

Press release, Brussels, 22nd March 2012

EU Trade Agreements- Latin America fails the socio-environmental test

Brussels, 22nd March, 2012. The civil society networks ALOP, CIFCA, Grupo Sur and ODHACO, along with other Belgian and European organisations and Members of the European Parliament, have jointly organised the conference “Latin America: Natural Resources and Trade Agreements.”

The event, which is being held as part of the discussion process in the European Parliament on the Association Agreements between the EU and Central America and the Free Trade Agreement between the EU and Colombia and Peru will welcome Latin American experts who have studied the socio-environmental impacts of these agreements. These include the growth of the mining and biofuels industry and their impact on the right to water.

Mining increases socio environmental conflict

In her speech, Tatiana Rodriguez, coordinator of the mining sector in the organisation CENSAT Agua Viva- Friends of the Earth Colombia, emphasised that the mining which will increase with the implementation of these Agreements, functions as “an enclave economy.” It places ownership of the Earth’s in the hands of a minority, creates very few jobs and requires vast amounts of land. It is capital and machinery intensive and has either few or no links with other industries. It serves, therefore, to reinforce the primary role of Latin American economies as exporters. Rodriguez stated that the European Parliament did not need to be warned about the environmental risks associated with mining- Europe has experienced these first hand, with the spillage of red mud in Hungary in 2010 and the Doñana Natural Park case. Heavy metals will forever remain in the park’s soil and water.

Green gold fever, expansion of the palm oil and sugar plantations

Aberto Alonso-Fradejas is from the organization CONGCOOP (Coordination of Guatemalan NGOs and co-operatives.) For him, the green gold fever triggered by the financial, environmental and energy crisis and by policies such as the EU’s Renewable Energy Directive, has meant that “in 10 years, 29% of land used to grow food and 20% of rainforest were allocated to oil palm plantation in Guatemala”. Agreements such as that between the EU and Latin America lack clear mechanisms which allow the serious problems arising from the expansion of palm oil and sugar cane plantations to be monitored, reported or tackled.

The Agreements disregard the right to water

According to Carlos Zepeda, author of the report *Water for life or for trade*, “ensuring universal access to clean, sustainable water as a fundamental right is a non-negotiable principal where human development is concerned. This should be taken into account when assessing the impact of trade Agreements- something which hasn’t been done.” He added that ‘under these agreements, water is

treated as an economic asset and not as a common public good. “ Without institutions and legal frameworks which ensure the right to water, the poorest and most vulnerable people of Central America, Colombia and Peru will directly suffer the negative consequences of these Agreements.

The Members of the European Parliament also expressed their concern

All the Members of the European Parliament who attended the event, Catherine Bearder (ALDE), Jürgen KLUTE (GUE), Kriton Arsenis (PSE) and Andrés Perello (PSE) highlighted the importance to go deeper into the debate on socio-environmental issues in Latin America, that could be worsen by these Agreements. Catherine Bearder, of the Alliance of Liberals and Democrats for Europe (ALDE), who opened the event, reminded that the Trade Sustainability Impact Assessments, commissioned by the European Commission, do warn about the risks of serious impacts on natural resources linked to these Agreements: “we will keep on investigating before voting”.

For Jürgen KLUTE, of the Confederal Group of the European United Left (GUE), “The European Parliament must listen to the voices of those who say NO to these agreements and pay attention to their recommendations”

The organisations present at the conference believe that until now, the European Commission have heeded the warnings of the possible serious socio-environmental impacts of these Agreements. Their question is this: what does the European Parliament intend to do about this before these Agreements are ratified?