

SAMUDRA editorial

## Shooting for accountability

Another response to the SAMUDRA Report editorial  
on the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization

As a regular reader of SAMUDRA Report, I felt encouraged to write this letter by Nalini Nayak's and Anna-Rosa Martinez's calls for a debate on the WTO in their responses to your editorial comment of December 1999.

Anna-Rosa Martinez, in her response, made some of the key points necessary to any debate on the WTO—the subjugation of all areas of human development to the demands of trade, the contested legitimacy of the institution itself, and the shortsightedness of any development strategy that relies on export at the expense of food security, environmental conservation, and nurturing young people for a better future. A serious debate on the subject requires that these areas be explored in more detail, and the specific impact of multilateral trade agreements on various types of fishery and fishing communities be studied and evaluated carefully. Members of the ICSF are better qualified than I to undertake this kind of informed scrutiny, but I do believe the following general political points might be useful to keep in mind when doing so.

First, it might be helpful to clarify the various constituencies and their interests. Do they relate to fisher people only as *producers* whose interests will be best served by increased individual incomes through export? Are they not also *citizens* who share with others an interest in having an accountable and well-endowed government that will ensure basic needs, job creation, etc.; *women and men* who may benefit unequally from trade; *children and youth* who may have aspirations other than to follow in the footsteps of their parents (out of a lack of choice)?

Keeping these broader identities in mind, the following questions need to be asked: Will trade generate enough earnings for

individuals to replace the need for public provision of education, healthcare, etc.? Alternatively, will the multilateral trade agreements permit the State to raise revenues and invest them in these areas? Or will they, instead, constrain government action in this area as being detrimental to 'competitiveness'? Will earnings through trade accrue equally to all members of the community? If not, will public institutions have the means to redress this imbalance? Or will these means be undermined by clauses in the trade agreements? A balanced evaluation of the WTO would require answering these questions, as well as those related to terms of trade.

A second broad point has to do with the methods chosen: whether to protest outside the WTO for its dismantling, or, at least, for greater accountability; or work within it to win concessions for the constituency it represents.

As Anna-Rosa Martinez pointed out, the protesters at Seattle came from a variety of backgrounds, with very different interests and analyses. The one thing they agreed on was the illegitimacy of having a trade organization determine so many vital areas of their lives. But even if one were convinced of the illegitimacy of the WTO as a forum (non-representative, non-accountable and premised on the priority of trade), one may see the usefulness of acting within it to shift its presumptions and make it more accountable.

### Internal space

It would be a mistake to completely abandon the internal space, rather than continue to exploit it. However, to set oneself against the protesters outside is to take a clear political stance on the side of capital, governments and 'experts' and



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against those whose exclusion from power structures allows them few other forums but the street. This, as Nalini Nayak rightly points out, cannot be justified by anyone who has in mind the interests of the historically marginalized fishing communities of the world. ❧

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