

As FTAs (free trade agreements) are being signed around the world, their impact on society as a force pushing for deregulation and privatisation is starting to be felt. And grassroots struggles are fighting back. But these struggles, on varying issues, are often cut off from each other. So in July 2006 a workshop brought together 60 participants, from 19 countries, all of whom have been fighting FTAs, to share their experiences and to build a strategy to fight FTAs.

Sharing FTA experiences

GRAIN



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In recent years, the US, Europe and other industrialised powers have been stepping up their efforts to sign bilateral free trade agreements (FTAs) and bilateral investment treaties (BITs). This increased attention to bilateral deals goes hand in hand with the deadlock in global trade talks at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). FTAs not only commit countries to accelerated liberalisation of trade in goods, such as agricultural products, but also bring in new rules for trade in services, intellectual property rights, investment, and so on. Negotiated outside the multilateral system (which means that they are even further away from public scrutiny) they provide greater freedom for the world's

most powerful governments to push developing countries, and smaller industrialised countries, to adopt policies that are much worse than those agreed to at the WTO.

Despite their name, these agreements are about much more than trade, for they provide transnational corporations (TNCs) with vast, new, legally enforceable rights in foreign markets. As a result, countries are being hand-picked for bilateral agreements on the basis of geopolitical concerns. Much of the FTA "chess game" today is a competition between large powers trying to secure spheres of political and economic influence. Competition between the US and the EU is a key

"For the WTO resistance, it is easier to gather people across countries and continents to mobilise together. But with FTAs, we are struggling on our own"

Participant at the International Strategy Workshop.

part of that dynamic. But China, India, Japan, Brazil and others are also vying for a place in the emerging new landscape.

People's movements have been fighting FTAs ever since the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) was signed between Mexico, the US and Canada in 1993. Over the years, that fight has multiplied and grown, from Morocco to Korea, from Ecuador to Thailand. To our knowledge, only one FTA negotiation process so far (in Ecuador) has been stopped as a result of social mobilisation and pressure. In other instances, particularly in Korea, social movements have caused significant disruptions and delays to their governments' FTAs. Still, many grassroots struggles against FTAs and BITs have remained cut off from each other, a direct result of the "divide and rule" logic of bilateralism. FTA Watch, a loose coalition at the forefront of the struggle in Thailand, felt a strong desire to break this logic and share experiences with anti-FTA movements in other countries. It called on bilaterals.org, GRAIN and MSF – all of whom had been involved in global work against FTAs and BITs for many years – to help them to organise an international strategy meeting, which was held in Bangkok on 27–29 July 2006.

This workshop brought together for the first time, from many different countries, movements that have been fighting FTAs and BITs. There were nearly 60 participants from 19 countries across every time zone. Many have been directly involved in grassroots struggles to derail these agreements. Rather than attempting to set up a new network or build a common agenda, the workshop's objectives were to share people's experiences fighting FTAs and to build strategy ideas to strengthen national, regional and international struggles against FTAs.

The FTAs do much more than make up for a failed WTO. For nearly two decades now, they have been used deliberately to lock countries into political, economic and social policies – such as stronger patent monopolies on medicines – which are far more extreme than the US and Europe could ever achieve in the multilateral fora. The push for FTAs is a complex global phenomenon, with both North–South and South–South agreements on the rise. The North–South deals are comprehensive (they cover a huge number of issues) and serve to open up new opportunities for TNCs to extract more profits from developing countries. They further help to dismantle states through privatisation and deregulation, and by pulling jurisdiction over disputes away from national courts. The South–South deals tend to be less comprehensive

and less oriented towards an overhaul of national laws, but their impact on farmers, workers and the environment has been devastating.

The term "free trade agreement" is a misnomer. FTAs basically give corporations in one of the signatory countries a very broad set of new rights in the other: rights to dictate the terms of their investments there, rights to buy state industries, rights to deliver local services such as education and health, rights to get access to natural resources and energy sources, and rights effectively to sue the government of the other country if it does not fully meet their wishes. FTAs are also highly geopolitical treaties, aimed at cementing political alliances between specific countries. FTAs with the US are inextricably linked to American military and national security interests, invariably requiring support for US foreign policy.

In all countries, North or South, the secrecy surrounding these agreements is often more intensive than any Green Room process at the WTO. The public and its parliamentary representatives are routinely denied the right to see any text before it is signed. In FTAs with the US, some countries are even obliged to keep the negotiating history secret for several years. For all the hype about democracy, FTAs are profoundly anti-democratic. To speak of FTA "negotiations" is, in this sense, another misnomer. It is more accurate to say that FTAs are imposed rather than negotiated.

It is clear from many different countries' experiences of FTAs that they do not benefit farmers or workers. This is sometimes hard to explain to people, because governments and the corporate media bombard us with the message that agricultural exports will increase. Yet even where they do increase, none of the gains go to the producers; they tend to go instead to retailers and traders.

