



Insights from WTO Trade Dialogues on Food and Agri-Food Business Day

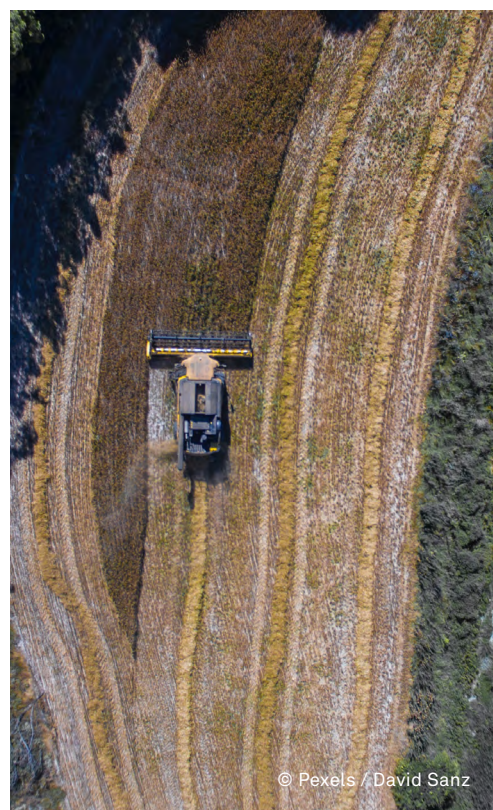
Doaa Abdel-Motaal,
Curator

FROM PANDEMIC TO CONFLICT – THE WTO TRADE DIALOGUES ON FOOD

The World Trade Organization's (WTO) Trade Dialogues on Food were launched at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic in April 2020, right at the time when airports and ports were shutting down, and an infinite number of restrictions was being imposed on the movement of people, including farm labour.¹ There was immediate concern at the outset of the pandemic that a health crisis could turn into a food crisis if governments were to also impede the movement of food across the globe. This fear set off a fascinating set of conversations around the future of food systems, and the critical role that international trade plays in ensuring global food security. Suddenly, the world wanted to hear from the WTO how it could prevent a health crisis from turning into a food crisis.

The world was haunted by the 2007-08 food price crisis where, due to a multitude of factors such as droughts, other weather-related events, and increased demand for biofuels, governments had restricted the export of food, and in particular rice. One export restriction had led to another, fuelling financial speculation in food markets, and leading to a massive rise in the global price of food. At the time, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Price Index had registered a 45% increase,² with an extra 40 million people pushed into hunger across the globe.³ A scenario that the international community in 2020 desperately sought to avoid.

In an attempt to turn a crisis – the pandemic - into an opportunity, in October 2020 the United Nations Secretary General announced the launch of a United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS) that would look at how food systems could be reformed to become more resistant to shocks and responsive to planetary needs.⁴ The Summit took place in 2021 and was organized around a number of tracks that were seen as the main gateways to food system reform.⁵ Trade was considered a controversial topic by Summit organizers, who were not quite sure how it would cut across the various tracks. Not wanting trade to fall off the agenda, in July 2021, the WTO organized a Global Dialogue on Trade under the aegis of the Summit to explain exactly how vital international trade is to the global food



1 [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food](#).

2 [Oakland Institute: High Food Price Crisis](#).

3 [FAO: Number of hungry people rises to 963 million High food prices to blame – economic crisis could compound woes](#).

4 [UN News: UN chief announces major push to transform harmful food systems](#).

5 [UNFSS Action Tracks](#). The Action Tracks included: (1) Ensuring access to safe and nutritious food for all; (2) Shifting to sustainable consumption patterns; (3) Boosting nature-positive production; (4) Advancing equitable livelihoods; and (5) Building resilience to vulnerabilities, shocks and stress.



system.⁶ In ten breakout sessions, trade officials brainstormed with civil society, businesses, farm groups and other international organizations on the vital contribution that international trade makes not only to global food security, but to nutrition and environmental protection as well.

