

RCEP:

Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership

Currently, international trade is no longer simple cooperation amongst nations to complement goods produced overseas. As trade has become ever more competitive, there are efforts have been made to sustain and deepen the accessibility and openness of the market, encouraging connectivity (in the context of global supply chain) and deregulation. In light of the slow negotiations within the WTO in recent years, it is unsurprising that TNCs and industrial countries have begun to focus on FTAs between countries (bilateral) and within regional areas (such as ASEAN). In the context of such WTO multilateral trade schemes, issues of sustainability are difficult to promote.

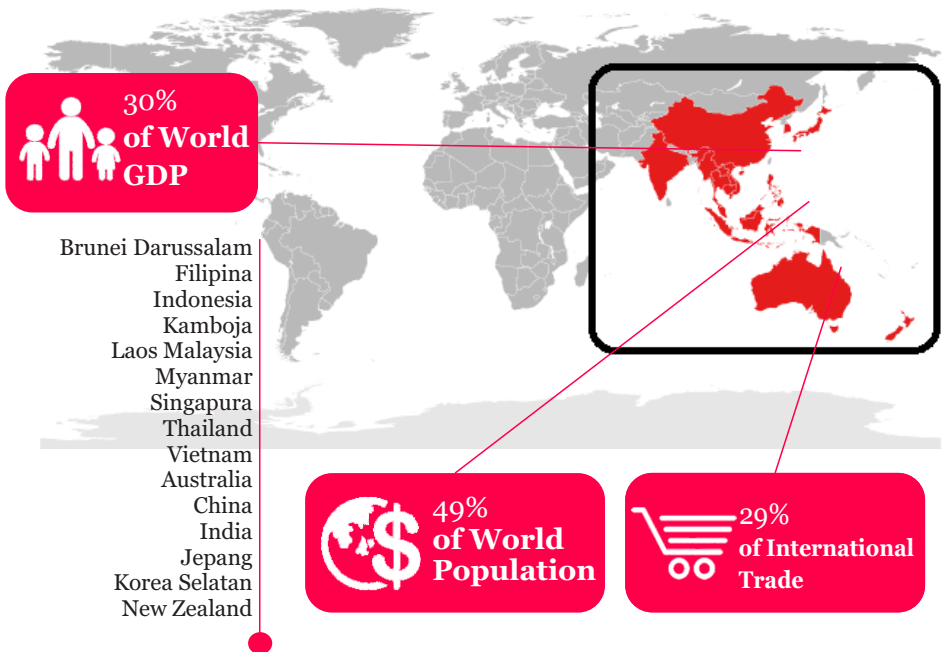
In the middle of fully implementing ASEAN Economic Community, Indonesia is considering joining the TPP (Trans-Pacific Partnership) that initiated by the United States. Another agreement, the RCEP (Regional Comprehensive Economic Partnership), has now appeared to contest the TPP as a mega trading bloc,¹ competing for control of trade within the Asia Pacific region. But unlike the TPP, which has been largely publicised, the RCEP has not seemingly raised concerns - although it will similarly impact the lives of communities, particularly the lives of women. It is important to note that the issue is not *who* will 'win' this competition. Whether the TPP or RCEP succeeds, both will only strengthen the interests of TNCs and developed countries. Both will eliminate national sovereignty and reduce citizen's rights, including women's rights to their livelihoods.

¹"Mega Trading Bloc" refers to the developing trend towards free trade within a much wider scope – involving both the geographical regions as well as the scope of the regulations implemented.

What is RCEP?

RCEP is an initiative to connect the 10 ASEAN member countries with its 6 partners in a Free Trade Agreement: Australia, China, India, Japan, South Korea and New Zealand. If negotiations are to be successful, the RCEP will become the largest trading bloc with enormous implications for the world economy – particularly for the Asian countries.

Although it is referred to as a 'trade' agreement, the scope of the RCEP is much broader than just trade. The majority of the contents of this agreement will give developed countries and their corporations the power to influence many issues other than trade, with many implications for other sectors and communities.



Timeline



Between American and Chinese interests: What about the People?

The Asia-Pacific represents a lucrative economic region for industrialised countries and multi/trans-national corporations. One of the major arguments presented by the Obama administration in advocating for the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) was that if American did not seal a trade agreement, then the Chinese would do so. As such, competition exists between the American-led TPP that excludes China, and the RCEP that includes China.

There is, however, a serious issue within the Asia-Pacific region, where free trade agreements have proliferated in recent years. By 2015, there were at least 126 free trade agreements active within Asia. As a result, many Asian countries have complex trade rules which are often conflicting, paradoxical and contradictory (the so called “noodle bowl effect”).

Amidst the competition between these free trade agreement schemes, it is important to question where the interests of people, especially women, lie. The United Nations have expressed concern about the potential for human rights violations. A statement issued by the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights on 2 June 2016 emphasised “their concerns very clearly, that the various investment agreements, bilateral and multilateral,

have the potential to exacerbate issues of poverty, impact on the renegotiation of foreign debt in a fair and efficient manner, and could affect the rights of indigenous peoples, minorities, the disabled and other vulnerable minority groups.”

