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Latin American Debt: An Overview (Discussion Paper #58)

Antonio Jorge

Florida International University, Department of Economics, Antonio.Jorge@fiu.edu

Jorge Salazar-Carrillo

Florida International University, Department of Economics, Jorge.Salazar-Carrillo@fiu.edu

Raul Moncarz

Florida International University, Raul.Moncarz@fiu.edu

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The Latin American Debt: an Overview

Antonio Jorge
Jorge Salazar-Carrillo
Raul Moncarz

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Department of Economics
Florida International University
Miami, Florida 33199

THE LATIN AMERICAN DEBT:

AN OVERVIEW

Antonio Jorge

Jorge Salazar-Carrillo

Raul Moncarz

Universidad Internacional de la Florida

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"When asked to dine with caviar and wine, the Lady of Kent knew well what it meant, yet she went". Anonymous.

INTRODUCTION

The international environment since the 1970s has been one of successive shocks. These have come forth while the Eurodollar market consolidated as a system uncontrolled by the forces of the lenders of last resort in the different countries. The international monetary authorities delinked from gold and accepted the floating of currency exchange rates, and inflation and interest rates were allowed to vary widely and attain the highest levels in two decades. Confronted with such shocks, and facing the international conditions just outlined, the Latin Americans decided not to slow the wheels of industry by consuming less oil, but rather to increase their rates of growth.

Since the late forties the world has experienced an era of tremendous economic expansion. The Latin American countries, as part of the developing world, have been growing at rates seldom paralleled in history. Since 1950 the rates of economic growth of the developing countries have been averaging 5.5% a year, in real terms, with Latin America being slightly above the average. The ratios of investment and saving to total expenditure have increased substantially. In Latin America, gross domestic investment in the 1970s was close to

25% of gross domestic product. Of course, there was still a savings gap, and the usual need for capital inflows from those capital-rich countries. Thus, Latin America adjusted to the shocks, given the environment, by applying the same strategy that had worked before: growing out of its problems.

But in addition, the Latin American countries began to abandon their older beliefs in the benefits of import substituting industrialization as part of their adjustments to the momentous changes of the seventies. They opened their economies significantly. Export surpluses in trade balances have not been infrequent in Latin America during the seventies and early eighties. They are now only willing to promote import substituting industry to the extent that it is justifiable by dynamic comparative advantage within the various Latin American integration areas. They are not so prone either to undertake white-elephant type of investments or to grant types of protection that will create difficulties downstream for their export industries, and even their primary product lines.

However, as a result of this combination of environment and policy, the Latin American total foreign debt has reached \$350 billion. This debt is concentrated in the largest economies, and for those countries the interest payments on the debt now represent close to 50% of their export earnings. For 1982 and 1983, per capita income

has declined in these countries as they adjust their economies to heavy debt repayment.

In the sections that follow an attempt is made to consider the recent changes in the environment of international trade and finance, particularly as they concern the Latin American nations. These are complemented by an examination of development strategies in present day Latin America.

These pieces are followed by an analysis of possible solutions to short run dilemmas through international public lending, particularly examining the role of the InterAmerican Development Bank. In closing some conclusions are derived for economic stabilization policy in Latin America, and for international agreement on private debt repayment schemes.

RECENT CHANGES IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND FINANCE ¹

The apparent cornucopia brought about by an expanding world trade has never been a totally unmixed blessing. For one thing, like all cumulative growth mechanisms, it partakes of the "riding on a tiger" logic. Once the race starts, it cannot stop. At increasingly higher levels of activity the delicate mechanism of world trade can easily get derailed by a host of difficulties, ranging from the misalignment

of exchange rates to deflationary domestic policies, not to exclude the occurrence of purely stochastic events. Once one or a few countries begin to react defensively to adverse happenings, the stage is set for successive rounds of mutually damaging beggar-thy-neighbor type of policies.