Little did the world expect at the time, that the pandemic would soon be pushed into the background by yet another crisis; this time political conflict in the Black Sea Region. A conflict that hit right at the heart of the one of the world's most important breadbasket regions, responsible for 12% of the total calories traded on the international stage and for significant quantities of fertilizer.⁷ Global food supply chains, already stretched by the COVID-19 pandemic, found themselves challenged once again by shortages of raw materials and inputs, and the blockage of numerous air and sea routes. Many importing countries that had historically relied on the Black Sea Region for their food security and

for the functioning of their agricultural systems, were deeply affected. This was particularly the case for a number of countries in the Middle East and Africa.⁸

The role of trade, once again, became the focus of international discussions. Could trade in food and fertilizer from the Black Sea Region resume, and how? The Black Sea Grain Initiative, brokered by the United Nations Secretary General and Turkey, and the Memorandum of Understanding between the Russian Federation and the United Nations Secretariat, proved to be game-changers that brought some stability and hope to markets,⁹ along with the massive grain market re-organization that allowed new sources of grain to close the supply gap.

POLARIZING NARRATIVES VS. CENTRIST VIEWS

Against a background of complex world events, the WTO Trade Dialogues on Food have sought to generate a conversation on the role of international trade in the global food system. They were later complemented with the WTO's first

⁶ [Global Dialogue on Trade: Trade, an essential piece of the food systems puzzle](#). The Breakout Rooms covered the following ten topics:

- International Trade in Food In Times of Crisis
- Can the Reform of Agricultural Subsidies Contribute to Food System Transformation?
- The WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA); The Way Forward
- Trade Facilitation and the Cutting of Red Tape for Food System Transformation
- Global Agricultural Value Chains
- Realizing the Human Right to Food
- Ensuring Sustainable Food Trade
- Nutrition Security and International Trade
- Food Security and International Trade
- Food Safety and International Trade

⁷ [IFPRI Blog: How will Russia's invasion of Ukraine affect global food security? February 24, 2022](#).

⁸ [The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington: The Ukraine Crisis Deepens Food Insecurity Across the Middle East and Africa](#).

⁹ [UNCTAD: A Trade Hope: The impact of the Black Sea Grain Initiative, March 2023](#).

Agri-Food Business Day held at the end 2022¹⁰ - an event that allowed WTO Members and the agri-food industry to take a deeper dive into food supply chain blockages.

While some have sought to polarize the narrative on trade, the WTO Trade Dialogues on Food have shown that far from being a polarizing issue, the vast majority of government officials, businesses, farm leaders, civil society groups, consumer associations and other international organizations would much prefer to discuss *how* to better trade in food rather than *whether* to do so. Examples of some of the most polarizing narratives that are occasionally heard in policy circles, and which have found no echo in the Trade Dialogues on Food, include:

- *That international trade in food reduces the resilience of national food systems, and that there should be less trade in food rather than more;*
- *That international trade in food can simply be “switched off” by stopping food from moving from country A to country B without doing much harm;*
- *That international trade in food hurts nutrition, leading to changing diets, malnutrition and obesity;*
- *That it is better for the planet for food to be produced closer to home; and*
- *That the WTO has failed on agriculture.*

INTERNATIONAL TRADE IN FOOD IS NOT A LUXURY BUT A MUST - A MORAL OBLIGATION

In fact, the WTO Trade Dialogues have debunked most of these extreme narratives and demonstrated the opposite. First and foremost, the Dialogues have shown that international trade in food is not a luxury, but a must – and even a moral obligation. International trade, in fact, is no more than a transmission belt that allows food to flow from the parts of the world that have a food surplus to the parts that are in deficit. No one put this better than former WTO Deputy Director-General Alan Wolff when he spoke at the one of the first episodes, entitled International Trade and Food Security in the Era of COVID-19:¹¹

1 in every 6 people around the world depends almost entirely on international trade to be fed and I want to expand on that. That’s 17% of humanity or 1.3 billion people. Currently, there are over 30 countries in the world that must rely on imported food, not to increase their food variety, but to avoid starvation.

If anything, he went on to explain that international trade in food would become even more important in light of the climate crisis, and the natural disasters likely to result in sudden disruptions of local food supply.

¹⁰ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day](#).

¹¹ [DDG Wolff: Reliance on international trade for food security likely to grow](#).



Equally important to international trade in food is international trade in the many other agricultural inputs that make food production possible. Seeds are one of them – and are in fact the starting point of any food system. In a Dialogue entitled Improved Seed Trade; Unlocking Global Food Security,¹² Michael Keller, the Secretary General of the International Seed Federation (ISF) said that approximately 7 million metric tons of seed are imported annually, to the tune of \$14 billion. This makes the seed sector a major sector of world trade.

