
WTO: Who's common future?

In November of 2001, trade ministers from 140 nations gathered in Doha, Qatar to give the World Trade Organization (WTO) a historic new mandate that could intensify logging of native forests, the depletion of fisheries, the burning of fossil fuels, the use of toxic chemicals, and the release of genetically-modified organisms.

Despite rhetoric about poverty alleviation and sustainable development, the ministerial's official statement (known as the Doha declaration) gives the WTO new powers to restrain governments from regulating the behavior of global corporations. By declaring itself the arbiter of planetary natural resource crises and the fora for determining the relationship between conflicting international agreements on trade and environment, the Doha agenda throws down a direct challenge to the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa.

The WTO's new mandate covers questions whose answers will ultimately define our common future. If left unchallenged, the question of global governance will have been resolved by the WTO's declaring itself the arbiter of all things. The global corporations shaping WTO rules will define the futures of countless small farmers, fisher peoples, forest dwellers, indigenous peoples, and others whose survival depends on access to, and control over, the natural resources that exist in local commons worldwide. Threats to these traditional peoples' sustainable livelihoods are inherent to the Doha agenda.

The Doha agenda has empowered the WTO to:

- increase corporate control over natural resources by allowing decisions about their use to be driven even more closely by the short-term demands of global financial markets;
- intensify export-based forestry, farming, and fishing, as well as fossil fuels burning, mining, and other natural resource exploitation;
- eliminate more conservation and community development policies as unfair "barriers" to trade;
- determine who captures the remnants of the world's collapsing natural resources;
- subordinate multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) to the rights of corporations enshrined in the WTO rules.

Furthermore, the WTO's market access agenda combines two dangerous impacts that undermine natural resource conservation and sustainable livelihoods: 1) the expansion of exports to wasteful consumers; 2) the elimination of legal protections that ensure sustainable natural resource use and local communities who depend on them. The forestry, fishing, and farming sectors are particularly impacted. Negotiations are broken down by the elimination of tariffs (import taxes) and so-called Non Tariff Measures, or NTMs.

Forest tariffs were an issue of great concern to protesters in Seattle, as ministers had prepared to finalize a deal that week. Popularly known as the "Global Free Logging Agreement," forest conservationists succeeded in getting the US Trade Representative to publish its first ever environmental assessment of trade liberalization, released just before the 1999 Ministerial. In the

report, which was done by a timber industry-funded group, trade officials buried the real findings: tariff reductions would result in increased logging in some of the world's most threatened original forests inhabited by indigenous peoples. Cutting tariffs reduces wood prices for consumers, in turn stimulating more wasteful consumption, especially in the rich nations where tariffs are highest. WTO tariff elimination could undermine efforts to reduce wood and other resource consumption, a priority identified by the 1992 UN Rio Earth Summit. Yet the Johannesburg preparatory report by the UN Secretary-General hails the WTO's Doha agenda a "success."

Non Tariff Measures (NTMs) are considered to be any government measure, policy, or practice that has the effect of "distorting" trade. Forest NTMs are broadly defined as any measure that "distorts" trade. Even measures that have a "potential" to impact trade, such as ecolabels, are under the WTO microscope. The NTM agenda is the final push to remove all government control from regulating natural resources, where any policy objective, such as conservation or community development, is made subservient to expanding trade.

The Doha deal may some day come to be known as a declaration of silent war against the rights of people and the planet. It threatens poor peoples' access to and control over the very resources upon which their survival depends, deepening the spiral of exclusion that drives so many into insecurity and desperation. There is talk in the WSSD preparatory process of striking a "Global Deal" in Johannesburg. Any meaningful deal would have to initiate a people-driven process to transform international economic institutions. Otherwise, decisions taken under WSSD will be undermined by the WTO, the IMF, the World Bank, and the global corporations they serve.

While the cheerleaders of global free trade spin Doha's outcomes as a victory in the global war on poverty, and remain "convinced that trade and environment policies can and must be mutually supportive," the contradictions between the Doha and Johannesburg agendas become increasingly clear.

With the very real prospect of global governance being usurped by transnational corporations via the WTO, civil society must use the Johannesburg process as a vehicle to defy the Doha agenda and intensify challenges to today's global economic institutions. Regardless of the WSSD's official outcomes, the peoples' process, as in Seattle, will and must ultimately replace the WTO with a truly democratic system that values life over money, and the rights of people over the rights of corporations.

Far from being finalized, global civil society's response to the Doha agenda has already been launched: grassroots organizations around the world will be using the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development as an organizing vehicle to beat back the Doha agenda. The Johannesburg's "peoples' process" will be just one of a number of convergences required to replace the WTO's bid for a corporate utopia with an international citizen's agenda that protects the poor and the planet. If not, Doha will be known as a pivotal point in history where global governance was truly usurped.

By: Victor Menotti, International Forum on Globalization, e-mail: vmenotti@ifg.org