

What's new for **tomorrow's** **international trade?**



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The Phosphore collection is a series of studies launched by the SIA collective (Humundi, Iles de Paix, Autre Terre) on the challenges of food systems. It is characterised by the analysis of contested issues that drive the decision-making arenas of food systems. It seeks to understand the reading grids that underlie political discourses, the competing arguments and their scientific validity. Each issue is intended to provide an overview of a debate, and aims to equip readers in the controversy.



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It has become obvious to most observers that the international trade model based on neoliberal globalization is running out of steam. The machine is breaking down on all sides, with malfunctions such as supply chain disruptions during the Covid-19 pandemic, speculation on grain markets following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or the US breaking with the free trade paradigm among some of its proliferations. These phenomena have led to a resurgence of food insecurity both in the Global South and in the Global North.

After several decades of neoliberal globalization, it is a foregone conclusion: this model of international trade, based on the quest for profit and comparative advantages, which leads to the relocation of production, the concentration of land, and the growing expansion of a small number of corporations, coupled with the plundering of non-renewable natural resources, is inadequate to solve the problem of hunger, and will not even allow us to achieve, more generally, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The one institution which, more than any other, embodies this economic order is the World Trade Organization (WTO). This institution is in a state of paralysis according to some, and on the verge of implosion for others, and is caught in a trap of its own making. Indeed, by tailoring trade rules to suit the then rich countries,

the very structure of the WTO makes it unfit to fulfill its role in a now definitively multipolar world, where alliances between countries are more volatile than ever and where the dominance of the Western block hangs by a thread.

So, what can be done? If a paradigm shift seems inevitable, how should that be approached: with or without the WTO? How can one hope for change, and will that change come from within, through reforms, or will it be more revolutionary and simply bypass and sideline the WTO? Despite three decades of lively debate within social movements, concrete proposals for structuring a new and operational fair-trade order have been few and far between. This year, two proposals from civil society have shed a new light on this debate by proposing concrete alternatives

to the WTO: an alternative trade framework based on food sovereignty for the first, and an Agreement on Agriculture Re-Imagined, for the second.

This new issue of Phosphore therefore proposes to examine the question of the kind of model of international trade that would be advisable and feasible outside the WTO: we will first take stock of the deadlocks that exist in international trade and then present two proposals for alternatives to the WTO, analyzing their strengths and weaknesses. Finally, in conclusion, a series of recommendations will be outlined to refine the vision of international trade that our organizations wish to promote.

1. Agricultural policies, yes, but not just any policies!

Structurally unstable agricultural markets

Agricultural markets are driven by different forces. On the one hand, supply is subject to biological processes, soil and climate conditions, and environmental disruptions. On the other hand, these markets respond to the demand for agricultural products, which is vital for the population. These factors make agricultural markets structurally unbalanced and unstable¹. Taking into account these key characteristics of agricultural markets implies considering the regulations that need to be put in place to correct this unpredictability.

INELASTICITY OF DEMAND

While food production (or supply, to simplify) varies greatly depending on factors such as weather conditions and production processes, consumption, in other words demand, remains relatively stable, as it is governed by nutritional needs and the caloric intake necessary for the population to live according to human rights standards. Demand is therefore relatively insensitive to price variations, due to the imperative for consumers or industries to obtain supplies, at any cost. This is an essential factor in understanding how variations in agricultural markets have direct and immediate consequences for consumers.

PRODUCTION AND RESPONSE TIMES TO DEMAND

In addition to being subject to significant variations, agricultural production is unable to respond in the short term to price fluctuations on

agricultural markets. This is due to the unavoidable time lag involved in the biological processes of plant growth. This slow response is even more important in the case of animal production, given the time required for livestock to grow.

ASYMMETRY OF THE MEDIUM-TERM SUPPLY RESPONSE

Finally, production delays mean that there is a time lag between the pricing of agricultural products at the time of sowing and the pricing at the time of harvest. This lag leads to many forecasting errors on the part of farmers: when prices for a product are high at the time of sowing, farmers will tend to plant more crops, invest more, and expand, leading to theoretically higher production at harvest time and therefore a drop in prices. Conversely, when prices are low, farmers remain subject to significant fixed costs (investment in agricultural machinery, loans, rent, etc.) and will tend to want to sell more in order to pay off these fixed costs, which will contribute even more to the fall in prices if no mechanism is put in place to counterbalance this. Temporal asymmetry can thus be observed in the inability of agricultural supply to meet demand in the short term.

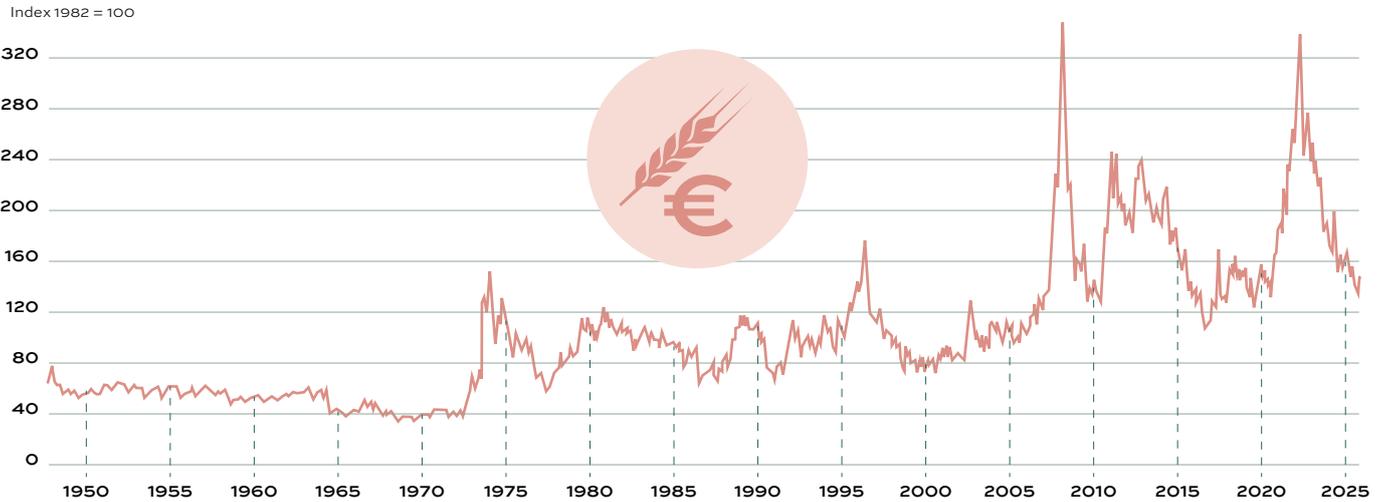
FINANCIALIZATION OF MARKETS

The financialization of agricultural markets through futures markets is a relatively old phenomenon dating back to the 19th century. However, this phenomenon accelerated sharply in the 1990s with the liberalization of financial and agricultural markets, allowing speculators to gain an increasingly large share of the

Financial markets are so interconnected that the price of agricultural commodities is dependent on the price of energy commodities (oil and gas).

agricultural markets². Nowadays, financial markets are so interconnected that the price of agricultural commodities is dependent on the price of energy commodities (oil and gas), so the fundamentals of supply and demand are now only secondary variables in explaining fluctuations in agricultural markets. In addition, periods of market fluctuation are becoming increasingly irregular and intense. Given this unpredictability, it is difficult to foresee the future of markets and anticipate the price of agricultural commodities, which has immediate repercussions for food security, particularly in countries in the Global South. Furthermore, while international trade can, under certain conditions, mitigate the consequences of these market variations by

Monthly **Wheat** Procuder Price (1947-2025)



Source : Federal Reserve Bank of St Louis, USA.

supplying deficit areas, it does nothing to resolve the structural instability of the markets.