ASEAN Centrality

several parties have reported that the ASEAN RCEP is an initiative led by Indonesia, and that it is not an initiative of China. RCEP purportedly seeks to consolidate all ASEAN member states within the principle of “ASEAN centrality”. However, in practice, the member countries within ASEAN exist and operate on different levels.



Ironically, though the potential impacts are far-reaching, RCEP negotiations involve only certain corporations and business groups, as well as government officials from the countries involved. No details or records are made available to the public, parliamentarians, civil society or the media. Therefore, potentially affected communities do not know what they are facing. The lack of transparency in these negotiations is highly undemocratic and not in accordance with the spirit of a 'People-Centred ASEAN'.

A few details about the RCEP have been revealed in a series of leaked documents. From these documents, it appears that RCEP would threaten public access to medication, and strengthen companies through the Investor State Dispute Settlement (ISDS) which would severely impact on developing countries.



The provisions on intellectual property (IP) have the potential to restrict access to generic drugs for millions of people across Asia, including those suffering with HIV, TB and cancer. Large pharmaceutical companies stand to benefit, and would have the power to extend their monopoly over patents and control drug prices.



ISDS mechanisms would make national governments highly vulnerable to being sued by private companies for any attempts to protect labour rights, fragile environments or public health, or for usages of land that are considered adverse to investment. ISDS mechanisms are also often used by companies to avoid taxes. Company tax evasion is now a serious global issue.



Reduction of import tariffs will affect the state's revenue from the taxation sector. This tax revenue contributes to over 70% of the state's total domestic revenue.



The sovereignty of peasants over seeds will be eradicated. This is due to countries like Japan and Korea, who will encourage the member states of RCEP to join UPOV 1991 as a standard. This would then compel states to implement 'protection' of their own plant varieties. There are further proposals to criminalise seed storage without the authorisation of the patent holder.



Member countries will be forced into a “race to the bottom”; countries will race to eliminate workers' rights and environmental protection standards in order to attract more investors. Companies would then choose the cheapest labour and resources amongst member countries.



Once agreed to, production will be executed by other member countries. Export-oriented economies will be dependent on imports, which hinders any possibility for the development of domestic industries.

Bad for Society, a Disaster for Women

The various threats that accompany the RCEP negotiations will be perceived and faced differently by women. This is due to the societal constraints of gender roles on women and their sexuality.



The possibility of criminalising seed breeders will directly threaten women farmers, as women are often given roles preserving and maintaining seeds due to their perceived 'diligence'.²

²In 2010, a farmer breeding corn seeds was reported to police by PT BISI (Seed Company, subsidiary of Charoen Phoeckphand) on suspicion of committing criminal offenses – cultivation of crops without permission. Countries and corporations can utilise Law No. 12 (1992, regarding Plant Cultivation Systems) and Law No. 29 (2000, regarding Plant Variety Protection). In the name of protecting high-yielding varieties of corporate-owned crops, small farmers were arrested by the state.



Export orientation in agricultural production will displace women subsistence³ farmers. This is as the processes of large-scale production for export will require agricultural mechanisation. Furthermore, patriarchal cultures within these women's communities restrict their access to, and control of agricultural resources.



As health services increase in price due to the monopoly of drug companies, women will suffer more. This is due to the fact that the burden of family care still falls to women. The RCEP will guarantee immense privileges and patents on a variety of important drugs and medical services for multi/trans-national companies.

The RCEP will encourage competition for labour, but without any protection of labour rights. Export-oriented economies will seek to minimise costs of production, including wages for workers. In such situations, women often experience downward pressure on wages, declining labour standards and the loss of other rights, including their reproductive rights.

³Subsistence patterns of production refer to those geared to meet the food requirements of individual women and their families, not the large scale production destined for export.

What Can Be Done?

The RCEP threatens our state sovereignty, our national interests, the protection of the environment, the provision of public services and the maintenance of citizen's rights, including women's rights. Therefore, it is vital for us to develop our collective strength and uphold our responsibility to protect our country and the welfare of our people.



Spread Information

Voice your opposition to free trade agreements, including the RCEP. Continue to circulate information and critical studies on this topic, as well as any information surrounding the potential impacts of free trade. Target this information primarily towards those groups of people who will be affected.



Be Involved in Campaigning

Garner public support for the rejection of unjust free trade mechanisms through various forms of creative campaigns.



Protest

Organise collective action, to urge the Government to protect the interests of the Indonesian people from free trade deals.



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Solidaritas Perempuan (SP) – Women's Solidarity for Human Rights - is a feminist organisation, established on December 10th, 1990. Our vision is to achieve a democratic social order, based on principles of justice, ecological awareness, respect for pluralism, and anti-violence. We are committed to equality between women and men, who must share fair access to and control over all resources: natural, social, cultural, economic and political.