

Can GATT really go green?

Increased world trade leads to higher per capita incomes, and with that the freedom and incentive to devote a growing proportion of national expenditure to the environment." So says the GATT Secretariat's summary of the world trade body's recent study regarding trade policies and the environment. The assumption is based on data such as the rate of sulfur dioxide emissions compared to gross domestic product per capita; the richer a country, the less it pollutes is the conclusion. The analysis is based, not on total SO₂ pollution, but on additional units of pollution above a determined level (which is not mentioned). It is certain that all countries pollute, rich and poor, yet GATT has decided that because some can afford catalytic converters on their cars and smokestacks, they pollute less and therefore unfettered trade is alright.

There are, however, always two sides to a coin. Prosperity also gave rise to such infamous offspring as DDT. Having wrecked ecological havoc for several decades through irresponsible use, the prosperous nations banned the pesticide within their own borders but continue to exercise their 'Freedom and incentive,' provided by unrestricted trade to prosper from sales to less developed nations. Undoubtedly a study would show that DDT contamination in rich nations is less than in poor ones, but what does it prove about the environmental benefits of free trade?

The GATT analysis also ignores the detrimental environmental consequences that prosperity has provided: the dramatic increase in petro-chemical fertilizers as a substitute for manure in achieving improved crop yields; the tremendous rise in energy consumption by machinery as a substitute for labour; the higher use of drugs and additives with the intensification of livestock husbandry. Yes, prosperity has given developed nations the means to benefit from this trade in agricultural inputs, but has also hidden from view the costs associated with their use. Poorer nations may not have the resources to install catalytic converters but equally they do not have the surplus of wealth to spray their crops every Sunday - whether they need to or not.

The GATT proposition is that prosperity equals environmental protection, a simplistic assumption that appears ludicrous in light of the consumptive binge that the developed world has enthusiastically pursued in this century, and which the less developed nations wish to emulate before 'last call' comes round. The latest GATT proposal concedes that nations should have the right to implement environmental programs without penalty in terms of trade. The world trade organization warns, however, that environmental rules should not be used as a barrier to trade. "It is no longer possible for a country to create an appropriate environmental policy on its own," states the GATT study. What this means is that the Canadian government may grant its farmers the financial resources to construct environmentally-sound manure handling facilities but cannot (necessarily) tell another

nation, either on a competitive or environmental basis, that because they use DDT their products cannot enter Canada.

The GATT fancies that if all nations are equal in trading practices, they will all become equal in environmental matters. It is a precarious notion that has little will to stand in the way of improved profit margins. This light-hearted treatment of the environment makes the GATT beyond greening, and clear that a parallel set of world rules for environmental practices must be developed, ones that will one day supersede trading rules in national priorities. The GATT talks may conclude this April but the negotiations for a more prosperous agricultural and environmental world will begin this June, first with the meeting of the International Federation of Agricultural Producers (IFAP) in Quebec City, where an environmental agenda will be developed for, secondly, the international environmental conference to be held in Brazil later that month.

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