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editorial

rethinking global trade in a time of geopolitical tensions

For much of this century, the multilateral system established after World War II has been corrupted and hijacked by a cohort of wealthy, powerful nations that are reshaping the (so-called) global rules-based order and redefining what cooperation, justice, shared prosperity and stability are. Leading the charge is the United States of America, which, through the combined power of capital and military might, is bypassing collective rules and imposing unilateral decisions that are fundamentally reshaping global politics and trade. This has led to a fragile international system where all rules are changeable and brute power determines outcomes.

This is not to say that the besieged international/multilateral system is fair, equitable or democratic. Its foremost bodies—the UN Security Council, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank and the World Trade Organization (WTO)—have long been instruments to advance the interests of former colonial powers. The bitter irony nowadays is that even the rules imposed by these institutions are in disarray.

Global trade and investment—whether negotiated through WTO agreements, bilateral Free Trade Agreements or Strategic Economic Partnerships—have morphed into weapons in geopolitical conflicts. Tariffs, sanctions, and financial restrictions are wielded not to correct trade imbalances but to exert ruthless political pressure and vanquish nations and peoples. Economic measures target those who dare to chart any alternate path to global capitalism and fascist ideologies.

As the latest war in West Asia shows, these actions ripple far beyond the nations involved. For developing countries, the consequences are devastating. Fluctuating tariffs, aggressive sanctions, and volatile commodity prices threaten working-class livelihoods, strain food systems, and deepen dependence on increasingly unreliable external markets.

Small-scale producers and workers—the backbone of local economies—find themselves caught in a vice of global price swings, escalating production costs and decreasing incomes.

When economic policies are driven by imperial and settler colonial ambitions, the expectation of fair and equitable trade evaporates. Cuba, Palestine, and Venezuela illustrate how trade weaponization combined with colonial assertions leads to the collective punishment of peoples.

However, this moment of crisis also offers a critical opportunity. As faith in existing systems wanes, countries and social movements are rising to demand a renewal of genuine multilateralism—one based on cooperation rather than oppression, and on participatory democracy rather than opaque representation.

Focus on the Global South, La Via Campesina

A new international trade framework that works for all

At the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum held in September 2025 in Sri Lanka, La Via Campesina laid out the essential principles for a Global Framework on Agricultural Trade Based on Food Sovereignty.

Guided by the foundational definition of food sovereignty established at the 2007 Nyéléni Global Forum and grounded in international human rights law, this framework articulates an ethical paradigm for trade that prioritizes human dignity, environmental justice, and democratic governance of food systems at all levels—local, regional, and global.

It asserts that all trade mechanisms must be designed to respect the inalienable rights of peoples and nations to determine their own agricultural and food policies, recognizing food as a fundamental human right rather than a commodity. It firmly emphasizes that trade mechanisms shall neither be weaponized nor subordinate basic rights to commercial interests. Instead, trade shall be reconstituted as an instrument of mutual benefit, replacing exploitative practices with equitable exchange and shared prosperity among nations.

Integral to this vision is the commitment to protecting the planet by preserving biological diversity and respecting planetary limits, recognizing the crucial roles of Indigenous Peoples as custodians of ecosystems, and advancing regional food systems alongside agroecological methods rather than corporate-controlled supply chains.

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The US demolition of the post-World War II global order and the Global South

A dying global order

In the second year of Donald Trump’s second term, beginning with the kidnapping of Venezuelan President Nicolas Maduro, followed by the war he has waged against Iran alongside Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the US president has continued his demolition of the 80-year-old global order set up by the US in the aftermath of the Second World War.

The dying regime is a structure of rules, practices, and policies maintaining the hegemony of the US and the rest of the capitalist west that was promoted with the rhetoric of freedom, free trade, and democracy. The US has replaced its rules and practices, which were already unfair to the Global South, with the unilateral exercise of coercion and force, and the rule that *might makes right*.

