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THE WTO 20 YEARS AFER THE 'BATTLE OF SEATTLE'

On the 20th anniversary of the protests against the World Trade Organisation (WTO), evidence of its harm to workers, healthcare, farmers and the environment, and particularly to developing countries, has proven its critics right.

On that cold winter's day in Seattle on 1st December 1999, the proponents of the WTO model of corporate globalisation were seeking to launch a new 'Millennium' round of liberalisation. Labour unions and environmentalists, development advocates and public interest groups voiced their opposition, and faced state security forces who doused them with tear gas and pepper spray, shot them with rubber bullets, and arrested them by the hundreds. The vast majority were exercising their democratic rights.

At the time of the protests, the WTO was less than five years old. But critics had already seen how the largest corporations in the world had succeeded in using the organisation to achieve a new set of agreements covering not just trade in goods but also trade-related investment measures, trade-related intellectual property (IP) rules, agriculture and services. These new agreements gave new rights to trading corporations and constrained governments seeking to regulate in the public interest. Furthermore, the WTO dispute settlement system adjudicates according to a set of rules guided by corporate interests. In the 45 cases in which member States have

tried to use public interest regulations as a defence in a case brought against them by a foreign corporation, commercial interests have won out 44 times.

Predictions of increased jobs and prosperity under the WTO system have failed abysmally. Inequalities have soared, leaving hundreds of millions impoverished while billionaires multiplied. This is because corporate elites hijacked 'trade' and rigged the rules to distribute income upwards, while reducing protections for workers - a far cry from the original goal of achieving full employment. Meanwhile, for example, the global pharmaceutical industry ('Big Pharma') won in its efforts to spread maximalist intellectual property protections - a distortion of 'free trade' that has cost untold lives, as prices of medicines have skyrocketed.

The environment has suffered as countries have exploited it to gain a competitive advantage. Trade is responsible for a growing percentage of the greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. As well, subsidies for the environmentally damaging production of oil and gas remain undisciplined, while countries have successfully sued one another in the WTO for directing subsidies towards greener fuels.

Unfair agriculture rules contribute to global food crises and the impoverishment of millions - there are still nearly a billion hungry people in the world - and keep

developing countries from benefitting from fair trade. Yet, the USA is currently suing India in the WTO for implementing the largest food security program in the history of the world.

After Seattle, supporters of the WTO were able to get developing countries to agree to a new round of trade talks only by claiming it would be a 'development' round that put the needs of developing countries at its heart. Since then, developed countries have never delivered on their promises to address the bad WTO rules that inhibit fair and equitable development.

Instead, now the Big Tech industry wants to use the WTO to protect and facilitate their rights in the global (digital) economy to access markets and permanently privatise the biggest resource in the world – data - while handcuffing governments from regulating the industry in the public interest.

They are also seeking new rules to limit even further their tax liabilities; to ensure an unlimited supply of cheap labour stripped of its rights, and to prevent their having any accountability to the communities in which they operate.

At a time when most conversations regarding Big Tech are around the need for stronger anti-trust and tax enforcement, and preventing their model of 'surveillance capitalism' from engineering our media, democracy, human rights, education and social relationships, the industry is working through the WTO, without public debate, to consolidate their power and profits.

They aim to achieve their ambitions in a new 'plurilateral'¹ agreement among nearly half the membership of the WTO, at the next Ministerial Meeting in June 2020 in Kazakhstan. Hint: these same provisions are already in the United States Mexico Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Thus, there is a crisis in the WTO, but it is one of its own making. To regain stability - and ensure true prosperity for their peoples - governments must address the fundamental flaws of the current system of corporate-led globalisation and not expand and entrench power imbalances.

We all need a global economy that facilitates decent jobs, access to affordable medicines, healthy food and a thriving environment. In 2015, nearly all governments agreed to this mandate through the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Agenda 2030. The rules of the global economy should be shaped around ensuring that trade can help achieve these goals not constrain governments from doing so.

The solution to the current conflicts on trade policy is not a false nationalism that nonetheless expands corporate control, nor a defence of the current failed corporate system. We need a wholly different system than that embodied in the WTO. This is what the protesters clamoured for in Seattle 20 years ago. It requires a multi-lateral vision of ecological stability, shared prosperity and leadership committed to that vision.² Until then, we can expect more crises.

*Source: Deborah James, Our World Is Not for Sale Network, www.ourworldisnotforsale.net
Published by Al Jazeera, 1st December 2019,
www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion
Some editing by A Healey.*

¹ Unlike multilateral agreements, plurilateral agreements are those to which some, but not all, member States are committed.

² A blueprint for achieving this vision is outlined in *A New Multilateralism for Shared Prosperity*:

Geneva Principles for a Green New Deal, published by the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) which is inspiring fresh thinking on the topic around the world.

