUR and other large countries.

Hence the EPA results in a major restriction on the 'policy space' of CARICOM governments—their room to pursue policies that favour local industries and local enterprises and to develop South-South cooperation. It represents a model of 'asymmetrical neoliberal integration'—reciprocal trade and investment liberalisation is applied to partners of highly unequal size and levels of development. In relation to CARIFORUM (grouping consisting of CARICOM and the Dominican Republic) the EU's population is 20 times greater; its economy is 88 times larger and its average

⁵ I.e. the obligation to treat foreign enterprises and suppliers no less favourably than local enterprises and suppliers.

per capita income is 4.5 times higher. EU firms will have an enormously superior capacity to compete and invest relative to Caribbean firms. While it is too early to assess the economic results of the agreement; it is evident that the private sector of most or all of the CARICOM countries are thoroughly unprepared to take advantage of the new export opportunities that the agreement supposedly makes available; and that the majority of Caribbean governments are not equipped with the institutional capacity and the financial resources to implement its onerous obligations. The funds available from Europe to assist with EPA implementation and economic adjustment and diversification are woefully inadequate⁶. EDF funding is also widely regarded as difficult to access, cumbersome to administer, and slow-disbursing. In short, the EPA has been criticised by academics and civil society as being an unfair and unbalanced agreement; which was signed under duress, and with unrealistic assessments of the likely benefits⁷.

1.4 ALBA

The *Alianza Bolivariana para los Pueblos de Nuestra América* (Bolivarian Alliance for the Peoples of Our America, ALBA) was launched in 2004 as an alternative model of integration to one based on free trade and other neoliberal principles⁸. The trade component, *Tratado de Comercio de los Pueblos* (Trade Agreement of the Peoples) was formally added in 2006. ALBA's membership now includes eight Latin American and Caribbean countries⁹ with a combined population of approximately 70 million and a GDP of \$465 billion and in 2011 became 'the second major bloc of countries in South America' (South Journal 2011).

ALBA's emergence has to be seen in the context of developments in the political economy of the Latin American and Caribbean region: disenchantment with the Washington Consensus; emergence of social movements opposed to neoliberal

⁶ EU 165 million for 2008-2013 has been approved under the regional allocation of the European Development Fund which is part of the Cotonou Agreement. This amount is small when spread over 15 countries over a five-year period; and it is well below the amount which was estimated to be necessary for this purpose, which was close to EU 1 billion. National allocations from the EDF have also been made; but this is merely a continuation of national programmes that pre-dates the EPA.

⁷ For a synopsis of the critiques, see Girvan (2009).

⁸ See ALBA 2004. Originally the "A" in the acronym stood for *Alternativa*, denoting alternative to the U.S.-sponsored FTAA; this was changed after collapse of the FTAA negotiations.

⁹ Founding countries Cuba and Venezuela (2004); Bolivia (2006), Nicaragua (2007), Dominica (2008), Ecuador (2009), Antigua and Barbuda (2009) and St Vincent and the Grenadines (2009). Honduras became a member in 2008 but withdrew after the coup d'état against President Manuel Zelaya in 2009.

globalisation; and election of governments of the moderate or radical left in several countries. Negotiations to create the U.S.-sponsored Free Trade Agreement of the Americas collapsed in 2005. Formation of the Union of South American States (UNASUR) in 2003 and of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CLACS) in 2010 were other signals of the consolidation of LAC unity and intention to chart a course independent of Washington.

ALBA was founded by Cuba and Venezuela and was originally put forward as the 'Bolivarian Alternative' to the FTAA. With the failure of the FTAA negotiations; it continues to be promoted as a model of integration based on principles of cooperation, solidarity, complementarity and sovereignty. ALBA's name signals its mission to be an alliance of people to fulfil the dreams of Bolivar and Marti for a united and sovereign Latin America.

Key elements of the ALBA integration model had already been applied in the bilateral cooperation programmes of its founding members. Cuban social cooperation with scores of developing countries dates back to the 1960s. In 2008, under Cuban social cooperation programmes 30,000 doctors were providing free services to the poor throughout Latin America and the Caribbean; 70,000 students were receiving training as health professionals; over two million had been made literate and 600,000 people had had 'had their sight restored via Operation Miracle and free surgical operations'(Diaz 2007). In 2000 Venezuela's President Chavez had announced the *Acuerdo De Cooperacion Energetica De Caracas*, to provide credit to Caribbean countries to offset part of the cost of purchases of Venezuelan oil. *Petrocaribe* was established in 2005 to manage this programme, which now includes 16 countries of the Greater Caribbean. 25-year, 1 percent credits are used within the importing country to finance state-owned oil refineries, other economic infrastructure, and social projects. By 2008 Petrocaribe had become by far the largest provider of concessionary finance in absolute terms to the recipient countries; exceeding the flows of development assistance from the EU, USAID, the IADB and the World Bank (Girvan 2008).

