

CRIT/CWS WORKING PAPER SERIES

WORKING PAPER

**TRADE AND AGRICULTURE: A DISCOURSE ON CROSS CUTTING
ISSUES**

CRIT/CWS WORKING PAPER SERIES No. 73

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MAY 2024

CENTRE FOR WTO STUDIES

CENTRE FOR RESEARCH IN INTERNATIONAL TRADE

INDIAN INSTITUTE OF FOREIGN TRADE

NEW DELHI

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Trade and Agriculture: A discourse on Cross Cutting issues¹

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ABSTRACT

Several cross-cutting issues on trade and agriculture are emerging in discussions at various international forums, including the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and Bilateral trade agreements. The global agriculture landscape faces multifaceted challenges including ensuring food security, posing a serious concern towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). In achieving social, economic and environmental dimensions of SDGs, multilateral rules governing agriculture trade are integral. Amid the negotiations at the WTO, several cross-cutting issues have emerged beyond the core negotiation areas. This study delves into some of these issues, encompassing repurposing agricultural subsidies, public stockholding for food security purposes, sustainable food systems, unilateral trade measures, special safeguard mechanisms, cotton, export restrictions, as well as work program for Least Developed Countries and Net Food Importing Developing Countries. It aims to shed light on the discourse surrounding these issues to navigate the complexities of agriculture trade better, fostering a more inclusive global agriculture framework.

Keywords: WTO, Agriculture trade, Sustainable Development Goal, Cross-Cutting issues, PSH, Food Security, Subsidies.

¹ A modified version of this working paper will also be published as a book chapter in the International Economic Integration, Oxford University Press.

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LIST OF ABBRIVIATIONS

ABBREVIATION	DEFINITION
AoA	Agreement on Agriculture
AMS	Aggregate Measurement of Support
CoASS	Committee on Agriculture Special Session
COA	Committee on Agriculture
CTE	Committee on Trade and Environment
ERP	External Reference Price of 1986-88
GATT	General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation
LDC	Least Developed Countries
NFIDC	Net Food Importing Countries
PSH	Public Stockholding
SDG	Sustainable Development Goal
SSM	Special Safeguard Mechanism
SFS	Sustainable Food Systems
SPS	Sanitary and Phytosanitary
S&DT	Special and Differential Treatment
TDDS	Trade Distorting Domestic Support
TESSD	Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions
WTO	World Trade Organisation
USMCA	United States Mexico Canada Agreement
UNEP	United Nations Environment Programme
UNFCCC	The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
MC12	12 th WTO Ministerial Conference
MC13	13 th WTO Ministerial Conference

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1. INTRODUCTION

The global agriculture landscape finds itself grappling with a myriad of challenges, from the impacts of climate change to ensuring food security, posing a serious concern towards achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDG). Various SDGs related to trade and agriculture are being intensely discussed at multiple multilateral and regional forums, including G20, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Trade Organisation (WTO). At the WTO, the sustainability issue related to agriculture is being deliberated within different committees, including the Committee on Agriculture Special Session (CoASS), the Committee on Agriculture (CoA), the Committee on Trade and Environment (CTE), and the Committee on Sanitary and Phytosanitary measures (SPS Committee). At the 12th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC12), the highest decision-making body, members declared to make progress towards the promotion of sustainable agriculture and food systems and resilient agriculture practices (WTO, 2022c, 2022e).

Some of the cross-cutting issues in agriculture trade that are being discussed in various committees are repurposing agriculture subsidies, public stockholding for food security purposes (PSH), export restrictions, work program for Least Developed Countries (LDC) and Net Food Importing Developing Countries (NFIDC), market access, special safeguard mechanism (SSM), cotton, transparency, sustainable food systems and unilateral trade measures.

At the CoASS, members are currently pursuing talks on seven negotiating topics in the area of food and agricultural trade, namely domestic support, market access, export competition, SSM, export restrictions, cotton, and PSH. The issue of a permanent solution to PSH and SSM for developing countries are mandates agreed upon by the members at the 2015 Nairobi Ministerial Conference, and the cotton subsidies mandate was agreed upon at the 2004 Hong Kong Ministerial Conference, which was reaffirmed at the 2015 Nairobi Ministerial Conference. All members agree on the importance of updating the WTO agricultural rules to tackle the growing challenges. Several proposals have been tabled on the negotiating issues, however, consensus remains elusive due to divergence in members' positions towards tackling these challenges.

Negotiations pertaining to disciplines on agriculture subsidies are being undertaken under CoASS. Simultaneously, interested members in the CTE are engaged in plurilateral discussions under Trade and Environmental Sustainability Structured Discussions (TESSD), where, among others, the environmental effects of agriculture subsidies are examined to reduce carbon emissions to achieve climate goals under UNFCCC. Food security challenges have taken center stage in negotiations on PSH and export restrictions. Further, discussions on concerns pertaining to LDCs and NFIDCs on the WTO rules are being undertaken at the CoA. At the SPS Committee, discussions are ongoing on issues related to sustainable food systems and how the implementation of the SPS agreement can help tackle emerging challenges. The SPS agreement sets out the basic rules on food safety and animal and plant health standards for members.

