

World Trade & the ‘Level Playing Field’

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I often hear advocates of global industrialism, commerce and trade speak of “leveling the playing field.” This euphemism for fairer play in world trade, which the World Trade Organization is helping orchestrate, is indeed a leveling – a leveling of the Earth.

What is a “playing field?” Have we forgotten? We would never “level” a sloping field if we could not find a flat area on the village commons or on a farm. This would harm the watershed and ruin the topsoil.

When I went to playing fields on Saturday afternoon in England as a boy, to play soccer or cricket with farmers’ and miners’ sons, we would “level the field” if it was not flat by simply changing sides at half-time. We also made the game fair by playing according to the rules.

But what are the rules for the world-play of global free trade that the WTO is advocating? While we try in the United States to link farming and ranching with conservation, and to save once-viable family farms and rural communities almost totally leveled by globalized forces of commerce and trade, what is happening abroad?

In the year 2000 – and prior to the Foot-and-Mouth disease epidemic – one farmer every week in England committed suicide. Scores of farmers in India recently killed themselves with agrichemicals because they were unable to pay their debts for seeds and agrichemical pesticides and fertilizers when their “high-yield” hybrid crops failed.

The World Bank and other agencies from the industrialized world have been promoting the adoption of “high yield” Green Revolution in the developing world for decades. Now in order to help bring these countries into the global market economy – which is regarded as progress and the way to end poverty and hunger – aid and development loans are now being given out to further promote intensive livestock “factory” production systems, especially for broiler chickens, laying hens, pigs and dairy cows. These systems are linked with monoculture production of corn, soy and other crops, primarily to feed these animals rather than the estimated 840 million Third World people who live in abject poverty and suffer the devastating consequences of chronic malnutrition. These people cannot afford the produce from the Green and Livestock Revolutions, and the land that once sustained them has been expropriated by the rich and powerful. In at least one instance in South America, peasants have been forced off their land at gunpoint by soldiers to set up soybean production so that government could get foreign exchange and pay off international debt by exporting soybeans for America’s poultry industry.

Should we be surprised that multinational corporations that are committing genocide, ecocide and agricide have governments and non-governmental organizations in their pockets; sophisticated industrial intelligence, counter-espionage and public relations resources at their fingertips; and scientific and other experts from the academic ranks of corrupted land-grant colleges around the country to disinform the media.

Vertical Integration

The North-South slant of the world market playing field is increasingly favoring the North in accelerating increments of vertical integration. Aid and development loans and programs that facilitate the adoption of high-input, export-oriented agricultural systems that linked with the “level playing field” of the WTO’s world market place will mean a New World Order. The rich will get richer, and the poor will get poorer.

The WTO and the World Bank are now beginning to wrestle with these costs and consequences as an emerging civil society confronts them and forgets local and international links to demand governmental accountability, transparency and corporate responsibility. The rural farming communities and playing fields of England and around the world need to be restored by rule of law and convention, and social and environmental justice – the essence of fair play – need to prevail over the newspeak banner of “free” trade.

Free traders call it protectionism when civil society calls for justice, equality and fair trade. The threat of non-tariff trade barriers related to food safety and quality, to how workers and farm animal are treated, and to environmental and social costs is a reality that free trade oriented governments and non governmental organizations would rather not face.

The doublethink rhetoric of “polluter pays,” of “internalizing” the costly harmful consequences (the “externalities” of livestock factories, and of perpetuating the myth of industrialization and economic growth as the solution to work hunger and poverty are major obstacles to improving the quality of life for all – and to reason and compassion.

The level playing field of civil society is beginning to be established, and it will enlighten self-interest for corporations and allied governments to play by the rules.