



## Food sovereignty and agricultural trade policy commitments: How much leeway do West African nations have?

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### ABSTRACT

The 2008 food crisis has challenged the political legitimacy and economic efficiency of the liberalization of international agricultural trade. An alternative vision defended by the food sovereignty movement is that long-term food security cannot rely on dependency on food imports, but must be built on the development of domestic production with enough barrier protection to shelter it from world price fluctuations and unfair trading.

The purpose of this paper is to look into whether the West African nations can achieve food sovereignty given their various trade commitments and other external constraints. The particularity of our approach is to combine a historical economic analysis with a political approach to food sovereignty and trade commitments.

Our results suggest that external brakes on the development of food sovereignty policies are marginal, as the countries still have unused room for manoeuvre to protect their smallholder agriculture under the terms of draft World Trade Organization agreements and Economic Partnership Agreements and under the international financial institutions' recommendations. Rather the international environment seems to be instrumented by West African states that do not manage to secure a national political consensus to drive structural reforms deemed vital and further the food security of the urban populations over the marginalized rural populations. Recently, the regional integration process has made headway with a common agricultural support and protection policy project that could herald an internal political balance more conducive to food-producing agriculture.

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### Introduction

In the second half of the 20th century, developed countries turned to price support mechanisms and high import duties as their main agricultural policy tools in response to falling, unstable agricultural prices on the world markets. The Uruguay Round of the international trade talks (1986–1994) reassessed agricultural market protection and produced binding commitments to reduce domestic support measures suspected of impacting world prices. The ongoing agricultural negotiations at the World Trade Organization (WTO) are still looking to discipline and reduce the protection obtained by WTO members by means of their trade policies and domestic support measures in the agricultural sector.

In the 1990s, a certain number of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and representative civil society organizations (CSOs)

introduced the concept of “food sovereignty” to promote the idea that developing countries should have the right to protect themselves from food imports from third countries when these imports compete with and risk destabilizing local production sectors. The “food sovereignty” concept was driven by a collective movement. It is held up as a global alternative to the Uruguay Round's agricultural liberalization and one that is able to provide food security, thereby challenging the legitimacy and the hegemony of the corporate food regime (Holt Giménez and Shattuck, 2011). Food sovereignty implies an end to unfair trading on world markets and certain forms of protection for developing countries' domestic agricultural markets. Some organizations, such as via Campesina, accuse the WTO rules and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) structural adjustments of making this goal unattainable. The concept has triggered a revolution in thinking and contributed, when the WTO trade talks reopened in the early 2000s, to promoting anew the merits of government intervention in the agricultural markets.

In 2008, the food crisis challenged the political legitimacy and economic efficiency of the deregulation and liberalization of

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international agricultural trade. The world agricultural price surge in 2007–2008 showed that developing countries, particularly Africa, are constantly threatened by chronic food crisis. Food riots, rocketing prices and concerns about the future effects of climate change have led some to claim that food security is improved by agricultural trade liberalization, because only trade can offset local market shortcomings and provide consumers with commodities at low prices. Timmer (2010) suggests that the best way to prevent food crises in the long run is to invest in “agricultural productivity and policies on behalf of stable food production and prices” rather than “trying to cope afterwards with the food crisis impact on the poor”. A third view defended by the food sovereignty movement is that long-term food security cannot depend on food imports, but must be built on the development of domestic production with enough barrier protection to shelter it from world price fluctuations and unfair trading.

The purpose of this paper is to look into the extent to which West African nations can implement the food sovereignty movement’s recommendations, especially the economic instruments required to step up developing countries’ agricultural protection, given their various trade commitments and other external constraints. The particularity of our approach is to combine a historical economic analysis with a political approach to food sovereignty and trade commitments (in terms of public policymakers’ objectives and strategies).

Firstly, we find a huge gap between food sovereignty discourse and instrumentation and the reality of agricultural protection and support in the developing countries in general and West Africa in particular. The second part of this paper focuses on the binding international commitments to see whether there actually is, as the food sovereignty movement suggests, a conflict between a neo-liberal view of globalization, as implemented by the World Trade Organization (WTO) and the International Financing Institutions (IFIs) system, and an alternative based on food sovereignty. The last part of our paper studies internal constraints on and recent dynamics in the development of food sovereignty policy in West Africa.