These were the foundational programmes of ALBA. They were examples of practical applications of the principles which were now to be formalised in a plurilateral framework and was presented as a new integration model.

Box 1. 22 Differences between ALBA-TCP and Neoliberal integration schemes

1. Key principles are “**complementarity**, as an alternative to competition; **solidarity** as opposed to domination; **cooperation** as a replacement for exploitation; and **respect for sovereignty** rather than corporate rule”.
 2. Financial cooperation is an integral and major element
 3. Social cooperation is an integral and major element.
 4. ‘A la carte’ participation and ‘negotiated flexibility’ rather than Single Undertaking. Each member accedes on individually negotiated terms and its participation in trade and ALBA projects is negotiated on a case-by-case basis.
 5. Trade can be a means of settlement of financial and/or social cooperation
 6. Asymmetrical and non-reciprocal market access in favour of smaller and/or weaker member economies
 7. Tariff protection of infant industries allowed
 8. Provision for counter-trade arrangements; i.e. direct product exchanges.
 9. Creation of the ‘sucre’, an accounting currency unit used to value bilateral and multilateral trade among the members and to settle balances. In effect, this permits multilateral counter-trade. Participation is not mandatory for members.
 10. Recognition of the role of the state in development and in economic regulation
 11. Public procurement as an instrument of national economic development
 12. Protection of citizens’ rights to basic social services (i.e. from privatisation and commercialisation)
 13. Protection of labour rights
 14. Protection of the rights of indigenous people
 15. Protection of ‘Mother Earth’ (the environment)
 16. Rights to development and health take precedence over intellectual and industrial property rights
 17. Privileging of production for the national market and satisfaction of the needs of the population
 18. Privileging of communal and cooperative enterprises and of small and medium enterprises
 19. Submission of foreign investors to national law in Dispute Resolution
 20. Rapid responsiveness and creativity in developing new programmes; e.g. ALBA Food Security Initiative and ALBA Haiti Earthquake Relief Fund
 21. Formation of Grandnational Enterprises— multi-country state-to-state joint ventures for dedicated purposes in several areas.
 22. Political solidarity on threats to member states (such as the U.S. embargo on Cuba, the Honduras coup of 2009, the Colombia-U.S. bases agreement of 2009, and the attempted coup in Ecuador in 2010). Member countries are free to abstain or reserve their position.
- Source:* author, based on ALBA documents and agreements and Principles of TCP

The new model addresses most of the criticisms made of neoliberal integration schemes and the tenets of the Washington Consensus. This is highlighted by the significant differences between the two, shown in Box 1. Noteworthy are those relating to the role of the state and to policy space. Tariff protection for infant industries is allowed; public procurement as a tool of development is recognised; intellectual property rights are subordinated to the right to development and health; basic social services are, by implication, insulated from privatisation and commercialisation; special treatment for indigenous enterprises is assured; there will be concessionary treatment of smaller and weaker economies; and the rights of labour and indigenous peoples are guaranteed; among others. Further, financial and social cooperation are *integral parts* of the ALBA scheme and not add-ons to a relationship driven by trade liberalisation. Finally, the scope for 'a la carte' participation, in contrast to the requirement of a Single Undertaking, allows individual countries the flexibility to negotiate the terms of their participation which are appropriate to their idiosyncrasies.

The caveat is that these guiding principles shown are in the nature of political statements rather than embodied in legally binding obligations. Much depends on how, and how far, they are put into practice. Furthermore, there will be varied interpretations of what 'putting into practice' actually means in the application of particular principles. In this regard, the experience of CARICOM ALBA countries is instructive.

Box 2: Dominica and ALBA

Dominica has participated in PetroCaribe since 2005 and became a member of ALBA in 2008 after several years of closer social and economic cooperation with Venezuela. The government reports total financial assistance of EC\$119 million* for 26 projects in housing, infrastructure, security and agriculture; benefitting over 1,000 families and 34,000 individuals; the latter figure being approximately 45 percent of the national population. These projects are a central element in the government's *Medium-Term Growth and Social Protection Strategy (GSPS)* (2006) which aims to achieve poverty reduction and social protection through pro-poor growth (<http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2006/cr06290.pdf>). The government reports that findings from a recent Country Poverty Assessment are that the level of poverty has fallen from 39% in 2003 to 28.8% in 2009; and absolute poverty or indigence fell from 10% in 2003 to 3.1% in 2009. The reduction in poverty is mainly attributed to attempts by the government to stabilize the economy, contain the debt and expand social and physical infrastructure.

