Shakira's children [1]

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EXCERPTS

Last October, on the plane from Miami to San Salvador, Shakira stared into her MacBook, pondering. The next morning, she was to give a speech on the importance of early-childhood development to an Ibero-American summit meeting that would gather most of the heads of state of Latin America as well as the prime minister and king of Spain, the prime minister of Portugal and a select group of somewhat lesser dignitaries.

This was not the usual venue for Shakira Mebarak Ripoll of Barranquilla, Colombia. That would be stadium-size, and could be anywhere in the world, filled with thousands and thousands of fans, the people who have made her among the biggest-selling female vocalists on the planet. But Shakira has this other side — she began charitable work right after she had her first big hit, at 18 — and two years ago she, her longtime boyfriend, Antonio de la Rua, and some of their friends conceived the idea of a loose union of Ibero-American singers, called ALAS ("wings" in Spanish), which would use the power of their fame to mobilize fans, and the politicians fans vote for, to advance the cause of early-childhood development.

Since then they had rallied most of the biggest pop stars in the Spanish-speaking and Portuguese-speaking worlds; held enormous concerts in Mexico and Argentina; gained the philanthropic support of some of Latin America's richest families (as well as Warren Buffett's son Howard); and captured the attention of a good number of heads of state. Now, flying down to El Salvador, staring at her Mac, she was, perhaps, approaching her moment of political breakthrough.

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Celebrity philanthropy, rock 'n' roll philanthropy, is no longer a novelty, but what Shakira and ALAS were trying was indeed new. They were looking to use the power of pop to help the populations not of distant impoverished lands but of the Ibero-American world from which they come. They have a policy focus — early-childhood nutrition, education and medical care — that is on a scale beyond the reach of private charity. It requires the steady effort of the state. It cannot be addressed by rich countries' check-writing. So the trick is to take pop celebrity, marry it to big business and permanently alter the way Latin American governments help care for the young and the poor. What the golden-haired young woman staring at her laptop was trying to do was a tall order, given the fragility of celebrity influence, the dubious track record of Latin American governments in providing social services and the lengthening shadow of a global recession that was straitening everyone's budget. But she is not someone whom it would be reasonable to underestimate.

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Speeding along in the S.U.V. past the rickety roadside stalls of San Salvador, Shakira kept her focus on practical policy: "It has been scientifically proven," Shakira said — as Bono told me in an e-mail message, "When she gets going on the subject of child poverty she can be pretty scary" — "that a kid that receives proper stimulation and nutrition during these early years will develop all their potential in life: intellectual skills, learning abilities, social and emotional abilities. . . . So many other countries in Asia or in Europe are already putting early-childhood development at the top of their agendas, and we want our heads of state to do the same."

To that end, she told me she would insist on obtaining promises of action and the establishment of an early-childhood working group at this year's Ibero-American Summit. "We want that every president walks out with a firm commitment. We want to make sure that they will go back to their countries with those children between zero and 6 years old in their minds, and understanding very well what early-childhood development initiatives mean."

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In private or public, Shakira often uses the sound bites of the expert social entrepreneur. "I grew up in the developing world, I grew up

seeing injustice," she told me. "I grew up in the middle of a severe social crisis, left and right wings fighting with each other, people in the middle caught in the crossfire. I've seen millions of people displaced in Colombia. But I've also seen that, in countries like mine, when a child is born poor, he will die poor, unless he receives an opportunity. That opportunity is education. It's that helping hand that they're looking for. Latin America is a young continent, it's malleable, it's flexible. We still can change."

