

Evaluating the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IRSA): Economic, Social and the Environmental Impacts in the Amazon Countries in the Cardoso and Lula Governments (1995-2010)

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Introduction:

Since the 1990s Brazil began to take special interest in South American affairs, specifically during the presidencies of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (2003-2010), which resulted in the strengthening of MERCOSUL.

During this period, countries with the highest economic growth were those located around the Pacific Rim, which made the Brazilian Amazon region increasingly important because of its shared border with countries with access to the Pacific, such as Peru.

Today, this trend in international growth has continued and Brazil is working to increase the Initiative for the Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) in order to gain access to the Pacific. However the construction of a new road or the improvement of an existing road on adjacent territories may also involve economic, social and environmental dimensions.

For this reason the concept of “Strategic Environmental Assessment” (SEA) is very important because the objective is not to promote more or less deforestation *per se*, but to analyze how changes in land-use affect the lives of the people living in the Amazon and what the implications are for the rest of the world in terms of reduced environmental services.

Recognizing that deforestation has both costs and benefits, and beginning to measure the magnitude of these, is the first step towards developing meaningful international and domestic policies that will deliver both the environmental services so desired in the North hemisphere as well as the economic development so needed in the South hemisphere.

1- Brazil’s role in the South American integration during the presidencies of Fernando Henrique Cardoso (1995-2002) and Luiz Inácio “Lula” da Silva (2003-2010)

The proposal for a South American Free Trade Area (SAFTA) was first outlined by Brazilian President Itamar Franco in September 1993 and was presented to a meeting of the Latin American Association of Integration (ALADI) in February 1994. The goal of SAFTA was to create a free trade zone for “substantially all trade” within the subcontinent, through a linear, automatic, and progressive schedule of liberalization over the ten-year period of 1995 to 2005. By launching SAFTA, Brazil was promoting a concept of ALADI without Mexico, “a scheme that would be free of US interference and which the hegemonic role would inevitably be played by Brazil” (CARRANZA, 2000, p. 84-85). The same author added:

Brazil has been playing such a role in Mercosur, and could potentially play the same role in a future South American Free Trade Area (SAFTA). From this perspective, Mercosur can be seen as an assertion of Brazilian regional hegemony rather than as a step toward Western hemispheric integration under US leadership. The prospects for the emergence of SAFTA depend to a significant extent on whether Brazil can consolidate its hegemonic role in the subcontinent or whether US

hegemony in the Western Hemisphere completely overshadows and neutralizes Brazilian hegemony in South America (CARRANZA, 2000, p. 29)

Sean W. Burges sustains that Brazil does not have enough resources to support the development of South America integration. He defends an interesting thesis in which he argues that the solution to the resource-scarcity conundrum facing foreign-policy makers during the Cardoso period was to use the opening of the subregional and regional context as a device to capture the influence necessary to guide and direct the continental environment from within. At the same time, this opening would simultaneously create a degree of insulation from potential hemispheric and global intervention. In his perspective, there was a complex mix of ideas based on a **reformulated dependency view of developing-country insertion into the global economy** with economic initiatives such as region formation on a subregional and continental scale as well as the Initiative for Regional Infrastructure Integration in South America (IIRSA) (BURGES, 2007, p. 4, my highlight)

The former Brazilian President Cardoso said that the regional integration efforts could not stop Mercosur from remaining alive and active. “The integration of our physical space has become one of the goals of the planning proposals that we take to the meetings of the Presidents of the countries of South America”. He reported that after this point, they launched the initiatives of the Brazil-Bolivia gas pipeline, the energy integration with Argentina, the BR-173 highway between Manaus and the border with Venezuela. In addition, they launched the line of transmission of the Guri Dam in Venezuela, one of the largest hydroelectric dams in the world, bringing energy from the neighboring country to the Amazon region (this began in the second term of Venezuela President Rafael Caldera (1994-1999) and concluded under the government of his successor, Hugo Chávez). FHC concluded:

In Brasilia in August 2000, we called the first historic meeting that brought together all the presidents of South America, which was followed by another meeting in Guayaquil, Ecuador in 2001. That meeting saw the beginning of what would be called the Initiative for the Infrastructural Integration of the South American Region, known by its Portuguese acronym IIRSA. With the support of the IDB over the following years, the governments of the countries of South America carried out an extensive study of the needs and possibilities of physical integration of the region, selecting a set of strategic projects for the development of the continent. These complementary efforts to build a “South American Region” relates to the regional integration of energy, transport, and telecommunications. Politically, however, it seem to a few countries, especially Mexico, that the initiative could mean the isolation of the South American nations, under the leadership of Brazil, from the rest of Latin America that is closer to the United States. This was never the intention. (CARDOSO, 2006, p. 620).