Amidst these multilateral discussions on approaches towards tackling challenges, a growing concern emerges regarding the adoption of unilateral trade measures such as the European Union Deforestation Regulation (EUDR) to address climate change concerns. Further, some countries have expressed willingness to adopt similar measures. Such an approach has raised several concerns among WTO members. Due to the dysfunctional WTO dispute settlement body, this could lead to a downward spiral of tit-for-tat responses and a more fragmented world dominated by regional trade blocs. WTO members can adopt retaliatory mechanisms to mitigate the impact of these measures, which will lead to a significant impact on global trade in agricultural goods.

Some of these cross-cutting issues such as addressing sustainable food systems, export restrictions, and agricultural safeguards, can be traced in provisions of free trade agreements (FTA) like the EU-Chile, the United States- Mexico- Canada Agreement (USMCA). While specific provisions seek to enhance cooperation on these issues, some provisions extend beyond the established ambit of the WTO rules, imposing binding obligations on the involved parties and further subjecting them to dispute settlement mechanisms in cases of non-compliance.

In this context, this study looks into some of the cross-cutting issues in agriculture trade at the WTO, concurrently discussing provisions in the bilateral trade agreements and unravelling the intricate tapestry of negotiations and agreements shaping the future of agriculture trade and

production. It is divided into eight sections. Section 2 explores the discourse on climate change and agriculture subsidies. Section 3 discusses the issue of PSH. Section 4 deals with export restrictions. Section 5 provides an overview of the discussion on sustainable food systems. Section 6 discusses the issue of unilateral trade measures. Section 7 attempts to explore miscellaneous issues, including the CoA work program for LDCs and NFIDCs, the demand for SSM, the issue of cotton, and transparency as a cross-cutting issue. Section 8 concludes the study.

2. CLIMATE CHANGE AND AGRICULTURE SUBSIDIES

Trade and sustainable agriculture have been frequently featured in the discourse surrounding environmental issues and climate change. There is a growing concern that agricultural subsidies have been adversely affecting the environment, as one-third of global greenhouse emissions in 2019 were contributed by agriculture-food systems (Bellman, 2022). It is estimated that support to agricultural producers will increase to US\$ 1.80 trillion by 2030 (FAO, UNDP and UNEP, 2021). Furthermore, the calls for repurposing agricultural support were raised at the 2023 Conference of the Parties (COP28) to the UNFCCC. Repurposing agriculture subsidies means reducing or eliminating trade-distorting support with a corresponding increase in non-trade-distorting support. For instance, a reduction in the Amber box spending with a corresponding increase in the Green box under the WTO Agreement on Agriculture (AoA).

While the issue of agriculture subsidies is being discussed in the CTE (Bachhus, 2023), the rules for disciplining the agriculture subsidies are being negotiated under the CoASS. As discussed in Chapter 23 on “Multilateral Rules on Agriculture”, the AoA provides detailed provisions on domestic support, and the reduction in trade-distorting support is one of the objectives of the reform program through agriculture negotiations under Article 20. The preamble of the AoA requires that the reform program be made in an equitable way to address the issues related to food security and environmental protection. It also enunciates that special and differential treatment (S&DT) to be an integral element of the negotiations. These negotiations aim to further limit the policy space to provide trade-distorting agricultural subsidies. Given the sensitivities and varied interests of the WTO members, consensus remains elusive.

Many developing countries, whose farmers are primarily low-income or resource-poor, contend that the AoA is imbalanced and embedded with asymmetries undermining a level playing field for their farmers. They argue that the Aggregate Measurement of Support (AMS) entitlements allow some countries to continue with massive agricultural subsidies without breaching their commitments. With these entitlements, a member can provide a high level of subsidies as a percentage of the value of production and concentrate the support in a few products. Therefore, developing countries are demanding that any domestic support reforms should first address this asymmetry by eliminating the AMS entitlements, and it is a prerequisite for considering other reforms in domestic support negotiations (WTO, 2018). Most developing countries also have strong reservations about capping the support to provide investment subsidies and input subsidies to low-income or resource-poor farmers under the Development box (Article 6.2). Besides eliminating AMS entitlements, the African Group has proposed a cap on Blue box support and limiting the direct payments under Green box at 5 percent of the value of production. However, the proposal seeks direct payments under the Green box to low-income or resource-poor farmers shall be exempted (WTO, 2023d). Notably, the developed countries, especially the European Union (EU) have strong objections to capping the direct payments under the Green box as it provides significant support under this provision.

