

A Vision for Agriculture at the WTO

When government negotiators met in Seattle at the WTO Ministerial, agriculture was on the top of the agenda. For many countries in the world, agriculture is an important element of their export economy (sometimes the only element!) and it provides a livelihood for the overwhelming majority of their poor people. The serious disagreements over agriculture between the 135 (and counting) countries that belong to the WTO contributed to the ultimate breakdown in the negotiations. These disagreements can be traced back the Uruguay Round of the GATT, which delivered little on agriculture for the developing world. Despite the failure of the Seattle Ministerial, WTO negotiations on agriculture are scheduled to begin in 2000 as agreed to under the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture.

The AoA has two objectives that, carefully defined, many Non-Governmental Organizations support. The first is to remove "market distortions", which for us means break monopolies and oligopolies, ban patents on living organisms, build in differential treatment for poorer countries, and allow countries to decide their priorities for food and agriculture policy, including the importance they choose to place on exports.

The second is the promotion of food security, which is mentioned in the agreement at the outset as an important "non-trade concern" but not addressed by the existing provisions. Those working to promote food security in the world know that food security is not about global food supply levels. It is about farmers, above all women, who put food on the table for their families. It is also about protecting indigenous cultures and biodiversity. It is about employment and having the means to secure food. It is certainly not about dependence on food aid, and it should not be dependence on world commodity prices either.

The first need -and this is an obligation under the existing AoA -- is to review the implementation experience four years into the WTO. What happened? This should be an exercise for us, who eat, and for those who grow food. It is also an obligation of governments that are asking us to accept more deregulation in agriculture as the means to achieve the two goals mentioned above. So far, farm organizations, non-profit researchers, even multilateral organizations, are critical of the existing rules and want to see changes. We do not need more of the same.

Here are a few things that need to either put on the agenda, or strengthened:

1. Prohibit the sale of agricultural products in world markets at less than cost of production.
2. Affirm the principle of special and differential treatment by allowing developing countries flexibility in managing their domestic agriculture and their trade policy.
3. Affirm the importance of other parts of the multilateral system, eg. the Convention on Biological Diversity is the appropriate multilateral forum to address the use and exchange of biotechnology.
4. Ensure trade rules that allow domestic farm support programs that support small farmers, sustainable agriculture and safely produced healthy food.
5. Regulate the handful of companies that overwhelmingly dominate world (and sometimes local) trade in food to avoid the abuses and market distortions created by oligopolistic power.
6. Affirm the Precautionary Principle in considering the introduction and dissemination of new technologies.

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