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THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION (WTO) AND THE PANDEMIC THE LATEST

This is our third report on this topic (see Bulletins November 2021 and January 2022).

India and South Africa, in October 2020, proposed a temporary suspension of a number of provisions in WTO rules that protected intellectual property rights on pandemic-related vaccines, diagnostics, therapeutics and medical goods such as ventilators. The goal was to give ready access for low income countries to all they needed to respond promptly to the threat of COVID-19. Ever since, there has been a struggle among WTO members to gain sufficient support for the implementation of these measures. Countries with big, powerful pharmaceutical industries have opposed it. The USA was one of these, but amended its position to limiting the waiver to vaccines only. .

In December, India, South Africa, the USA and the European Union (EU) met behind closed doors to try to break the impasse. Although such a meeting hardly represented the interest of the broad membership of the WTO, it was strongly backed by the Director General, Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, who is under pressure to show that the WTO has some relevance in these crisis-prone times. They emerged with a so-called compromise draft, which was leaked in mid-March, to *Politico*

Europe, proposing a waiver applied to vaccines only.

International health advocates have described the draft as 'lowest common denominator, 'worse than nothing,' 'the fifth best option'. Far from being a true compromise that would benefit global public health this draft mainly reflects European submission to *Big Pharma* and the dogged insistence of the USA on its limited stance. Clause 8 in the draft says, 'no later than six months from the date of this decision, members will decide on its extension to cover the production and distribution of COVID-19 diagnostics and therapeutics'. Unfortunately, we are at a stage in the pandemic when rapid, regular, and affordable testing and treatments are just as important as vaccines. Low-income nations are extremely vulnerable to new, more contagious strains. Testing, treatment and newer therapeutics are vitally important.

Another problem with this draft is that it does not cover all the intellectual property rights that can obstruct the production and export of off-patent vaccines. *Public Citizen* calls them 'thorny thickets' of intertwined intellectual property rights, 'not just a patent or two'. These include chemical trials data and other proprietary

information that are treated as protected trade secrets by the WTO.

Next step: At some point soon, our countries will be asked to vote *yes* or *no* to a deeply flawed proposal. If there is any chance to make the waiver more effective

by covering more than vaccines, and more than patents, our countries should take every opportunity to do so.

Source: Stewart Trew, 'A trade news bulletin' from the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, March 22, 2022. Condensed and edited by Mary Boyd

DEBT AND BIODIVERSITY

According to the Third World Network, addressing debt is crucial to halting biodiversity loss. Longstanding economic pressures have been, and are, pushing countries into decisions that result in diminishing biodiversity. Many countries have developed patterns of trade and investment and financial structures, all of which cause biodiversity loss. Hence, proposals on the table to address 'wide-spread indebtedness in developing countries', at the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) held in Geneva, 14-29 March, 2022.

The CBD is the primary international treaty that aims to ensure the conservation of biodiversity, the sustainable use of its components and the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the use of genetic resources. Parties to the CBD are currently negotiating a post-2020 Global Diversity Framework (GDF), with specific goals and targets to guide countries in meeting their obligations. Debt has not previously been on the CBD agenda specifically, but there is increasing urgency to address the structural causes of biodiversity loss, including the economic factors that push countries into debt.

There are three primary ways that debt should be considered:

1. Attached to sovereign debt and its repayment are a number of conditions that often require developing nations to

depend on mining their raw materials (extractive industries) and exporting these and other products in order to earn foreign currency. This drives biodiversity loss further. The CBD Executive Secretary, Elizabeth Maruma Mrema, has affirmed that it will be difficult to achieve CBD objectives without addressing, for example, agricultural expansion in the Global South, driven by this need to 'earn hard currency to pay their debts to international lenders' (iv).

2. The same conditions and repayment terms are also an impediment to government spending on public needs and services, including the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity. Public funding is simply not available for biodiversity objectives and the mobilizing of resources to achieve them.
3. Developed nations need to take account of the ongoing ecological debts, including significant losses of biodiversity, being incurred in developing nations and compensate them. These debts should be recognized in the way funds for CBD targets are raised and distributed.

Currently, Target 15 of the draft of the Global Diversity Framework recognises that finances have a large impact on biodiversity and it seeks to address this, requiring standards of disclosure and risk-based frameworks for companies and

investors. Target 16 places emphasis on responsible personal consumption in line with biodiversity objectives. However, there are also equity aspects that are not 'addressed, e.g., developing countries' dependence on extractive exports.