CLIMATE CHANGE

The final contributing factor to the instability of agricultural markets is climate change. The rise in the concentration of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere has a myriad of consequences for agriculture, with increasingly variable harvests in terms of quantity and quality, more extreme weather events (droughts, rain, hail, etc.), and a loss of biodiversity and crop auxiliaries. In return, by promoting large-scale monocultures, the industrial agricultural system exacerbates the consequences of climate disasters. Finally, the resurgence of epizootic diseases (contagious nodular dermatitis (CND), bluetongue³, etc.) linked to rising global temperatures should also be highlighted. The combination of all these factors is already causing substantial losses in agricultural production in several regions of the world⁴.

Such instability makes it impossible for agricultural markets to spontaneously reach an equilibrium that satisfies both consumers and producers. The role of agricultural policies is therefore to regulate the difference between supply and demand in order to curb the causes of agricultural market instability. Consequently, public authorities must implement a set of policies aimed at smoothing out imperfections and variations in agricultural markets, as a matter of food security as well as a means to support farmers' incomes.

Trade and food security

The question of whether current trade rules are compatible with achieving a balance between ensuring food security and providing a decent income to farmers therefore seems entirely relevant. Professor of European agricultural policy Alan Matthews demonstrates this in a nuanced but nonetheless critical picture of the impact of trade on food security and availability⁵:

TRADE AND FOOD AVAILABILITY

International trade is essential to ensure the food supply of many countries, particularly those who are net importers of agricultural commodities. Without it these countries would face catastrophic food insecurity. However, in the long term, these same countries tend to suffer from a gradual deterioration in the terms of trade. In other words, their dependence on the international market becomes ever more costly as agricultural prices rise. This means

that in times of crisis, these countries, which often face poor food security situations, will be hit harder and find it more difficult to recover. This was exemplified in the case of the rice market in 2007/08, and again with the wheat market in 2022/23.

TRADE AND FOOD ACCESSIBILITY

The expansion of agricultural markets is a political priority for agro-exporting countries, because new markets inevitably imply more opportunities to increase production and thus generate income. Countries that export agricultural products therefore have every reason to push for trade liberalization. Meanwhile, for countries with lower agricultural productivity, less competitiveness, or simply less subsidized agricultural sectors, the opening of new markets will benefit some actors (entrepreneurs, export sectors, etc.) by allowing the introduction of new agricultural techniques resulting in growth opportunities for the agricultural sector. However, small-scale farmers will often pay the heaviest price for market liberalization, as they are unable to compete with large-scale subsidized farms.

International trade lead to an acceleration of the transition to diets high in sugar, fat, and ultra-processed products.

In this opening up of markets, it is generally industries and consumers, particularly in urban areas, who benefit the most, as the former can source supplies at better prices and the latter can enjoy cheap goods from international markets. For producers the situation is riskier, as they find

themselves in direct competition with more productive agricultural systems, without the capacity to compete.

TRADE AND USE OF FOODSTUFFS

As with the other pillars of food security, the link between food use and international trade is complex, given that nutrition-related problems range from undernutrition to overnutrition.

By facilitating food supply, international trade can reduce undernutrition, depending on the context, the type of national policies in place, etc., as it allows for better supply to net importing countries of agricultural commodities, leading to lower agricultural prices. Trade also creates economic opportunities, thereby generating employment and increasing people's incomes. It is therefore a vehicle for reducing food insecurity.

However, this observation must be nuanced given that international trade also encourages the standardization of diets, which is detrimental to local traditions and, above all, accelerates the transition to diets high in sugar, fat, and ultra-processed products. These types of diet are associated with an increase in obesity, cardiovascular problems, and chronic diseases.

Finally, when it comes to agricultural commodities and how they are used, the issue of livestock farming and agrofuels also needs to be considered. Land use and agricultural production dedicated to animal husbandry or agrofuels potentially competes with human consumption. Trade policies tend to respond to demand, whether the demand is for agricultural products destined for human or non-human consumption, or for agrofuels, and does not prioritize food use, which undermines food security.

TRADE AND FOOD STABILITY

The instability of agricultural markets is a phenomenon that occurs both at the domestic and international level, yet the literature highlights that domestic shocks are more severe

and more frequent than those on the international market⁸. This shows that food self-sufficiency—envisaged as independence from the international market—cannot be an end in itself, as it is unable to counter price volatility at the domestic level.

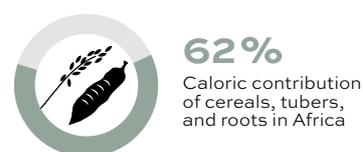
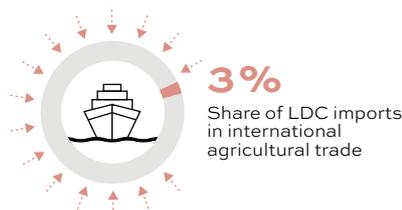
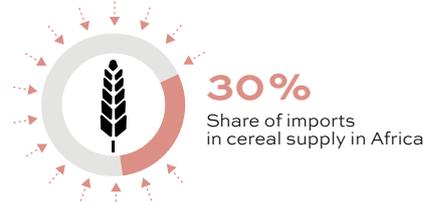
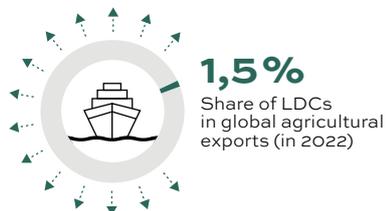
It is therefore paramount for countries to be connected to international trade, given that national and international agricultural policies operate in an interconnected manner. This spillover of disruption is particularly visible in the event of a food crisis, such as in the case of export restrictions. A systemic approach is therefore essential when it comes to agricultural trade policies.

THE MOST DEPENDENT COUNTRIES

The first victims of the vagaries of international trade are the least developed countries⁹ (LDCs) and countries in the Middle East North Africa region (MENA) (see Fig. 1), given that these are the countries that depend proportionally more than any other on imports from the international market to ensure their food security. They are also the countries with the least financial resources to cope with agricultural markets fluctuations. The WTO itself reports that the trade balance of most LDCs suffers from a structural deficit⁹. For LDCs that export agricultural products, the situation is even worse, as they are hit by a deterioration of the terms of trade. To put it simply, developed countries^{*} that export manufactured goods benefit in the long term from technological progress and the associated increase in value, while developing countries^{*} that mainly export raw materials suffer from the downward trend in the relative prices of these commodities⁹.

In 2023, LDCs will account for 16.7% of the world's population and in 2022, they will be home to more than 22% of the world's hungry people¹⁰. In 2022, their share of global agricultural exports will be limited to 1.5%, while their imports will account for 3% of international agricultural trade¹¹. This

Some **key** figures



gap underscores the fragility of LDC economies in addressing their food insecurity endogenously. Worse, LDCs are dependent on the US market for their exports (nearly 9% of their exports go to the United States, while they account for only 0.9% of total US imports), which subjects these countries to US trade dictates (see section 4.1).

Africa, which accounts for the vast majority of LDCs¹², depends on imports for more than 30% of its cereal supply, while cereals, tubers, and roots account for 62% of the continent's calorie intake¹³. However, studies on arable land that is rain-fed and not yet cultivated suggest enormous potential in sub-Saharan Africa (but also in Latin America), without affecting forests or protected areas¹⁴. Were they provided with the appropriate budget and policies, as well as sufficiently remunerative agricultural prices, African countries (to stick to this region of the world) would be able to solve their food security problem, as the amount of arable land is far greater than what is needed to guarantee food security for the population. In any event, these data

underscore the crucial role of trade in maintaining food security for certain categories of countries.

International trade appears to be a vital element of global food security. That being said, there is no scientific consensus on the complex correlation between trade and food insecurity. In order to pinpoint one, it would be necessary to isolate the “agricultural trade policies” component from other public policies, which is difficult given that these policies are largely interconnected. Moreover, while trade cannot be held solely responsible for the persistence of food insecurity, the failure of the welfare state to mitigate the effects of international trade certainly is, as domestic policies—or at least the lack thereof—account for the largest share of the scourge of food insecurity¹⁵. The current economic system is therefore unable to resolve the contradictions governing the agricultural sector, and under current international rules states do not have enough political space to address these issues¹⁶.