On the other hand, some members of the Cairns group³ call for the establishment of a Total Trade-distorting Domestic Support (TTDS) entitlement limit, which would cap the support under the Blue box, Development box, and Amber box, including the *de minimis* limit. These countries argue that TTDS entitlement of all WTO members has been increasing steeply and is projected to be US\$ 2 Trillion by 2030 (WTO,2019c). They have expressed concerns that these flexibilities would undermine sustainability and climate goals. Hence, they are demanding capping and reducing the sum of current global TTDS entitlements by at least half till 2034 (WTO, 2024a). The current TTDS of a member would be determined based on their flexibility under Article 6 of the AoA, namely the Amber box, Development box, and Blue box. The global TTDS is the summation of the current TTDS of all members. To reduce the global TTDS by half, the contribution by individual members will need to be proportionate to the size of those members' current entitlements. As the TTDS limit would be in fixed monetary terms, the flexibility to support the agriculture sector as a percentage of the value of production would shrink over the years. The idea behind this capping is to divert the support from Article 6

³ A 19-member coalition of agricultural exporting nations lobbying for agricultural trade liberalization.

support to Green box measures, which are deemed to be non or minimal trade-distorting support.

However, the majority of developing countries are not agreeing to this approach owing to the dilution of the Development box and steep reduction in the *de minimis* flexibility resulting from the capping and reduction in terms of TTDS (Sharma et.al., 2023). Importantly, some of the G10 countries and China have expressed sensitivities regarding capping the Blue box. In recent times, China has been providing significant support under the Blue box to support its cotton and corn farmers. Additionally, the USA insists for discussions on domestic support under an overall agriculture package, which also includes market access, wherein the EU has a lot of sensitivities. The LDCs, including recently graduated LDCs, are seeking exemption from any capping and reduction commitments. There have also been demands to discipline domestic support based on per-farmer entitlements, to adequately capture the wide socio-economic differences between developed and developing members (WTO, 2023g; Sharma et.al., 2021).

Given the different positions, members failed to reach a consensus to further discipline agricultural subsidies. Overall, the issue of disciplining agricultural subsidies is not only discussed and debated from a trade perspective but also increasingly in the context of climate change and environmental concerns.

Provisions on domestic support can also be traced in FTAs such as the USMCA. These provisions are on a best endeavour basis. USMCA has a specific provision on domestic support (USMCA, 2020), seeking parties to consider domestic support measures that have no, or at most minimal, trade-distorting effects or effects on production. Further, it seeks to provide all the relevant information pertaining to measures having a negative impact on trade and to minimise the negative trade impact.

3. PUBLIC STOCKHOLDING FOR FOOD SECURITY PURPOSES

PSH has been the most debated and discussed issue under the WTO agriculture negotiations. A permanent solution to the PSH remains the most critical and long-pending mandated issue at the WTO, directly impacting the fight against hunger.

In many developing countries, the government implements price-support-backed PSH programs to ensure food security and shield their farmers from price fluctuations (Sharma, 2016). Procurement, storage, and distribution are three key elements of these PSH programs. The expenditures on storage and distribution are covered by the Green box, under which measures are exempted from financial limits. Moreover, if the procurement is done at the current market price, then that expenditure is also covered by the Green box.

However, if developing countries procure the food grains at the administered price, the difference between the administered price and an external reference price (ERP) needs to be accounted for under the Amber box, which sets strict financial capping for measures under it. The ERP is based on average export or import prices prevailing during 1986-88. Furthermore, the market price support (MPS) is calculated by multiplying the difference between the administered price and the fixed ERP with the eligible production covered by the measure. As for most developing countries, the MPS cannot exceed 10 percent of the value of production of a specific product due to the amber box limit.

Therefore, the limited policy space under the Amber box, along with an outdated MPS formula wherein the current administered price is compared with the fixed ERP, led to shrinking policy space for developing countries to implement price support-backed PSH programs.

Due to this, since 2000, developing countries have been raising concerns about the constraining provisions of the AoA and are seeking a solution to address this issue. Over the years, several proposals were made. In 2013, prior to the 9th WTO Ministerial Conference at Bali (MC9), the G33 made a submission, providing options of (i) a peace clause, (ii) a dynamic ERP based on recent import/ export prices or inflation-adjusted (WTO, 2013a). Later, at the MC9, members agreed to an interim solution, also called the “Bali peace clause” (WTO, 2013b). Invoking the Bali peace clause shields the PSH programs of the developing country members from legal challenges if they are at risk of breaching or have already breached their respective domestic support commitments. Additionally, members agreed to negotiate a permanent solution on the

issue of PSH by the 11th Ministerial Conference of the WTO in 2017. The Peace Clause was extended to perpetuity by the decision of the WTO General Council in November 2014, which ensured that PSH programs of developing members would continue to be shielded by the Bali peace clause until a permanent solution was agreed upon and adopted (WTO, 2014). The 10th Ministerial conference of the WTO at Nairobi reaffirmed the General Council Decision, and it was decided that negotiations on the permanent solution for PSH shall be held in dedicated sessions of the CoASS in an accelerated time frame, distinct from the agriculture negotiations on other issues (WTO, 2015b) Notably, India is the only WTO member that has invoked the Bali peace clause.

