

From Toxic Food to Agrarian Disaster: Dirty Deals Done Dirt Cheap

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Region: [Europe](#)

Theme: [Biotechnology and GMO](#)

During the early days of the coronavirus lockdowns, [in some quarters](#) there was a certain degree of optimism around. Although millions of people were suffering, the hope was that the Covid-19 crisis would shine light on societal and economic systems across the world, exposing some of the deep-rooted flaws of capitalism. There was a belief that people working together with their respective governments could start building a fairer capitalism and more sustainable economies.

However, we see exactly the opposite taking place. In the UK, we now witness a post-Brexit trade deal being negotiated behind closed doors with the US that could see a lowering of food and environment standards, despite the Conservative government [pledge](#) that it would not compromise on standards in these areas. The government now proposes that chlorine-washed chicken, beef treated with growth hormones, pork from ractopamine-injected animals and many other toxic foods produced in the US will be allowed into the UK. Sanctioning the entry of (chemical-resistant) GM crops and GM food are also likely to be part of any deal.

It would effectively mean sacrificing UK farmers' livelihoods, the environment and the nation's health to suit the bottom line of US agribusiness corporations.

The UK isn't the only country that US agribusiness has set its sights on. [World Bank Group President David Malpass](#) has stated that poorer countries will be 'helped' to get back on their feet after the various coronavirus lockdowns. This 'help' will be on condition that neoliberal reforms are implemented and become further embedded. [Ranil Salgado](#), mission chief for India at the IMF, says that when the economic shock passes, it's important that India returns to its path of undertaking such long-term reforms.

But haven't ordinary Indians already had enough of these 'structural adjustments' and their impacts? Rural affairs commentator [P. Sainath](#) has highlighted the desperate plight of migrant workers in India. He notes that millions of rural livelihoods have been deliberately snuffed out over a period of many years, sparking an [agrarian](#) crisis. As a result of lockdown, tens of millions went back to their villages but there is no work there because rural jobs have been extinguished - the reason for urban migration in the first place.

The US has been pushing to bring Indian agriculture under corporate control for a long time. Further 'reforms' would serve to accelerate this process. US agribusiness wants to force GMO food crops into the country, further displace peasant farmers thereby driving even more people to cities and ensure corporate consolidation and commercialisation of the sector based on industrial-scale monocrop farms incorporated into global supply chains dominated by transnational agribusiness and retail giants.

Like the UK, India is also involved in trade talks with the US. If this deal goes through and India capitulates to US demands, it could devastate the dairy, poultry, soybean, maize and other sectors and severely deepen the crisis in the countryside. India could also see GMO food flooding the country and the further corporate consolidation of the seed sector. The article '[Perils of the US-India free trade agreement for Indian farmers](#)' published on the grain.org website highlights what could be in store.

In the wake of India deciding to not participate in the Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership, another trade deal that would have had devastating consequences for farmers and the food system. the article concludes:

“It would be inconsistent, and a slap in the face, to now start US-India trade talks that will pose much bigger challenges for India’s rural communities and agriculture sector. Such a deal would greatly compromise India’s huge diversity of local seeds and plants which are conserved and reused by millions of Indian farmers year after year. It will also destroy India’s hope for food sovereignty.”

Any such trade deal will be for the benefit of powerful agribusiness giants and will reinforce the concentration of political and economic power in the hands of these corporations. It would also send millions more to the cities in search of jobs that are just not there. This will be the result of the ‘reforms’ demanded by the World Bank and IMF.

If lockdown has shown anything, it is that many of those who sought better lives in the cities have failed to establish a firm foothold. They are marginalised and employed in the worst jobs working long hours for minimal wages. The fragility of their position is demonstrated by the reverse migrations we have witnessed and the callous treatment they are used to was demonstrated by the government’s attitude to their plight under lockdown.

The various lockdowns around the globe have also exposed the fragility of the global food system, dominated by long-line supply chains and global conglomerates – which effectively suck food and wealth from the Global South to the richer nations.

What we have seen underscores the need for a radical transformation of the prevailing globalised food regime based on a system of agroecology which reduces dependency on external proprietary inputs, distant volatile commodity markets and patented technologies. It would help to shorten chains, increase crop diversity, improve diets, regenerate soils, support food sovereignty, re-localise production and consumption and boost local economies, which in India would stem the flow of people moving to the cities and would even create livelihoods for those who have returned to the countryside.

It is the type of system that [Prof Michel Pimbert and Colin Anderson](#) of Coventry University in the UK advocate. In contrast to corporate-driven trade deals, centrally controlled hi-tech innovations, people-free farming, drones replacing bees, genetically engineered crops and a future of synthetic lab-based food, the two academics argue:

“Agroecological innovations... are being driven largely [from the bottom up](#) by civil society, social movements and allied researchers. In this context, priorities for innovations are ones that increase citizen control for food sovereignty and decentralise power.”

Instead of trade deals hammered out behind closed doors above the heads of ordinary people by elite interests, the authors state that deliberative, inclusive processes like [citizens' juries](#), peoples' assemblies and community-led [participatory actions](#) are urgently needed.

It is these types of processes that should guide all economic sectors, not just agriculture. Processes underpinned by a vision for a better, more just world that can only be delivered by challenging capitalism's dispossessive strategies which fuel India's agrarian crisis and the types of human and environmental degradation and exploitation we see across the globe.

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