GJOP
Global Justice
Overcoming Poverty

Network BULLETIN

- Conference in Colombia, April 2026: Fossil fuels, world trade and global climate
- For Better or Worse: Reforming the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

***March – May continuity***

*The first article in the last Bulletin (March 2026) reported on a statement from civil society groups and networks around the world addressed to a significant international conference to be held in Colombia in April. Our report included the full text of the sign-on statement. In this Bulletin, there are a few more facts related to the statement and an article on the Colombia Conference itself.*

***More about the statement and its contents***

*More than 340 civil society organisations from over 50 countries signed a global statement urging governments to work together to end investor-state dispute settlements (ISDS) in trade and investment agreements.*

*Fossil fuel companies alone have secured more than $87 billion in ISDS payouts from governments, with the worst impacts in developing countries.*

*Australian billionaire, Clive Palmer, has registered his mining company in Singapore, claiming to be a Singaporean investor and is using ISDS in the Australia – Singapore trade agreement to sue the Australian Government for $1120 billion for its refusal of coal and energy permits.*

## CONFERENCE IN COLOMBIA, APRIL 2026
## FOSSIL FUELS, WORLD TRADE AND GLOBAL CLIMATE

The world must move away from coal, gas and oil – quickly. Fossil fuels pollute land, water and air. Trade in fossil fuels brings volatility in the price of energy and global instability, increasing the gap between rich and poor. Our use of fossil fuels alters the climate in ways that threaten health and survival. But it's difficult to accomplish this when the global economic system prevents governments from protecting public health and the environment.

The first conference on *Transitioning away from Fossil Fuels,* held in Santa Marta, Colombia, April 24 -29, shone a spotlight on this contradiction. Hosted by Columbia and the Netherlands, it brought government representatives from 57 nations together with Indigenous

Peoples, scientists, academics, non-government organisations, social movements and representatives of farmers, youth**,** women, labour and health concerns.

Participants emphasised that the climate crisis is far beyond an environmental emergency; it's the ultimate test of whether international cooperation, under strain from current economic and legal systems, can secure communities and people, rather than protect concentrated private power. The international trade and investment treaties that underpin the global economy allow corporate interests to override peoples' rights to a healthy environment and life, to healthy water and food, to democratic decision-making.

The Santa Marta conference made clear that the global struggle against dependence on fossil fuels must be understood as a part of a much longer movement for global economic justice. Formal colonial rule may have receded but many of its economic structures have endured in trade, finance and law. Assisted by investment treaties and investor-state dispute settlements (ISDS), foreign corporations have been granted powerful rights to challenge public interest measures when they feel that their profits, even speculative profits, could be insecure. Communities facing environmental harm, displacement or threats to health from extractive industries enabled by foreign investments, have no equal standing.

More than 2,500 international investment treaties allow corporations to bypass domestic courts and bring claims before trade tribunals that operate with limited transparency, without ordinary judicial safeguards and escaping virtually all public scrutiny. So it is that foreign corporations can contest climate measures, environmental protections, Indigenous rights and public health decisions to buttress investor privilege.

When governments decide to regulate in the public interest, they must confront the risk of costly claims. This can create a regulatory chill[1] and discourage ambitious action before policies are enacted. The fossil fuel sector has been the principal beneficiary of what we have described. Worldwide, companies have challenged efforts to accelerate the energy transition, eg, coal phase-outs, cancelled infrastructure projects and drilling restrictions. They have thwarted these and other efforts to uphold human and environmental rights and protect climate and biodiversity. Although states have committed to transition away from fossil fuels (as evidenced by the decision at the COP28 climate summit to 'accelerate action across all areas by 2030'), they remain constrained by legal arrangements that can penalize them for doing so.

Public investment can and should play a central role in financing renewable energy, public infrastructure and a just transition.[2] But clear, public interest objectives must govern what is done. If public funds are used to prolong fossil fuel dependence, we are not transforming the system but extending it. If countries want credibility on climate leadership, they must reform

[1] **Regulatory chill** occurs when governments delay, weaken, or abandon beneficial public-interest policies, fearful of costly arbitration, or threats from powerful corporate entities.

