

# World's Small Farmers Fighting Back as World Trade Organization Pushes Corporate Agenda



A farmer cultivates crops in Tanzania. (Photo: World Bank/flickr/cc)

By Nadia Prupis | [Common Dreams](#)

The World Trade Organization (WTO) [kicked off](#) its 10th ministerial conference in Kenya on Tuesday to develop a new free trade agreement, as grassroots activists rallied worldwide against measures they say would undermine the rights of small-scale farmers in developing countries.

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It is the first time the WTO has met in Africa, where free

trade and globalization have left a legacy of poverty, unemployment, and other institutional crises in numerous countries. The four-day ministerial conference (MC10) will center around a set of trade barriers between wealthy and developing nations. The talks are starting where a previous round of negotiations left off in 2001 in Doha, Qatar—although a few of the WTO’s 162 members, including the U.S. and the European Union (EU), are pushing for the organization to craft an entirely new set of rules rather than iron out the old ones.

On the ground in Nairobi, La Via Campesina, an Indigenous and peasant-run food sovereignty movement, [said the WTO](#) is aiming to strengthen a “corporate-driven free trade regime” while ignoring solutions that would protect small-scale farmers and increase food security worldwide.

One particularly contentious issue at MC10 involves whether to allow developing nations the power to raise tariffs on imported goods in order to protect their own farmers’ livelihoods. Western leaders are now claiming that certain countries, such as China and India, have made so much economic progress in the intervening 14 years since the Doha talks that their tariff privileges should be revoked.

“WTO led by U.S. and EU and their [corporate] interests affects the sovereignty of the African countries.” –La Via Campesina

But developing nations counter that the WTO has long favored rich countries with preferential agricultural subsidies, allowing the U.S. and others to benefit from global trade deals while farmers in Africa and Asia [continue to struggle](#).

Via Campesina charged that hosting MC10 in Kenya is an attempt by the WTO to whitewash its own contributions to many African countries’ economic destruction.

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“After many years of ignoring African challenges posed by global trading system, the WTO—one of the principal instruments of global economic governance—comes to the continent to seek legitimacy,” Via Campesina said in a statement Wednesday. “WTO led by U.S. and EU and their [corporate] interests affects the sovereignty of the African countries. It undermines countries’ constitutions by imposing rules which compromises their policy space, human rights and deny FOOD SOVEREIGNTY.”

Indeed, as *All Africa’s* Aggrey Mutambo [reports](#), it is uncertain whether the WTO’s agenda “represents the interests of tens of millions of impoverished farmers and even if it did whether the rich countries are interested in solving other people’s problems.”

Mutambo writes:

Making it easy for poor countries to add value to agricultural products would have ensured that farmers are paid more and jobs are created.

[...] Yesterday, activists under the umbrella of Social Movement Working Group against WTO charged that Kenya and Africa as a whole should pull out of the WTO because they have been getting a raw deal.

“Seeking to push issues like Trade Facilitation will not address the skewed nature of the WTO agreements as they will only serve to facilitate the multinationals to continue dominating the fragile Kenyan market at the expense of local entrepreneurs,” the activists said in a statement last evening.

Farmers in India’s North Karnataka region also staged demonstrations warning that the WTO’s new proposals would continue favoring corporations at the expense of social and

economic justice. [According to The Hindu](#):

The Nairobi meeting was aimed at speeding up the implementation of various anti-farmer policies. Successive governments had failed to address the problems of farmers, who were reeling under crop and financial losses and committing suicides, alleged the protesters.

John Hilary, executive director of social and economic justice advocacy group War on Want, [explained](#) the disastrous effects of the WTO's previous negotiations and deals for an op-ed in *The Independent* on Tuesday:

The WTO's first summit after the launch of the Doha Round collapsed in acrimonious failure. The next was marked by pitched battles in the streets of Hong Kong as riot police fought Asian farmers desperately trying to save their livelihoods from the WTO's free trade agenda.

[...] It was the WTO's poisonous cocktail of trade expansion and market deregulation that led to the economic crisis of 2008. Years of export-led growth resulted in a crisis of overproduction that could only be sustained with mountains of debt.

Economist Yash Tandon, CEO of the Southern & Eastern Trade Information and Negotiations Institute, told *Voice of America* on Wednesday, "The WTO is asymmetrical, unequal and the power is held by the Western countries in league with the secretariat of the WTO, which is totally biased against us [Africa]. So in that kind of climate where they are pushing for what they call free trade, it's totally unbalanced against us."

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Loosening financial restrictions for wealthy nations faces stiff opposition from grassroots groups—but the matter is not

so simple. As Global Justice Now policy and campaigns head Polly Jones [warned](#) on Tuesday, “an impasse at the WTO risks increasing mega-regional trade deals” like the Trade in Services Agreement (TISA) or the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP).

According to Hilary, the only solution to “breaking the cycle of economic and ecological crisis” is to shut down the WTO altogether. “For the planet to survive, the WTO must die,” he wrote.

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