

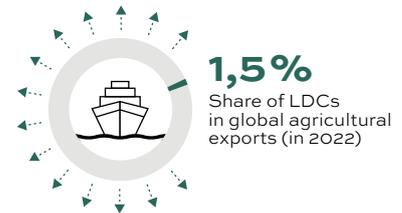
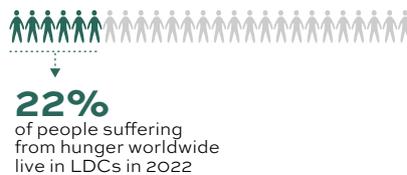
What's new for **tomorrow's** **international trade?**



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

International agricultural trade is running out of steam. The World Trade Organization (WTO) is paralysed, unable to arbitrate between development, food security and fairness. The latest issue of Phosphore raises a key issue : what multilateral framework could replace or reform the WTO in order to achieve fairer and more sustainable agricultural trade?

Some **key** figures



Since 2020, the successive shocks caused by the Covid-19, the war in Ukraine and the nationalist-authoritarian turn in the United States have revealed the fragility of a model long dominated by the pursuit of comparative advantages, short-term profit, land concentration and the exploitation of natural resources.

Fundamentally unstable agricultural markets

Agricultural markets obey their own particular logic. Supply depends on biological and climatic contexts, while demand remains rigid, dictated by vital needs. Production times, farmers' expectations, the financialization of agricultural markets and the effects of climate change cause structural instability in supply : agricultural prices fluctuate wildly, threatening both producers and consumers.

These imbalances justify strong public policies : price regulation, safety nets, public stocks or targeted support. However, the current international trade, shaped by the WTO, severely restricts these tools in the name of free competition.

Trade and food security : a tricky equation

International trade plays an ambiguous role: while it enables many importing countries to secure their food supplies, it also increases their dependence on increasingly volatile markets. While trade liberalization has sometimes helped to lower food prices, it has also exacerbated unfair competition between unequal agricultural sectors and accelerated the standardization of diets in favour of ultra-processed products.

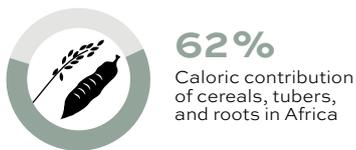
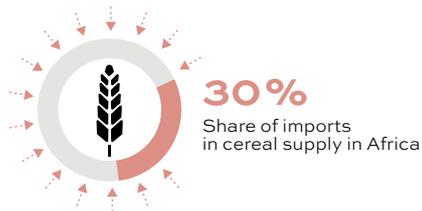
The Least Developed Countries (LDC), particularly in Africa, embody this dependence : a structural public deficit prevents them from supporting producers and makes them extremely vulnerable to fluctuations in agricultural markets. In 2022, these countries accounted for 22% of the world's undernourished population.

In other words, without strong national policies, current agricultural trade rules do not allow food security objectives to be achieved.

The WTO at a deadlock

Since 1995, the WTO has regulated agricultural trade through its Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). Inspired by the theory of comparative advantages, it is based on specialisation in agricultural production and the opening of national markets. In practice, this system perpetuates inequalities: rich countries continue to provide massive support to their agriculture, while countries in the Global South see their policy space reduced, unable to bridge the gap that separates them from countries in the North in terms of agricultural productivity.

Negotiations intended to correct these imbalances, notably the Doha Round launched in 2001, have never been successful. Only a few minor agreements (public stockholding in 2013, end of export subsidies in 2015) have been adopted. As a result, states are now taking back control, multiplying national agricultural policies and protectionist measures – a sign of disapproval of the multilateral system..



Alternatives in the making

Faced with the paralysis of the WTO, civil society and research centers are exploring other avenues. Three proposals are highlighted:

1. THE HAVANA CHARTER (1948)

This initiative was supposed to give rise to the International Trade Organization (ITO). The charter advocates that trade must be related to cooperation between states and regulation of commodity markets. Intergovernmental agreements should set prices and quantities over several years, protecting producers and consumers from soaring market prices.

2. LA VIA CAMPESINA'S FOOD SOVEREIGNTY FRAMEWORK

The large international farmers' union advocates a complete overhaul of the system: prioritizing human rights, relocating trade, banning dumping and ensuring democratic control of agricultural policies. Each country should

be free to define its own food strategy, with the support of UN institutions (FAO, UNCTAD, CFS).

However, the feasibility of such a framework is questionable : these agencies have little binding power and lack resources. The establishment of a new regime would also require a complex and costly transfer of expertise outside of the WTO.

3. THE AGREEMENT ON AGRICULTURE RE-IMAGINED (AOA REI)

Developed by researchers at the IATP and the University of Bern, this project aims to technically and legally rewrite the Agreement on Agriculture. It places human rights, international cooperation, sustainable prosperity and sustainable food systems at the heart of the treaty.

Its precision and legal language make it a credible alternative, but one that is more technocratic and less radical than the one of La Via Campesina. The concept of food security supersedes the more political concept of food sovereignty.

Reinventing multilateralism

Recent protectionist moves by the United States – including 'reciprocal' tariffs introduced by the Trump administration in 2025 – have further weakened the multilateral system. Most-favored-nation principle is being ignored, and the poorest countries are bearing the brunt of the consequences.

Three paths are emerging:

- **Post-WTO multilateralism**, based on the FAO's Committee on World Food Security as the governing body : inclusive, intergovernmental and based on the right to food.
- **An internal reform of the WTO**, incorporating the promises of the Doha Round, an overhaul of the Agreement on Agriculture, and a redefinition of its objectives

on human rights and the environment, while maintaining the principle of consensus to preserve state sovereignty.

- **A coalition of volunteers**, bringing together countries from the North and South determined to move forward without the United States, establishing new "friendly" supply chains (friendshoring).

The European Union, for its part, must truly work towards multilateralism by ceasing to multiply bilateral free trade agreements and by echoing the demands of countries in the Global South. NGOs also recommend removing the privileges inherited from the WTO by revising the European Common Agricultural Policy : making direct payments less export-oriented and targeting sustainable agricultural practices.

Towards a new trade agreement

Successive crises have reshuffled the deck : international trade can no longer be viewed as an end in itself, but rather as a means to promote the right to food, social justice and agroecological transition.

BREAKING FREE FROM THE NEOLIBERALISM MEANS :

- **PUT FOOD SECURITY and sovereignty back at the heart of policy;**
- **STRENGTHEN COOPERATION** between states rather than competition;
- **SUBORDINATE** trade rules to fundamental rights and planetary boundaries.

The overhaul of global trade will not come spontaneously from institutions or markets, but from the ability of civil societies to impose an alternative vision. Between reform and rupture, the choice of a fair, solidarity-based and sustainable trade model remains open.



The Phosphore Collection
is a collaboration between the NGOs
Autre Terre, Humundi and Iles de Paix.

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Photos

cover 1 & 4: Darksite,
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Printed on recycled paper.

Responsible Publisher

Benoit De Waegeneer,
4 rue aux Laines, 1 000 Bruxelles

With the support of

the French Community of Belgium



and the Directorate-general for Develop-
ment Cooperation and Humanitarian Aid
(DGD)



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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