[11] **Just transition** is a framework to ensure that the shift to a net-zero, climate-resilient economy is fair, socially equitable, and leaves no worker or community behind.

trade and investment rules, respect Indigenous rights and ensure public institutions and initiatives serve the transition rather than the status quo.

The Santa Marta conference leaves no doubt: climate action requires transferring power from foreign corporate privilege to justice, democracy and the communities most affected.

*Source: David Suzuki, with contributions from David Suzuki Foundation Quebec and Canada Director General, Sabaa Khan. Atlantic May 8, 2026. Shortened and slightly edited by Mary Boyd.*

## FOR BETTER OR WORSE
## REFORMING THE WORLD TRADE ORGANISATION (WTO)

A recent article by New Zealand academic, Jane Kelsey, argues that what is being described as 'WTO reform' amounts to a quiet coup led by powerful, richer nations, notably the European Union and the United States. What they are pushing, she writes, would fundamentally reshape how the global trade body operates, and poorer nations, particularly in Africa and the Pacific, stand to lose the most.

China is widely seen as the primary target of the reforms, but it is thought to have the economic and strategic might to withstand their impact.

In early February, Kelsey was invited to an Africa Consultative Meeting in Entebbe, Uganda. This gathering brought together the Africa Trade Network, African civil society organisations (CSOs), Geneva-based ambassadors from several countries and experts. The Fourteenth WTO Ministerial Conference was scheduled to take place in Cameroon in March and they met to prepare for it. The sessions focussed on challenging unequal global trade rules, securing policy space for developing economies and pushing for reforms that reaffirm fairness and development. They feared that new proposed agreements could sideline the priorities of Least Developed Countries (LDCs).

These are examples of reform proposals from the EU and the USA that low-income countries fear they will pay the heaviest price for if they succeed:

**Plurilateral Agreements**

Decision-making consensus (multilateral) has been the practice of the WTO. Plurilateral agreements are negotiated by self-selected groups of countries, thus bypassing the objections of those with contrary views. While avoiding the frustration of blockages in the multilateral system, plurilateral groupings can pursue their own interests at the expense of others. This signifies a movement from inclusion to exclusion.

**Special and differential treatment**

Historically, the WTO has allowed countries to self-declare as developing nations and be eligible for special and differential treatment. The USA wants to ensure that wealthier emerging economies, such as China, are bound by the same strict obligations as developed nations. However, other weaker and repressed economies, aspiring to development, reject the prospect of being caught up in a tighter regime. These countries, for example in Africa, strong in natural resources, have seen these extracted and processed by foreign governments and corporations, increasing their wealth over many long years, and now they seek opportunities for home processing and enrichment. They want more freedom, not more restriction.

What happened at the Ministerial Conference in Cameroon in March 2026, for which African and other civil society groups prepared at their meeting in Uganda? The Ministers failed to reach agreement on the reform proposals. The achievement of the meeting has been described as 'modest'. In the end the Ministers referred the unresolved agenda to the WTO officials in Geneva for further interaction with the relevant countries.

*Sources: Patricia Ranald, AFTINET (Australian Fair Trade and Investment Network) report Feb.2026; Jane Kelsey in Newsroom, Auckland Feb.2026; relevant websites. Compiled by Alison Healey.*

"Just as the commandment 'Thou shalt not kill' sets a clear limit in order to safeguard the value of human life, today we also have to say 'thou shalt not' to an economy of exclusion and inequality. Such an economy kills. How can it be that it is not a news item when an elderly homeless person dies of exposure, but it is news when the stock market loses two points? This is a case of exclusion."

**– Pope Francis, November 26, 2013**

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The Bulletin is currently produced by the Justice and Trade Agreements Network.
Coordinators: Mary Boyd (maryboyd@live.ca), Alison Healey (info@grailaustralia.org.au):
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