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Sowing trouble

Seed systems,
farmers' rights
and food
sovereignty
under threat



Agribusiness



The privatisation of seeds through intellectual property protection is undermining the interests of farmers and food security.

11

ECOLOGY

2 'Reduce, reuse, recycle' is corporate gaslighting – the real change must come from the fossil fuel industry – *Alex Lenferna*

HEALTH & SAFETY

4 Philanthrocapitalism will not save the World Health Organisation – *Vivek N.D.*

ECONOMICS

6 Sri Lanka's austerity is one of the most severe in history – *Shiran Illanperuma*
8 The parable of the Nile perch – *Liam Taylor*

COVER

Sowing trouble

Seed systems, farmers' rights and food sovereignty under threat

THIRD WORLD RESURGENCE is published quarterly by the Third World Network, an independent non-profit international research and advocacy organisation involved in bringing about a greater articulation of the needs, aspirations and rights of the peoples in the South and in promoting just, equitable and ecological development.

11 Seeds of conflict – *Lean Ka-Min*

14 Strong call to implement farmers' rights and resist UPOV 1991 and corporate capture – *Karina Yong*

18 Seeds, sovereignty and struggle – *GRAIN*

21 Global food systems being hijacked by corporate interests, warns report – *Kanaga Raja*

26 UNDROP is lighting the way for peasants' rights – *Georgina Catacora-Vargas* interviewed by *Ann Doherty*

WORLD AFFAIRS

28 Venezuela's oil, US-led regime change and America's gangster politics – *Jeffrey D. Sachs* and *Sybil Fares*

30 A huge airbase with a small country attached to it – *Juan Cole*

33 How 'conflict-free' minerals are used in the waging of modern wars – *Mark Griffiths* and *Mohamed El-Shewy*

HUMAN RIGHTS

35 Neoliberalism by force in Ecuador – *Ana Sofia Armand* and *Lisbeth Moya González*

WOMEN

37 The women looking after the elderly in Colombia also need care – *Roxana Baspineiro*

CULTURE

40 Cultural resistance: a crucial component of struggle – *Roomaan Leach*

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‘Reduce, reuse, recycle’ is corporate gaslighting – the real change must come from the fossil fuel industry

Focus on individual behaviours to stem climate change deflects attention from the corporate culprits driving the ecological crisis.

Alex Lenferna

‘REDUCE, reuse, recycle.’ For more than 50 years, those three Rs have been the world’s go-to environmental mantra.

On the face of it, the three Rs sound like an empowering call for each of us to play our part for the planet. However, the individualist approach behind the slogan has come in for increasing criticism by climate change activists. I am one of them.

As a scholar-activist who has spent over 16 years working with climate justice movements, I have studied how movements are challenging the individualistic focus to climate change – an approach that is heavily promoted by corporate public relations campaigns.

Fossil fuel corporations have worked with public relations firms to convince the public that environmental problems are the fault of consumer behaviour. One of the main aims of these campaigns is to shift attention and blame away from the main actors responsible for ecological destruction – wealthy corporations, polluting industries and the captured governments that enable them.

Individual emissions within the average person’s direct control account for less than 20% of total emissions. The vast majority come from industrial systems and infrastructure beyond people’s



Robert So

‘Even the most diligent recycling or green consumerism simply won’t get us to zero emissions.’

control.

The fossil fuel industry’s public relations campaigns also want individuals to focus on their own environmental footprint so that they are distracted from pushing for more structural and policy-driven changes. Those structural changes would threaten the profits of the fossil fuel industry.

The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, the world’s leading authority on climate change, has said that ‘rapid and far-reaching transitions across all sectors and systems are necessary to achieve deep and sustained emissions reductions’. Compared with the scale of change we need, ‘reduce, reuse, recycle’ falls short.

Building on that evidence, climate ethics literature and discourse analysis, in a newly

published book chapter¹ I argue that it’s past time to go deeper than just the old ‘Three Rs’. In addition, environmental education should embrace new, more radical mantras that tackle the root causes of our ecological crises, such as Regulation, Redistribution and Reparations.

These more radical Rs focus on the structural and economic factors that drive ecological crises, working to reorient societies towards more socially and ecologically just ends. Social movements are increasingly realising that we need to focus on such systemic factors, which is part of why the slogan ‘System Change, Not Climate Change’ has become such a key rallying call for climate justice movements across the world.

The first R is regulation – putting in place strong, enforceable

rules to rein in destructive industries and hold elites accountable. Corporations have tried to sell the idea that they don't need to be regulated and that markets will solve the problem. However, despite decades of voluntary corporate pledges, most businesses are far off-track.

Recent research into 23,200 companies from 14 industries across 129 countries found that nearly 75% had no official plans in place (climate transition plans) to end their greenhouse gas emissions. Fossil fuel companies are continuing to invest in vast amounts of new oil, gas and coal production – even though the world already has much more fossil fuel than we can burn to avoid climate catastrophe.

The second R is redistribution – shifting wealth and resources away from wealthy and destructive industries towards a more socially and ecologically just future.

Along those lines, South African trade union federations Cosatu and Saftu have proposed progressive taxes on wealth, pollution and financial transactions to fund a just transition for workers and communities. Similar proposals have been put forward in many other countries, including by the Africa Tax Justice Network.

Such progressive taxation is especially key in deeply unequal countries like South Africa, where 10% of the population owns more than 80% of the wealth. Tackling that inequality through fair taxation, divestment from fossil fuels, and reinvestment in community-led projects is essential.

Redistribution can help ensure that the benefits of climate action reach those most affected by the crisis, and help us build a more prosperous and socially and ecologically just future.

The third R, reparations, recognises that today's ecological crisis is rooted in centuries of colonial extraction and exploitation.

Africa is the continent least responsible for the climate crisis, yet it experiences countless climate disasters. Therefore reparations should mean debt cancellation,



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The vast majority of emissions come from industrial systems and infrastructure beyond people's direct control.

technology transfer and climate finance from wealthy polluting nations – not as loans, but as debt payments.

However, reparations should be about more than just financial transfers. As philosopher Olúfémí O. Táíwò argues, reparations are a world-making project. In other words, they can be used to rebuild relationships, communities, societies and ecosystems that were damaged by colonialism, capitalism and environmental racism. Reparations should form the basis of creating new systems based on social and ecological wellbeing, not exploitation.

What needs to happen next

Even the most diligent recycling or green consumerism simply won't get us to zero emissions. For example, during the 2020 COVID-19 lockdowns when much of the world stayed home, global emissions fell by only 8%. That was a large, unprecedented drop. But it came nowhere near enough to get us to the needed goal of net zero or even negative overall human-caused emissions.

None of this is to say that one shouldn't reduce, reuse or recycle. However, we must be careful about focusing too heavily on individual actions at the expense of structural change.

A similar lesson can be drawn from the history of struggles for

racial justice. One of the founders of the Black Consciousness Movement in South Africa, Stephen Bantu Biko, critiqued how some churches, during apartheid, would blame the poor in South Africa for their poverty. The churches said people were poor because they were sinful, not because apartheid had been constructed to exploit people and keep them in poverty.

Likewise, the Three Rs can stigmatise individuals as environmental sinners. This removes the attention from the fossil-fuelled economic system that's driving the ecological crisis.

If educators, activists and concerned citizens want to promote an effective environmental ethic, it is vital to move past a narrow focus on individual actions. Rather than trying to clean up the symptoms of the problem, society needs to tackle the roots of the ecological crises we face. ♦

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Notes

1. Alex Lenferna, 'Three Radical R's of Environmentalism: From "Reduce, Reuse, Recycle" to "Regulation, Redistribution, and Reparations"', in B.R. Barnes et al. (eds.), *Community, Psychology and Climate Justice*, Cham: Springer, 2025.

Philanthrocapitalism will not save the World Health Organisation

WHO's growing dependence on funding from wealthy private entities is skewing global health priorities and undermining democratic accountability.

Vivek N.D.

IN the past two decades, global health governance has undergone a quiet revolution, shaped less by sovereign states and more by the growing influence of private capital. The World Health Organisation (WHO), once envisioned as the democratic engine of international public health, has increasingly come to rely on large-scale philanthropic foundations. This shift towards what is now commonly termed 'philanthrocapitalism' – where billionaire-funded entities use business strategies and methods to tackle social and environmental challenges – has profound implications. It is not just a matter of money, but of power, accountability and legitimacy.

Amid what many now describe as a global health financing emergency, WHO's growing dependence on a handful of wealthy private actors has exposed deep cracks in the system of multilateralism upon which it was founded. Thus, philanthrocapitalism is undermining democratic global health governance by concentrating power in the hands of the wealthy and eroding public accountability.

Philanthrocapitalism and WHO's financial shift

When WHO was established in 1948, its financing rested primarily on assessed contributions – mandatory payments from member states calculated by metrics such as gross domestic product (GDP) and population. These payments



As more governments retreat from public financing, WHO becomes even more dependent on philanthropic largesse.

formed the backbone of its budget and enabled the organisation to pursue independent, needs-based global health priorities. But by the 1990s, austerity-driven reforms and dwindling political interest in global public goods led to a freeze – and in some cases, a rollback – of these core state contributions.

Into this vacuum stepped philanthropic foundations, corporate-linked charities and other non-state actors, who began offering voluntary contributions. Today, these voluntary funds make up over 80% of WHO's budget. The vast majority are earmarked – meaning that donors, not WHO, decide how and where the money is spent.

This is where the logic of philanthrocapitalism takes hold. According to WHO's Programme Budget Portal for 2024–2025, the Gates Foundation is currently the largest donor, providing over \$763

million or 13.16% of voluntary contributions to WHO. The second largest contributor is another private actor, the GAVI Alliance which contributed \$645 million or 11.61%. Notably, over 90% of the Gates Foundation's donations were earmarked for specific diseases or technical programmes, rather than WHO's core functions. In May 2025, the Novo Nordisk Foundation pledged \$57.76 million to WHO. Through its holding company Novo Holdings, the Denmark-based Novo Nordisk Foundation owns Novo Nordisk, which made \$42 billion in sales in 2024 from drugs like Ozempic and Wegovy, using the profits to fund scientific, social and humanitarian grants.

To regulate these interactions, WHO adopted the Framework of Engagement with Non-State Actors (FENSA) in 2016. It was designed to establish guardrails for interactions

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with philanthropic and corporate entities. But FENSA has proven largely toothless. The framework has been inadequate for managing the vast power asymmetries between sovereign governments and mega-donors like Gates or the Rockefeller Foundation. In effect, it treats all 'non-state actors' equally, even though only a handful control the majority of voluntary financing.

Funding gaps and the distortion of global health priorities

This structural imbalance now sits at the heart of WHO's growing crisis. WHO revealed it is falling nearly \$1.9 billion short of the planned \$4.2 billion budget for 2026–27, with an additional \$600 million deficit projected through the end of 2025. These resources are needed to support essential global health functions such as disease surveillance, regulatory coordination and health system strengthening. At the same time, its earmarked programmes – targeting diseases like polio, malaria and COVID-19 – are flush with resources. The result is a misaligned institution, overfunded for technical verticals and underfunded for horizontal public health priorities. This distortion is not an accident – it is a direct outcome of the political economy of philanthrocapitalism.

Philanthropic foundations, under the guise of neutrality and technical problem-solving, increasingly undermine democracy by using their wealth to shape development agendas, weaken public institutions, depoliticise structural issues like poverty and bypass democratic accountability – all while benefiting from tax privileges and promoting a corporate-driven vision of global change.

Philanthropic foundations tend to favour technical, vertical programmes with measurable results – such as eradicating polio or developing a vaccine for a

specific disease – over systemic, long-term investments like public health workforce training or community-based care. The Gates Foundation's focus on malaria, polio and tuberculosis exemplifies this. GAVI's funding model follows suit, focusing heavily on vaccine procurement and delivery while underemphasising the broader ecosystem of primary healthcare infrastructure.

The political risks of philanthrocapitalist dependency

Moreover, the ideologies embedded within philanthrocapitalist giving emphasise efficiency metrics and public-private partnerships – concepts borrowed from business strategy rather than social justice. Thus, philanthrocapitalism is entrenching a neoliberal development agenda by enabling elites to dominate and direct global policy priorities. GAVI, largely created and funded by Gates, has promoted a model of vaccine distribution that relies on corporate manufacturers and intellectual property protections. During the COVID-19 pandemic, GAVI co-led COVAX, a global vaccine-sharing initiative intended to ensure equitable distribution. Yet COVAX was criticised for failing to deliver on its promises, as high-income countries hoarded early vaccine stocks and patent waivers were fiercely resisted.

Beyond the structural distortions, there are real political risks. The rise of philanthrocapitalism and impact investing reflects a broader shift in development financing, where public aid is increasingly privatised and aligned with financial sector interests, allowing elites to reshape global development agendas under the guise of innovation and efficiency.

As more governments retreat from public financing, WHO

becomes even more dependent on philanthropic largesse. This can become a vicious cycle. Governments, seeing WHO's needs met through private donors, feel less obligated to contribute themselves. But when philanthropic funding priorities shift – as they inevitably do – WHO is left vulnerable. Its ability to respond to emerging crises, strengthen health systems or tackle neglected areas like mental health and climate-related diseases is hobbled.

Conclusion

None of this is to say that philanthropic contributions are inherently harmful. The generosity of donors like Gates, Wellcome and Bloomberg has undeniably saved lives and accelerated innovation. But the political consequences of allowing billionaire-backed foundations to shape the priorities of a multilateral public institution must be confronted honestly. These actors operate with minimal transparency, are not subject to democratic oversight and often mirror corporate values that are ill-suited to addressing the structural inequalities at the heart of global health.

Ultimately, WHO's crisis is not merely financial – it is a crisis of governance, of legitimacy and of global solidarity. Philanthrocapitalism may provide resources, but it cannot replace the foundational idea that global health is a public good, to be protected and promoted through democratic multilateralism. The more WHO becomes a vehicle for donor-defined agendas, the more it drifts from the universal mission upon which it was founded. ♦

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Sri Lanka's austerity is one of the most severe in history

To repay its creditors, Sri Lanka massively scaled back public spending – at great cost to its people and economy.

Shiran Illanperuma

SRI Lanka has undergone one of the sharpest and fastest episodes of austerity in history, driven by a massive retrenchment in public investment and the suppression of real wages, according to a World Bank report.

On 9 September, the World Bank published a report called *Sri Lanka Public Finance Review: Towards a Balanced Fiscal Adjustment*. The 109-page report is anchored in the theoretical certainty that austerity was a painful but necessary adjustment following Sri Lanka's default on its external debts in 2022. Yet even within this paradigm, the report provides a treasure trove of data that serves as a damning indictment of how austerity has suppressed investment, undermined growth and deepened social distress.

According to the World Bank, across 330 episodes of austerity in 123 countries between 1980 and 2024, Sri Lanka's 'fiscal adjustment' from 2021 to 2024 stands out as being 'sharper and faster'. For Sri Lanka, this record fiscal consolidation is second only to the period from 1980 to 1983 – a turbulent period of neoliberalisation bookended by state-sponsored union-busting and ethnic pogroms.

Since Sri Lanka entered into its 17th International Monetary Fund (IMF) programme in 2021, its primary balance (the difference between government revenue and expenditure, not counting debt repayment) has increased by 8%. Yet this achievement came at an



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More than a quarter of the Sri Lankan population has fallen below the poverty line, with another third categorised as vulnerable and living on the brink of poverty.

extraordinary cost.

The most severe blow has been dealt to public investment: a retrenchment in this area drove 72% of the spending adjustment between 2019 and 2023. The contribution of public investment to growth turned negative between 2021 and 2023, dragging overall gross domestic product (GDP) downward. Instead of acting countercyclically, public investment was shackled precisely when it was most needed to absorb labour, stimulate demand and lay the foundations for industrial recovery.

The cuts to public investment are particularly egregious given Sri Lanka's already poor infrastructure. The World Bank itself acknowledges that Sri Lanka's public capital

stock ranked close to rock bottom – 143rd out of 166 countries in 2019 – with glaring deficiencies in overall infrastructure. A significant portion of Sri Lanka's rural road network remains unpaved and in poor condition. In public transport, a third of the public bus fleet is non-operational and over two-thirds of train engines are over 40 years old.

This suppression of investment is directly linked to an economic stagnation that has crippled the country. The World Bank admits that 'real GDP is not expected to return to its 2018 level until 2026'. In other words, the country has lost almost a decade of development. The industrial sector, a key engine for employment and development, has been hit hardest,

suffering a cumulative contraction of 25% over 2022 and 2023.

The human toll of this austerity policy is hard to digest. The report states that more than a quarter of the population has fallen below the poverty line, with another third of the population categorised as vulnerable and living on the brink of poverty. The report acknowledges that a 4% increase in poverty was directly attributable to the fiscal adjustment between mid-2022 and mid-2023. The poor have been disproportionately impacted; the removal of electricity subsidies alone led to a 5% decrease in disposable income for the poorest households.

Meanwhile, the promise of stability and recovery has failed to materialise for the average worker. Real wages remain 14% and 24% lower than pre-crisis levels for the private and public sectors, respectively. The public sector, under a hiring freeze, has borne the brunt of this. The average public sector wage, which was already low, fell from 88% of per capita GDP in 2020 to just 62% in 2023, making government wages the least competitive for highly skilled workers.

