



- Stranglehold on access to essential COVID-19 medicines
- A return to traditional food?
- World Trade Organisation 12<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference

## STRANGLEHOLD ON ACCESS TO ESSENTIAL COVID-19 MEDICINES

### Pharmaceutical companies-WTO alliance must be broken

More than two years into a pandemic that has killed 15 million people, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) shamefully maintains deadly limitations to global access to COVID-19 vaccines, tests and treatments. These limitations can be found in the WTO agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). At the 12<sup>th</sup> WTO Ministerial Conference, June 12-17, a few wealthy countries promoting pharmaceutical corporation interests blocked the use of the WTO's waiver mechanism to temporarily suspend such barriers despite more than 100 WTO member countries supporting the waiver. The WTO's notoriously exclusionary, oppressive processes were deployed to force through a sham text that will not improve global access to COVID-19 medicines because it not only fails to remove IP obstacles but also adds further constraints to existing WTO flexibilities for medicines production. This outrageous situation calls for immediate action from governments in rejection of the WTO's protection of pharmaceutical monopolies rather than human lives.

As we have reported in previous Bulletins (January and November 2021), a temporary suspension (waiver) of clauses in TRIPS that prevented global access to COVID vaccines, tests, medicines, treatments and diagnostics had been proposed by a number of countries. However, despite the fact that over 100 member countries voted in favour of it, the

European Union, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, acting on behalf of pharmaceutical interests, blocked the proposal and so have betrayed billions of people worldwide who still need access to these life-saving resources. In failing to deliver on a vaccine waiver, for which it announced support, and blocking the inclusion of treatments and tests, the United States has also turned its back on a planet desperate for the COVID-19 pandemic to end.

The failure to waive temporarily sections of the TRIPS agreement spotlights just how broken and dangerously out-of-touch the WTO remains. The vast majority of the world's countries demand it, along with public health experts and health workers, generic medicine manufacturers, human rights advocates, faith leaders including Pope Francis, labour unions, community groups, scores of Nobel laureates and former heads of state, and the WTO Director-General. Health needs cannot be subservient to the profits of pharmaceutical monopolies. Civil society organisations around the globe are calling on governments to:

- **take every step necessary to save lives and end the pandemic , including full use of the WTO's existing, albeit limited, flexibilities;**
- **pledge not to use the dispute mechanisms in WTO and other**

**trade and investment agreements, or other means, in an attempt to stop or dissuade countries from producing, distributing or using medical technologies or from sharing information on how to do so, regardless of WTO and free trade agreement IP rules;**

- **circumvent the WTO's pharmaceutical monopoly rules when possible and disregard them outright when necessary.**

The WTO's draconian Intellectual Property (IP) rules have already helped to prolong the current pandemic and, if countries cannot get these rules out of the way, they will continue to contribute to massive public health, economic and social damage during future pandemics as well. And pandemics are not our only concern. Billions of people lack access to

lifesaving medicines that prevent, treat and cure many other illnesses because IP rules distort research priorities, create scarcity by artificially restricting supplies and allow excessive pricing and inequitable distribution. People living in poverty and people in lower-income countries suffer the consequences. Countries that do not accept those rules are subjected to trade threats and repercussions that undermine their sovereign regulations and processes. This cannot continue.

The monopolization of manufacturing and distribution cannot be allowed when it comes to COVID diagnostics, treatments and second-generation vaccines. To prevent this ongoing and disastrous injustice, member governments of the WTO must now act in good faith outside the WTO's structures.

*Source: Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, July 16, 2022. Edited by Mary Boyd.*

## **A RETURN TO TRADITIONAL FOOD?**

The dangers of too much dependence on imported food are currently being felt through consequences of the Ukraine war. Many countries imported wheat from Ukraine. With rapidly rising world market prices, many foods are becoming unaffordable for poorer populations. **A successful project in Kenya** encourages the population to grow and eat traditional vegetables.

### **A loss of Traditional Culture**

For centuries, despite droughts and floods, the peoples of Africa fed themselves and developed diverse and healthy culinary cultures using indigenous vegetables, herbs, spices and fruits. The European colonial powers brought their European way of life, including their way of eating, to

Africa, where they were adopted by the wealthy and educated classes. Traditional food became more and more considered inferior, impoverished and backward. To combat the prejudices against traditional food, research institutes, community organisations and government agencies in Kenya developed an interesting project in 1995 to promote local food systems.

### **High Quality Food**

Initially, 24 varieties of the 210 vegetables used in Africa were evaluated for their acceptability, marketability and impact on health. Many traditional plants were found to have higher nutritional value than the three most popular vegetables: cabbage, kale (called sukuma wiki) and chard. The leaves of the spider plant provide many

times more vitamin A than cabbage. Amaranth contains up to 12 times as much iron and calcium and almost twice as much fibre as cabbage. The leaves of cassava, an important vegetable in Central African countries, are rich in protein and vitamin A. The pulp of the baobab tree can provide up to 10 times as much vitamin C as oranges. Flying termites, and quail are an important source of protein, as are mushrooms, of which there are hundreds of edible species. These and many other crops prevent widespread malnutrition among children and disease.

