

- Time is running out
- Balsa harvesting in the Sacred Waters region, Ecuador
- Urgent call to WTO to act justly *now*

TIME IS RUNNING OUT....

Time is running out for a new agricultural model for the global South. Climate change is posing immediate threats to humanity and indeed to all living organisms on the planet. Extreme weather events are being experienced across the globe, along with other environmental stresses such as rising water levels or falling water tables, desertification and worsening sanitation. Industrial agriculture requiring chemical inputs is both the cause and victim of these changes. Cultivation patterns such as mono-cropping, with heavy reliance on groundwater and chemicals, have reduced the food sovereignty of poor countries and increased environmental problems.

This accumulation of events has affected food security and caused more severe and widespread hunger. The number of hungry people in the world started to increase in 2015 - the year when zero hunger was declared a Sustainable Development Goal of the United Nations. The very first Food Systems Summit met (virtually) on September 23 this year. It was called to respond to the following needs:

- to ensure more sustainable food production;
- to feed more people;
- to enable farmers and producers to make a decent living from agriculture.

Reducing hunger and malnutrition around the world and managing risks from climate change are also key global challenges.

The Summit's biggest concern should have been how to make the necessary changes to our food production, distribution and consumption patterns to adapt them better to nature and make them more resilient. There is a growing fear among many that, instead of recognizing the need for truly transformative strategies, corporate-orientated agriculture models, which make worse present problems, will be further endorsed and supported.

The Food Systems Summit has been mired in controversy. The Rome-based UN bodies – the Food and Agricultural Organisation, the World Food Program and the International Fund for Agricultural Development – have been sounding the alarm on the inequality within global food systems and their lack of sustainability, but these organisations were effectively sidelined. Instead, the World Economic Forum, an unofficial platform essentially representing global corporate interests, was made the partner.

As well, the Summit was led by a UN special envoy, Agnes Kalibata, President of the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA), which has been criticised for pushing a particular strategy in Africa without transparency or accountability. Fears surfaced that the Summit could simply become an opportunity for more fundraising for AGRA, which will soon run out of money, but has achieved little in its 15 years of existence. AGRA was launched in 2006 by the Bill and Melinda Gates and the Rockefeller Foundations. It was designed along 1950-60s 'green

revolution' lines, ie, mono-cropping based on a combination of high-yielding commercial seeds, synthetic fertilisers and chemical pesticides and requiring lots of irrigation to increase yields per acre. In the Asian region, this model produced, at best, mixed outcomes over the medium term and was associated with major ecological problems. But it certainly benefits the global agribusinesses that provide the seeds and fertilisers and pesticides and control the global distribution of crops. This may be a reason why this model was pushed on Africa and has persisted there. AGRA has provided around \$1 billion to 13 countries, and several recipient governments have contributed many multiples of that amount in seed and fertilizer subsidies – totalling well in excess of funding devoted to agro-ecological cultivation.

There is little to show for all this spending. AGRA initially aimed to double the yields and household incomes of 20 million small-scale African farmers by 2020; and to halve food insecurity in 20 countries through productivity improvements. It subsequently scaled-down its goals, reported no actual outcomes and the Gates Foundation has not revealed the results of an audit it is said to have conducted. An independent academic study found little evidence of significant increases in small producers' productivity, incomes or food security. Instead, the number of hungry people in AGRA countries apparently increased by 30% in the first 12 years of its operations. According to the UN, severe hunger has increased by 50% in sub-Saharan Africa since AGRA was founded.

Source: Jayati Ghosh, 'Time is Running Out for a New Agricultural Model for the Global South', in Social Europe, 20th September 2021. Condensed by Mary Boyd.

¹ A Declaration of African Civil Society and Faith leaders was sent to the African Union (AU)– European Union (EU) Foreign Ministers' Conference, October 2021. This meeting of Foreign Ministers in Kigali, Rwanda, was held in view of an AU EU Summit in February 2022 in Brussels,

This is why farmers' associations, civil society and faith groups across Africa have come out against the promotion of AGRA and demand that funding go towards agro-ecological strategies based on small farmers.¹ This would be more equitable and sustainable over time. Major experts on food issues who have worked closely with the UN system have warned that the Summit could erode the UN's public support and legitimacy. Several civil-society and farmers' groups boycotted the Summit because of these concerns.

It seems obvious:

- that the basic premise of a Food Systems Summit in today's world must be that everyone should have access to sufficient nutritious and affordable food, and so does not go hungry or fall into unhealthy food consumption practices;
- that this food is produced in sustainable ways, which take into account the limitations and growing constraints imposed by nature and do not create future ecological damage; and
- that small farmers, who do the bulk of cultivation in most of the developing world, are able to sustain themselves and their families and earn reasonable incomes through this activity.

Clearly, the Food Systems Summit must move away from promoting more of the same failed model such as that of AGRA. Humanity cannot keep on blowing up the few chances it has to save itself and this planet.

Belgium. The Declaration, entitled *Our Land Is Our Life*, is a heartfelt, powerful statement. Recommended reading. See posting by the Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN). www.aefjn.org

BALSA HARVESTING IN THE SACRED WATERS REGION

From environmental threat to sustainable resource

Pachamama Alliance has partnered with Indigenous Nations in the Sacred Headwaters region of the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador and Peru to protect their land and culture from extractive industries such as oil and mining. Their partnership has helped keep these cultures strong and territories healthy and vibrant for the past twenty-five years.

