

**Claude Girod, For other trade rules**  
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On June 16, the European Commission launched a public consultation for the review of its trade policy<sup>1</sup>. To this end, it called for a reform of the World Trade Organization (WTO) so that this institution can once again become "*an effective forum for the development of new trade rules, appropriate in their implementation and in the settlement of disputes*".

In response to questions from the European Commission, anxious to relegitimize the WTO, the European Coordination Via Campesina (ECVC) can only repeat its fundamental objective: food sovereignty. For our peasant organizations, members of La Via Campesina, food sovereignty means the right of populations, their States or unions of States, to define their agricultural and food policy, without dumping vis-à-vis third countries.

### **The WTO outside agriculture**

On the contrary, the WTO, in its dogmas and its functioning, generalizes dumping in the name of trade, without addressing fundamental rights – "human rights", cultural and social rights, labor rights, the right to food – or even conventions, charters and agreements, such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants<sup>2</sup> or the climate agreements.

While international trade in agricultural raw materials concerns barely 20% of world production, market principles for "free and undistorted" competition impact all production, everywhere on the planet. The European Union's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) had to renounce milk quota regulations, Brazil had to revise its "zero hunger" policy, India had to renounce food aid for the poorest.

It's a frantic race on prices, independently of the real costs of production, which gives priority to the giants of agribusiness.

It is also social and environmental dumping, since the rights and wages of land workers weigh little compared to the injunctions of the market, which does not bother any more about the use of pesticides, fertilizers, GMO-based animal feed or the health standards of production chains.

### **Ever more dangerous free trade agreements**

Initially, the European Commission favored this type of agreement with developing countries, far from the eyes of their citizens. But how can Tunisia defend its interests against the powerful European Union? What happens to the Argentinean textile industry in the negotiations of or with Mercosur<sup>3</sup>?

The WTO prohibits favoring a country or group of countries in trade negotiations and the European Union must abide by its rules (which it did not want or know how to oppose). It has thus had to renounce the Cotonou Agreements (which adopted the absence of customs duties on entering the European market), and adopt total reciprocity in the so-called Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) with African, Caribbean and Pacific countries. Likewise, it must grant equivalent import quotas to all countries, which means that a sector such as beef is gradually being eaten up by all kinds of imports from North America, Latin America, Australia or New Zealand.

The WTO granted a waiver to the "least developed countries", the poorest countries, authorized to maintain customs duties, which are essential to their treasury. Today, a clever division of Africa into "large regions" has made this a thing of the past. South Africa in the "Southern" region and Nigeria in the "Western" region, the continent's driving forces, are cancelling these safeguards.

Henceforth, in these free trade agreements, imports are quantified and sometimes subject to large volumes (such as beef in Europe). The machine continues on its way as the agreements are in perpetual revision, with rising obligatory quotas, falling customs duties and targeted threats against non-tariff barriers.

Like other countries or unions of countries, the European Union has its own rules of origin and sanitary and phytosanitary standards. Since the WTO cannot eradicate them multilaterally, it is now up to each bilateral agreement or FTA to try to iron out the remaining "obstacles", such as the precautionary principle or the moratorium on GMO crops.

The confidentiality of the negotiations makes it possible to establish guarantees of return on foreign investment through the threat of commercial and private jurisdictions – known as dispute settlement – which will condemn any national or citizen desire: a windfall for all those who monopolize land, water, seeds or other natural resources.

Not only are the free trade agreements being negotiated by the European Union trapped in an inflexible regulatory straitjacket, but sovereignty and democracy are excluded from any negotiation. It is difficult and illusory in this perspective to define priorities in response to the questions formulated in this sense by the European Union in its consultation on its trade policy.

### **SME or agriculture?**

Paradoxically, there is no mention of agriculture in the Commission's battery of questions. The WTO claims to reduce and include agricultural issues under the register of small and medium-sized enterprises. The avoidance reinforces the conviction of the European farmers' organizations of La Via Campesina of the little consideration that the European Commission gives us as producers, planners of space and territories, providers of jobs, guardians of biodiversity, environment and climate.

Farms are rapidly disappearing in all EU member States. A growth plan for employment necessarily involves voluntary policies for setting up and supporting agriculture (question 7). The model of family farming is so fragile that the FAO, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, is opening a ten-year reflection on this subject.

On the other hand, more and more migrants are being exploited in Europe in undignified working conditions, particularly in the fruit and vegetable sector, in the name of supposedly inevitable competition. ECVC denounces the European circulars on these "posted workers", the discrimination in hiring, the existence of labor companies in this niche, the criminalization of support movements for migrants seeking work and / or refuge.

Today, the WTO seems to think that interesting results in terms of growth could be brought about by new technologies and internet commerce (e-commerce). Just as we claim food sovereignty, it is high time to build an authentic digital sovereignty for Europe. As attacks against our rules and standards are daily, the development of virtual trade, without an

independent and reliable control authority, can only work against European farmers. It is a question of coherence since the CAP imposes traceability and transparency on its territory (question 9).

### **A new paradigm for Europe**

Climate change makes a complete overhaul of trade rules indispensable. At a time when everyone praises the need to relocate production, it is necessary to take stock of the political choices based on the growth of international trade. The "Paris Agreement" on climate change signed at the end of 2015 aims to reduce transport, citing taxes. ECVC provides a range of proposals for a revision of the CAP.

The health crisis has provoked all sorts of declarations along the same lines, for an "after-world" and a desire for independence, or even sovereignty of our supplies. Why not take this step, starting with agriculture, which is vital to our lives?

Assessments and impact studies are sorely lacking prior to trade negotiations. Those that are published draw up a catastrophic assessment of their results. This is the case for the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in terms of jobs and growth. More and more voices, including Nobel Prize winners in economics, are now denouncing the liberal frenzy of recent decades. We know today that the expected results are not there, that inequalities are widening, that the countryside is emptying out, that there are more and more people suffering from malnutrition.

Rather than attempting a superficial reform of what already exists, knowing full well that it is illusory, wouldn't it be time for the European Union to lay the foundations for a completely different kind of trade?

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<sup>1</sup> *Presentation and documents: [urlz.fr/e25F](http://urlz.fr/e25F)*

<sup>2</sup> *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas, adopted by the United Nations General Assembly on December 17, 2018: [viacampesina.org/en/illustrations-peasantsrights.org](http://viacampesina.org/en/illustrations-peasantsrights.org)*

<sup>3</sup> *The Southern Common Market, so-called Mercosur, is an economic community that includes Argentina, Brazil, Paraguay and Uruguay.*