

Press Release

International Day of Solidarity Action against WTO and Free Trade Agreements

Sunday 26 September 2021, by [La Via Campesina](#) (Date first published: 9 September 2021).

The 10th of September is marked as the International Day of Solidarity Action against WTO and Free Trade Agreements by La Via Campesina, to commemorate the sacrifice of Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae, who stabbed himself to death, outside the venue of the WTO Ministerial at Cancun Mexico, 2003. His act was a desperate and angry reaction to WTO-led free trade deals that led to a total marginalisation of small-scale food producers in his country and the world.

Harare, the 09th of September 2021:

'Zero Hunger by 2030' and 'Ending Poverty in all its forms everywhere' lists among the Sustainable Developments Goals that the United Nations aims to achieve by the end of this decade.

Yet, as of September 2021, two trends stand in complete contrast to this goal.

Hunger has been rising since 2015, and the latest estimate of hungry people stands at 820 million. The majority of the world's malnourished - 381 million - are still found in Asia. More than 250 million live in Africa, where the number of undernourished is growing faster than anywhere in the world. Despite being the sites of aggressive corporate-led agricultural operations, Latin American and Caribbean nations are also home to nearly 84 million people living in extreme poverty, facing hunger and malnutrition.

In May 2021, global food prices rose at their fastest monthly rate in more than a decade [FAO]. A surge in the international prices of vegetable oils, sugar and cereals has led to this increase.

All this is even though each year, an estimated one-third of all food produced - equivalent to 1.3 billion tonnes worth around \$1 trillion - ends up rotting in the bins of consumers and retailers or spoiling due to poor transportation and harvesting practices.

Clearly, the global food system is broken.

A host of multilateral and bilateral free trade agreements between countries and continents form the central pillar of this broken system. These instruments have enabled a host of mega-corporations - that are engaged in seeds, farm inputs, meat, dairy, palm oil, cotton and processed food businesses - to gain market entry into economically developing and under-developed nations around the world. It has had devastating consequences for local trade, peasant markets and peoples' food sovereignty.

Almost all of these free trade negotiations on agriculture and fisheries are inspired by the WTO's highly problematic Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). This global framework essentially bats for lower import tariffs, withdrawal of domestic subsidies, and abolishing public stock-holding for food security purposes. It is an outdated 20th century model of trade that serves corporate interests at the expense of planetary boundaries and animal welfare and drives us towards untenable social inequalities. The fact that industrial agriculture and its associated practices contribute nearly half of the global greenhouse gas emissions is not deterring its expansion through these trade deals.

At this point, at least 350 regional free trade agreements and more than 3000 bilateral investment treaties (BITs) are in force worldwide. BITs usually include the controversial investor-state dispute settlement (ISDS) mechanism. ISDS enables companies to sue the governments, if they deem that new laws or regulations negatively affect their business. This controversial settlement dispute mechanism relies on arbitration rather than public courts, and nearly 1000 investor-state disputes have been brought against governments by corporations worldwide.

Free Trade Agreements and Investment treaties aim to exploit cheap labour and relaxed environmental and labour regulations in economically less-developed nations. Major powers such as the US and the European Union push other countries to adopt their intellectual property standards. Under pressure, and under the guise of ease-of-doing-business, most national governments end up dismantling national regulatory mechanisms that offer protection to local trade, local labour and natural resources.

In June 2021, at the 100th session of the Committee on Regional Trade Agreements. Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, the Director-General of the WTO, reminded the participants that the objective of the WTO is to raise living standards, create jobs, and promote sustainable development and human well-being across the world.

Yet, over the last five decades of its existence, global free trade agreements have only delivered hunger, food riots, farmer suicides, climate crises, extreme poverty and distress migration. These trade agreements, laid the pathway for privatisation, deregulation and withdrawal of the State's obligation in delivering essential public services to its people. It has had a devastating impact on rural areas in particular. Women and children face the extreme brunt of it, as distress migration forces them to flee their villages and work under sub-human conditions in the cities. Across countries, the availability and quality of public healthcare and public education have suffered immensely over the last five decades, especially in rural areas, thereby denying a right to decent life to women, children and youth. South Korean farmer Lee Kyung Hae's desperate act of sacrificing his life, right outside the venue of a WTO ministerial in Cancun eighteen years ago, tragically expressed these crises in rural areas worldwide.