THE SMALLHOLDER FARMERS AND THE DREAM OF FOOD SECURITY

Delivering on more sustainable agriculture has never been more compelling than it is now in the face of the growing environmental crises. It is an issue that needs our honest attention. While Africa and some other Third World countries remain on the threshold of food insecurity, agro-industrial businesses are exploiting all the loopholes they can find in international agreements and processes.. It is a situation that continually calls our ethical values into question and demands their re-examination.

The smallholder farmers produce 80% of the food consumed worldwide and so constitute the cornerstone of food security globally. This sector sustains Africa's rural economy; it has the potential for job creation for Africa's growing and young population; it is the antidote to urban migration and dangerous migration to foreign countries in search of the elusive 'greener pastures'. And to their credit, the smallholder farmers use methods of food production that are ecologically friendly and sustainable.

This being so, why is this sector which is most able to ensure global food security in the shortest possible time the least supported for development?

First of all, there must be an intentional political choice to define the modernisation of agriculture as meaning moving out labour and bringing in capital. This leads to an ever increasing industrialisation of agriculture and prevents smallholder farmers from getting adequate consideration in public policy spaces. As things are now, it is becoming increasingly difficult to defend the smallholder farmers in the policy spaces which are dominated by the overbearing propaganda of the agro-

industrialists. Smallholder farmers cannot access agricultural development finances because of impossible conditions placed on them to achieve such access.

The *Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network* believes that linking the smallholder farmers to sources of funding and mechanising their agriculture will give them the necessary leverage. They need access to a market that will get rid of the middlemen who reap the profits of the farmers' labours. They need guidance to think beyond subsistence agriculture and to enter the arena of entrepreneurship. This innovation would bring smallholder farmers to success within the secure fortress of sustainability. The available evidence suggests that the smallholder farmers' approach to food production is more climate-resilient than what is currently obtainable by following the policies in the various Bilateral Investment Treaties, the African Union, the World Trade Organisation and the European Union. It is imperative to formulate national and international policies and programs that follow this food system and food culture of the smallholder farmers.

It has become critical to lay bare the real interests of the agro-industrialists and the ethics of governments that prefer to welcome these investors into the economy rather than protect and promote the smallholder farmers, the common good and the ecosystem. Now is the *Kairos* moment for refocussing - for the sake of survival of the poor and oppressed and the Earth, our common home.

Source: Chika Onyejiuwa, Africa Europe Faith and Justice Network, AEFJN Echoes, Nov, 2019. Some limited editing by A Healey

USA-MEXICO BORDER SEES SURGE AFRICA MIGRANTS

While most migrants apprehended at the USA border are from Central American countries, a growing number of Africans are making their way to the United States, via the same routes traditionally used by Central Americans and Mexicans.

In June, according to the Department of Homeland Security, border patrol apprehended a record number of African refugees and immigrants from 19 countries, consisting mostly of family units and single adults.

Mexican authorities have reported that they apprehended 3,500 individuals in the months, October 2018 to May 2019, and Jessica Bolter, at the Migration Policy Institute, Washington, says that these numbers were expected to at least double by October 2019..

The journey to the United States takes months. African migrants enter the Western hemisphere with visas into countries like Ecuador and Brazil, which have easy visa requirements. From there, they travel to Colombia to make the trek through Central America to the USA border. The journey through Latin America is strenuous, dangerous and expensive. Most migrants' journeys are facilitated by smugglers who demand thousands of dollars in smuggling and bribery fees. The most treacherous part is the Darien Gap — the world's most remote jungle region accessible only by foot

or canoe. The jungle is populated with snakes, poisonous insects and wild animals. Many migrants die of exhaustion or drown in the river.

The Trump administration has adopted a policy of pressuring Mexico to reduce as much as possible the flow of migrants reaching the United States. Currently camped in the southern state of Chiapas in Mexico, many African migrants are in dire need of humanitarian aid. Mexico's immigration law requires asylum seekers to stay in the State where they request asylum or a humanitarian visa. As a result, many people cannot leave Chiapas and this puts extreme strain on this poor state in Mexico with its limited ability effectively to support this population. Those migrants not in detention centres find themselves homeless and extremely vulnerable to violence. 'The Mexican government is doing nothing to help them. It's an absolute nightmare,' said Claudia León, from Jesuit Refugee Service in Mexico.

The situation, say experts, is only set to worsen in the coming months, with immigration becoming a pivotal issue for President Donald Trump's 2020 re-election campaign.

Source: Sarah Salvadore, National Catholic Reporter, Nov 18, 2019, summarised A. Healey. ssalvadore@ncronline.org

You just need to be a flea against injustice. Enough committed fleas biting strategically can make even the biggest dog uncomfortable and transform even the biggest nation.

Failure is just another way to learn how to do something right.

Marian Wright Edelman

Contributions to Bulletin and responses to its content are welcomed.

Publication bi-monthly from office in Sydney. Deadline: 14th of each publication month.

The Bulletin is currently produced by two networks: *Justice and Trade Agreements* and *Human Trafficking*.

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Design: Thanks to Marian Kelly for her donation of time and talent.