However, developing country members, including LDCs, have serious concerns about conditions related to the Bali peace clause such as (i) limited product coverage of only “traditional staple crops”; (ii) only PSH programs implemented before the Bali decision are shielded; and (iii) contains broad anti-circumvention conditions which prescribe that the PSH programs shall not distort trade or adversely affect the food security of other members. Additionally, there is ambiguity pertaining to what these broad anti-circumvention conditions entail.

Despite a clear mandate, the subsequent Ministerial Conferences of the WTO, i.e. the MC 11(Buenos Aires) and MC12 (Geneva), failed to deliver an outcome on this issue. More than 75 WTO members from the G33, African, Caribbean, and Pacific countries (ACP) and the African group are advocating for a Permanent Solution based on improvement to the existing Bali peace clause. These members are seeking expansion of coverage in terms of “new programs”, “foodstuffs” rather than traditional staple crops and “dynamic ERP” based on either recent export/import prices or consideration of inflation, among others (WTO, 2022b; Sharma & Shajahan, 2024).

On the other hand, some members of the Cairns group have put forth strong reservations, stating that a permanent solution based on the existing Bali peace clause with more product and program coverage would provide unrestricted trade-distorting entitlements to the developing countries. Therefore, some WTO members, such as the majority of the Cairns group members, the EU, and the US, are linking the issue of a permanent solution to the agricultural negotiations on domestic support or market access pillars. Furthermore, these members have also proposed incorporating onerous conditions based on export or import performance within

the permanent solution (WTO,2024a; WTO,2022a). However, proponents strongly oppose any linkage of the permanent solution with other issues such as domestic support, market access, or export-import performance and reiterate that it is a standalone mandated issue.

4. EXPORT RESTRICTIONS AND FOOD SECURITY

At a time of a food crisis, the global food market experiences scarcity and a sudden increase in international prices. To address food security concerns and safeguard their vulnerable population, countries tend to adopt different trade measures, including export restrictions and reductions in import tariffs to boost the supply of foodstuffs in their domestic markets. Many countries, including India, the EU, Thailand, Malaysia, Egypt, Ghana, Argentina, Ukraine, Russia, Turkey, and Vietnam, have implemented these restrictions irrespective of their development status.

Export restrictions refer to measures imposed by governments to limit or control the export of agricultural products. These restrictions can take various forms, including export bans, quotas, tariffs, or other regulatory measures. These measures are generally criticised due to their likely adverse impact on the food security of importing countries, inflating international prices, disrupting the global supply chains, being labelled as unreliable exporters, and causing opportunity losses for domestic traders and farmers.

Notably, at the WTO MC12, members agreed to exempt food purchases on humanitarian grounds by the World Food Programme from the ambit of export restrictions (WTO,2022d). However, an added condition to the exemption was that it does not prevent the adoption of measures by any member to ensure its domestic food security in accordance with the relevant WTO provisions. Furthermore, some countries are seeking additional disciplines and, therefore, have tabled proposals to discipline these measures.

The relevant WTO provisions pertaining to export restrictions are Article XI of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1994 and Article 12 of the AoA. These provisions allow members to apply export restrictions temporarily to prevent or relieve critical shortages of foodstuffs or other essential products. Net-food exporting members imposing such measures

shall provide a notification to the WTO CoA and further are required to give due consideration to the food security needs of others.

By highlighting the adverse impact of the export restrictions on food security and resilient supply chains, a few countries such as the UK, Japan (WTO, 2024b, 2023f) are seeking to further discipline the export restrictions by clarifying the terms in existing rules such as “critical shortages”, 30 days advance notification obligation, changing the notification format, and rendering exemption to LDC and NFIDCs. However, members have divergent positions.

Some developing countries argue that export restrictions are essential policy tools in times of crisis to ensure domestic food security and consider that existing WTO rules are adequate as they balance the food security interests of both exporting and importing countries. Further, they contend that any additional disciplines, such as advance notification of 30 days, would render the export restrictions ineffective, undermining the domestic food security of the exporting country. On the other hand, Paraguay is linking the issue of export restrictions with the market access pillar.

Some members have also expressed concerns about the demands of granting exemption to LDCs and NFIDCs as it would undermine the very intent of imposing export restrictions, undermining the food security of exporting countries. Furthermore, some LDCs may also be a net exporter of certain foodstuffs. Due to the above-discussed concerns and divergence in members’ approaches, a consensus on the matter of export restrictions has not been reached at the 2024 13th WTO Ministerial Conference (MC13).

