

## **FTA and the food on our tables**

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October 2007

The purpose of Free Trade Agreements (FTA) is to lower tariffs and reduce other barriers for products traded between two countries. Since 2002, Japan has concluded FTAs with Singapore, Mexico and Malaysia, and is also currently in the process of negotiating deals with South Korea, India and Australia.

I participated in two meetings sponsored by NGOs and experts that oppose FTA negotiations in Sydney, Australia, in parallel with the APEC Summit in September, 2007. People from different backgrounds in the Asia-Pacific region voiced their opinions and shared experiences of how their countries are dealing with trade liberalization, investment rules, intellectual property rights and other topics. I was also invited to give a talk about the problems related to agriculture and food systems.

### Agriculture and Food Security under Threat from FTAs

During the meetings we heard about Pakistan's experience with trade deals. Pakistan's FTA with the United States has made it increasingly difficult for farmers to continue their age-old farming methods. Cheap US food products are flooding the countryside, where there are few other jobs. Also, US beef has been imported into the country without any country-of-origin labels, and consumers are worried about the safety.

From the Malaysian NGO Third World Network we heard about the complex issues related to intellectual property rights and patents. Due to Malaysia's FTA with the United States, patent laws were extended from 20 or 50 years to 70 years and in certain cases even 120 years. Farmers are especially concerned about patent rules for seeds, as large companies may take control over genetic resources in the country, with the result

that the freedom of food production in every country is gradually going to disappear. This was also echoed in the presentation about India, where farmers are lured into contract farming to produce genetically modified crops for multinational corporations.

From Thailand's experience with FTAs, it was also clear that cheap agricultural products such as beef and dairy products are now flooding the local markets. Yet, free trade deals are being sought with China, Australia, the United States and Japan. US companies in particular have been relentlessly pushing for intellectual property rights, but farmers have to pay license fees that this would require. In its FTA negotiations with Japan, Thailand had to accept that rice would not be included, as this would have negative effects on Japan's agricultural sector, while sugar, shrimp and chicken can be exported.

In the case of Japan, increased imports have led to a decrease in food self-sufficiency. Japan's calorie-based food self-sufficiency rate is only 39%. This is further threatened by even lower tariffs on Australian foods as a result of the Japan-Australia FTA. We are concerned that this will have a very negative influence on farmers in Hokkaido, and that entire communities in northern Japan may collapse.

As seen from such examples, it is clear that FTAs are a threat to the food sovereignty of each country. For consumers, it means a loss of a stable food supply. In addition, as agriculture becomes an export-oriented industry, the local food supply is no longer a priority. There is also an increased concern about environmental issues among consumers.

### Food Safety and FTAs

During the meeting, we heard how the United States forced Pakistan to accept imports of genetically modified foods. Food safety standards had to be lowered so that the GM crops could be imported.

Similarly, Korea had to accept US demands, such as changing the Korean import restrictions for US beef. After the Korean market had re-opened, a number of cases of violations occurred, and there is now a strong movement in Korea to stop US beef.

In Australia, each state has imposed a local moratorium so that genetically modified rape cannot be farmed. The central government is under pressure from the US government and the biotech industry to allow GM crops. In each state, such as Western Australia, there are campaigns to maintain the moratorium. In a special workshop, we also explained how Japanese consumers feel about GM crops, and expressed our strong support for the Australian states that do not allow GM crops. The No! GMO Campaign in Japan has been particularly active in its efforts to keep GMO foods off our food tables – which was applauded by the participants.

If a Free Trade Agreement between Japan and Australia is concluded, we are concerned that GM crops such as rape will be imported to Japan. Again and again, it is clear that food sovereignty for each country needs to be established, to guarantee the safety of our food. This is an urgent matter of international solidarity.

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