Recent events in the international system of trade and finance provide a good illustration. The system was thrown out of kilter by the oil shock of 1974-1975, the oil shock of 1979-1980, and the subsequent financial shock of 1980-1982. Heightened interdependence had accentuated the role imports played in determining domestic macro-economic equilibrium,² particularly after the liberalization of trade that followed the Kennedy and Tokyo Rounds. However, the resulting world of the early eighties led to a rising tide of protectionism. Until 1984, international trade had first stagnated and then declined. After an average annual growth rate of eight percent in merchandise trade among industrial countries for the period 1950-1975, the real volume of world commerce increased by 1.5 percent in 1980, was flat in 1981, and actually declined in 1982 and 1983.³

In order to exemplify the nature of the highly sensitive interdependence between world economic activity and trade, Bergsten and Cline have recently postulated the following relationship: "When economic activity in the OECD countries is growing at a rate above

1.5 percent per year in real terms, their non-oil imports tend to grow about three times as fast; yet, when the growth of product and income is below 1.5 percent, their imports flatten out or decline".⁴ Thus, a current bright note is that economic expansion has been vigorous in the U. S. during the first, second, and third quarters of 1984 (at an annual rate of growth of G.N.P. of over 6 percent), following the strong recovery of the economy in 1983. Likewise, Western European economies appear to be showing an average growth rate of G.N.P. above two percent for the first three quarters of 1984. These encouraging developments may help to bring about an amelioration of the protectionist syndrome. In addition to the recent stagnation in international trade, a most unfavorable occurrence which also significantly worsened the Latin American economies, was also the drastic contraction in the flow of capital to less developed countries since 1982. To Latin America this had amounted to \$38 billion in 1981, declining to half that figure in 1982, and to less than \$4.5 billion in 1983. As a result, there were larger flows of capital from Latin America to the rest of the world of approximately \$20 billion in 1982 and \$29 billion in 1983. The decrease in capital imports predictably led to a rapid slow-down in the rate of growth of the external debt.⁵

According to the ECLA estimates, a successful rescheduling of the external debt which would be compatible with the maintenance of social and political stability in the area, by holding the line on per capita

income at the 1982 level, would require an annual flow of capital into Latin America of about \$35 billion, which would roughly cover upcoming debt obligations for the next two to three years. ⁶ As noted by the author in a recent publication: "If the flow of resources or its accompanying conditions are such as to curtail or hinder the normal servicing of the debt and the developmental process itself, this will tend to bring about the very results which are often feared by the most pessimistic observers. In that case, their inclination will be to attribute the experienced reality to the operation of some inevitable forces that predetermined the outcome itself rather than to the very same policies which are adopted in order to forestall its occurrence."

PRESENT DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES IN LATIN AMERICA

After the practical experiences of the post-war decades and the theoretical advances in the field of development strategy, largely based on accumulated empirical evidence, a sensible and eclectic position widely shared by many academicians and policy makers seems to be emerging. Extreme autarchic views and dependentist positions are rapidly receding as viable solutions to the complex problems of world development and trade. Although it is apparent that institutional and organizational changes and adjustments in the economic relations between developed and less developed countries, leading to a more balanced relationship among them, is clearly looming in the horizon

and gradually asserting itself as the wave of the future, it is equally evident that increasing interdependence and not de-linking is the only answer to the needs and aspirations of the people of the world.

Obviously, each country and regional grouping will have to find its own position, which in turn will probably have to change over time. Nonetheless, progress has been made insofar as the range of admissible deviation from the interval of efficient solutions has been narrowed. In this respect, it is interesting to refer in passing to the recent work of economists like Bela Balassa and Hollis Chenery as an example of this tendency.

In Essay 1 of his recently published book, The Newly Industrializing Countries in the World Economy, Balassa points out that: "The experience of developing countries in the post-war period leads to certain policy prescriptions. First, while infant industry considerations call for the preferential treatment of manufacturing activities, this should be done on a moderate scale, both to avoid the establishment and the maintenance of inefficient industries and to ensure the continued expansion of primary production for domestic and for foreign markets. Second, one should provide equal treatment to exports and to import substitution in the manufacturing sector, in order to ensure allocation according to comparative advantage and the exploitation of economies of scale." He goes on to indicate

that, "An outward-oriented development strategy should not be interpreted to mean favoring exports over import substitution. Rather, it is characterized by providing similar incentives to production for domestic and for export markets."

A very illuminating illustration of Balassa's views is their application to the experience of Latin American countries within the framework of first-stage and second-stage import substitution in the post-war period. His discussion of the experiences of Argentina, Brazil, Colombia, and Mexico, with initially heavily inward oriented strategies, followed by moderation of same after the beginning of the second stage, would seem to accord well with the actual performance of the countries in question.