Export restrictions are also an important element of recent FTAs. Provisions on export restrictions can be traced to FTAs such as USMCA, which have stringent and binding obligations that go beyond existing WTO obligations. Disciplines stronger than WTO include stricter defined rules on implementation, the maximum length of a period of time they can be used, and a stringent timeline for advance notification (30 days), among others.

5. SUSTAINABLE FOOD SYSTEMS

Sustainable food systems (SFS) are being discussed at various multilateral and bilateral platforms, as well as regional forums such as G20. The UN Food Systems Summit in 2021 recognised the role of SFS as critical for achieving all 2030 SDGs and essential for addressing our planetary crisis (UNFSS, 2021) The FAO defines a SFS as a food system that delivers food security and nutrition for all in such a way that the economic, social, and environmental bases to generate food security and nutrition for current and future generations are not compromised. Economic sustainability implies profitability over time, social sustainability entails broad-based societal benefits, and environmental sustainability denotes a positive or neutral impact on the natural environment (FAO,2018).

5.1. *SFS Discussions at the WTO*

Two proposals form the basis for incorporating SFS under the ambit of the WTO in 2022. In 2021, the EU and Norway proposed (WTO, 2021b) a work programme to the WTO SPS Committee to address issues related to the transition to sustainable food systems. This proposal highlighted the importance of a One-Health approach, recognising the strong interconnection between human health, the health of animals and plants, and the environment, deeming it vital for resilient economies. It is an approach for designing and implementing programs, policies, legislation, and research in which multiple sectors communicate and work together to achieve better public health outcomes. The SPS agreement sets out the basic rules for measures related to the protection of human, animal, and plant life or health. Since two elements of the One-Health approach—human health and the health of animals and plants—fall under the SPS Agreement, the proposal asserted that the objectives of the SPS Agreement cannot be furthered in isolation from the current global challenges such as climate change, and expanding global population. Additionally, a proposal by Brazil, Canada, and the US in 2020 (WTO, 2020) called for a work programme to identify the impacts of emerging pressures on the application of the SPS agreement.

Based on these two proposals, in 2022, the WTO members adopted the SPS declaration at the MC12 (WTO, 2022e). This resulted in the incorporation of SFS for the first time under the ambit of the WTO. The SPS declaration acknowledges new opportunities and emerging challenges to the international trade in food, including the expanding global population, climate change, increasing environmental challenges, shifting pressure due to the spread of pests and diseases, and the growing importance of sustainable agricultural practices. To this end, a work

program was established, and the SPS Committee was directed to work on the enhancement of the implementation of the SPS Agreement in order to better manage the emerging challenges.

It identified five themes. First, how to facilitate global food security and more sustainable food systems. Second, how to support basing SPS measures on scientific evidence and principles. Third, how to enhance safe, international trade in food, animals, plants, and related products through the adaptation of SPS measures to regional conditions. Fourth, how to encourage cooperation with observer organisations and Fifth, how to increase participation of developing and LDC members in the development and application of SPS measures while ensuring support for their special needs.

At the SPS committee, countries have suggested different approaches toward a transition to SFS (WTO,2023b). The EU approach emphasises agroecology, biodiversity conservation, alternatives to chemical pesticides, a one-health approach, the relevance of animal welfare issues, and the fight against antimicrobial resistance.

Countries like Canada, the US, Argentina, and Brazil have stressed the vital role of innovation in the long-term strengthening of SFS. Specifically, these countries underscored the importance of Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs). It is pertinent to note that these countries are major producers and exporters of GM crops and seeds. Importantly, they consistently advocate for mitigating trade disruptions arising from divergent approaches to regulating trade in GM products.

Developing countries such as India have cautioned against using SFS as disguised barriers to trade. It further highlights the issue of imposing stringent maximum residue limits (MRL). MRLs are the highest level of pesticide residue that is legally tolerated in or on food or feed when pesticides are applied. Developing countries have criticised the practice of imposing stringent MRLs than international standards, and without scientific justification, posing a big challenge for ensuring global food security. The discussions also emphasise the lack of technical capacity and capital of developing countries and LDCs to set up a food safety system in accordance with international standards.

Paragraph 10 of the SPS declaration mandates that, based on the discussions, the WTO Secretariat was required to report the key findings and actions undertaken to the MC13 with

recommendations. In June 2023, a draft report of the work programme was shared. The findings acknowledged the importance of sustainable and resilient food systems and the particular relevance of science, research, and innovation as a means to sustainably increase production to address emerging challenges. It further recommended continuing discussions and reflections on the implementation of the SPS agreement in light of emerging challenges beyond the work programme.

The draft report of the work programme, which was subsequently revised based on members' comments was circulated for adoption. However, no consensus was reached, and hence, the draft report was not adopted.

5.2. SFS under Free Trade Agreements

The above-suggested approaches can also be traced in various FTAs of the respective countries, driven by diverse trade interests and socio-economic considerations. Noteworthy examples include the inclusion of dedicated chapters on SFS in the EU FTAs, such as those with Chile, the United Kingdom, and ongoing negotiations with India.(EU-Chile, EU-India, 2022) These chapters outline provisions encompassing a holistic “one health” approach, considerations for animal welfare, and antimicrobial assistance.

