

Policy Pennings by Dr. Daryll E. Ray

## Agriculture: A “countries’ rights” issue?

International agricultural interests have sorted themselves into two polar extremes. One group believes fiercely in WTO-type free markets as the solution to all problems agricultural. This group tends to be the one that is most often heard from, especially in the US. They want the market to determine the international location, mix, and quantities of worldwide agricultural production with no restrictions on trade.

But it is important to know that there is another group that has coalesced at the other polar extreme that is made up of family farmers and agricultural producers’ organizations from 4 continents. This increasingly vocal and influential group met in the state of Santa Catarina, Brazil in January 2005. That meeting was a follow-up to a 2003 meeting in Dakar, where they issued the Declaration of Dakar in which they called upon governments “to reject the current WTO [World Trade Organization] vision and proposals and defend in Cancun the principle of food sovereignty.”

While the sticking issue was not food sovereignty, the WTO meeting in Cancun was adjourned without reaching an agreement on a new round of trade rules. In late 2004, after a year of intense negotiating and arm twisting by the US, a general agreement for a framework for the next round of negotiations was accepted by all WTO member states.

The adoption of the framework for future negotiations put the Agreement on Agriculture, with its policies that would eliminate the concept of food sovereignty, back on the table. As a result, the group representatives who recently met in Brazil issued a “Call from Chapeco” in which they demanded that their governments “stop adhering to the dogmatic view of agricultural policies promoted by the international institutions, in particular the WTO, the IMF [International Monetary Fund], and the World Bank.”

The call went on further to argue that the “neo-liberal view, based on market deregulation, is destructive for family farmers across the world: ten years later, we can attest to the failure of the WTO.” The destruction cited in the call includes reduced access of family farmers to land and other resources, the elimination of border protection so that local markets are now flooded with food that is being imported at less than the cost of production, the shifting of local production to export

crops (ignoring the food need of the local populace including the farmers), and a sharp drop in prices received by local producers.

The call identifies four alternate redirections in policy. Foremost among the recommendations is for governments to “prioritize food production for the domestic market . . . in order to satisfy food needs.” Import protection is described as a right in the Call from Chapeco.

Ensuring “remunerative agricultural prices” is also called for in the document. The policy suggestions for achieving this goal include “border protection, supply management, collective marketing, and sustainable production methods. Dumping is specifically named as a practice that is antithetical to the needs of agricultural producers around the world.

One of the areas where supply management practices are specifically called for in the Chapeco document is with tropical products like bananas, coffee, and cocoa. For instance, recent development programs sponsored by the IMF have funded the proliferation of coffee plantations in countries that traditionally were not significant producers. The result has been an oversupply of coffee and a drop in price for all coffee producers.

The producers gathered in Chapeco argue that “governments must reorient their priorities. Given the WTO’s inability to manage the specificities of agriculture, governments must reappropriate” their traditional rights of establishing food policies that meet the needs of their citizens.

Whether or not you agree with the specifics, the group makes a point worth considering: Should the people and governments of individual countries have the primary say in how they address specific food and agriculture issues within their borders or is that the near exclusive domain of international “governments.”

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