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How could the European Union's trade policy become a tool for promoting sustainable food systems?

For many, “trade and sustainability” is an oxymoron that associates the world as it is today with a world expected for tomorrow. The former is quite real and one of its key characteristics is the tremendous growth of world trade that occurred between the early 18th century and today [\[read\]](#). The latter, often put in sharp contrast with hyper-consumption and long-distance trade, is described in terms of local consumption and short supply chains and remains a dream that, one has good reasons to fear, will turn into a myth, as prefigured by our virtual standstill on the way towards sustainability.



Since it was created, the European Union (EU) adopted, in the field of international trade, an approach based on internal (among its member states) as well as external (with the rest of the world) free trade, in the framework of agreements where a high priority is given to the economic dimension, tempered by norms of quality and protection of its consumer citizens and its firms.

We have already discussed elsewhere [\[read\]](#) how the EU had, through a historical political mistake, wasted the opportunity to contribute to shaping a more sustainable world, more social and more respectful of our environment, by choosing not to use its commercial and investment power to push for the emergence of a world consistent with its narrative on development and the principles underpinning the Rome Treaty.

The International Panel of Experts on Sustainable Food Systems ([IPES–Food](#)), in collaboration with the European Centre for Development Policy Management ([ECDPM](#)), published a [briefing note](#) on what an EU policy promoting sustainable food systems would look like.

Starting from the fact that the EU is the largest food importer in the world, the note makes recommendations on how the Union could provide stimuli and incentives to trade partners adopting sustainable practices. It primarily envisages the enforcement of sustainability rules and norms that would allow promoting imports of sustainable goods and restrict those of illegally or unsustainably manufactured products.

The four proposed principles on which this policy would be based, are:

- **EU Policy coherence**, especially of trade and non–trade policies, of internal policies of member countries and of policies towards partners of the EU (e.g. development cooperation policies), that should all be in favour of sustainable food systems and sustainable development.
- A **gradual implementation** of the new approaches together with the most willing partners.
- The reliance on **inclusive consultation and partnership building processes** to generate assent and interest, and ensure ownership.
- **Adopt sustainability as the explicit overarching goal** guiding all EU policies. This will require a clear differentiation between trade of sustainable and trade of non–sustainable goods, through targeted subsidies and the use of standards, certification and traceability schemes that could raise difficulties with respect to existing WTO rules.

Implementation, the note adds, could rest, for example, on:

- **Specific cooperation agreements** with objectives such as zero deforestation, zero child labour, zero biodiversity loss and carbon neutrality. These agreements would draw lessons from already ongoing pilots, such as that regarding cocoa.
- **Preferential trade frameworks** differentiating goods in favour of those that are sustainable or have a positive impact on consumer health.
- The **inclusion of the sustainability objective** in trade agreements, supported by specific measures, such as the effective use of the EU’s designed sustainability impact assessments (SIAs).

Seen from the perspective of hungerexplained.org, these recommendations go into the right direction and they should be also be applied to all ongoing trade agreements that should be revised to make them fully consistent with the proposed principles.

The ball, now, is in the camp of policy-makers (the European Parliament, the EU Commission and Member Country authorities), and that will probably be the hard part. The question is: will Member Country governments come to an agreement and unite to implement this approach? Will there be enough public opinion pressure to convince policy-makers to take the leap?

We may fervently hope for this ... while suspecting that such an agreement won't occur without some of the important elements put forward by the IPBES-Food note being dropped. This, of course, would undermine the effective change of orientation of the EU's trade policies in favour of the promotion of sustainable food systems.

There will be a need to keep an eye on this!

To know more:

- F. Rampa et al., EU trade policy for sustainable food systems, Briefing note, IPBES-Food/ECDPM, 2020.

Selection of past articles on hungerexplained.org related to the topic:

- Obstacles to transition – Why is it so difficult to make our food system more sustainable and climate-friendly? 2019.
- Borders in the global economy – Control of labour, mobility of goods and capital, preservation of profits and exacerbation of inequalities, 2018.
- Intergenerational equity: the European social model – The story of a political mistake, 2015.
- International trade in agricultural commodities, 2011/2014.