Conversely, an emphasis on innovation underscores rules governing international trade in genetically modified (GM) products within FTAs of the US and Canada, such as the US-Mexico-Canada Agreement (USMCA) and the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP) (USMCA, 2020; CPTPP, 2018).

Certain provisions are framed as cooperative efforts on a best endeavour basis, while others are legally binding in their interpretation, providing parties to the FTA with the recourse to seek resolution through the FTAs dispute settlement mechanisms. For instance, recently, trade in GM products has become a bone of contention between Mexico and the US escalating to the dispute settlement mechanism under the USMCA trade agreement (USMCA, 2020b).

As global discussions evolve, it is evident that the pursuit of sustainable food systems has become intricately woven into the fabric of international trade, influencing policies and agreements.

6. UNILATERAL TRADE MEASURES AND GLOBAL CHALLENGES

Some countries are increasingly leaning towards implementing unilateral agriculture trade measures with extra-territorial effects, all in pursuit of addressing the global challenges of climate change. This shift marks a divergence from the multilateral cooperation approach. A prominent example is the European Union Green Deal, under which policy initiatives such as the EU deforestation regulation (EUDR, 2023) for deforestation-free supply chain have direct linkages to agriculture trade. Nevertheless, these EU sustainability initiatives have drawn up intense discussions at the WTO as well as COP28, raising concerns regarding potential abuse as a trade barrier. Several developing and least-developed countries are wary about the rise of ‘green protectionism’ being endorsed by some countries.

The EUDR covers wood, cattle, soy, palm oil, cocoa, rubber, and coffee as well as many derived products listed in the annex to the regulation. It specifically claims to aim at “reducing deforestation globally, decreasing greenhouse gas emissions, and safeguarding biodiversity”. The measure officially entered into force on 29th June 2023, but its application will start on 30th December 2024. Following this, several countries such as the UK, Australia, and the US have expressed their consideration for the adoption of similar measures.

The EUDR has set out certain conditions and rules for accepting imports of the identified deforestation-free products post-December 2024. In case of non-compliance with the regulation, the exported countries would not be able to access the EU market. It sets out mandatory due diligence rules for placing the covered products on the EU market. As part of their due diligence systems, operators will have to go through three steps: provide all relevant information, perform risk assessment, and mitigate risk.

At the WTO, the EUDR has drawn sharp scrutiny and criticism from many members, calling it a unilateral and extra-territorial policy, disguising protectionism as environmental stewardship. Several WTO members have raised questions to the EU at various WTO committees, such as the CTE and COA seeking the compliance of the EU regulation with WTO rules and raised concerns over its economic impacts.

Members like Argentina, Colombia, and Paraguay claim that the EUDR has potential broad effects on the multilateral trading system (WTO, 2023h). Members claim that the regulation imposes unnecessary trade restrictions and undermines the competitiveness of the products originating in developing countries that hold a substantial share of the EU market in the covered commodities. This can have significant economic impacts since EU market access will be conditioned on compliance with the EUDR.

Taking into account the complexity of the implementation and application of the regulation, the EUDR could negatively affect hundreds of thousands of small and medium-sized producers and exporters, leading to increased poverty and deforestation, contrary to its intended objectives.

At COP28, the shift away from multilateral efforts on the part of some countries in favour of unilateral trade measures related to climate change and their potential impact has led to growing frustrations among developing countries, leading to heavy disagreement around unilateral measures. The tensions highlight a delicate balance between the pursuit of environmental objectives and international trade.

7. OTHER ISSUES

7.1. COA work program: Food Security of LDCs and NFIDCs

In pursuit of the Zero Hunger SDG (WTO, SDG), members adopted the declaration on the Emergency Response to Food Insecurity (WTO, 2022c) at the MC12. It emphasises the critical role of trade, alongside domestic production, in enhancing global food security.

Paragraph 8 of the declaration reaffirms the importance of effective implementation and monitoring of the Marrakesh Decision on Measures Concerning the Possible Negative Effects of the Reform Programme on Least-Developed and Net Food-Importing Developing Countries (Decision on LDCs and NFIDCs) (WTO, 1995).

The decision on LDCs and NFIDCs recognises that all members should benefit from the opportunities for trade expansion and economic growth as the Uruguay round reforms are gradually implemented. It also recognises that some countries could suffer, including all LDCs

and NFIDCs. The decision renders ways to ensure that enough food aid continues to be available to help developing countries meet their needs during the Uruguay Round agricultural reforms.

Further, Article 16 of the AoA calls for action from developed country members as provided within the framework of the Marrakesh Decision. It empowers the CoA to monitor the implementation of the Marrakesh decision on LDCs and NFIDCs. Seventy developing countries are currently eligible as beneficiaries of the decision on the basis of a list established by the WTO CoA (WTO, 2023a).