In Sean Burges’ opinion Brazil “has a long history of acting to protect its own interests in the Americas by quietly influencing and pressuring its neighbors, a process that accelerated toward the end of the twentieth century.” Still this author says that the fact that “such actions have often gone largely unnoticed is not just a by-product of broad international indifference to Brazil’s foreign policy, but also a result of the methods that the Brazilian Foreign Ministry, Itamaraty, uses to pursue the country’s international agenda.” He complemented his idea explaining that:

(...) overt action or intervention has not been the norm. Rather, the strategy has been one of secreting the country's integrated and sustained ambitions for hemispheric and global leadership behind a cloak of indirect and ostensibly technocratic apolitical programs, well wrapped in an added mantle of multilateralism and often run through other government ministries and agencies (BURGES, 2007, p. 1).

Burges continues to explain why sometimes seemingly unrelated Brazilian initiatives pursued in the South American context provide a clear picture of how Itamaraty goes about advancing Brazil's international agenda. In this way, this author develops the notion of "consensual hegemony" related to the role of Brazil on South America. He argues that:

Nuance is important. Traditional conceptions of leadership as relying on forms of coercion and domination played little role in the approach adopted by Itamaraty during the Cardoso era. Instead, a new style of leadership was developed, one that found parallels in the Gramscian student-teacher dialectic's focus on consensus creation, discussion, and mutual internalization of new ideas and techniques. **The intent was not to seek Brazilian leadership of a South American region through imposition, but to instigate a mutually beneficial ordering that would quietly embed Brazilians interests, aspirations, and strategies in the region. While this goal was sometimes hinted at in official statements and academic analyses, it was not explicitly proclaimed or comprehensively examined until the transition to the Lula presidency** (BURGES, 2007, p. 185, my highlight).

Burges asserts that Brazil's foreign-policy makers sought to deploy ostensibly apolitical or technocratic agreements as a tool for reforming production structures and fostering the confidence and interdependence necessary to support Brazil-centered regional projects. He concluded:

The inclusive nature of a Gramsci-inspired approach to leadership predicated on the notion of consensual hegemony, particularly in the fostering of substate-level interaction between countries, emerges clearly in the contrasting analysis of Mercosul, SAFTA, and IIRSA to strongly suggest that political intent is not enough to form a region. Rather, political initiatives must be married with leadership in concrete and seemingly apolitical policies such as infrastructure integration to bring about the mutual interpenetration necessary to incite pressure from civil society and business groups for a continuation and deepening of the regional project. The emphasis on cooperation and inclusion free of aggressive coercion is critical because, as has been argued here, the formation and operation of a successful region depends on decisions made by business independent of state influence. In short, the ultimate decision by business and wider population to embrace a regional project on a sustained basis will be based on a calculation of interests, not on political rhetoric. As the brief discussion of Lula's continuation of the consensual hegemony leadership strategy suggests, an important part of the approach adopted by Itamaraty during the Cardoso era was a clear and sustained willingness to actively disavow leadership ambitions when solid, fungible resources were not available consistently to offer payoffs in return for acquiescence to the regional project (BURGES, 2007, p. 185-186).

Burges further shows that Brazil during the Cardoso era and the first Lula administration remained economically and politically unable to underwrite and sustain the development of neighboring countries. In this sense Brazil was unable to

truly take on the responsibility of leadership and fulfill the role of an economic engine for South America, “a shortcoming demonstrated by the paucity of complex transnationalized production chains and the slow spread of Brazilian firms throughout the continent.” However, he argues that it would be wrong to suggest that policy in the economic dimension was a failure:

Just as the ideational basis of the regional leadership project offered positive returns, so did efforts aimed at tighter economic integration. The advent and preservation of Mercosul allowed a transformation in trade patterns and the consolidation of value-added industries in addition to providing an expanded market to entice sustained inward flow of foreign direct investment. Elaboration of a continental energy matrix allowed Brazil to convert its greatest economic weakness into a strategic strength as it transformed energy dependency into a device to deepen ties with neighboring countries, especially Argentina, Paraguay, Bolivia, and Venezuela. Indeed, the combination of an emergent industrialized market in Mercosul and the deepened economic ties on the continent precipitated by the energy matrix pointed toward the potential for expanded intra-South American trade (BURGES, 2007, p. 187-188).