ALBA/PetroCaribe/Venezuela Funded Projects in Dominica, as of May 2011

AREA	NO PROJECTS	FINANCIAL SUPPORT (EC\$ M)*	SOURCES	BENEFITS
Infrastructure: roads, sea defence, airport and other	7	57.25	ALBA Caribe Fund (35.25)	Transport safety access International air access 26,000 beneficiaries
Low income housing	10	41.3	ALBA Caribe Fund (\$40.2 M)	1,011 low and lower-middle income families, including public servants and the indigenous Carib community
Vendors arcade for SMEs catering to tourists	1	14.0	ALBA Caribe Fund	Crafts persons and craft vendors
Security: Police Stations, Marine Patrol, Crime Lab., etc	6	9.0	ALBA Caribe Fund	8,500 persons directly; enhanced national security
Assistance to Disadvantaged Persons	1	2.5	ALBA Caribe Fund	
Pork, Poultry, Fishing	1	N.A.		
Total	26	119.358		

* EC\$2.70 = US\$1.00. Source: Based on information supplied from Government of Dominica

Box 3. Antigua and Barbuda: ALBA and Petrocaribe Financial Assistance

Antigua and Barbuda

ALBA

- i. Soft loan of US\$50 Million in August 2009 to help meet the government's budget deficit.
- ii. Grant from the ALBA Fund of US\$7.5 Million in 2006 utilized to refurbish the V.C. Bird International Airport in preparation for Cricket World Cup.
- iii. Grant from the ALBA Fund of US\$8 Million in 2008 to finance a major water infrastructure project.

Petrocaribe

Petrocaribe credits amount to approximately US\$57 Million for 2007-2010. Part of the funds is invested to repay PDVSA when the debts fall due and the remainder is used to support social projects. Projects benefitting so far are listed below.

- i. EC\$9 Million* under the Senior Citizens Utility Subsidy Programme, by which pensioners receive EC\$100/month to assist with electricity, water and land line telephone bills.
- ii. EC\$6 Million in infrastructural work at the Sir Vivian Richards Cricket Stadium
- iii. EC\$3.8 Million through the People's Benefit Programme, by which persons with disabilities and economically disadvantaged receive \$215 per month to help purchase food and other personal items from designated retail outlets.
- iv. EC\$1.8 Million for construction work on the new public library
- v. EC\$1 Million in relief supplies following the passage of Hurricane Omar
- vi. EC\$1 Million to help repair the airport in Barbuda
- vii. EC\$300,000 to rehabilitate the King George V Grounds
- viii. EC\$50,000 to support the agro processing industry for acquisition of a solar dryer
- ix. EC\$25,000 to transport cooking gas to Barbuda, to help to offset the price differential for consumers in Barbuda compared to Antigua.

Social cooperation

In 2011 Antigua and Barbuda had 125 students on scholarship in Cuba.

Sources: Written responses to author's questions from officials in Antigua and Barbuda in December 2010 and January 2011; ALBA documents; published sources.

Box 4. St Vincent and the Grenadines: ALBA and Petrocaribe Financial Support

St Vincent and the Grenadines

ALBA Bank has approved a loan of US\$50 million

- i. US\$20 million for construction of a new international airport
- ii. US\$30 million for budget support to the government

Petrocaribe credits up to the end of November, 2010 amounted to EC \$29.7 million.

- i. EC\$28.0 million of provided as loan financing to the state-owned International Airport Development Company (IADC) for the construction of the new international airport. Repayments by the IADC to the ALBA Board will be recycled into financing for social projects.
- ii. LPG Filling Plant and the Fuel Storage Plant

Government of Venezuela Grant funding

- i. US\$10.275 million to finance housing for low-income or no-income beneficiaries.
- ii. EC\$1.85 million for rural development projects in the areas of eco-tourism, sporting facilities and fishing.
- iii. EC\$27,000 for Community-based anti-crime initiative ("Pan¹ against crime")
- v. EC\$16,000 for Carnival Development Cooperation

Additional financial assistance

- i. Loan of EC\$400,000 for the Bridges Roads and General Services Authority (BRAGSA)
- ii. Loan of EC\$222,000 for National Security

Note: EC\$2.70 = US\$1.00

Sources: Written responses to author's questions from officials in Antigua and Barbuda in December 2010 and January 2011; PetroCaribe

2. ALBA and CARICOM

2.1 Benefits of ALBA to CARICOM member states

It should be noted that it is possible to access many of the benefits of ALBA without having formal membership. Ten of the 17 Caribbean countries that benefit from Petrocaribe credits are non-members of ALBA. Non-members access loans from the ALBA Caribe Fund, from the ALBA Bank and from the ALBA Food Security Fund; all three are financed by PetroCaribe¹⁰. CARICOM non-ALBA beneficiaries of these programmes includes Belize, Grenada, Guyana, Haiti, Jamaica, Suriname and St Kitts and Nevis. To that extent these countries have also experienced features of the new model of integration.

Membership of ALBA implies a higher level of political and economic participation. Member countries declare their commitment to ALBA's political and economic objectives; they participate in summits and in meetings of other ALBA bodies. They join in making statements on political and other issues; with the right to abstain or reserve their position. They make trade agreements among themselves and participate in projects involving state-to-state cooperation such as Grandnational Enterprises and the ALBA currency; albeit on a voluntary basis. There is also some evidence that membership is associated with a higher level of financial cooperation.

