

ALBA expands its allies in the Caribbean

By Kevin Edmonds, published on the author's blog on NACLA, *The Other Side of Paradise*, [NACLA, February 16, 2012](#)

Part one

The weekend of February 4 and 5, 2012 saw the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) convene its 11th summit in Caracas, Venezuela. ALBA began as an alternative vision to the reckless neoliberal agenda promoted by Washington throughout Latin America and the Caribbean. In 2004, Venezuela and Cuba sought to establish a regional alliance which would be committed to an agenda of poverty eradication, sustainable development and social justice founded upon the values of co-operation, equality, and solidarity. The regional integration promoted by ALBA importantly stresses policy flexibility, fair trade, and recognition of the unique circumstances faced by the small Caribbean economies.

As many expected, the weekend summit contained the standard denunciations of American imperialism and the need for deeper economic integration but surprisingly ended with St. Lucia and Suriname expressing their desire for full membership in the organization and Haiti joining ranks as a permanent observer.

While St. Lucia and Suriname cannot fully join the organization without following the necessary political processes in their respective countries, the two nations were admitted to the meeting as “special guest members”—a prior step to their full entry. St. Lucia, Suriname and Haiti would join their CARICOM neighbours Dominica, who joined the regional organization in 2008, and St. Vincent and Antigua, who became members in 2009.

Professor Norman Girvan of the University of the West Indies, a leading scholar in Caribbean political economy, sees the recent regional shift towards ALBA as the result of the organization providing a more dynamic alternative to CARICOM, [remarking that](#) “(ALBA) poses the urgency of revitalising CARICOM and if CARICOM continues to be relatively moribund in its economic integration aspect then inevitably ALBA will become an attractive alternative for more and more CARICOM states.”

Furthermore, Petrocaribe—an alliance which allows Caribbean nations to purchase oil from Venezuela in a preferential agreement, has proved to be an attractive option for the cash strapped governments. The oil can be paid for over a 25 year period, at a 1 percent interest rate.

According to the [United Nations Conference on Trade and Development](#), in comparison to the traditional methods of purchasing oil in the region, Petrocaribe provides significant savings to the participating countries, providing an importance source of finance which respective governments can use to invest in social development programs. David Jessop, the Director of the Caribbean Council [stated that](#) “If it were not for the energy lifeline that it [Venezuela] has provided to every Caribbean nation other than Trinidad and Barbados, much of the region would by now be in economic free fall.”

It is precisely because the Caribbean has been hit so hard by the forces of globalization that many CARICOM members are looking to establish deeper alliances with Caracas and Havana instead of Washington— and for good reason.

The forceful intervention by Washington on behalf of the financial interests of multinational fruit companies like Chiquita in the nearly 20 year long “banana war” at the World Trade Organization fundamentally changed the economies of St. Lucia, Dominica and St. Vincent for the worse. Furthermore, in Haiti, the reintroduction of a sweatshop model of development called [HOPE II](#), is little more than a recycled version of Ronald Reagan’s failed Caribbean Basin Initiative of the 1980’s which perversely sees the country’s poverty as its greatest asset. Based upon the poverty-inducing actions of the United States in the region, it makes one wonder how the Caribbean did not explore this alternative alliance to neoliberal globalization earlier.

Speaking on the economic realities which sparked St. Lucia’s decision to explore membership in ALBA, Prime Minister Kenny Anthony [stated](#), “It is going to be critical and crucial that St. Lucia look for new opportunities of support and in particular for governments who are willing to assist the development of the country... So we have to be busy, we have to search for new sources of funding and it is in that context that we have to look at organisations like ALBA as an option.”

According to Professor Girvan, this makes perfect sense as ALBA is, “mobilising resources on a much more significant scale... The ALBA bank and Petrocaribe funding are much larger than those mobilized by the CARICOM Development Fund, and as ALBA is moving ahead it keeps launching new projects, for example food security and agriculture that CARICOM has been talking a lot but doing very little.”