Along the same lines, the most recent work of Hollis Chenery Structural Change and Development Policy,

which recapitulates and supplements his earlier investigations with Watanabe and Syrquin, fundamentally confirms the basic outline of Balassa's findings and his policy implications and prescriptions. After discussing various patterns of development based on empirical evidence regarding the strategies and policies adopted on the one hand and the actual economic performance of the countries involved on the other, Chenery indicates the advantages, shortcomings and limitations of these fundamental patterns: (a) primary oriented, (b) balanced and

(c) industry oriented. One overall conclusion of direct relevance to our concerns is that excessive protection, or its slanted application for the purpose of pursuing a strongly oriented import-substitution strategy, always proves very costly in the end in terms of a reduced rate of growth of the economy.

Latin American leaders and policy makers are very much aware of these realities. In this context, there are three other related considerations regarding the nature of the development process about which there is very little dispute nowadays and which serve to further narrow the area of divergence over the choice of strategy.

The first, directly tied to the notion of dynamic comparative advantage, reinforces a coordinated drive to bring about import substitution, along with the enlargement of the domestic market for the sake of exploiting economies of scale, and a simultaneous promotion of manufactured exports, without detriment to the cost structure of traditional exports.

The second point has to do with schemes of economic integration and regional trade. It is obvious that a sound and minimally balanced development process has to make use of the great internal possibilities of larger integration areas for real external economies of many different kinds. Not only would regional integration and cooperation serve

to greatly rationalize resource allocation patterns, but would also help to decrease the risks attendant on strictly subscribing to the international division of labor model. Latin America is large and diverse enough to fruitfully take advantage in seeking optimal patterns of regional and sub-regional specialization. ⁸

The third issue deals with the need to maintain socio-political stability. It is in this connection, that it must be insisted that any successful development strategy in Latin America must not lose sight of the necessity to pay heed to the basic needs approach. In the effort to meet short-run difficulties, one must not be oblivious to the fundamental requirements for stability and continuity, and of the true long term interests of the area.

Latin America does not need any radical revision of its developmental strategy. At this point, there are no longer any great theoretical debates on this topic. What is required is the necessary understanding and support to successfully negotiate short-term obstacles, imbalances and maladjustments which will inevitably take place both in the world and regional economy in the normal course of events.

PUBLIC INTERNATIONAL FINANCING

One of the major strands of the scenario that dawned upon the

world economy in the 1970s was the decline in the participation of official sources in supplying the financial needs of the developing world. The efforts devoted to aid and concessional lending by the advanced nations, as part of their G.N.P., began to drop noticeably towards the end of the development decade of the 1960s. The decade of the new international economic order that followed was one of increasing confrontations at the North/South dialogues and the UNCTAD meetings. The stage was set for a substantial vacuum to develop regarding the financial needs of the developing world.

Latin America, already ascribed as the middle class of the world, suffered more from the ebbing of development lending and aid. As the issue of graduation emerged in the mid 1970s, to complement the increasing concentration of development funding on low income countries, the poor segments of the population, and the basic needs approach, the countries of Latin America were forced to search for new sources of finance.

The first oil shock added a new dimension to international lending. Recycling provided new sources of funds, but a new borrowing need arose for the developing world over and above the long-standing capital formation requirements. Oil being perhaps the product of intermediate and final demand par excellence, it was essential to ensure a certain level of oil imports to keep the wheels turning, transportation running

and housing supplied with power for cooking and lighting. Again affected the most were the Latin American nations, which had greater intermediate and final consumption uses for what has been adroitly termed "black gold".

When international private banking began to increasingly utilize the liquidity available in the world money centers to recycle the balance of trade surpluses of the oil exporters, developing nations, and especially the Latin American countries, welcomed the move. Sharply increased loan volumes by the money-center banks in the U. S., Europe and Japan gave rise to an unparalleled decade of international private lending. Although the new lending was at higher rates of interest than the concessional financing previously available, all things considered, the cost differences were not that great, because of the flexibility, lack of conditionality and untied nature of the private funds.

A different world would be upon us nowadays if official assistance and lending had complied with the responsibilities that lay ahead in the decade of the 1970s, rather than shrink away from the financial needs of the less developed nations.⁹ It is true that the word of the day put forth by the advanced countries was that trade, not aid, would cure the ills of the developing world. Yet, the apparent dilemma between trade and aid was clearly a moot point.

