



WTO Trade Dialogues on Food

The Story

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INTRODUCTION

From the moment **the first Trade Dialogue on Food was convened in April 2020**, the world stood at a precipice. Ports were closing, planes were grounded, farm labour could not move, and countries were struggling to understand whether a health crisis might metastasize into a food crisis. The global food system, which until then had seemed stable in its complexity, suddenly appeared fragile. The Dialogues became the place where that fragility could be assessed honestly, where agricultural producers, food companies, small farmers and large traders could sit alongside governments and international organizations and seek clarity on how food keeps flowing when the world tackles various crises. What these Dialogues ultimately illuminated over the years from 2020 to 2025 is a far richer and more nuanced picture of the global food system: one deeply interdependent, often misunderstood, and permanently shaped by trade. They revealed not only how food moves, but why it must move, what hinders it, and what new realities will define its future.



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In the early pandemic months, the fear was straightforward: restrictions on the physical movement of people and products, would lead to a shortage of food. The ghost of the 2007–08 food price crisis hung heavily over the debates. Participants repeatedly returned to the memory of cascading rice export bans and rising global prices that had many into hunger. This collective memory shaped the first year of the Dialogues, which became an exercise in reminding governments that food cannot be treated like any other good during crises. Speakers explained repeatedly that one in six people on Earth depend on international trade for their daily calories, and that geology, climate, and the natural distribution of resources make this dependence permanent. As the Dialogues repeatedly made clear, trade is not a luxury of the rich world. It is a lifeline for the food-deficit nations of the Middle East, North Africa, and small island states; a mechanism that allows drought-stricken regions to survive bad harvests; a stabilizing force when natural disasters strike; and increasingly, as the climate crisis deepens, a buffer that keeps local shocks from turning into global catastrophes.

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This first phase of the Dialogues established a simple but foundational conclusion: trade in food is a moral obligation. It is not merely an economic activity but a system of solidarity, one in which the surplus of one region prevents the starvation of another. It is a set of arteries that cannot be cut without causing real human suffering. Throughout 2020 and 2021, participants argued that the multilateral trading system had prevented the pandemic from triggering a collapse in global food supplies. Despite some instances of export restrictions, most countries kept markets open. Food moved. Ships sailed. Ports adapted. Industry actors innovated. And this occurred largely because the global food system was already highly globalized, diversified, and underpinned by decades of World Trade Organization (WTO) rules that enhanced predictability.

Yet just as the world began to steady itself, geopolitical conflict reintroduced uncertainty. The Russia–Ukraine war disrupted one of the most important breadbasket regions in the world. The Black Sea’s grains, oils, fertilizers, and inputs are central to food security for dozens of countries. Suddenly, participants from Africa, the Middle East, and South Asia were voicing alarm. Ships could not move freely; insurance costs soared; and global fertilizer markets were disrupted. The Dialogues took on an urgency similar to the early pandemic phase but with a sharper geopolitical tone. What became apparent was that crises do not replace each other: they accumulate. The pandemic strained logistics; the war strained supplies; climate events were worsening year by year. Taken together, these pressures underscored that the global food system is only as strong as its weakest link – and that link may lie thousands of kilometers away from where the food is consumed.

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Despite these disruptions, the Dialogues highlighted another significant reality: markets reorganize. Over the course of 2022 and 2023, new grain corridors emerged; new suppliers stepped forward; fertilizers were rerouted; and trade patterns shifted with remarkable speed. This adaptability demonstrated what many participants called the “hidden resilience” of the food system. When one region is cut off, trade reallocates flows, often faster than policy-makers expect. But this reallocation carries costs, particularly for low-income import-dependent countries, which face the brunt of price spikes and logistical bottlenecks. The Dialogues revealed that while trade cushions shocks, it cannot do so equally for all. It requires accompanying policies - financing, storage, risk management tools, infrastructure - to ensure that poorer countries are able to benefit from the same stabilizing effects.

