WAR ON WANT

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GLOBAL EUROPE: A CRITIQUE OF THE EUROPEAN COMMISSION'S POLICY PAPER ON EXTERNAL COMPETITIVENESS

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The European Commission's October 2006 communication *Global Europe – competing in the world* aims to link together the EU's external trade policy with its internal liberalisation agenda. The following short analysis provides a basic introduction to the communication and a critique of the policy it presents.

Provenance

Global Europe – competing in the world is a reaffirmation of the EU's neoliberal Lisbon Agenda as it applies to the EU's external economic relations. The document has its origins in the process initiated by the European Commission in September 2005 with its issues paper on 'Trade and Competitiveness', which was then discussed with business representatives at the Commission's fifth market access symposium in Brussels on 19 September 2005. DG Trade's 'Draft Communication on External Aspects of Competitiveness' appeared on 28 June 2006, prior to initial discussion at the 133 Committee of 7 July. The Commission published the final communication on 4 October 2006, along with a more detailed staff working paper and other supporting documents, and the Council of the EU received it officially at its General Affairs Council of 13 November 2006. The analysis in this paper draws from all of the above documents to construct a comprehensive picture of the communication's true meaning.

Content

Global Europe – competing in the world defines the EU's global interests in terms of an aggressive market access agenda on behalf of European business, and promises a renewed market access strategy paper for early 2007. Much is made of the need for an "activist"or "hard-nosed" approach to obtaining new market opportunities for European exporters, and the communication identifies free trade agreements (FTAs) with partners such as ASEAN, Korea, Mercosur, India, Russia and the Gulf Cooperation Council as priorities for taking forward this agenda (China is singled out for special consideration, and has been the subject of a dedicated policy paper 'Closer Partners, Growing Responsibilities' published on 24 October 2006). At the same time, following earlier criticism that the prioritisation of FTAs represents a significant retreat from multilateralism on the EU's part, the communication offers a qualified commitment to the WTO and the resumption of negotiations under the Doha Round.

The communication identifies three key areas in which the EU will press to secure new market access opportunities for its corporations in external markets:

- **non-tariff barriers:** The communication renews the EU's commitment to reducing tariffs in third countries, despite the acknowledged problems this can cause in many developing economies (including mass bankruptcies, redundancies and revenue losses). However, the EU also now seeks to increase its focus on a wide range of behind-the-border regulations which it terms barriers to trade. To this end, the EU proposes that its new generation of FTAs should provide for European companies to have prior consultation rights over new regulations which host countries might wish to introduce, and that industry should have access to monitoring and enforcement mechanisms "as efficient as the WTO dispute settlement" (which operates only on a state-state basis).

- **access to resources:** In response to lobbying by European business groups, the EU identifies unimpeded access to natural resources as a high priority and commits itself to tackling the "major problems" faced by EU industries in this regard. Many third countries employ export controls in order to safeguard natural resources for their own developmental and environmental purposes, and there has been strong resistance to what are widely perceived as the neocolonial intentions of powerful states in this regard. Yet the EU lists a wide range of sectors, and energy in particular, in which controls must be removed so that the access of EU business to such resources is guaranteed.

- **new areas of growth:** The EU lists intellectual property, services, investment, public procurement and competition as "areas of economic importance to us" which will require more aggressive action in future. While companies have succeeded in winning far-reaching intellectual property rights under the WTO's TRIPS agreement, largely to the detriment of developing countries, the EU complains that enforcement of these rights remains a challenge. Similarly, the EU bemoans the fact that services account for three quarters of its GDP and employment but only one quarter of world trade – yet third countries have expressed far-reaching concerns at the negative social and developmental impacts of liberalising their services markets for the benefit of EU business interests. The three issues of investment, public procurement and competition attained notoriety at the WTO, given the profound threats posed by liberalisation in these areas. Yet the EU still seeks to win "the ability to invest freely in third markets" on behalf of its industries by means of an "ambitious" new model EU investment agreement, as well as opening public procurement markets to the major transport, construction and utilities companies of the EU.

In addition, *Global Europe – competing in the world* looks to a programme of internal as well as external liberalisation. The most significant threat posed by this programme comes with the desire to adopt "an open and flexible approach to setting our rules", with the express intention of "harmonising" European standards so that they no longer create friction with trading partners whose standards are lower. Trade Commissioner Peter Mandelson stated explicitly in his Churchill Lecture (Berlin, 18 September 2006) that this means above all a process of convergence with the US regulatory system beloved by business for its meagre social and environmental content. The *Global Europe* communication confirms that this agenda is driven wholly by corporate interests: "The greater the consistency in rules and practices with our main partners, the better for EU business." Nowhere does it mention the damage which such an agenda will cause to the peoples, the environment or the social model of the EU.

Analysis

The EU's twin focus on FTAs and internal liberalisation stems from its failure to achieve its corporate agenda through multilateral channels. The EU's attempt to introduce a multilateral investment agreement failed first at the OECD and then at the WTO's Cancún ministerial in 2003. The attempt to start WTO negotiations on public procurement and competition policy also failed at Cancún, while the European services lobby has repeatedly expressed frustration with the Commission's unsuccessful efforts to open up foreign services markets on its behalf. The EU's proposed ban on export taxes which restrict corporate access to the natural resources of developing countries has failed even to get onto the negotiating agenda at the WTO.

This failure is partly due to the fact that developing countries are no longer willing to submit to the ambitions of the European business community as represented to them by the European Commission. The formation of developing country blocs at the WTO has succeeded in frustrating the worst excesses of the industrialised countries' agenda, even if it has failed to deliver anything close to a 'development round'. The EU clearly hopes that it can win much greater gains for its business community through the bilateral route of FTAs.

Yet there has also been a home front of resistance to the EU's liberalisation agenda. Action from NGOs, farmers' groups, trade unions and a wide range of progressive political forces has frustrated the EU's most extreme efforts to liberalise the EU economy, whether through the WTO, the Bolkestein services directive, the port liberalisation programme or the EU constitution itself. This resistance has in turn frustrated the EU's ability to gain more market access for its companies overseas. Put simply, the EU has not been able to offer its trading partners the open markets which the Commission would love to create internally, and therefore has not been able to extract from those trading partners the new business opportunities demanded by EU companies externally.

Conclusion

Global Europe – competing in the world therefore represents a dual assault on the major markets of the developing world and also on the internal markets of the EU. By overcoming popular resistance within Europe, the Commission seeks also to deliver to its business community the desired market access overseas. The dual threat posed by this corporate agenda demands a comprehensive political response from civil society in the EU and throughout the world. War on Want will be working with its partners to develop such a response over the coming months.

For more information:

John Hilary
Director of Campaigns and Policy
War on Want
Development House
56-64 Leonard Street
London EC2A 4LT, UK
jhilary@waronwant.org