These figures contextualise the exodus of skilled workers, or ‘brain drain’, that the country has been grappling with. A recent study found that an estimated 1,489 doctors, including specialists, emigrated between 2022 and 2024, causing a financial burden of nearly \$41.5 million to the Sri Lankan government and taxpayers. This outflow has placed significant pressure on the healthcare system, resulting in shortages of key specialists, disruption in medical training and widening disparities in access to healthcare.

The report carries a plethora of technocratic recommendations to make the austerity more palatable. Many of these recommendations – such as improving tax administration, shifting towards



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Train service in Sri Lanka. Cuts to public investment will hurt the country's already poor infrastructure; for example, over two-thirds of train engines are over 40 years old.

direct rather than indirect taxation, and better targeting public spending – are inoffensive in themselves. One could say they are no-brainers. Where the report has no answer is on two critical structural issues:

The debt bomb: The fact is that overall public spending in Sri Lanka is low. The single biggest component of public expenditure is interest payments, which accounted for 9% of GDP in 2023. To quote the report, ‘Sri Lanka’s interest payment expenditures are relatively large, whereas the public sector wage bill, capital expenditures, and spending on health, social protection and education are relatively low.’ No amount of internal fiscal adjustment can provide long-term stability without defusing the debt bomb that crowds out social investment. A thoroughgoing restructuring or cancellation is needed.

Structural non-transformation: The words ‘manufacturing’ or ‘industrialisation’ hardly appear in the report. Naturally, the World Bank, with its long history of prescribing a development model based on agricultural exports and services, shows little concern for structural transformation. The problem of government spending is viewed in near-total isolation

from the task of building a modern economy that can generate jobs and growth while sustaining infrastructure and public services. Balancing the budget will not transform the economy in a way that preempts the next crisis; long-term planning and industrial policy are needed.

Sri Lanka’s example is one among many in the Global South – around 54 underdeveloped countries, home to 3.4 billion people, spend most of their tax revenues to pay creditors rather than invest in the wellbeing of their people. In these nations, the claims of the creditor supersede the dignity of human beings.

When will the hunger of the creditors be satisfied? How can the financing and technology transfers needed for structural transformation be acquired? These are questions the World Bank does not want to ask. Instead, it insists that what has been done before can be done again – just in a more ‘balanced’ way. ◆

This article was produced by Globetrotter (globetrotter.media). Shiran Illanperuma is a Sri Lankan journalist and political economist. He is a researcher at Tricontinental: Institute for Social Research and a co-editor of Wenhua Zongheng: A Journal of Contemporary Chinese Thought.

The parable of the Nile perch

Vignettes from Uganda's market society

As the ruthless logic of commodification takes hold, many in Uganda fall by the wayside.

The investor left / with our land yesterday, / still, we scratch our destiny / from hands of a curtailing fate.

— Harriet Anena, ‘Scratching Destiny’

ONE day in 1954, or perhaps the following year, junior workers at the Uganda Game and Fisheries Department covertly dropped Nile perch off a pier in Entebbe, changing Lake Victoria forever. Its waters had hitherto been flecked with colourful *enkejje*, varieties of haplochromine cichlids which nurture their young in their mouths. ‘The *Haplochromis* is generally regarded as “trash fish” of very little value,’ wrote Alec Anderson, the British fisheries officer who masterminded the introduction of the Nile perch. ‘It seems clear that the obvious way to utilise *Haplochromis* is to introduce a predator which will convert them into something worthwhile.’

Within a few years, Tanzanian fishermen were hooking Nile perch on the distant shore. By the 1980s, the lake had reached a tipping point, its balance upset by algal blooms, falling oxygen levels and the voracious appetite of the new intruder. More than half of the haplochromine species vanished. Dutch biologists wrote that their disappearance ‘may well represent the largest extinction event among vertebrates during this century’. Meanwhile the economic value of the fishery rose fivefold because the meatier Nile perch could be sold to international buyers. An ecological disaster was a commercial triumph.

Fisherfolk referred to Nile perch as ‘lake gold’, even though

Liam Taylor

little of the catch made it to their tables. European and Asian traders opened fish processing factories on the shoreline, where fillets were packed in styrofoam and ice, then flown to distant corners of the world. By the mid-1990s, fish had become Uganda’s second-biggest export; the factory owners today claim that the sector supports more than a million people all told.

But the commercialisation of the lake also required new tactics to police it, because the lucrative Nile perch was itself threatened by overfishing. After half-hearted experiments with community management, the government settled on military patrols. Soldiers arrested and beat the *barias* who manned the boats. The poor could not bribe their way out of trouble, nor afford the larger boats that were now mandated by law. ‘When the government programme comes, they come with those who are educated, elite, rich,’ I was once told by a veteran fisherman, ‘and the government sends its soldiers to hunt for the poor man.’ At the landing stages along the shoreline, people whisper of the things they have lost: their houses demolished, their boats set on fire, their friends drowned while trying to escape.

The parable of the lake is the story of all Uganda: of its land, trees, minerals, cattle, crops, labour, politics. After adjusting for inflation, the economy has grown more than eightfold in size since Yoweri Museveni seized power in 1986. But this is not experienced

as widespread prosperity. The same process of commodification which has brought profit to some is felt by others as a source of uncertainty and threat, often entwined with violence. Uganda’s predicament cannot be understood in narrowly political terms — democracy, militarism, rights — without also addressing these social ructions. This is how the market, like the Nile perch, preys on things it considers ‘of very little value’ and ‘converts them into something worthwhile’.

The cattle raiders

The dry plains of Karamoja, in Uganda’s north-east, are as distant from the squally waters of Lake Victoria as it is possible to be. Seen from Kampala, it is a permanent periphery, its backwardness evidenced by deadly cycles of cattle raiding. ‘We shall not wait for Karamoja to develop,’ said Milton Obote, the country’s first prime minister after independence. This may seem an unlikely place to look for a commercial transformation.

But to view cattle raids as a primordial relic is mistaken. In 1979 soldiers abandoned the Moroto armoury after the fall of Idi Amin. For days Karamojong emptied its stores, loading guns onto donkeys like bundles of firewood. It was a catalytic moment, like fish being tossed into a lake. The proliferation of small arms allowed the longstanding practice of raiding to expand in lethality and scope.

Young men had once raided to restock herds, accumulate bridewealth or show their daring. Those motives were now supplemented by monetary gain.

Economies of scale allowed gangs to turn raiding into a business, selling cows into trading networks which fed the demand for meat in distant cities or swelled the herds of wealthy elites. During the most recent upsurge of violence, which began in 2019, everyone from the president downwards decried the 'commercialisation' of raiding. Herders followed the footprints of stolen herds until the trail went dead at tarmac roads, where cows had been loaded onto lorries and driven away. Somehow the vehicles made it through official checkpoints. Local leaders wondered, pointedly, why they found cartridges of army-issue bullets after raids.

Karamoja is being emptied of cattle, just as Lake Victoria is being emptied of fish. A survey in 2017 by the Karamoja Resilience Support Unit, a research group, found that 57% of households did not have enough animals to live primarily off their livestock. Instead, they survive by other labours: brewing beer, digging for wages, felling trees for charcoal, quarrying for limestone, sifting the earth for gold, or escaping along the same roads as the vanished cattle.

When the army sweeps through towns at dawn, rounding up young men in its search for illegal guns, it first releases those who speak good English, only later the *boda-boda* drivers, and last of all, the men who transport jerrycans of homebrewed *kwete* on the back of bicycles. 'They are now categorising people based on how they appear,' said one detainee, speaking to me two days after a round-up in 2022. The emerging class structure doubles as a hierarchy of suspicion.

Leaving the land

The lake and the plains are each, in their own way, places on the margins. But the same process of commodification can also be found in the agricultural heart of the country, in the struggle for land. Since independence in 1962,

the area of cropland in Uganda has slightly more than doubled but the rural population has risen nearly sixfold. Two-thirds of farming households now own less than a hectare, an area the size of a large football pitch; around 40% of them own less than half of that. The growth of cities has also pushed up the price of land on their outskirts.

The strains are especially visible in the Buganda region, which contains the capital Kampala. Much of the land here falls under an unusual system of *mailo* tenure, where the rights of landowners and occupiers overlap. By law, anyone with *kibanja* rights in a parcel of land cannot be evicted so long as they pay a nominal ground rent, fixed at a few dollars a year. But landlords are trying to get around that restriction so that they can cash in on rising land prices. One strategy is to sell the title to new owners with political connections, who use their influence to evict *kibanja* holders in disregard of the law. The implicit justification is that land should go to those who can make the most profitable use of it, which is assumed to mean commercial farms, industrial enterprises and residential developments. 'If you have something prime you don't want to sell, [land grabbers] will use other means,' complained Matia Lwanga Bwanika, the chairman of Wakiso district, when I met him in 2023.

Similar pressures are felt all over the country, even though land markets generally remain thin. In the Acholi region of the north, many farmers returned from displacement camps after the war with Joseph Kony's rebels to find their fields earmarked for sugar plantations or game reserves. In Bunyoro, land wrangles exploded in anticipation of oil development. As the researcher Yusuf Serunkuma has noted, the payment of cash compensation in instances of land acquisition reshapes local economies, livelihoods, gender relations and much else besides. 'Nowadays they

have seen money has arrived, they have changed things,' sings the Alur artiste Professor Lengmbe in his song 'Refinery', explaining that men now want 'a brown [wife]' because 'the one at home is too black'.

Time bomb

In each of the examples, there is an undertone of Malthusian pessimism: a sense that there are no longer enough fish, cattle or land to go around. But this is more than a crisis of population growth. The cash economy is pressing on daily life from all sides – a grip that is also felt in the expansion of casual wage labour, the illicit trades in timber and charcoal, the cutthroat practices of coffee marketing, the spiralling costs of political campaigns, the struggle to pay school fees, or the relentless hustle of city life. Chains of commerce stretch regionally, as in the cattle trade, or internationally, as in the export of fish, gold and domestic workers. Profit flows to whoever has the most political influence, legal muscle, market power or access to credit – or simply the least scruples.

The point here is not to pine for some pristine version of the past, which never existed, nor to romanticise small-scale subsistence, which is no way for a country to grow rich. Some Ugandans find opportunities as 'entrepreneurs' or 'consumers'; even capitalism's harshest critics recognise its tremendous power to marshal resources, enable specialisation and expand production. But the 'uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions', as Marx called it, is especially turbulent in a society like contemporary Uganda, at the sharp end of the global order, which since the 1980s has been a testing ground for market-led reform.

The Hungarian political economist Karl Polanyi, writing in the 1940s, described a 'double movement' in the history of capitalism: first a drive to let

the market loose from its social moorings, and then a counter-movement to contain it. In today's Uganda, where unions, cooperatives and political parties have been undermined, an organised pushback is hard to discern. In his 2014 hit 'Time Bomb', the singer Bobi Wine lamented the high price of education and electricity, but as an opposition leader he has shown little interest in economics. Whereas the factories and mines of industrial countries were historically a seedbed for

solidarity, Uganda's informal economy is fragmented and its workers atomised. They are too busy looking for 'some *ka* money' within the existing system to invent a new one.

But that does not mean that Ugandans are at ease with the new dispensation. Discontent can be found everywhere from protests against land grabs to the burning of sugarcane plantations to the laments of dissenting intellectuals. And it lives in the murmurs of everyday

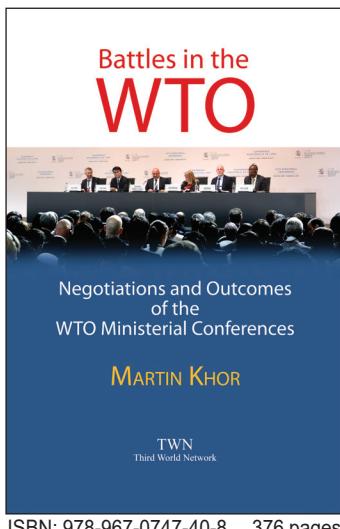
conversation. 'It's because of thieves,' a woman in Wakiso told me as stick-wielding thugs eyed her banana garden. 'They are the ones mixing up the country.' The men had been sent by a surveyor who wanted to develop the land, to sell it, to profit from it – in short, to convert it into something worthwhile. ◆

Liam Taylor is a freelance journalist who was based in Uganda from 2016 until 2022. This article is reproduced from roape.net, the website of the Review of African Political Economy.

Battles in the WTO

Negotiations and Outcomes of the WTO Ministerial Conferences

Martin Khor



The World Trade Organisation has been an extremely controversial and divided organisation ever since its establishment in 1995. The big battles are most evident at its highest governing body, the Ministerial Conference, where the Trade Ministers of member states convene to chart the WTO's course.

This book is a compilation of contemporaneous reports and analyses of what unfolded at each Ministerial, as well as a few "mini-Ministerials", that took place from the WTO's inception up to 2017. As these articles reveal, the Ministerials have been the stage on which battles over the future direction of the WTO are most prominently played out. These clashes have mainly pitted developed member states pushing to expand the WTO's ambit into

new subject areas, against many developing countries which call instead for redressing imbalances in the existing set of WTO rules.

This book also shines a light on the murky decision-making methods often employed during Ministerials, where agreements are sought to

be hammered out by a select few delegations behind closed doors before being foisted on the rest of the membership. Such exclusionary processes, coupled with the crucial substantive issues at stake, have led to dramatic outcomes in many a Ministerial.

The ringside accounts of Ministerial battles collected here offer important insights into the contested dynamics of the WTO and the multilateral trading system in general.

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Seeds of conflict

Farmers' rights and our long-term food security are under threat from an international treaty that is concentrating corporate control over seed supplies.

SEEDS are the stuff of life, the source of the crops that provide our food. Control of seed supply is therefore nothing less than an existential issue, one that is however currently being played out far away from the farms and fields, in corporate boardrooms and the halls of international diplomacy.

Farmers have traditionally used seeds saved from their own harvest, exchanged with neighbours or bought from local markets and other farmers. They also breed new varieties with desirable traits adapted to the local environment. This informal seed system produces some 70–90% of the seeds used in much of the developing world.

The rest are sourced from the formal system, where seeds are marketed as commodities for profit. Modern varieties are developed by commercial plant breeders and released for sale by seed companies to farmers.

The informal and formal systems complement each other and should co-exist; in fact, the latter often turns to the former for the genetic resources used as the source material for its breeding activities. The essential role that farmers play is acknowledged in the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (Plant Treaty), which 'recognises the enormous contribution that the local and indigenous communities and farmers of all regions of the world ... have made and will continue to make for the conservation and development of plant genetic resources which constitute the basis of food and agriculture production throughout the world'.

The Plant Treaty and the United Nations Declaration on the

Lean Ka-Min



Under UPOV 1991, farmers are barred from saving seeds of protected plant varieties, except under very limited circumstances.

Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) both affirm farmers' rights to save, use, exchange and sell farm-saved seed and other propagating material. However, these rights, so integral to the informal farmer seed system, are now under serious threat.

The threat comes in the form of UPOV – the French acronym for the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants. UPOV was established in 1961 following calls by European breeding companies to enshrine intellectual property rights over plant varieties. The conference which paved the way for the adoption of

UPOV's founding Convention had only European governments taking part, with the participation of three seed industry associations and the International Association for the Protection of Intellectual Property as observers.

The UPOV Convention 'was largely conceived and designed by and for European commercial breeding interests', notes the intellectual property scholar Graham Dutfield, and each subsequent revision of the 1961 text has only reinforced its pro-industry bent. The latest iteration, drawn up in 1991, grants wide-ranging intellectual property rights to plant breeders at the expense of farmers' rights.

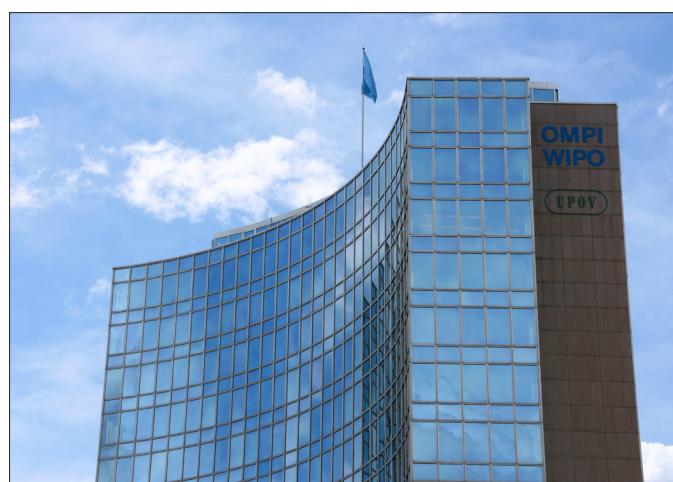
Under UPOV 1991, no one is allowed to undertake the following acts in respect of a protected plant variety without the breeder's permission: production or reproduction; conditioning for the purpose of propagation; offering for sale; selling or other marketing; exporting; importing; and stocking for any of the above purposes. What this laundry list of restrictions effectively amounts to is that farmers are barred from saving seeds of protected varieties, except under very limited circumstances. They are prohibited altogether from exchanging and selling farm-saved seeds, even among themselves on a local scale. This would essentially compel them to purchase the seeds anew from the rights-owning seed company every planting season.

