
Free Trade Agreements with the European Union in Latin America: A path to the loss of sovereignty and territories

A group of Latin American social organizations (1) met in Montevideo to examine the Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) that the European Union (EU) signed last May with Central America, Colombia and Peru. Not only are these FTAs a serious threat to the food sovereignty of the peoples, the forests, the region's main ecosystems and to artisan fisheries, but they will also worsen climate change. The organizations warned that the MERCOSUR (2) countries run the same risks following their decision to re-initiate their negotiations with the EU at the end of June.

These FTAs are part of a strategy called "Global Europe," implemented by the EU since 2006 aimed at strengthening its large transnational corporations worldwide.

The sectoral analysis of FTA impacts show that they have put food sovereignty on the rack and that they affect small-scale agriculture, artisan fisheries, forests and other essential ecosystems and worsen the climate crisis. These trade agreements with the EU are just as dangerous or even more dangerous than the ones signed by the United States with Colombia, Peru and Central America, and have the same objective: to step up trade liberalization in wide sectors of Latin American economies to the benefit of European corporations.

Some of the instruments included in these FTAs are the liberalization of investments and the service sector, the opening up of the agricultural sector, the elimination of export barriers (both tariff and non-tariff barriers), the strengthening of Intellectual Property Rights (patents) and free access to State Purchases by European purveyors.

One of the examples mentioned at the meeting was the case of the recent flooding of the market in Colombia by European dairy products and the lethal consequences this has had, particularly for small Colombian farmers. The European Union had demanded for the dairy sector relief from all tariffs for large quantities of European powdered milk and cheeses. The new regulations also apply to Peru and the Central American countries. In the case of Costa Rica, for example, acceptance of this provision would be very damaging to the sector "as presently it has 'zero imports' of dairy products." (3)

"These measures will increase the presence of large corporations in the agricultural sector. Industrialized agriculture with heavy machinery and the use of agro-toxic chemicals will be further enhanced and, added to seed patents, will be detrimental to family and peasant farming. Food policies controlled by the international market will continue to benefit corporations and damage the peoples' food sovereignty and their possibility to determine their local and national food practices," stated the Latin American social groups present at the event.

They also pointed out that the FTAs promoted by the EU will increase momentum in the global South of timber extraction activities, agrofuels, agribusiness, extensive stock-raising and monoculture tree plantations, which have devastated forests and other important ecosystems such as grasslands and also displaced local communities, particularly those of indigenous peoples. The European race to

access all types of natural resources and seize biodiversity, added to unrestrained economic activities, threatens to eliminate the continent's remaining forests.

The social organizations warned that small-scale artisan fisheries, which are essential for food sovereignty and for feeding the people, also run risks. The large European corporations already occupy dominant positions in the Latin American fisheries and fish-farming sector, controlling the trade of such species as shrimps, tuna, and tilapia. Their absolutely unsustainable trawling is already serious today and the trade measures defending the fishing corporations are detrimental to the possibilities of small scale fisher-folk who capture fewer and fewer fish.

Finally, the Latin American groups pointed out that the conditions imposed by the EU during the negotiations strengthen the increasing implementation of false solutions to climate change in our countries: development of transgenic plants, agrofuels, projects for the Reduction of Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), together with tree plantations to trap and store carbon, and dams. These measures divert attention away from what is really necessary to face the climate crisis: the radical reduction by industrialized countries of green-house gas effect emissions.

Furthermore, these agreements are incompatible with the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of the Indigenous Peoples and with the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, because the requisite of prior consultations with the indigenous communities has not been fulfilled. This was denounced by the Andean Coordinator for Indigenous Organizations (Coordinadora Andina de Organizaciones Indígenas - CAOI), adding that the governments of Colombia and Peru had issued no information during the whole negotiation process.

"The FTAs that the EU is promoting in Latin America are another turn of the screw to ensure security for its corporations and the abusive consumer patterns of its countries. The beneficiaries in our region will be a few economically powerful groups and the disadvantaged groups will be our peoples. The Central American, Colombian, Peruvian and MERCOSUR parliamentarians are still in time to curb this serious European advance against our future as sovereign peoples," stressed the organizations present in Montevideo.

(1) The Colombian "Grupo Semillas", the Ecuadorian Mangrove Network, the Andean Project for Peasant Technologies in Peru, the Brazilian CEPEDDES, the World Rainforest Movement and REDES-Friends of the Earth in Uruguay.

(2) The Common Market of the South (MERCOSUR) comprises Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay while Bolivia, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador, Peru and Venezuela are Associate States to the bloc.

(3) Taken from one of the documents prepared by REDES for this event.

Article based on information from Redes – Friends of the Earth Uruguay. The documents may be requested from Jose Elosegui, e-mail: jelosegui@gmail.com