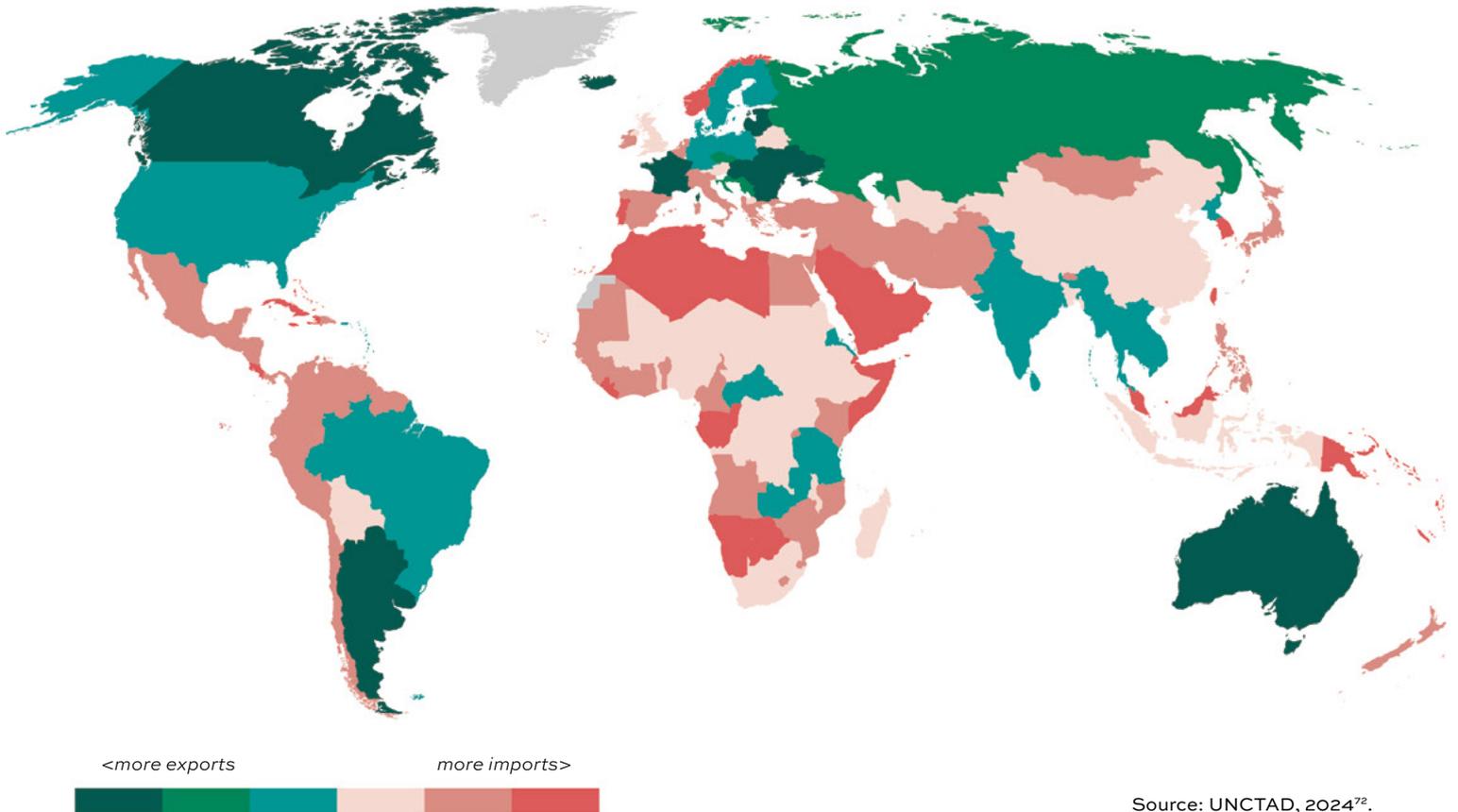
Overall, while the agricultural sector needs policies to correct and opti-

mize agricultural markets, the dominant neoliberal economic thinking is headed in the opposite direction, under the assumption that the market tends to regulate itself and, above all, that the most dominant players are the ones who guide the market's evolution¹⁷. Even if the theoretical models used to explain price fluctuations result in different analyses, the empirical evidence shows that agricultural markets are very unlikely to spontaneously reach an equilibrium price¹⁸ that satisfies consumers, the agri-food industry, and farmers alike.

It therefore becomes obvious that we do not need fewer agricultural policies, but more and, above all, better ones.

Net exporters and importers of cereals

Cereal import dependency ratio, per cent, 2020-2022



Source: UNCTAD, 2024⁷².

Note: Countries with a negative import dependency ratio are net exporters of cereals. Cereal import dependency does not imply that countries are overall importers or have a net negative agricultural balance.

Countries facing acute food insecurity often depend on imports.

How the **WTO** works

Until 1986 agriculture was exempt from trade rules and eligible for protection and subsidies. That year, in Punta Del Este (Uruguay), a new round of GATT negotiations was launched, this time including agriculture. On December 15, 1993, the GATT agreement was concluded between the 117 member countries after seven years of negotiations. New international trade rules were introduced, this time including agriculture, and provisions were made for the transformation of the GATT into the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 1995. The agreement was signed in Marrakesh on April 15, 1994, for a period of six years, before a new round of negotiations (Doha).¹⁹

To regulate agricultural markets, categories of subsidies known as boxes were created:

- **THE AMBER BOX:** domestic support practices that must be subject to reduction commitments due to the distortions they cause in the production and trade of agricultural products.
- **THE BLUE BOX:** measures that are not subject to reduction, but which are accompanied by production limitation programs.
- **THE GREEN BOX:** support that is disconnected from production and prices, and that is not supposed to have an impact on agricultural production and trade. This also includes security stocks, domestic food aid, rural services, research, etc.

Theoretically decoupled from production, green box support is not subject to any limitations. However, studies have shown that some countries, particularly the United States and the EU, transferred funds from one box to another when

the AoA was implemented, thereby avoiding any limitations on domestic support. The result is that there is currently massive support in developed countries* that are not required to reduce their domestic support because they provide it in the form of subsidies that are conventionally considered not to have any distorting effects on trade²⁰.

Amber box support, on the other hand, is subject to a limitation imposed by the AoA (*de minimis*): 10% of the total value of production for developing countries* and 5% for developed countries* (AoA, Article 6.4). This percentage represents the political space given to Member States to finance their agricultural sector. Above this threshold, such support becomes illegal and is therefore subject to potential complaints from other Member States. The policy space available to most developing countries* to implement these public stock programs is limited to the *de minimis*.

In terms of democratic legitimacy, the WTO raises a number of issues:

- By seeking to liberalize trade, the WTO subjects Member States to a restrictive framework in terms of public policy, particularly on issues of subsidies and market protection. In this sense, it undermines the autonomy and sovereignty of Member States.
- Decisions made by the GATT and the WTO, both on new agreements and on the integration of new members, are made by consensus. While this “one country, one vote” decision-making method is egalitarian in principle, the influence on votes is obvious, with some countries being subject to strong pressure from the major powerhouses. In practice, therefore, only a very small number of countries dare to oppose a consensus (India, China, South Africa, and Indonesia being the most prominent ones). Consensus-based decision-making contributes above all to the permanent deadlock of negotiations due to conflicts and/or arrangements between Member States. As a result, many ministerial conferences end in failure, with no agreement on agriculture

having been adopted since 2001 apart from the Bali package.

