

Globalization and agricultural trade: the market access and food security dilemmas of developing countries

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Poverty reduction and debt relief programs, fixed by the big powers, have repeated the dogma of globalisation through 'free trade' as a means of salvation for poor countries. The Cairns Group, an agricultural export lobby, has reinforced this message in relation to farming. Yet agriculture in developing countries is far too important to be reduced to a function of the latest export opportunity. In poor, rural based communities, there is a huge cost in abandoning subsistence production and domestic markets to the vagaries of global markets. Nevertheless, international trade remains important as a source of income and foreign exchange, and whatever their attitude to global institutions, all countries engage in agreements in pursuit of trade opportunities. The problems lie in the terms of engagement.

The disadvantage faced by developing countries in international trade agreements has been characterised as an overemphasis on industrial trade and a failure of 'market access' arrangements for agricultural produce. An Agreement on Agriculture in the final round of the GATT and a new emphasis on agricultural 'market access' in the WTO's 'Doha Round' were said to be important means of addressing this disadvantage. These arguments were made most strongly by the grain exporting member countries of the Cairns Group, such as Australia. However tensions within the eighteen member Cairns Group have underlined some serious problems with this approach. The agricultural exporters are divided over the mechanisms of trade re-regulation, and the means towards establishing greater market access for their exports, while protecting food security and rural livelihoods.

For developing countries, the two major problems with the globalisation of agricultural trade and its associated liberalisation ideology are the practical dilemmas of market access and food security. Trade negotiations are poorly represented by theoretical models of mutual advantage. They are rather exercises in power politics, with new rules constructed to suit the interests of the big powers (see Jawara and Kwa 2003). Capital intensive agriculture, carried out in the wealthy countries on large tracts of land and with substantial subsidies and infrastructural support, has an enormous commercial head start on the poor farmers of the developing world. To this advantage we must add the capacity of wealthy states to stay two steps ahead of trade re-regulation, through new and non-proscribed subsidies. This has been a particular feature of agricultural trade, where the wealthy countries have shifted, rather than reduced, their various forms of protection. This uneven capacity helps explain the need for the closest scrutiny of new 'market access' proposals, and their associated and usually simplistic liberalisation rationale.

'Free trade' in agriculture has always been a more than usually strained concept. It took decades for the big powers (the US and the EU) to decide to seriously include agriculture in international trade agreements, with a focus on tariff reduction. Yet an increase in the range of subsidies has accompanied this tariff reduction, a shift which causes more grief for the poorer countries, which rely more on tariffs and can less afford subsidies.

Despite the expansion of global trade, most people in developing countries survive through farming, and have only a marginal stake in international trade. Yet the non-commercial value

of their land use - as subsistence production, barter, informal employment, housing, ecological management, cultural reproduction, social security and food security - are critical factors that are poorly understood in the wealthy countries. Changes in international trade regulation force us to pay more attention to these non-commercial aspects of agricultural production (FAO 2000; Mazoyer 2001).

After introducing the main elements of international trade agreements on agriculture, this chapter will discuss the dilemmas of market access and food security posed for developing countries through the globalisation of agricultural trade.

The Agreement on Agriculture

Several of the trade treaties signed at the conclusion of the final round of GATT in December 1994 had important implications for agriculture. The new agreement on intellectual property (TRIPS) raised, for the first time, the prospect of corporate ownership - and therefore restricted supply and high prices - for new seed varieties. The Sanitary-Phytosanitary Agreement appeared to maintain states' capacities to regulate quarantine and public health standards; but this was subject to challenge. However the Agreement on Agriculture (AOA) was the first real attempt to comprehensively include agriculture in the GATT liberalisation schedules.

The final Agreement on Agriculture forms part of the final set of GATT agreements, which were taken over and administered by a new permanent body, the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The AOA is a much less developed treaty than the industrial trade agreements, but it does form a framework for future negotiations. Back in 1994 the US and the EU said they had already complied with the terms of the AOA, before it was finalised. But they had done this by changing, not eliminating, their subsidies. The Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) accorded developing countries was almost entirely through more gradual schedules of liberalisation.