The Commonwealth of Dominica joined ALBA in 2008; followed by Antigua and Barbuda and St Vincent and the Grenadines, both of which joined in 2009¹¹. All three are small island states with an average population of just under 90,000. They are full members of CARICOM and of the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (O.E.C.S.). This author presented written questions to officials of the three soliciting information on the benefits of membership, compatibility with CARICOM obligations and problem areas in the relationship. Petrocaribe support was included in the scope of the information solicited¹². Answers were received from all three; where appropriate, this was supplemented with information from published sources. Summaries of the reported are provided in Boxes 2, 3 and 4.

¹⁰ In September 2010 it was reported that the ALBA Caribbean Fund had allocated \$179 M to 85 projects in 11 countries in the region; and the ALBA Foods Initiative had provided \$24 M for 12 agribusiness proposals in 9 countries. Source: Petrocaribe (2010) The ALBA Bank also made a loan of \$40 M to St Kitts and Nevis, a non-member of ALBA, in 2009. Source Petrocaribe (2009).

¹¹ See Statements of Accession, ALBA 2008, 2009a,b,c,; Antigua and Barbuda 2009.

¹² St Vincent and the Grenadines also provided information on direct bilateral funding from the government of Venezuela as part of the 'ALBA package'.

Financial cooperation is reported as the main benefit. ALBA/Petrocaribe provides public sector financing that, compared with conventional sources, is (i) low-conditionality and host-country determined, (ii) low-interest and (iii) quick-disbursing. Petrocaribe credits, direct bilateral financing from the government of Venezuela and funding from the ALBA Bank are generally seen as a package. This is logical, since all three are from the same source, respond to the principle of solidarity and are sometimes linked as to the uses to which the money is put.

The largest amounts provided have been for direct budgetary support. Soft loans for this purpose were made of US\$50 million to Antigua and Barbuda and US\$30 million to St Vincent and the Grenadines; both made in 2009 on their accession to ALBA. At that time both countries were experiencing grave fiscal difficulties as a result of falling receipts from exports, tourism and remittances; due to the world economic slowdown.

Second is infrastructure. The ALBA Caribbean Fund is a major funder of Dominica's public sector infrastructural programme; which directly benefits some 45 percent of the national population and is a central element in the country's poverty reduction and social protection strategy (Box 2). Construction of an international airport in Vincent and the Grenadines has been supported by a soft loan of US\$20 million from the ALBA Bank and US\$10 million from Petrocaribe credits. This is of strategic importance; in that the country has been unable to fully develop its tourism industry due to the absence of an international airport capable of handling large-body jet aircraft and has been unable to secure financing for this from the normal sources¹³. Other infrastructure projects supported include the Antigua international airport and the small airport on the island of Barbuda; water, cricket stadium, public library and hurricane reconstruction in Antigua and Barbuda; and roads and bridges in St Vincent and the Grenadines.

High social impact projects figure prominently. Dominica's 'Housing Revolution' programme supported by the ALBA Caribbean Fund benefits some 1,011 low-income families, or about 4.5 percent of the number of households¹⁴. In Antigua and Barbuda poor and vulnerable groups benefit from the Senior Citizens Utility Subsidy Programme, the People's Benefit Programme, provision of post-hurricane

¹³ Multilateral agencies have considered the project to be economically unfeasible and bilateral donors have considered it to be too expensive for them to consider. St Vincent and the Grenadines' most recent efforts to secure financing from the Caribbean Development Bank were unsuccessful. The ALBA/Petrocaribe funding has therefore enabled the country to finance a project considered strategic to its economic development (CMC 2011).

¹⁴ Total number of households reported in the 2005 Census was 22,359 (Betti, Gianni; Francesca Ballini, Laura Neri; *The Survey of Living Conditions in the Commonwealth of Dominica: a revision* . p. 5.
http://www.unisi.it/ricerca/dip/dmq/working%20paper/DMQ_WP_65.pdf (Accessed 16 May 2011)

relief supplies, acquisition of a solar dryer for the agro processing industry, and subsidies for transport of cooking gas to the island of Barbuda. In St Vincent and the Grenadines, there is a major project to finance housing for low-income or no-income beneficiaries, and support for rural development projects in eco-tourism, sport facilities and fishing and for a Community-based anti-crime initiative.

The scale and terms of ALBA finance are highly advantageous for countries that face the fourfold pressures of high indebtedness, rising energy prices, widening fiscal deficits and high-conditionality access to international lending agencies. One official reports:

The disbursement requirements for ALBA are considerably less stringent/onerous than those associated with multilateral lending agencies, donors or development banks. Funds are typically disbursed in a lump sum or in two tranches.. in all projects supported (we are the ones who) identified the projects and requested funding... there has been no interference/influence in terms of the use to which funds are put¹⁵.

