

AN OVERVIEW OF CURRENT INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND BASIC FOOD SAFETY PRINCIPLES

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Abstract

This paper examines the conceptual, institutional, and historical foundations of international trade to better understand its impact on food security in the current global context. The analysis expands significantly on economic theories, historical developments, legal frameworks, and technical-scientific progress as reflected in institutional practices and official documents. It highlights the evolution from classical economic treatises (Ricardo, Smith, Marshall) to modern regulatory and trade frameworks (e.g., WTO, GATT rounds). Despite advancements in trade liberalization and international cooperation, global food security remains an unresolved challenge. The study suggests that while international trade can foster greater food availability, the uneven distribution of gains and regulatory asymmetries continue to undermine equitable access. Therefore, food security remains a matter under debate, situated at the intersection of economic policy, institutional action, and scientific development, and far from being an exact science.

Keywords: international (trade) agreements, trade policies, most favoured nation , food safety

JEL Classification: F10, F11, F13.

1. Introduction

Economy is the ensemble of operations of the extraction and processing of a reduced set of resources in order to obtain a significantly and increasingly larger number of goods and services able to meet utilities on *the individuals' and collectivities' side*. Economy also means activity and developed policies submitted to the same definition. The whole economy, as well as its components and sections, does develop and belong to the same behaviour – so does the international trade. Moreover, economics, the science that studies the economy, is often dominated by theoretical approaches, unlike the natural sciences, which rely on postulates (Andrei, 2013). The international trade segment is no exception to this theoretical orientation.

This paper builds on the historical and theoretical foundations to explore how international trade frameworks influence and interact with the issue of food security. It aims to clarify the conceptual background, analyze institutional mechanisms (such as WTO agreements), and examine the implications of economic globalization for the agri-food sector. Through this approach, the study seeks to offer a broader understanding of the potential and limitations of international trade in contributing to sustainable and equitable food systems.

International trade has its own distinct area of study, rooted in the work of classical economists. One of the most important figures is David Ricardo (1772–1823) a „classic” economist, the author of a treaty of economics called „*The Principles of Political Economy and Taxation*” (Ricardo, 1817) written during what is often referred to as the „era of economic treatises”. This period is generally considered to have begun with Adam Smith’s “*Wealth of Nations*” (Smith, 1776), published in 1776, and to have ended with the Alfred Marshall’s “*Principles of Economics*”, published in 1890 (Marshall, 1890).

That was nearly one and a half centuries during which such writings (not many, but each one reflecting the economic thinking that belonged to a generation like a real encyclopedia of the time) dominated the same economic thinking, despite that other writings of economics were equally published in this one and a half centuries. A treaty in which the theory called „of the international trade” was given birth. That „classic” part of this theory was coming to belong to Ricardo only, i.e.

none other economic theorist of the whole 19th century then came to turn about it while, though, many other economic issues and concepts have been studied and the *treaties epoch* stayed in place up to this century end. International trade theory returned about 100 years after Ricardo's time, just after the Great Recession (1929–1933), in a neoclassical form, with more important authors and a clearly different way of thinking. Ricardo, at his time, had studied just the trade between England and Portugal, the English part exporting woools to import wines from Portugal. That was a time in which the international trade was looking pretty insignificant amounts and government economic policies even less. That being the given paradigm of the international trade at the time of the Ricardo's writings, the „great truth” of this author was his intuition about the international world trade through the end of century. Trade between businesses operating freely in their own countries led to international trade flows, and soon national governments also became interested in trade, just like business leaders. Both nations involved in such transactions might be winner while, though, there was about „absolute” and „comparative” advantages on the nations' side in international trade – i.e. that might appear quite different on the individual business' side, where no transaction develops in the absence of profit on all sides. Country specialisation on such „new” markets was coming to identify the key of such a new process and of its results. The world economy was coming to change face once international flows were adding to those developed within domestic areas. *Ricardo, at his time and through his genius, was seeing the day in which governments would stop being so reluctant to developments beyond their countries' boundaries.*

