

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

During the Global counter-summit of social movement convened on the occasion of the annual meetings of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank in Marrakesh in October, bilaterals.org organised a workshop, with Attac Maroc, CADTM Africa, GRAIN and the Tunisian Observatory of Economy.

The aim of the counter-summit was to bring together social and climate movements, trade unions, NGOs, women's, small farmers' and indigenous peoples' organisations to talk, share and organise our struggles and build our society, our way of life. The participating organisations also expressed their solidarity with Palestine and the Palestinian struggle.

The bilaterals.org workshop focused on the link between free trade and debt in imposing a neocolonial system of domination. Debt has historically played a central role in the colonial system in Africa, while international trade was hijacked by imperialist powers to advance their interests.

As Attac Maroc pointed out, the debt increased as a result of colonialism, reaching one billion dirhams by the time of independence in 1956. The World Bank and IMF's structural adjustment programmes in the 1980s, followed by the push for free trade agreements in the 1990s and 2000s, had a devastating impact on the daily lives of the Moroccan people.

The workshop went on to highlight the lesser-known role of the World Bank's International Centre for Settlement of Investment Disputes in perpetuating the use of a parallel and extraterritorial judicial system created in the colonial era to resolve trade and investment disputes related to the activities of colonisers.

This process is known as Investor-State Dispute Settlement (or ISDS) and has been criticised by social movements around the world. For example, ISDS was at the heart of negotiations between the European Union and Tunisia for a 'Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement', which has so far failed to win the approval of the Tunisian side due to people's resistance in the African country.

According to the Tunisian Observatory of Economy, the trade agreement is characterised by a neocolonial attitude on the part of the Europeans. They wanted to impose their rules and prevent Tunisia from subsidising its agriculture, even though the European Union could subsidise its own agriculture. The Europeans also tried to lure Tunisia with financial aid as a condition for signing the FTA.

A broad coalition managed to derail the deal by organising protests, lobbying and outreach, demanding parliamentary accountability and blocking negotiations. Ultimately, the trade deal was shelved and negotiations have not resumed since.

The Kenyan Peasants League went on to say that Kenya faces a different fate as an Economic Partnership Agreement was signed with the European Union in June 2023.

The EPA will strengthen export-oriented and monoculture agriculture in Kenya, undermining the country's food sovereignty and putting local producers in unhealthy competition with highly subsidised European companies. The League added that tomato farmers in Ghana are suffering from imports of cheap European produce, while chicken farmers in Cameroon have suffered the same fate as a result of their countries signing a trade agreement with the EU.

While many social movements have been vocal in their opposition to these free trade agreements, CADTM Africa explained that another neoliberal project is looming over the African continent: it is known as the African Continental Free Trade Area.

It aims to create a free trade area across Africa, liberalising 90% of non-sensitive products. But while the mantra of pan-Africanism has been used by proponents of the deal, it is actually based on the dogma of free-market capitalism and promotes an export-led development model. It includes trade rules contained in bilateral agreements that benefit elites and transnational capital at the expense of local communities.

The workshop concluded that social movements, communities, citizens, etc. need to build a power struggle to reverse this trend. To defeat imperialism, Thomas Sankara said everyone should consume and eat local. Debt and so-called 'free trade' have been instrumental in imposing a system based on ever more exports and dependence on extractivism. Favouring the local over the international could well be one of the alternatives for societies to face the challenges of our time, including the climate crisis, migration, food and energy sovereignty. International mobilisations such as this counter-summit allow people from all over the world to connect and raise awareness on global issues, playing an important role in building solidarity for social justice.

In other news, the European Parliament and the European Council have voted largely in favour of the trade deal between the European Union and New Zealand. The deal has been slammed by social movements which say it will deepen the climate crisis by promoting trade between regions more than 20,000 kilometres apart.

Also last month, the post-Cotonou agreement, known as the Samoa Agreement, was signed between the European Union and the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States. But 35 of the 79 countries in the group refused to sign.

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