He explained that seeds need “*local adaptation*,” making them different from any other agriculture input, and that it was therefore vital that they be allowed to travel to adapt to different climatic and other conditions so the right kind of seed can emerge. Because seeds cross international borders along significant timescales, with a single seed sometimes taking up to 10-12 years to do so, he insisted that a predictable, rules-based multilateral trading system is absolutely critical to making seed production possible. In fact, today, according to ISF, no country can fully supply farmers with agricultural

inputs exclusively from domestic sources, which has resulted in the doubling of international seed trade over the past ten years.

Fertilizer is no different. In a Dialogue entitled Global Value Chains in Agriculture and Food, in an Era of COVID-19,¹³ Charlotte Hebebrand, the former Director General of the International Fertilizer Association (IFA) noted that 45% of total fertilizer production is traded internationally (with the figure rising to nearly 80% for potash), and that international trade is vital to this sector because of the geographic concentration of its raw material around the globe. Fertilizer use is responsible for 50% of crop yields worldwide, with any harm to trade in this sector having an immediate impact on global food security. The world must be able to “feed its plants with the necessary nutrients,” she stated.

While certain polarizing narratives seek to portray the trading system as being harmful to either farmers, or to certain parts of the world like Africa, the WTO Trade Dialogues on Food have demonstrated otherwise. In a Dialogue entitled Enabling Agricultural Trade,¹⁴ Arianna Giuliadori, Secretary General of the World Farmers Organisation (WFO) stated that:

There is no farmer that does not wish to trade. Farmers are businessmen, and when they do not sell their produce, they themselves can starve. But farmers look for the right conditions to trade, and above all require infrastructure -

12 [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways, A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2020-2022\)](#), p.45. See also [Catalogue, Trade Dialogues on Food](#).

13 *Ibid.*, p.8.

14 *Ibid.*, p.26.

railways, roads, and storage facilities. All the factors that enable “connectivity”, including digital platforms. However, farmers need to be made part of the global decision-making process. While they feel that the weight of food system transformation falls on their shoulders, they feel excluded from vital policy deliberations.

In a Dialogue entitled The Africa Agriculture Trade Monitor; What Next for the African Continent?,¹⁵ Elizabeth Nsimadala, President of the Pan-African Farmers Organization, expressed a similar view. She stressed that agriculture was still not considered a business in Africa, noting that “*good policies are made in Africa but applied elsewhere*”. The sector is held back by unpredictable policies, poor land distribution, a high cost of logistics, high levels of bureaucracy, multiple clearance requirements, double-taxation, poor infrastructure and corruption, she argued. Factors that scare-off investment.

In another Dialogue dedicated to Africa, entitled COVID-19 Flattening the Food Insecurity Curve in Africa,¹⁶ a range of African trade policy leaders lamented the limited intra-African food trade that takes place, expressing high hopes for the African Continental Free Trade Agreement (ACFTA). In fact, Trudi Hartzenberg, Executive Director TRALAC (Trade Law Center, South Africa) explained that while there are eight different economic communities in Africa, or regional trading arrangements, not counting the new ACFTA, Africa has one of the lowest levels of intra-regional trade (with intra-regional trade in Europe standing at 70%, Asia 60%, America 50%, but Africa only 15%). Moreover, intra-regional African trade contains little food.

In a Dialogue entitled The Disruptors; A Conversation with the Technology Giants Revolutionizing African Agriculture,¹⁷ four award-winning African technological “*disruptors*” who are revolutionizing African agriculture, all the way from banking and access to finance, to empowering smallholder farmers in different corners of Africa through their digital platforms, expressed strong support for international trade. Their technological disruption is enabling trade to happen every day, and to do so faster.