### **A Success Story**

In the project's second phase, the seeds of the different varieties were collected, improved and distributed to interested parties. Experts propagated the advantages of the old varieties, advised farmers on cultivation, helped them to market their products and provided cooking recipes. Slowly, negative attitudes began to change. Supermarkets began to sell the traditional vegetables.. Today, traditional leafy vegetables are commonplace in

restaurants, street markets and homes. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation ( UNESCO) became aware of the successful campaign in Kenya. At a 2021 conference, the project was presented and made publicly available on the list of practices for the protection of cultural heritage. The information provides an incentive for other countries to start similar projects.

### **A Cultural Heritage**

Producing, processing and enjoying food is more than just an economic activity. It is an expression of a culture and a way of life. The intangible heritage in traditional foods includes knowledge, social practices, skills, beliefs and uses of food in ceremonies. One goal of the project was to contribute to the preservation of cultural heritage.

*Sources: The Conversation, [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com), reported in Africa-Europe Faith and Justice Network (AEFJN) Echoes, June 2022. Edited by Alison Healey.*

## **WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION, 12<sup>TH</sup> MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE 'PRO-CORPORATE, ANTI-WORKER, ANTI-DEVELOPMENT'**

The World Trade Organisation (WTO) held its 12th Ministerial Conference (MC12) this year in Geneva, 12-17 June. The assessment of it in the sub-heading comes from the network of networks, *Our World Is Not For Sale (OWINFS)*. Another observation: 'The last chance for developing countries to stay afloat in the WTO begins now. Before they "wake up" on the concluding day of the 13<sup>th</sup> Ministerial Conference in 2024, they may realise that they are almost dismembered with no rights and entitlements.'

When the conference concluded, Ms Okonjo-Iweala, WTO Director General (2221-25), declared it an 'unprecedented' meeting with 'very, very substantive outcomes'. The 'substantive outcomes' seem to have been concerned with:

- extending the e-commerce moratorium for two more years with the promise for the first time, of 'terminating' the decision at the end of this period;
- the TRIPS waiver (see our report above); and
- the Ministerial *Outcome* document that paves the way for discussions on WTO reforms under the direction of the

WTO General Council, and its committees and working parties.

On the second last day of the MC 12, an online press conference of leaders of trade unions and farmers' organisations and civil society asked developing country negotiators to reject compromise outcomes and reclaim policy space by taking steps to dismantle the WTO.

Shalmali Guttal, Executive Director of *Focus on the Global South (FGS)* stressed that, the WTO has failed to facilitate timely, appropriate responses to food and health crises –most evidently during the COVID pandemic. There has not been a single positive outcome for developing countries from the WTO.

Waldon Bello from FGS stated, 'WTO declarations with some nice language does not mean there is actual consensus on contentious issues. Developing countries must move from defensive to offensive positions and reclaim lost policy space.

Kate Lappin of *Public Services International* argued that as the world continues to face vaccine apartheid, the WTO should have no role whatsoever in global health policy including access to vaccines and treatment. She noted that at the MC 12, developed countries pushed through very anti-democratic rules around domestic regulations in the service sector that will constrain legitimate sovereign policy making .

Faroog Tarig of *Pakistan Kissan Rabita Committee* and *La Via Campesina* spoke

on the impact of the Agreement on Agriculture on rural farming communities in the Global South, stating that the pro corporate farming model of thie Agreement has brought food riots, poverty, hunger and misery to millions of farmers in the Global South. WTO agreements limit peasants' ability to grow seeds; Industrial agriculture exploits cheap migrant labour, particularly of women and girls. *La Via Campesina's* proposal for a new international framework based on food sovereignty is the way to go.

Sagari Ramdas of *Kudali Learning Centre* and *Food Sovereignty Alliance* spoke about how three decades of neoliberal pro-corporate policies on agriculture in the WTO have enabled the reproduction of old patterns of global exploitation. She also highlighted the Indian Government's duplicity: 'At Geneva, the Indian representatives are defending farmers and the right to public stockholding. But, back home in Delhi, they are embracing neoliberal policies that cut subsidies and impoverish small farmers. India's embrace of a pro-corporate model of farming has decimated cooperatives and led to dispossession and displacement of millions of small-scale food producers – especially women from indigenous and marginalised backgrounds that represent a vast majority of India's agricultural workforce'

*Sources: Third World Network, Info Service on WTO and Trade Issues (26 June 2022); WTO: South Suffers Loss at MC12, EU & US biggest Winners; Press Release: Developing Countries Should Walk Out of WTO Ministerial, 17 June 2022. Edited by Mary Boyd*

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