Paragraph 8 of the MC12 declaration mandated the establishment of a work programme to help LDCs and NFIDCs increase their resilience to food insecurity. The work programme was established in November 2022, and a revised working group report was published in November 2023.

The four agreed on themes under the work programme are – access to international food markets; financing of food imports; agricultural and production resilience of LDCs and NFIDCs; and select horizontal issues - also underlines the importance of ‘resilience’.

The themes deliberated upon a non-exhaustive list of elements. The first theme of ‘access to international food markets’ deliberated on elements of global and regional supply chain bottlenecks, implications of trade measures on foodstuffs on LDCs and NFIDC’s access to food, and the role of international food aid in meeting recipient countries' food needs. The second theme on ‘financing of food imports’ deliberated on WTO rules on export finance and their implementation, availability of finance from international financial institutions etc. The third theme on ‘Agriculture and production resilience’ of LDCs and NFIDCs deliberated upon the use of WTO rules and flexibilities to strengthen agricultural production and productivity, technical and financial assistance, access to agricultural inputs (e.g. seeds, fertilisers, pesticides), technology transfer and knowledge cooperation. Horizontal issues included the identification of challenges and needs of LDCs and NFIDCs, fostering collaboration among international organisations, and coordinated rapid response of international organisations to food security crises.

WTO members have divergent views on the elements of the themes. For instance, some members discussed the proposal under negotiations at CoASS to exempt exports destined for LDCs and NFIDCs from the imposition of export restrictions (WTO, 2023e). On the other hand, some members contend that the existing rules on export restrictions were already effective and balanced to address the current food security challenges.

The revised working group report entails obligations for members on an endeavour basis rather than a full-fledged commitment. It deals with many issues which form the basis for the AoA negotiations. Overall, all LDCs and NFIDCs are seeking special carveouts in agriculture negotiations.

7.2. Agriculture Safeguards and the Demand for Special Safeguard Mechanism

Most developing country members have been consistently demanding a policy instrument called SSM, which is similar to the special safeguards (SSGs) under the AoA. It would allow developing members to temporarily increase tariffs on agriculture products in cases of import surges or price declines without proving any injury caused. Many developing countries have faced import surges or price declines, and have limited policy space to impose high applied tariffs due to market access commitments (Das & Ors., 2020). The import surges or price declines can adversely impact the farm income and livelihood of many low-income or resource-poor farmers.

The demand for SSM has been a longstanding mandate in the WTO Agriculture Negotiations. While at the 2015 Nairobi Ministerial conference, WTO members adopted a decision (WTO, 2015a) reaffirming the 2005 Hong Kong Ministerial mandate (WTO, 2005) for the establishment of an SSM for developing country members, there have been disagreements among members on various aspects of the SSM. As per the Nairobi Ministerial decision, the negotiations on SSM have to be done in dedicated sessions under the CoASS.

Over the years, the need, importance and technical aspects of the SSM have been vigorously debated in the agriculture negotiations (WTO, 2023c). This has resulted in several proposals and draft modalities being presented on the negotiating tables on various aspects of the SSM such as product coverage, trigger levels, etc. Nonetheless, as of yet, members have failed to reach a consensus on the SSM modalities. Most developing members are seeking both price-

based and volume-based triggers that are automatic in nature and do not make it a necessary condition to prove injury caused by import surges or price dips. While developing members stress the need for the SSM to be accessible, effective and operable for all members, opponents believe that the SSM would lead to increased protectionism in agriculture. Therefore, the opponents are linking the SSM with broad negotiations on market access as well as domestic support negotiations (WTO,2024a). Thus, despite being a mandated issue, there is a lack of consensus among the WTO members on this issue.

7.3. Cotton

The issue of cotton subsidies garnered global attention in 2002 when Oxfam published a report (Watkins, 2002) titled ‘Cultivating Poverty’, which found that enormous cotton subsidies by the US have adversely impacted the farm income and livelihood of cotton producers in African countries, especially Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali (referred to as the ‘C-4’ countries). Therefore, C-4 countries have been demanding a steep reduction in the flexibility of members to provide cotton subsidies, which is essential for food security and poverty reduction (WTO, 2003).

At the Hong Kong Ministerial Decision in 2005 members agreed to address the issue of cotton subsidies “ambitiously, expeditiously and specifically” than whatever general formula is agreed upon for reducing trade-distorting agricultural support. The C-4 countries have submitted multiple proposals (WTO, 2017, 2019b) since 2003 for a steep reduction in the domestic support to cotton, especially through Amber and Blue box. However, some members believe that an outcome on cotton domestic support should be a part of a holistic and comprehensive outcome in agriculture or market access issues related to cotton should also be taken into consideration in these negotiations. Little progress has been achieved on this issue due to divergences in members’ positions (Sharma et.al., 2020). Even at the MC13 in 2024, there was no consensus on cotton subsidies between members.

