

## **WTO and Global Health (or ill-health)**

In Bolivia, a country with a population of over 8,000, 000 people, it has been estimated that 50% of the population is infected with Chagas Disease with 60% of the country declared as endemic<sup>1</sup>. Fifty thousand people die from this illness in Latin America every year. Bolivia has the highest incidence of infection in the region, the majority of who live in poverty-stricken areas. Half of the population – some 3.5 million people – is at risk. Chagas has also been referred to as the ‘forgotten disease’ or the ‘silent killer’ since very little research is carried out to find a cure or a vaccine and it is often absent from the development agendas of many bilateral and international agencies. MSF goes onto say, “In the developed western world, these figures would have long ago motivated pharmaceutical companies to develop a cure – or at least an effective treatment or vaccine. But Chagas is also known as a ‘disease of the poor’ and this is the reason why, for 30 years now, there has only been one treatment, already obsolete: and still the side effects, resistance or incompatibilities are not yet known.” Bastien says, “Tropical diseases in impoverished countries receive little recognition and research. Chagas Disease is a poverty-driven disease.”<sup>2</sup> Other neglected tropical diseases such as guinea worm, river blindness and trachoma predominately found in Africa are also diseases which primarily affect the poorer sectors of these societies.

It is well known that pharmaceutical companies which are profit-driven will not invest money into projects which will in the long run cost more than the potential of benefits gained. As Bakan says in his critique of corporations, “Developing drugs to deal with personality disorders in family pets seems to have a higher priority than controlling diseases that kill millions of human beings each year.”<sup>3</sup> Pharmaceutical companies are key actors in a world economy buttressed by trade agreements and policies stipulated by the WTO in their favor which often leaves governments of poorer countries in vulnerable and weaker positions.

I argue that the World Trade Organization and other multilateral agencies such as the World Bank and IMF perpetuate a form of global injustice expressed as health disparities within developing countries by proposing and implementing agreements and policies expounded by these entities. These agreements and policies are fundamentally entrenched in patriarchal, liberalized thought which basically holds individualism, self-interests and economic gains as their principle tenets. As St. Clair says, “organizational cultures and dominant experts in these global institutions tend to be dominated by neo-liberal economics, ill prepared to deal with the complexities of development processes and their impact on people’s lives and the environment.”<sup>4</sup> Using Chagas Disease and other neglected tropical diseases I will argue that an ethical dimension needs to be included in the political structures and thought of these large global institutions. I will also refer to Iris Young’s work on social justice where she describes the need to move beyond the distributive paradigm where the focus is on the patterns of distribution to one which focuses on the level of participation in deliberative and decision-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.msf.org/msfinternational>

<sup>2</sup> J. Bastien, *The Kiss of Death: Chagas Disease in the Americas*, p. xix University of Utah Press c.1998

<sup>3</sup> J. Bakan, Chapter 2 Business as Usual, from *The Corporation*. NY: The Free Press, 2004

<sup>4</sup> St. Clair, Asuncion, A Methodologically Pragmatist Approach to Development Ethics in *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol 3: 2 August 2007

making processes. According to Young, “The concepts of domination and oppression, rather than the concept of distribution should be the starting point for a conception of social justice.”<sup>5</sup>

Firstly I will briefly discuss the situation of Chagas Disease in Latin America and primarily in Bolivia and the social implications of neglected diseases. In discussing the WTO, World Bank and the IMF, I will also analyze the Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Agreement (TRIPS) in an attempt to show how the revision of this agreement is crucial to providing countries with more autonomy in the management of their health programs and provision of generic medicines. Following this I will expand more on Young’s work exploring the five faces of oppression she introduces: exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence and discuss how in the practice this is evident through neglected diseases and the interplay of institutions such as the WTO, World Bank and IMF. I also argue that a political approach which includes an ethical dimension will also provide rationality not purely instrumental in nature and a way to address the collective interests of people in an endeavor to stimulate change to alter current injustices and disparities.

**Keywords:** WTO, neglected diseases, social justice, ethics

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<sup>5</sup> Young, I, 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. p.16 Princeton University Press, Princeton