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Corollaries of an "opaque" Trade Summit. Disagreements in Geneva between rich and poor. The WTO's great concern is its survival

La Via Campesina, for its part, announced that in the coming days it will publish a detailed balance sheet on the 12th WTO Ministerial Summit.



Although the leaders of the World Trade Organization (WTO) overflowed with euphoria over the results of their recent Ministerial Conference in Geneva, La Via Campesina International considered them "opaque and disappointing".

After five days of negotiations (12-17 June) between representatives of 164 states participating in the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference, their spokesmen spoke of "unprecedented agreements". They referred, in particular, to patents for COVID-19 vaccines, food safety and rules governing fisheries.

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This Conference "confirms the historic importance of the multilateral trading system," emphasized Ngozi Okonjo-Iweala, Director-General of the WTO, closing the marathon of discussions that lasted 48 hours longer than expected with the aim of reaching minimum consensus.



Behind these consensuses was the very credibility – already strongly questioned – of this body that had not been able to meet in person for five years since the December 2017 conference in Buenos Aires and that had not been able to reach any type of agreement for a decade.

For its part, La Via Campesina, the most important rural movement at the international level, assesses that the WTO has hesitated on the most pressing issues for rural and urban small-scale food producers worldwide. In its June 20 statement it says that "[the Geneva Package does not address the multiple crises of inflation, price increases, hunger, and global warming.](#)"



Atmosphere of protest

On Saturday, June 11, a day before the start of the Geneva conclave, hundreds of demonstrators took to the streets of the city to demand the annulment of the rules on agriculture that currently govern.

La Via Campesina and other international organizations launched the invitation to protest in late April. Under the slogan: "Free trade is hunger! WTO outside agriculture!", the organization also called on all its members and allies to organize public meetings, conferences and demonstrations between June 10 and 15 in order to "expose the impact of Free Trade Agreements and WTO policies on small food producers both rural and urban."



For this rural movement, in the current global conjuncture marked by the pandemic, by the visible effects of global warming on agriculture and by the war in Ukraine, "it is clear that making people's food security dependent on international trade and transnational corporations is a crime." This must end, he stressed, and insisted that the WTO must not control agriculture. On the contrary, Food Sovereignty must be the basis of agricultural and food policies in each country and internationally.

For the international rural movement, the WTO is trying to impose its hegemony in a world plagued by inequality, hunger, extreme poverty, wars and a pandemic unique in the century. And that is why it is essential ["to mobilize to denounce this organization and defend the Food Sovereignty of the peoples."](#)



Without the necessary police authorization to hold the protest in front of the headquarters of the World Trade Organization, the demonstration on June 11 chose to walk the streets of Geneva, interspersing at different points along the way speeches of peasant leaders who arrived from the various continents.

Critical view of civil society

Different voices of international civil society came to the crossroads of the euphoric statements of the WTO that the international news agencies unilaterally amplified without giving the floor to the social movements.



Isolda Agazzi, an expert in international trade within the Swiss platform Alianza Sur, was forceful in evaluating the WTO summit: "she approved an insubstantial decision on COVID 19. Nor did it find a permanent solution for mandatory food storage." And he stressed that the agency " does not propose viable solutions either for the health crisis or for the food crisis that plagues our planet. As is often the case in such negotiations, resolutions were only adopted because they represent a compromise; no one is really happy with that."



Isolde Agazzi

According to Agazzi, whose platform brings together the main Swiss cooperation NGOs, the agreements reached on COVID-19 at the Summit are a far cry from the proposal that India and South Africa had presented in October 2020, to democratize and decentralize the production of vaccines and anti-COVID-19 drugs to countries of the South.

That proposal called for a temporary suspension of all exclusive intellectual property rights (patents, trade secrets and data) on coronavirus vaccines, drugs and tests, which should facilitate their manufacture and commercialization in developing countries and thus benefit populations less protected from the pandemic.

Very quickly, the India-South Africa initiative was supported by a hundred countries and NGOs around the world. But from the outset, Switzerland and the United Kingdom, among other developed nations, were radically opposed to protect the interests of the big pharmaceutical transnationals that have their headquarters in northern countries.

The decision taken at the recent Geneva Summit, Agazzi explains, simply repeats the existing WTO provisions. In particular, there is a possibility that eligible or designated developing countries may commercialize generic drugs despite patent protection through a mechanism called "compulsory licensing".

However, this agreement does not contribute to strengthening local productive capacities. In fact, it makes no sense to revoke patents without revealing production secrets and without transferring technology and knowledge. On the other hand, such a "compulsory licensing" mechanism is complicated and time-consuming for implementation. Proof of this is that, although it entered into force in 2001, it has been used only exceptionally.

According to Agazzi, NGOs, including Alianza Sur, would have preferred no agreement to be reached because this is a bad agreement. In that scenario, WTO member states would have been obliged to start trying to find a satisfactory multilateral solution for the production of anti-COVID vaccines and medicines in certain countries of the South.

No substantive responses to the food crisis

As for the agreement on the collection of food to counter the global food crisis – as a result of the Ukraine-Russia conflict and the climate drama – social movements consider that the Geneva Summit did not adopt the key measure that would have allowed developing countries to really increase their production capacity.

This lasting solution would require a revision of the WTO's agriculture treaty that the major industrialized nations do not want to amend. A revision of this magnitude would mean that the WTO would modify its rules on agriculture to allow developing countries to support (subsidize) their own poor producers and consumers, as developed countries have long done.

Several wealthy nations, such as the United States, blocked any possibility of getting to the bottom of the problem, in part because of their fear that India and other southern nations could export their subsidized grains. Nor did they agree to seek a temporary transitional option that would be valid until a permanent solution to the food crisis was found in the future.

Far from essential strategic agreements for developing countries, two documents were adopted in Geneva. One of them is the Ministerial Declaration on the Emergency Response to Food Insecurity, which underlines the importance of "not imposing export prohibitions or restrictions" contrary to WTO rules.

The second document protects food purchases by the World Food Programme (WFP), exempting it from restrictions that could be imposed by some countries. In view of WFP's humanitarian aid in crisis – aggravated by the sharp rise in world hunger levels – the WTO

calls on its member states not to impose "[bans or restrictions on the export of food products purchased by WFP for humanitarian, non-commercial purposes](#)".



In evaluating the Geneva Ministerial Summit, the Europe-Third World Centre (CETIM) considers that "decision-making on food security has been postponed indefinitely, since for some powerful States the priority is to defend at all costs the particular interests of agribusiness and promote the liberalization of the agricultural market."

For this association based in Geneva and which is one of the most recognized voices worldwide on the subject of trade negotiations, "the serious problems posed by highly mechanized industrial agriculture are well known: pollution of land and waterways, advance of desertification, large monocultures for export, decrease in the nutritional quality of food, waste of food and natural resources, high food prices, rural exodus, among others."

The CETIM emphasizes that despite the serious problems posed by industrial agriculture, some powerful states (with the United States at the head) continue to promote the total liberalization of the agri-food sector within the WTO. Their main argument: encourage competition! He concludes: "As we all know, WTO rules are tailored to the interests of transnational corporations. Putting small and medium-sized family farmers in competition with multi-billion dollar companies means sentencing them to death."

La Via Campesina, for its part, announced that in the coming days it will publish a detailed balance sheet on the 12th WTO Ministerial Summit. And he anticipates that in it he will analyze how the Geneva 2022 Package, which the WTO presents as a historic success, "is only an attempt to save the World Trade Organization from extinction."

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Edited by [María Piedad Ossaba](#)

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