In this paper's order of approach, David Ricardo – the „classic”, once again – began work on this famous theory by issuing the concept of the terms of exchange between commodities in traffic on the foreign market, a concept thus “debutant.” This „classic-debutant” concept was then taken over by neoclassics and developed as the terms of trade – see Singer (1950), Myrdal (1959) and Prebisch (1962, 1964). Finally, this theory stretches between the Ricardo's and neoclassics' contributions through the international trade liberalizing constant (Malik,1998) and the reality of benefits' differentiation between nation partners in context and of international trade flows turning into the world economy distinct area.

2. The United Nations and international trade

Let us first reiterate from above the way of changing paradigm of the international trade in the first half of the 20th century, about hundred years after David Ricardo. Just to complete here the above description by the Great Recession event (1929-1933) intruded, but especially by its aftermath and, in this, the economic thinking turning point named John Maynard Keynes. His capital paper - *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money*” (Keynes,1936) explicitly introduced the term concept of *dirigisme* in economics, here including in the international trade – i.e. *economic policies* and *trade policies*. Or, the last go apparently on the opposite side of the reality and the principle of the international trade theory – i.e. freedom of international trade development – by defining as *restrictions applied to international transactions* according to the individual States' interests.

2.1 The Bretton-Woods conference (1944)

The United Nations played a key role in the emergence of the idea of a “world organization of trade.” While this concept may or may not have originated directly from academic thought, it was certainly conceived around the end of the Second World War. In 1944, when the last World War was not yet ended, at *Bretton Woods*, nearby Wahington DC, so on the secured American soil, a large international (inter-States) conference took place for a new international monetary and financial order to be built – to replace the corresponding such order of before WW2 and here it was assumed a large negotiation among the States' representatives (Andrei, 2011).

Organisms like the *International Monetary Fund (IMF)* and *World Bank* resulted from this large event and then were included in the United Nations' management system. And then, the same

inter-States dialogues were exploring the perspectives of a presumptive “World Trade Organization” (WTO).

2.2 The General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)

Four years later than the Bretton Woods event (1944), in 1948 „The Havana Charter” was drawn and signed as the founding document of the new Organization. But unlike those discussed and established four years earlier at Bretton Woods, here there were several governments not ratifying this document and among them the one of the US. It was so that an alternative and provisory procedure came to be accepted – this was the *General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade (GATT)*, a transitory organisms to the foundation of the forthcoming WTO (Unger, 2017).

This Organism formally complying with its “provisory status” then saw itself in force for about five decades, actually for 47 years. They worked for cancelling tariffs and other restrictions of the trade transactions between countries, and the GATT’s story has been the one of eight rounds of work, like shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of GATT activities

No.	Round name	Place	Year interval
I	Geneva	Geneva	1947
II	Annecy	Annecy	1949
III	Torquay	Torquay	1950–1951
IV	Geneva II	Geneva	1955–1956
V	Dillon Round	Geneva	1960–1961
VI	Kennedy Round	Geneva	1964–1967
VII	Tokyo Round	Tokyo	1973–1979
VIII	Uruguay Round	Geneva	1986–1994

Source: Adapted by the author based on WTO historical data and official GATT documentation.

The most important and significant moment on the long-term and part of GATT’s activity was the *Uruguay Round* – that was the last in the chronological order and ended in the year of the new WTO’s foundation. The Uruguay Round came to be called “The Uruguay Round (1986–94) was the largest and most ambitious trade negotiation ever undertaken in human history” (Oesch, 2014). It lasted for seven and a half years — twice as long as initially planned. A total of 125 countries participated, which later became member states of the World Trade Organization (WTO), significantly more than the former GATT members. This round of negotiations covered a wide range of topics: industrial products, including agriculture and textiles, financial services, intellectual property, capital movements, innovative biological products, software, medicines for AIDS treatment, and more.

