

Submission on the Korea-Australia Free Trade Agreement

Please accept this submission into the proposed Korea-Australia Free Trade Agreement that I understand is currently under negotiation and for which submissions from the general public are being sought. I wish to note that many issues with this proposal are a cause for concern, and I object to the agreement being accepted. The specific issues are well known, and are listed and examined below.

Without doubt, the most egregious aspect of agreements such as this is the primacy given to foreign corporations' self-interested financial considerations ahead of local health, community and environmental rights. It is inexcusable for any Australian government to treat the rights of its citizens so cavalierly, and the secrecy which seems to surround this suite of agreements immediately places them under suspicion.

1. ISDS has developed expanded legal rights for investors which are not found in national legal systems

ISDS enables foreign investors to sue governments for compensation in an international tribunal if they can claim that a domestic law or policy “harms” their investment. ISDS has expanded beyond its original intention, which was to pay monetary compensation to foreign investors in the event of the actual expropriation or taking of their property by host governments. There has been an expansion of legal concepts like “indirect expropriation” and “fair and equitable treatment” beyond the scope of their meaning in national legal systems, to enable investors to lodge claims against domestic law or policy on the grounds that it reduces the value of their investment.

(United Nations Committee on Trade and Development, (UNCTAD), 2000, p. 11)

2. Increasing numbers of ISDS cases against health and environmental legislation

There are increasing numbers of cases in which foreign investors are suing governments for hundreds of millions of dollars over health, environment and other public interest legislation. Recent examples include :

- the Philip Morris Tobacco Company suing Australia and Uruguay over regulation of tobacco packaging for public health reasons
- the Eli Lilly pharmaceutical company suing the Canadian national government over a court decision to refuse a medicine patent
- the US Lone Pine mining company suing the Québec provincial government of Canada over environmental regulation of shale gas mining
- the Swedish energy company, Vattenfall, suing the German government over its decision to phase out nuclear energy

(Gaukrodger and Gordon OECD, 2012, p. 7, Public Citizen Table of Cases, 2014).

3. The “safeguards” in the ISDS clause in KAFTA which claims to protect health, environment and other public interest legislation are weak

It has been claimed that the ISDS clause contained in KAFTA has “safeguards” which will prevent foreign investors from suing governments over health, environment or other public interest legislation. But the first “safeguard” sentence in the KAFTA reads: "except in rare circumstances non-discriminatory regulatory actions by a party that are designed and applied to protect legitimate public welfare objectives, such as public health, safety and the environment, do not constitute indirect expropriations" (KAFTA chapter 11, annex 2B). Many legal experts have pointed out that the phrase "except in rare circumstances" leaves a very big loophole, which recent cases have used to advantage.

The second “safeguard” is a more limited definition of "fair and equitable treatment" for foreign investors (KAFTA chapter 11, clause 11.5.2 and Annex 2A). However tribunals have ignored these limitations and applied the previous higher standard.

A third “safeguard” is a reference to the general protections for “human, animal or plant life” in article XX of the WTO General agreement on Tariffs and Trade (KAFTA Article 22.1). This article has only been successful in one out of 35 cases in the WTO which have attempted to use it to safeguard health and environmental legislation.

4. These same “safeguards” have proven ineffective in other agreements

These same “safeguards” in recent trade agreements like the Central American Free Trade Agreement and the Peru-US Free Trade Agreement have not prevented foreign investors from launching cases against environmental legislation. For example:

- the Government of El Salvador has been sued by Pacific Rim Mining Corporation under the Central American Free Trade agreement, over a ban on mining to protect the nation’s limited groundwater resources
- the US-based Renco Group is using ISDS in the Peru-US free Trade Agreement to contest a local court decision that it was responsible for pollution from its lead mine. Both cases are ongoing and may take several years to be resolved.

(See case studies in Public Citizen, 2010, 2013, 2014)

5. Costs to government and taxpayers

Both the costs of running cases (OECD estimates an average of \$8 million per case, with some cases costing up to \$30 million) and the compensation awarded to foreign investors (often hundreds of millions and in some cases billions of dollars), can discourage governments from proceeding with legitimate domestic legislation. The highest compensation award so far is \$1.8 billion against the government of Ecuador. This can have a “freezing effect” on legitimate domestic legislation.

(Gaukrodger and Gordon, OECD, 2012, p. 19, UNCTAD, 2013a, p. 3)

6. Lack of legal protections found in domestic legal systems

The disputes are heard by international investment tribunals, operating in under different sets of rules, but all of which lack the safeguards of national legal systems in the following ways:

- The proceedings are not made public unless both parties agree and even the results of proceedings can remain secret, unlike national legal systems, where proceedings and results are public
- The arbitrators can also be practising advocates, and so lack the independence of judges in national legal systems
- There is no system of precedents, and no appeal system, so decisions lack consistency
- third-party funding of cases, described by the OECD as “a new industry composed of institutional investors who invest in litigation by providing finance in return for a stake in a legal claim” has encouraged a growing industry of investment law firms to actively solicit business and encourage large claims.

(UNCTAD, 2013b, p. 1, Gaukrodger and Gordon, OECD, 2012, p. 36)

7. Increasing numbers of governments are withdrawing from ISDS

Increasing numbers of governments are reviewing and terminating their involvement in ISDS. These include members of the European Union like France and Germany, Brazil, Argentina and eight other countries in Latin America, India and South Africa. Indonesia has recently announced it will terminate all 67 of bilateral investment treaties.

(Gaukrodger and Gordon, OECD, 2012, p.7, European Parliamentary Research Service, 2014. p.2, Bland and Donnan, 2014)

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