We are only in the first three months of 2026, but Trump has already succeeded in dismantling the political fictions of the old regime, among them the central principle of the UN that expressly prohibits “the threat of the use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state, or in any other manner inconsistent with the Purposes of the United Nations.” The kidnapping of Maduro and the assassination of Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei were the hegemon’s announcement to the world that no country was exempt from outright, brazen intervention should Trump see it fit to do so. Nor were foreign territories belonging to close allies, such as Greenland, immune from annexation should Trump decide it is in the US national interest to grab them.

Transforming the multilateral economic regime

But before dismantling the political-military fiction of the old regime, Trump assaulted its economic fiction in 2025, resuming what he began during his first presidency, from 2017 to 2021. During that period, he continued the policy of his predecessor, President Barack Obama, of blocking appointments and reappointments to the Appellate Court of the World Trade Organization (WTO), effectively paralyzing the body. But even more brazenly, he declared a unilateral trade war against China, undermining the system of rules and conventions of global trade that the US led in institutionalizing in 1994 with the founding of the WTO.

In 2025, Trump expanded his trade wars to about 90 other countries. Among them were 50 African countries, some of whom received some of the highest, most punitive tariff increases in the world, like Lesotho (50 per cent), Madagascar (47%), Mauritius (40%), Botswana (37%), and South Africa (30%). There was little reason to the rates imposed, though in the case of South Africa, it was partly as punishment for bringing Israel to the International Court of Justice for committing genocide in Gaza.

Foreign aid as an instrument of US policy was a pillar of the old international regime. As Thomas Sankara, one of Africa's foremost fighters for liberation, observed, "He who feeds you controls you." To please his far-right base that did not see foreign aid as important for the maintenance of US hegemony, one of Trump's first acts, undertaken with Elon Musk, the world's richest individual, was the abolition of the Agency for International Development (AID). For some, this was a tragedy since USAID programs were allegedly funding important public health and reproductive health projects in the Global South. For others, it was no loss at all since most of the funds for these initiatives went to pay the US contractors delivering or managing them.

But Trump and Musk did not make any move to dismantle or reduce the flow of US funds to the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and regional development banks through which the US channels money for dominating the Global South via "development assistance" or "structural adjustment", and in which the US has veto power.

These institutions continue to maintain poverty-creating structural adjustment programs, especially in Africa, promote wrong-headed so-called export-led industrialization efforts even as the US imposes massive punitive tariffs on imports from the Global South, and block all efforts to solve the massive indebtedness of developing countries (over \$11.4 trillion).

Towards a global alliance of resistance and change

Trump's moves are mainly directed at people and countries in the Global South. There is a logic to this strategy since it is mainly the Global South that has shifted the balance of global power and created the crisis of US hegemony. Among the landmarks in this historic process have been the rise of China to becoming the second most powerful economy in the world, the massive defeats of US arms in Iraq, Libya, and Afghanistan over the last 25 years, the rise of Iran as a regional power despite all the efforts of the US and Israel to contain it, the ability of developing countries to stymie the WTO as an engine of trade liberalization, and the rise of the BRICS as a potential counterweight to the western alliance.

Also central to the weakening of the hegemon has been the deepening crisis of the global capitalist regime, the key manifestations of which are the deindustrialization of the US and Europe, the financialization of the leading capitalist economies where speculation rather than production has become the investment of choice, the astounding rise in global income and wealth inequality, and the sharpening contradiction between planetary survival and the ever more intensive drive for profits.

Trump's regime of unilateralism is savage. But there is no going back to the old regime of US hegemony exercised through a multilateral order systematically biased against the Global South behind a façade of liberal democratic rhetoric. For us in the Global South, indeed, for all who are partisans of justice, peace, and planetary survival, there is no choice but to bravely meet the challenge of navigating the turbulent waters of this period of transition if we are to get to the haven of a new global order that will serve the common interest of humanity and the planet.

box 1

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It insists that such a global trade framework must be inclusive, transparent, equitable, and empowering; it shall prioritize and protect small-scale food producers (farmers, farmworkers, fishers, pastoralists) and food system workers, Indigenous Peoples, and historically marginalized groups, with particular attention to women and gender minorities.