FOOD SOLICITS ALL FOUR CORNERS OF THE WTO RULEBOOK AND IS INCREASINGLY “MADE IN THE WORLD”

Today absolutely all continents engage in the import and export of food, as well as in the trade of all the things that make food production possible.¹⁸

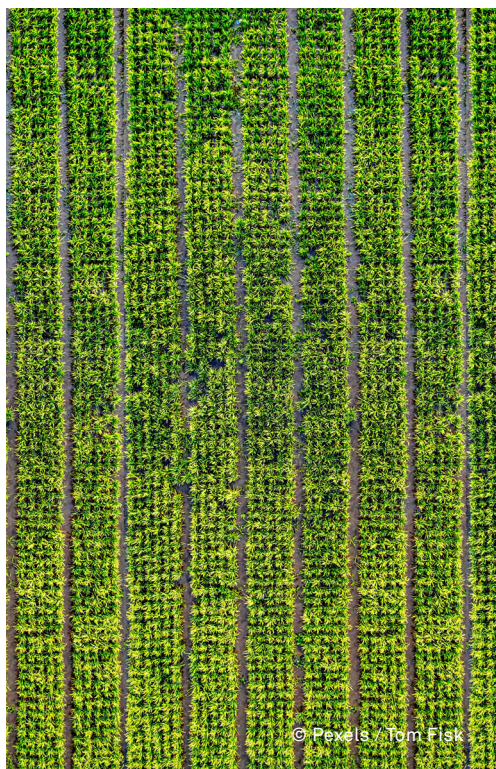
On the manufacturing side, this includes everything from seeds, agro-chemicals and fertilizer, to farm equipment such as tractors and ploughs, and more sophisticated products like drones. Food systems also require a range of services to function such as transportation, marketing and retail services, for food to get to the final consumer. A range of other service such as banking and finance and weather monitoring are also vital to agriculture.

¹⁵ Ibid., p.24.

¹⁶ Ibid., p.11.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.16. The ‘disruptors’ who participated in this Dialogue are: Bolaji Akinboro, Co-Founder and Co-CEO, Cellulant Corporation; Onyeka Akumah, Founder and CEO, Farmcrowdy; Kikonde Mwatela, Co-Founder and Chief Operating Officer, Twiga Foods; and Kamal Yacub, CEO, Trotror Tractor Ltd.

¹⁸ [WTO Secretariat: Trends in World Agricultural Trade, 25 Years of the Agreement on Agriculture \(AoA\).](#)



Intellectual Property Rights (IPRs) are equally fundamental since continued innovation will be key to food system transformation. According to McKinsey, “more than 40,000 patents related to agricultural inputs have been granted in the past ten years.”¹⁹ The agriculture sector therefore is heavily intertwined with other sectors of the world economy, demonstrating not only the relevance of the entirety WTO rule-book to agricultural trade, but also how any obstruction to agricultural trade would immediately impact other sectors of the global economy.

These linkages are strongly born out by Trade In Value Added (TIVA) data. While around 60% of the value-added content of world agricultural exports originates from the agriculture industry, approximately 40% of value addition is derived from other industries that are further upstream in the production chain. TIVA data show that manufacturing companies (food, chemicals and machinery) supply inputs for agricultural production of up to 12% of total value-addition. TIVA data also confirm

the importance of services to agricultural exports, which account for 23% of value-addition (with distribution services alone accounting for 9%).²⁰

These points were echoed by industry groups across multiple Dialogues and Agri-Food Business Day. In the latter event, Stéphane Graber, Director General of the International Federation of Freight Forwarders Association (IFFA), explained for instance how critical international freight and logistical services are to agricultural trade, and how IFFA needed to be supported by the WTO rulebook in the areas trade facilitation, digitalization and e-commerce.²¹

Another important feature of trade in food and agricultural commodities today, is that it takes place through complex Global Value Chains (GVCs). In fact, according to FAO’s State of Food and Agriculture Report 2020, today one third of global agricultural and food exports cross international borders at least twice.²² No one brought this point home better than Anabel Gonzalez, WTO Deputy Director General, in following statement at Agri-Food Business Day:²³

No product can help us understand just how globalized our food systems are like a chocolate bar. Most people don’t realize the number of countries involved in the production of a bar of chocolate. West African countries, particularly Ivory Coast and Ghana, are the leading producers of cocoa today, accounting for some 60% of the world cocoa supply. The milk that goes into

19 [McKinsey & Company: Needle in a haystack: Patents that inspire agricultural innovation, September 2020.](#)

20 [WTO Secretariat: Trends in World Agricultural Trade, 25 Years of the Agreement on Agriculture \(AoA\), p.23.](#)

21 [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Third Roundtable, Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

22 [State of Food and Agriculture 2020.](#)