Looking at the record of assistance ALBA has already provided to its three initial Caribbean members, it provides a strong incentive to other CARICOM nations looking to join the bloc pragmatic reasons.

In Dominica, the government reports total financial assistance of \$119 million East Caribbean dollars 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.

In Antigua, ALBA provided a \$7.5 million U.S. dollar grant to refurbish the V.C. Bird International Airport, and another US\$8 million to finance a major water infrastructure project.

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

In St. Vincent, US\$10.275 million has been provided as a grant by the government of Venezuela to finance housing for low-income or no-income beneficiaries, and \$1.85 million East Caribbean dollars has been given for rural development projects related to eco-tourism, sporting facilities and fishing.

(All figures taken from: [Is ALBA a New Model of Integration? Reflections on the CARICOM Experience](#) by Norman Girvan.)

Despite the many successes of ALBA in the Caribbean so far, the future of the organization hangs in a precarious position, as the October elections in Venezuela will do a great deal to determine both its strength and durability. Nevertheless, the expansion of the group's membership in the Caribbean, in addition to the newly formed Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, signals an important shift away from American hegemony in the region. It is no longer Washington's "backyard" anymore but rather a region which has been taken for granted and is now looking to put its priorities first for a change. It is a change which is long overdue.

(The second part of this article will focus specifically on the relationship between ALBA and Haiti. Kevin Edmonds is a new NACLA blogger focusing on the Caribbean. For more from his blog, "The Other Side of Paradise," visit nacla.org/blog/other-side-paradise. Edmonds is a former NACLA research associate and a current PhD student at the University of Toronto.)

Part two

When looking at the vast array of reconstruction plans and promises of aid to rebuild Haiti, the old cliché "actions speak louder than words" rings true. Two years later, the failed reconstruction of Haiti has shown that a great deal of the international community's optimism which emerged after the earthquake was simply that—talk. While this may be a harsh criticism of seemingly well-intentioned efforts, when contrasted to the actions of a small but determined group of Latin American and Caribbean countries, the majority of international efforts in Haiti are shameful.

The countries which comprise the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) have always regarded Haiti as an important sister nation and partner in the fight against imperialism and neoliberal globalization. At the inauguration of President Michel Martelly last May, Héctor Rodríguez, vice-president of the Social Area Council of Venezuela wasted no time in renewing ALBA's cooperation to Haiti, [stating](#) [2], "We have a historical debt to pay to our brothers and sisters in Haiti, because they helped us liberate our Latin America." Rodríguez's remarks referred to the assistance of then-Haitian President Petion to Simón Bolívar during the independence wars against Spain, where newly liberated Haiti provided soldiers, financial aid, and political asylum to the Latin American revolutionary.

The first week of February saw the 11th summit of the Bolivarian Alternative of the Americas (ALBA) convene in Caracas, Venezuela. With Haiti in attendance as a permanent observer, Martelly's attendance at the summit was a surprise to many, due to his reactionary political program domestically, his close relationships with the Haitian elite, and his determination that Haiti will achieve real and sustainable development through neoliberal policy and the construction of low-wage sweatshops.

Despite Martelly's political positions, the impact of ALBA's assistance to Haiti (primarily via Cuba and Venezuela) is too powerful for him to ignore—doing so would discredit him in the eyes of the Haitian people. At a regional summit of the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, which was founded last December, Martelly confirmed the vital role Venezuelan aid is playing in Haiti, [saying that](#) [3] "The cooperation with Venezuela is the most important in Haiti right now in terms of impact, direct impact... We are grateful to President Chávez for helping us from the bottom of his heart."

The principal reason why Venezuela and Cuba have been so effective in delivering assistance to Haiti is their engagement in developing infrastructure and professional capacity prior to the earthquake. These countries had spent tremendous time and resources developing networks, relationships and infrastructure which would prove critical to the relief effort, and they had a proven capacity to work constructively with the ministries of the Haitian government and organizations of civil society.