- The WTO administers around 30 agreements. Since its creation in 1994, another 30 agreements and decisions have been added to the original texts. Developed countries* with large delegations can afford to have advisors who follow all these negotiations, but for developing countries* and especially the least developed ones*, it is virtually impossible to follow all the negotiations. Their agreement is therefore given without their informed consent.
- The Dispute Settlement Body (DSB) allows Member States to take action against other states if they do not comply with trade rules. However, in practice, the DSB is used by multinational corporations to have states attack other states, which favors the interests of large companies.

Agriculture in international negotiations



The Agreement on Agriculture: the Gordian knot of the agricultural world

When it was established in 1995 the WTO took over and encompassed the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), providing its secretariat from thereon after. The WTO is governed by a set of agreements (services, investment, etc.) which are mainly aimed at reducing barriers to free trade and increasing economic exchange through international trade. The organization was founded during the heyday of free trade theory in the 1990s and therefore bases its commercial approach on one of the founding principles of this vision: the theory of comparative advantage, theorized by economist David Ricardo, “the single most powerful insight into economics” according to the WTO:

“Economics tells us that we can benefit when these goods and services are traded. Simply put, the principle of “comparative advantage” says that countries prosper first by taking advantage of their assets in order to concentrate on what they can produce best, and then by trading these products for products that other countries produce best.

In other words, liberal trade policies [...] sharpen competition, motivate innovation and breed success. They multiply the rewards that result from producing the best products, with the best design, at the best price.²¹”

Yet, as mentioned above, by recognizing that LDCs specializing in agricultural exports are experiencing a deterioration in their terms of trade, the WTO—along with other international organizations such as the FAO and UNCTAD—is implicitly acknowledging that this specialization based on comparative advantage has not proven fruitful. As early as 1996, the WTO noted that agricultural products had experienced a deterioration in the terms of trade relative to manufactured goods in world trade:

agricultural products fell from 20% of world trade in 1973 to 11% in 1995 (they are now around 9%), while the share of manufactured goods rose from around 55% in 1973 to 78% in 1995 (currently around 65%). In other words, by specializing in agricultural exports, developing countries* and LDCs in particular found it increasingly difficult to finance their imports with the income generated by exports. Combined with structural adjustment programs and the burden of public debt, this imbalance has hampered the implementation of effective development policies capable of tackling the problem of food insecurity and pursuing appropriate policies²².

At the heart of the WTO’s agricultural negotiations lies the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), which crystallizes all the tensions of the sector, as it was negotiated during the Uruguay Round in 1986 and enshrines the dominance of the richest countries of the time by authorizing certain types of public financing (known as domestic support) while severely restricting the future possibilities for other countries to implement such financing²³.

In 2001, a new round of negotiations began in which the United States and the European Union, who faced growing discontent among developing countries*, were forced to make concessions. The Doha Round was supposed to smooth out inequalities between developed countries* and developing countries*, and the 4th WTO Ministerial Conference in 2001 put a reduction in customs tariffs for developed countries on the table that aimed to allow developing countries* access to their markets. It also provided a further reduction in trade-distorting domestic support, and the elimination of export subsidies. For developing countries*, Doha focused on rural development, food security and special products, special and differential treatment, etc.²⁴.

These negotiations ended abruptly in 2008 due to tensions between the United States and India over agricultural issues²⁵. Doha, the only round

of negotiations opened during the WTO's existence, remains unfinished. And yet, Alan Matthews points out that the leveling of support between developed countries* and developing countries* through the conclusion of the Doha Round remains the first essential step before starting new rounds of negotiations²⁶.

Doha, the only round of negotiations opened during the WTO's existence, remains unfinished.

Since 2008, therefore, apart from a few issues (the Bali peace clause on public stockholding in 2013²⁷ and the end of export subsidies in 2015), progress has been virtually non-existent²⁸. Moreover, recent developments leave little doubt about the chances of resolving the situation²⁹. For years, there has been a proliferation of bilateral free trade agreements with even more dramatic consequences for developing countries* as well as plurilateral agreements³⁰ aimed at completely bypassing the consensus approach in force at the WTO.

Faced with climate change, which is already affecting agricultural production and whose future consequences are expected to be significant, and geopolitical turmoil, which is exacerbating panic on the financial markets, there is an ever-growing need for agricultural policies to meet sustainable development goals and address food security issues. Countries have clearly understood this: since the food crisis of 2007/08, there has been a strong resurgence of policies and programs to support domestic producers, particularly small farmers, in order to offset structural imbalances in agricultural markets. This

return to domestic policies demonstrates, once again, the WTO's failure in this area. By basing its trade approach on the hyper-specialization of agricultural models, the WTO and its Agreement on Agriculture have found themselves completely outdated before they have even been able to produce any substantial agreements. The limitation of public policies at the heart of the box system makes it impossible to control agricultural markets through domestic support and tools such as public stockholding, which are relevant for curbing food inflation and market speculation, are severely restricted by the limitations imposed by the AoA³¹. This stagnation of the WTO and neoliberal policies has been observed for many years in the countries of the Global South, which are unable to resolve their food security problems, but it has taken on a new dimension since food inflation has also affected the countries of the North, where the Covid crisis and the war in Ukraine have plunged millions of people into food insecurity at the heart of the EU³².

Ultimately, the AoA, and the WTO more generally, seem incapable of reforming themselves, prompting civil society organizations to consider alternatives to break the deadlock. This defense of new, fairer, and more equitable trade rules is at the heart of this study, because while changing the rules of international trade in agricultural products is a political goal to be achieved, the path to achieving such change still needs to be considered and evaluated.

WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- [Agricultural markets need agricultural policies and regulatory tools to be efficient.
- [International trade and the political space left to the discretion of states do not allow states to meet food security requirements and to move towards greater food sovereignty.
- [The WTO theoretically promotes the free market, which limits the possibilities for regulation, perpetuates food insecurity, continues to ensure the failure to achieve the SDGs, and enhances the inequality in our food systems.

2.

A search for multilateral **alternatives**

Recognizing the ineffectiveness of the neoliberal trade model calls for the development of alternatives to lay the foundations for a fairer trade regime, promoting greater solidarity between rich countries and lower-income countries, enabling better pay for farmers, the production of healthy, high-quality food for consumers and, overall, accelerating the transition to sustainable food systems. Various past, present or current alternatives have raised hopes that such a system will see the light of day.

Past and abandoned initiatives: the Havana Charter and the International Trade Organization (ITO)

Among the reflections of WTO critics, there is a call from many experts for a return to the spirit of the Havana Charter³³. This project, launched under the auspices of the United Nations Economic and Social Council by a resolution of February 18, 1946, led to a conference held in Havana in 1947-48. The charter, which was to give rise to the International Trade Organization (ITO), was ultimately abandoned in 1951 in response to the United States' refusal to ratify it. The ITO would have been placed, like other international agencies, under the auspices of the United Nations, and would have been one of the three pillars of the UN world order³⁴. This grouping under the UN umbrella would have allowed trade rules to be placed under the jurisdiction of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) rather than under a dispute settlement body independent of UN institutions.

The Havana Charter has a more social dimension, as it seeks to strike a balance between trade policies and economic regulation in the interests of the population's well-being and defend the mutual interests of states—a set of restrictions on free trade, so to speak. The stability of agricultural markets is considered a common good to be preserved, and food crises are acknowledged to have consequences that are far too catastrophic to be considered epiphenomena. The Havana

Charter represents an interesting approach, as it combines monopoly control with sector-by-sector regulation of the agricultural industry.

Negotiations on commodities are covered in Chapter VI of the charter, which emphasizes the need to mitigate agricultural market distortions by controlling trade in commodities³⁵. The aim of these sectoral agreements or commodity agreements is therefore “to prevent or alleviate the serious economic difficulties which may arise when adjustments between production and consumption cannot be effected by normal market forces alone as rapidly as the circumstances require” and “to prevent or moderate pronounced fluctuations in the price of a primary commodity” or “to maintain and develop the natural resources of the world and protect them from unnecessary exhaustion³⁶”. These are therefore agreements stipulating price or production regulation or implementing quantitative control of imports or exports, with a view to preserving natural resources³⁷.