Tragically, instead of heeding to the voices of the peasants, indigenous people, fishers and migrant farmworkers, the World Trade Organisation and wealthy governments continue with their business as usual and pursue these policies as if none of these crises ever existed.

People around the world are pushing back more than ever.

India's protesting farmers, who have been on the streets for the last nine months, have cited how the new farm laws aim to corporatise Indian Agriculture and can jeopardise the country's public procurement system. They also point to further trade negotiations on the horizon (with the US and EU) that threaten their food sovereignty, autonomy and biosafety norms around GM foods. In Indonesia, Thailand, Japan, the Philippines and South Korea, peasant farmers resist CP-TPP, RCEP, FTAAP-21 and a host of other regional trade agreements being pushed through by global economic powerhouses like the US and China.

In Argentina, Ecuador, Kenya and Zambia, citizens protest against the IMF-induced debt crisis. The EU-Mercosur deal is finding resistance from peasants and civil society organisations on both sides of the spectrum. They point out that in the Mercosur countries, soya, sugar and meat production, for example, is becoming increasingly industrialised, mainly in connection with the aggressive export-orientated model. The Amazonia basin of South America, central to climate and biodiversity worldwide, is forced to give way to this model.

Even as the global health pandemic demands worldwide solidarity and empathy, Europe and the United States are at the forefront of blocking the effort spearheaded by South Africa and India within the World Trade Organization to waive intellectual property protections COVID-19 vaccines and other tools.

Those who resist these unjust trade agreements are oppressed and criminalised. Most of the agrarian conflicts worldwide today arise from the corporate grabbing of natural resources, often in connivance with local governments and authorities. These forced acquisitions of our territories are usually carried out to honour these negotiated trade and investment deals, signed and executed without the approval or participation of peasant and indigenous communities.

What use are WTO and a host of these Free Trade Agreements if they are merely extending a colonial habit of subjugating a majority of the people? These free trade agreements, often negotiated behind closed doors through opaque processes, are the enduring symbols of imperialism and neocolonialism of the 21st century.

Hunger is real. Rural poverty and starvation are real. Pandemic is real. Vaccine inequity is real. Distress migration is real. Climate crises are real. Do we know what else is real? In a time of a global health and food crisis, Nestlé's shareholders and executives awarded themselves a record dividend payout [1] of US\$8 billion, more than the entire annual budget for the UN's World Food Programme!

These agribusinesses have been repeatedly exposed and called out by communities around the world. Pushed to the back foot by widespread protests and adverse court judgements, these giant corporations are now entering global governance spaces and co-opting the human rights language with a renewed aggression, all in the hope of green-washing their criminal conduct. The latest example of this image-building effort is the UN Food Systems Summit – a facade behind which agribusinesses can hide their countless human rights violations and unfair trade practices.

In the face of extreme human distress, hunger and poverty, we must fight against this vulgarity of capitalism and neoliberalism. Under Article 16, the *United Nations Declaration on Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP)* affirms that States shall take appropriate measures to strengthen and support local, national and regional markets. They must do it in ways that facilitate and ensure our full and equitable access and participation in these markets, to sell our products at prices that allow them and their families to attain an adequate standard of living. Our struggles in our territories must draw their strength from the Peasants' Rights Declaration and demand public policies that are in line with UNDROP.

As we mark this International Day of Solidarity Action Against WTO and Free Trade Agreements, La Via Campesina echoes the last words of Farmer Lee from Cancun in 2003.

He said, "My warning goes out to all citizens that human beings are in an endangered situation. That uncontrolled multinational corporations and a small number of big WTO Members are leading undesirable globalisation that is inhumane, environmentally degrading, farmer-killing, and undemocratic."

As La Via Campesina, we pledge to struggle until victory. We will stay alert to the 12th Ministerial Meeting of the WTO to be held in Geneva from the 30th of November. We will press on with our demands to push WTO and FTAs out of agriculture! We will insist on a global trade system that respects the dignity of the people and bases itself on solidarity and reciprocity beyond borders.

Resist Free Trade Agreements!

End the WTO!

Solidarity Trade, Now!

La Via Campesina

Footnotes

[1] ESSF (article 59603), [TNCs & Pandemy: Agro-imperialism in the time of Covid-19](#).