When experiences of resistance to FTAs are compared, it becomes clear that some countries have been successful in building broad anti-FTA coalitions at the national level. This happened because people mobilised on the basis of an understanding that the FTA will affect every aspect of social and economic life in the country. In Morocco, for example, the protection of human rights (to food, to health, to education, to self-determination, and so on) was the banner uniting a broad range of social sectors campaigning against the US–Morocco FTA. In Korea, the opposition movement started in the peasant sector, but quickly spread to trade unions, the cultural sector, health



FTAs are...

- FTAs are all about allowing corporations new rights in signatory countries
- FTAs are principally based on privatisation and deregulation
- FTAs take away jurisdiction over disputes from national courts and take power away from national parliaments
- FTAs go much further than agreed multilateral deals such as the WTO
- FTAs cover a very wide range of issues which are all endorsed by one signature – major legislative decisions are often bolted on to FTAs to ensure that they are included
- FTAs are often linked to military and national security interests
- FTAs are highly secretive
- FTAs are signed despite mass pressure put on national parliaments and the media
- FTAs rarely benefit farmers (especially small holders) or farm workers
- FTAs benefit an elite few, usually large businesses

workers, teachers, consumer groups, and the media. In Costa Rica, the anti-CAFTA movement has also been highly diverse and strongly decentralised, making it hard to manipulate. In Thailand, the cooperation between people living with HIV/AIDS and farmers has been a backbone of resistance.

Detailed, independent research and analysis has been crucial to our campaigns. Rather than focusing on one issue, research on FTAs needs to cover all the issues in order to be relevant and support movement-building. In Korea, a team of 300 was mobilised to investigate different aspects of the proposed US–Korea deal, illustrating how it will affect farmers, workers, film-makers, and service sectors. Mapping the impacts in detail is difficult and time-consuming, especially when the proposed text is not available. But looking at what happened in other countries that have already signed FTAs, such as Mexico and Chile, has often been very useful.

Some groups have been able to use parliamentary and other legal processes (freedom of information laws or constitutional provisions, for example) to obtain information and arouse public concern. In the Philippines and Costa Rica they succeeded in delaying the signing of the agreement.

In a number of countries, building and sustaining common ground and tactical alliances with small and medium-sized businesses has been important to the campaigns. FTAs usually benefit only a small minority within the business community. It is common for some local firms, such as pharmaceutical companies or livestock operations, to come out in opposition to FTA talks. Social

movements have various (and mixed) experiences working with them in the national campaigns.

But FTAs do get signed, despite people's resistance. We cannot rely on parliamentary processes, media exposure or sporadic actions. We need to build mass public pressure through sustained campaigns to stop the agreements. If our struggle does not succeed in stopping the signature or ratification of an agreement, it is not the end of the struggle. We need to continue the fight.

Resistance to the FTAs provoke a counter-attack by their proponents and defenders. We find the language of social movements and concepts such as “partnership” and “commons” (see the editorial in this *Seedling*) increasingly being deployed by promoters of neoliberalism. Governments co-opt NGOs and communities, even creating pro-FTA “community organisations” in their drive to sign FTAs. USAID and other “development assistance” agencies have been effectively supporting this strategy in all of our regions. When processes of “dialogue” and “participation” are designed to neutralise opposition and legitimise neoliberal policies such as FTAs, we need to expose them and counteract them with our own analysis and action.

When fighting FTAs, social movements are often challenged to come up with an alternative. Many workshop participants felt that there was no need to engage in such an argument. Our coalitions are built around stopping the advance of neoliberalism, and we have to uphold consensus positions and baseline objectives. In many cases, we do not need to create an alternative: the things that FTAs aim



to destroy, such as peasant agriculture or collective rights, already exist as an alternative. Besides, as FTAs are much more about investors' rights than trade, what are we supposed to develop an alternative to? Rather than provide governments with an alternative, the onus should be put on governments to explain – and attempt to justify – what they are trying to achieve through an FTA.

People's organisations value solidarity and cooperation, and some have been open to discussions about redesigning trade relations at the regional or subregional level based on these principles. The example of ALBA – the Bolivarian Alternative for the Americas, promoted by Hugo Chávez to oppose George Bush's Free Trade Area of the Americas – was particularly debated in this respect. However, as ALBA is still at an experimental stage, some people felt that more time was needed to assess how far it can meet its aims without running into contradictions. Others, however, argued that, given the non-representativeness of governments, South–South trade arrangements and regional blocs will not deliver any better results for the majority

of the people than the North–South agreements. As one participant put it, "Neoliberalism is never questioned. That's where the problem lies."

It is important to draw the line, take a clear "No" position and lay bare the real issues early on in the struggle against FTAs. Many participants commented that the most successful struggles, among the experiences we shared, were those that linked FTAs to neoliberalism more generally. Privatisation affects everyone – from high school students to pensioners. So does deregulation. FTAs are Trojan horses for these things plus investors' rights and geopolitical–military alliances. While we focus on free trade agreements as very specific instruments, we need to be clear about what is at stake, what our positions are, and what the battle is really about.

[This is a GRAIN-edited version of another report written by the organising team of the International Strategy Workshop held in Bangkok in July 2006. This more comprehensive report can be found at: <http://www.grain.org/i/?id=162>]