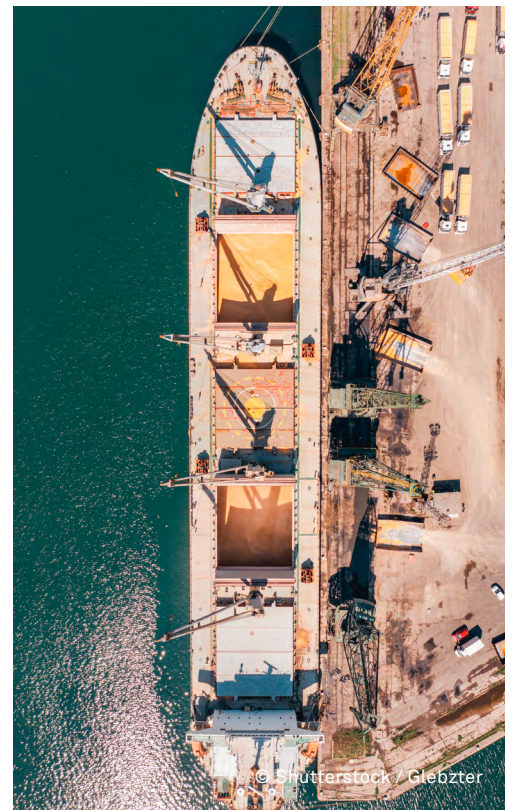
23 [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Closing Remarks, DDG Anabel Gonzalez.](#)

our chocolate will come from many different locations. Among the world's top milk exporting countries are New Zealand, Germany, the Netherlands, and the United States. In a bar of chocolate we also find sugar and we find various additives and flavourings, which are themselves sourced from across the globe. Among the world's top sugar exporting countries are Brazil, Thailand, India, France and Guatemala. And I will spare you the details on the hazelnuts and raisins, which might come from yet another set of countries.

Not to mention that when that bar of chocolate is finally "assembled", and I stress the world "assembled", it then needs packaging, marketing, transportation and retail sale. All of these goods and services will also come from different locations. So the reality is that a bar of chocolate is not made in any particular country, it is "made in the world." And that does not stop with chocolate, but now applies to almost all of our processed food.

The idea therefore that international trade in food can simply be "switched off" by stopping food from moving from Country A to Country B, is an idea that ignores multiple new realities. Stopping trade in cocoa, or trade milk, could lead to the collapse of the bar of chocolate that DDG Gonzalez mentioned. It could also reverberate across other sectors of the global economy that might depend on that chocolate bar (think of the packaging industry for instance). In fact, DDG Gonzalez added that we are no longer in a world where restricting the import of ingredient X or Y would any way benefit a country. Rather these restrictions would hurt all domestic producers that form part of the global assembly line: *"We are in a world where we need to nurture and promote our interdependence, since this interdependence has led to products that we love – like chocolate, but has also enormously enriched the human diet and boosted global food security."*²⁴

The sophistication and complexity of today's food systems has prompted numerous participants in the WTO Trade Dialogues on Food and Agri-Food Business Day to express concern at the phenomenon of export restrictions, whether on food itself, or on anything else that is required to make food production possible. In fact, in a Dialogue entitled *Food Trade Policy, the G20 and COVID-19*, Maximo Torero, Chief Economist of the FAO, indicated that while prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the main concern of the G20 was how to increase food production to meet the demands of growing population, focus has shifted in recent years to keeping markets open, protecting supply chains and removing export restrictions.



24 Ibid.

Speaking to the global fertilizer shortage at Agri-Food Business Day, Gerald Masila, Executive Director of the East Africa Grain Council (EAGC), highlighted the gravity of fertilizer export restrictions on the African grain sector. *“To restrict the export of fertilizer in one end of the globe would be to sign a death warrant for people on the other end,”* he said. He urged policy-makers to change their perception of fertilizer, which has to be seen as equivalent to food and as synonymous to food security. Global fertilizer supply chains underpin global food security, he maintained.²⁵

INTERNATIONAL TRADE EXPANDS THE HUMAN DIET

The relationship between international trade in food and the human diet is without doubt a complex topic. However, assertions that international trade is responsible for poorer nutrition, if not the crisis of obesity, are simplistic. In a Dialogue entitled [Exploring the Nutrition and International Trade Nexus](#),²⁶ participants discussed the State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021 report.²⁷ The report estimates that between 720 and 811 million people in the world faced hunger in 2020 - 161 million more than in 2019. Nearly 2.37 billion people did not have access to adequate food in 2020 - an increase of 320 million people in just one year, with no region of the world having been spared. The report argued that the high cost of healthy diets and persistently high levels of poverty and income inequality have continued to keep healthy diets out of the reach of 3 billion people.