Table1: GATT's 1994 Agreement on Agriculture			
	Principle	Numerical Target	Other features
'Market Access'	Remove NTBs - 'tariffication' - and 'bound' tariffs		Eliminate quotas, but introduce 'tariff quotas'; 'safeguard' action allowed against surging imports
Tariff cuts	Scheduled tariff reductions	Average cut (from base 1995): WC: 36% by 2000 DC: 24% by 2004	Minimum cut per product: WC: 15% DC: 10%
Domestic support	Limit trade related domestic support schemes	Total AMS cuts (from base 1986-88): WC: 20% DC: 13%	The 'boxes': green, blue & amber
Export subsidies	Prohibit export subsidies unless 'specified'	Total value cuts: WC: 36% DC: 24%	Cuts in subsidised quantities: WC: 21% DC: 14%
Source: WTO (2003) The Agreements: Agriculture, www.wto.org ; WC = developed countries, DC = developing countries			

There are four main heads of agreement in the AOA - market access, tariff cuts, domestic support and export subsidies. 'Market access' here means that states agree to convert their protection measures into import taxes (tariffs) which can then be 'bound' (fixed) and negotiated downwards. Domestic subsidies were compiled into an Aggregate Measure of Support (AMS) and there were 'special and differential' schedules for developing countries. Schedules were set up for countries to reduce their levels of agricultural tariffs, domestic support and export subsidies (see Table 1). However most schedules were set to run out in 2004, and so needed renewal if agricultural liberalisation were to proceed.

There are currently many exceptions to rules within the AOA. Special measures are authorised to allow higher tariffs when prices fall or imports surge ('safeguard mechanisms'), and to protect 'sensitive products'. However as at 2004, for example, the EU had 539 listed sensitive products, to which special protection measures can be applied (Windfuhr 2002: 31-34). Many Asian countries list rice as a sensitive product, but wealthy countries were clearly taking even greater advantage of protective opportunities in the agreement.

No domestic support measures for agriculture were totally prohibited. They were categorised in the WTO colour system, like traffic lights, where red is not allowed and green is allowed. The AOA has 'green', 'amber' and 'blue boxes', but no 'red' box. Green box subsidies (allowed) are those which 'must not distort trade, or at most cause minimal distortion', and must involve government funds rather than price controls. Such subsidies include Government funded research, disease control, infrastructure, food security programs, direct income support to farmers, assistance to restructure agriculture, and direct payments under conservation and regional assistance programs. In other words, a large number of agricultural subsidies have been defined as 'outside' the scope of trade regulation. Blue box subsidies (allowed, with conditions) include those which require farmers to limit production, which encourage rural development in developing countries, and which provide small scale support (5% of total value in wealthy countries and 10% in developing countries). Amber box subsidies (those expected to be reduced) are those which must be wound back (on the AMS measure) according to the quantitative schedules of the AOA (WTO 2003; see Table 1). These are measures which are said to be more closely 'trade related'.

However, tariffs and simple trade restrictions are often more convenient farm support (and therefore food security) measures for developing countries, compared to domestic subsidies. Only wealthy countries can afford to pump large fiscal subsidies into their agriculture. The US and the EU complied with the AOA by shifting their protection measures away from tariffs and export subsidies and into tens of billions of dollars of 'green boxed' domestic subsidies (e.g. European Commission 2004). In this way, they escaped regulation. On the other hand, after the AOA, the applied tariff levels in many developing countries were found to be much lower than their 'bound' tariff commitments, in part because of previous 'reforms' (such as World Bank programs); yet their capacity for domestic subsidies was so low that their AMS were often "well below the committed or permitted levels" (FAO 2000: 2-5). Economic power is thus directly related to the capacity to evade changing regulation.