As conversations deepened, the Dialogues began to dismantle persistent myths about trade that continue to shape public debates. One such myth is that international trade undermines the resilience of national food systems. Speaker after speaker explained the opposite: that in a world of rising weather extremes, biodiversity loss, and unpredictable harvests, no country can rely exclusively on its own production. Even the world’s largest agricultural exporters rely on imports of seeds, fertilizers, equipment, feed, and services. The Dialogues brought forward voices from the private sector - seed companies, fertilizer producers, farmers’ organizations - who explained in detail how interdependent these systems are.



A seed may cross multiple borders over a decade as it is bred, tested, adapted, and multiplied. Fertilizer ingredients come from distinct planetary deposits, and 45–80 percent of fertilizer products must move across borders to reach farmers. Tractors, drones, satellites, weather data networks, and agri-fintech services bind agriculture into global supply chains that no single country can replicate.

This interdependence emerged as a defining theme of the Dialogues. The more complex and technology-driven agriculture becomes, the more trade is needed - not less. Trade allows farmers to plant the best seeds for their local environment, even if those seeds were developed half a world away. It allows fertilizers to reach regions that would otherwise face soil depletion. It allows innovations in cultivation, monitoring, and processing to spread rapidly across continents. And as participants emphasized repeatedly, restricting trade would not bring production home. It would instead trap farmers in a system deprived of the tools, inputs, and knowledge they need to remain productive and competitive.

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repeatedly. Experts instead pointed to the multiple pathways through which trade enhances nutrition: by making food more diverse, more affordable, more stable, and more resilient to shocks. Dialogues highlighted examples of countries that improved nutrition outcomes by lowering tariffs on fruits, vegetables, or protein sources. Conversely, they also examined cases where tariff reductions on sugary drinks or processed foods led to negative consequences. The conclusion reached was not that trade is inherently good or bad for nutrition, but that trade policy must be accompanied by domestic regulation - labeling, education, standards - that guide consumer choices. What became clear is that trade expands options; governments shape outcomes.

Similarly, environmental debates within the Dialogues drew attention to another widespread misunderstanding: that local production is inherently better for the planet. Participants explained that transportation emissions represent only a fraction of the environmental footprint of food, and that growing water-intensive crops in water-stressed countries is far more damaging than shipping them from water-abundant regions. Through detailed life-cycle assessments, speakers showed that trade can be a powerful tool for the efficient allocation of natural resources. It allows land-intensive crops to be grown where land is available, dairy to be produced where pasture is sustainable, and perishables to flow from climates



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that can support them year-round without artificial heating or cooling. The Dialogues thus contributed to reframing environmental discussions away from simplistic distance-based metrics and toward a more holistic understanding of sustainability.

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As the years progressed, another set of themes emerged around the difficulties faced by farmers, especially in the developing world. African farmer organizations underscored the barriers their members face: poor infrastructure, unpredictable regulations, fragmented markets, lack of insurance, insufficient storage, and high logistics costs. Farmers expressed frustration that agriculture in their countries is often treated as a subsistence activity rather than a business, and that policies designed to help them frequently fail to be implemented. The Dialogues became a platform through which these farmers could articulate their needs: better connectivity, harmonized regional standards, fair opportunities to participate in value chains, and - above all - a voice in decisions that shape the global food system. These testimonies underscored a recurring point: trade has the potential to empower farmers, but only if complementary domestic measures enable them to participate meaningfully.

By 2023 and 2024, the Dialogues entered a new phase. Participants increasingly looked beyond crisis management and turned to the future of food systems. Several new questions came to dominate the discussions: How should trade adapt to the rise of digital agriculture and to the role of e-commerce? How will new technologies - cultivated meat, gene editing and vertical farming - fit into the WTO framework? How should customs classification evolve to handle foods that do not fit traditional categories? How should the trading system respond to growing concerns about sustainability and rising consumer demand for information about the food on supermarket shelves? And how should intellectual property be treated in a world where software, algorithms, sensors, and biotech innovations increasingly shape agricultural productivity?