With the mean relative levels of living of the developing countries being about one tenth of those of the developed world, clearly both sources of growth had to complement each other for some time yet.

More than a decade later the world has come full circle, and now is light years away from the failure of the Oil Facility at the IMF, after the first oil shock. The IMF, together with the World Bank and the cadre of regional banks and special lending agencies, are vigorously expanding their international lending and asserting their leadership in the field. They are filling the vacuum that they had once contributed to create. With international private lending to Latin America being mostly of an involuntary nature, this is a welcome change.

The world economy is a non-zero sum game in which the stronger countries probably have the most to gain. It is clear that the number one priority at the moment is to ensure the renewed growth of world trade and finance. To attain these objectives, the best prospects lie in the expansion of the activities of the international public lending agencies and official donors. The stability and growth of the world economy and the financial requirements of the developing world have become common cause.

With respect to Latin America however, there is an especially

treacherous road to traverse. The higher levels of income in the Western Hemisphere will make the international lending agencies hesitant to provide much increased resource flows to this part of the developing world over the longer future. It is here that the role of regional financial organizations, like the InterAmerican Development Bank, can become of utmost importance. This institution was designed for aiding in the developing process of Latin America, and will not shy away from such responsibility despite pressures from the issue of graduation. Yet it must attract increasing sources of finance so as to funnel the capital available in the world markets and the advanced countries towards the middle-class nations of Latin America. To better ponder the performance that can be expected from the InterAmerican Development Bank in the future, the recent trajectory of its financial operations should be reviewed.

RECENT FINANCIAL ACTIVITIES OF THE INTERAMERICAN DEVELOPMENT BANK

In 1983, the InterAmerican Development Bank increased its lending to Latin America to a total of \$3.05 billion dollars a year. although this was the authorized volume, loan disbursements were much less, amounting to \$1.73 billion. This represented a 14% increase over the 1982 disbursements.

Cognizant of the predicament described above, the Bank has just finished a replenishment operation that would boost its capital

subscription to \$30.81 billion in total resources at the end of 1983. At the same time, the Bank has increased its borrowings in the world's capital markets, having borrowed \$1.41 billion in 1983, and has been placing several issues, amounting to \$1.70 billion dollars, in 1984.

Since most of the subscriptions constitute callable capital, the Bank uses the paid subscriptions, the borrowings, its level of reserves (which stood at \$2.23 billion dollars at the end of 1983) and loan repayments to conduct ordinary business. However, the new subscriptions constitute an impressive backing for the operations of the IDB, and represent a very solid leveraging of all the loans authorized by the Bank.

Concentrating on the replenishment agreed upon in 1983, it will constitute an increase of \$15.70 billion dollars in the Bank's resources during the 1983-86 period, or an almost 50% increase by 1986. Although operations will not expand that quickly as long as the paid-in portion of the capital expansion remains small, the 1984 contributions (\$1.275 billion) represent important additions to the paid-in capital of the Bank, which at the end of 1983 amounted to \$2.10 billion dollars.

The Bank adopted in 1983 a special program of interest rate deductions, financed from its capital resources. This would mean that

certain hard-pressed countries were charged below normal rates of interest for some loans. At the same time, it began undertaking a qualitative program to provide special lending to countries experiencing grave balance-of-payment problems and debt repayment stringencies. It should be noted that the IDB has been entrusted with coordinating, at the international level, the public and private assistance to Central America, which is carrying an unusual burden in terms of its political crisis, over and above the afflictions generally affecting the rest of Latin America.

An accomplishment of the Bank in 1983 was the creation of the InterAmerican Investment Corporation, which will act like the World Bank's International Finance Corporation (IFC). It will operate with equity capital geared to help small and medium-sized enterprises with capital infusions that would help promote private investment in Latin America.

This initiative will complement the co-financing that the IDB has been conducting for some years without much success. Such complementary financing only raised \$30 million in the world's private capital markets during 1983. In contrast with the usual IDB terms, co-financing loans charge the prevailing rates in the credit markets, generally a fixed spread over LIBOR or the prime rate. This is in contrast with "loans extended directly by the Bank....which may vary from 1% to 4% on concessionary resources to the 11% rate in effect

will have to provide for Latin American nations a respite of several years in making amortization and interest payments on their foreign debts.

