

WTO Mini-Ministerial Conference: the right to food sovereignty rather than all-out liberalization

The Trade Ministers of the leading member countries of the World Trade Organization (WTO) will meet for a Mini-Ministerial Conference during the week of July 21. Their objective is to go even further on the road to liberalization of agricultural trade. The decisions that will be made there could have a considerable impact on hundreds of millions of farmers and citizens, and more severely affect people already afflicted by the current world food crisis. They could also threaten all farmers here at home, especially those who produce our milk, eggs and poultry.

As committed citizens concerned about the future of agriculture, we have serious reservations, as this meeting begins, about greater liberalization of agricultural trade. Above all, we want to express our clear support for the concept of food sovereignty, which means the right of the world's peoples to define their own food and agricultural policy, the better to meet their own needs. This concept should be the basis of any agreement on international trade in agricultural products and be recognized as an inalienable right, prevailing over mere commercial interests.

The current food crisis which has hit a part of the planet clearly illustrates that agricultural and agri-food market liberalization policies, such as those advocated by the WTO, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), are leading to a dead end and are not a solution to world food and agricultural problems. The agricultural market liberalization imposed on the developing countries is one of the deep-rooted causes of the current food crisis. It has destroyed the local production base of the developing countries in favour of agriculture geared to export products, such as coffee and cacao. It has made them dependent on imports for their staple foods, with the results that we see today. Soaring food prices on the world market have had devastating consequences for the people of these countries. Agricultural products cannot be treated like just any commodity, because agriculture and food are vital sectors for all countries.

The WTO proposes to go even further in liberalization of agricultural markets. Not only would this worsen the situation of the poorest countries, but here at home it would open up the markets for products under supply management: milk, poultry and eggs. Supply management is the farming model we adopted nearly 40 years ago in Canada to establish the best balance

between supply and demand for milk, eggs and poultry. This is a fair model and it concretely espouses the principles of food sovereignty. It allows producers to make a decent living, without subsidies, and assures Canadians of a supply of high-quality products, at stable and reasonable prices. Thanks to supply management, for example, Canada was protected against the soaring dairy, egg and poultry prices that prevailed on the world market in the past year.

Supply management also fosters local food production and avoids long-distance transportation of food. In the context of growing energy costs and global warming, increasing energy expenditures and greenhouse gas emissions to ship food across the world, as the WTO proposes, makes no sense.

For all of these reasons, we consider that the only viable long-term solution, in both environmental and food security terms, is to allow countries to exercise their food sovereignty to develop a type of agriculture primarily designed to feed their people. Less than 10% of the food produced worldwide is traded between countries. The WTO should concentrate on regulating the world trade of these products and let countries decide on their own domestic agricultural policies and extent of food self-sufficiency.

Supply-managed commodities play an essential role in Canada's agricultural sector and in the Canadian economy. The adoption of an accord based on the proposal that will be discussed at the next WTO conference would prevent the maintenance of an effective supply management system. It would also lead to the replacement of local production by massive food imports in these sectors. This would have harmful economic, environmental and social consequences for our regions and for consumers.

As we know, the Government of Canada, all the major federal political parties, the National Assembly and several provincial legislatures firmly support supply management. We urge the Government of Canada to honour its commitment not to sign an agreement that would compromise this principle.

Signatories:

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