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CORPORATE EUROPE OBSERVATORY

VISION

Corporate Europe Observatory wants to see trade for public, not private, interests. We need to change priorities by placing the interests of farmers, consumers and the planet above the interests of multinationals and cross-border trade. Food sovereignty should be respected, allowing countries and communities to prioritise local and regional food systems, choose what they eat, and make sure their community's food is healthy and accessible to everyone. Where global food chains exist, income must be fairly distributed along the chain.

Governments should be allowed to regulate imports, exports and investments in pursuit of their own strategies for sustainable development. Trade negotiations should be open to public scrutiny and decisions should be made democratically. Privileged access to trade negotiations for corporations should end, and society should have ample opportunities to help set priorities in this area. In this vision, there is no place for a private court system for investors (ISDS).

Trade touches on nearly every other field of regulation. Problems caused by the current 'free trade' dogma cannot be solved simply by another set of trade policies, but require other areas of social and environmental policies to be strengthened. Human and environmental rights should always have primacy over corporate rights.



PROBLEMS

Trade deals are negotiated behind closed doors. Corporate lobby groups have access to sensitive information about on-going trade negotiations – information withheld from public interest groups. Corporations also have privileged access and far greater means to lobby trade departments to work in their favour when devising trade policies. National delegations at trade negotiations often promote the interests of ‘their’ multinationals more than the interests of their general population or of smaller firms.

Current trade deal negotiations seek to eliminate social and environmental safeguards, increasingly through regulatory cooperation and ISDS. They are eroding labour rights, destroying livelihoods and communities, and have become a major impediment to countries wishing to block certain imports on environmental or social grounds.

These trade deals therefore contribute to the widening gap between the protection of human and environmental rights and the enforcement of regulations to control the behaviour of multinational corporations. For instance, UN initiatives to regulate corporations were replaced by guiding principles, much to industry’s liking. Corporations on the other hand have increased access to private ISDS courts allowing them to sue governments if they adopt policies that the corporation says harms their profits.

DEMANDS

Corporate power is transnational. Efforts to control it must be too. We need a binding treaty on transnational corporations and their subsidiaries at the UN level to enforce human rights, including peasants’ rights and environmental rights, with a strong enforcement system able to impose sanctions in the case of violations.

In addition, the mandate of the International Criminal Court should be extended to enable it to stop corporations from committing crimes against the environment (ecocide). Corporations must be required to actively and formally take account of the interests of workers, customers, suppliers, people living near their operations and the rest of the world. This would fundamentally change what corporations do. This international system should be easily accessible to victims of abuse by multinationals.

We need legally-binding instruments against undue lobbying influence by corporations in trade policies and other policies at all levels. In the most pressing cases, this could be inspired by the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control which bans industry lobbyists from influencing decision-making on public health policies. In addition, the public should have full access to negotiating texts when trade deals are made. Up-to-date texts should be posted online and be easily accessible. Public interest organisations, affected groups and interested citizens need meaningful opportunities to set trade priorities.

Countries and regions have the right to develop – and to give priority to – local and regional trade over global trade. They must be allowed to regulate imports, exports and investments in pursuit of their own strategies for sustainable development. To stop the destruction of agricultural markets in the Global South, and to reduce EU dependence on (and depletion of) natural resources in these countries, the EU needs to set a long-term goal of becoming as self-sufficient as possible in food and feed. EU policies should help all farmers receive a fair price for their produce, including in the Global South provided certain social and environmental conditions are met. The EU supply management system should be reinvigorated.

