

The South Centre: An Advocate for Developing Countries in Global Negotiation Fora

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The South Centre (SC) is an intergovernmental organization dedicated to representing the interests of developing countries in the areas of trade and development in global negotiation fora.<sup>1</sup> The work of the SC is rooted in the foundational perspective that developing countries occupy a disadvantaged position in trade and development hierarchies, and as a result, its efforts have taken the form of a critique of trade and development policies that continue to privilege developed countries through international institutions such as the World Trade Organization (WTO).

I was curious to learn more about the nature of this hierarchy during my visit to the Canadian Permanent Mission to the WTO in Geneva, Switzerland. The Ambassador and Permanent Representative to the WTO immediately exposed this unequal relationship in his outright assertion that the delegates from developing countries within organizations such as the SC “need help.” He qualified this statement by revealing that these delegates lack the resources necessary to exercising meaningful influence in negotiation fora. The Ambassador to the WTO went a step further, however, to attribute the marginalization of these delegates to their perceived inability to identify what is in the best interest of their states.

The Ambassador’s statement that the delegates within the SC are incapable of identifying their own needs is a highly questionable assertion on a variety of levels. His assumption bears an uncomfortable resemblance to neocolonial discourses that suppose, first, the inferiority of developing countries, and second, that call for a paternalistic Western saviour. It is in this way that the Ambassador’s assumption is also ahistorical, and similarly apolitical, as it neglects the legacies of exploitation that license developed countries, and the international institutions of which they are leaders, to steer the courses of action taken by developing countries. The

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1. “About the South Centre,” *The South Centre*, accessed January 8, 2018.

Ambassador's statement is thus, at best, an endorsement of the superiority complex of the WTO and is also, at worst, responsible for the reinforcement of inequality in trade and development hierarchies.

The existence of barriers to meaningful participation in negotiation fora for developing countries is a reality that even the Coordinator of the Trade and Development Programme at the SC recognized. I do not believe, though, that this reality should automatically lead to the conclusion that delegates lack credibility in understanding and articulating the needs of their states. To the contrary, would these barriers to participation not lead developing countries to become 'selfish' as a pragmatic way to protect their interests?

In her presentation to our group, the Programme Coordinator from the SC advanced an idea that serves to counter the Canadian Mission's view of the SC: She claimed that the SC has worked to create its own "development perspective." This assertion demonstrates how the SC's efforts are, in fact, grounded in and informed by a framework of principles that have evolved over time and in a particular context. As echoed by representatives from the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development and the International Institute for Sustainable Development, the SC is also able to avoid many of the constraints experienced by dominant institutions resulting from their dependence on powerful states or larger supranational bodies. When the Programme Coordinator stated that the SC "does not need to step on eggshells," she was referring to the ways in which the SC is free to construct a foundational perspective on trade and development that stands in purposeful opposition to the dominant discourses purported by the WTO.

A particular point of contention in my research is worth mentioning at this juncture. Despite their cultivation of a "strong partnership" with the SC, the Foundation Friedrich Ebert

Stiftung (FES) criticized the SC for prioritizing the symbolic act of resistance to multilateral trade agreements at the expense of the survival of people in developing countries. A Senior Programme Officer at FES even went as far to condemn Martin Khor, the Executive Director of the SC, for “letting people die.” While the maintenance of sustained resistance is necessary to promoting transformations in trade and development orthodoxy, the Programme Officer at FES saw this practice as problematic because it often replaced genuine attempts at the implementation of policy that could potentially benefit the people of developing countries.

The insights generated from this experience merely serve to reproduce the tensions that characterize the field of international trade and development. The complexity of these challenges is no doubt frustrating for both experts and students of the field alike. A representative from the SC offered us a glimmer of hope, though, when she reminded us of the importance of retaining a critical lens. She left us with some inspirational last words: “The success of the international community demands citizens who are willing to scrutinize the status quo in an attempt to amplify the voices of the developing world.”

Key Takeaways:

1. The work of the South Centre is rooted in the foundational perspective that developing countries occupy a disadvantaged position in trade and development hierarchies, and as a result, its efforts have taken the form of a critique of trade and development policies that continue to privilege developed countries through international institutions such as the World Trade Organization.
  
2. The Ambassador and Permanent Representative at the Canadian Permanent Mission to the World Trade Organization attributed the marginalization of delegates from the SC within global negotiation fora to their perceived inability to identify what is in the best interest of their states. His statement is, at best, an endorsement of the superiority complex of the WTO and is, at worst, responsible for the reinforcement of inequality in trade and development hierarchies.
  
3. The Coordinator of the Trade and Development Programme at the South Centre advanced an idea that serves to counter the Canadian Mission's view of the South Centre. She claimed that the South Centre is free to construct a foundational perspective on trade and development that stands in purposeful opposition to the dominant discourses purported by the World Trade Organization.
  
4. "The success of the international community demands citizens who are willing to scrutinize the status quo in an attempt to amplify the voices of the developing world."

## Bibliography

“About the South Centre.” *The South Centre*. Accessed January 8, 2018. <https://www.southcentre.int/about-the-south-centre/>.