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Businesses in Latin America that 'do no harm'

By Jim Creskey

The Canadian Foundation for the Americas (FOCAL) introduced, with an apology and a disclaimer, a new survey Tuesday about the role Canadian businesses are playing in helping Latin America's poor. "This study doesn't pretend to be comprehensive," said FOCAL director Eduardo del Buey. As a first attempt it clearly wasn't comprehensive. The survey asked Canadian businesses (34 questionnaires were sent out) if they were participating in corporate social responsibility programs in Latin America or the Caribbean. Of the 14 business executives who responded, slightly more than half said they had some kind of social responsibility plan. Although it didn't come up with many answers it did spur a roundtable that began to ask some of the right questions. The discussion on private sector investment in the development sphere took place Tuesday in Ottawa. There were questions about corporate investment, about the controversial role of remittances and about corporate philanthropy: "Philanthropy in Latin America is often the pet project of the CEO's señora," said Audra Jones from the U.S. government's Inter-American Foundation.

Three Canadian companies, PlacerDome mines, Scotiabank and Ottawa Bridgehead coffee, teamed up with FOCAL and development agency representatives to give accounts of their work, largely in Latin America, that had social consequences for the poor. Scotiabank's Krista Pawley talked about microcredit, PlacerDome's Wayne Dunn about his company's efforts to prevent HIV/AIDS at their South African mine and Tracy Clark about Bridgehead's work in creating a model for fairly traded, organic coffee.

Antonio Vives of the Inter-American Development broke the entire roundtable out of a lull of statistics that seemed to suggest that the private sector alone was going to become the big player in helping Latin America's poor: The best thing corporations can do to help the poor, he said, "is to carry out regular practices that do no harm."

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