

SAMUDRA editorial

Whose side are you on?

An editorial in SAMUDRA Report No. 24 on the Seattle protests against the World Trade Organization has elicited this spirited response

I was surprised by the editorial comment in SAMUDRA Report No. 24, "Sloganeering in Seattle". There are a number of reasons why I think the editorial was, unusually, unfortunate.

First, I personally found the title offensive for those many NGOs that have prepared for months both the forms and the contents of the Seattle protests. In fact, together with street demonstrations, a host of activities had been arranged for information sharing and strategy planning.

Demonstrators in Seattle were far from limiting themselves to mere sloganeering, but were actively networking and educating about the huge concentration of unaccountable decision-making power vested in the WTO ministerial and best expressed in the infamous 'green room meetings'.

As an activist working on issues related to the impact of the industrialization of the fisheries and agricultural sectors in the South, I was more than delighted to see how committed citizens and irritated governments from the South were able to break the public credibility of WTO into tiny little pieces. Just compare this to the virtual lack of monitoring of the Uruguay Round negotiations and the signing of the Marrakesh agreement in 1995 and you realize what a revolution has taken place.

Beyond a more or less fancy header, though, my real concern is the failure of the editorial to separate the issue of the need for the South to access markets in the North from the WTO—to the point that any person unfamiliar with the ICSF could conclude that our organization considers the WTO to be the legitimate forum to guarantee such an access. I think this is a regrettable confusion.

I do not intend to list here the reasons why many think the WTO should be scrapped. I want, though, to focus on that issue which, in my view, is at the very core of the organization: the assumption that an ever-larger area of societies' structures and economic activities should be subordinated to the requirements of international trade and traders—most of them transnational corporations—rather than to their genuine concerns and needs. Should ICSF consider that fisheries—and access to them—would be better managed under such premises? What would then be the role for food security, access to resources, or the protection of the environment?

I can understand the concern of the editorial about fishing communities' access to rich markets in the North and generating income through food processing, but gambling for the WTO as a mechanism to ensure such an access would seem quite a politically naive proposition. WTO has continually been shaped to favour the interests of the powerful. Look at what happened to agricultural subsidies when agriculture was introduced into the WTO: the formula in place to limit agricultural subsidies for both developed and developing countries turns out to allow both the US and the EU to actually increase (and even to double!) their financial support to agro-industries.

Importance downplayed

Another aspect of the editorial that I find worrying is the downplaying of the importance of fish for the food security of the poor in its quest for access to Northern markets. Along these years, I have always understood that the pressure of Northern markets has resulted in a decreased access for local, non-fishing but fish requiring, population. This seems to have been the case at least in Chile, India, Lake Victoria

and now in Southeast Asia, particularly as a result of trash fishing for shrimp aquaculture. I might be unaware of recent studies indicating a different trend. If this is the case, please let me know them.

And a word for child labour. I agree that it is a sad reality that children in rural families often have to join their parents to ensure a living for all of the family, and I agree they need to learn their likely future profession. My own father, the son of a small-farmer family, helped his parents as a child. However, in my opinion — and if the circle of poverty is to be broken one day — this should never condemn those children to a lack of access to schooling and formal education and to the overexploitation of their working capacity.

It is disturbing for me to find out that SAMUDRA seems to indicate that “Sloganeering in Seattle”—the work of NGOs from North and South—is against the interests of the South, and, ultimately, promotes ecoimperialism. I would really appreciate a clarification on the opinion of the editorial team, and also the views of other readers. If you did not intend to express an endorsement of the WTO as the international body regulating fish trade, I would like to see an editorial in SAMUDRA making the point clear. If the impression I get from the article is the right one, I would invite ICSF members and other SAMUDRA readers to promote an

open-ended and critical discussion on the role of the WTO and its stand. This could encompass an in-depth discussion about the dialectic that arises from this editorial comment: the competition between food security strategies centred on self-sufficiency and those centred on access to international markets (the comparative advantage approach). ¶

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