Market Access

The agricultural 'market access' argument suggests that trade liberalisation has so far been biased, only suiting the interests of the wealthy exporters of industrial goods. Liberalisation of agricultural produce, it is claimed, will begin to redress the balance, and allow developing countries access to a greater share of world trade. This argument has been put most forcefully by the Cairns Group, formed in 1987. This agricultural trade lobby group had thirteen original members (some wealthy, but many developing countries) but later several more joined. By 2001 there were 18 members (see Table 3). The Cairns Group has pointed to the massive agricultural subsidies of the EU and the USA. OECD calculations put total annual subsidies to agriculture in OECD countries at US\$318 billion (2002: Tangermann 2004), with subsidies comprising 18% of farm income in the USA, 37% in the EU and 58% in Japan (Way 2005: 3). These subsidies are said to unfairly distort agricultural trade, and to contribute to the dumping (sale below cost) of cheap food, which damages domestic markets and production in developing countries.

The Cairns Group called for the elimination of all amber and blue box domestic subsidies, and bigger cuts to export subsidies, as part of a WTO 'development round'. An associated argument is that the removal of these huge subsidies would help raise the international prices of agricultural produce (Anderson and Tyers 1991), and thus provide a better and fairer return to poor farmers - or at least to 'non-subsidised' farmers. This is distinct from the usual argument that liberalisation would reduce prices for consumers.

In support of this argument Australia, a wealthy agro-exporter which claims solidarity with developing countries, argues that "unfair subsidies" must be removed and that this must apply to all, as "market access reform is for everyone or for no-one" (DFAT 2003). As a liberal argument - stressing mutual advantages and masking distinct interests - these assertions have caused tensions in the Cairns Group and exposed Australia to criticisms of hypocrisy. Other countries in the group have expectations that the WTO's professed 'special and differential treatment' for developing countries can be used to oppose the domestic and export subsidies of the wealthy countries, while allowing tariff protection and safeguard measures for the poorer countries.

While making its criticisms of subsidies in the US and the EU, Australia has hidden the fact that (like other wealthy countries) its own agribusiness has been constructed with the support of important public investment and subsidy. Substantial public infrastructure in the form of roads, rail, ports, finance, communications and scientific support underwrote the capacity of Australia's agro-exporters. Historical advantages accrued through the British system of imperial trade preferences (dismantled in the 1960s), internal and external protection measures (e.g. margarine quotas, to protect the milk industry), as well as the assistance of the price stabilisation authorities for wheat and wool. Then there are ongoing rural industry subsidies in the form of diesel fuel rebates for the transport of rural produce (more than A\$2bn per year: ATO 2003), the semi-permanent 'drought relief' packages (which encourage farming in semi-arid areas), well funded industry restructuring packages (eg. to help consolidate the sugar and milk industries), and remediation programs for the environmental damage caused by farming (eg. salination). The fact that tariffs on imported agricultural products are low in Australia is no real measure of the 'open market' status of Australian agriculture.

Tensions in the Cairns Group became public, during the WTO's Doha Round. In March 2002 the Philippines Government said it was considering withdrawing from the Cairns Group and the WTO, over what it called discrimination between the developed and developing members

(Dow Jones 2002). Then in September 2002 Indonesia refused to sign a Cairns Group paper calling for drastic tariff cuts in agriculture (TIU 2002). Australia, on the other hand, flatly rejected the developing countries' "special and differential" claims for protection of strategic crops and "counter-balancing measures", maintaining that it supports only 'efficient' exporters (DFAT 2003). This latter comment can be taken as a reference to capital intensive agribusiness.

At Cancun (Mexico) in 2003, these arguments came to a head, and to a halt. The 'market access' push confronted an intransigent, practical barrier. The agricultural protection of the EU and the USA has effectively switched into "green box" subsidy measures, which are immune to bilateral agreements and quarantined in multilateral negotiations. In contrast tariffs, as the major 'currency' of all 'free trade' agreements, are still heavily relied on by the developing countries, both for revenue and for the protection of domestic production.

The UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation had already recognised many of these problems. In a study titled 'Agriculture, Trade and Food Security' the organisation looked at the impact of WTO agreements on a select group of developing countries. It noted that agriculture was central to economic development in developing countries, where an average of 50% of the population was engaged in agriculture - compared to 8% in the developed countries (FAO 2000: Table 1). It observed that: "tariffs play a much broader and more important role in developing countries for lack of other trade instruments and alternative safety-net measures". There was a need for "an appropriate safeguard mechanism" and, unlike the big powers, subsidies were weak (FAO 2000: 4). While many of the fourteen developing countries under study increased their agricultural exports in the 1990s, this mostly built on trends in the 1980s. More significantly, the rise in agricultural exports was overwhelmed in most of the countries by a rise in agricultural imports. In ten of the fourteen countries the rise in imports was much more than that of exports (see Table 2). Poor, rural based societies were increasing their food import dependence.

Table 2: Agricultural trade of select developing countries, 1990s		
	Between 1990-94 and 1995-98	
	Change in agric. exports, %	Change in agric. imports, %
Bangladesh	-0.1	77.8
Botswana	32	37.4
Brazil	53.1	106.7
Egypt	21.6	41.6
Guyana	51.4	40.9
India	82.8	168.4
Jamaica	23.6	44.4
Kenya	46	49.3
Morocco	37.5	68
Pakistan	14.4	52.8

Peru	99.3	57.3
Senegal	-32.2	30.1
Sri Lanka	62	42.1
Thailand	35.4	71.1
Source: FAO 2000: Tables 4 & 5		

While the AOA had been in place for only a few years at the time of this study, the FAO report concluded that there was "a general trend towards the consolidation of farms as competitive pressures began to build up following trade liberalisation" and that there was a "need for a more cautious approach to trade liberalisation if social costs are to be minimised." Because agriculture includes so many people in developing countries, "the textbook solution of redistributing the gains between winners and losers at the national level becomes impracticable" (FAO 2000: 11-12).

Floods of cheap imports are a serious concern for many poor countries. Jawara and Kwa point out that "cheap European milk powder has displaced dairy farmers in India and Jamaica, and is threatening the livelihoods of Thai farmers. Corn farmers in Mindanao in the Philippines have been wiped out" (Jawara & Kwa 2003: 29). So the interest in accessing new export markets may be chastened if the means to do so involves exposure to greater vulnerability in domestic markets and domestic production. A wealthy country might contemplate dislocation of 8% of its population and their livelihoods; it might even have the means to compensate for some of this dislocation. A poor country cannot contemplate the certain disaster of such dislocation amongst 50% of its very poor, rural population.

In summary, while many developing countries share some of the interests of the wealthier agro-exporters, to access new markets for agricultural exports, they differ in their approach to the means to be used. Both argue for reductions in export subsidies. However countries like Australia are able to provide a range of indirect subsidies and infrastructural support to their rural industries, while they demand the elimination of tariffs and quotas. Developing countries, on the other hand, generally want to maintain some level of tariff protection, as well as special mechanisms to protect strategically important rural production.

Food security & rural livelihoods

The globalisation of agricultural markets has raised new food security dilemmas for developing countries. Underlying the concern to protect domestic markets and domestic production is a critical concern for food security. This is a concern also expressed by many wealthy countries, and used in support of their subsidies (e.g. ERS 2001). If domestic food production is smashed by a flood of cheap imports from large scale, heavily subsidised agribusiness, precious foreign exchange will be required simply to replace subsistence food production. Most countries want to stabilise their domestic production, as the central component of a food security strategy. No country is really happy to be import-dependent for its basic food needs. This could spell disaster in the event of trade disruption or war. However, few countries possess the capacity for expensive policies of subsidy and infrastructure, which can circumvent the new forms of global trade regulation.

While the need for food security is universally recognised, the neoliberal version focusses on commercial means, while the poor country version relies on a stabilisation of domestic capacity. In the first version, productivity and efficiency are measured as commercial returns. In the second, the capacity of farming to contribute to food, security and rural livelihoods is taken into account.