Another official states:

..The process for getting a loan from the Alba Bank is shorter and the requirements less. ... to get a US\$4 million loan from (the CARICOM Development Fund) took over a year to get approved while consultants were contracted to report on (the viability of) the project. Resources from the EU have stringent disbursement requirements and government agencies sometimes don't have the manpower to effectively respond to those requirements and resources are lost. With loans from the ALBA bank, the borrowing country has full determination of use. On grant resources, there is a joint approval process¹⁶.

2.2 ALBA and 'Special and Differential Treatment '

Of particular interest is the way in which ALBA has treated the issue of special treatment for these small economies. In the literature on international trade, this

¹⁵ Written response to this author dated 12 December 2010.

¹⁶ Written response to this author dated 29 December 2010.

issue is treated under the rubric of 'Special and Differential Treatment' (SDT) for developing countries or for particular groups of developing countries. This issue has become highly contentious. To summarise, SDT had been enshrined in the GATT agreement that preceded the WTO; under provisions that allowed developing countries to use tariff protection and other policies to promote development of their agriculture and their manufacturing industries. However, the WTO agreement of 1994 substantially diluted SDT in the name of reciprocity and free trade. Except for the poorest countries, developing countries were required to bring their tariffs down over the course of a transition period. Legally binding obligations on the developed countries to help developing countries were replaced, for the most part, with so-called 'best endeavour' undertakings (South Centre, 2002). Although a 'Small Vulnerable Economies' (SVEs) group has been formed in the WTO, little success has been registered in securing acceptance of such a category of members deserving of special treatment under WTO rules; such as exceptions and derogations from tariff liberalisation and extended periods of implementation¹⁷.

ALBA documents do not use the term SDT itself; but the application of ALBA principles in agreements has had the effect of operationalising SDT for the smaller economies. This is because of the absence a Single Undertaking and of reciprocity obligations; the inclusion of financial and social cooperation; and the considerable latitude individual countries have in negotiating the terms of participation. The neoliberal critique of these practices is that they compromise the kind of predictability and stability of the policy environment that are required for the efficient functioning of market forces and to maintain investor confidence. In the neoliberal model, predictability and reciprocity go together and operate to restrict policy space—the room for governments to employ pro-development policies. The arguments in their favour lose force where the state plays a leading role in development; driving investment, promoting Small and Medium Enterprises (SMEs), cooperatives and community enterprises organising foreign trade.

Another concern is that such agreements are excessively politicised. They may be inordinately influenced by the state of personal relations among leaders. They are also dependent on the willingness of the stronger country not to exploit a situation of asymmetrical power. Such concerns are not peculiar to ALBA; they also exist in relation to neoliberal trade agreements among unequal partners¹⁸. So far there have been no complaints of Venezuela turning its superior position in size and resources to its advantage in its relations with other ALBA members, including the CARICOM ALBA members. There is some concern, however, that decision-making

¹⁷ Proposals of this kind for treatment of SVEs have not so far been accepted. See WTO 2002, 2004.

¹⁸ For example in the bilateral and plurilateral FTAs negotiated between the US and the EU respectively with developing countries; where the latter have generally been forced to make greater concessions to the former than in the WTO.

on ALBA loans is excessively centralised¹⁹. This concern should serve as a warning to ALBA decision-makers.

2.3 Problem areas

Several issues were raised under this heading. First, there is the high degree of centralisation in the approval process at the Venezuelan end. Thus, the same official who reported that 'the process is shorter and the requirements less', noted that:

The biggest problem with access to resources in ALBA is that everything is centralized. Even to get approval for a loan from the ALBA bank, the decision is made by (the Office of the President). Once the decision is made, the machinery moves slowly and sometimes it takes direct intervention by the President or the Minister of Foreign Affairs to unlock the bottleneck²⁰.

Second, there are frequent requests from Venezuelan agencies for the same information. In the words of one official:

The one consideration that has been somewhat tedious (but not onerous) has been the repeated reviews by various agencies in Venezuela for social impact of the various projects. Multiple agencies have conducted such reviews, and there appears to be little coordination between them. The end result is that we have to repeatedly review the same projects, provide documentation etc...(nonetheless) We have not encountered any difficulties in utilizing either PetroCaribe or ALBA Funds²¹.

Two other issues are the cost of attendance at meetings and translation of documents:

ALBA has frequent meetings which necessitate international travel. In the context of fiscal constraints, this places a significant burden on (us).. We have not been able to participate in many of the meetings. We suggested that the responsibility be shared with the other two OECS members of ALBA

¹⁹ See next section.

²⁰ Written response to this author dated 29 December 2010.

²¹ Written response to this author dated 12 December 2010.

(but) that has not been implemented. (Also) The issuing of documents in both languages is not implemented consistently. This should be addressed²².