That farmers' interests are given short shrift by UPOV was dramatically underlined in 2009 when an application by the European Coordination Via Campesina (then known as CPE) for observer status in UPOV bodies

was rejected. ECVC is a member of La Via Campesina, the largest international peasants' movement. The reason for the rejection: La Via Campesina had earlier in the year called for the suspension of intellectual property rights on seeds in connection with the global food crisis that was then raging. Such a stance, according to UPOV's Vice Secretary-General, was at odds with the UPOV Convention and thus unacceptable. It was only with the support of individual UPOV

member states that ECVC was eventually accredited the following year, but the rough ride it faced contrasts with the welcome mat laid out for the seed industry, which is well represented among the ranks of UPOV observers.

The prioritisation of the commercial seed sector by UPOV not only undermines farmers' rights; it also puts long-term food security at risk. Under an intellectual-property-driven model, plant breeding efforts are skewed towards development of a narrow range of high-value commercial varieties, focusing primarily on genetic uniformity to meet industrial or market demands. A 2009 report by then UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food Olivier De Schutter found that 'most of mankind now lives off no more than 12 plant species, with the four biggest staple crops (wheat, rice, maize and potato) taking the lion's share'. Genetic variability within crops is also declining: while 2,000 varieties of rice were cultivated in Sri Lanka in 1959, there were fewer than 100 in 1992, 75% of which were descended from a common stock. Some 74% and 62% of the rice varieties in Indonesia and Bangladesh respectively descend from a common stock. This erosion of genetic diversity increases the vulnerability of food crops to new



UPOV's headquarters, which it shares with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO), in Geneva. The UPOV Convention 'was largely conceived and designed by and for European commercial breeding interests'.

pests and diseases and to shifts in the climate – no small concern in an age of global warming.

In contrast, resilience is a hallmark of the informal seed system, with farmers having engaged in plant breeding since the dawn of agriculture and where the accumulated traditional knowledge and free exchange of seeds have contributed to crop diversity and the development of locally appropriate varieties. However, this farmer-managed system is steadily being sidelined, even by national governments. As De Schutter explained, traditional farmers' varieties are often excluded from government-approved seed lists and seldom included in state-subsidised seed distribution programmes. Instead, it is commercial varieties which come bundled with government assistance packages that also include associated inputs like fertilisers and pesticides as well as much-needed credit, making it difficult for farmers to forgo.

Development of the informal system is further hampered when farmers' innovation – which may involve combining traditional and modern varieties to produce locally adapted varieties – is stymied by stringent intellectual property restrictions like the ones imposed by UPOV 1991.

Marek Slusarczyk (CC BY 3.0) The good news for advocates of the farmers' seed system is that countries are not obliged to adopt UPOV 1991 under the World Trade Organization (WTO)'s Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS). While the TRIPS Agreement does require WTO member states to provide intellectual property protection for plant varieties, it does not bind them to any particular means of protection. They are free to put

in place 'an effective *sui generis* system' of protection that better balances farmers' and breeders' rights.

However, governments find themselves coming under pressure from other sources to join UPOV, not least from its major beneficiaries. Given UPOV's Eurocentric origins, countries from Europe are among its most fervent cheerleaders, along with the United States and Japan, and it's not difficult to see why. Over 80% of global seed exports in 2022, valued at more than \$13 billion, originated from the European Union, the US and Japan. Seven of the top nine seed companies are from Germany, France, the US and Japan, controlling over 55% of the world seed market in 2023 with sales exceeding \$28 billion. To entrench their dominant positions, these firms turn to plant variety protection: in 2023, over three-quarters of all PVP applications filed globally by non-residents were lodged by entities from the US, the Netherlands, Switzerland, France, Germany and Japan. And when it comes to the scope of PVP rights, few are more demanding than UPOV.

This is why the likes of the EU, the US and Japan have incorporated in their free trade agreements with other countries

requirements to provide plant variety protection along UPOV 1991 lines or to accede to UPOV 1991 itself. Meanwhile, the East Asia Plant Variety Protection Forum – which comprises Japan, China, South Korea and 10 Southeast Asian countries – was initiated and is hosted and principally funded by Japan, with substantial support from the UPOV secretariat. The Forum is upfront about its ‘long-term direction’ to ‘establish effective PVP systems consistent with the UPOV Convention among Forum members towards achieving all Forum members’ membership of UPOV, as a basis for further PVP harmonisation and cooperation in the region...’. Lending keen support to this aim are intellectual property offices and other government agencies from developed countries as well as seed industry representatives, who are regular ‘guests’ at Forum meetings.

Beyond the regional level, developed-country entities have also been hard at work spreading the UPOV gospel in individual developing countries. For example, the Collaborative Seed Programme under the Nigeria-Netherlands Seed Partnership financed by the Dutch foreign ministry seeks, among other goals, to ‘develop an operational PVP system [in Nigeria] in accordance to the UPOV system that supports the growth of the seed sector’. The Dutch government has also funded a PVP Development Program that includes a ‘PVP Toolbox’ for technical assistance and knowledge sharing with other countries on setting up UPOV-aligned national PVP systems.

If such campaigns bear fruit and a country decides to join UPOV, it will then have to jump through legal hoops before it can be accepted as a member: to pass muster, its PVP laws must be assessed by UPOV as being in compliance with UPOV 1991. The experience of Malaysia and the Philippines, which had submitted their legislation for scrutiny, is instructive. In both

instances, provisions in their laws pertaining to farmers’ rights to save, use, exchange and sell seeds fell foul of the UPOV examination and were recommended to be either watered down or removed altogether. (Neither Malaysia nor the Philippines went on to implement UPOV’s recommendations, and both countries remain non-members for now.)

In other cases, UPOV’s input is sought not to evaluate existing laws but to actually draw up new laws. In Zambia, a draft PVP bill had UPOV’s fingerprints all over it: the electronic copy in the form of a Word document sent to stakeholders in the spring of 2024 showed the author as the UPOV secretariat and contained comments and recommendations from UPOV. The draft, proposed as a replacement for the PVP act currently in force, drops or restricts farmers’ rights conferred by the present law and curbs existing public-interest limitations on breeders’ rights. It was rejected by the Zambia Alliance for Agroecology and Biodiversity, a broad network of farmer and civil society groups, for being ‘completely an ill-suited PVP model for the Zambian context’.

This concern about the inappropriateness of UPOV standards is echoed in more general terms by a study commissioned on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development. The 2015 study concluded that ‘the “one size fits all” approach of UPOV appears ... problematic if the highly diverse conditions and needs of developing countries are to be addressed’, and that ‘UPOV 91-based PVP laws were found to not advance the realisation of Farmers’ Rights; rather they are effective in the opposite direction’. It recommended that developing countries ‘consider opting for an alternative *sui generis* system of PVP that allows for more flexibility’.

Such a PVP regime must be crafted through an inclusive process that involves the various stakeholders in the food and

agriculture sectors, including of course farmers themselves. It has to recognise and promote the informal and formal seed systems alike, acknowledging their complementary and mutually supportive roles in advancing food security. The public interest could be safeguarded with, for example, measures to ensure protected varieties are made available within the country in sufficient quantities at reasonable prices, and to ensure fair sharing of benefits stemming from the use of traditional local farming resources and knowledge.

Away from the confining dictates of UPOV, farmers’ rights can be preserved and, in turn, seeds of a more food-secure future planted. ♦

Lean Ka-Min is editor of Third World Resurgence.

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Strong call to implement farmers' rights and resist UPOV 1991 and corporate capture

A recent international symposium flagged the dangers posed to farmers' rights by UPOV 1991 and biopiracy.

AT the Second Global Symposium on Farmers' Rights in Manila (16–19 September 2025), participants voiced deep concerns about the direction and effectiveness of current implementation of farmers' rights under the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA).

While remarkable initiatives led by the Global South showcased how farmers remain true custodians of seeds and agricultural heritage, the event's proceedings highlighted two persistent and rising threats. Firstly, from corporate-driven regimes, especially the 1991 Act of the International Convention for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV 1991). Secondly, unresolved contradictions in the functioning of the ITPGRFA's Multilateral System of Access and Benefit-sharing (MLS). These are alongside major gaps in funding, policy coherence, and realisation of farmers' rights as human rights.

The Symposium was convened by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and ITPGRFA. Participants included representatives from governments, civil society organisations, farmers' groups and international organisations.

Legal and structural barriers raised by UPOV 1991 and trade agreements

The Symposium celebrated innovative farmer-led programmes

Karina Yong

across Africa, Asia and Latin America, including farmer-managed seed systems, agroecology alliances, and constitutional protections for indigenous custodianship. Yet, speakers repeatedly noted the alarming disconnect between these advances and the reality that most farmers face: national laws often fail to operationalise Article 9 of the ITPGRFA on farmers' rights – in many cases, farmer-managed seed systems remain systematically excluded or disadvantaged by seed laws and regulatory standards, particularly due to UPOV 1991.

Pressure to join UPOV 1991 comes through trade deals with developed countries, loan conditionalities from the international financial institutions or conditions tagged onto development aid. African and Asian groups reported that in some cases, UPOV 1991-compliant laws criminalised farmers' customary practices of saving, exchanging and selling seeds. Such regimes not only are in direct contradiction to farmers' rights and erode traditional knowledge and local autonomy, but also reduce crop diversity and intensify social inequalities and rural poverty. Fragmented, incomplete frameworks leave communities exposed to privatisation pressures and 'capture' of their seeds and knowledge by multinational seed corporations.

Speakers condemned the dominant narrative that corporate seed systems provide unequivocal benefit and debunked claims of increased productivity. They also pointed to how these systems exclude or actively undermine local and heirloom varieties which offer proven resilience and nutritional value.

Participants stressed the need for robust legislative reform to remove barriers within seed laws, protect farmers' ability to save, use, exchange and sell seed, and resist criminalisation of farmer practices. Calls were made for the categorical denunciation of UPOV 1991 for its dissonance with farmers' rights, with recommendations that countries of the South refrain from accession and not be pressured to accede.

Lack of funding and land security

Participants also decried chronic underfunding for farmers' rights implementation across the Global South, coupled with insufficient public awareness and participation at all levels. Projects often depend on short-term external grants and exist as a result of civil society efforts, leaving community seed banks and on-farm conservation activities unsustainable and fragile after donor cycles end. Land tenure insecurity further undermines the position of farmers as seed guardians.



Zoologist dz

Participants at the Second Global Symposium on Farmers' Rights stressed the need to protect farmers' ability to save, use, exchange and sell seed.

Expansion of MLS: Risks, governance gaps and biopiracy

South-based non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and farmers' groups were also wary of amendment proposals to expand the scope of Annex 1 of the ITPGRFA, which will subject virtually all agricultural genetic resources – including *in situ* crops and landraces – to multinational access with scant protection for sovereign and community rights. The current governance system of the Treaty's MLS lacks real-time tracking, transparency and local accountability, with repeated evidence that most accessions to the MLS benefit commercial actors rather than farmers, and real fears of the same then being monopolised under intellectual property rights frameworks.

Statistics show that to date, more than seven million accessions of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture (PGRFA) have been shared via the MLS to more than 28,000 identified users; however, only six of them have shared any monetary benefits with the MLS so far. Weak safeguards for digital

sequence information (DSI) further expose the risk of digital biopiracy, where corporations access and use genetic data with no obligation for fair and equitable benefit-sharing with originating countries or communities.

RAISE Asia, a regional network of civil society and farmer groups, submitted a statement to the ITPGRFA Secretariat ahead of the upcoming 11th meeting of the Treaty's Governing Body in Lima, Peru (24–29 November 2025). The statement (reproduced below) was shared with country delegates present at the Manila Symposium. It called specifically for all ITPGRFA Contracting Parties to urgently and robustly safeguard farmers' rights in the implementation of the MLS. RAISE Asia emphasised: 'Any resolutions aimed at enhancing the MLS must incorporate concomitant obligations to the full and effective realisation of fair and equitable benefit sharing arising from the use of PGRFA. This includes guaranteeing farmers' right to timely and meaningful information regarding activities involving their seeds, especially when those seeds are collected, shared, or utilised through the MLS. Strengthening

the MLS must prioritise effective governance mechanisms to ensure benefits derived from PGRFA and DSI of PGRFA are genuinely and equitably shared. Concrete improvements in transparency, accountability, and participatory oversight are essential prerequisites before any expansion of the scope of [the Treaty's] Annex 1.'

In addition, a global sign-on was submitted to FAO and the ITPGRFA Secretariat by the Bharat Beej Swaraj Manch (India Seed Sovereignty Alliance) expressing the same concerns (<https://seedtreaty.org/>).

Calls for coherence: Farmers' rights as human rights

Across all sessions of the Symposium, the message from Southern government delegates was clear: only a rights-based, farmer-first framework grounded in human rights, food sovereignty and participatory governance can genuinely fulfil the promise and obligations of the ITPGRFA and address the inequities and risks posed by expanding Annex 1 and MLS access and corporate capture. The ITPGRFA's implementation must align with international human rights instruments, notably the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP).

Participants stressed that the articles within the ITPGRFA have to be construed as a cohesive whole to give primacy to farmers' rights, and the ITPGRFA must be explicitly recognised and enforced as human rights, requiring active integration with CEDAW (Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women), UNDRIP (UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), ICESCR (International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights) and other human-rights-based approaches. ♦

Karina Yong is a senior researcher with the Third World Network, where she specialises in the impact of investment and trade agreements on human rights and environmental and other laws and policies in developing and least-developed countries. This includes analysing the implications of multilateral agreements, UN treaties/conventions, investment treaties and the investment chapters of free trade agreements on human rights such as the right to health, the

right to food, indigenous rights and responsible business conduct. Karina was a lead author of the Malaysian Competition Commission's market review of the pharmaceutical sector which investigated the factors influencing the affordability and availability of medicines in the country. Prior to joining TWN, Karina worked as a litigation lawyer in areas of civil, administrative, constitutional and environmental law.

Statement of RAISE Asia partners¹ on the Second Global Symposium on Farmers' Rights

The following statement by RAISE Asia, a coalition of civil society and farmer organisations (including the Third World Network), was issued at the Manila Symposium and presented to the ITPGRFA Secretariat.



The Second Global Symposium on Farmers' Rights took place in Manila in September.

The implementation of farmers' rights remains at the core of the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGRFA).

In the first global symposium, smallholder farmers have been generously praised and recognised in the conservation, development, and sustainable use of PGRFA.

We thank the secretariat of the treaty for the document 'Draft assessment of the state of implementation of Article 9 of the International Treaty', which provides the gaps and needs in the implementation of farmers' rights such as fragmented legal frameworks, weak institutional coordination, insufficient financial

and human resources, regulatory and market barriers to farmer-managed seed systems, limited public awareness, and socio-economic inequalities, and in some regions, gender-related barriers. We urge the Governing Body to address these concerns soonest.

Additionally,

1. We also refer participants to the Governing Body's decisions in Resolution 7/2022² and Resolution 14/2022³, which was reiterated in Resolutions 7/2023⁴ and 14/2023.⁵ These resolutions request the Secretary to collaborate, particularly with international human rights bodies to realise farmers' rights. While such collaboration was identified

in the Work Programme for the 2024–2025 Biennium, no activities occurred on the cooperation between the International Treaty and the UN human rights bodies to promote the implementation of Farmers' Rights. We urge the Secretary to please breathe life to the mentioned resolutions and coordinate with the Working Body of the UNDROP since this is the most relevant international human rights body regarding farmers' rights;

2. We also urge Contracting Parties to adopt the Voluntary Guidelines for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Farmers' Varieties/Landraces. This comprehensive document provides guidance that national governments may use for conserving and sustainably using farmers' varieties and landraces; and is helpful for contracting parties to develop their National Plan for the Conservation and Sustainable Use of Farmers' Varieties/Landraces.

3. We call on all Contracting Parties to urgently and robustly safeguard farmers' rights in the implementation of the Multilateral System on Access and Benefit Sharing (MLS). Any resolutions aimed at enhancing the MLS must incorporate concomitant obligations to the full and effective realisation of fair and equitable benefit sharing arising from the use of Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (PGRFA). This includes guaranteeing farmers' right to timely and meaningful information regarding activities involving their seeds, especially when those seeds are collected, shared, or utilised through the MLS. Strengthening the MLS must prioritise effective governance mechanisms to ensure benefits derived from PGRFA and digital sequence information (DSI) of PGRFA are genuinely and equitably shared. Concrete improvements in transparency, accountability, and participatory oversight are essential prerequisites before any expansion

of the scope of Annex 1.

We need to go beyond the recognition and appreciation showered on smallholder farmers as stewards and responsible custodians of PGRA. This time around, we need to ensure and realise their right to equitably participate in sharing nonmonetary and monetary benefits arising from the utilisation of plant genetic resources for food and agriculture.