In a 1996 report called Food Security and Trade, Australia presented the neoliberal argument, that trade liberalisation leads to growth, growth leads to poverty reduction and poverty reduction solves food security. Distribution, not production, is recognised as the root of the problem; but open trade and participation in global markets is said to be the means to resolve that distributional problem. Food security is linked to poverty, and poverty is said to be best addressed through generalised growth.

"Food security ... is about the distribution of food and ways to ensure that everyone has the resources or the capacity to access available food supplies through purchase, barter, growing food or other means ... Poverty is the fundamental cause of food insecurity ... how can poverty be alleviated? ... [through] economic growth. ... broad based trade liberalisation is an important vehicle for economic growth and the alleviation of poverty. It thus makes a major contribution to food security." (DFAT 1996: x)

Australia has repeated this theme many times since then, and has linked both aid and trade to this version of 'food security'. In 2005 Australia's aid agency asserted that "a more open trading system is central to food security", and that Australia's aid "aims to advance Australia's national interest by assisting developing countries to reduce poverty and achieve sustainable development" (AusAID 2004b: 1)

However, such an approach is regarded as inappropriate in most developing countries. India, Indonesia and several Latin American countries have provided input subsidies to small farmers - as well as food subsidies for poor urban consumers - as a type of social security system. Cheap seeds and fertiliser in the country - as well as guaranteed cheap basic grains and cooking fuels in the cities - have helped stabilise production, underwrite rural and urban food security, and have been an essential safeguard against starvation. But food subsidies have been attacked by IMF structural adjustment programs, while farming subsidies have come under attack at the WTO. India, a past leader in these debates, argued at the WTO for developing countries to maintain high tariffs for staple grains such as rice, wheat and maize, new special safeguard mechanisms to protect against surges of cheap imports, flexible domestic supports for agriculture, the elimination of export subsidies, and a reduction of agricultural tariffs in the wealthy countries (Kwa 2000: 2-3).

Indonesia, for its part, has observed that it is too simplistic to assume that liberalisation would help countries achieve food security - Indonesia's rice consumption alone is two thirds of the total world trade in rice - and has consistently stressed "non trade concerns" (principally food security and rural development) in the WTO's agriculture talks (Hidayat 2002). Together with the Philippines, and fourteen other developing countries at the WTO, Indonesia broke with the Cairns Group to form an Alliance for 'special products' and 'special and strategic measures', to help protect domestic agriculture (Glipo et al 2003). The 'agriculture as multifunctional' group comprises rich and poor countries, including the EU, Japan, South Korea and Norway. In these circles, agriculture was said to be "not only about food production but . . . non-trade concerns such as ensuring food security, environmental protection, [and] protecting the cultural landscape" (Kwa 2000: 4).

This is the theme developed by Marcel Mazoyer. In a report for the FAO he argued the 'multifunctionality' of small farming - that small farms not only contribute market produce but also support food security, social security, productive livelihoods and more effective

environmental management. Mazoyer says small farmers need "sufficiently high" prices to be induced to plant crops, and to survive. On the other hand, the domination of global agriculture by large subsidised corporations is undermining small farming and food security.

"[It] will condemn hundreds of millions of small farmers and agricultural workers to stagnation, impoverishment, migration and hence to unemployment and low wages, especially in developing countries but also to some extent in developed countries" (Mazoyer 2001: 22)

Forced liberalisation of agricultural trade would enhance the capital-intensive, corporate domination of agricultural production. This could well aggravate dumping, forcing down prices, destroying small markets and local food production, and pushing millions of small farmers from their lands. The resultant dispossession, unemployment and land clearing would create severe social and environmental problems in many developing countries.

Agribusiness in the wealthy countries is extending its dominance of global produce markets. The FAO points out that, while cheaper food imports have "moderated the food import bills" of developing countries, they have also led to an increase in import dependence, which can damage local production and local markets.

"Although lower basic food prices on international markets bring short-term benefits to net food-importing developing countries, lower international prices can also have negative impacts on domestic production in developing countries that might have lingering effects on their food security" (FAO 2004: s.5).

Developing countries are now, on aggregate, net food importers. This trend in recent years has been reinforced by the decline in Chinese grain production (FAO 2004: s.4-5).