For these considerations, the proposal of IIRSA seems very useful in considering the role of Brazil in the integration of South America, as this initiative opens perspectives of mutual advantages between Brazil and its neighbors.

2- The potentials and the limits of IIRSA

Pitou van Dijck argues that infrastructure plays a key role in stimulating economic growth by facilitating production and trade, thus generating income and employment. Without efficient transportation and communication infrastructure, economic agents face high costs that hamper production, trade, and consumption, and consequently reduce welfare. Adds:

Particularly, countries that pursue export-orientated development policies may suffer greatly from a lack of efficient (transport) infrastructure. Transportation costs may be expressed in terms of their import tariff equivalents, and their impact on welfare may be considered in similar ways. IIRSA is part of a comprehensive set of policy initiatives to strengthen the position of South America in the global economy. The new insertion of the region in world markets was initiated by a process of unilaterally implemented trade liberalization, strengthened by group-wise initiatives to improve market access, and locked in at the multilateral level. Stabilization and restructuring policies, aiming at the liberalization of trade and capital movement, privatization, and regional integration, have made the region's prospects to improve the standard of living more dependent on the capability of domestic producers to compete in domestic and foreign markets and to supply worldwide the required quantities and qualities in time. To support domestic producers to meet this challenge, a broad array of measures is required to facilitate trade and enhance trade-related capacity (DIJCK, 2008, p. 106).

Dijck argues that the renewed insertion of the South American countries in world markets coincides and is partly induced by the emergence of new centers of gravity in the world economy, offering new trade opportunities and challenges. This holds true especially for the growing significance of East Asia, and China in particular, as an importer of South American commodities. This explains part of the increased interest

in the relations between Brazil and the countries of the Amazon basin, since these countries have natural access to Pacific Ocean, and thus East Asia. As Enrique Amayo Zevallos pointed out in 1993:

From our perspective, the **Amazon will not remain apart from the Pacific Ocean. Sooner or later the links will be established, and the natural exit will be through Peru; we call it *natural* because it is the shortest distance, and the least difficult, between the Brazilian Amazon and the Pacific coast.** You only need to look at maps to come to this conclusion (AMAYO Z., 2009, p. 106, my highlight).

As Amayo explained, this shorter distance means lower transportation costs and the Peruvian coast benefits from having the best position in South America to transport commodities to key spots in the Pacific. He concludes:

Brazil is a major soy bean producer, and its largest soy crops are located closer to Peru than to the Atlantic Coast. Brazil would certainly benefit from selling larger volumes to the insatiable Asian market, with more competitive transport costs. Peru would benefit mainly from the port construction, and corresponding revenues from a port that probably would be the largest in the Pacific Coast of South America. Moreover, the volumes of Peruvian sales of fishery and phosphates to Brazil would increase. With the easy access, Brazil could buy the natural fertilizer at lower prices, causing less damage to its environment. Therefore, both countries would benefit from a link between the Brazilian Amazon and the Pacific Ocean through northern Peru, a model to other partnerships in the subcontinent.

The opinion of Pitou van Dijck is also valid when he says that the rise of Asia not only contributes to Latin America's export potential but may also jeopardize its aspirations of becoming a platform for manufacturing production and assembly for the international market.