One study of 65 nations found that 'higher levels of debt service, structural adjustment and primary sector exports are associated with higher numbers of threatened mammals and birds.' However, this requires more study.

Developing countries' debt is estimated at \$11 trillion; and the servicing of that debt is an estimated \$3.4 trillion annually. One study concludes that developing country resources flowing toward foreign debt repayment tripled from 2011 to 2020.

These patterns correlate with falling domestic spending. Now, countries' climate vulnerabilities are being assessed by credit rating agencies, leading to an increase in interest rates on sovereign debt for the most vulnerable. This in turn leads to increased borrowing costs at a time when the crisis in the world economy today is that of unsustainable sovereign debt. Adding insult to injury, the Group of 20 Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors met in Jakarta on 17-18 February 2022 to discuss global economic recovery, yet offered no new actions to combat the debt crisis.

Source: Third World Network (TWN), 'Info Service on Finance and Development' (4 Feb.2022) 'Info Service on Biodiversity' and 'Traditional Knowledge' (3 March2022). Edited by Mary Boyd.

BUILDING WOMEN'S CAPACITY FOR A MORE SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEM

Agribusiness companies try to convince farmers to use chemical pesticides, claiming it makes the work easier and helps to produce higher yields. What they don't say is that pesticides destroy biodiversity, make the soil toxic and kill earthworms, butterflies, bees and other organisms. Research in Kenya has found alarming levels of pesticides in fresh foods, which are partly responsible for increases in cancer and other diseases due to the carcinogenic components they contain. Many of the pesticides available in Kenya have been abolished by law in other countries. Unfortunately, the weak legislative systems in Africa are leading to the continent's becoming a dumping ground for what is no longer useful in other parts of the world. This is the sad reality that many farmers don't know or are not allowed to know.

Farmers often say that 10 or 20 years ago, they grew food without using any chemicals. Now they do: prior to seeding, when crops are growing and even during harvest. Often, they say that while these chemicals increased production initially, yields are now declining. *Leonida Odongo*, a community educator and food justice activist, is one who is building capacity for a more sustainable food system in Kenya. Her programs bring farmers together to reflect on their experience. For example, they are asked to bring a glass of soil from their farm and to count how many leaves, earthworms and other organisms they can spot. If there are no leaves, it means there are no micro-organisms. If there are no earthworms, it means that chemicals have killed them. With no leaves and micro-organisms, it also means that there is no humus in the soil. Then together they reflect on the

importance of microorganisms and humus and their roles in soil fertility.

'If you change the way you look at things, you will change the things you see'. Wayne Dyer

This approach has proved successful because farmers want to see tangible change. The beauty is that together they co-create knowledge informed by the farmers' own reflections on experiences. What is very enjoyable is transgenerational knowledge sharing, for instance when elderly farmers talk about the different herbs that can be used to make organic fertilisers and when innovative farmers talk about how and what they produce. These exchanges between farmers help to re-emphasise that indigenous, agro-ecological forms of production really work. They also engage in practical training, making compost, bio-fertilisers and natural pest repellents.

What is the role of women and feminism in these initiatives? Leonida's response to

this is that agroecology has a female face. The majority of people who till the land and save seeds are women, who have relationships and knowledge that are important for agroecology. Even if in most of African households, men are the ones controlling the land, cattle and coffee or tea plantations, women are the ones on the frontline in practice: they harvest the tea and coffee (deemed to be 'male' crops) and take them to the millers for processing but when the cash gets paid, it is the males who control the money. That is why it is important to start a dialogue about food production and who controls the resources.

The community dialogues enable women to have safe spaces where their voices can be heard and their concerns listened to. These platforms also provide opportunities for women to recognise their importance, not only in terms of reproduction but also in terms of production.

Source: Posted by Odile Ntakirutimana, Jan. 10, 2022 in 'Africa, Food Sovereignty'. Submitted by Alison Healey.

WEAPON

The will to power destroys the power to will.
The weapon made, we cannot help but use it;
it drags us with its own momentum still.

The power to kill compounds the need to kill.
Grown out of hand, the heart cannot refuse it;
The will to power undoes the power to will.

Though as we strike we cry 'I did not choose it',
It drags us with its own momentum still.
In the one stroke we win the world and lose it.
The will to power destroys the power to will.

Judith Wright, *Collected Poems 1942-85*,
with permission of the publisher, HarperCollins, Sydney

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