Notes

1. RAISE Asia stands for Rights-based and Agroecological Initiatives for Sustainability and Equity in Asia, consisting of 24 partners across 12 countries in Asia that work for strengthening peasants' rights through regional networks of farmers, pastoralists, farm workers, women and youth.
2. Resolution 7/2022: Implementation of Article 9, Farmers' Rights – Article 14: 'Requests the Secretary to strengthen, to the extent feasible, collaboration between the International Treaty and other units and partners that work for the promotion of Farmers' Rights within and outside FAO, and the broader United Nations including with international human rights bodies, in order to promote the realization of Farmers' Rights'.
3. Resolution 14/2022: Cooperation with Other International Bodies and Organizations – Article 13: 'Requests the Secretary to continue to report to the Governing Body on cooperation with other relevant international bodies and organizations, including with the Human Rights Council and other international human rights bodies, and related collaborative activities'.
4. Resolution 7/2023: Implementation of Article 9, Farmers' Rights – Article 14: 'Requests the Secretary to strengthen, to the extent feasible, collaboration between the International Treaty and other units and partners that work for the promotion of Farmers' Rights within and outside FAO, and the broader United Nations including with international human rights bodies and the relevant targets of the GBF, in order to promote the protection

and realization of Farmers' Rights in accordance with Article 9 of the International Treaty'.

5. Resolution 14/2023: Cooperation with Other International Bodies and Organizations – Article 14: 'Requests the Secretary to continue to report to

the Governing Body on cooperation with other relevant international bodies and organizations, including with the Human Rights Council and other international human rights bodies, and related collaborative activities'.

The East Asia Plant Variety Protection Forum and UPOV 1991 Implications for Seed Systems in Southeast Asia

Sangeeta Shashikant

THIS paper critically examines the growing pressure on Southeast Asian (SEA) countries to adopt the rigid 1991 Convention of the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV 1991) designed for the commercialized farming structures of industrialized nations.

It reveals how the East Asia Plant Variety Protection Forum, initiated by Japan under the guise of cooperation, has evolved into a key platform for aggressively promoting UPOV 1991 standards, sidelining national agricultural priorities and farmers' rights. Through detailed analysis, the paper exposes the commercial motivations driving this agenda and the pivotal role of developed countries and their allied entities, who stand as the primary beneficiaries of the UPOV system and regional harmonization based on it. It highlights how the Forum's pro-UPOV activities threaten to erode national sovereignty, undermine food security, and entrench a rigid, inappropriate plant variety protection (PVP) system across the region – one designed to serve the commercial interests of Japan and other developed nations, particularly the Netherlands, Germany, France and the United States.

It calls on SEA countries to critically reassess their participation in the Forum, advocate for meaningful reforms to safeguard their policy space, and, if necessary, withdraw to protect their national interests and ensure implementation of a PVP system that is aligned with domestic agricultural needs and that safeguards the interests of farmers and food sovereignty.

Available at: https://twn.my/title2/books/EAPVP_Forum_and_UPOV_1991.htm



The East Asia Plant Variety Protection Forum and UPOV 1991

Implications for Seed Systems in Southeast Asia

Sangeeta Shashikant

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Seeds, sovereignty and struggle

The ongoing battle against UPOV and seed privatisation

Communities around the world are fighting back against corporate takeover of seed systems.

PEASANTS and rural communities everywhere know the critical role seeds play in sustaining food production. Seeds, alongside land and water, are among the most fundamental agricultural resources. The idea that seeds should circulate freely is so deeply rooted in human societies that until 1960, national seed systems were universally based on the principle that stored seeds should be available to anyone needing them.

However, this changed with the establishment of the International Union for the Protection of New Varieties of Plants (UPOV) in 1961, which sought to privatisate seeds and crop varieties. Resistance to this notion was immediate and strong. For the first seven years, only a handful of European countries supported UPOV, with no other nation willing to ratify it.

Today, the assault on people's seeds has intensified. Efforts to regulate, standardise and privatisate seeds aim to expand corporate markets, facilitated by plant breeders' rights, patent laws, seed certification schemes, variety registries and marketing laws. These measures, regardless of their form, serve to legalise exploitation, dispossession and destruction. But communities around the world are fighting back.

Africa: The attack on the seeds that feed us

Local seed systems, maintained by farmers, continue to feed most people, particularly in

GRAIN

the Global South. Yet, increasingly powerful seed companies, backed by their home governments through aid and trade deals, are pressuring countries, like those in Africa, to accelerate the adoption of 'formal' seed systems that prioritise industrial seeds.

In early 2023, Benin's parliament introduced a proposal for the country to join UPOV. As a member of the African Intellectual Property Organisation (OAPI), Benin is already indirectly tied to UPOV through OAPI's membership. Direct membership, however, would expose Benin to greater pressure from the global seed industry.

In response, Benin's civil society swung into action to stop the proposal. They conducted consultations, trainings and public debates. At the regional level, a coalition of farmers' organisations, women's organisations, trade activists and consumer advocates sounded the alarm. They urged Benin's government to withdraw the proposal to join UPOV and collaborate with peasant organisations and civil society to evaluate strategies for seed systems that prioritise local needs. By mid-2023, sustained pressure from social movements successfully stopped parliamentary discussion on joining UPOV.

For millions of African small-scale producers, diverse farmers' seed varieties are crucial to food

sovereignty, nutrition, enhancing biodiversity and sustaining livelihoods not just in rural areas but also in urban and peri-urban areas. Yet, the push for corporate seeds in Africa continues, spearheaded by institutions like the Alliance for Green Revolution in Africa (AGRA) which introduced hybrid and genetically modified (GM) seeds in the continent.

In Zambia, a new plant breeders' rights bill, driven by multinational seed companies, was tabled for consultations in April 2024. There's no compelling reason for repealing the existing Plant Breeders Rights Act, besides to align Zambia's existing law more closely with UPOV. Farmers' organisations and other civil society groups in Zambia are fighting hard to stop this move, warning that it will increase corporate control over the country's seed and food systems.

At the continental level, the African Union is attempting to harmonise seed laws across its 54 member states under the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA). A proposed protocol on intellectual property would privatisate seeds. With half of AU member states already aligning their laws with UPOV, this initiative is expected to boost UPOV membership, jeopardising farmers' rights and local seed systems.

Efforts to harmonise seeds laws, such as the East African Community Seed and Plant Varieties Bill 2024 – modelled on UPOV – threaten to create an inflexible regulatory environment. These laws, through the promotion



Activists protesting in front of UPOV headquarters in Geneva. The campaign to stop UPOV and similar seed laws that threaten farmers' seeds continues.

Barolome (CC BY-SA 4.0)

of cross-border seed movement, expose local varieties to competition from powerful seed companies, further eroding seed sovereignty and biodiversity across the continent.

Organisations like the Zambia Alliance for Agroecology and Biodiversity (Zaab) and the Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa (Afsa) have vehemently opposed UPOV and the corporate control of seeds. In unison, grassroots groups across Africa have stood up in defence of African seeds and food systems.

Latin America: Mobilising to defend peasants' seeds

Across Latin America, free trade agreements have reinforced efforts to privatised seeds through new regulations and laws. By enforcing plant breeders' rights, patents and seed marketing laws, large companies are infringing on people's fundamental freedom to save, exchange, multiply and reproduce seeds. In 2012, when the Honduran Congress approved the Law for the Protection of Plant Varieties, it made it illegal to save, share or exchange seeds. In response, farmers' organisations like ANAFAE (Asociación Nacional para el Fomento de la Agricultura Ecológica) launched a decade-long

legal battle to have the law declared unconstitutional. Although the plea was rejected, they persisted and filed a new motion.

After a long process, in November 2021, the Honduran Supreme Court ruled the law unconstitutional. The Court's decision was based on the argument that UPOV violated the country's sovereignty, right to self-determination and constitutional principles related to life, human dignity and the right of the Honduran people to an adequate standard of living. It also recognised that the law was an attack on the right of the people to nutritious, healthy and culturally appropriate foods.

Across Latin America, these laws are commonly referred to as 'Monsanto laws'. In Guatemala, indigenous peoples have been protesting in the streets since mid-2023, demanding that their government abandon a proposed bill to adopt UPOV standards. These protests became a central part of a nationwide strike against the government.

In addition to the pressures from trade agreements, the push to join UPOV also comes through intense political campaigns. In Argentina, the government of Javier Milei is trying to include a clause in its 'Omnibus Law' bill (Article 241) to join UPOV 1991. This

initiative, backed by powerful seed corporations like Bayer, Syngenta, Corteva and BASF, aims to stop farmers from freely reusing seeds and extend corporate control over harvested materials, threatening Argentina's food sovereignty. Whoever controls the seeds controls the agri-food chain – and thus the availability, quality and price of food for the population. In response, a massive social movement was launched to defeat this bill and remove Article 241.

On 24 January 2024, a nationwide strike and mobilisation led by Argentina's major trade unions drew around 5 million participants. UPOV was a key focus of the protests, which managed to stop the bill. However, the struggle continues as the government remains determined to introduce a new seed law to prevent farmers from freely saving seeds.

In May 2024, peasants and civil society organisations from Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Colombia and Ecuador gathered in Costa Rica for the 'Defence of seeds and maize' meeting. They shared and planned actions to counter the growing control of seeds and planting materials by transnational corporations through intellectual property, marketing and other laws. Participants at the meeting specifically denounced free trade agreements and UPOV laws, which they see as a critical threat to their communities.

Asia: Decades of struggle against UPOV

Halfway around the world, since the mid-1990s, people in Thailand have been fighting to prevent the country from joining UPOV. With one-third of the population made up of small farmers, rural communities remain a significant source of agricultural seeds. The country also has a thriving local seed breeding community and seed enterprises.



Farming in Zambia. Farmers' organisations and other civil society groups in the country are fighting to stop a new plant breeders' rights bill pushed by multinational seed companies.

However, in 2017, under pressure from the European Union and the Trans-Pacific trade agreement, which impose UPOV, the Thai government quietly proposed an amendment to the 1999 seed law to align with UPOV 1991. This attempt was met with strong opposition from various sectors, which openly challenged the government's plan, eventually forcing it to backtrack. Organisations such as BioThai and the Alternative Agriculture Network argued that the amendment would have increased the monopoly of global seed companies, as well as Thai-based multinational Charoen Pokphand.

A similar situation is unfolding in Indonesia, where farmers have been struggling with restrictive UPOV-like seed laws. These laws have been used by a local subsidiary of Charoen Pokphand, PT BISI. The company has charged several farmers with alleged infringement of its intellectual property over seeds. After being convicted, the farmers received suspended six-month sentences. One farmer ended up in jail for a month and all were prohibited from planting their own seeds for a year. These cases underscore a disturbing message: 'Buy your seeds from the companies or else....'

Indonesian ratification of the free trade agreement with the European Free Trade

Association (EFTA, comprising Iceland, Norway, Switzerland and Liechtenstein) triggered an assessment process from the country's plant variety protection body about joining UPOV 1991. This raised concerns from farmers' organisations and wider social movements, which mobilised to put pressure on the government, including seeking intervention from UN Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri. In response, in February 2024, the Indonesian permanent mission to the UN in Geneva issued a statement confirming that the country would not join UPOV 1991. This is seen as a significant victory for farmers and civil society movements in the country, who have been resisting seed privatisation for over 20 years.

However, the fight is not always won. Vietnam joined UPOV in 2006, when nearly all of the country's plant breeding was publicly controlled. At that time, hundreds of farmer-run seed clubs operated in the Mekong Delta, with only 3.5% of rice seeds used by farmers coming from the formal system. Within 10 years, the seed industry in Vietnam became highly consolidated, with eight companies – most of them global giants like Syngenta, Monsanto and Japan's Sakata – controlling 80% of the market. While it has been difficult to challenge the new seed law,

which adheres to UPOV, indigenous farmers, especially those in the mountains, continue practising traditional farming methods. These practices allow them greater freedom to use, save and exchange seeds, compared with lowland farmers who are more dependent on industrial varieties.

A global fight against seed privatisation and UPOV

Building on decades of resistance to seed privatisation and UPOV, and marking UPOV's 60th anniversary on 2 December 2021, hundreds of farmers' groups and civil society organisations around the world have come together to oppose the corporate hijack of seed systems. They are calling for the dismantling of UPOV, denouncing 60 years of restrictions on the freedom to save, breed, share and distribute seeds – restrictions that undermine the diverse farmer-led seed systems necessary to tackle the climate and food crises. Together, these groups stand against national and international intellectual property laws like UPOV, as well as seed marketing regulations which dispossess people of their resources and knowledge.

The call continues as an ongoing campaign to stop UPOV and similar seed laws that threaten farmers' seeds. It seeks to amplify action, strengthen information sharing and mobilise to prevent the spread of laws that privatise seeds. As we face a coordinated political and technocratic crusade to impose uniform and rigid laws and regulations in favour of agroindustry, it is crucial for rural and urban farmers, indigenous communities and civil society to unite and strengthen the movement against intellectual property regimes like UPOV. ♦

GRAIN is a small international non-profit organisation that works to support small farmers and social movements in their struggles for community-controlled and biodiversity-based food systems. This article is reproduced from its website (grain.org).

Global food systems being hijacked by corporate interests, warns report

Beyond seeds, corporations are also asserting dominance over other areas of the food system, with ruinous effects on human rights, health and the environment, points out a UN rights expert.

CORPORATE power in food systems is highly concentrated, allowing a relatively small group of people to shape what is grown, how it is grown, labour conditions, prices and food choices in a way that serves the ultimate goal of profit maximisation and not the public good.

This is one of the main conclusions highlighted by the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the right to food, Michael Fakhri, in his latest report (UN document A/80/213) to the UN General Assembly.

In his report, issued in July and titled 'Corporate power and human rights in food systems', the Special Rapporteur examines how a relatively small number of corporations have amassed so much power within the world's food systems and how this phenomenon is violating human rights.

Corporations have grown so large and powerful over the past several decades that they now globally dominate food systems, he said. 'Many transnational agrifood companies are more in the business of selling edible commodities rather than good food. Moreover, corporations are increasingly influencing how policy decisions are being made within national Governments and the United Nations.'

The rise of corporate power in food systems correlates with the increasing trend of the industrialisation of food production,

Kanaga Raja

the independent UN expert noted. As a result, corporate-led industrial food systems have increased rates of greenhouse gas emissions, biodiversity degradation, pollution and systemic human rights violations.

He also said that today agrifood corporations are turning more towards new digital technologies and large amounts of data processing through the use of digitalisation, which creates new human rights challenges in food systems.

The Special Rapporteur said the problem of corporate power in food systems stretches back centuries as a part of imperial rule. However, 'what is unique today is the expansion of corporate power into all aspects of the food system and the consolidation of corporate power over the past decades'.

Beginning in the 1960s, the food and agriculture sector in developed countries became increasingly dominated by corporations. As a result, developed countries' agricultural subsidies were in effect corporate subsidies, he said.

He said that at the World Food Conference in 1974, some national delegates raised concerns that multinational corporations had too much power as both buyers of developing-country products and

sellers of necessary inputs, much like the core debates around the Food Systems Summit held in 2021.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, industrialised agriculture and food production sites became breeding grounds for pathogens, he added.

Moreover, Fakhri said, by prioritising economic growth and efficiency, industrial agriculture drives a constant demand for more territory and large-scale monocrop farms that pollute land, air and water and debase animal life. 'It also encourages employers to prioritise profits over workers' rights and treat people like replaceable units.'

He said the recent increase in food prices reflects the high concentration of suppliers' market power. Globally, food inflation rates are at record highs. 'Food inflation is principally caused by transnational corporations raising prices at rates that exceed increased costs and risks.' Corporations have been falsely attributing price hikes to various crises to hide their profiteering, Fakhri said.

Corporate power

Elaborating on the political economy of corporate food systems, the Special Rapporteur said corporations in food systems have increased and consolidated their market power primarily through mergers and acquisitions. Market power refers to the capacity of firms to influence supply and/or demand

elements of a market in ways that enable them to control prices and generate profits that exceed normal return on capital.

Corporations may engage in horizontal strategies such as mergers, acquisitions and joint ventures to reduce competition and expand market share. They may also engage in vertical strategies and use mergers, acquisitions or contractual control over suppliers, distributors, retailers and ancillary industries (e.g., transportation and storage) to dominate the supply chain and gatekeep market access, Fakhri observed.

He provided some examples in the agricultural input and processing sectors:

- Seeds and pesticides: Four firms (Bayer, Corteva, Syngenta and BASF) control 56% of the global commercial seed market and 61% of the pesticide market. These companies increasingly rely on genetically modified organisms and artificial intelligence to drive seed development.
- Fertilisers: Five firms – OCP (Morocco), the Mosaic Company (United States), ICL (Israel), Nutrien (United States) and Sinofert (China) – control 25% of the phosphate fertiliser market.
- Farm machinery: Four companies – Deere and Company (United States), CNH Industrial (Netherlands), AGCO (United States) and Kubota (Japan) – dominate 43% of the global market and are heavily investing in artificial intelligence–driven precision agriculture.
- Animal pharmaceuticals: The top 10 firms control 68% of the market, with the top four holding nearly 50%.
- Poultry genetics: Three corporations – Tyson Foods (United States), EW Group (Germany) and Hendrix Genetics (Netherlands) –

dominate the sector. In the United States, they supply 98% of the breeding stock for broilers. Similar market control is replicated in Brazil, China and Africa. Evidence of price manipulation and market coordination has emerged in Zambia and the United States, leading to investigations and penalties.