2.3 The Establishment and Structure of the World Trade Organisation (WTO)

The foundation agreement of the *World Trade Organisation* was signed on 15 April 1994 in Marrakech, Morocco, by the specialized ministers of the 125 founding member states. On 1 January of the following year, 1995, the new Organization began its activity also in Geneva. With the help of the current 160 member States WTO succeeded to cover so far as high as 98% of the world trade and about 20 more States also currently apply for membership – i.e. and not to omit that this is equally about popularity of the WTO rules proper to free trade in the international area. In context, the EU, as legal entity, joint WTO separately from its member States in a legal formula that stays proper to the WTO foundation agreement and not to other multilateral international agreements. Following "a path already trodden" by its GATT predecessor, WTO performs several

functions: developing and operating a (global) system of trade rules, a forum for negotiating trade agreements, resolving trade disputes between member States and, no less, supporting the needs of developing economies.

Shortly, WTO is the UN's achievement in building that singular structure dealing with the international trade in terms that concomitantly are direct, pragmatic and directly acting. And all these on a few principles that, in their turn, are simple, intelligible and accessible on a unique declared object that is: “benefits to all!” This way the trade flows were supposed to get freedom in movement in its maximum as possible, unless secondary unfavorable consequences. On the one hand, international trade obstacles to be eliminated; on the other, all in international trade – individuals and economic entities –, the same as governments, do know all specific regulations all over the world. It is the way these rules become “transparent” to all, the way the trade policies will stay stable and foreseeable when to be adjusted here and there.

International agreements (see in pc. 3, below) to be elaborated, reported and signed by State partners, always prove complicated and controversial and so need, together with ample debates, a primary function taken by WTO: this is serving as a forum for holding trade negotiations.

Another important aspect of the WTO's activity is *the resolution of disputes and disagreements* (WTO,2024). Trade relations often involve conflicting interests. Agreements, as well as contracts and here including those negotiated in the WTO system, often require interpretation. However, the best way to resolve such disagreements may be to choose impartial procedures, based on legal foundations agreed upon between the parties. Here and thus another component arises -- the process of resolving disagreements, established through WTO's own agreements.

The WTO's major decisions actually belong to its member governments -- i.e. to ministers, who reunite at least every two years, and to ambassadors or their delegates at their regular meetings in Geneva. From a formal and operational point of view, the Organization's major decision-making forum is the "Ministerial Conference", which meets every two years and subordinates the "General Council" - which itself meets several times a year - and other councils and departments. The Organization's budget is mainly provided by contributions from member States, according to a formula based on the member State's share in world trade, and has 650 employees (WTO,2024).

3. The trade agreements

Then the literature was searching for the appropriate definition for the *trade agreement*, but actually several forms resulted, of which two will be here preferred. One refers to agreement done between two or among several country-parts in the aim of so limiting or modifying the existing trade related policies (ResearchFDI,2022). The other - a trade agreement, also known as a *commercial pact or treaty*, that outlines the terms and conditions of trade relationship between countries. These agreements often address tariffs, quotas, and other trade restrictions, aiming to facilitate trade between the participating countries. They may also cover investment guarantees and other aspects of economic cooperation (Australian Government, 2024).

Most of existing agreements world-wide so far do refer to *preferential* and or *free* trade, but both these types keep in common reducing, up to eliminating all about tariffs, quotas and other restrictions concerning objects of the transactions between the signatory parties. Agreements prove helpful to fixing tariffs practiced and to exports and imports distribution on territorial departments. Agreements -- as formal, and formally done -- also provide include punishment(s) for breaking their provisions and or rules included (Grossman, 2016). This is the same way with reducing all misunderstanding; the opposite for trust among the parts of agreements and of trade transactions. From such a view-point, there are *unilateral*, *bilateral*, *regional* and *multilateral* agreements.