Previous food crises have shown how important it is to exercise strict control over agricultural prices, particularly for LDCs. In this sense, the spirit of the charter—making state intervention the rule rather than the exception in times of crisis—remains highly relevant in the current context, even if it would require some rebalancing in light of the progress of economic globalization since the mid-20th century.

Although the ITO never saw the light of day, commodity agreements continued to structure agricultural trade until the late 1980s, when the GATT agricultural negotiations (Uruguay Round) challenged them. In any case, the return of the issue of raw materials to the geopolitical scene highlights

the need to strengthen the production and negotiating capacities of agricultural producers. It is precisely this type of agreement that is promoted in La Via Campesina's proposal (next chapter).

Making state intervention the rule rather than the exception.

Despite this, the economist Jacques Berthelot have warned against euphemizing the Havana Charter: while the charter has progressive aspects, its articles overlap, intertwine and are accompanied by complex procedures forming a tangled web that makes it difficult to read and translate. Berthelot was particularly concerned about the semantic similarity between many articles of the GATT and the Havana Charter, which refutes the idea that the charter was a significant step forward compared to the GATT³⁸. Finally, the charter does not establish any hierarchy of standards, which suggests that trade would have prevailed over social and environmental interests, as is currently the case.



Selected excerpts from the Havana Charter

- Article 11 of the charter states: “to achieve the objectives set out in the United Nations Charter, particularly the improvement of living standards, full employment, and conditions for progress and development in the economic and social order.”

The Charter is based on an approach aimed at developing countries through inter-state cooperation.

- Art. 13: “Member States recognize that [...] it may be necessary to resort to special State assistance and that [...] the granting of such assistance in the form of protective measures is justified.”

Internal support authorized

- Art. 15: “Member States recognize that special circumstances [...] may justify the conclusion of new preferential agreements between two or more countries.”

Preferential agreements possible

- Art. 26: “No Member State shall directly or indirectly grant any export subsidy for any product.”

- Article 28: “No Member State which grants, in any form whatsoever, a subsidy that has the direct or indirect effect of maintaining or increasing its exports of a commodity, shall administer that subsidy in such a way as to retain or obtain a share of world trade in that commodity in excess of its fair share.”

Prohibition of dumping and export subsidies.

THE HAVANA CHARTER LAYS DOWN SEVERAL KEY PRINCIPLES:

- [**The need to return to intergovernmental agreements on commodities:** having structured agricultural trade until the 1990s, these contracts set prices and quantities over several years and offer greater visibility for producers, as well as greater transparency in agricultural markets, which acts as a bulwark against excessive speculation.
- [**Food security control under the auspices of the United Nations:** this idea amounts to subjecting trade to the fundamental principles of democracy, respect for human rights, and the environment.
- [**Balance between economic liberalization and global trade regulation,** with a real emphasis on inter-state cooperation and development policies.

An alternative international agricultural trade framework based on food sovereignty

La Via Campesina (LVC) is an international peasant movement bringing together more than 180 local and national organizations in over 80 countries. Rooted in the values of defending peasant agriculture, LVC has made the promotion of food sovereignty its central cause, while raising awareness of the concept among a wide audience³⁹. The movement was built in conjunction with the WTO and has made rejecting the organization a prerequisite for the transition to a new agricultural model.

Based on the concrete reality of small-scale farmers, LVC therefore defends a vision centered on food sovereignty and based on the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Peasants (UNDROP). The founding principles of its alternative trade framework are:

FUNDAMENTAL PRINCIPLES

Trade must prioritize the rights of people, communities, and ecosystems over profit. The framework must be consistent with human rights and apply coherent principles within and between countries, in accordance with the definition of food sovereignty.

DEMOCRATIC SOVEREIGNTY

Every country must have the right to define its own food and agricultural policies. United Nations institutions such as the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the Committee on World Food Security (CFS), and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD) must support these rights.

REGIONAL TRADE

Regional supply chains must be prioritized over transcontinental traffic in order to relocalize food systems and improve market stability.

FAIR MARKETS

Small-scale producers must benefit from price support measures and income guarantees. This can be achieved by respecting labor rights, ensuring fair wages, and creating a public observatory for price transparency.

PROHIBITION OF HARMFUL PRACTICES

Dumping and subsidies to agribusinesses and speculative trade must be prohibited.

CURRENCY AND SOLIDARITY

Trade must move beyond dependence on dominant currencies, support fair trade, and reject neoliberal debt and conditional aid.

DEFENSE OF COMMON GOODS

Trade must protect land, water, biodiversity, and common goods. Trade must promote agrarian reform and collective, indigenous, and agroecological management, free from corporate control and “greenwashing” strategies.⁴⁰

Some points for discussion⁴¹:

THE VISION

La Via Campesina’s vision is based on food sovereignty. It therefore takes a holistic approach to agriculture, addressing not only agricultural policies, but also monetary, financial, maritime, and digital policies. While the whole may form a coherent whole, the articles that make up the trade framework have different impacts.

The LVC undoubtedly has expertise and legitimacy in the agricultural field, which gives indisputable weight to its claims in this area. However, the ambition to address trade regulation issues and related issues such as currency, digitalization, and labor rights all at the same time is proving to be an ambitious approach given the format of the treaty.

THE INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK

The trade framework developed by the LVC aims to strengthen the self-determination of peoples and their countries in a more democratic context. To this end, the movement underscores how United Nations organizations such as the FAO, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), IFAD, and the CFS could be of any help in this process. However, all these organizations act primarily as advisory bodies and therefore have no real decision-making power. The question therefore remains as to how such a transfer of competences is to take place, and by what means.

The Via Campesina considers that agricultural trade must not be governed by the WTO.

Furthermore, while institutions such as the CFS are relatively close to civil society and the interests of peasants, the claims made by organizations such as UNCTAD raise a number of questions. Indeed UNCTAD has over time significantly reduced both its power and its critical stance towards the architecture of international financial and trade, which means that “in just over 50 years, UNCTAD has gone from being a critical institution with a strong political dimension, aiming for systemic change in the global financial and economic order and linking the problems of over-indebtedness to structural inequalities between the development models of the South and North, to a technical institution applying the political precepts dictated by the IMF and the World Bank.”⁴²

The Agreement on Agriculture is obsolete and harmful.

In the area of agriculture, for example, UNCTAD has spoken out in favor of the African Continental Free Trade Area (AfCFTA)⁴³, has taken positions that lack nuance on the initiatives of multinational agri-food companies⁴⁴, and now even sees trade as part of the solution to gender inequalities and climate change. Finally, the FAO too has ambivalent positions and seems divided between several schools of thought. While its support for family farming—through the Decade of Family Farming, for example—is to be encouraged, it lacks a critical approach to trade when it comes to Economic Partnership Agreements (EPAs) or Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) and does not advocate for higher customs tariffs to protect developing countries* from imports from rich countries⁴⁵. In this context, basing a new trade regime on such institutions raises several questions about ethics and about the actual achievement of results.

IMPLEMENTATION

While many countries in the Global South may show a clear interest in a trade regime that gives them more leeway and, potentially, shifts the center of gravity of decision-making in their favor, there is reason to fear considerable resistance from the dominant powers that initiated the current economic order.

To rephrase Jacques Berthelot, if agriculture were to leave the WTO or the WTO were to leave agriculture, there is little to no reason why states would accept what they refuse to accept within the WTO, within a third organization (FAO, UNCTAD, or CFS). In addition, Berthelot underlined the issue of expertise transfer. The new institution will need to recruit lawyers who are experts in agricultural trade issues, all with reference to case law (Dispute Settlement Body, panels, Appellate Body). All this expertise is currently found within the WTO, which raises the issue of resetting the neoliberal software. Finally, the crux of the matter is that in the context of massive “defunding” of international institutions, we can only hope that countries will dedicate new budget lines to such an institution⁴⁶.