Perhaps the most important example of solidarity in Haiti has been the deployment of Cuban medical brigades. Cuban medical assistance to Haiti began after Hurricane George in 1998. An agreement to establish a sustainable model of public healthcare was initiated between Fidel Castro and President René Préval. The model would focus on the immediate provision of services and the construction of medical clinics throughout the country, and the beginning of training of Haitian doctors, nurses and technicians, both domestically and at the Latin American School of Medicine in Cuba (ELAM). Seventy Haitian students were enrolled per year at ELAM; the first year of graduation was 2005.

By 2007, eight years after the Cuban medical cooperation began in earnest, Cuba had become the primary healthcare provider for nearly 75% of the population which has access to healthcare services, with over 14 million medical consultations. Statistics from the Pan American Health Organization in 2007 indicated that the presence of the Cuban doctors had led to several dramatic improvements in several key public health indicators.

Improvements in Public Health in Haiti, 1999-2007 *

<u>Health Indicator</u>	<u>1999</u>	<u>2007</u>
Infant mortality, per 1,000 live births	80	33
Child mortality (deaths under age of 5 per 1,000 live births)	135	59.4
Maternal Mortality per 100,000 live births	523	285
Life Expectancy (years)	54	61

* Figures taken from Emily J. Kirk and John M. Kirk's *[One of the World's Best Kept Secrets: Cuban Medical Aid to Haiti](#)*. [4] For more recent statistics on infant and child mortality rates, see here: http://www.childinfo.org/files/Child_Mortality_Report_2011.pdf

On the eve of the earthquake, Cuba had trained 550 Haitian doctors at no cost, with another 567 medical students enrolled in Cuba. These doctors, in addition to Cuban medical personnel, would provide the most widespread and successful medical campaign in post-earthquake Haiti. In an incredibly important gesture at the United Nations Donor Conference in March 2010, Cuba pledged to rebuild a sustainable, public healthcare system in Haiti—over ten years and at a cost of [\\$690.5 million](#) [5]. Not wanting to be outdone by small, socialist Cuba, this ambitious and deeply needed plan for Haiti was virtually ignored by the international media. Despite the rejection by the United Nations, Cuba's medical efforts in Haiti continue, with collaborative assistance from Venezuela, Brazil and Norway.

Notwithstanding the cholera epidemic (introduced to Haiti due to the negligence of United Nations troops), many non-governmental organizations have left the country as their funds dried up. Cuba is once again leading the charge to save lives. Its medical brigades have established 44

cholera treatment units and 23 cholera treatment centers. They have achieved a mortality rate of just 0.36% in the areas they serve, four times lower than the [national average](#) [6]. Cuba's medical assistance to Haiti was chosen by [Project Censored](#) [7] as one of the top 25 underreported news stories in 2011.

With the signing of agreements with Venezuela in 2007 during President Hugo Chávez's visit to the country, a series of significant projects were ushered in, including US\$80 million for an oil refinery, US\$56 million for three electricity plants, US\$4 million for a liquid gas plant, and US\$3 million for a waste collection program.

Venezuela has also provided significant financial assistance to Haiti through the terms of the [Petrocaribe](#) [8] program. Under the program, Haiti became a participant in a preferential trade agreement, where they could pay for Venezuelan oil over a 25-year period, with 1 % interest rate.

After the earthquake Venezuela once again stepped up to help Haiti, by pledging [US\\$2.4 billion](#) [9] in reconstruction and relief aid, the largest financial contribution among 58 donors, [according to](#) [10] the U.N. Office of the Special Envoy for Haiti. In another significant act of solidarity, in June 2010, the Venezuelan government also cancelled all of Haiti's debt with Petrocaribe—amounting to the cancellation of almost [US\\$400 million](#) [11].

The February 2012 ALBA summit in Caracas produced a further roadmap to Haiti's recovery, focusing on Haiti's sustainable reconstruction, building infrastructure, and increasing independence in the areas of energy, agriculture, healthcare and education.