It calls for a system of trade governance that ensures decent incomes and safe working conditions across food systems, democratic participation in trade decision-making, public accountability in market operations, and strong market regulation.

A global framework for agricultural trade should lead to a systemic transformation of trade relations to realize food sovereignty, climate justice, and social equity for both present and future generations. It affirms that the implementation of these principles shall be measured by their concrete advancement of human rights, environmental protection, and economic and social equity for all people.

State autonomy and small-scale producers' mobilization are key to strong market regulation, food sovereignty, and a fair-trading system

Strong market regulation and territorial markets are essential for building autonomous food systems and ensuring food sovereignty. By defending national autonomy and using it wisely, countries can effectively implement regulations that prioritize the needs of their small-scale producers. Small-scale producers across regions are mobilizing to demand necessary policy measures that allow them to continue farming, fishing, herding, and producing food for all. Those engaged in family farming often find themselves squeezed by an unregulated global market that prioritizes corporate and speculative interests.

The global pandemic and geopolitical conflicts have highlighted the vulnerabilities of the global trade system and the challenges posed by dependence on imported food and inputs. In Africa, some governments have co-opted the concept of "food sovereignty" to refer to domestic food self-sufficiency through modernized agriculture. Despite this distortion, there is growing recognition of the resilience of family farms and the advantages of territorial markets versus global supply chains.

FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization) reports and recommendations from the UN Committee on World Food Security reveal that most food consumed worldwide flows through various territorial markets rather than global supply chains. These markets are linked to local, national, and regional food systems; they are more inclusive and diversified than single commodity value chains, particularly for women and youth. Territorial markets perform multiple economic, social, cultural, and ecological functions, contributing significantly to local economies by allowing wealth to be retained and redistributed at the farm level.

Market regulation is crucial for defending these markets and ensuring fair revenues for small-scale producers,

covering their production costs while providing healthy food at stable prices for consumers. This goal requires addressing structural issues through proactive public policies and instruments, such as public food stocks, import quotas, and minimum price regulations.

Over recent decades, market regulation tools have been undermined by structural adjustments and neo-liberal policies that have worsened food insecurity and favored speculation and corporate consolidation in global supply chains, detracting from healthy local food production. The current context presents opportunities to advocate for the reintroduction of regulations at the core of sustainable food systems development.

In West Africa, movements like the Network of Peasant and Agricultural Producer Organizations (ROPPA) implement actions aimed at strengthening market regulation and building local markets to ensure fair prices. These efforts promote family farms and support local food systems that protect markets and develop shorter marketing channels connecting producers with consumers.

Moreover, organized peasant networks often hold agricultural fairs that enhance local and urban markets, positively impacting farmers' incomes. At the 3rd Nyéléni Global Forum held in Sri Lanka in September 2025, small-scale food producers emphasized the need to generate analyses and evidence for effective advocacy. Movements are working to identify global examples of effective market regulation initiatives supported by researchers to document proactive benefits.

In this challenging geopolitical era, it is vital for non-aligned governments to unite and craft policies that defend their small-scale food producers and protect food sovereignty.

who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **Nyéléni is the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, ETC Group, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, Transnational Institute, VSF Justicia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People, WAMIP.

voices from the field

1

Zainal Arifin Fuat, Serikat Petani, Indonesia

Current geopolitical and geo-economic tensions are reshaping trade relations and food systems across Southeast Asia. Trade policy is increasingly used as a strategic tool by powerful economies, placing pressure on countries in the region to open markets and adjust domestic regulations. US reciprocal tariff policies affect Indonesia, Vietnam, Thailand, and Malaysia, which are urged to negotiate concessions to maintain export market access. These developments carry significant implications for agriculture and rural livelihoods, particularly for small-scale food producers facing volatile prices and unequal market access.

Indonesia's Agreement on Reciprocal Trade (ART) with the US illustrates the asymmetrical nature of emerging trade arrangements. While Indonesia is expected to increase imports of US agricultural commodities such as soybeans, wheat, and beef, Indonesian exports remain subject to tariffs and changing trade provisions that would favor the U.S but without equivalent guarantees for Indonesia. The agreement also obligates Indonesia to align with certain US trade restrictions toward other countries, raising concerns for state and food sovereignty.