Just this last year a new threat arrived in this region – the uncontrolled and illegal harvesting of balsa wood. Balsa is a super-light-weight timber native to this region of the Amazon which is in growing demand for its use in the construction of wind turbine blades.

Since the 1940s, Ecuador has been a leading exporter of balsa wood to world markets. In 2019-20, the exports doubled. Demand could no longer be filled by the traditional balsa plantations on the coast. Production spread to the Amazon and uncontrolled harvesting is threatening that ecosystem. The COVID-19 pandemic shut down the eco-tourism industry, a primary source of income for this region. With the demand for balsa and the ongoing needs for medicines and school supplies, many Indigenous communities turned to balsa traders (balseros) who came from outside the region, willing to pay cash for harvested balsa trees. However, the balseros were driving uncontrolled harvesting, they were capturing most of the profit and they were a disruptive outside influence on the Indigenous cultures.

Balsa is a fast-maturing tree (five years to harvesting size) that grows easily in the rainforest environment. It is economically

and culturally feasible to cultivate, manage and harvest it in a sustainable way. Many communities are already growing balsa as a source of immediate income. With a sustainable management plan, they should be able to count on continuous income that does not come at the expense of the rainforest on which they and the world depend.

Creating a Sustainable Management Plan

Pachamama Alliance's sister organisation in Ecuador, *Fundación Pachamama*, is now working with the Achuar, other Indigenous groups and academics and scientists to develop a sustainable management plan for balsa wood production in the Sacred Headwaters region. It will:

- define the areas for harvesting, for cultivation, and for protection of balsa trees;
- set up a method of certifying the balsa as sustainably harvested;
- sell and deliver directly to international buyers, eliminating the middle-men;
- develop methods for sharing the surpluses generated by the balsa business with the communities;
- set up an ongoing professional governance and administrative structure independent of the political leadership of the communities;
- ensure ongoing analysis of impacts on the natural evolution of the forest ecosystem.

If it is successful in the Achuar territory, the plan could serve as a model to be applied in other Indigenous nations of the Ecuadorian Amazon, and possibly in nearby areas in Peru.

*Source: The Pachamama Alliance Fall Newsletter, 30th September, 2021. www.pachamama.org
Slightly edited by Alison Healey.*

**'There may be times when we are powerless to prevent injustice,
but there must never be a time when we fail to protest.'**

Elie Wiesel

URGENT GLOBAL CALL TO WTO TO ACT JUSTLY NOW

Over 130 global, regional and national civil society organisations from around the world have again written to the Members of the World Trade Organisation WTO, urging swift action on behalf of low-income countries, to help them raise their level of protection and treatment for their people in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic. The letter points to the scandal of pharmaceutical companies having taken tens of billions of revenue from their vaccine sales to rich countries, while other countries have been left defenceless. The WTO has the power and responsibility to act on behalf of all its Members, not only the rich. Yet, for more than a year, it has failed to do so.

Ministerial Conference postponed

The WTO, has now postponed its 12th Ministerial Conference due to take place in Geneva, 29th November-3rd December. No new date has been set. The COVID-19 pandemic has prevented Ministers and officials, especially from the global South, to attend a conference at this time even when their fundamental interests are at stake.

Proposal to waive Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs)

We have already twice reported in the GJOP Bulletin on this proposal, which was presented to the WTO in October 2020, initially by South Africa and India and then co-sponsored by over 64 other countries. It has the support of 100 of the 164 WTO members. The proposal is that

the relevant IPR rules of the WTO be suspended until the end of the COVID-19 pandemic, so that all countries can have access to the necessary knowledge and produce effective treatments, diagnostics, and vaccines. A handful of powerful governments, led by the European Union, the United Kingdom, Switzerland and Norway, continue to block the proposal, and so protect the monopolies of the global pharmaceutical industry giving priority to profits over people. The USA had also opposed the proposal earlier, but, in April this year, announced qualified support for waiving the IPR rules, but only for vaccines. This was a welcome shift of position but an insufficient one.

The postponement of the Ministerial meeting need not delay a decision on this urgent matter. The General Council of the WTO that meets regularly in Geneva has the authority to approve waivers; it could do it now – and could have done it any time in the last year. The delay, in the view of civil society organisations worldwide, is ‘shameful’.

For years now, the WTO has faced a crisis of legitimacy for its failure to address systemic instability: there are poor countries mired in debt; inequality everywhere is blighting the lives of workers, women, Indigenous peoples and vulnerable communities. The COVID-19 pandemic has laid bare these deep ruptures between the global North and global South, rich and poor, privileged and vulnerable.

Source: Deborah James of the Our World Is Not for Sale (OWINFS) Network coordinated this letter, released November 23, 2021. Edited A.Healey. OWINFS is a global network of NGOs and social movements working for a sustainable, socially just, and democratic multilateral trading system. The International Grail Justice and Trade Network is a participating network of OWINFS.

www.ourworldisnotforsale.net

**Contributions to the Bulletin and responses to its content are welcomed.
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