At the 10th WTO Ministerial Conference in Nairobi, it was agreed that developed country members and developing country members declaring themselves in a position to do so would grant duty-free and quota-free market access to cotton exports from LDCs by 1st January 2016; export subsidies to cotton would be eliminated; and development assistance for cotton in LDCs would be strengthened. Currently, the cotton issue is discussed under two tracks at the WTO.

First, trade reforms in the cotton sector are being negotiated as a mandated issue at the CoASS; and second, the development assistance aspect is covered by the ‘Director-General’s Consultative Framework Mechanism on Cotton’.

7.4. Transparency

Transparency is a cross-cutting issue across all pillars of agriculture trade negotiations. Some members seek enhancing transparency and monitoring, including streamlining the existing notification requirements. It is considered that improved transparency is essential to achieve various SDGs, including achieving the zero hunger SDG and disciplining any harmful trade restrictions and access to global markets. To achieve this, members are encouraged to comply with the existing notification obligations under WTO document G/AG/2, such as domestic support, export restrictions, and Tariff-Rate Quota notifications. Furthermore, a few members, such as Australia, Brazil, Canada and Ukraine, (WTO, 2021a) called for enhanced transparency in applied tariff rate changes by developing guidelines for *en route* shipment and provide a public notice prior to coming into force of a change in an applied tariff rate. In the context of export restrictions, some members, including the UK have suggested changing the format of notifications related to export restrictions (WTO, 2024b). However, some countries such as the African Group, India, Cuba and Oman suggested that transparency obligation shall not be onerous and that any discipline on transparency needs to consider the capacity and resource constraints of the developing and LDCs (WTO, 2019a). Overall, the issue of transparency is being discussed as a standalone issue as well as in relation to other issues of agriculture negotiations.

8. CONCLUSION

Over the past decade, the global landscape has witnessed formidable challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, food crises, geopolitical tensions and climate change. These challenges have substantially impacted agricultural trade, indicating a challenging path towards achieving SDGs by 2030. Sustainable Development emphasises the importance of integrating environmental protection, social equity, and economic prosperity to create a more resilient, equitable, and prosperous future for people and the planet. Several SDGs are linked to agriculture, emphasising the importance of socio, economic and environmental dimensions such as SDG 2. It aims to end hunger and malnutrition while simultaneously striving to double

small-scale farmers' agricultural productivity and income thereby addressing both food security and economic empowerment within the agricultural sector.

To achieve these SDGs holistically, the multilateral rules governing agriculture trade cannot be ignored. At the WTO, for several years, members have been negotiating on various agricultural issues towards updating the rules but were unable to achieve any concrete outcomes except the 10th Ministerial Conference outcome on the elimination of export subsidies. The impact of these emerging challenges on agriculture trade is exacerbated due to the dysfunctional WTO appellate body. As the cases appealed to the appellate body from the panel stage, are stranded because of the non-appointment of appellate body members, having a significant impact on resolving the disputes and the implementation of the agreements.

The WTO members agree on the necessity to update existing agriculture rules to address the existing constraints in the rules as well as to address the emerging challenges of the 21st Century. The analysis shows that despite acknowledging the challenges, there is a lack of consensus among members regarding how to update the existing rules to incorporate new provisions and to address the cross-cutting issues. The long pending mandated issues of a permanent solution to PSH for food security purposes, SSM and Cotton are of primary importance for large WTO membership for addressing food security and livelihood concerns of low-income and resource poor farmers. On disciplining agriculture subsidies, addressing the prevailing concerns of imbalances in the AoA will ensure levelling the playing field. Further, considering the challenges, it is imperative that members give prominence to ensuring effective special and differential treatment and recognise the socio-economic and capacity challenges of the developing and LDCs to achieve sustainable development goals holistically.

Given the lack of progress in multilateral negotiations, members are incorporating several issues under the FTAs, promoting their respective approaches. At present, commitments are on enhancing cooperation for issues such as SFS, domestic support and safeguards. Some FTAs include commitments that go beyond WTO rules, such as provisions on export restrictions. In areas like biotechnology, the binding nature of the provisions remains open to interpretation. However, issues such as disciplines on domestic support must be addressed at the multilateral level to serve the best interests of all members. Considering that global challenges need global solutions, addressing these issues collectively is imperative. Further, diverging from the multilateral approach, unilateral trade measures such as EU deforestation regulation have taken

prominence in the debates on tackling climate change. Such measures may adversely impact international agriculture trade and progress in achieving SDG goals.

To effectively navigate the complexities of the current global challenges, WTO members must not only engage in ongoing discussions but also take concrete steps domestically. It is now incumbent upon WTO members to unite, bridge their differences, and actively work towards delivering meaningful outcomes in agriculture for the future of global trade and a hunger-free world.

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