

International cooperation for food security: Finding a way forward

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A central topic of concern for the governments and peoples of the world is, understandably, food security.

Not every country can be largely self-sufficient. Each must, in varying degrees, rely on imports. The degree of food security for any country has can be assessed in terms of food availability, as well as affordability, quality and safety, and more recently, sustainability.

Food security has become a heightened 21st century concern. This is despite the fact that the green revolution should have made food shortages, and worse, famine, threats largely of the past. Still shaping government thinking today are the sharp increases in the costs of critical food supplies during the financial crisis in 2007/08 which caused food emergencies in 48 countries. In 2020, the COVID pandemic disrupted supply chains. In 2022, the Russian invasion of [Ukraine](#) caused fresh concern over food security especially for countries dependent on grain and fertilizer from the Black Sea region. During the last few months, the threat to trade through the Red Sea from the Houthis has caused an expensive [rerouting](#) of food shipments. Trade through the Panama Canal has been limited due to a shortfall of rain. Geopolitical tensions also play a role into some governments' desire to increase food self-sufficiency.

The International Agricultural Trade Research Consortium (IATRC) commissioned a paper¹ published a few weeks ago in April surveying policy responses to food security. It notes that since the beginning of the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) has identified [50 export restrictions by 30 states](#) (Laborde et al.) The IATRC paper summarizes developments in major trading nations in each region, finding that food-importing countries have reacted to food security concerns mostly by shoring up self-sufficiency in large part through traditional means of granting domestic support, but also through deciding to diversify their sources.

¹ [Geostrategic aspects of policies on food security in the light of recent global tensions – Insights from seven countries](#) authored by **Bettina Rudloff**, EU/Europe Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs, SWP, Berlin, Germany, **Kristina Mensah**, Agriculture and Food Policy Department, University of Hohenheim, Germany, and **Christine Wieck**, Agriculture and Food Policy Department, University of Hohenheim, Germany.

The current status of food security at the WTO

Food security is a topic given increasing attention at the FAO, the World Bank, and other international organizations. That trade must provide a critical response to food security concerns is naturally a substantial focus for the World Trade Organization (WTO). The latest FAO figures indicate that about a quarter of world production of food crosses an international border. At the first post pandemic WTO Ministerial Conference (MC12), held in Geneva in 2022, the ministers rededicated themselves to the subject of food security. In terms of concrete results, it yielded the following [commitment](#) adopted by all WTO members:

In view of the critical humanitarian support provided by the World Food Programme, made more urgent as global hunger levels have increased sharply:

- 1. Members shall not impose export prohibitions or restrictions on foodstuffs purchased for noncommercial humanitarian purposes by the World Food Programme.*
- 2. This Decision shall not be construed to prevent the adoption by any Member of measures to ensure its domestic food security in accordance with the relevant provisions of the WTO agreements.*

The ministers also issued a [declaration](#) at the conference in which they pledged to take concrete steps to facilitate trade and improve the functioning and long-term resilience of global markets for food and agriculture, including cereals, fertilizers, and other agriculture production inputs. They reaffirmed the importance of not imposing export prohibitions or restrictions in a manner inconsistent with relevant WTO provisions. They further resolved to ensure that any emergency measures introduced to address food security concerns are to minimize trade distortions as far as possible, be temporary, targeted, and transparent, be notified, and implemented in accordance with WTO rules. They said that they would be giving particular consideration to the specific needs and circumstances of developing country Members, especially those of least-developed and net food-importing developing countries.

(A word is also in order about public stockholding (PSH), not because any new conclusion was reached at MC12, but because it has become an issue in each ministerial conference. The question is whether a permanent solution can be found to public stockholding. Whereas some developing countries believe that such programs could enhance their food security, there are concerns about them distorting trade and undermining the food security of other countries. Much depends on prices at which public stocks are acquired (which can confer a subsidy for producers), and the conditions under which the stocks are released into the market. Several members subscribe to the view that broad agricultural reform would make food more accessible and affordable and have a positive impact on the food security of countries more generally rather than singling out public stockholding for resolution.)

The declaration was a good start. It reaffirmed many good intentions. But intentions are not binding commitments, and what the WTO is primarily about is creating and updating a rulebook that will govern the conduct of member nations.

Here there is a problem. There is a clear need in times of food scarcity to move food from areas of plenty to areas of need, but this is not part of members' WTO commitments. Although one of the most important WTO rules is that export restrictions are forbidden generally, it has an important exception.