Corporate power becomes problematic when corporations have the ability to increase their profit by raising prices (especially for inputs) and/or lowering wages; that power gives corporations control over inflation and employment, thereby limiting people's power to determine how to live with dignity, said Fakhri.

He said corporations also gain control over material conditions such as technology, labour conditions, processing practices and food environments, thereby limiting choices for consumers and workers.

Furthermore, corporations are shaping food policy because of their growing political influence, which weakens democratic participation, Fakhri noted. In Argentina, civil society organisations and Indigenous Peoples were reportedly sidelined in public discussions regarding seed law reform, unlike the biotechnology corporations concerned. Meanwhile, in the European Union, 162 corporations and trade associations spend at least €343 million annually on lobbying to weaken green policies, a one-third increase since 2020.

The Special Rapporteur said that transnational corporations are increasingly exploiting workers across the food system in order to keep production costs low and increase returns for shareholders. 'Workers are often paid less than a living wage, forced into long working hours, lack contracts and social or maternity protection, are subjected to sexual harassment and/or abuse, exposed to harmful substances without adequate

protection and have their right to organise curtailed.'

The UN expert said that industrial intensification was also designed to make farmers dependent on the expensive inputs provided by agrochemical companies. 'Such market concentration means that a small number of companies will unfairly control the price of seeds, which are the origins of life itself. Any increase in seed prices will increase the cost of farming, making it harder for farmers to turn a profit.'

Moreover, said Fakhri, the 'Big Four' in the seed sector produce most of the agrochemicals correlated with genetically modified seeds. 'Those agrochemicals reduce biodiversity, which in turn lowers agricultural resilience, making farms more vulnerable to climate change shocks.'

In comparison, countries such as Bolivia, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico and Venezuela promote the conservation of native seeds, said Fakhri; Ecuador recognises the political and social elements of farming and supports initiatives to enable small and family farmers to more easily access consumers.

Unhealthy foods

Fakhri cited a recent report by the UN Special Rapporteur on the right to health which explained how corporate production and marketing strategies for unhealthy foods and beverages detrimentally influence dietary decisions. For example, many companies specifically target lower-income countries with unhealthy products, while often pushing healthier foodstuffs in wealthier countries.

'Many food and beverage corporations market or repackage their products in a way that creates the perception that they are altering their business practices to address social, economic, environmental and health problems,' he said. Such strategies can be highly deceptive, luring consumers into believing that certain products are more

sustainable or nutritious than they actually are.

Corporations are also creating an increase in demand for ultraprocessed products through advertising, promotions and other marketing strategies that disproportionately target racial and ethnic minorities and people from socially disadvantaged backgrounds. For example, between 2000 and 2013, the consumption of ultraprocessed products in Latin America increased by more than 25% and the consumption of fast food by 40%. Similar trends were seen in parts of Africa as well.

Most alarming, said Fakhri, is the disproportionate targeting of children. Food and beverage marketing is pervasive, with the majority of food types marketed to children as part of an approach aimed at influencing their preferences, requests, purchases and eating behaviours, increasing the risk of childhood obesity.

Despite the prohibition on advertising and other forms of promotion of breast-milk substitutes, some industry tactics include marketing practices that spread false health and nutrition claims, the cross-promotion of milks and associated brands for infants, toddlers, older children and adults, as well as lobbying and the use of trade associations and front groups.

‘Ultratprocessed products rely on cheap, easily exchangeable ingredients, have a long shelf life, cause addiction and overeating, pose a great risk of obesity and non-communicable diseases, and can be sold at a much higher price than their production cost. The result is that corporations are driving the homogenisation of diets.’

Encouragingly, said the Special Rapporteur, several states have adopted or are undertaking efforts to adopt front-of-package warning labelling to foster healthier lives. For instance, Chile, Peru and Uruguay have implemented front-of-package warning labels,

while Brazil, Canada, Colombia and Uganda, among others, are in the process of considering or adopting similar systems. Mexico has passed one of the most effective front-of-package labelling systems. ‘Such positive measures notwithstanding, the food and beverage industry continues to strongly and extensively oppose front-of-package warning labelling regulations.’

The UN expert also said the exponential growth of supermarkets and fast-food chains is displacing smaller, informal fresh food markets that sell locally sourced food. The spread of supermarkets often coincides with increased imports and sales of ultraprocessed foods. He said that between 1990 and 2000, supermarkets’ share of all retail food sales in Latin America increased from 15% to 60%, with similar transitions occurring in Asia, parts of Europe, Western Asia and urban parts of Africa. This shift in food environments favours larger-scale suppliers, often multinationals, that can meet supermarkets’ needs and requirements more easily than smaller-scale suppliers, which in turn reinforces the power imbalances throughout the food system.

However, Fakhri points to the counter-example of Brazil, which has implemented various programmes such as a food basket programme that prioritises local fresh food and a procurement programme for schools that prioritises family farms, especially those that are held by land reform settlements, Indigenous Peoples, people of African descent and women.

Environmental damage

Unhealthy diets are linked to an unhealthy environment, said Fakhri. Businesses are responsible for the damage caused by industrial agriculture because of input-heavy monoculture plantations, intensive livestock operations, land- and

water-grabbing, deforestation and overfishing, thus exacerbating the global environmental crisis.

In fact, the leading cause of biodiversity loss is agriculture. Agriculture and aquaculture are listed as major threats for 85% of the species identified by the International Union for Conservation of Nature on its Red List of Threatened Species. Moreover, food systems are responsible for between 21% and 37% of global greenhouse gas emissions.

The Special Rapporteur also said that industrial food systems rely heavily on plastic packaging. Inadequate waste management systems cause plastic to enter air, water and soil, where it breaks down into micro-particles that harm wildlife, affect plant growth and ultimately contaminate food. Gear abandoned by industrial fishing fleets is a major source of marine plastic pollution.

Agriculture is also responsible for surprisingly large contributions to air pollution, the largest environmental risk factor for premature death. Over 90% of global ammonia emissions come from agriculture, constituting a major source of fine particulate matter, which has significant health impacts.

Meanwhile, industrial agricultural practices are the leading cause of water pollution and the largest threat to the drinking water supply of hundreds of millions of people due to the extensive use of industrial pesticides and fertilisers and to slurry from intensive livestock farming. Rivers and aquifers are increasingly contaminated by heavy metals, metalloids and other toxins originating from mining or industrial discharges, but also, more and more, by pesticides used in agriculture. All of those pollutants not only severely affect the drinkability of water but also contaminate food chains, since these are toxins that progressively accumulate in living tissues, Fakhri

pointed out.

In addition, he said, excessive withdrawals for large irrigation schemes in lakes and basins have led to large-scale disasters. For example, in the Aral Sea basin, the irrigation of almost 10 million hectares, using flows from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers, decreased the surface of the Aral Sea by one-sixth. As a result, 40,000 tons of fish were lost.

Turning to another important factor, the UN expert said, 'Without fertile soil, the world cannot eat – to abuse soil is a violation of the right to life itself. Yet, approximately 33% of land is classified as degraded because of erosion, salinisation, compaction, acidification and chemical pollution.'

He said land degradation has intensified over the past decades as a result of mounting pressures from industrial agriculture and livestock operations, including over-cultivation, overgrazing and forest clearing. These aspects are compounded by rapid urban expansion, deforestation and climate-related events such as prolonged droughts and coastal flooding, which contribute to soil salinisation and reduced land productivity.

According to the report, soil erosion washes away between 20 billion and 37 billion tons of topsoil each year, reducing the soil's ability to store water and, consequently, increasing water irrigation needs. 'The loss of soil is practically irrecoverable, since regenerating 2 to 3 cm of soil can take up to 1,000 years.'

Fakhri also said that in the past decades, large transnational corporations have been acquiring community or community-used lands on a large scale, with the active collaboration of governments. The top 10 institutional landowners control over 400,000 sq km globally, approximately the size of Japan; just 1% of the large industrial farms now control 70% of global farmland,

while 84% of farms (smaller than 2 hectares) manage only 12%.

'These land grabs are coupled with the appropriation of water rights. This land- and water-grabbing, carried out in the name of increasing agricultural productivity, has harmed Indigenous Peoples and rural communities by disrupting their way of life, limiting their access to good food and water and depriving them of the vital resources on which their livelihoods depend.'

Digitalisation

According to the Special Rapporteur, agrifood and technology corporations are quickly promoting the use of digital technologies across all aspects of food systems. He said digital technologies now feature in the creation of inputs [e.g., predictive plant breeding and financial technology (fintech) credit services]; farm operations (on-farm robotics and management platforms); trade (digital commodities marketplaces); processing (robotics in food packaging and processing); transport and storage (digital logistics); food retail (e-commerce platforms, mobile-based food delivery); and traceability across the supply chain (blockchain analytics).

'Over the past decade, digital technologies have become an increasingly important tool for corporate actors to expand their reach and control over food systems. Indeed, digital data and the intelligence derived from them are becoming increasingly important resources, while digital technologies increasingly shape access to services and control over resources and goods.'

Consequently, Fakhri said, the ability to collect, store, process, analyse and use data increasingly determines the profit, prospects and power of companies and other actors. 'That trend is reflected by the entry of big tech companies into agriculture and food, as well as in

partnerships between agribusiness and big tech.'

Corporations are telling farmers that sensors, robots, digital farming platforms and other new digital technologies will improve their decision-making. However, that same technology is designed to help corporations to accumulate data and undermine peasant food production and agroecology, the Special Rapporteur cautioned.

'What is needed is not more data, but better governance systems that ensure the power of data generation and dissemination is in the hands of the people generating those data, which in turn is used to realise the human rights of communities and Indigenous Peoples.'

Competition law

Fakhri also underscored that competition law can play an important role in keeping markets fair and stable by disallowing the creation of market dominance, monopolies, oligopolies or monopsonies. For example, in Germany, cartel practices among seven agrochemical wholesalers between 1998 and 2015 led to fines of nearly €155 million for coordinated price fixing.

Nevertheless, said Fakhri, competition law needs to be reformed or better enforced. For instance, in Australia, the poultry sector is dominated by two companies, Baiada and Ingham's, which control approximately 70% of the national poultry market. Under this system, much like in the United States, contract farmers bear the cost and risk associated with infrastructure, while the corporations retain ownership over the birds and feed. In Yemen, where 17.1 million people are food-insecure, the country heavily depends on food imports, with over 90% of staple foods such as wheat, rice and sugar sourced from abroad. A small number of intermediaries

and large importers reportedly dominate food distribution channels, especially for staple foods. Such concentration facilitates price manipulation, limits market competition and restricts access to affordable, culturally appropriate foods.

Corporate accountability

According to the Special Rapporteur, the challenge in holding corporations liable is that they not only have the resources to outspend victims in terms of legal fees but are also legal persons that can exist in perpetuity (barring bankruptcy or personal choice), thereby outlasting the victims.

Legal damages that result from human rights violations can be budgeted for as 'operating costs', he said, adding that transnational corporations are especially difficult to hold liable because of the complex web of subsidiaries and contracts they use across multiple jurisdictions.

'Voluntary guiding principles have proven inadequate to tackle the rise of corporate power and human rights violations,' he said.

Fakhri said corporations may sometimes concede to incentives in lieu of regulation; corporate incentives to abide by human rights law, however, are in effect corporate subsidies and might sometimes reward bad behaviour by paying human rights violators to change their ways.

He pointed to the European Union as an example of how corporate concentration has led to an unjust distribution of agricultural subsidies. Approximately 80% of EU Common Agricultural Policy funds go to the largest 20% of farms, typically meat and dairy producers. As a result, the EU lost 5.3 million farms between 2005 and 2020 (a 37% decline), primarily small-scale farmers.

The Special Rapporteur said some viable international methods

of holding corporations accountable for human rights violations include international criminal law; the proposed international legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises; and the proposed international tax treaty.

Individual corporate executives can be prosecuted by the International Criminal Court for genocide, war crimes, crimes against humanity and the crime of aggression, noted Fakhri. Corporations cannot be prosecuted at the Court and in fact there is no international forum with clear international criminal jurisdiction over legal persons. Nevertheless, corporations may still be held liable under international criminal law. There is a growing argument that corporations as legal persons may face international criminal liability as a matter of customary international law. Moreover, a number of treaties hold corporations criminally liable for specific crimes in areas including genocide, apartheid, financing terrorism, organised crime, corruption and financial fraud.

Fakhri said that for the past 10 years, under the auspices of the UN Human Rights Council, states have been negotiating an international legally binding instrument to regulate the activities of transnational corporations and other business enterprises, which has the support of a number of states.

There is a growing international consensus over the importance of mandatory due diligence obligations for businesses, which is reflected in the expansion of such practices in several jurisdictions, he said. Yet the proliferation of national and regional models could entail fragmentation of practices across jurisdictions. The legally binding instrument could help to avoid fragmentation by adopting a

multilateral standard for such an obligation.

Due to the profit-driven nature of corporations, the proposed business and human rights treaty cannot rely only on due diligence. The legally binding instrument should enable international cooperation and enhance corporate legal liability across jurisdictions.'

Indeed, Fakhri said that corporate power is dynamic and therefore the treaty should ensure that reforms in international human rights law (and international environmental law) are continuously incorporated into business and human rights practice.

Finally, the legally binding instrument must take a systemic perspective, and therefore recognise the inalienable, indivisible, interdependent and interrelated nature of all human rights, he added.

Meanwhile, there is a 'historic opportunity to rebuild the architecture of the global tax system', Fakhri said. In 2024, the UN finalised the terms of reference for a UN Framework Convention on International Tax Cooperation, which is set to be finalised by the end of 2027.

The aim is to establish an international tax system for sustainable development. This global tax deal is needed to end the exploitation of the public purse and the environment by multinational corporations, the ultra-rich and the polluters, said Fakhri. At the same time, it can enable a coordinated approach towards surcharging the profits of companies that systemically violate human rights. 'Such a top-up tax on the industries' profits will disincentivise the business-as-usual approach, shift investments and thus catalyse a just and equitable transition to a food system that realises human rights.'

Kanaga Raja is the Editor of SUNS (South-North Development Monitor), which is published by the Third World Network. This article originally appeared in SUNS (No. 10296, 24 September 2025).

UNDROP is lighting the way for peasants' rights

In the face of corporate power over food systems and myriad other challenges, peasants continue to play a key role in feeding the world and safeguarding farming cultures. In this interview with *Ann Doherty*, agroecologist *Georgina Catacora-Vargas* explains how a landmark international instrument adopted in 2018 – the UN Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas (UNDROP) – can support the cause of peasants and food sovereignty.

AD: In your eyes, what makes this declaration unique and unprecedented?

GCV: Importantly, it is the very first UN instrument that clearly defines whom we mean when we talk about 'peasants'. We often think of peasants solely as people who cultivate crops on a small scale. This is true and very important; however, peasants also include pastoralists, artisanal and small-scale fishers, gatherers, Indigenous People and others – whether sedentary, nomadic, semi-nomadic, with land, or landless – whose livelihoods are closely tied with the land and other components of ecosystems.

The definition of peasants also refers to women, youth and children. This comprehensive description of peasants is essential: for recognising all of these rights holders, for helping to ensure they are no longer ignored, and for acknowledging the dynamics that keep them in vulnerable and marginalised situations. Recognition is the first step towards justice and dignity.

UNDROP is also unprecedented in that it includes language on the 'right to food sovereignty'. This is quite remarkable! In general, governments have an aversion to the term 'food sovereignty'. This has to do with the inherent political



Georgina Catacora-Vargas.

implications of the power shifting that occurs when peasants exercise their rights to seeds, land, water and the protection of their traditional knowledge, which are key aspects of food sovereignty.

From a human rights perspective, UNDROP contains other unique elements that have not been addressed before in any UN instrument. These include the recognition of agroecology as a means to achieve important peasants' rights, the right to be protected against the use of – and the right not to use – hazardous substances such

as agrochemicals, and the right to be protected against human rights infringements arising from GMO [genetically modified organism]-related activities.

What are the roots of UNDROP?

Over the years, awareness has been growing about the essential socio-cultural roles of peasants, as well as their collective production capacity in terms of volume, diversity and outreach. We've seen increased discussions in international fora about the vulnerable situation and lack of protection for peasants and rural workers.

Recognition of the need to respect peasants' rights is long overdue. Peasants not only play an essential role in feeding the world; they also manage agroecosystems and preserve cultures connected with farming and food. The 2.4 billion peasants around the world produce up to 80% of all locally consumed food, mostly on small plots of land of under five hectares. Paradoxically, peasants suffer more material poverty, discrimination and rights violations than any other population around the world.

UNDROP is the result of attempts to address these systemic injustices. It was born out of a rightful need and an ethical urgency to recognise, respect and dignify peasants and rural agricultural

workers.