2.2 Is ALBA membership compatible with CARICOM Single Market and Economy?

The issues here are both legal and substantive. From the legal point of view, the three countries' membership of ALBA has not conflicted with their membership of CARICOM, the CSME and the O.E.C.S. This is because the negotiated flexibility of ALBA membership has allowed them to avoid undertaking obligations that might conflict with the respective Treaties. This is important, for if these countries were required to liberalise trade and investment with other ALBA countries, and grant them other like privileges; this would probably have been an insuperable obstacle to their membership. It is also important that the ALBA organs of governance have no legal standing in the domestic jurisdiction of member states. They function as organs of consultation and coordination of position; and countries have the right not to participate in the coordination of specific positions.

Two other notable areas in which flexibility has been important are foreign policy and the ALBA currency. The CARICOM ALBA countries have not generally participated in ALBA foreign policy declarations since foreign policy coordination is an obligation under the CARICOM treaty and is the province of the CARICOM Council for Foreign and Community Relations (COFCOR). In many instances the CARICOM position and that of ALBA coincide²³. In such instances the three countries may join in ALBA declarations where these coincide with the declared position of CARICOM. In others instances they may simply abstain. In the words of one official:

ALBA does not have any official authority to negotiate on (our) behalf..On a case by case basis, we review proposed statements and either endorse them or reserve comment on them. . Our statement of accession clearly indicated that we joined the grouping based on the founding principles which include respect for sovereignty.. While some countries have indeed alleged that we have "sold out" or are "puppets", we have no such concerns as the principles of ALBA and our statement of accession clearly indicated that we joined the

²² Written response to this author dated 12 December 2010.

²³ For example in calling for lifting of the U.S. embargo on Cuba, condemning the 2009 coup in Honduras and the 2010 attempted coup in Ecuador. However COFCOR did not issue a statement on the controversial U.S.-Colombia bases agreement.

grouping based on the founding principles which include respect for sovereignty

(We) have no reservations about articulating a different foreign policy position to that held by any or all of the members of ALBA...our statement of accession to ALBA indicated that our participation in that body was completely without prejudice to our obligations to CARICOM. (When it was proposed that) ALBA members coordinate a response to the earthquake in Haiti; we applauded ALBA's readiness to help and advised that our response would be coordinated through the CARICOM Secretariat²⁴.

And another

The relationship with ALBA has not impacted on foreign policy coordination in CARICOM. While the responses from ALBA have been stronger than CARICOM on the issues raised above, fundamentally the positions have been the same. In both ALBA and CARICOM, member states have the ability to enter a reservation on a majority decision...(we have used this) in ALBA on (at least two occasions)²⁵.

However, one issue that was noted was

... there have been a number of occasions when statements have been issued under ALBA's name without stating which countries have endorsed the statement. This has caused some sensitivity from time to time²⁶.

The three countries are also not participating in the ALBA currency arrangement, the *sucre*, in deference to their participation in the O.E.C.S. common currency through their membership of the East Caribbean Monetary Union and Central Bank.

Insofar as one can speak of 'conditionalities' of ALBA membership: these would be (a) support for its general principles; and (ii) use of ALBA funding exclusively for the public sector (government and state enterprises); and (iii) orientation of projects and social cooperation to disadvantaged socio-economic sectors of the population. None of these has presented a problem for CARICOM's ALBA members.

²⁴ Written response to the author dated 12 December 2010.

²⁵ Written response to the author dated 29 December 2010.

²⁶ Written response to this author dated 12 December 2010.

This brings us to the substantive issue: how is it possible to reconcile ALBA's 'socialistic' orientation with the neoliberal orientation of the CSME? Again, the reason for this is ALBA's flexibility. While ALBA financing is exclusively for the public sector; member governments are not *required* to commit to a statist or socialist path of development as a condition of their adhesion. What they do in the non-ALBA funded is their own business; so that much scope is allowed for the operation of private enterprise. The CSME, for its part, leaves considerable room for the operation of the public sector. ALBA-financed state participation in the energy sector and public spending on infrastructure and poverty alleviation are not incompatible with the CSME.

The main effect of ALBA funding has been to expand the fiscal space available to these countries. There is evidence that this has increased their bargaining power in dealing with traditional donors. This is clearly the case of the financing for the international airport of St Vincent and the Grenadines. Budget support for Antigua and Barbuda in mid-2009 also afforded that country some breathing space. Officials confirm that the budget loan enabled the government to soften the degree of fiscal adjustment that they were obliged to undertake under an IMF standby agreement in 2010²⁷.

2.4 Is ALBA a viable alternative to the EPA?

For the same reasons as above, ALBA membership has not been incompatible with these countries' participation in the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA) with the EU. The question here is whether ALBA can constitute an alternative set of arrangements for framing the external trade and financial relationships of small Caribbean countries; one that is free of the standard neoliberal conditionalities and more development friendly.

