

International producer groups offer a competing proposal for WTO ag negotiations

In the two previous columns, we looked at the competing agricultural negotiating positions, being put forth by U.S. officials and ministers from the 49 Least Developed Countries. Both of these positions represent official governmental positions. In contrast to these official positions, a group of what some might call agrarian farm organizations met in Dakar, Senegal (not to be confused with Dhaka, Bangladesh where trade ministers from 49 LDCs recently met and set forth their position on agricultural trade negotiations) to stake out their position on critical agricultural issues that are slated to be considered at the WTO negotiations in Cancun. Participating in this meeting from the United States was Dena Hoff of the National Family Farm Coalition.

At the end of the May 19-21, 2003 meeting, the participants issued their Declaration of Dakar entitled "For mutually supportive agricultural and trade policies." The declaration starts with a critique of the current WTO vision of the world arguing that "the "liberalization" of agricultural trade and deregulation, promoted by the WTO, the IMF, the Free Trade Agreements, etc. are substantial causes of damage all over the world." The declaration goes on to argue that "the assumption that the international market can produce valid results, uniform for all the countries, has been disproved by the facts. Agricultural prices are unstable, chronically depressed and tend to fall over time."

Over against WTO's reliance on trade liberalization, the Dakar Declaration argues for rights based agricultural policies. These rights include, but are not limited to, 1) the right to healthy, culturally adapted food; 2) the right to produce this food; 3) access to resources (land, seed, water, credit,...); 4) respect for the environment including sustainable production modes and biodiversity; and 5) equity (right to decent income).

The Dakar Declaration calls for food sovereignty asserting that the establishment of these rights "is the responsibility of the public authorities, at the local level, at the scale of a country or group of countries. ...In order to ensure these rights, there is a need for instruments, particularly import protection and supply management. Agricultural prices must cover production costs, including a decent remuneration for the farmer." In the implementation of these rights, the declaration argues that

"trade is necessary, but it does not have prevalence over fundamental rights."

Based on these rights, the participants agreed on six policies.

1. "Exports should not lead to the destabilization of domestic markets in other countries. Priority should be given to supplying the domestic market."
2. "Market access should take place without deregulating the market of the importing country. The aim must be to eliminate all forms of dumping."
3. "Agricultural subsidies are legitimate if they are granted on the basis of the populations' rights and expectations and are not used for promoting exports."
4. "Trade rules must not prevent countries from encouraging sustainable production systems based on family farming."
5. "There must be consultation and effort to manage supply on world markets."
6. "Populations' legitimate choices, refusing for instance GMOs, hormones ..., must prevail over the trade companies' interests and be respected by international trade rules."

The Dakar Declaration is based upon the concepts of food sovereignty and food security arguing that each nation has the right to establish food policies that meet the needs of its citizenry (food sovereignty). In addition each nation is entitled to implement measures to ensure a stable supply of food over the long term (food security). They also argue that trade in agricultural products needs to be conducted in such a manner as to contribute to each nation's food sovereignty and security.

Clearly, there will be vastly different views presented in Cancun in September on the future direction of WTO agricultural negotiations. The question is whether there will be any one alternative that will come to the fore. If not, there may be no progress toward a consensus on agricultural issues.

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