Thanks to the work of committed civil society and grassroots organisations including La Vía Campesina, the peasants' rights discussion was 'elevated' to the UN fora. The participation of peasants throughout the entire UNDROP drafting process allowed them to bring their specific struggles to the negotiating table. Thanks in part to their crucial contribution, UNDROP addresses many of the complex and interrelated challenges faced by peasants and rural workers.

How will UNDROP be useful for the agroecology movement, and vice versa?

Agroecology is recognised as both a right and a duty in the declaration, at different complementary levels. UNDROP explicitly mentions the role of agroecology in preserving livelihoods and traditional knowledge, in protecting land and so-called natural resources, and in the transition to sustainable agriculture. Moreover, other provisions of UNDROP are relevant to agroecological management and the positive impacts it fosters.

At the same time, the agroecological movement will be fundamental in the implementation of UNDROP. For instance, agroecology supports the fulfilment of peasants' rights by restoring the ecosystems upon which peasant livelihoods and identities are built. Furthermore, the technical and social processes promoted by agroecology contribute to achieving keystone rights: to food sovereignty, to resilience, to healthy food, to decent work and safe working conditions, and to many other rights covered by UNDROP. UNDROP and agroecological movements and processes are therefore mutually supportive.

Does this new agreement give you optimism about the coming years?

Yes! UNDROP comes at a very crucial time for the strengthening and supporting

of peasants' movements in a context where rural areas are aging, cities and infrastructure are expanding on agricultural lands, mainstream market and trade practices are impoverishing peasant communities, and illegal activities and armed conflicts are eroding peasant territories around the world. Moreover, climate change is devastating rural livelihoods, and there is insufficient institutional support for coping in the short term and adapting in the long term. These are enormous and intertwined issues that weaken and shrink peasantries. This in turn is very dangerous: without peasants, humanity will face unbearable food and cultural crises.

UNDROP and agroecological movements and processes are mutually supportive.

Even though the prediction that peasants will disappear has been around for many decades, they still show huge amounts of relevance and resilience. But we know resilience also has its limits. It is therefore very important to work on different levels – global, national and local – to strengthen, revive and dignify peasants, including women, children and youth. Let me share some specific examples in which UNDROP has played a supporting role.

There are already examples of how UNDROP has been used in practice. At the territorial level, elements in the declaration provided guidance to three Indigenous nations in Bolivia (Yampara, Khara Khara and Guarani) in proposing a new regulatory instrument. This led to a departmental law that protects native varieties and landraces of maize and the associated knowledge, based on the rights of

Indigenous Peoples and peasants. At the national level, in July 2023 Colombia recognised the country's peasants as rights holders and people deserving special protection. Globally, the UN approved a special mechanism to strengthen the implementation and monitoring of UNDROP in September 2023. Around two months later, the first regional governmental consultation on the implementation of UNDROP in Latin America and the Caribbean was held in Colombia. Also, various international grassroots groups, such as the International Planning Committee for Food Sovereignty (IPC) and La Vía Campesina, together with civil society organisations and committed scholars, are actively promoting UNDROP as a cross-cutting instrument in different UN discussions.

The road ahead is long, but the stage is set for adopting human-rights-based approaches that will help us to effectively address urgent global challenges. Promoting, protecting and implementing the rights of peasants is vital, and involves profound positive transformations including changing our values and the way we recognise and respect each other.

UNDROP and agroecology respectively provide the legal framework and the territorial experiences and evidence that will help us to move towards more just, dignified and healthy livelihoods for peasants and, hence, for all humanity. ♦

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Venezuela's oil, US-led regime change and America's gangster politics

Washington's current machinations against Venezuela are only the latest in a long, unsavoury line of resource-grabbing US regime-change operations.

Jeffrey D. Sachs and
Sybil Fares

THE United States is dusting off its old regime-change playbook in Venezuela. Although the slogan has shifted from 'restoring democracy' to 'fighting narco-terrorists', the objective remains the same, which is control of Venezuela's oil. The methods followed by the US are familiar: sanctions that strangle the economy, threats of force, and a \$50 million bounty on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro as if this were the Wild West.

The US is addicted to war. With the renaming of the Department of War, a proposed Pentagon budget of \$1.01 trillion and more than 750 military bases across some 80 countries, this is not a nation pursuing peace. For the past two decades, Venezuela has been a persistent target of US regime change. The motive, which is clearly laid out by President Donald Trump, is the roughly 300 billion barrels of oil reserves beneath the Orinoco belt, the largest petroleum reserves on the planet.

In 2023, Trump openly stated: 'When I left, Venezuela was ready to collapse. We would have taken it over, we would have gotten all that oil ... but now we're buying oil from Venezuela, so we're making a dictator very rich.' His words reveal the underlying logic of US foreign policy that has an utter disregard for sovereignty and instead favours



A 2019 protest against US intervention in Venezuela. For the past two decades, Venezuela has been a persistent target of US regime change.

Joe Catron (CC BY-NC 2.0)

the grabbing of other country's resources.

What's underway today is a typical US-led regime-change operation dressed up in the language of anti-drug interdiction. The US has amassed thousands of troops, warships and aircraft in the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean. The president has boastfully authorised the CIA to conduct covert operations inside Venezuela.

On 26 October, US Senator Lindsey Graham went on national television to defend recent US military strikes on Venezuelan vessels and to say land strikes inside Venezuela and Colombia are a 'real possibility'. Fellow Senator Rick Scott, in the same news cycle, mused that if he were Nicolás Maduro he'd 'head to Russia or China right now'.

These senators aim to normalise the idea that Washington decides who governs Venezuela and what happens to its oil. Remember that Graham similarly champions the US fighting Russia in Ukraine to secure the \$10 trillion of mineral wealth that Graham fatuously claims is available for the US to grab.

Nor are Trump's moves a new story vis-à-vis Venezuela. For more than 20 years, successive US administrations have tried to submit Venezuela's internal politics to Washington's will. In April 2002, a shortlived military coup briefly ousted then President Hugo Chávez. The CIA knew the details of the coup in advance and the US immediately recognised the new government. In the end, Chávez retook power. Yet the US did not

end its support for regime change.

In March 2015, Barack Obama codified a remarkable legal fiction. Obama signed Executive Order 13692 declaring Venezuela's internal political situation an 'unusual and extraordinary threat' to US national security to trigger US economic sanctions. That move set the stage for escalating coercion by the US. The White House has maintained that claim of a US 'national emergency' ever since. Trump added increasingly draconian economic sanctions during his first term. Astoundingly, in January 2019, Trump declared Juan Guaidó, then an opposition figure, to be Venezuela's 'interim president', as if Trump could simply name a new Venezuelan president. This tragicomedy of the US eventually fell to pieces in 2023, when the US dropped this failed and ludicrous gambit.

The US is now starting a new chapter of resource grabbing. Trump has long been vocal about 'keeping the oil'. In 2019, when discussing Syria, President Trump said, 'We are keeping the oil, we have the oil, the oil is secure, we left troops behind only for the oil.' To those in doubt, US troops are still in the northeast of Syria today, occupying the oil fields. Earlier, in 2016, on Iraq's oil, Trump said, 'I was saying this constantly and consistently to whoever would listen, I said keep the oil, keep the oil, keep the oil, don't let somebody else get it.'

Now, with fresh military strikes on Venezuelan vessels and open talk of land attacks, the administration is invoking narcotics to justify regime change. Yet Article 2(4) of the United Nations Charter expressly prohibits 'the threat or use of force against the territorial integrity or political independence of any state'. No US theory of 'cartel wars' remotely justifies coercive regime change.

Even before the military strikes, US coercive sanctions have functioned as a siege engine. Obama built the sanctions framework in



Oil wells on Lake Maracaibo, Venezuela. The country has the world's largest petroleum reserves.

2015 and Trump further weaponised it to topple Maduro. The claim was that 'maximum pressure' would empower Venezuelans. In practice, the sanctions have caused widespread suffering. As economist and renowned sanctions expert Francisco Rodríguez found in his study of the 'Human Consequences of Economic Sanctions', the result of the coercive US measures has been a catastrophic decline in Venezuelan living standards, starkly worsening health and nutrition, and dire harm to vulnerable populations.

The flimsy moral pretext today is the fight against narcotics, yet the real objective is to overthrow a sovereign government, and the collateral damage is the suffering of the Venezuelan people. If this sounds familiar, that's because it is. The US has repeatedly undertaken regime-change operations in pursuit of oil, uranium, banana plantations, pipeline routes and other resources: Iran (1953), Guatemala (1954), Congo (1960), Chile (1973), Iraq (2003), Haiti (2004), Syria (2011), Libya (2011) and Ukraine (2014), just to name a few such cases. Now Venezuela is on the block.

In her brilliant book *Covert Regime Change* (2017), Professor Lindsay O'Rourke details the machinations, blowbacks and disasters of no fewer than 64 US

covert regime-change operations during the years 1947–89! She focused on this earlier period because many key documents for that era have by now been declassified. Tragically, the pattern of a US foreign policy based on covert (and not-so-covert) regime-change operations continues to this day.

The calls by the US government for escalation reflect a reckless disregard for Venezuela's sovereignty, international law and human life. A war against Venezuela would be a war that Americans do not want, against a country that has not threatened or attacked the US, and on legal grounds that would fail a first-year law student. Bombing vessels, ports, refineries or soldiers is not a show of strength. It is the epitome of gangsterism. ♦

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A huge airbase with a small country attached to it

Facilitated by its Western allies, Israel has been unleashing waves of aerial attacks on the Palestinians and neighbouring states, but, like its imperial antecedents, this latest attempt at air-power colonialism is unlikely to succeed.

Juan Cole

DONALD Trump's and Benjamin Netanyahu's nomination of former British Prime Minister Tony Blair, his hands already crimson with the blood of innocent Iraqis, to run post-war Gaza, brings to mind a distant era when London sent its politicians out to be viceroys in its global colonial domains. Consider Blair's proposed appointment, made (of course!) without consulting any Palestinians, a clear signal that the Middle East has entered a second era of Western imperialism. Other than Palestine, which has already been subjected to classic settler colonialism, our current neo-imperial moment is characterised by the American use of Israel as its base in the Middle East and by the employment of air power to subdue any challengers.

The odd assortment of grifters, oil men, financiers, mercenaries, White nationalists, and Christian and Jewish Zionists now presiding in Washington, led by that great orange-hued hotelier-in-chief, has (with the help of Germany, Great Britain and France) built up Israel into a huge airbase with a small country attached to it. From that airbase, a constant stream of missiles, rockets, drones and fighter jets routinely swarm out to hit regional neighbours.

Gaza was pounded into rubble almost hourly for the last two years, only the first month of which could plausibly have been justified as 'self-defence' in the wake of the horrific Hamas attack on Israel on 7



Jaber Jihad Badwan (CC BY-SA 4.0)

'What we're now seeing is Israel's version of air-power colonialism': An Israeli airstrike on Gaza.

October 2023. Even the Palestinian West Bank, already under Israeli military rule, has been struck repeatedly from above. Lebanon has been subject to numerous bombings despite a supposed ceasefire, as has Syria (no matter that its leader claims he wants good relations with his neighbour). Yemen, which has indeed fired missiles at Israel to protest the genocide in Gaza, has now been hit endlessly by the Israelis, who also struck Iranian nuclear enrichment sites and other targets last June.

Some of the Israeli bombing raids or missile and drone strikes were indeed tit-for-tat replies to attacks by that country's enemies. Others were only made necessary because of Israeli provocations, including its seemingly never-ending atrocities in Gaza, to which regional actors have felt compelled to reply. Many Israeli strikes, however, have had little, if anything, to do with self-defence, often being

aimed at civilian targets or at places like Syria that pose no immediate threat. On 9 September, Israel even bombed Qatar, the country its leaders had asked to help negotiate with Hamas for the return of Israeli hostages taken on 7 October.

In short, what we're now seeing is Israel's version of air-power colonialism.

Typically, its fighter jets bombed the Yemeni capital of Sanaa on 28 August, assassinating northern Yemen's prime minister, Ahmed al-Rahwi, along with several senior members of the region's Houthi government and numerous journalists. (Israeli officials had previously boasted that they could have killed the top leadership of Iran in their 12-day war on that country in June.)

In reality, Tel Aviv is now shaping governments of the Middle East simply by wiping their officials off the face of the earth or credibly threatening to do so. Israel has also

had an eerie hand in shaping outside perceptions of developments in the region by regularly assassinating journalists, not only in Palestine but also in Lebanon and as far abroad as Yemen. However, by failing to come close to subduing the region entirely, what Tel Aviv has created is a negative version of hegemony rather than grasping any kind of positive leadership role.

Negative imperialism

The massive June bombardment of Iran by Israel and the United States, destroying civilian nuclear enrichment facilities at Natanz and Fordow, came amid ongoing diplomatic negotiations in Oman. As a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, Iran has the right to enrich uranium for civilian uses and no credible evidence was presented that Tehran had decided to militarise its programme. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) condemned both sets of strikes as severe violations of the UN Charter and of its own statutes. They also posed public health concerns, mainly because of the release of potentially toxic chemicals and radiological contaminants.

Those attacks, in short, were aimed at denying Iran the sort of economic and scientific enterprises that are a routine part of life in Israel and the United States, as well as Brazil, China, France, Germany, India, Japan, the Netherlands, Pakistan, Russia and the United Kingdom. Several of those countries (like Israel) do, of course, also have nuclear weapons, while Iran does not. In the end, Tehran saw no benefit in the 2015 nuclear deal its leaders had agreed to that required it to mothball 80% of its civilian nuclear enrichment programme. Indeed, President Trump functionally punished the Iranian leadership for complying with it when he imposed maximum-pressure sanctions in May 2018 – sanctions largely maintained by the

Biden administration and in place to this day.

Those dangerous and illegal air strikes on Iran should bring to mind 19th-century British and Russian resistance to the building of a railroad by Iran's Qajar dynasty, a form of what I've come to think of as 'negative imperialism'. In other words, contrary to classic theories of imperialism that focused on the domination of markets and the extraction of resources, some imperial strategies have always been aimed at preventing the operation of markets in order to keep a victim nation weak.

After all, Iran has few navigable waterways and its economy has long suffered from transportation difficulties. The obvious solution once upon a time was to build a railroad, something both the British and the Russians came to oppose out of a desire to keep that country a weak buffer zone between their empires. Iran didn't, in fact, get such a railroad until 1938.

In a similar fashion, 21st-century imperialism-from-the-air is denying it the ability to produce fuel for its nuclear power plant at Bushehr. The United States, Europe and Israel are treating Iran differently from so many other countries in this regard because of its government's rejection of a Western-imposed imperial order in the region.

Popular movements and revolts brought the long decades of British and French colonial dominance of the Middle East to an end after World War II. The demise of colonialism and the rise of independent nation-states was, however, never truly accepted by right-wing politicians in either Europe or the United States who had no interest in confronting the horrors of the colonial age. Instead, they preferred to ignore history, including the slave trade, economic looting, the displacement or massacre of indigenous populations, the mismanagement of famines, and

forms of racist apartheid. Worse yet, the desire for a sanitised history of the colonial era was often coupled with a determination to run the entire deadly experiment all over again.

The framers of the ill-omened Global War on Terror's nightmares in Afghanistan and Iraq during the administration of President George W. Bush would openly celebrate what was functionally the return of Western colonialism. They attempted to use America's moment as a hyperpower (unconstrained by great-power competition after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991) to attempt to recolonise the Greater Middle East.

Predictably, they failed miserably. Unlike their 19th-century ancestors, people in the Global South are now largely urban and literate, connected by newspapers and the Internet, organised by political parties and non-governmental outfits, and in possession of capital, resources and sophisticated weaponry. Direct colonisation could now only be achieved through truly genocidal acts, as Israeli actions in Gaza suggest – and, even then, would be unlikely to succeed.

Air power

No wonder imperial powers have once again turned to indirect dominance through aerial bombardment. The use of air power to try to subdue or at least curb Middle Easterners is, in fact, more than a century old. That tactic was inaugurated by the government of Italian Prime Minister Giovanni Giolitti during his country's invasion and occupation of Ottoman Libya in 1911. Aerial surveillance pilot Lieutenant Giulio Gavotti fitted detonators to two-pound grenades, dropping them on enemy camps. Though he caused no injuries, his act, then seen as sneaky and ungentlemanly, provoked outrage.

The ruthless British subjugation of Palestine, aimed at

– this should sound eerily familiar today – displacing the indigenous population and establishing a European ‘Jewish Ulster’ there to bolster British rule in the Middle East, also deployed air power. As Irish parliamentarian Chris Hazzard observed, ‘Herbert Samuel, hated in Ireland for sanctioning Roger Casement’s execution and the internment of thousands following the Easter Rising in 1916 – would, as Britain’s first High Commissioner in Palestine, order the indiscriminate aerial bombardment of Palestinian protestors in 1921 (the first bombs dropped from the sky on Palestinian civilians)’.

The most extensive use of aerial bombardment for imperial control, however, would be pursued by the British in Mesopotamia, which they derogatorily called ‘Mespot’. The fragile British occupation of what is now Iraq from 1917 to 1932 ended long before imperialists like then Secretary of State for War, Air, and the Colonies Winston Churchill thought it should, largely because the armed local population mounted a vigorous resistance to it. A war-weary British public proved unwilling to bear the costs of a large occupation army there in the 1920s, so Churchill decided to use the Royal Air Force to keep control.