ALAS may seek to change Latin America, but it also represents something very traditional — the power of concentrated wealth. Its president, Alejandro Santo Domingo, is the 32-year-old scion of Colombia's formidable Santo Domingo family. The vice presidents are Shakira's boyfriend, de la Rua, who is a son of a former president of Argentina, and Alejandro Soberón, a very successful Mexican entertainment promoter and developer. He is a business associate of Carlos Slim, one of the world's richest men (and a prominent stakeholder in The New York Times). Slim is on ALAS's board, as are Joseph Safra (Brazilian banker and investor), Alejandro Bulgheroni (Argentina; oil and gas), Emilio Azcárraga (Mexico; broadcasting) and Stanley Motta (Panama; airlines). Latin America is run by families, and together the ALAS board accounts for a significant portion of the region's economy. Could Latin America's richest philanthropists succeed in reducing its crushing levels of inequality when generations of strongmen, technocrats, guerrillas and reformers have failed?

Over the past decade, Latin American governments have increased their spending on primary and secondary education, which have improved significantly. But early childhood was much less of a priority, and according to Inter-American Development Bank (I.D.B.) figures, 46 million children in Latin America under the age of 6 are going without basic health care and education. Governments have been working on early-childhood development more in the past five years, although it remains an immense challenge to get a country's health, education and social-service ministries to work together. And the recession has indeed led Latin American governments to look to richer countries for help in financing social services.

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The presidential meeting appeared to require subdued glamour, and for her late-morning speech Shakira wore a light gray dress with her hair down. At her entrance, diplomats discreetly took photos from their chairs, while a Salvadoran military officer strode up, cellphone before him like a prow, until he nearly collided with her.

The president of El Salvador welcomed her, Sanz and Fher, the lead singer of the hugely successful Mexican rock band Maná. Then Shakira began: "We are here to initiate the creation of a grand alliance, between the public sector and civil society, to protect the most fragile people in our population, the children."

She noted the economic crisis — "We realize that the coming period will be a difficult one" — but moved on to her talking points. She cited research to the effect that "for each dollar invested in the early education of a child, this child will eventually return to the state $17" (an I.D.B. figure). She spoke of the "regional working group" that would be set up as a result of this meeting, describing its structure and goals, then concluded, "Let us find the strength to defend the very youngest in these difficult times."

When the speeches were over, Shakira bolted to a reception room. The president of Honduras, Manuel Zelaya, proved to be a fleet-footed head of state and was soon trying to charm Shakira with praise. With slicked hair and a forceful black mustache, Zelaya came from a big landowning family and was well into an undistinguished term tainted by scandal. Unsmiling, Shakira pressed him for specifics on his early-childhood programs and to make concrete commitments for the future, which put the man back on his heels.

In came Chile's president, Michelle Bachelet, and Shakira turned to her happily, crying out, "Mi heroína!" and embracing her. They chatted for a while, with the Honduran struggling to insert himself into the conversation.

Back into the S.U.V.'s, back along the narrow road with motorcycle cops fore and aft and a helicopter above, back into the jet, and soon San Salvador was beneath and we were off to the northeast and the Caribbean. Had I been able to see, Shakira asked, whether the eyes of Colombia's president, Alvaro Uribe, teared up when he spoke at the meeting?

I had wondered about it, too, but couldn't tell, though I was sure his voice had caught.

This is Shakira's difficult dance: to be close enough to the politicians to move them, but not so close that you become their tool.

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Back at the Quibdó airstrip, Shakira posed with various soldiers — they were part of the ongoing counterinsurgency in the area — and then we took off. The journalists and others on the plane started to drop into sleep, leaving Shakira in the unaccustomed position of being inactive. She looked around. Her adviser, María Emma Mejía, went forward in the cabin to chat. Mejía is a former foreign minister and education minister of Colombia, and a serious politician. She knelt in the aisle and they — together with Trevor Neilson, a philanthropy adviser — talked about future plans as the other passengers rested. What about a nutrition program in El Salvador? What should they talk to Howard Buffett about for a next project? How big should their next moves be? They talked rapidly, in English mostly (for Neilson's benefit). Mejía returned to the rear of the plane after 20 minutes, saying with a world-weary smile, "There, we had our board meeting." Shakira turned to Antonio de la Rua and, with her gaze fixed on his face, started talking with him about what to do, what to do next in this

relentless and unlikely life.

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