A unilateral agreement (European Commission, 2024a) is made by one country that hopes other countries will join later. An example is the most-favoured-nation (MFN) status. This means one country gives trade benefits to another country. When the first country gives new benefits to

other countries in the future, the country with MFN status automatically gets those benefits too. The WTO requires all its member countries to give this MFN status to each other.

Bilateral agreements do fill the most typical category of agreements and refers to the exchange of goods and services between two countries, usually governed by agreements designed to reduce or eliminate trade barriers such as tariffs and quotas. These agreements aim to enhance economic cooperation and mutual benefits by simplifying trade flows and encouraging investment between the two parties (Kagan, 2024).

In their turn *regional agreements* might be exemplified by the “North American Free Trade Agreement” (NAFTA) – of 1 January 1989. The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) established a free-trade area between the United States, Canada, and Mexico, eliminating tariffs on goods produced and traded within these countries, with the goal of fostering regional economic integration (Kenton, W. (2022). The North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) terminated on June 30, 2020 and was replaced on July 1, 2020 by the United States – Mexico – Canada Agreement (USMCA).

Finally, *multilateral agreements* might be illustrated by the example of the “Association of the South-East Asian Nations” (ASEAN) – of 1967, with Indonesia, Malaysia, Filipins, Singapore and Thailand for the need of reciprocal political and economic support(s) in the aim of stability within the region. Gonzales (1998) ranks agreements as such by what he calls the degree of “intensity” – i.e. of course, of the inter-States relationships in the given region, and so NAFTA belongs to “low intensity” and the EU, on the contrary, to the “high” one.

Pascal Lamy, former Director-General of the WTO, points out that trade agreements can be controversial. They can change economic behaviour, strengthen ties with some countries more than with others, and create confusion or unpredictability in global trade. This can make international business more complicated and costly (Lamy, 2007).

4. The specific of international food trade

The *international trade with food products* does reclaim all that was written in the above chapters, here including its important *de-facto* development on the ground (UNIDO, 1997). Besides, the post-War United Nations (UN) Organization – that takes the basic humanity’s concerns – did not stop on the WTO’s foundation on this sector: since its first years of existence, in 40ies, other two Organizations were coming into being - i.e. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and World Health Organization (WHO). And these two were then working and cooperating on elaborating and publishing the *Codex Alimentarius* - a collection of international standards, codes of *good-food* practice, guides and other recommendations relating to food products, for their production and safety, respectively a set of standards aspiring to exhaustive reference to food (of all categories): prepared, semi-prepared or raw and for distribution to the consumer, provisions regarding food hygiene, food additives, pesticide residues, contamination factors, labelling and presentation, methods of analysis and sampling (FAO, 2009).

Hazard Analysis Critical Control Point (HACCP) is an important part of *Codex* and introduces the notion of *hazard*: "a physical, biological, chemical or caloric agent in food or its conditions with the potential to cause an adverse health effect" (FAO & WHO,1997). *Hazards* are caused by any of the following: (1) unacceptable presence of a biological, chemical or physical contaminant in raw materials or in semi-finished or finished products; (2) unacceptable potential for growth or survival of microorganisms or the unacceptable potential for the generation of chemicals in semi-finished or finished products, or in the environment of a production line; (3) unacceptable contamination or re-contamination of semi-finished or finished products with microorganisms, chemicals or foreign materials. Hazards can be classified into three main groups: chemical, micro, biological and physical (ILSI Europe, 2004).

Improvement of food safety comes directly opposite to specific hazards. A food is considered safe when it is “wholesome and does not exceed an acceptable level of risk associated

with pathogenic organisms or chemicals” (National Research Council,1999). It is the stakeholder that makes the specific motivation for *food safety* and so this varies accordingly around. Thus, governments impose higher levels of safety on the nation's food supply in order to reduce the incidence of foodborne illness (Buzby et al. 1998). Producers along the chain, in their turn, seek to achieve existing acceptable levels of hazard and minimize the likelihood that their products will be identified as the cause of illness (Ollinger & Ballenger, 2003).