Arthur ‘Bomber’ Harris, a settler in colonial Rhodesia, who joined the British Air Force during the First World War, was then sent to Iraq. As he wrote, ‘We were equipped with Vickers Venon and subsequently Victoria aircraft ... By sawing a sighting hole in the nose of our troop carriers and making our own bomb racks we converted them into what were nearly the first post-war long-range heavy bombers.’ He did not attempt to gild the lily about his tactics: ‘[I]f the rebellion continued, we destroyed the villages and by air patrols kept the insurgents away from their homes for as long as necessary.’ That, as he explained, was far less expensive than using troops and, of course,

produced no high infantry casualty counts of the sort that had scarred Europe’s conscience during World War I.

Colonial officials obscured the fact that such measures were being taken against a civilian population in peacetime, rather than enemy soldiers during a war. In short, the denial that there are any civilians in Palestine, or in the Middle East more generally, has a long colonial heritage. It should be noted, however, that, in the end, Great Britain’s aerial dominance of Iraq failed, and it finally had to grant that country what at least passed for independence in 1932. In 1958, an enraged public would finally violently overthrow the government the British had installed there, after which Iraq became a nationalist challenger to Western dominance in the region for decades to come.

Of course, Harris’s air power strategy, whetted in Mesopotamia, came to haunt Europe itself during the Second World War, when he emerged as commander-in-chief of Bomber Command and rose to the rank of air chief marshal. He would then pioneer the tactic of massively bombarding civilian cities, beginning with the ‘thousand bomber’ raid on Cologne in May 1942. His ‘total war’ air campaign would, of course, culminate in the notorious 1945 firebombing of Dresden, which devastated eight square miles of the ‘Florence of Germany’, wiping out at least 25,000 victims, most of them non-combatants.

Terror from the skies

In the end, the way Bomber Harris’s deadly skies came home to Europe should be an object lesson to our own neo-imperialists. At this very moment, in fact, Europe faces menacing drones no less than does the Middle East. Moreover, unlike genuine international leadership, the Frankenstein monster of negative hegemony in the Middle East stirs only opposition and

resistance. Despite Israel’s technological superiority, it has hardly achieved invulnerability. Poverty-stricken and war-ridden Yemen has, for instance, managed to all but close the vital Red Sea to international shipping to protest the genocide in Gaza and has hit Israel with hypersonic missiles, closing the port of Eilat. Nor, during their 12-day war, did Iran prove entirely helpless either. It took out Israel’s major oil refinery and struck key military and research facilities. Instead of shaking the Iranian government, Israel appears to have pushed Iranians to rally around the flag. Nor is it even clear that Iran’s stockpile of highly enriched uranium was affected.

Most damning of all, Israel’s ability to inflict atrocities on the Palestinians of Gaza (often with US-supplied weaponry) has produced widespread revulsion. It is now increasingly isolated, its prime minister unable even to fly over France and Spain due to a fear of an International Criminal Court warrant for his arrest. The publics of the Middle East are boiling with anger, as are many Europeans. In early October, Italy’s major labour unions called a general strike, essentially closing the country down to protest Israel’s interception of the Global Sumud Flotilla, a group of ships attempting to bring humanitarian aid to Gaza. As with Bomber Harris’s ill-starred domination of Iraq, terror from the skies in Gaza and beyond is all too likely to fail as a long-term Grand Strategy. ♦

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How ‘conflict-free’ minerals are used in the waging of modern wars

The bloody links between mineral supplies and armed conflict are forged not only in the extraction stage but also at the other end of the supply chain.

**Mark Griffiths and
Mohamed El-Shewy**

MINERALS such as cobalt, copper, lithium, tantalum, tin and tungsten, which are all abundant in central Africa, are essential to the comforts of everyday life. Our phones, laptops and electric vehicles would not function without them.

These minerals are also tied intimately with conflict. For decades, military and paramilitary violence in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC) and on its borders – particularly with Rwanda – has been shaped and financed by control over some of these sought-after commodities.

Many of these minerals, including those that have supposedly been sourced responsibly, are linked to violence at the other end of the supply chain too. As we found in our recently published research,¹ minerals sourced in central Africa play a crucial role in the waging of modern wars.

Extensive campaigning and lobbying over the past two decades has focused on the idea of ‘conflict-free minerals’ as a way to address links between extraction and armed conflict in mining regions. This has resulted in a suite of legislation in the EU and US obliging tech manufacturers that use minerals from the DRC and surrounding countries to submit so-called ‘conflict minerals reports’ to national authorities.



Artisanal cobalt miners in the Democratic Republic of Congo. For decades, military and paramilitary violence in the DRC has been shaped and financed by control over cobalt and other valuable minerals.

In the US, for example, tech firms file what is known as a ‘specialised disclosure form’ to the Securities and Exchange Commission detailing all sources of four key minerals commonly associated with conflict in Africa: tantalum, tin, tungsten and gold. The form requires a declaration that trade is compliant with the due diligence guidelines set by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) on responsible supply chains in the DRC and neighbouring states. This guidance has, in turn, given rise to an industry of regulators that seeks to ensure minerals connected to conflict do not enter supply chains.

Tech companies worldwide – big and small – now comply with conflict minerals policies. The fact that these firms can be held under a critical spotlight, and that attention is falling on how bloody wars are connected to consumer products, is a positive development. But there are many flaws to this system of accountability.

One issue is the difficulty in proving that mineral supply is truly conflict-free. Many of the ‘conflict-free’ minerals sold through Rwanda, for instance, are very likely to have at least some connection to war. In the early 2000s, when Rwandan forces were involved in armed conflict in the DRC, the UN estimated that the



A US Air Force unmanned aerial vehicle flying a combat mission in Afghanistan in 2008. So-called 'conflict-free' minerals are used to make vital components of drones and other modern military hardware.

US Air Force/Lt Col Leslie Pratt

Rwandan army controlled between 60% and 70% of all the coltan (tantalum ore) produced there. It is widely accepted that Rwandan influence has persisted in the DRC since.

Another issue is that, under conflict-free mineral legislation, 'conflict' is associated with minerals only at source. There is no oversight on how minerals are connected to conflict at the other end of supply chains in modern weapons of war.

Conflict minerals

Weapons are no longer fashioned only with lead, iron and brass. They now depend on a range of advanced technologies: lithium batteries, cobalt cathodes, tantalum resistors, nickel capacitors, tin semiconductors, tungsten electrodes and so forth. In fact, everything advanced militaries do nowadays – whether it involves a fighter jet, drone, guided bomb, smart bullet, night vision or remote sensing – utilises these components.

As we outline in our study, 'conflict-free' minerals are essential to the waging of modern wars. We traced the movement of ores from the DRC into Rwanda, from where they are then sold to some of the world's largest weapons makers as 'conflict-free' minerals.

A coterie of defence contractors source minerals via

this route. These minerals, as our previous research shows, are used as 'volumetrically minor yet functionally essential' ingredients of the products these firms sell to militaries worldwide.

To draw focus on two 'conflict-free' minerals traded through Rwanda, tin and tantalum are vital to the function of a wide range of military wares. According to the US defence department, tin is present in 'nearly all military hardware'. It is crucial in compound forms to defrost screens at high altitudes and to deflect radio waves to enhance stealth. Tin is also used to power the Joint Direct Attack Munition guidance kits that improve the accuracy of bombs.

Tantalum-based semiconductors comprise the basic circuitry of drones. And among other things, tantalum is the active adsorbent material in the infrared camera tubes that make night vision possible. High-tech wars cannot be fought without these minerals, which are traded under conflict-free mineral legislation.

Researchers have long suspected that minerals can never be conflict-free at source. But our findings now turn attention to the other end of the supply chain. If it is to have any purchase at all, the idea of 'conflict-free' minerals must be entirely refigured.

Virtually all commentary by

journalists, lawyers and scholars focuses narrowly on consumer technologies, with the injustices faced by mining communities in central Africa contrasted with phones and electric vehicles. The source of minerals is the sole focus of ethical scrutiny.

This is an important aspect of minerals supply chains. But there is a growing prominence of other tech companies, in the form of modern weapons manufacturers, whose customers are not the global masses but the militaries of the world's most belligerent states.

Companies like Elbit Systems – which did not respond to a request for comment by The Conversation (where this article originally appeared) – present themselves as complying with ethical standards. In its 2020 conflict minerals report, Elbit declared a corporate stance against 'human rights abuses and atrocities'. It also expressed a commitment to 'sourcing materials from companies that share our values with respect to human rights, ethics and environmental responsibility'.

Yet, as our research shows, some companies are sourcing minerals from one war zone and then making profit from another. It should be recalled that Elbit, for example, supplies 'hundreds of products' to Israel's defence ministry.

There needs to be more scrutiny on the use of minerals 'downstream' to stem the flow of the raw materials that propel wars in Gaza and beyond. ♦

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Notes

1. Kali Rubaii, Mohamed El-Shewy and Mark Griffiths, 'When "conflict free" minerals go to war', *Political Geography*, Vol. 123, December 2025, 103425.

Neoliberalism by force in Ecuador

Despite brutal government repression of a national strike, diverse sectors of Ecuadorian society continue to make their voices of resistance heard.

‘WE are not terrorists. We are ancients.’ So reads a slogan that appears alongside images of the Aya Huma that have been circulating online over the last weeks in Ecuador.

The Aya Huma is an ancestral figure who, according to the Andean worldview, represents guidance, wisdom and strength. And in the context of the national strike that began on 18 September, it has taken on new meanings. It appears with its face covered, just like the protesters, who wear masks to protect their identities, and their faces, from tear gas. The slogan that accompanies the Aya Huma is a popular response to the attempt to criminalise protest and resistance, as is taking place under the government of President Daniel Noboa. It also denounces the persistence of structural racism and the historical exclusion of Indigenous peoples, especially in contexts such as this.

‘Every strike opens up a Pandora’s box of resentment and racism that exists within different people, as well as revealing the government’s neglect of social sectors,’ said Lisbeth Aguilar, a Kichwa-Otavalo lawyer, during a video interview with Ojalá (where this article was originally published).

Ecuador is not a country that tolerates would-be dictators: presidents Abdalá Bucaram, Jamil Mahuad and Lucio Gutiérrez were overthrown in 1997, 2000 and 2005, respectively. Street protest has long been fundamental in the overthrow of governments.

Since Lenin Moreno’s government, there have been three national strikes. The first took place in October 2019 and lasted almost two weeks, leaving at least 12 people dead. It achieved the repeal

Ana Sofia Armand and Lisbeth Moya González

of Decree 883, which eliminated fuel subsidies. The second took place in June 2022 and left at least seven people dead. It also sought to revoke fuel price increases and review economic and security policies.

The current cycle of mobilisation made up the third national strike. It was called by the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) in September to reject the Noboa government’s policies, targeting in particular a proposal to eliminate subsidies for diesel, among other things. The national strike was lifted on 22 October, around one month after it began.

‘In light of the brutal repression ordered by the government of #DanielNoboa, with three dead and dozens injured, we’ve made the difficult but necessary decision to end the #ParoNacional2025, clear the roads, and retreat to our territories to protect the lives of our people,’ CONAIE said in an official statement. Even so, some Indigenous organisations, including the Union of Indigenous and Peasant Organisations of Cotacachi (UNORCAC), have not recognised this decision and continue to protest.

The crisis in Ecuador has not let up since Noboa took office. His term began with an escalation of organised crime violence, in the face of which he declared an internal armed conflict, and has been marked by the energy crisis. The protests that fuelled the national strike took place throughout the country, with epicentres in Imbabura, Cotopaxi, Pichincha and Cuenca, where

blockades, marches and clashes with police were reported.

The high cost of the month-long strike

The Persecución Ecuador platform, which monitored violence during the national strike, reported that, as of 18 October, there had been 117 events of repression, including three alleged extrajudicial executions, 38 injuries and 57 arrests.

Repression against demonstrators has taken many forms, including the blocking of bank accounts belonging to leaders, attacks on journalists as they covered events, shutdown of the Internet during episodes of state violence, and the deportation of a foreign journalist.

There have also been arbitrary arrests and various examples of excessive use of force, including with live ammunition and excessive quantities of tear gas, which caused the death of an elderly person due to inhalation, and affected others with no involvement in the strike. Other measures include the intimidation and closure of media outlets, entry into medical centres to prevent treatment of the wounded, and the militarisation of the Central University of Ecuador (UCE).

People who mapped the resistance reported that by 15 October, 547 collective actions, including vigils, symbolic actions, marches, road closures, sit-ins, assemblies and pot-banging protests, had taken place.

In this context, the violence of state forces has been undeniable. For example, a video of the murder of Cotacachi community member Efraín Fuérez is circulating online, in which armed soldiers beat him

and a man who came to his aid while he was mortally wounded on the ground.

Diverse forms of resistance

This strike was unique in that it was mainly sustained in Indigenous territories. Quito, the capital, remained mostly peripheral to the events, as Jess Caiza, a student at the Central University of Ecuador, explained.

‘The resistance in the territories has shown that the ability to mobilise doesn’t exist in Quito, and this has exposed the racism that’s still super present, and it’s why we were unable to sustain the strike from the city,’ explained Caiza, who was arriving at the UCE to join her classmates in the protest.

On the night of 15 October, the UCE was taken over by the military, violating university autonomy. Even so, students held demonstrations the following day.

The cold is constant in Quito, and it’s been raining, which means the tear gas is even more effective. Over the last month, young people could be seen on street corners blowing tobacco smoke into the faces of their tear-gassed comrades to ease the pain. At times, it was impossible to distinguish between the fog and the gas. Even so, student actions persisted.

‘We held several sit-ins in Plaza Indoamérica, in front of the university; these sit-ins allowed us to close the streets and keep the roads blocked for hours, always accompanied by music and art,’ said Caiza. ‘We’ve also organised cultural events, community potlucks, and spaces for children.

‘*El que no salta es de cartón*’ (He who does not jump is made of cardboard) is a verse by the Ecuadorian band Mugre Sur which has been present during the national strike protests. The song, strongly critical of the Noboa administration, makes a mockery of the use of life-size cardboard figures during his presidential campaign.

Artists formed networks of support during the protest, deploying street art as a tool for denunciation and popular education. But their organising started well before September.

‘When Daniel Noboa merged the ministries of Education, Culture and Heritage, and Sports via Decree Number 60, artists took action by going out into the streets and carrying out activities to express our rejection of a measure that further jeopardises our livelihoods,’ explained Minotauro, an artist who asked to use a pseudonym when we spoke to them out of fear of repression.

Our source explained how artists have joined forces with UNORCAC and communities that continue to resist in their territories. They also work together to support struggles against mining projects promoted by the government in the territories of Imbabura, Las Naves, Palo Quemado, Quimsacocha and Fierro Urco.

Other networks have sprung up to support those who are in permanent struggle, including an effort at articulation carried by the Transfeminist Assembly. Ojalá spoke with various members of this organisation, which oversaw the collection and delivery of donations together with leaders from communities in Imbabura, as well as coordinating with cultural centres, organisations and individuals who contributed supplies and provided transportation.

‘Our collection efforts seek to break with the logic of welfare and reactivate class solidarity, understanding care as a principle in the broader construction of the struggle,’ explained members of the Transfeminist Assembly. They have been putting their bodies on the line in the streets, and they, too, asked to speak anonymously and collectively.

The role of the Transfeminist Assembly goes beyond logistical support, protest and emotional accompaniment. They’ve formed

alliances in Quito that have organised assemblies with various groups every Thursday. These meetings first arose in the context of the dissolution of ministries and the government’s attacks. In these spaces, everyone is free to speak, and collective solutions to social tensions are sought. Protests are organised in a manner that seeks to sustain long-term collective processes.

While the Noboa government shuts down dialogue, criminalises and represses protesters with bullets, different sectors – Indigenous peoples, feminists, students, artists and the population more generally – continue to organise collective actions that seek to make their demands visible, as well as sustaining spaces from which they can mobilise.

The political climate in the coming months will reveal whether these forms of coordination and resistance, beyond the national strike, will succeed in influencing the national political agenda or opening new avenues for dialogue between those who are mobilised and the state.

Amidst so much difficulty, there is also beauty. Indigenous women standing up to soldiers, students caring for their comrades affected by tear gas, people handing out food grown with their own hands on the land, healing the wounded with ancestral medicines, and community members singing and dancing in a circle in the middle of a demonstration, as if it was part of Inti Raymi, the most important celebration within the Andean cosmovision.

In these ways, the strike also became a collective song of resistance to pain. ♦

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The women looking after the elderly in Colombia also need care

Undervalued and overburdened, caregivers in Colombia seek the rights and recognition they deserve.

Roxana Baspineiro

IT is 4.45 in the morning, and Sandra Moreno is already up. She moves quietly, so as not to wake her parents, quickly gets ready, and steps out into the traffic of Bogotá, bound for the adult care centre where she has been working for three years. Although she studied early childhood education, life has taken her in another direction, looking after the elderly, a task she now undertakes with patience and dedication.