Agreement on Agriculture Re-Imagined

The Agreement on Agriculture Re-Imagined (AoA Rel) project is an initiative of three experts in agricultural trade, social justice, and agriculture. The main institutional partners are the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP) and a university research center (the Center for Development and Environment (CDE) at the University of Bern, composed of a group of experts from Argentina, Brazil, China, the United States, Europe, Uganda, and Zimbabwe.

Based on the observation that the WTO and its Agreement on Agriculture (AoA) are incapable of resolving the contradictions of international trade⁴⁷, the members of the AoA-Rel initiative have drafted new proposals to reimagine a treaty to replace the AoA. In doing so, they are instilling hope for a paradigm shift in which it would be possible to reimagine international agricultural trade that serves society with its own set of rules and principles⁴⁸.

The AoA Rel is based on the principles of international law, particularly human and environmental rights. These principles are cumulative, meaning they are indivisible. Furthermore, the project’s interdisciplinary approach is undeniably one of its strengths, as it breaks with the monolithic take that has so far prevailed in orthodox views of international trade. The principles of the treaty are as follows⁴⁹:

The principles of the treaty



1

Human rights and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): the parties must be guided by UN declarations. The parties may not invoke the terms of the treaty to undermine the realization of the rights of other parties or to weaken planetary boundaries.



2

Food security, a common concern for humanity: all parties commit to achieving food security through sustainable food systems.



3

Human beings are on an equal footing with nature: humans and all their activities are an integral part of nature. As such, the parties commit to keeping activities within planetary boundaries and to limit their environmental impact.



4

International cooperation and governance: all parties must collaborate at the regional and international levels with a view to international solidarity.



5

Sovereignty and no harm: parties have the option of implementing their own policies while ensuring that they do not cause harm outside their territory.



6

Inclusive and sustainable prosperity and economic well-being: food systems must be designed to be consistent with the objectives of prosperity and economic well-being.



7

Redressing power inequalities: the parties must take measures to ensure substantial equality between countries.



8

Participation, accountability, and inclusive governance: the parties must structure their agricultural policies in such a way as to enable the full, meaningful, and informed participation of all actors in society.

Some points for discussion:

ISSUES WITH VOCABULARY AND CONCEPTS

The treaty is carefully worded, demonstrating the professionalism and expertise of its authors. The definition of the terms used, the syntax, and the treaty's focus on agricultural issues ensure that the whole document is highly consistent and relevant. This professionalism is a definite added value in terms of gaining credibility with national delegations and opening up the debate in international arenas. We will now consider certain elements that are particularly relevant.

One of the contributions of the AoA-Rel is the concept of sustainable food systems, which is established as one of the central concepts of the vision. The definition set out in the annex to the document is entirely consistent with the vision of the CFS High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE) (without, however, ensuring semantic continuity). The issues of agro-ecological zones and socio-ecological systems are also terms that bring a new perspective to the agricultural question. Instead of thinking in terms of national territories, the treaty proposes extending the management of agroecosystems beyond national jurisdictions and, where necessary, adopting a regional vision. This approach thus makes it possible to strengthen cooperation between national stakeholders and to emphasize the management of agricultural systems, which is more in line with ecological realities (watersheds, meso- and macroclimates, etc.) as well as with the diversity of culinary practices and traditions (rice and corn civilizations, etc.). Nevertheless, whether such a concept can still be realistically applied in a world where borders and territories seem increasingly closed, remains to be seen.

THE VISION

However, the AoA-Rel adopts the term food security to frame its vision and does not mention the term food sovereignty. Although some of the cen-



tral elements of food sovereignty are included in the definition of sustainable food systems, the term does not appear anywhere in the treaty.

Sustainable food systems is established as one of the central concepts of the Agreement on Agriculture Re-Imagined.

This absence is striking, as food sovereignty is a term rooted in the political demands of contemporary peasantry. Food security, on the other hand, is

a dynamic term that has undergone many changes, notably the integration of new commonly accepted pillars in addition to the four traditional pillars—agency and sustainability⁵⁰—, but remains a relatively quantitative and technocratic term, subject to criticism from certain organizations and schools of thought. The limitations of the concept of food security lie mainly in its compatibility with the industrial agri-food system, as it does not fundamentally challenge the international division of trade or the inequity of trade between rich countries and low- and middle-income countries⁵¹.

The economist Arnaud Orain goes a step further by asserting that, over the past fifteen years, the original meaning of the term food security has been reversed: while it was originally conceived as a measure of supply and demand, encouraging increased agricultural production –

which two researchers from the French Agricultural Research Centre for International Development (CIRAD) had already described in 2008 as “productionism”⁵² – it is now used to promote the monopolization of agricultural resources, or “recolonization,” in a kind of neo-mercantile approach. The author theorizes this view under the term “capitalism of finitude,” in which the quest for food security serves as a pretext for rich countries in the North to exacerbate the takeover of land and agricultural capacities by multinational corporations in countries in the Global South—a 21st-century version of neo-mercantilism⁵³.

Even if the concept of food sovereignty is open to criticism in many respects⁵⁴, it remains a central and unifying concept in peasant struggles. It is therefore concerning that it should be excluded from the agreement.

IMPLEMENTATION OF NATIONAL STRATEGIES

The AoA-Rel commits to making the Parties take responsibility and act to develop national strategies for the transition to sustainable food systems. Although couched in different terms, the wording used to refer to the strategies that members must pursue is similar to that of multistakeholderism⁵⁵, which raises certain challenges. Indeed, the concept of multistakeholderism (or multi-stakeholder partnerships) has been flourishing in recent years in the jargon of international institutions to promote the participation of all stakeholders in decision-making, as was seen at the United Nations Food Systems Summit (UNFSS). Yet, multistakeholderism tends to reproduce pre-existing inequalities within food systems by ignoring the weight of actors and the differentiated roles and responsibilities of stakeholders⁵⁶. The HLPE warned against this mechanism:

Multistakeholder partnerships are not immune to another pitfall, which is that of reproducing existing power asymmetries and, in so doing, further entrenching the position of the most influential actors. One of the challenges for partnerships working in the field of food security and nutrition is therefore to recognize these imbalances in power relations and find ways to address them. In this regard, openness, transparency, and accountability play a fundamental role. To ensure the full participation of the most marginalized and vulnerable groups, who are directly affected by food insecurity and malnutrition, it is imperative that the most fragile partners have the right and the capacity to express themselves, make their voices heard, and influence decisions⁵⁷.

Not distinguishing between the different actors in the food chain is problematic because farmers in the Global South can obviously not be placed on an equal footing with large industrial groups, lest we perpetuate the same pitfalls that plague our food systems.

WHAT TO REMEMBER:

- [Food sovereignty provides a relevant framework to reflect on a new trade regime for agriculture.
- [The return of Member States and domestic agricultural policies calls into question the relevance of the WTO.
- [However, administering such a trade regime is a thorny question: if the WTO is illegitimate, replacing it with a legitimate organization is a challenging endeavor.
- [While LVC takes a more ideological approach, focused on food sovereignty, the Reimagined Agreement on Agriculture is based on a more technical approach, similar to the model of the existing Agreement on Agriculture.
- [While LVC's vision is ideologically more coherent, it lacks precision and implementation details. The AoA Rel's expertise and technical expertise are impressive but sometimes come at the expense of a certain radicalism in the language and terms used.

3.

What can we learn from these initiatives: towards a new international **trade regime**?