Valeeva et al. (2005) finds the food safety as quite complex – i.e. no single indicator can be used to measure it in individual products. The established acceptable levels of food safety hazards are implicit and so require further clarification to make the process of improving food safety understandable for producers. Whenever and wherever food safety failures arise, they mainly arise from problems caused by the ability of hazards to enter the production chain at many points. To date, this technical aspect has been the main guide in developing a chain approach to improving food safety, as production stages and inputs are interconnected. The literature widely describes potential economic benefits and costs of improving food safety, as well as methods for assessing them.

However, the assessment of benefits mostly focuses on consumer and social benefits, the latter benefits only at the end of the chain. There is rather yet missing a quantitative estimate of the benefits to private producers and little research on the benefits and costs of improving food safety at the chain level, either, i.e. knowledge of the economic consequences for the different stages of the chain and for the entire chain is quite incomplete.

Most existing studies on the costs of improving food safety actually focus just on some stages of the chain, especially the processing and retail stages. The few studies available at the chain level explore the costs of different combinations of control measures in terms of risk reduction. Little information is available to guide producers along the chain in choosing the cost-effective set of control measures to increase a given level of food safety and minimize the associated costs. And these while such optimization of food safety measures using the chain approach could help identify such points of intervention with minimal costs for different levels of food safety.

Back to the above Codex document – i.e. actually, not quite differently from other UN’s documents and references – it doesn’t succeed to avoid the qualificative of controversial – e.g. on the one hand it appears to have “compulsory” provisions for its member States since all over invoked by WTO; on the other supporters of Codex do not really exclude using also other scientific references and/or studies in favour of food safety and consumer’s protection.

With the strengthening of international trade in food goods, the Uruguay Round had included agriculture in trade negotiations in a significant and thus also internationally unprecedented way. These trade discussions would lead to two other binding documents agreements relevant to food regulations: the *Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS)* and the *Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT)*. The SPS and TBT agreements establish important parameters governing the adoption and implementation of food quality and safety measures. They are designed to minimize the discriminatory and adverse effects of food regulations (FAO & WHO, 1997). Last but not least, in the area of international food trade, mutual recognition agreements (MRA) establish that one country's inspection and certification system is equivalent to that of another, offering the same level of protection (Malik, 1998). To see that unilateral or so-called "reciprocal" agreements between buyer and seller become a thing of the past, the Codex committees concerned must play a crucial role in developing the objective and scientific principles that should govern international trade. At the origin of MRAs were the requirements of the importing countries, namely their own regulations. The inspection and certification involved were carried out - biased - in favour of the buyer's specifications (FAO & WHO,1997).

5. Conclusions

Food safety may seem, at first glance, just a technical component of (the international) trade. In reality, it cannot be fully understood without being placed in the broader context of economic theory, the exact sciences, historical development, legal regulations and practical experience. Economically, the international trade is explained through theories such as its specific one, which provides the basics for understanding how countries interact and exchange goods between. Exact sciences, especially those belonging to the food and public health fields, underpin risk control mechanisms such as the HACCP system. History here brings the GATT and, later, the larger WTO, the agreements that shaped the global system of trade rules, introducing principles such as reciprocity and most-favoured-nation treatment.

In addition, the legal framework – national and international – ensures that food trade operates according to accepted norms. At the same time, the experience gained in decades of negotiations, treaties and trade agreements highlights the complexity of simultaneously ensuring economic efficiency and consumer protection.

Therefore, the ongoing debate about food safety in the context of trade does not indicate a lack of clarity, but rather reflects a high level of maturity and responsibility. It is a matter of fundamental civilization: ensuring that the products we exchange, especially food, are not only economically valuable but also safe and reliable. The study of food trade and food safety is more than just a technical matter – it reflects the shared progress and responsibility of researchers, institutions, and communities working together for everyone’s well-being.

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