For small-scale food producers across Southeast Asia, reciprocal tariff pressures and trade liberalization will intensify import competition, depress farm-gate prices, and weaken local food systems. These dynamics risk deepening dependency on global markets and undermining the ability of states to protect domestic agriculture. Defending food sovereignty requires reclaiming policy space to protect peasants, regulate imports, and strengthen local and agroecological food systems.

The conflict in West Asia, though geographically distant, significantly impacts Indonesia through soaring production costs. Rising global oil prices affect production and peasant welfare, as well as distribution by peasant cooperatives. Since oil is vital to food production and distribution for farming families, fuel price increases directly threaten agricultural viability.

Indonesian agriculture remains in transition from conventional to agroecological systems, meaning fertilizers are not yet fully produced domestically. High reliance on imported fertilizers substantially increases production input costs. Fuel price surges will destabilize food prices. With government food reserves still not sovereign, those most affected will be urban communities and peasants lacking sufficient food stocks. Food sovereignty and agroecological agriculture are essential responses to these cascading crises.

2

Jose Maria Oviedo, National Union of Costa Rican Agricultural Producers (UNAG), Costa Rica / CLOC-La Vía Campesina

From a geopolitical perspective, the war in Iran highlights that the United States believes the world should belong to them and that they must hold power over all nations. They justify attacking Iran by claiming a need to destroy the region's military capabilities, especially ballistic missiles, and to eliminate nuclear weapons. They also insist on changing Iran's regime for supporting what they label as Western adversaries. We have seen how the US believes that America is synonymous with the United States, where any government that disagrees with US policies must be intervened upon or invaded. For instance, Nicolás Maduro in Venezuela serves as a recent example. Countries like Cuba, Nicaragua, Mexico, and Panama have all faced threats for not adhering to American directives.

Economically, the conflict in the West Asia—a region producing twenty percent of the world's oil—has serious implications. Rising oil prices could lead to global inflation and even famine due to the significant impact on economies, including China's. With China as a major wheat producer, shortages in grains could result from this situation, exacerbating food scarcity.



We argue that the US empire is collapsing. Historical examples, like Jimmy Carter's attempts at positive alliances with China in 1979, contrast sharply with the US focus on global warfare. The financial toll of these wars has reportedly cost the American public 300 billion dollars, which has not been invested in the US or in community development globally.

Economically, we anticipate a significant US fiscal deficit (government spending higher than tax income), along with increased tariffs on exports to the US, particularly affecting Central America. As many countries in our region depend on oil imports, inflation poses a critical challenge. The depreciation of the dollar and efforts to appreciate it further threaten to escalate global inflation, making the situation even more precarious for nations reliant on imported oil.

voices from the field

3

Andoni García, Euskal Herriko Nekazarien Elkartasuna – EHNE Bizkaia, Spain

The EU's trade policy, starting with the General Agreement on Tariffs Trade (GATT) and the inclusion of agriculture and food in the WTO, has been decisive in agricultural and food policy and has had devastating consequences for small farmers. This subordination eliminated the market and price regulation instruments that the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) contained until 1992. Despite the WTO's failure, the EU has pursued Free Trade Agreements without restraint, where agriculture and internal markets have been bargaining chips.

Opening to international markets, reducing tariffs, lowering prices for farmers, and the EU's aggressive agroexport policy has caused a severe reduction in millions of small farmers. From 2013 to 2023, five million farms were lost in the EU. The EU and its agroexport policy have been directly responsible for speculative escalation on food globally.

The agricultural model in the EU is increasingly agroindustrial and based on economies of scale.

Yet the EU is also less food self-sufficient today, as its food sovereignty and strategic autonomy are subordinated to Free Trade Agreements and the economic interests of elites embedded in globalization. In the previous legislature, the EU addressed

how to respond to climate, environmental, biodiversity, energy, and food crises through the European Green Deal, Farm to Fork Strategy, and Biodiversity initiatives—though without questioning its trade policy.

