

Welcome to a new edition of the bilaterals.org podcast where we discuss the most recent developments around free trade and investment agreements.

Services have become the largest part of countries' economies, and the largest source of employment. But the idea of 'Trade in services' is an artificial creation of the late 1970s and 1980s. It was designed to bring the social and public phenomenon of services under international 'trade' rules that would work for corporations. The big services corporations of the time, such as airlines, finance and telecommunications, developed and promoted the idea, as they sought to shape a globalised economy.

Both the World Trade Organization and free trade agreements now impose a fundamental rethink of services. Services are hugely important as sources of jobs, transmitters of culture, and as public goods that central and local governments provide for their people's wellbeing, but they are bought and sold in markets like a can of sardines.

Today new rules known as "e-commerce", "digital trade" or "digital services" have been designed to empower big tech corporations to operate globally in an almost regulation-free zone. They have been included in recent trade deals, like the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement or the Trans-Pacific Partnership.

Globally international people's campaigns to stop the World Trade Organization, the Trade in Services Agreement, and the mega-regional trade agreements have been a constant thorn in the side of trade in services negotiations. There have been many successes. Leaked texts broke down the secrecy of negotiations and forced governments, and the WTO, to defend themselves.

Rich countries have been exposed as demanding developing countries open their water and other public services to western transnational corporations. Trade unions mobilised nationally and internationally to defend public services, whether in education, health, local government or the environment. Activists, like anti-poverty campaigners, indigenous Peoples, consumer advocates, among others, educated themselves so that they could lead debates and explain to their legislatures what was happening behind their backs. The struggle continues.

Two recently released reports about the trade deal between India and the European Union highlight concerns about the negative impacts the agreement would have in India. Specifically they point out to food security, industrial development, and access to resources, services, and medicines.

The reports show the EU trade policy's contradictions. For example, the Trade and Sustainable Development chapter intends to protect women's rights but elsewhere the agreement aims to limit the use of government procurement to help local companies. In India, a lot of small companies run by women benefit from government procurement and losing such help would jeopardise their work. The same logic applies to small-scale women dairy producers whose activities would likely decline if the Indian market was open to large EU agribusinesses. This demonstrates that policies that might look nice on a piece of paper in a Brussels office are usually contradicted by the reality on the ground.

EU-India trade negotiations were relaunched in June 2022, as a result of the recent shift in the geopolitical context for both India and the EU.

Kenya and the United States have concluded the first round of what is known as Strategic Trade and Investment Partnership negotiations.

Among the initial areas the deal identified are agriculture, digital trade, environment and climate action, regulatory practices, micro, small and medium-size enterprises, and workers' rights.

Health groups in Kenya are concerned that the trade agreement could be used to push intellectual property rules that restrain the access to affordable essential medicines, especially for people affected by HIV and tuberculosis.

They say that the original negotiations under the Trump administration included intellectual property and they hope the issue will not be reintroduced.

They worry that the unequal power relations between Kenya and the US pose a real danger on whether Kenya may negotiate for better terms, considering the fact that the US is one of the largest donors for Kenya's HIV treatment budget.

And now in brief.

In light of the start of negotiations for a Free Trade Agreement between Canada and Ecuador, groups in Ecuador warn about the serious effects that this agreement would have on human and collective rights and the environment. They say the agreement would specifically guarantee greater impunity for Canadian investments in the mining sector in Indigenous and peasant territories, where mining projects are being opposed due to evidence of water contamination.

In the Philippines, the Senate voted in favour of the ratification of the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, in spite of farmers' mobilisations that pointed out that the free trade deal will not benefit small-scale farmers and fishers, and will result in massive job losses in small and medium enterprises.

In Mexico, pressure is ramping up on the government's ban on genetically modified corn after both the US and Canada requested formal trade consultations under the North American free trade agreement

Finally environmental organisations in Slovenia are considering bringing about a court challenge to the trade deal between the European Union and Canada. They say the agreement is not in line with the Constitution. In Slovenia, water sources must serve primarily to supply drinking water and water to households, and are not marketable goods. But the agreement defines concessions for the extraction of natural resources as investments, which can be understood as marketable goods.

And that's it for today. I'm Nicolas Roux, bilaterals.org. If you'd like to read more information about this podcast's content, you can click on the links provided in the description box. More news coming up soon in our next podcast. In the meantime, you can visit bilaterals.org.