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ANALYSIS OF THE CHARACTERISTICS, STRUCTURE AND PROBLEMS OF WORLD TRADE IN DAIRY PRODUCTS

Extract from Statement made by the Representative of the
European Communities on 23 June 1975

As the principal producer, principal importer and principal world exporter of dairy products, the Community attaches very great importance to the negotiations in this sector which are due to begin now in this Sub-Group.

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The world market in dairy products is characterized by sudden surpluses and critical shortages, and of all the agricultural sectors the economy of the dairy products sector is among the most complex. It is both homogeneous, in that all its products are derived from a single basic product - milk, and highly diversified, in that its derived products are infinitely varied. Starting from the basic product, which practically never appears on the international market in that form, the producer makes his decisions not only in the light of the various market opportunities, but also in the light of the technical requirements of the products put on the market. There is thus a close interdependence between the various products in the dairy sector and a fairly broad scope for transfers of production and utilization from one sector to another, whence the necessity in our negotiations to cover all dairy products.

Moreover, milk production is a field where it is impossible to adapt supply to changes in demand immediately. For while it would be quite possible to adapt production to a fall in demand by slaughtering dairy cattle, that would involve a structural adaptation and it would then be impossible to increase production again quickly. But even with a given number of heads of cattle, fluctuations in production can be substantial and sometimes disastrous in their effects on the world market, which is relatively narrow in relation to total milk production. For example, a variation in milk production in the EEC of only 1 per cent - and a variation of that kind can result from just two or three weeks of good or bad weather -

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means a variation of about 100,000 tons of powdered milk and some 35,000 tons of butter. The narrowness of the international dairy products market is further emphasized by the fact that most countries have a very high self-sufficiency ratio, due to the need to ensure fresh milk supplies. And it is probably this need which is responsible for the general adoption of support policies which, in the dairy sector, are more widespread and rigid than anywhere else.

Again, every dairy product has its own special characteristics. The world market in butter and other butter fats is a particularly narrow one because of the limited number of importing countries, at least as regards imports on strictly commercial terms. Moreover, it is subject to a number of constraints because it is heavily dependent on food habits and especially on the relationship between the price of butter and the price of other fats, vegetable or animal. Variations in consumption can therefore lead to substantial variations in the supply/demand ratio, whereas stocking possibilities are limited by the capacity and cost of the necessary installations and the restricted period for which such products can be preserved in good condition.

With regard to the market for powdered skimmed milk, its characteristic feature is the existence of a considerable potential demand, though a strong limiting factor is the price level. Where powdered skimmed milk is used as animal feed, this limit results from the competition of other animal feeding stuffs with a high protein content. Where it is used as a protein supplement to human food in the less-developed countries, it results from the limited financial resources of the purchasers. Under these conditions, and also because it is a less-processed product, the production of powdered milk is a less satisfactory means of valorization of milk than the production of cheese or fresh products.

Unlike the two products mentioned above, the cheese market embraces a wide variety of products, even if some of them are fairly homogeneous. The feature of this market - and it is currently being accentuated in alarming fashion - is the existence of protective barriers in their most rigid form, that of quotas, together with health measures. At the same time, and as a consequence of this excessive protectionism, price competition is becoming a very acute problem for suppliers, while the importing countries are erecting additional barriers designed to impose strict limits on exports though exporters are already faced with difficult market conditions and are anxious to maintain consumption at as high a level as possible.

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