WTO/GATT Article XI provides in relevant part:

1. *No prohibitions or restrictions other than duties, taxes or other charges, whether made effective through quotas, import or export licences or other measures, shall be instituted or maintained by any contracting party on the importation of any product of the territory of any other contracting party or on the exportation or sale for export of any product destined for the territory of any other contracting party.*

So far so good. The provision, however, continues:

2. *The provisions of paragraph 1 of this Article shall not extend to the following:*

(a) Export prohibitions or restrictions temporarily applied to prevent or relieve critical shortages of foodstuffs or other products essential to the exporting contracting party; (emphasis supplied).

While the exception appears to be narrow, operationally it is not. What is "temporary" is left undefined or is not regulated. Nor is there a definition of when a "critical shortage" exists, nor for that matter when a foodstuff is "essential". Worse, there is no understanding as to the extent of the measure, whether a complete ban or a sharp reduction in exports.

There is an attempt to make up for the breadth of this exception in GATT Article XI (2) (a) by specifying in Article 12 of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA). It provides that that the impact on import-dependent countries will be taken into account and that notice of the measure is to be given:

1. *Where any Member institutes any new export prohibition or restriction on foodstuffs in accordance with paragraph 2(a) of Article XI of GATT 1994, the Member shall observe the following provisions:*

(a) the Member instituting the export prohibition or restriction shall give due consideration to the effects of such prohibition or restriction on importing Members' food security;

(b) before any Member institutes an export prohibition or restriction, it shall give notice in writing, as far in advance as practicable, to the Committee on Agriculture comprising such information as the nature and the duration of such measure, and shall consult, upon request, with any other Member having a substantial interest as an importer with respect to any matter related to the measure in question. The Member instituting such export prohibition or restriction shall provide, upon request, such a Member with necessary information.

The AoA notice provision has been invoked [over 30 times](#) since the WTO was founded, and over half of those instances have been from 2020 to the present. While it is positive that notice has been given, this does not mean that conduct has been effectively regulated. The scope of the export restriction and its duration are entirely a matter of self-judgment of the member imposing the restriction, as is meeting the requirement to give “due consideration” to the effects of the export restriction of any importing country.

The continuing issue of food security stems in part from the insufficiency of the discipline over export restrictions by the WTO’s existing provisions. This has led to a series of discussions at the WTO, particularly in the Committee on Agriculture (CoA) and the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (COASS), to find remedies to the problem. There is a range of opinion on addressing export restrictions. Members are at best divided on accepting new obligations. This includes developing countries, many of which would be the primary beneficiaries of major food exporting countries being under some degree of obligation to provide food to others. Some WTO members in the discussions at the CoA have focused on improving the notification process, making trade measures more transparent. Some take refuge behind seeking a “balanced outcome” without specifying where the balance is to be found.

Finding common interests

There is, however, some hope of working toward addressing the specific food security challenges faced by LDCs and NFIDCs (net food-importing developing countries). One forward-leaning member has suggested that Members “shall refrain” from imposing export restrictions or prohibitions on consignments of foodstuffs that will be imported by LDCs for their domestic use”. There is a range of possible approaches. Less than one month ago, on April 17, the Committee on Agriculture in Special Session (COASS) adopted a report on food insecurity with findings and recommendations (WTO document TN/AG/58 8 February 2024). The key proposed recommendations were as follows:

That, in dealing with food security, members recognize:

- The value of autonomous tariff lowering and quota opening.
- The importance of transparency in the application of export restrictions.
- The need to align restrictions with domestic needs [that is, that they should not be more restrictive than necessary].

- That members may voluntarily explore practical, WTO-consistent means to lessen the effect of measures on importing countries, particularly LDCs and NFIDCs, in response to specific requests from Members having a substantial interest as an importer.
- That they should maintain levels of food aid during periods of increased prices of basic foodstuffs.
- That they should suspend import duties on food aid.
- That they should facilitate imports utilizing measures such as those cited in line with the Trade Facilitation Agreement, (e.g., using electronic means to make filings, etc.)

The proposed recommendations indicate the direction of thinking of WTO members. However, even if adopted, the list contains no binding commitments. It would be a guide to good conduct, particularly with respect to measures favoring net food importing developing countries and least developed countries.

Agricultural negotiations, called for in the Agreement on Agriculture, insofar as food security is concerned, beyond the WFP exclusion from export restrictions agreed at MC12, have largely not progressed. However not all is static with respect to members interests. This is evident in the series of country summaries contained in the IATRC paper cited earlier regarding national policy approaches to the challenge of food insecurity. The paper looks at the policies adopted by selected countries – Brazil, China, the EU, Nigeria, the Philippines, the United Kingdom, and the United States, for example, identifying the measures each has taken to deal with COVID, the Russian invasion of Russian and other recent and current events. This calls for a reassessment of where common ground might be found.