The overall structure of IIRSA involves three regional development banks: the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Andean Development Corporation (CAF) and the Financial Fund for the Development of the Rio de la Plata Basin (FONPLATA). Moreover, the European Investment Bank (EIB) will be involved in view of its particular expertise in the areas of cross-border financial and legal institutional cooperation. All this does not exclude that at a later stage other official and private financial institutions will be involved. Clearly, co-financing arrangements are actively pursued and so are PPPs arrangements." The same researches add: "The principal advantage of PPPs is that they enable governments to make use of private sector finance, efficiency and innovation, thereby reducing the costs of infrastructure services for the public sector while at the same time improving quality. (...) For governments with large fiscal problems PPPs can offer interesting opportunities to elevate infrastructure investments and stimulate economic growth. **However, economic theory and the international experience with PPPs over the last decade also show that PPPs are not a guarantee for high-quality and cost-efficient infrastructure. Negative financial and fiscal consequences of PPPs can be substantial, particularly when the organization and regulation of such contracts are not accurately defined** (DIJCK and HAAK, 2006, p. 2-4, my highlight).

Indeed, IIRSA and Public-Private Partnerships (PPP) plans for the construction of several transcontinental roads, linking the Atlantic side of the region with the Pacific, the so-called *bioceánicas*, not only facilitate Latin America's export drive but may also contribute to competition in the regional market by Asia's industry. In support of an enhanced insertion in international markets, measures are required that complement the traditional agenda of shallow liberalization, focusing on the abolishment of barriers to trade and integration at the borders. In contrast with shallow integration, deeper integration may be conceived of as a form of integration that moves beyond the removal of trade obstacles in the following ways: improvement of customs procedures and other forms of trade facilitation; regulations pertaining to trade-related technical, sanitary and phytosanitary standards; and trade-related physical infrastructure. Such measures may enhance the capability of countries to exploit trade opportunities in regional or global markets. With declining rates of import tariffs, the role of transportation costs – expressed in terms of their tariff equivalent – in international competition has increased (DIJCK, 2008, p. 106-107).

The impact of the construction of a new road or the improvement of an existing road on adjacent territories may also involve economic, social and environmental dimensions. Dijck explains that the spatial extent of the impact depends on a large number of factors that differ among hubs and specific locations along these hubs. In this way, he asserts that:

Hence, meaningful generalizations on the impact of roads on their environment – defined broadly and including economic, social, physical, ecological and institutional dimensions – are not warranted. Put differently, generalized claims regarding the potentials of infrastructure in support of sustainable development will be hard to substantiate, and the same holds for allegations pertaining to the negative effects of these infrastructure programmes. Notwithstanding the wide variety in impact that roads may have on adjacent territories, some regularities and patterns may be inferred from statistical studies on land use conversion and deforestation effects of road building and improvement (...) (DIJCK, 2008, p. 108).

In addition, Dijck explains the concept of “Strategic Environmental Assessment” (SEA) and that, thus far, only a few SEAs have been conducted in relation to corridors in the IIRSA agenda, and only very little systemic knowledge and skills have been developed related to the appropriate methodology for studies of such large-scale corridors. Dijck warns too of the real risk that future SEAs will not be particularly comprehensive as governments and financial institutions increase pressure to limit the time and resources expended on SEAs. He added:

It has been proposed to limit the time available to undertake a SEA to six months and to limit the available budget to US\$ 300,000 (approximately € 200,000). One may question the rationale of this recent approach for at least three reasons. First, earlier experience with road construction in Amazonian shows that unexpected spatially widespread negative environmental and economic developments with an irreversible character have occurred in cases characterized by inadequate *ex ante* assessment. The developments related to the Polonoeste (BR 364) in Rondônia that ultimately contributed to the withdrawal of multilateral financial institutions such as IDB and The World Bank from financing large-scale road infrastructure programmes in South America for a long period of time, are a case in point. Moreover, there is no need to postpone investment in the proposed hub entirely during the period in which a

comprehensive SEA is being executed as specific projects along the trajectory can be started that do not depend on the outcomes of the overall assessment and on final decisions concerning the development of the integrated hub. Finally, in view of the overall budgeted expenses of the IIRSA hubs (...) the expenses on a comprehensive SEA are modest (DIJCK, 2008, p. 116).

In this sense, the same author points out that SEAs are a vital mechanism to stimulate the potential welfare-enhancing impact of road infrastructure and mitigate potential negative effects on human welfare, animal and plant life, and the environment. He concludes:

Cutting time and budgets available for making SEAs in the context of large infrastructure programs like IIRSA with potentially large and irreversible effects is probably unsound from the perspective of rational decision-making and human welfare. Moreover, it may undermine political and popular support for the infrastructure program itself, at the local, national and international level (DIJCK, 2008, p. 118).