The fragility of these approaches and their contradiction with international trade lobbies has become evident in the new geopolitical situation. The EU is backtracking on its political stance to address crises and strongly pursues Free Trade Agreements to project strength globally, yet this crumbles when its subordination to the US in decision-making becomes apparent. The European Commission has proposed, for the EU budget from 2028 onward, increasing military spending while decreasing support for farmers. The CAP and environmental protection policies are rapidly retreating.

Additionally, the European Commission has accelerated Free Trade Agreements, disregarding European Parliament decisions and widespread farmer opposition. And now, the US and Israeli attacks on Iran, triggering a war with global repercussions, have sparked fierce speculation on fuel, production costs, and food—again exposing risks to food sovereignty, food access, and the fragility of globalized food systems caused by EU policies.

4

Annette Hiatt, National Family Farm Coalition/Land Loss Prevention Project, USA

Multilateral and international trade agreements often heavily impact small producers, but do not benefit or engage small producers. Many small farmers, such as those in North Carolina (southeast region of the US), are not directly involved in international trade, but the decisions made behind closed doors at the international level to shape and influence power relationships have a direct impact on those same growers and the communities they live in.

In January, it was estimated that trade tariffs could have a devastating impact on North Carolina's agricultural economy with \$1.2 billion in revenue losses and a possible loss of 8000 jobs. In the absence of price support for small-scale producers, the erratic use of trade tariffs can mean smallholders get further pitted against large-scale corporate agriculture for access to domestic markets.

More than 50% of North Carolina farms operate on less than fifty acres and more than 50% of farmers make less than \$10,000 annually from farming. These are not the farmers engaging in international export, but often are the bedrock of local food systems feeding their communities. But they feel, deeply, that groceries cost more, and the costs for inputs, like fuel and fertilizer are rising. With farmers' costs of production systematically exceeding the prices they are paid, mounting farm debt is pushing our small producers—the root of our rural communities—off the land.

Those same small farmers hold the key to resilience and community building but are treated like pawns in a game and there is little value placed on production that also builds our local economies. Trade policy should strengthen the livelihoods of our small farmers and rural communities, facilitate land access and food sovereignty, and allow for stewardship that supports resilient and agroecological food production in the USA and abroad.



box 2

Global finance and trade bodies enabling the aggression on oceans, rivers, and fisher peoples

Imperialistic nations' relentless accumulation of wealth is not only exploiting and expropriating the historical, traditional and Indigenous customary homelands of fisher peoples and coastal communities, but is simultaneously annihilating their sovereign rights over lands, waters and fisheries, ethnically cleansing and violently uprooting their ways of life, their socio-ecological identities and their cultural belonging from coasts, oceans, rivers, inland waters, mangroves, islands, seas and all their traditional territories.

Ocean and land grabbing, including fisheries, has accelerated through extractive industries (mining, oil, gas); destructive industrial fishing; mega infrastructure projects (waterways, industrial wind farms, pipelines, smart cities, reclamation, port construction); financialized conservation schemes like 30x30 and OECMs (Other Effective Area-Based Conservation Measures); marketization and privatization of nature; and corporate industrial aquaculture (fish factories or blue foods).

Narratives such as "blue growth", "blue economy", and "blue transformation" promise sustainability but accelerate grabbing and amount to greenwashing. These initiatives are embedded into national economies through blue finance programs, binding nations to fiscal conditionalities that subordinate sovereignty to transnational capital, reducing even democratically elected states to "rentier states" leasing oceans for corporate profit. This drives the

climate crisis and the criminalization of fisher peoples, who resist commodification of oceans, fisheries, and coasts and advocate at all levels against false solutions and territorial grabbing under fraudulent "green" or "blue" claims.

The WTO, International Monetary Fund (IMF), World Bank, and free-trade agreements have been used to dismantle national policies that protected people's sovereignty over natural resources and local markets.

Movements such as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) denounce those who persistently push this agenda, including large international environmental organizations, the World Bank, regional development banks, and corporations; and call for genuine community-led, rights-based development shaped by fisher peoples.