If export earnings continue to revive, and if voluntary private lending resumes, the greatly expanded contribution that international public lenders and rich country donors will have to provide (as bridge loans, emergency short-term lending, larger quotas in international institutions, increased aid flows, etc.) in these long-range re-schedulings may substantially diminish. Nonetheless, the healthy recovery and continued expansion in the world's economy over the 1980s and 1990s, require a clear leadership role on the part of the industrial nations, which must be accompanied by the acceptance of their responsibility in providing ample development financing for their less fortunate partners in the international economic network.

CONCLUSION

The trade surpluses that have been created in the short-run, and which have resulted in the servicing and repayment of over 30 billion in Latin American debt in 1983, have been the result of sharply tightening imports.

As a result, production began disintegrating in Latin America, with scarcities of basic inputs providing the spark. Clearly the reactivation of the Latin American economies has to go hand in hand with the expansion of their export earnings. Actually the volume of exports of Latin America has increased significantly over the past two or three years, but their value has not. In terms of total activity, the per capita gross national product of these countries suffered a steep decline since 1981.

To allow this positive-sum-game solution to take hold in the Latin American economies, it is essential that rescheduling of their external debts be accomplished following a long-run general plan of action, agreed upon between private and public lenders, and the borrowing nations. Such overall solution would be applied to each individual country in accordance with the casuistic demand made by the particular circumstances characterizing them. It is obvious such a scheme

on disbursements made on new conventional loans in 1983." 10

Finally, a new program that should also be highlighted is the special lending provided for exports and industrial reactivation. This program, initiated in 1982, is predicated upon the need of the Latin American countries to increase exports, so as to generate the trade surpluses required to service their external debt. Such efforts cannot be expected to succeed unless their internal economic activity rebounds from the cyclical troughs experienced in 1983. Industrial loans have been earmarked for countries where capacity utilization has been quite low, mainly as a result of scarcities of intermediate inputs imported from abroad.

From the above it is clear that the IDB, even with the recent replenishment, cannot be expected to soon attract the resources required to come close to serving the annual loan requirements of Latin America. In the next few years, the Bank will at best be disbursing streams of funds that may approach the \$3 billion a year mark. However, if the rich donor countries and international lending institutions would expand their activities at rates of growth similar to those of the InterAmerican Development Bank (about 15% a year) an important dent will be made in the overall problems of financing investment and economic development in Latin America.

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2. "From 1953-54 to 1979-80, imports of goods and services as a share of GNP rose from 4.3 percent to 10.6 percent in the United States; an average of 16.8 percent to 22.2 percent in England, France, and Germany; and 11.8 percent to 14.9 percent in Japan", International Monetary Fund, International Financial Statistics, May 1978 and April 1982.
3. "Introduction and Summary" by William R. Cline, ed., Trade Policy in the 1980s, Institute for International Economics, 1981.
4. These results are from regression analysis contained in C. Fred Bergsten and William R. Cline, "Trade Policy in the 1980s: An Overview," in William R. Cline, ed., Trade Policy in the 1980s, op. cit., Ch. 2.
5. The statistical information is from Economic Commission For Latin America (ECLA), "Balance Preliminar de la Economia Latino Americana en 1983", 1984.
6. See E C L A., "La Crisis Mundial y America Latina", 1984.
7. See Antonio Jorge, Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, and Enrique Sanchez, ed., Trade, Debt and Growth in Latin America, Pergamon Press, 1984.
8. Refer to Antonio Jorge and Jorge Salazar-Carrillo, Integracion y Cooperacion en America Latina, University Press of Florida, 1982, for a detailed examination of this and related questions.
9. In another sense, the developing world was let down by the parsimony of the advanced nations in the 70s and early 80s. Since the 1950s these countries had been chided (particularly the Latin American ones) by the industrial nations for closing up their economies, undertaking infant industry protection and using scarce resources on "white elephant" projects. They were asked to convert to the wonders of international trade and neo-classical resource allocation, to recognize the contributions of foreign investment, etc. Yet, as soon as many developing nations, and finally even the

heretic Latin Americans, decided to adopt this dogma and establish outward looking policies, the advanced world pulled away from the even then not fulfilling levels of aid of the 1950s and 1960s.

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