

Trade, Health and Poverty

Voices from developing nations

TRANSCRIPT

from video news feature cablecast at WTO meeting in Cancun

Developing countries face major problems that are virtually unknown in the United States and Europe. Unless they are addressed, the World Trade Organization and its members will be unsuccessful in their efforts to spur economic growth and development, achieve a more stable and equitable world, and generate greater health and prosperity for the Earth's poorest citizens.

This is the transcript from a video program that was produced by twelve international public policy institutes, and broadcast over the WTO closed-circuit television system during the WTO meeting in Cancun, Mexico, September 10-14, 2003.

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Speakers: Thompson Ayodele (Nigeria), Roger Bate (Africa Fighting Malaria), Eneas Biglione (Argentina), Leon Louw (South Africa), Barun Mitra (India), James Shikwati (Kenya)

1. ARUNGA. Thousands of World Trade Organization delegates have gathered here in Cancun, to negotiate changes in the way nations conduct business among themselves. One of their goals is to make the world's trade and commerce system more equitable for developing countries. I'm June Arunga. I'm from Kenya, and I know poverty.

2. ARUNGA. This ministerial meeting will help determine whether billions of people enjoy better, longer lives, hope and opportunity – or merely endure more misery, disease and daily struggles for simple survival. They are counting on the WTO to make sure trade and environmental regulations do not keep their countries locked in squalor.

3. ARUNGA. For centuries, trade has helped generate prosperity, opportunity, better health and improved environmental quality. Today, developing countries want to share more fully in these benefits.

4. BIGLIONE. But if the WTO lets environmental agreements take precedence over trade treaty obligations, some industrialized nations will use those agreements to cover up for more trade protectionism. And impoverished developing countries will continue to suffer.

5. ARUNGA. For 2 billion people in Africa, Asia and Latin America, electricity is virtually unknown. Cooking, heating and indoor lighting mean burning cow dung, or forests. Their homes are thick with smoke from fires that belch soot, bacteria and pollution.

6. AYODELE. In many places, water doesn't come from a tap. It's carried in cans, on heads or shoulders, maybe for miles. It comes from lakes and rivers that are filled with eroded soil and dangerous bacteria.

7. ARUNGA. Depleted soils, droughts and the absence of modern equipment mean subsistence farmers can barely feed their families. In many areas, malnutrition is so widespread that any plant, fish, mammal or even insect is fair game for the next meal – no matter how endangered it might be.

8. ARUNGA. Disease is rampant. Malaria alone afflicts 300 million people every year – and kills 2 million. That's like the entire population of Houston, Texas disappearing every year.

9. SHIKWATI. Half of these malaria victims are children, and most live in sub-Saharan Africa. Many who don't die get so sick, they can't work or go to school for weeks or even months. And malaria makes many people so weak that they die from other diseases you rarely hear about in Europe or the United States of America.

10. BATE. Pesticides, especially DDT, would kill mosquitoes that carry malaria and yellow fever. Just spraying tiny amounts of DDT on the inside walls of homes, just once a year, can reduce malaria rates by 80 percent. If we're forced to use just bed nets and drugs, a million people will die every year, who would live if we could also use DDT.

11. ARUNGA. Dysentery and diarrhea kill a million adults and 3 million children a year in developing countries. Lung diseases kill another million women and 4 million infants and children annually.

12. ARUNGA. Many of these impoverished countries have received aid from developed nations – trillions of dollars over the past 50 years. We are grateful. But more foreign aid is not the answer.

13. SHIKWATI. Foreign aid is like life support for corrupt politicians who keep their people poor. We need free and open trade, access to modern technology, the right to solve our critical health and energy problems.

14. MITRA. Free the people, and they will fish for themselves. Don't chain us with restrictions, and prevent us from addressing the problems that are killing our people. Let us trade with the world. Then our creative, hard-working people will prosper. Trade is the key to prosperity – not aid.

15. ARUNGA. Good health care and good jobs require electricity. To power hospitals, light schools, modernize farms and factories, and operate water purification plants. Wind and solar cannot generate enough power to meet the needs of a modern society, even if we blanket vast scenic areas and wildlife habitats. And they would leave us without electricity when the sun isn't shining or the wind isn't blowing.

16. BIGLIONE. Only hydroelectric, fossil fuel and nuclear power plants can provide enough affordable, reliable electricity. Without them, we will always be poor.