In this Dialogue, Chris Hegadorn, former Secretary of the Committee of the World Food Security explained that trade policy could cut either way in this debate, improving or worsening nutrition outcomes. In one instance, he said, a country that reduced tariffs on vegetables was able to promote a much healthier and greener diet. In another instance, a country that lowered tariffs on sugary drinks found a rise in sugar consumption and obesity.

Charlie Worthington, Food Specialist at Consumers International, added that greater trade in food increases food availability, accessibility, and affordability and therefore improves nutrition outcomes in particular for the poor. It was vital for consumers, therefore, that the competitiveness of the food sector be boosted through international trade. Rick White, former Chair of the International Agri-Food Network (IAFN), explained that the private sector can only contribute to better nutrition if GVCs are made more resilient, so that food can travel unimpeded.

In view of the serious nutrition crisis in the Pacific, the Ambassador of Vanuatu participated in this Dialogue. He explained that the Pacific was particularly hit by natural disasters that imperiled its food security, and that trade policy therefore had an important role to play in promoting better nutrition. International trade could cushion the impact of such crises. However, trade had to be regulated to protect traditional diets that were quite often more nutritious than imported ones.

²⁵ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: First Roundtable: Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

²⁶ [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways. A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2020-2022\)](#), p.30.

²⁷ [State of Food Security and Nutrition in the World 2021](#).

Overall, the Dialogue demonstrated that there are four main pathways through which international trade can improve nutrition: it can contribute to the stability of food supply and food prices acting as a buffer against fluctuations in the domestic market; it can contribute to the diversity of food supply thereby improving national diets; it can lower food prices making a healthier diet more accessible to consumers; and it can increase incomes thereby enhancing consumer purchasing power.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE LEADS TO AN EFFICIENT ALLOCATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES; LAND, WATER, ENERGY

In a Dialogue entitled Food Miles”: Do They Help or Hurt our Planet?,²⁸ participants discussed whether it is better for the planet that food be produced closer to home. There was consensus amongst speakers that the concept of ‘food miles’ is not useful from an environmental point of view. A full life cycle analysis of food is needed to properly assess the environmental footprint of our food (a “*cradle-to-grave*” approach). In addition, numerous speakers confirmed that transportation emissions are but a small fraction of the overall environmental footprint of internationally traded food; with much of our food being shipped rather than air-freighted (shipping has a low carbon footprint).

Tara Garnett, Director of Table at the Oxford Martin Program on the Future of Food argued that the concept of food miles is not purely environmental however. It also relates to culture, livelihoods, views about nutrition and diet, and globalization. She stated that, as flawed from an environmental perspective as the concept is, it is nevertheless an enduring. This is because of its simplicity, because of how easy it is to associate long-distance transport with international trade, and because of simple notions of food freshness being associated with proximity.

Alexander Kasterine, Senior Advisor at the International Trade Center, cautioned that the concept is being countered by the developing world through the notion of ‘*fair miles.*’ The developing world wants to have the environmental merits of its food exports properly assessed. Fair miles incorporate the concept of Common but Differentiated Responsibility, he explained - designed to reflect the main culprits of past, and not just present, environmental damage.



²⁸ [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways, A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2020-2022\)](#), p.28.

Speakers in this Dialogue emphasized that trade in food is nothing other than trade in natural resources and that international has a vital role to play in their efficient allocation. An issue that was also highlighted by a Roundtable on Sustainability at Agri-Food Business Day:²⁹

Agriculture and the environment are inextricably interlinked. Globally agriculture uses around 40% of the global land area, and about 70% of the world's total freshwater. International trade in food is trade in land, water and energy. In fact, as the United Nations Development Program tells us that were a country such as Egypt to aim for food self-sufficiency it would need three River Niles not one. International trade in food is therefore critical to the efficient allocation of natural resources. It allows water-intensive crops to grow where water is abundant for example, and not in areas of water shortage.