Her day begins serving a *tinto* (black coffee) or *agua aromática* (herbal tea) to the residents. ‘Sometimes they even argue over that,’ says Moreno. The hours go by, between the daily routines, exercises, recreational activities and the constant surveillance to prevent any falls or defuse any crises. Many have Alzheimer’s, dementia or depression. Others simply want someone to listen to them.

When her shift ends, Sandra does not rest. Her parents, both elderly and in poor health, are awaiting her at home. She manages their medical appointments, picks up their medication and arranges their tests. ‘Everything falls on me,’ she says. She does not have a car, so taking her parents to their appointments often means paying for taxis. ‘It’s not easy,’ she says.

‘It’s as if we were care machines,’ she laments. ‘People forget that we are also human beings, with feelings and needs of our own. Sometimes it feels like I’m working double or even triple



The reality for those who care for the elderly continues to be one of excessive workloads, informal employment and a lack of labour guarantees.

shifts.’

Although she has a stable job and social security coverage, she feels that neither her pay nor the recognition she receives reflects the effort her work entails. Every morning when she starts her working day, Sandra confirms an uncomfortable truth: in Colombia, caring for the elderly falls mainly to women like her, who are also ageing, also get tired and also need looking after.

Care, a historical and cultural burden for women

In Latin America and the Caribbean, at least eight million older persons need assistance with

basic activities such as eating, dressing or bathing, according to a study by the Pan American Health Organization and the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB). As the population ages, by 2050 this figure could triple.

Behind this growing demand lies one constant: most carers are women. In Colombia, for example, 6.2 million people (of all ages) require direct care, and women take on 76.2% of this work in the home, without remuneration.

For Diana Cecilia Gómez at Confederación de Trabajadores de Colombia (CTC), Colombia’s historic trade union confederation, the country has taken valuable steps towards raising the profile

of this work. ‘One major step was to include its measurement in the national accounts, which made it possible to quantify its real contribution to the economy,’ she explains.

Unpaid work alone accounts for nearly 20% of Colombia’s gross domestic product (GDP). If it were remunerated, it would be the largest economic sector in the country, ahead of commerce or public administration.

But inequality remains intact. While men spend an average of two to three hours a day on these tasks, women devote up to seven. For Gómez, this gap manifests itself as physical and emotional exhaustion, and life trajectories marked by constant dedication, often without recognition.

Susana Barria of Public Services International (PSI) for the Andean region defines it as a structural crisis. For her, the problem lies in the fact that care is assumed to be the responsibility of families and, within families, of women. ‘It cannot continue to be solely a family [private] matter; it has to be a societal matter, and the state has an essential role to play in this respect,’ she says.

Sandra is experiencing this in the flesh. ‘Sometimes it seems like we only exist to care for others. But we also have families, and we neglect them because of this work. Society doesn’t see that.’

It is a burden that is not individual but cultural. As María Yolanda Castaño, gender secretary at the Confederación General del Trabajo (CGT) labour confederation, says: ‘Machismo has historically assigned caregiving to women, with very little male involvement. It is a cultural pattern that perpetuates inequalities and limits women’s personal and professional development.’

A National Care Policy: a commitment now underway?

Colombia took an important

step forward in February 2025 when it approved its first National Care Policy (CONPES 4143). For the first time, the country has recognised care as a right, not only for those who receive it – children, older adults and people with disabilities – but also for those who provide it, the majority of whom are women.

The policy takes a comprehensive approach: redistributing care between the state, families and society; strengthening public and community services; and changing cultural patterns that have historically placed this responsibility on women’s shoulders. It is an ambitious undertaking, with investments planned up to 2034.

Beyond the announcement made, a number of questions remain unanswered. How will it be implemented in the territories? What actual resources will be available to ensure the promised changes? What will be done to ensure that women like Sandra see tangible improvements in their situation?

The CTC’s Gómez assesses the policy: ‘Recognising the role of community care is crucial. But raising awareness is not enough: the work must be remunerated, with employment guarantees. It is a job that requires time, training and resources.’

Barria of PSI recalls that, on the international front, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights has already recognised care as a standalone right. This places states under the obligation to guarantee decent conditions for those who provide care.

For workers like Sandra, this support is essential: ‘So many things need improving: working hours, salaries and training, to be able to move up the career ladder. I sometimes feel that we are seen only as carers, not as professionals.’

For Castaño of the CGT: ‘CONPES 4143 has been approved, but it is not yet clear how it will

be implemented. The trade union movement urgently needs to adopt a critical stance and demand that the government establish clear mechanisms for coordination with trade unions, to ensure its implementation.’

While the policy represents a milestone, its implementation is only just beginning. Ensuring that it does not become a dead letter will require political will, social participation and the active commitment of the state.

Realities and challenges

Pending the policy’s implementation, the reality for those who care for the elderly continues to be one of excessive workloads, informal employment and a lack of labour guarantees. An IDB survey in Latin America and the Caribbean indicates that many carers work without adequate training, which exacerbates the precariousness of their situation and also affects the quality of care. According to Barria, even in public institutions, up to 80% of contracts are for the provision of services (OPS), with no job stability or social security. ‘The conditions are very poor, and this has been overlooked in the public debate,’ she warns.

Casualisation also reflects internal inequalities in the workplace. The CTC representative explains it clearly: ‘In a semi-private nursing home, perhaps the manager and one or two nurses have employment benefits. But the cleaning lady – who also provides care – is unlikely to have the same conditions.’

As a worker in the sector, Sandra is well aware of this reality: many of her colleagues work without stable employment contracts or benefits, and she knows all too well what the burden of caregiving entails. ‘You become overwhelmed by everything you experience. Sometimes I come home frustrated by things I couldn’t resolve, and there’s no one to listen

to us. We should have professional support, someone to help us cope. Because this job is also emotionally draining.'

Her testimony reveals an aspect that is often silenced: the emotional impact of caregiving. Not only is there a lack of recognition for the work, but there is also a lack of care and support for those who provide it.

For Castaño, professionalising the care sector is key: 'It is not enough to formalise their employment. We need to make progress in certifying and recognising care workers. We need to identify barriers, design sustainable strategies and really understand what people who work in this sector need.'

Beyond the lack of policies or resources, a deeply rooted idea persists: that caregiving is inherently a woman's duty. Gómez, from the CTC, sums it up: 'Being a nurse, teacher or caregiver is seen as an extension of being a mother. And since all things feminine are undervalued, caregiving is also undervalued.'

Challenging this view requires changes in everyday practices. Gómez emphasises that trade unions can drive change by promoting, for example, paternity leave. 'Showing that men also have care responsibilities is a concrete way of building equality,' she argues. 'Housework does not get done by itself. Recognising this means accepting that it should be a shared task.'

Sandra Moreno also speaks from experience. 'I wish I could say, "I don't want to care for anyone today", feel entitled to rest, to be cared for. But no one thinks about that. So where does that leave me as a human being?'

Castaño, who has many years' experience in trade unions, acknowledges that there is still no clear proposal to formalise unpaid care work in the home. This omission even raises questions among trade unions, which have long left care work out of their priorities. Breaking

with this inertia, according to the CGT, means opening up the debate, strengthening social coordination and moving towards real shared responsibility, without succumbing to approaches that perpetuate gender stereotypes, but insisting on public services and policies that recognise care as a central pillar of social life.

For years, care workers – both inside and outside the home – have worked silently, shouldering a responsibility that has rarely been called into question. Today, trade unions are beginning to open up spaces for their voices to be heard, recognising that care is also an area of political struggle. 'In Colombia, much remains to be done in terms of reflection and going beyond "assistentialism", or welfare support, towards genuine policies that improve quality of life for older adults and those who care for them,' says Gómez.

Barria, of PSI, emphasises that collective organisation is key. 'Many care workers feel alone. International solidarity helps ensure that their demands do not remain local; when a conflict is made visible outside the country, it generates political pressure,' she explains.

For the CGT's Castaño, the challenge is fundamentally political. To ensure that the policy on care does not become a dead letter, trade unions must take on an active role in dealing with the state. Without such involvement, she insists, achieving concrete change will be very difficult.

Who looks after those who care for the elderly?

The future of care policy in Colombia is hanging in the balance: it could become a tool for bringing dignity to people's lives, or end up as an empty promise. Care has finally made it onto the political agenda, with responsibilities that can no longer be left on hold.

For Barria, the Andean region

has a historical debt to both older people and those who care for them. For her, neither the public nor the private sector currently offers sufficient services or decent conditions for these essential workers. The COVID-19 pandemic also brought this reality into sharp focus: care cannot continue to be treated as a commodity.

'These are human lives we are talking about, vulnerable people. This cannot be left to the market but must be recognised as a public good and a right,' she insists.

Some countries have, however, delegated the provision of care services to private companies. And in much of the Americas, care remains unequal and limited. This is why Colombia is facing up to the challenge of accepting that care is a responsibility of the state.

Without clear and committed public leadership, warns the PSI representative, inequality will continue to determine who receives care, and who is left without.

Meanwhile, women like Sandra Moreno continue to rise before dawn. 'I am a listener of stories, a preserver of memories, and a facilitator of moments of peace in the wisest stage of life: old age,' she says.

Her words bring us back to the fundamental question: who cares for those who care for others?

Bringing dignity to care, whether paid or unpaid, is to recognise a truth that is often overlooked but underpins everything else: without those who provide care – in homes, nursing homes, hospitals and so many other places where life is protected – quite simply, nothing would work. Caring is not a minor gesture, it is what allows life to go on and 'is essential to all other work'. ♦

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Cultural resistance: a crucial component of struggle

Art has always served as the heartbeat of liberation movements, and the struggle for Palestinian freedom is no different.

Ten percent of any population is cruel, no matter what, and 10 percent is merciful, no matter what, and the remaining 80 percent can be moved in either direction.

– Susan Sontag

IN an era in which Palestinian voices are silenced under rubble while the world debates semantics, the raw, unfiltered voice of cultural resistance has never been more vital. From London's grimy underground scene to Hollywood's red carpets, contemporary artists are wielding their platforms as weapons against manufactured consent.

Sontag's insight cuts to the heart of why this form of cultural work matters. The majority of people are not inherently committed to either justice or injustice; they are simply responding to the cultural forces surrounding them, the stories they're told and the examples they witness. In the face of this apathy, every protest at an award show, every speech evoking Palestine and every cent raised by celebrity figures matters far beyond its immediate impact.

Art as resistance

Art has always served as the heartbeat of liberation movements, and the struggle for Palestinian freedom is no different. Punk may have evolved and mutated across genres but its mandate remains unchanged: flying the banner of resistance in the face of fascist regimes. It's because of this that today's artists can no longer hide behind the veneer of being mere entertainers. They have become a bastion of resistance against apathy, against hopelessness, and against the manufactured consent that

Roomaan Leach

enables mass atrocity.

Contemporary artists like Bob Vylan, Kneecap and Macklemore have positioned themselves at the forefront of this movement. They use their platforms to challenge not just abstract systems of oppression, but the very real, immediate violence being perpetrated against the Palestinian people. Each public figure that refuses to normalise genocide and occupation brings something distinct to the movement, but all recognise that their platforms do not afford them 'opportunities' for dissent but rather make it obligatory.

Bob Vylan's confrontational approach cuts through the comfortable distance that allows atrocities to continue. Their music forces British audiences to confront their government's arms sales to Israel and the myriad of ways their tax money funds occupation. There is no gentle awakening here – only the harsh light of complicity exposed. Louis Theroux, on the other hand, wields his platform as a beloved British personality more subtly. He uses wit and humour to point out the absurdities in the settler ethos. Both understand that their platforms come with responsibility. Both understand that silence in the face of genocide is complicity.

Kneecap's perspective as Irish artists carries particular weight in Palestinian solidarity. Their understanding of colonialism emerges from lived experience of British occupation. When they speak about Palestinian liberation, they're drawing blood-soaked connections between historical and contemporary forms of colonial

violence that run deeper than academic discourse ever could.

When Gianmarco Soresi, a Jewish American comedian, uses his comedy to expose the inanity of Western media coverage of Palestine, he provides emotional permission for audiences to question narratives they've been told are unquestionable. Comedy becomes a weapon against manufactured consent. Each time Ms. Rachel risks her career to speak for Palestinian children, she's modelling a courage that ordinary people feel empowered to emulate.

Macklemore's evolution from mainstream success to outspoken human rights advocate represents perhaps the most dramatic example of cultural resistance in action. His music has always carried political undertones, but his advocacy for Palestine became a gateway to broader consciousness. When he cancelled shows in the UAE over their complicity in Sudanese suffering, he demonstrated how cultural resistance moves beyond symbolic gestures into material action with real economic consequences. This is solidarity in motion: one struggle illuminating another, each act expanding the borders of resistance.

Attacking the cultural foundations of genocide

To understand why cultural resistance matters so urgently, we must examine how propaganda enables genocide. The story of Erna Petri, a Nazi homemaker who murdered Jewish children while maintaining ordinary domesticity, reveals how people become complicit through gradual normalisation of dehumanisation.

Petri didn't transform overnight into a killer; she progressed through small steps of complicity, each making the next seem reasonable. She accepted that Jewish people were different, then threatening, then expendable, then deserving of death.

This same progression operates today in Palestine. Media coverage that obsesses over Israeli casualties while treating Palestinian deaths as statistics. Language that describes Israeli 'responses' to Palestinian 'provocations' rather than acknowledging the ongoing siege. Cultural representations that present Palestinian resistance as terrorism while Israeli violence is self-defence. All of these create conditions that make genocide psychologically acceptable to ordinary people.

As Edward Said understood, 'colonialism is not just about economic and political control of territory and people, but also about the control of knowledge, culture, and consciousness'. The Israeli state has invested enormous resources in controlling cultural narratives about Palestine – funding institutions, sponsoring exchanges and leveraging celebrity endorsements to normalise occupation. This cultural dimension of colonialism extends beyond direct propaganda to the very frameworks through which Palestinian experience is understood.

Artists who challenge these narratives are disrupting the cognitive infrastructure that makes occupation possible. They're attacking the cultural foundations of genocide.

Traditional spaces for Palestinian political discourse have been systematically compromised. Academic institutions face donor pressure and accusations of antisemitism. Mainstream media operates under editorial constraints, preventing honest reporting about Israeli violence. Political institutions are captured by lobbying that makes meaningful policy change nearly impossible.

Cultural resistance fills this gap by bringing Palestinian

solidarity into popular spaces where people actually gather and engage emotionally. A punk show becomes political education about apartheid. A comedy special introduces audiences to Palestinian history they'd never encounter in mainstream education. A protest song makes Palestinian suffering emotionally accessible in ways that news reports, constrained by false balance, cannot achieve.

This accessibility is crucial because Palestinian liberation requires mass mobilisation. Cultural figures are uniquely situated within the public discourse, allowing them to reach audiences that traditional political organisations might struggle to engage. By putting Palestinian humanity in the spotlight, in spaces where it's commonly erased, the cultural foundations of political transformation begin to take root. In a world designed to obscure the moral clarity of Palestinian liberation – where genocide is debated rather than condemned – cultural resistance serves a vital clarifying function. It cuts through manufactured complexity to identify what matters: Palestinians are being murdered; Palestinian land is being stolen; Palestinian culture is being systematically erased.

Cultural figures from Kneecap to Gary Lineker understand that their role extends beyond entertainment to moral witness. They recognise that in a society where Palestinian suffering is systematically minimised, where Palestinian voices are silenced, cultural work becomes survival. They understand that neutrality in the face of genocide is complicity, that entertainment divorced from political reality is little more than propaganda for the status quo.

This moral clarity proves contagious precisely because it's so rare. When artists refuse to separate cultural work from political commitment, they challenge audiences to examine their own complicity. They make it impossible to enjoy their art while remaining comfortable with Palestinian oppression. They force Sontag's

persuadable 80% to choose sides in a conflict where only one side represents justice.

The revolution made irresistible

Punk's not dead, because the conditions that created punk – systemic violence, manufactured consent, suppression of dissent – have intensified around the Palestinian struggle. The angry, uncompromising voice of cultural resistance is not just relevant; it's essential for collective survival, for maintaining our capacity to recognise atrocity and demand its end.

The artists carrying forward this tradition understand their work serves functions beyond personal expression or commercial success. They are cultural workers fighting for Palestinian liberation, using their platforms to maintain space for dissent, to preserve memory of Palestinian struggle, to connect Palestinian liberation with global movements for justice. They punch holes in the framework of manufactured consent that enables ongoing genocide.

As Toni Cade Bambara reminds us: 'The role of the artist is to make the revolution irresistible.' Cultural resistance to Palestinian oppression represents our collective immune system – the force that keeps societies capable of recognising and responding to atrocity. In preserving and supporting these voices, we preserve our capacity for moral imagination, our ability to see genocide and demand its end.

The 80% can still be moved – towards justice, towards liberation, towards recognising that Palestinian freedom is inseparable from our own humanity.

*Aluta continua
Tiocfaidh ár lá
Amandla!*

Roomaan Leach is a member of the South Africa-based Amandla! Collective and Founder/Director of Dismantle the Ivory Tower. This article was originally published in Amandla! magazine (No. 99, September 2025, www.amandla.org.za).