The Trump turning point

The sequence of events currently unfolding, brilliantly orchestrated by the Trump administration, is simply a continuation of an economic approach that has evolved from a rigid defense of free trade to a form of economic protectionism. In his essay, economist Arnaud Orain brings into focus a statement by Jake Sullivan, then President Joe Biden's national security advisor, who explained the impasse of free trade policy in April 2023, two years before Trump's Day of Liberation:

“One assumption was at the heart of this entire policy: markets always allocate capital productively and efficiently, no matter what our competitors do, no matter how great our challenges are, and no matter how many safeguards we have removed. No one, certainly not me, questions the power of markets. [...] The assumption that deep trade liberalization would help America export goods [...] is a promise that has not been kept. This means replacing an approach based solely on overly simplistic assumptions [...] with one that encourages targeted and necessary investment in areas where private markets cannot act alone⁵⁸ »

The United States has, in general, always put in place protectionist agricultural measures. Nevertheless, from the Biden administration onwards, a form of protectionism made a noteworthy comeback, constituting a sign that the center of gravity of the global economy, which for over a century had been the United States, was shifting. Biden's warning shots only

had to meet Trump's authoritarianism for events to come to a head. On April 2, 2025, the United States kicked the hornet's nest and broke the consensus that had prevailed in international trade: by introducing reciprocal tariffs and trafficking tariffs (targeting China, Canada, and Mexico in the specific case of fentanyl), the United States is seeking to reduce the gap between the customs protections still enjoyed by its partner countries and its own supposed abandonment of protectionism. These “reciprocal” measures, which are in fact one-sided and obtained through coercion, would supposedly restore fairness to the US trade balance⁵⁹.

Biden's warning shots only had to meet Trump's authoritarianism.

Admittedly, customs duties are a powerful tool to protect and stimulate domestic markets. This is why agricultural organizations are calling for such tariffs at borders, to protect their agricultural markets⁶⁰. However, the approach here is completely different: the primary objective of these customs tariffs is not to serve the public interest, ensure better incomes for farmers, and improve the allocation of public resources, but rather to ensure that US companies and the US economy in general improve their position in international markets through the balance of power.

Yet, the United States has benefited, and continues to benefit, from inter-

national agricultural trade through protectionist measures, massive funding for its industrial and export agriculture with support laundering under the green box when the WTO was created⁶¹, intellectual property rights, etc. Since the failure of the Doha Round, despite repeated requests from developing countries* through multiple communications filed with the WTO Secretariat⁶², these structural inequalities persist⁶³.

The European Union-United States trade agreement, like most agreements trumpeted by the United States, contravenes WTO regulations because it does not respect the most-favored-nation (MFN) principle enshrined in WTO law. According to the MFN clause, a country cannot impose different tariffs on the same product, and all tariffs must be equivalent regardless of the country. This agreement is therefore an outright rejection of one of the founding pillars of the neoliberal order raises the question, beyond the very legitimacy of the WTO, of its usefulness in continuing to govern international trade. However, it should be noted that a return to customs protectionism is not a foregone conclusion: if there is little economic benefit, it is highly likely that the financial community and the agricultural export sector will quickly call for a return to market liberalization⁶⁴.

In any case, the tariff agreements were ruled unconstitutional by the US International Trade Court on May 28, 2025, and by the District Court for the District of Columbia the following day⁶⁵. At issue was the justification of “national emergency” invoked by the president under the International

Intergovernmentality must replace supranationality of the WTO.

Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA). At the last minute, the government obtained a stay of the decision until the court's appeal, starting on November 5. In the meantime, the tariffs remain in force, but nothing has yet been decided⁶⁶. Whatever the outcome may be, the success or failure of such legal appeals does nothing to alleviate the threat to global trade: in case the Trump administration fails to use the IEEPA, it is already determined to use other legislative vehicles to achieve its ends via the Trade Act of 1974⁶⁷.

Once again, the case of LDCs remains a major concern given the risk these countries face in terms of food security. These countries are the most fragile, yet they are the ones most severely affected by the Trump administration's wrath. The situation is dramatic given that these countries account for a negligible share of US imports while, conversely, the United States accounts for a significant share of exports to LDCs. The result is a totally unfair playing field and sheds light on the brutality of the trade measures adopted.

What kind of multilateralism?

The various options that are on the table, and the current balance of power in international trade call for a pragmatic approach: while the WTO may be in a vegetative state and the benefits of its replacement become more and more obvious in light of the criticisms outlined above, the timing of such a replacement and the general state of the global geopolitical order call for internal reform measures that would help resolve a situation that is catastrophic for the peasant farming communities of the Global South. Ultimately, measures taken outside the multilateral framework, even if they may have harmful effects, seem to be easier to implement in such an uncertain context.

The following proposals are therefore ranked in order of preference.

A POST-WTO WORLD?

A new multilateralism that bypasses the WTO raises the question of which institution will replace the WTO. This institution will need to spearhead a new type of cooperation between Member States and set strong guidelines to limit the interstate competition that exists in the current multilateral system. Lastly, this institution must be capable of transcending the supranationalism that currently characterizes the WTO and which, as liberalization agreements progress, erodes the sovereignty of states. Sovereignty must

be respected, as it is key to providing states with the necessary political space.

The Committee on World Food Security (CFS), through its governance as an inclusive structure for civil society, indigenous peoples, and the private sector, through its composition as the main international and intergovernmental platform enabling all stakeholders to work together to ensure food security and nutrition for all and to realize the right to adequate food, and through its expertise as the High-Level Panel of Experts on Food Security and Nutrition (HLPE), seems to be the appropriate organization to take on such a role, as suggested by the projects featuring in this report.

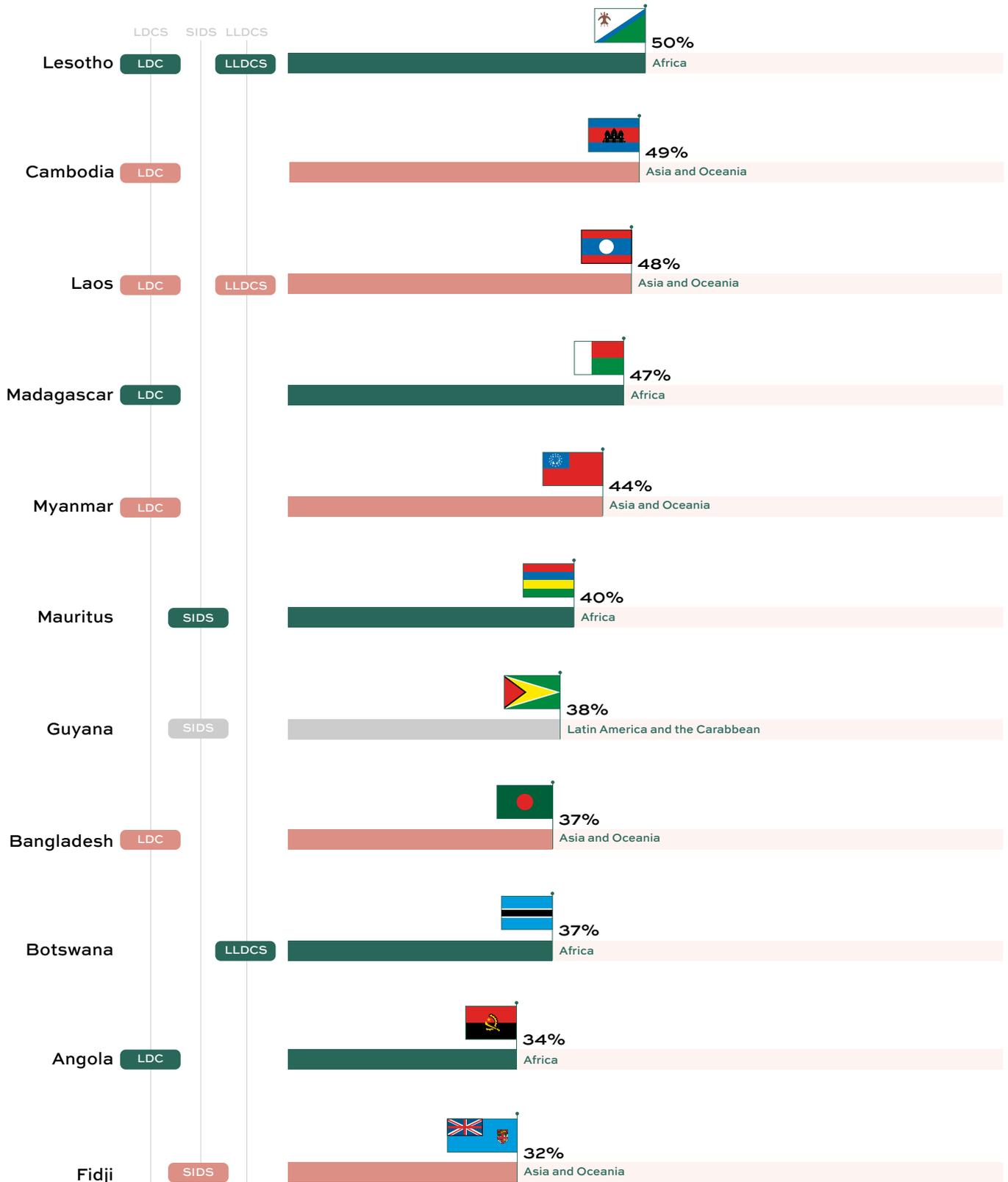
That said, there is the thorny question of the legitimacy of such a forum, its legally binding nature, and its ability to act. It is important to remember that the specificity of the WTO is precisely that it has a binding legal body (the DSB), which, albeit imperfect and violating the sovereignty of states, legitimizes its authority and guarantees compliance with its decisions. A CFS without such a legal arm would be a waste of time.