Dijk and Haak (2006, p. 61) explain that roads may induce significant economic and ecological changes along their trajectory. In this way, their construction or renovation may affect land use and land prices, local and regional economic activities, and, to a second degree, the life of local people and the ecosystem at-large. They added that the most significant and often irreversible impacts are located along trajectories through previously inaccessible areas like pristine forests.

With regard to the Brazilian experience with Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), still the same authors say that:

Comprehensive and adequate the legal framework for EIA may seem, the **actual Brazilian EIA-practice is rather different. First and foremost, the link between EIA and project design, not to mention project alteration or modification, is weak. In Brazil, the EIA is merely a step in the process of project planning, a sheer autograph that has to be obtained. As a result, the role of the EIA with respect to prevention and mitigation of negative environmental effects is severely limited.** Economic and political pressures contribute significantly to this problem. In general, the lobby by powerful interest groups for roads – like the soya farmers in the case of the BR-163 – starts long before a decision has to be taken. **As is the case with the multi-year investment plans, international financing is stimulated and attracted before even a minimal cost-benefit analysis has been carried out, thereby creating a (financial) momentum that cannot be stopped or adjusted by environmental or social concerns. An EIA often is carried out short before the start of a project, when alternatives or modifications are no longer possible.** Second, **EIAS in Brazil generally do not cover indirect or “dragging” effects and are of limited scope.** Most impacts of roads do not occur at the time of construction and in the direct vicinity of the road. Both time and area demarcation are too narrow. The case of the BR-163 highway is a clear example of these serious shortcomings of the Brazilian EIA-practice. **Another complicating factor is that EIAs have to be paid for by the project proponent. Consultants are regularly pressure to produce favourable reports, since the financial and political stakes in securing project approval are high. By means of nearly impossible deadlines, influence on draft reports and financial incentives – such as last installments after project approval-, project proponent tend to**

manipulate the EIA-process (DIJCK and HAAK, 2006, p. 65, my highlights).

The authors state that because of the significant environmental and social effects the BR-163 highway project was expected to generate, a large number of social and environmental organizations started to mobilize civil society shortly after President Lula announced the paving of the road in early 2003.

In thinking about the IIRSA and the PPP, Dijck and Haak further argue that the experience with PPP in the road infrastructure sector in South America has been limited overall and, in particular, with trans-border infrastructure efforts. The authors add that the international dimension of an infrastructural program increases its complexity by requiring rules and mechanisms for the distribution of costs, benefits and risks between the governments involved. Moreover, they explain that certain mechanisms are required to deal with differences in national regulations regarding road constructions and related environmental and technical standards:

(...) On paper, the regulatory framework for PPPs and ordinary concessions in Brazil is adequate and complete. **However, an adequate regulatory framework for a PPP is by no means a guarantee for a well-functioning PPP. As the analysis of the Brazilian experience with infrastructure projects in this study shows, the potential benefit of PPPs do not come into being automatically.** Financial risks and inadequate mechanisms to distribute risks can hamper seriously the accomplishment of higher efficiency in public investments and endanger the sustainability of the PPP programme, as illustrated in the case of the Mato Grosso State *Programa Estradeiro*. The assessment of the *Programa Estradeiro* shows that, instead of “socializing” the benefits of private sector efficiency, **PPPs can also be used to transfer costs from the private sector to the public sector and the community at large.** Mato Grosso provides a striking example of a region in which a dominant economic sector, the soybean sector, also holds political power. In order to foster its growth and profitability, soya farmers have engaged themselves in a PPP programme, the outline and mechanisms of which are particularly beneficial to their own interests but much less so to the interests of the wider community, the state of Mato Grosso (DIJCK and HAAK, 2006, p. 78-79, my highlights).

In this sense, rent seeking and political scheming may undermine the potential benefits of PPPs even further. Nevertheless, Dijck and Haak explain that PPPs are promising instruments to improve the efficiency of public investments in infrastructure projects. In addition, they have the potential to attract private capital, which can be used to increase the total investment in infrastructures projects. “With financial risks distributed more adequately, and by using comprehensive environmental assessments and cost-benefit analyses, PPPs can produce substantial rewards for society at large” (DIJCK and HAAK, 2006, p. 80).