These questions revealed the rapid technological transformation underway in the food sector. Representatives from digital agriculture companies explained how fintech, mobile platforms, and blockchain-enabled traceability are reshaping African and Asian farming. Remote sensing and AI-driven yield forecasting are giving farmers unprecedented access to information. High-tech foods - ranging from plant-based proteins to lab-grown dairy and cultivated meat - are emerging faster than regulatory systems can adapt. The Dialogues showed that the WTO will need to engage with these innovations proactively, because they directly implicate WTO rules under the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement), the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement), the Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS Agreement), and many more WTO disciplines. Technology is global, and its diffusion depends on open markets.

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Another strand of conversation increasingly centered on sustainability. Participants from industry and governments emphasized that global value chains cannot be greened through unilateral policies alone. Sustainability standards, carbon measurement, deforestation regulations, and emissions accounting must be interoperable if they are to avoid becoming de facto trade barriers. Industry actors argued for the “true cost of food” to be reflected in prices, while also cautioning that abrupt or poorly coordinated sustainability measures can undermine food security. Developing country representatives stressed that sustainability cannot be pursued at the expense of rural livelihoods or food availability. These debates revealed that the challenge for the coming decade is not whether trade and sustainability can coexist - they must - but how the world can design rules that encourage environmental progress without excluding or penalizing the countries least able to comply with demanding new requirements.

A parallel theme through 2024 and 2025 was the continuing need for WTO agricultural reform. While participants recognized past achievements - such as the elimination of agricultural export subsidies and the implementation of the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) that is helping prevent perishable foods from rotting in ports by reducing red tape - they also reaffirmed that the multilateral system remains unfinished business. Tariffs on agriculture remain roughly twice as high as those on industrial goods. Trade-distorting domestic support continues to disadvantage farmers in developing countries. Long-standing issues such as tariff escalation undermine trust in the fairness of the trading system by the developing world. The Dialogues confirmed that the credibility of global rules on food will depend on renewed progress in agricultural negotiations - progress that is increasingly urgent in light of climate change and rising global food demand.

By 2025, the world facing the Trade Dialogues on Food is very different from the one that existed in 2020. The food system is more globalized, more digitized, more interconnected, and more politically contested. Trade policies have become more volatile, with new tariffs and export restrictions appearing more frequently. Supply chains remain vulnerable to geopolitical crises, yet at the same time, services trade

has surged, and digitalization is creating new channels for market integration. The Dialogues have therefore shown that the future of food cannot be discussed within national borders alone. It must be addressed in a cooperative, multilateral setting where governments, businesses, and farmers can collectively anticipate challenges and design solutions.

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Perhaps the most profound contribution of the Trade Dialogues on Food has been the recognition that food security, trade, technology, sustainability, nutrition, and development are not separate debates. They are facets of a single global system. A drought in one region affects a port in another and a price index somewhere else. A digital innovation in East Africa reshapes market access in Southeast Asia. A sustainability standard in Europe reverberates through cocoa

farms in West Africa. A fertilizer export restriction in one country can determine crop yields halfway across the world. And in this tightly woven system, the question is never whether countries should trade in food but how they can trade better, more fairly, more sustainably, more transparently, and more predictably.

The Dialogues have shown that trade is the connective tissue of the global food system. It links thousands of actors across thousands of kilometers. It transforms inputs into outputs, raw materials into meals, local harvests into global nutrition. It absorbs shocks, reallocates scarcity, and distributes abundance. It spreads innovation, diffuses technology, and opens doors for farmers, consumers, and businesses alike. The picture that emerges from five years of conversation is neither naïve nor idealized. Trade is not perfect. It is not frictionless. It does not solve every problem. But without it, the food system would be far more unequal, far more volatile, and far more exposed to crisis.





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