THE WTO HAS DELIVERED ON AGRICULTURE, BUT NEEDS TO DO MORE AND FASTER

Since the entry into force of the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) in 1996, global trade in agricultural products has more than tripled, to reach over \$1.8 trillion today. The more fair and equitable rules created by the AoA have enabled the developing world to capture a greater share of world markets. Today, South–South agricultural trade accounts for roughly one-quarter of total agricultural trade flows.

As the Dialogue entitled *The AoA@25*³⁰ pointed out, it is easy to forget what agricultural trade looked like prior to the advent of the AoA. Trade barriers came in multiple shapes and forms and completely lacked transparency. Developed world trade-distorting agricultural subsidies crowded out developing world exports, and the law of the jungle prevailed. The AoA was complemented by trade liberalization in industrial goods and services, which also enhanced global food security.

While there is a perception that since the Uruguay Round the WTO has been slow to undertake further agricultural trade reforms, the picture is more nuanced. The WTO successfully eliminated agricultural export subsidies at its Nairobi Ministerial Conference,³¹ and adopted other agreements vital to agriculture, like the Trade Facilitation Agreement. The latter has proven to be crucial to slashing red tape at borders, and to improving customs procedures, thus preventing perishable foods from rotting and going to waste.

The WTO does however need to continue the agricultural trade reform process and to do so faster. While it has reduced tariffs and subsidies in the Uruguay Round and improved export competition, the agricultural sector continues to be far behind the industrial. In fact, the average bound agricultural tariff (of 55%) is double the average bound tariff of industrial goods. Furthermore, agricultural subsidies remain high, with the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP)

29 [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Fourth Roundtable, Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

30 [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways. A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2020-2022\)](#), p.22.

31 [Export Competition, Ministerial Decision of 19 December 2015, WT/MIN\(15\)/45, WT/L/980.](#)

recently issuing a call to repurpose the \$ 470 billion that are spent on agricultural support that distort prices, and hold back environmental and social progress.³²

In the Dialogue [AoA@25](#),³³ participants spoke of the needs of developing and least-developed countries (LDCs) in the agricultural negotiations. They argued that while the provision of Special and Differential Treatment (SDT) to the developing world has been useful, what was really needed was a levelling the playing field through a reduction of developed world domestic support. The Dialogue demonstrated that attention would also need to be paid to the specific set of issues placed by the developing world on the negotiating table, such as the Public Stockholding of Food, and the tariff peaks that hold back the processing of primary agricultural goods and the industrialization of food systems.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

As the process of agricultural trade reform proceeds, what the Trade Dialogues on Food have demonstrated is that food security will remain central to any discussion on the future of food or food system transformation – if not the starting point. In a Dialogue entitled [Parlons des Céréales](#), Sebastien Abis, Director-General of Club Demeter, made a strong case for addressing global inequalities in access to food:³⁴

The current food crisis, for some parts of the world, does not constitute anything new. It is only for Europe and other part of the world that have enjoyed near constant food security in the past few decades, that the crisis comes as a surprise. The crisis must sensitize us to global inequalities. While the 2008 food crisis was very significant, the current crisis takes place against an even weaker multilateral architecture, and less faith in international institutions. In fact, the worry now is that we are seeing the formation of “trade blocs”, with countries becoming more inward-looking and less willing to share food - a development counterproductive to global food security.

In terms of the way forward, what the Trade Dialogues on Food and Agri-Food Business Day show is that there are a variety of issues which the WTO might need to address: those that are somewhat within the WTO’s current reach and seem to be priority issues for the WTO stakeholders; and those that remain somewhat more elusive and which will require either new approaches or entirely new mandates.



32 [UNEP: A Multi-Billion-Dollar Opportunity: Repurposing Agricultural Support to Transform Food Systems, September 2021.](#)

33 [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways. A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2020-2022\)](#), p.23.

34 *Ibid.*, p. 42.