In recent decades Caribbean economies have diversified considerably into the export of services; mainly tourism and international financial services. In the three countries, services now account for between 73 and 99 percent of total export earnings (Table 1). In addition, merchandise exports to the EU bloc have fallen dramatically in the last decade (Table 2 shows the data for 2005-2009). This is due

²⁷ Interestingly, in the 2008 agreements made by CARICOM governments with the EU for the use of the 10th CDF, direct budgetary support is a major element. This is in contrast to previous practice, when the vast majority of funds were programmed for projects, with onerous documentation and reporting procedures. Was the change in EU funding policy due exclusively to complaints from the Caribbean; or was it also attributable to competition for influence with ALBA? On this matter, further research is needed.

mainly to the effect of liberalisation of the EU banana import regime, in compliance with WTO rulings. The consequences are that two of the three countries now derive only between 3 and 5 percent of their total export earnings from exports to the EU; and the third has no exports of significance to the EU. The banana farmers of Dominica and St Vincent and the Grenadines, however, who still rely on the EU market, remain a significant economic and political force in these countries.

On the other hand, ALBA is of virtually no significance to these countries as an export market (Table 3). In the years 2005-2008 each of three countries recorded only one year in which they exported to the Andean Community (which includes Bolivia, Ecuador and Venezuela), for a total of US\$168,000 for all three countries over four years. In the same period their imports from the Andean Community totalled \$72 million; so that there was huge trade deficit with this bloc, arising mostly from their petroleum imports from Venezuela. The scope for reversing this will lie in expanding services exports, particularly tourism, to Venezuela and other ALBA countries. One conclusion, therefore, is that intra-ALBA tourism needs to develop in order to balance the heavy concentration of merchandise trade in Venezuelan petroleum products.

But external alignment also relates to finance for development. In this area ALBA/Petrocaribe has already heavily eclipsed the EU (Table 4). The amounts received or in the pipeline from ALBA/Petrocaribe for two of the three countries already amount to US\$145 M, which compares to US\$27 M programmed from the EU for all three countries under the 10th EDF (European Development Fund) for 2008-2013. EU aid allocations to the three are relatively low because of their small populations and their classification as upper middle-income countries; EU aid prioritises low-income countries. The average population of the three is 88,000; and their average per capita income is estimated at US\$12, 533²⁸. CARICOM countries argue that they are disadvantaged by established development aid criteria; which do not take account of the vulnerability of small island states to external economic shocks, extreme weather events and global climate change. The application of ALBA principles, which take account of their specific characteristics and needs, has proven to be a great boon. In short, ALBA has been a complementary relationship rather than an alternative alignment to the EPA; albeit one that is motivated by an entirely different logic.

²⁸ Purchasing Power Parity dollars, 2010. Estimate based on data for the three in *CIA Fact book*.

2.5 Acceding to ALBA: Opportunistic or Ideological?

Was the adhesion of these countries to ALBA simply a case of financial opportunism, as distinct from ideological affinity with the ALBA project? The predominance of financial cooperation in their relationship with ALBA might support such a cynical view. On the other hand, their polities have a strong populist character; and their leadership is rooted in popular movements with a commitment to advance the interests of the majority classes by means of health, education, and support for small and medium enterprises and for small farmers. The reality is that in small vulnerable economies, policy choices are necessarily driven by external economic pressures and by calculations of the costs and benefits of particular courses of action. In the 1980s/1990 CARICOM governments believed that they had few options other than to follow the neoliberal path. But their experience of neoliberal globalisation has so far been negative, especially for the smaller countries. Their economies have been undermined and marginalised due to erosion of trade preferences in their traditional markets; a steep decline in aid flows; and attacks on their international financial services sectors under the banner of 'harmful tax competition'. It has delivered little by way of the promised benefits of economic diversification and higher inflows of foreign direct investment.

Hence CARICOM political elites feel betrayed by the rich countries that are their traditional economic partners. Antigua and Barbuda's internet gambling industry has been negatively impacted by U.S. actions and failure of that country to abide by WTO rulings on the matter. The banana industries of Dominica and St Vincent have been decimated by WTO rulings on the EU preferences made in response to U.S. complaints. St Vincent's plans to diversify further into tourism had been stymied by stringent lending policies by Western-dominated international financial institutions. When their leaders condemned neoliberal globalisation in their ALBA statements of accession; they had many reasons to do so²⁹. Indeed, ALBA's features have much in common with the New International Economic Order demanded by developing countries in the 1970s.

2.6 ALBA Solidarity: Asymmetrical or Non-reciprocal?

The two founding nations of ALBA had a relationship of mutual solidarity: Venezuela provided oil to Cuba; Cuba provided doctors, nurses and teachers to Venezuela. As

²⁹ See Antigua and Barbuda's Declaration of Adhesion, 2009.

membership was extended to smaller and/or poorer countries; a pattern emerged in which the two founding countries became the main sources of primarily one-way assistance to the others—including the three CARICOM members of ALBA. Can one therefore speak of 'asymmetrical' or 'non-reciprocal' solidarity? Further, is there a risk that solidarity relationships that are primarily one-way may lead to a 'free-loader', 'dependency' or 'mendicancy' syndrome?

These questions are germane to the broader discourse on 'solidarity' economics. Although a full discussion is not possible in this paper, we offer the following observations.