Brazil is a new and important player in any agreement on agriculture. Quoting from the country study authored by Niels Søndergaard: “[F]aced with the threats of trade disruptions caused either by direct conflict, but also by political measures to decouple or de-risk supply chains, Brazil has assumed a staunch position in defense of an open world economy, stressing the importance that political tensions do not spill over into the commercial realm. This was recently reiterated by Lula da Silva at the G7 summit in Japan in May 2023, in a somewhat remarkable turn of events in which a leftist Latin American President highlighted the importance of free and unhindered trade to his peers in the developed world.” This is new, and with other developments may, in my view, provide an opening for reassessing what can done with respect to food security at that WTO.

Likewise, the EU’s set of interests have clearly shifted from its long history of protection of its home market (now greatly expanded). The EU has become “a global dominant net exporter of most agricultural products.” This tendency will only increase as it works toward bringing a world class agricultural commodity exporter, Ukraine, into the Union. The EU generally supports efforts to get WTO members “to refrain from export restrictions in order to ensure open markets and by food aid”. (Drawing on the part of the IATRC paper written by Bettina Rudloff.)

While China, as with many other countries looks to increasing self-sufficiency particularly in grain, “China does have a strong interest in maintaining the flows of Ukrainian grain and seed oil exports, for example through the Black Sea Grain Initiative. In fact, China stresses the importance of continued Ukraine grain exports in its 12-point peace plan. . . . Overall strategic direction on food security and trade policy: resilient domestic supply and diversification of import sourcing.” (From the ITRC report section provided by Wusheng Yu).

Of the countries examined, The United Kingdom so far may have changed the least. It favored open agricultural trade largely before it joined the EU, was an internal voice for open trade during its European sojourn and has re-emerged post-Brexit to articulate this view for itself. “Brexit has contributed to a further decline in the notion of “agricultural exceptionalism”, the idea that the agricultural sector needs unique and preferential consideration. Grant and Geer (2023). This can also be seen in the [UK] trade agreement with Australia, where protection for most agri-food products will be reduced to zero after 10 years, this will also include products such as beef (Smith, 2023). Most food products enter the UK duty-free, and the global tariff scheme has resulted in a significant further reductions and simplifications across numerous tariff lines.” (IATRC, Kristina Mensah).

The wild card in the any new alignment of interests is the United States. A traditionally strong agricultural exporter, the US now takes little interest in negotiating market access, neither for its own interests, nor in the name of global efficiency to make global agriculture more resilient when faced with pandemics, climate change, changes in market conditions, or geopolitical division. It favors a Black Sea agreement insofar as it aids Ukraine but would not welcome Russia having earnings from grain or fertilizer exports. America’s agricultural exports were a casualty of its contest with China and could be seriously affected by changes in sourcing if a high tariff administration takes office in January 2025. The IATRC paper concludes: “on international food security there has been no geostrategic shift in US policy. Recent US policy emphasizes global food security, with contributions sought both from stabilizing world markets as a reliable source of supply, for example by dampening use of export restrictions in times of high prices, and from enhanced and sustainable food production for domestic consumption internationally, but with few new resources to achieve the latter goal.” IPEF is seen as aspirational, and not changing the orientation of US producers towards open markets and efficiency. (David Orden). I conclude: The United States is not changing policy but is taking no steps to implement it effectively. It would be a major development with respect to any WTO negotiation to enhance food security were the US to sit on the sidelines.

Conclusion – what solutions are possible?

In a PIIE policy brief published last fall authored by Joe Glauber, former U.S. Department of Agriculture Chief Economist, current senior research fellow at the International Policy Research Institute (IFPRI), October 2024, and myself, entitled [Food insecurity: What can the world trading system do about it?](#), we addressed a series of recommendations of approaches that could be taken up in an initiative launched at MC13 in Abu Dhabi in February 2024. As it

turned out, there was not a sufficient consensus among WTO members to even mention food security as an issue in the Outcomes Document of the Ministerial Conference.

The Glauber-Wolff recommendations are not contained here in their entirety but the following focus on a few of them related to the WTO. (Of course, trade finance and food aid will always be required).

