



Statement from ecumenical organisations addressed to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Ministers of Trade gathered in Cancun, Mexico for the 5th Ministerial Conference of the WTO from 10-14 September 2003

On the occasion of the opening of the 5th Ministerial Conference of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) in Cancun, Mexico on 10 September 2003, we – concerned Christians and representatives of Churches, Christian World Communions and faith-based organisations in Geneva – gather at the Ecumenical Centre in Geneva, Switzerland to make known our views on the current discussions in the WTO. We believe that these discussions have very profound implications for the livelihood, health, wellbeing and survival of peoples – especially in the developing world.

The ecumenical community approaches the Cancun Ministerial Meeting with an understanding of “trade and development” rooted in spiritual, moral and ethical perspectives. In evaluating WTO agreements so far, we ask the following questions: Are they just and fair – especially to the vulnerable and impoverished? For these, we believe, God has expressed a preferential option. Do the agreements support right relationships between North and South, between producers and consumers, and between the powerful and the powerless? Are they friendly to God’s creation? Do they enhance and not diminish the planet’s capacity to sustain and nurture present as well as future generations of humankind and all other life forms? Do they affirm human dignity and care for life in all its richness and diversity?

The ecumenical community believes that international trade agreements should first and foremost respect, value and uphold the sacred nature of all life. In contrast, the economic agendas of some governments, especially Northern governments, seem to be largely driven by corporate interests at the expense of economic justice. Guided by this core vision, we make the following recommendations on some of the critical issues that will be taken up in the Cancun Ministerial Meeting:

We call upon all governments of developed countries to recognise the rights of the weak and in co-operation with developing countries to develop fair conditions for trade with equal access for all.

On the Agreement on Agriculture, we believe that food sovereignty and adequate nutrition for all, especially children, should be the primary aim. We therefore call upon governments of developed countries, to:

- ‡ eliminate harmful subsidies and domestic support to agricultural enterprises;
- ‡ differentiate between small farmers and major agri-businesses;

- ‡ halt export dumping of food; and
- ‡ remove barriers to the access of developing countries to Northern agricultural markets.

These create unfair competition, destroy livelihoods and undermine long-term food sovereignty in developing countries.

On the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), we believe that essential public services such as water, health and education services are important vehicles for the realisation of basic human rights. Therefore these services cannot be commodified nor negotiated. Water in particular has spiritual value in all religions and cultures and is essential for the sustenance of life. We therefore call upon governments to keep these public services out of the GATS negotiations.

On Implementation Issues, developing countries should be allowed much more flexibility in implementing the Uruguay Round of agreements because of longstanding asymmetries between developing and developed countries. We therefore call upon all governments to:

- ‡ implement the agreements reached at Doha without forcing further concessions from developing countries; and
- ‡ strengthen provisions and mechanisms in all WTO agreements providing for special and differential treatment for developing countries such as longer implementation periods and lower tariff reduction rates, among others.

On Investment and “new issues,” we believe that:

- ‡ governments have a primary responsibility in guaranteeing the protection of the environment, safeguarding public health and promoting decent work;
- ‡ peoples’ rights and freedoms clearly have precedence over corporate rights and must be the primary principles to regulate the activities of transnational corporations.

We therefore call upon all governments to oppose the launching of a new round of negotiations on Investment and other “Singapore issues.”

On the Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) agreement, we believe that:

- ‡ health is a central concern to human development that should not be overridden by interests of pharmaceutical corporations in earning monopoly profits;
- ‡ all efforts should be taken to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and other diseases by enabling poor people to have access to affordable medicines; and
- ‡ living organisms (including seeds) are part of God’s creation and therefore should be neither patented nor commodified.

The TRIPs agreement and the interpretation of some of its regulations by the WTO has blocked the availability of generic drugs at affordable prices that are needed to combat diseases in the developing world. The recently achieved agreement in relation to such generic drugs does not resolve the problem in a sufficiently comprehensive manner that really benefits developing countries and the millions of people suffering from HIV/AIDS and other diseases.

We therefore call for radical changes of the trade regime concerning intellectual property rights and recognition of the right of developing countries to produce and import generic drugs in quantities and at prices that serve the needs of their people.

Motivated by **faith** in a compassionate God, and based on the **hope** that “another world is possible!” we issue this statement as part of our commitment to work with peoples and movements towards a global trading system that is just, sustainable and caring. The ecumenical community will continue to advocate for trade and finance policies that uphold human rights – especially economic, social and cultural rights – through the Trade for People Campaign under the Ecumenical Advocacy Alliance and the Debt Cancellation Campaign, among other initiatives.

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