1. ALBA solidarity assistance is provided in the context of the treatment of asymmetries in financial and human resources; hence the associated resource flows are of necessity asymmetrical. Non-reciprocity in trade agreements also fall in this category.
2. Solidarity is by definition disinterested--assistance is given without the expectation of repayment. 'Reciprocal solidarity' may be an oxymoron; a two-way flow of assistance more nearly approximates an exchange. Although solidarity creates goodwill for the giver; if this is the primary motive it is questionable whether it is genuine solidarity.
3. If the beneficiary of solidarity feels no moral obligation to reciprocate in situations where it can match its resources, however limited; to the needs of others; this raises doubts about the sincerity of its commitment to the principles of solidarity. This could indicate an unhealthy relationship of dependency or even mendicancy. In such a case one might propose the existence of '*non-reciprocated*' solidarity.
4. Solidarity is not only material but also political and psychological. An important form of solidarity provided by CARICOM countries to Cuba has been their consistent condemnation of the US embargo. CARICOM countries have also been consistent in their condemnation of unconstitutional changes in government or attempted coups, including in ALBA members Honduras in 2009 and Ecuador in 2010.

The relationship of the three CARICOM states with ALBA may be characterised as one of asymmetrical rather than non-reciprocated solidarity. This is a consequence of their smallness, vulnerability and weak limited financial and human resources relative to Venezuela and Cuba. Solidarity has been reciprocated, within the limits of resource constraints in the form of scholarships in hospitality training to Venezuela³⁰ and emergency assistance to Venezuela after the devastating floods of

³⁰ From Antigua and Barbuda

December 2010³¹. Several CARICOM countries provided humanitarian assistance to Haiti after the 2010 earthquake and to Cuba after the 2008 hurricanes. However, this needs to be expanded. CARICOM countries should identify ways in which they can assist other ALBA participating countries; for example in providing English language training and tourism-related training. The Community could also establish its own technical assistance and volunteer programmes for service in other developing countries (Brewster 2007; Girvan 2010c).

2.7 ALBA Sustainability

Several factors need to be taken into account in evaluating ALBA's long-term sustainability. One is the political durability of Venezuela's Bolivarian project, in particular that of President Chavez. While predictions cannot safely be made; the Chavez government has survived several major crises since 2000, including the coup of 2002; and the Bolivarian project appears to have a solid popular base. A second factor is the state of finances of PDVSA, the parent company of Petrocaribe; which provides most, if not all, of the resources for ALBA financial cooperation. The steep decline in oil prices in late 2008/2009 had no noticeable effect on the scale of financial cooperation; but this is a subject on which further research is needed.

Two other issues merit close attention. ALBA's non-oil trade is relatively weak. Total intra-trade was reported to average \$6 billion annually in 2009-2010; but a large part of this is assumed to be the value of Venezuelan oil shipments to the other countries³². Venezuelan imports from the four other Spanish-speaking ALBA countries were reported to have grown from \$639 million in 2006 to \$1.4 billion in 2010; or from 2.01 percent to 4.84 percent of Venezuela's total imports. This is a positive development, which is partly attributed to the operation of the SUCRE mechanism. But the weakness of CARICOM ALBA countries' export capabilities to the rest of ALBA will impact negatively their debt servicing capacity to Petrocaribe and to the ALBA Bank. Hence, the second issue is the debt sustainability of ALBA's borrowing countries which run large trade deficits with Venezuela. We have suggested that the development of intra-ALBA tourism targeted at these countries may be one way to address the imbalance. It also gives strategic importance to the development of ALBA Grandnational Enterprises in agriculture, industry, energy and transport as instruments of production and trade among member countries.

³¹ From Dominica and St Vincent and the Grenadines.

³² South Journal 2011. This is also the source for the data that follows.

Conclusion

ALBA's principles and practices provide a telling contrast with the features of neoliberal integration schemes. The scope for development policies and the role of the state, the inclusion of social and financial cooperation and the treatment of smaller economies; are commendable. The flexibility of the terms of participation in ALBA has proven capable of accommodating countries of different circumstances, including those like belonging to other integration schemes. A substantial proportion of ALBA supported projects show a strong pro-poor bias. The 'ALBA way' is worthy of close examination by other countries, particularly developing countries, desirous of constructing integration schemes supportive of people-oriented development and development of basic industries serving social needs. ALBA's main vulnerabilities are its dependence on Venezuelan financing and on Cuban human resource capabilities. Also notable is the relative weakness of the non-oil trade and related production among ALBA countries. Although this is being addressed through Grandnational Enterprises; it remains to be seen whether these entities, which are relatively new, will be up to the task. There are also issues of debt sustainability in ALBA's borrowing countries, of transparency in and accountability for ALBA projects, and of people participation in the ALBA process. These are beyond the scope of this paper and are worthy topics of future research.

16 May 2011.

[Tables 1-4 sent separately in Excel File.]

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