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WTO Will do Little for Farmers Around the World Groups Offer Alternative Plan to Protect People's Food Sovereignty

Geneva – This week, the World Trade Organisation's (WTO) General Council is meeting in Geneva, Switzerland to discuss the latest round of negotiations in preparation for the upcoming full Ministerial in Hong Kong in December 2005. One of this week's main topics in negotiations includes the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which would impact farmers, agricultural labour and consumers around the world.

Members of the international farmers' movement La Via Campesina, farm workers, consumer, environmental and other non-governmental organizations (NGOs) declare that the WTO and free trade agreements ignore the obvious problems that farmers face world wide. They claim that free trade rules have in fact imposed the plague of low prices on agricultural goods on every continent while disregarding the local and regional nature of farming and food systems. The groups outlined the problems with the current trading system and offered an alternative to the WTO regime in their statement, "WTO in Crisis; Groups Offer Alternative Plan to Protect People's Food Sovereignty.")°

Since the collapse of the WTO Ministerial Meeting in Cancun, the United States and the European Union have attempted to revive stalled trade talks by invoking the so-called Doha Development Agenda. However, there are no new proposals on the table that seriously address the concerns raised by developing countries in Cancun regarding agriculture trade. Nor have the trade majors made any attempt to address the concerns of the thousands of farmers who gathered in Cancun to demand their rights to food sovereignty and livelihoods, thus showing complete indifference to the reasons that led Mr. Lee, a Korean farmer, to sacrifice his life in protest.

"What the Cancun Ministerial collapse revealed was the need and right of developing countries to protect their farmers, their agriculture and food sovereignty. Yet this is precisely what is being ignored by all WTO members in the follow-up since Cancun." said Aksel Naerstad of The Development Fund, Norway. "The WTO must get out of agriculture to ensure people's food sovereignty throughout the world, as the WTO is the antithesis of the idea of sovereign peoples making their own decisions about food."

The groups say that despite skirmishes among the major trading countries and various developing country groupings on specific targets and numbers, WTO members seem unwilling to accept the fact that the fundamental problem lies in the very structure of the World Trade Organisation and the framework of the Agreement on Agriculture. Through disciplines for its three "pillars"

(market access, domestic supports and export subsidies), the AoA furthers and entrenches monopoly production in the hands of the world's largest agriculture producers and exporters, while the rest of the world suffers.

The groups call for a farm price policy that benefits poor farmers and small producers who have been the most affected by the neo-liberal agricultural model that benefits only a handful of large corporations. Any farm policy must serve people to advance towards food sovereignty. Additionally, it must serve to improve the living and working conditions of millions of migrant farm workers who are landless peasants. They are not only deprived of their dignity, but also receive low wages and work in inhumane conditions.

The groups also claim that small family farmers are most impacted by new regulations, lack of protection from cheap imports and external shocks. These make it difficult for family farmers to serve local markets. La Via Campesina and supporting non-governmental organizations see that People's Food Sovereignty is the only solution for a fair and equitable food production and distribution system.

“Instead of the WTO model, every country should have food sovereignty, so family farmers and consumers aren't always losers for the benefit of multi-national food corporations” said Pierre-Andre Tombez of Uniterre, a Swiss Farmers Union, member of European Farmers Coordination (CPE) and Via Campesina.

The current farm crisis demands a response from the world's governments, rather than the continued negotiations at the WTO. The groups will promote new forms of international cooperation, based on People's Food Sovereignty. In addition, they are preparing to join thousands of others to denounce the neo-liberal policies of the WTO at the next ministerial meeting in December 2005.

“The debate in agriculture must centre on peoples' food sovereignty rather than trade. Agriculture is the main source of employment for the majority of the world's people, especially in developing countries,” says Jacques-chai Chomthongdi of Focus on the Global South, Thailand. “It cannot be held captive to the profit-making interests of a minority. Democratic forms of decision-making at the regional, national and local levels are crucial to ensure food security, decent and dignified employment, health, and respect for the environment.”

For the complete statement see:

<http://www.peoplesfoodsovereignty.org/crisis-eng.html>

The statement is signed by Via Campesina (international peasant movement with 116 member organisations from 54 countries) as well as the following 36 organisations: All Nepal Peasant Association (ANPA), Nepal, Andhra Pradesh Vyavasaya Vruthidarula Union (APVVU), India, Centro Internazionale Crocevia – Italy, COECOceiba-Amigos de la Tierra Costa Rica, Coordinación Regional para el Caribe de Veterinarios Sin Fronteras – VETERMON, Republica Dominicana, Diverse Women for Diversity, A-60, Hauz Khas, New Delhi, India, Ecoportal, Argentina, Focsiv no dumping campaign, Italy, Focus on the Global South, Food First, USA, For Mother Earth, Friends of the Earth Flanders, member of Friends of the Earth International, Friends of the Earth, Honduras, Fundación Desarrollo Sustentable de Venezuela, Ibon Foundation, The Philippines, Institute for Global Justice (IGJ), Indonesia, Instituto de Desarrollo de la Economía Asociativa (IDEAC), República Dominicana, Kilusang Magbubukid ng Pilipinas (KMP), The Philippines, LOKOJ Institute, Bangladesh, l'Unité de Recherche, de Formation et d'Information sur la Globalisation (URFIG), France, Movimiento Agroecológico de América Latina y Caribe, MAELA, National Family Farm Coalition, USA, National Farmers Union, Canada, Otro Mercado al Sur, Argentina, Peoples Coalition for Foodsovereignty, Public Citizen, USA, REDES-Friends of the Earth Uruguay, Research Foundation for Science, Technology and Ecology, India, ROBA dell'Altro Mondo/FAIR, Italy, Roots for Equity Pakistan, South Asian Centre for Policy Advocacy (SACPA), The Development Fund, Norway, The Oakland Institute, USA, Tradewatch, Italy, Transnational Institute, The Netherlands, World Economy, Ecology & Development (WEED), Germany, World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fishworkers (WFF).