### **The clash between food sovereignty arguments and the low level of actual West African agricultural support and protection**

There is a huge gap between food sovereignty discourse and instrumentation and the reality of agricultural protection and support in the developing countries in general and West Africa in particular.

#### *Food sovereignty arguments*

The concept of food sovereignty was publicly presented for the first time by via Campesina on the sidelines of the first World Food Summit held by the FAO in Rome in 1996<sup>1</sup>. It has since been taken up and honed by global justice campaigners in different networks and international forums, including West African organizations such as the National Rural Communities’ Consultation and Cooperation Council (Senegal) and the Network of Farmers’ and Agricultural Producers’ Organisations of West Africa (ROPPA), which formally represents 45 million family farmers through its national member organizations in 10 of the 15 West African states. In this context, food sovereignty refers to the global justice and affiliated movements that defend the right of people to feed themselves and consequently the right for nations to develop an agricultural policy in line

with the interests of their own population without being a source of dumping for a third country.

In 2005, the International NGO/CSO Planning Committee to the FAO drew up clear-cut market recommendations:

“Market policies should be designed in order to:

- ensure adequate remunerative prices for all farmers and fishers;
- exercise the rights to protect domestic markets from imports at low prices;
- regulate production on the internal market in order to avoid the creation of surpluses;
- abolish all direct and indirect export supports; and
- phase out domestic production subsidies that promote unsustainable agriculture, inequitable land tenure patterns and destructive fishing practices; and support integrated agrarian reform programmes, including sustainable farming and fishing practices.”

The Nyeleni Forum for Food Sovereignty (2007) developed the most explicit definition of food sovereignty to date in terms of trade practices and policies: “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture policies, to protect and regulate domestic agricultural production and trade so as to attain their objectives of sustainable development, to determine in what measure they want to be autonomous and to limit the dumping of products on their market...” These definitions are the result of compromise and cooperative work by international civil society forums. Yet they set clear guidelines for national trade policies: (i) protect agricultural trade, and hence have the right to levy customs duties on imports of agricultural produce, and (ii) limit dumping, i.e. improve the competitiveness of exports and withdraw export subsidies. Food sovereignty is thus formulated by small farmer organizations and civil society organizations as a response to the dismantling of customs tariffs and domestic support policies initiated in the agricultural sector by the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture, which were seen as a threat to the survival of agriculture in the Southern countries. In particular, several cases of “unfair” trading were condemned by these same NGO/CSOs (Oxfam France – Agir Ici, 2001, 2004, 2005). In their information and action campaigns, the CSOs unanimously condemned Northern countries’ agricultural export subsidies. They argued that they disrupt the Southern countries’ food crops, resulting in the food dependency of states, malnutrition and the vulnerability of small farmers to world price volatility for the leading cereals. By the same token, the food sovereignty campaigners were in favor of the developing countries being able to protect their domestic markets from imports and limiting Northern country agricultural subsidies the time it takes to ensure their own agricultural development, including at the expense of bilateral and multilateral agreements.

With the launch of the Doha Development Agenda, the NGOs managed to get in on the debate and make their demands known to the public. For example, Oxfam International took an international petition to the 2005 Hong Kong WTO conference with over 17 million signatures, calling for the ministerial conference to lay down trade rules favorable to Southern countries, especially in the agricultural sector. Along with other organizations in its delegation, it worked hard on lobbying the different delegations attending the conference. Yet these two recommendations – minimal protection of local markets and an end to Northern agricultural dumping – reflected two schools of thought which, without being at odds, were often advocated separately at the WTO. In 2005, for example, cotton organizations in favor of opening up the Northern markets (as promoted by Oxfam UK at the WTO) left ROPPA, whose majority mixed farming-animal husbandry organizations were focusing their demands on local market protection. Some of the most radical NGO/CSOs in these movements argue that

<sup>1</sup> For more on the origins of food sovereignty, read Wittman, Desmarais & Wiebe, 2010, pp. 1–14.

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