Of the issues that are within reach are non-tariff barriers (NTBs) to trade and trade facilitation – priority areas for the agri-food industry that come up in every conversation. For instance, speaking at Agri-Food Business Day, Carel du Marchie Sarvaas, Executive Director of Health for Animals, noted that international trade is often impeded by the failure of countries to uphold existing international standards; by the use of non-scientific justifications in the standard-setting process; and by the imposition of uniform production standards on countries with fundamentally different production systems in the pursuit of sustainability goals. He argued against a “one-size fits all” approach to sustainability.³⁵ Valerie Picard, Deputy Director of the Global Alliance for Trade Facilitation called for a better implementation of the WTO’s Trade Facilitation Agreement: “By not fully implementing the Trade Facilitation Agreement, we are leaving money on the table. It’s about lost opportunities.”³⁶

Of the issues that remain elusive, is sustainability - a recurrent theme in most conversations. In the Roundtable on Sustainability at Agri-Food Business Day,³⁷ while some agri-businesses warned against using sustainability to raise barriers to trade, others argued that agricultural trade and sustainability were no longer themes that the world could afford to address separately. Berry Marttin, Rabobank Executive Board Member and President of the European Association of Co-operative Banks, urged that international trade take place on the basis of the “true cost of food.”

Antonia Wanner, Head of ESG, Sustainability Strategy and Deployment at Nestlé, indicated that because agricultural value chains are so globalized, no producer can claim to be operating sustainably until the totality of the global value chain is greened. International trade is therefore making it essential to take the sustainability discussion to a global scale. Nestlé also called for the repurposing of agricultural subsidies, explaining that the company was unable to green its supply chain with agricultural subsidies pushing in the wrong direction. George Mina, the Ambassador of Australia to the WTO, stated that while he would give the WTO a tick on the oceans, given its recent success with WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations, he would not be able to give it such a tick on land. In other words, the WTO has some unfinished business before it on agricultural subsidy reform.

Salomon Eheth, the Ambassador of Cameroon to the WTO, cautioned however against having sustainability compromise food security goals. He made a plea, for instance, that standards for deforestation not come at the expense of food security. The need to balance food and environmental security was also echoed

³⁵ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Second Roundtable; Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

³⁶ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Third Roundtable; Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

³⁷ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Fourth Roundtable; Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)

by businesses, like the Global Dairy Platform. Clearly, sustainability is a delicate issue, on a which careful balance will need to be struck at the WTO.

Other themes that seem to constitute a priority for stakeholders of the WTO system, which emerge in most conversations, but which do not feature prominently on the WTO agenda are those of the logistics of agricultural trade, automation, digitalization and innovation. For some of these issues, entirely new mandates might be needed, and they might even take the WTO beyond its traditional rule-making role.

In a Dialogue entitled High Tech Foods and WTO Rules,³⁸ Shir Slutzky, Deputy Permanent Representative to the WTO from the Mission of Israel, called for a dialogue on high tech foods in the WTO, indicating that the FAO and the World Health Organization (WHO) were discussing the addition of a new agenda item to the work of the Codex Alimentarius Commission on 'New Food Production Systems.' She argued that the WTO could follow suit, with there being a need to discuss agreements such as the Information Technology Agreement (ITA), the Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS), the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), and the Agreement on the Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) in this context. Issues to do with the customs classification of new foods would also need to be explored.

Similar views were expressed in Agri-Food Business Day,³⁹ where Darren Howie, Chair of the Digital Ag Association, explained that technology and digitalization are key to driving down inefficiency and reducing confusion in markets, and that the WTO plays a critical role in allowing innovation to flow across the globe. An unexpected outcome of the COVID-19 era, he noted, was the extent to which the pandemic had pushed the world to automate and digitalize agricultural business processes. Endless possibilities were now opening up in agriculture through technologies such as blockchain, artificial intelligence, robotics, 3D printing, vertical farming, and quantum computing. Technologies fueled, in part, he said by the need to think of innovative ways to grow more food with less land, water and other natural resources.

All of these issues constitute 'food for thought', and material that the stakeholders of the multilateral trading system may wish to reflect on as agricultural trade reform continues to take place in tandem with food system transformation.



³⁸ [WTO Trade Dialogues on Food: Big Take-Aways. A Very Quick Read \(Volume II, 2023\).](#)

³⁹ [WTO Agri-Food Business Day: Third Roundtable: Five Highlights and a Quote!](#)



World Trade Organization

Centre William Rappard,
Rue de Lausanne 154,
CH-1211 Geneva 21, Switzerland
Website: <http://www.wto.org>

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