Due to decades of unfair trade and aid policies, Haiti currently imports nearly 80% of its main food staple, rice. Venezuelan assistance is helping to restore the devastated rice industry in Haiti's Artibonite Valley by providing technical assistance and financial aid to Haitian farmers. According to President Martelly, the benefits of Petrocaribe include, "a deal where we repay the amount owed with rice, so this is good for us. Because the main thing for us is to create jobs."

Implementing assistance programs which develop rural linkages in Haiti and encourage domestic industrial growth is something that is unfortunately missing from many of the reconstruction plans of non-ALBA countries. For example, despite many announcements of reform, current USAID food assistance policies prohibit the procurement of foodstuffs from local sources. This means that US food aid (food grown and subsidized in the United States) is dumped into Haiti, destroying the agricultural industry. By comparison, Venezuela is creating incentives for Haitian farmers to cultivate rice once again in an effort to develop food security and employment opportunities.

In contrast to the aid provided by the United States and other major donors, President Martelly has stated that Venezuela's aid comes without excessive conditions and bureaucratic controls. "Sometimes for a simple project, it might take too long for the project to happen," [he remarked](#) [12]. "If you're asking me which one flows better, which one is easier, I'll tell you Venezuela."

The foreign ministers of ALBA countries will meet at a summit to be held in Jacmel, Haiti in March. It would be naive to assume that the United States will let Haiti join ALBA or establish

deeper ties without a fight. U.S. diplomatic cables released by Wikileaks have [revealed](#) [13] that the United States government and the large oil companies fought to prevent Haiti from joining Petrocaribe under the administration of President Préval. The United States and big oil exerted significant political pressure upon Préval, fearing the loss of traditional geopolitical dominance, not to speak of handsome profit margins from fuel delivery. (Haiti received its first shipment of Petrocaribe fuel in March 2008.)

Haiti's entry into full membership of ALBA would unleash untold pressure upon whatever Haitian government attempts to do so. Whether President Martelly's gestures are acts of political posturing or a signal of genuine intention to join ALBA, it is too early to tell. What is clear is that ALBA has offered extensive and unconditional support to the Haitian people, in contrast to many hollow promises of the international community. It has provided a model of solidarity and sustainability which should be emulated in the reconstruction of Haiti.

Kevin Edmonds is a new NACLA blogger focusing on the Caribbean. For more from his blog, "The Other Side of Paradise," visit nacla.org/blog/other-side-paradise [1]. Edmonds is a former NACLA research associate and a current PhD student at the University of Toronto, where he is studying the impact of neoliberalism on the St. Lucian banana trade. See also the July/August 2010 NACLA Report, "[Fault Lines: Perspectives on Haiti's Earthquake](#) [14]."

Notes:

[1] <https://nacla.org/blog/other-side-paradise>

[2] <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6191?page=4>

[3] <http://cnsnews.com/news/article/ap-interview-haiti-leader-says-venezuela-aid-key>

[4] <http://www.counterpunch.org/2010/04/01/cuban-medical-aid-to-haiti/>

[5] <http://www.globalresearch.ca/index.php?context=va&aid=18784>

[6] <http://canadahaitiacion.ca/content/interview-cubas-health-care-miracle-haiti>

[7] <http://www.projectcensored.org/top-stories/articles/12-cuba-provided-the-greatest-medical-aid-to-haiti-after-the-earthquake/>

[8]

http://www.petrocaribe.org/index.php?tpl=interface.en/design/union/readmenuprinc_acerca.tpl.html&newsid_temas=4

[9] <http://canadahaitiacion.ca/node/448>

[10] http://m.jamaicaobserver.com/mobile/news/Haitian-president-says-Venezuela-aid-key_10323575

[11] <http://venezuelanalysis.com/news/6191>

[12] http://www.jamaicaobserver.com/news/Haitian-president-says-Venezuela-aid-key_10323575

[13] <http://www.thenation.com/article/161056/wikileaks-haiti-petrocaribe-files>

[14] <https://nacla.org/edition/6630>