They also remain committed to engaging in legitimate multilateral policy platforms on food, fisheries, agriculture, climate, biodiversity, and human rights to advocate for their political autonomy and customary governance. WFFP and others recognize the FAO, the Committee on Fisheries (COFI), the Committee on Fisheries Subsidies (CFS), and the United Nations Human Rights Council (UNHRC) as the appropriate UN bodies for global governance in which social organizations actively participate.

box 3

The peoples of the seeds confront the tyranny of global trade

From January 19 to 21, 2026, the Latin American Seed Collective hosted the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal (PPT) in Cartago, Costa Rica, to "highlight the urgency of defending the relationship between peoples and their fundamental crops and seeds"—an ontological relationship dating back to time immemorial, that is crucial for leading humanity and the planet into the future.

The PPT heard about the threats faced by various communities around the world in their efforts to preserve and reproduce their seeds independently of the market, intellectual property restrictions, and biological and digital technologies.

The structure of politics —the PPT explains— has led to food and nutrition being progressively transformed into a sector of the economy, where everything related to sustenance is separated from people's actual lives and becomes a part of the global market. Oligopolies seek to turn people into a homogeneous mass of consumers, and natural diversity into profitable commodities.

Now that trade is also being used as a weapon of war, an initiative like this is vital.

"The peoples of the seeds," says the TPP, is a cross-cutting term that transcends borders and refers to those facing diverse yet overlapping and complementary challenges in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. If we do not view it this way, peoples that still care for their seeds and crops find themselves fragmented in the face of the brute force with which global trade is being restructured. In the face of the dismantling of international law, peoples with their seeds can bring sustenance everywhere, challenging not only global capitalism and supply chains, but also the commodification of the foundations of life.

Statement by the Permanent Peoples' Tribunal: <https://permanentpeopletribunal.org/the-permanent-peoples-tribunals-declaration-in-defence-of-the-seeds/?lang=en>

box 4 MC 14 Collapses — that's good!

The WTO's 14th Ministerial conference (MC 14) held in Yaoundé, Cameroon, has collapsed, without even a Ministerial Declaration. Negotiations on the e-commerce and TRIPS Non-Violation Complaints moratoria, fisheries subsidies, agriculture, WTO reform and a Least Developed Countries (LDC) package have been deferred to the General Council in Geneva.

The collapse is a welcome victory in a larger battle. Although many developing countries refused to let the US and its cohorts advance their agendas through the deception of multilateralism, this is not a straightforward rebellion of the Global South. Many South countries remain wedded to the logic of free trade, advancing proposals that undermine food sovereignty and benefit agribusiness at the expense of working people and small-scale food providers.

For 30 years, wealthy countries have used the rhetoric of rules-based trade and reciprocity, promises of increased development aid, and outright bullying to break alliances among South countries and extract greater concessions from them. WTO rules have always been skewed in favour of former colonizing powers. They lock in outcomes that favour their economies, their elites and their businesses, and consolidate transnational corporate power in food systems, public health and all sectors vital for life with dignity.

But even if competition were perfect and power games eliminated, the WTO framework is unacceptable. We reject the premise that all things on earth and our labour should be treated as merchandise, and a vision of human relations based on perpetual competition.

It is futile to expect any meaningful reform of the WTO that will advance the well-being, rights, aspirations and needs of the working peoples of the world. It is also damaging and dangerous for participatory democracy and accountability, since in too many countries, trade-investment negotiations and agreements are not subject to domestic scrutiny.

While we intensify our core demands of ending the WTO, we also need to use effectively and forcefully the entire body of international human rights law and our governments' human rights commitments to challenge the power of the WTO over our domestic policies. The rights of working people and small-scale food providers cannot be traded away for corporate profit. We want food sovereignty, not free trade!

For more info read the *Yaoundé Declaration: The WTO And Free Trade Cause Hunger, Poverty And Inequality* <https://viacampesina.org/en/2026/03/yaounde-declaration-the-wto-and-free-trade-cause-hunger-poverty-and-inequality>

