

Welcome to a new edition of the bilaterals.org podcast where we discuss the most recent developments around free trade and investment agreements.

Every 10th of September, the members of La Via Campesina around the world unite to resist the World Trade Organisation and Free Trade Agreement. They organise actions and conduct awareness campaigns to expose the injustices and inequalities caused by these policies on livelihoods, public health, the environment and food sovereignty.

In Africa, women of La Via Campesina gathered in Lome, Togo. They said NO to the WTO and free trade deals, because they do not serve them, they do not protect their rights as women peasants and they do not embrace food sovereignty. Instead, trade agreements developed by WTO are designed to only benefit a few individuals and specifically multinational corporations, often at the expense of us small-scale food producers and indigenous communities.

They added that these agreements promote industrial farming models that contribute to environmental degradation and land grabbing, threatening the livelihoods of small-scale food producers.

Across the Atlantic ocean, in North America, groups from La Via Campesina based in the US and in Canada, gathered on common ground to rise up against the ongoing dispossession violently imposed by free trade agreements. They indicated that the current agricultural system aims to deliver cheap raw materials to satisfy the insatiable profit motive of multinational corporations at immense cost to the environment, eaters, and those who produce good, healthy food for our communities in line with food sovereignty and agroecology.

All groups remain committed to working towards a shared vision of food systems transformation in the face of intersecting crises. They also mobilised on October 16th on the International Day of Action For People's Food Sovereignty, and Against Transnational Corporations.

Women leaders engaged in dangerous efforts to protect rights and the environment in Ecuador visited Canada earlier this month to speak out against trade talks aimed at expanding and attracting Canadian investment in resource extraction projects in ecologically vulnerable regions.

During their seven-day "Why We Say No Tour," four Ecuadorian Indigenous women and rights defenders met with government leaders, parliamentarians, trade negotiators, Indigenous leaders, civil society organisations and the press in Toronto, Ottawa, and Montreal.

Delegation member Zenaida Yasacama, who is the vice-president of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, said that, I quote, "our territory, our rights, and our lives are at stake in this trade deal, and it's being negotiated behind our backs and without our consent." She added that "we already know from experience the harm more Canadian mining

will bring, which is why we're coming to Canada to urgently call on the government to reconsider a trade agreement that will make a deteriorating human rights situation worse.”

The Ecuadorian delegation to Canada was equally concerned about ongoing efforts to include an investor-state dispute settlement process in a future FTA that will pass the scrutiny of Ecuador's supreme court.

Ivonne Ramos from Acción Ecológica pointed out that ISDS was already prohibited by Ecuador's Constitution and people voted in a referendum this past April to reaffirm this ban. Including any provision allowing for ISDS in this trade deal would drastically limit Ecuador's ability to govern in the interest of all Ecuadorians, setting a serious precedent for disrespecting the Constitution and the will of the people.

Both governments hope to sign the free trade agreement before general elections in Ecuador this February.

And at the same time, a "People's Tribunal" was held in Ecuador on September 25th, in which a court composed of social movements evaluated the impacts of the arbitration system on peoples, territories and nature.

Earlier this month, bilaterals.org released the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA) protocol on digital trade. In the turbulent waters of the digital economy, where technological innovation is outpacing regulatory frameworks, the protocol raises deep concerns.

It aims to liberalise electronic commerce and the digital economy in Africa, but the proposed rules would also restrict the right of African governments to regulate in the public interest.

The protocol's scope extends far beyond intra-African digital trade, sparking fears that more developed countries could exploit its provisions without reciprocal concessions. This expansive reach risks allowing global players to run roughshod over African economies. Large tech corporations, such as Google, Amazon, Meta, Alibaba and Tencent, could emerge as the ultimate winners.

In addition, the text states that the parties to the African free trade deal shall develop several annexes after the adoption of this protocol, including on cross-border data transfers, disclosure of source code and financial technology. However, the protocol does not specify the content of these annexes, even though they could have a significant impact on the way digital trade is conducted on the continent.

The measures of concern include the prohibition of digital customs duties. This confirms the 1996 temporary ban WTO members agreed on tariffs for electronic transmissions. This ban has been extended every two years since then. In 2020, a study showed that this moratorium cost African countries more than US\$2 billion in lost revenue.

The protocol also mandates unrestricted cross-border data flows and restrictions on data localisation, which clashes with the existing regulations of many African governments. The collection, storage and sale of personal data across borders has become a cornerstone of

diverse sectors' business, including insurance, education and healthcare providers, and financial lenders.

In addition, the protocol introduces a controversial provision limiting the ability of governments to demand access to source code. Governments typically need access to source codes for various purposes, such as enforcing competition laws, tax regulations, financial oversight, ensuring car safety, enabling technology transfer, and so on. These provisions could create a wider divide in the balance of power between private entities and regulators.

Under the promise that digital trade will bring economic growth and jobs, the AfCFTA digital trade protocol sacrifices safeguards for regulatory sovereignty. Tech corporations appear to be the biggest beneficiaries, raising serious concerns about the need to defend public interests and domestic regulatory autonomy.

The United Arab Emirates is stepping up its efforts to forge bilateral trade deals as part of its strategy to diversify its economy parallel to fossil fuels and to consolidate its geopolitical position. Recently it has signed FTAs with Australia and New Zealand and continues to negotiate with countries across the globe, including Japan, the EU and the Philippines. It is aiming to sign 26 free trade agreements over the next few years, positioning itself as a key player in the global supply chain.

The UAE is already an established business and tourism centre, but it seeks to consolidate its status as a financial powerhouse and expand into sectors such as clean energy, technology and agribusiness.

Food security actually is a critical geostrategic concern for the UAE, given its reliance on food imports. Through a tightly controlled network of ports and logistics platforms, and new trade deals, the UAE aims to become a central hub in the global agri-food trading system, where corporations can import and re-export products across Asia, Africa and Europe, quickly and duty-free.

As the UAE accelerates its post-oil economy plans, these comprehensive trade agreements will play a key role in shaping its new economic landscape. We'll give you regular updates as they come in the coming months.

And that's it for today. I'm Nicolas Roux, bilaterals.org. If you'd like more information about today's podcast, you can check out the links provided in the description. More trade news coming up soon in our next podcast. In the meantime, you can visit bilaterals.org.