Distinct food grain trade patterns help explain different national approaches to food security. While all Cairns Group members export food, only 5 or 6 of the 18 members are food grain exporters. Access to food grains (principally rice and wheat) is at the centre of food security concerns. Most Cairns Group members are substantial importers of food grain (see Table 3).

Table 3: Cairns Group food grain trade, 2001

	net imports ('000 tonnes)		
	rice	wheat	cereals
Argentina	-683	-11590	-24153
Australia	-909	-18010	-22440
Bolivia	14	453	499
Brazil	875	7813	11149
Canada	376	-18966	-21655
Chile	105	514	1824
Colombia	113	1095	3230
Costa Rica	59	213	766
Fiji	43	99	132
Guatemala	41	260	662
Indonesia	2035	4197	6897
Malaysia	747	1081	4400
New Zealand	47	232	266

Paraguay	-16	82	-84
Philippines	992	2700	4145
South Africa	776	581	884
Thailand	-9421	649	-5137
Uruguay	-1042	-8	-573

UN FAO (2002) Food Balance Sheet, <http://apps.fao.org/lim500/>

In the year 2000, Brazil, Indonesia and the Philippines imported 20, 13 and 8 million tonnes of basic food grains (FAO 2002). These countries do not want even greater dependence on food imports. The African continent is also a net grain importer, to the tune of about 76 million tonnes per year (FAO 2002). Yet poor African countries hardly need to increase their vulnerability to food imports. Little countries like East Timor, in the name of food security, focus on strengthening their subsistence sector and local markets, so that they may be less reliant on rice imports (MAAF 2005). This is poorly understood by its wealthy, grain-exporting neighbour Australia (DFAT 1996; 2003). Sensitivity to food grain dependence strongly influences most grain importers to stabilise their domestic production, so their dependence on staple grains does not worsen.

Concluding Remarks

The globalisation of agricultural trade is mostly a function of the rising power of global agribusiness corporations, backed by wealthy states, though in this chapter I have focussed on trade arguments and the multilateral negotiations. The globalisation process poses serious dilemmas for most developing countries. The opportunities for accessing new export markets are important, but probably limited in scope compared to parallel opportunities in labour intensive manufacturing and the pursuit of revenue and foreign exchange through global tourism. The intransigent nature of the wealthy countries' subsidies and infrastructural support for their rural industries imposes serious constraints on 'market access' opportunities and threatens the persistent dumping of cheap imports. This threat is at such a level that many farmer groups - faced with the elimination of their livelihoods - have demanded that agriculture be completely removed from WTO negotiations. The Mexican farmers group UNORCA says that:

"The WTO does not consider the multifunctionality of agriculture, nor its importance in guaranteeing the sustainability of the rural environment; of biodiversity; of nature; of water; of air; of the earth and the soil; of culture; of traditional knowledge; of the sources of work; of food sovereignty; and of the cultural, social and environmental preferences of consumers - none of these things are the concerns of markets. The WTO only considers agriculture as a source of commodities for world markets . . . our position is that the WTO gets out of agriculture" (UNORCA 2003).

It may well be that the failure of the Doha Round has brought an end, for the time being, to the multilateral liberalisation of agriculture; but the giant corporations have not halted their plans for expanded market share. The flurry of bilateral and regional agreements that has paralleled the WTO talks can do nothing to reduce wealthy country subsidies, as subsidy reduction can only be addressed multilaterally. However this issue was not properly addressed at the WTO. Most wealthy country subsidies were effectively quarantined in the 'green box'.

At least in bilateral and regional agreements there will be a little more room to identify and support strategically important farm sectors. Tariff protection remains important, for many poor countries. Cheap seeds and fertiliser, and guaranteed cheap basic grains, have helped

stabilise production and have been an essential safeguard against starvation. The imperative of food security, based in the first instance on domestic production and domestic markets, will continue to preoccupy most developing countries. Those countries with political will are likely to maintain some forms of protection, and to treat agriculture as something more than a global commodity.

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