WHICH REFORM OF THE WTO?

While removing agriculture from the WTO is a desirable political goal, an institution that would ensure the continuity of multilateralism is unlikely to emerge in the near future. More accessible reforms of the WTO are therefore needed in the shorter term:

US tariffs **imposed** on the poorest countries

(initial tariff proposal, before July 2025)



LDCS: Vulnerables economies include least developed countries
 SIDS: Small island developing States
 LLDCS: Landlocked developing countries

Source : UNCTAD, 2025.

The FAO Committee on World Food Security could be the organization administering the new trading regime.

- **ADOPT A REFORM OF THE AOA:**

the elements put forward by the Agreement on Agriculture Re-Imagined treaty deserve attention. They carry with them a long-standing demand for a revision of the Agreement on Agriculture to allow developing countries* to benefit from more policy space and to correct the inequalities inherent in the current AoA.

- **REVISE WTO OBJECTIVES:**

beyond simply reforming one of the WTO's numerous agreements, it is critical to review the organization's overall narrative and discourse. While trade can be seen as a tool for development, other prerogatives must be taken into consideration: human rights, environmental protection, the fight against global warming, the rights and protection of the population, etc.

- **MAINTAIN THE CONSENSUS APPROACH:**

the crux of the problem in WTO negotiations is the need for consensus on each reform of the agreements. However, consensus is the last safeguard that allows the principle of equal voting rights to be maintained and thus respects the sovereignty of member states. While, as Jacques Berthelot suggested⁶⁸, the principle of qualified majority voting would help to break the deadlock in certain negotiations, this voting method represents an unprecedented risk for the adoption of plurilateral agreements that some member states are insistently pushing for, and certain countries would then no longer be able to use their power of veto to obtain concessions (which is effectively a double-edged sword).

- **CONCLUDE THE DOHA ROUND:**

this is the sine qua non for progress in all WTO agricultural negotiations. Without the conclusion of the Doha Round, there will be no concessions on other issues, including:

- > Reducing internal support in developed countries so that developing countries* and LDCs can regain relative competitiveness

- > Creating a special safeguard mechanism (SSM) to protect developing countries* from import surges

- > A permanent solution on the issue of public stockholding

- **FORM A COALITION OF VOLUNTEERS?**

Even if it is unlikely to achieve tangible results, a coalition of developed* and developing* countries could decide to move negotiations forward by distancing themselves from the United States and its veto power. Technically speaking, the United States is already two years behind on its WTO contributions. However, the statutes are clear: if a member is not up to date with its contributions for three consecutive years, it becomes a de facto inactive member and loses the right to participate in the organization's decisions. In every case, strengthening trade or supply chain networks concentrated in countries considered political and economic allies, or friendshoring, is a necessity in a context of growing geopolitical instability.

WHAT SHOULD THE EU DO?

The EU must absolutely reverse its position: on the one hand, it champions multilateralism, while on the other hand constantly undermining it

by signing a myriad of bilateral agreements since 2005. The pace of these agreements has accelerated in recent years, and since Trump's second term they have served as a clear justification of the need for diversification among economic partners. However, this position is detrimental to both agriculture in developing countries* and European agriculture⁶⁹.

Regarding agricultural policies in European countries, the distorting effect of the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) subsidies has aftereffects on international agricultural markets (agricultural dumping). Since 2005, the European Commission has decoupled direct subsidies paid to farmers. Decoupling allows subsidies to be paid directly to farmers regardless of the quantities produced, production methods, or price levels, which ensures compliance with WTO law. In doing so, the Commission has created an undifferentiated approach to agricultural subsidies, which makes it unable to target sustainable agricultural practices or farmers' real income.

Conversely, for developing countries*, basing agricultural support on direct funding is an unattainable goal as the financial burden of such aid hinges on the number of farmers. In countries where the majority of the population lives off agriculture and where public finances are eroded by the burden of public debt, these subsidies are financially unsustainable. As things stand, it is therefore unrealistic to expect such support from many developing countries*, specifically LDCs⁷⁰.

To correct this imbalance, the EU must take action by:

- **ABANDONING THE PRIVILEGES** it granted itself during the Uruguay Round, that is, transferring its domestic support in green box support, and thus continuing to pursue a clearly export-oriented agricultural policy.
- **ENDING BILATERAL FREE TRADE AGREEMENTS** that are slowly killing any hope of a revival of multilateralism or of cooling down trade and diplomatic relations with the Global South.
- **REVISING THE CAP** to make it less export-oriented and implementing real and effective control of trade-distorting subsidies. In short, making the CAP more compatible with a multilateralism that is based on principles of cooperation and respects a hierarchy of norms (human rights and the environment take precedence over trade).

This state of uncertainty and drift in multilateralism could be a unique opportunity for the EU to embark on a third way between the United States and China and thus become the standard-bearer for a reinvigorated multilateralism.

UNILATERAL MEASURES

Conditioning access to the EU market can be a powerful and attractive way to encourage trading partners to improve production standards or to collaborate at a multilateral level. Nonetheless, in a multilateral context, this approach has its limitations, as it operates through coercive regulation (no compliance with standards means no market access) and tends to strain trade relations. Worse still, among agricultural producers, the smallest and most vulnerable ones will be the

first victims of new European regulations⁷¹. While unilateral measures may represent a short- or medium-term solution for regulating agricultural markets, they cannot constitute a structural, long-term response to international trade imbalances.

*The EU must
abandoned
the privileges
it granted itself
during the WTO's
inception.*

4.

Conclusion

The geopolitical upheavals in international trade threaten to sweep away the current economic system, or subject it to new dictates with consequences that are likely to be even more serious for the environment, climate change, and food security. Both for the economies of the lowest-income countries and for the international institutions that have built the current trade order since World War II, it is urgent to break out of the torpor caused by this unprecedented situation. It is indeed in these moments of change that it is possible to tip the balance in our favor and impose a new narrative on trade between countries and regions around the globe.

The WTO's apathy and its inability to defuse a tense trade situation, to move forward with agricultural trade negotiations that have been stalled for years, or even simply to enforce compliance with its trade rules, leads to the conclusion that it is high time to put an end to the institution. A new trade regime must be created, one that promotes fair development and cooperation between countries and nations, and above all, one that places human rights and environmental protection issues ahead of trade issues. The promotion of sustainable food systems requires a major overhaul of the trade framework.

The strength of civil society lies precisely in its ability to be a force for change. The proposals examined in this study from the Phosphore collection emphasize the potential that continues to exist in the cracks that still remain within civil society, and which it is vital to keep on filling.



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