17. ARUNGA. Biotechnology could replace crops that are being devastated by disease and drought. It could help feed people, and reduce the need for pesticides. It could

provide vaccines against diseases, and help prevent blindness and deaths, by ensuring that people get enough Vitamin A and other nutrients.

18. BIGLIONE. If developing countries have to continue using subsistence farming – what some call organic farming – to feed more people, they'll have to cut and plow rain forests and wildlife habitats the size of the Yucatan, maybe more. The less we can produce from a section of farmland, the more land we have to plow under. We don't want that to happen, but don't want to go hungry, either.

19. ARUNGA. Most developing workers see factory jobs as a ticket out of rural poverty. They get angry when they hear that activists caused local factories to close – or chased potential new jobs away. Even tedious, low-paying jobs, they say, are far better than backbreaking subsistence farming – far better than no jobs at all.

20. MITRA. When anti-sweatshop activists force factories to close, it is the very workers who suffer the most. Many women and children were forced to walk the street [as prostitutes], when garment factories in Bangladesh were closed.

21. ARUNGA. British scientist C.P. Snow once said: "If you want to go without much food, see most of your children die in infancy, accept twenty years off your own life – then I respect you for the strength of your aesthetic revulsion. But I don't respect you in the slightest if you try to impose the same choice on others who are not free to choose."

22. ARUNGA. Unfortunately, many here in Cancun promote policies that do exactly that.

23. LOUW. People say developing countries aren't ready to make informed choices about energy, pesticides, biotechnology or jobs. We don't want them imposing choices that may be wrong for us, based on First World preferences and fears that are irrelevant to our situations. We want to make our own decisions, even if we make occasional mistakes along the way.

24. AYODELE. Too many developed countries keep our products and crops out, by saying we have to comply with sustainable development rules, the precautionary principle – or treaties on chemicals or global warming. This protects *their* industries and jobs, but it hurts us.

25. ARUNGA. Developing countries face huge, life-threatening dangers. They *must* be allowed to address these problems, using whatever means and technologies *they* decide are most appropriate.

26. MITRA. Life-or-death "needs of the present" must not be made slaves to vague and emotional claims about the needs of future generations. The future will never do anything for the present, and so the present should not be sacrificed. Reducing consumption, restricting trade and imposing environmental regulations is worse than colonialism. It's eco-imperialism, and it's killing our people today.

27. ARUNGA. Three billion people – half the world's population – live on less than \$700 a year. Nearly a billion struggle to exist on less than \$200 a year. Meanwhile, European farmers get \$250 a year in subsidies for every cow.

28. ARUNGA. Subsidies like these, for farmers and other industries often price developing country foods and products out of European and US markets. They prevent our countries from exporting the few things we have to sell.

29. LOUW. The entire debate about world trade presumes that we should be concerned about businesses and farmers. But the purpose of trade is to benefit **consumers**. What matters, and what's ethical, is to allow the poor consumers of the world to buy the world's cheapest products, and sell freely to its richest countries. And for the poor of the world to use DDT to save lives, and biotech crops to compete with First World agriculture.

30. BATE. Health and environmental development are impossible without economic growth. If rich countries don't eliminate trade barriers, we will never have economic progress.

31. SHIKWATI. Kenyan plant biologist Florence Wambugu says, "I appreciate ethical concerns, but anything that doesn't help feed our children is **unethical**." She's quite right.

32. ARUNGA. Truly responsible and ethical trade policies would end these subsidies, tariffs and environmental linkages. They'd let developing nations trade and prosper. Recognize that these nations are responsible and mature enough to make their own decisions. And acknowledge that they could get themselves out of poverty, if the WTO and developed countries make sure that trade and environmental policies help us, instead of hinder us.

33. ARUNGA. That's the challenge here in Cancun. This meeting offers an exciting opportunity for developing nations to work with their Northern Hemisphere partners. If the World Trade Organization takes the lead, listens to the voices of developing countries, and gives them a chance to trade – without being subjected to subsidies and restrictions – people's lives, and their environment, will improve tremendously over the coming years.

34. ARUNGA. I'm June Arunga, vice president of the Inter-Region Economic Network of Kenya, with a vision of economic freedom for the hard-working individuals in developing countries. Thank you for listening.

Sponsoring organizations:

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