The Members should start with what they have in the WTO agreements and strengthen disciplines over export restrictions to the extent possible:

- The requirement of transparency should be enhanced. In addition to notifications and monitoring, in times of pronounced food scarcity, a horizontal, single subject trade policy review (TPR) or the equivalent, a working party, should be convened to review all measures, trade restricting and trade facilitating, in a standalone setting to provide a clear overview of reactions during a food crisis.
- Some objective criteria should be added to the provisions of GATT Art. XI 2 (a), to judge when there is a “critical shortage” and how “essential” restrictions are.
- There should be a sunset provision, a specified duration (perhaps renewable and reviewable) for the duration of any trade restrictive measure.
- Food should at least be treated as other goods are in GATT Art XX(j):

Subject to the requirement that such measures are not applied in a manner which would constitute a means of arbitrary or unjustifiable discrimination between countries where the same conditions prevail, or a disguised restriction on international trade, nothing in this Agreement shall be construed to prevent the adoption or enforcement by any contracting party of measures:

(j) essential to the acquisition or distribution of products in general or local short supply; Provided that any such measures shall be consistent with the principle that all contracting parties are entitled to an equitable share of the international supply of such products, and that any such measures, which are inconsistent with the other provisions of the Agreement shall be discontinued as soon as the conditions giving rise to them have ceased to exist. (emphasis supplied).

- The exception to the ban on export restrictions on food should be tied to providing an “equitable share” (with some guidance as to how this term is to be defined) to those in need, or those most in need.
- It should be possible to at least exempt LDCs or NFIDCs in a manner similar to the WFP provision added at MC12 to purchases by the WFP.

It may seem like a bridge too far to envisage some promise of sharing when there is scarcity. Critics will say that in times of serious shortage a commitment of that sort would not be honored, therefore it would not be agreed. However, interestingly, in the IATRC paper section on Nigeria, written by Olayinka Kareem, regional economic integration is seen as aiding food security. Kareem writes the following: “Nigeria has shown even more commitment to regional integration beyond ECOWAS by operationalizing the African Continental Free Trade Area ([AfCFTA](#)) Agreement in 2021 to deepen intra-Africa trade. This may be assumed as cross-country “insurance” to reduce food insecurity as threats affecting only some countries may be compensated by food exports from others.”

Conclusion

What is possible in a trade negotiation will be determined by the extent to which the participants can identify mutuality of interest among net food exporters and net food importers. What would convince a net food exporter to pledge to supply food to some degree and under what conditions? What if the buyer were to pledge to buy in times of plenty as well as when there is scarcity, that is, when prices are low or high, or at a certain benchmark price under any market condition? Could that commitment to market access be traded for commitments to supply? When covid struck and first personal protective equipment exports and later medical supplies and vaccines needed to be preserved for domestic use, no attempt was made to provide an effective means in the WTO rulebook for sharing. Is the same always to be true for foodstuffs?

We can assume that a government must see to its own people’s needs first. However, there have been examples of sharing during times of utmost stress. During WWII, the question arose often, what could be shared for an ally and what had to be kept for use at home? Sharing did occur, including through the rationing of food. True there was a common cause. During WWI, the US government encouraged [voluntary rationing](#) to feed the people of Belgium, where the need was severe.

Is there nothing that can be achieved now besides positive sentiments, without guidelines or commitments? The world’s nations have not gone very far in the direction of cooperation, but could they go somewhat further? That is what serious negotiations are for. A start should be made with helping those most in need, the poorest, a NFILDC group for example. If there is plenty or even light scarcity in one part of the world, and famine in another, isn’t some commitment to sharing possible? During war, there was rationing, voluntary or mandatory. Climate change could bring similar prospects to bear and require extraordinary responses. This is not to suggest that WTO members are ready yet to agree to go very far in this direction, but they should begin to contemplate some initial steps.

To deal with food security, the opposite pole in policy choices is occupied by self-sufficiency. The term “self-sufficiency” has a very positive ring to it for domestic audiences, appealing to nativism and nationalism. However, excessive self-reliance, besides being costly

from a viewpoint of economic efficiency when taken too far, can lead to overuse of scarce water, overuse of harmful chemical fertilizers, the degrading of land, and is inevitably costly in all respects including environmental. Imposing export restrictions can also be self-defeating. The United States, historically a major net food exporter, experimented with export restrictions in two instances that had long-term costs, and little positive to recommend the measures. This is told in a memoir of an official of Japan's Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries. A brief US embargo of soybeans had historically high costs for the US, shifting demand permanently to supply from Brazil. While the measure was beneficial to Brazil's trade position, carried to an extreme it risks deforestation, and conflict with European green policies. See https://cigs.canon/en/article/20220817_6944.html. A threat to food security dealt with poorly can result in lasting adverse effects for all concerned. It is far better to attempt to come to grips with the challenges through deliberation in international fora, including the WTO.

It will be difficult to make progress. That is demonstrably the case. However, to conclude in advance that nothing is possible, is to do more than foretell the outcome, failure of international cooperation, it is to guarantee it. It is time to increase the effort to find a way forward.