According to Patricia Molina, the principle stakeholders in financing and promoting projects in the IIRSA are entrepreneurs in Agribusiness, principally the major soy producers, river transportation companies, companies in the food sector such as Cargill and Bunge, and transgenic seed businesses, like Monsanto. These businesses are concerned primarily with cutting the cost of transporting their goods to ports on the Pacific Ocean in Peru and Chile, and in converting vast areas of the Amazon region in to monocultural farmland to grow soy (MOLINA, 2010, p. 32).

Claudete de Castro Silva Vitte concluded that:

(...) in this way, there is a commitment of public money, which eventually benefits the large investors, especially from the first world, who speculate to over-exploit the region's resources, subjecting the rivers to the risk of an environmental disaster, under the auspices of *progress*.

Alessandro Biazzi Couto highlights the active role of three large Brazilian contractors in the infrastructural integration of South America: Odebrecht, Camargo Correa, Andrade Gutierrez. These companies constituted the major holdings and have diversified their businesses. Couto states:

Beyond the area of engineering, Odebrecht is the largest petrochemical group in the Americas to control the company, Brazkem. It forecasts billion-dollar investments in the coming years to its subsidiary ETH Bioenergia, which is geared toward the production of ethanol from sugar cane. Camargo Correa already has its own cement plant and controls Alpargatas Calçados (Havaianas, Rainha, Topper, Timberland e Mizuno). It is also a shareholder of the Usiminas Steel Plant, the São Paulo state energy utility company (CPFL Energia), and the Companhia de Concessões Rodoviárias (CCR), which controls Dutra (RJ-SP) and Paraná with a total of 1,452 kilometers in road concessions. Andrade Gutierrez is not far behind: it is also a shareholder of the CCR and of the energy company, Light. It also controls the telecommunications company, Telemar, which includes the Oi cell phone service company, and will have the concession for the new airport in Quito, Ecuador which is still under construction. **Exposing such extensive date is crucial to the Brazilian social actors have a sense of the economic power of these Brazilian transnational businesses (...). This configuration of highly concentrated capital allows these groups to guide public policy and compete internationally with lower costs in relation to the larger projects, in which the transfer of public funds is often bureaucratic and late.**

Final Remarks

Bertha Becker made an important observation when considering the soy bean expansion in the Amazon, with the purpose of predicting the conflicts between the actors in several IIRSA hubs. She claimed that logistics are not the biggest challenge in maintaining the expansion of soy cultivation. The central difficulty lies in the socio-political and territorial fields, where there are two different time-space perspectives in conflict. On one side, the corporations' time-space, which bases itself in joining logistic with geopolitics, expands the production quickly. In the process, these corporations create alliances with governments and other companies in order to achieve their target goals. On the other hand, there is the time-space perspective of the agricultural industry which does not to adapt easily to change. While small farmers wish to keep their lands and identity, in general they do not have the required technical and financial support. However, they do have a unique instrument on their side: their organization and resilience. They are able to thus voice their opinions to society and put pressure on the State by using the pretext of the environment as their main defense (BECKER, 2007, p. 124).

These organized, local groups of farmers are also highly innovative. They use several resources to resist pressures, particularly from abroad since global process have strong local impacts. **The fact is that these local groups, once invisible, are becoming increasingly visible in the struggle against the efforts to put a price on nature** (VITTE, 2009, p. 10, my highlight).

For Isabella F. Wanderley *et al.*, the forecasted construction within the projects of IIRSA, especially in the north-center of the subcontinent, may create social and environmental conflicts.

(...) based on similar projects in the past, it is predicted that these conflicts potentially contribute to the increase in deforestation, the *illegal selling of land*, violence against native people, the spread of contagious diseases, the gradual loss of traditional cultural values, and also the decrease of environmental benefits, among other harmful impacts (WANDERLEY *et al.*, 2007, p. 5-7).

Beyond analyzing the strategic importance of the Amazon region for Brazil and the possible consequences of current integration plans, deeper evaluations of the interests involved in these projects is also necessary. It is most important to think about how this integration can benefit society as a whole in the long term, keeping in mind environmental impacts and working to not only take into account the interests of a small portion of the Brazilian business community.

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