From Marrakesh to Doha: Effects of Removing Food Subsidies on the Poor

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If successful, the Doha Round may cut global subsidies to food production. The vast majority of developing countries should benefit, but some will lose through a deterioration of their terms of trade. How great is their loss likely to be? What will happen to poor consumers in those countries? What is the appropriate policy response?

In examining these questions, we find that:

- The collective magnitude of the likely losses of net food importers is between $300 million and $1.2 billion per year depending on the final agreement, an amount that could readily be financed by donors. This is less than 0.7 percent of total merchandise imports of these countries and even those losses will phase-in over a long period. The food price increases will be about half as large as the annual year-to-year variations in food prices.
- Only 7 countries would see their net food import bills increase by more than 5 percent of total export earnings. This number is relatively small, because the projected increases in food prices are small and because many developing countries would also benefit from increases in the prices of their exports.
- The international community has several instruments to help countries faced with a terms-of-trade loss. The International Monetary Fund (IMF) can use its Compensatory Financing Facility or its new Trade Integration Mechanism (TIM). The World Bank and bilateral donors can provide transitional adjustment assistance for affected countries. The current discussions of "aid for trade" to assist countries overcome constraints to exports may result in additional resources. On the other hand, certain approaches are not likely to work. Commodity stabilization funds, for example, have generally been ineffective in staving off long-term secular declines in prices, and hedging efforts have proven costly and difficult to manage.
- The effects on poor people—as opposed to countries—also merit analysis. Many of the poor will gain because they are subsistence farmers, but some may be net buyers of food. While each case must be managed on its own terms, one relatively easy response to help the poor is to lower tariffs that may keep domestic prices above the international price. Lowering such tariffs will also improve overall efficiency, although at some cost to government revenues. If this is not possible, development assistance may have to provide some transitional finance.

Background

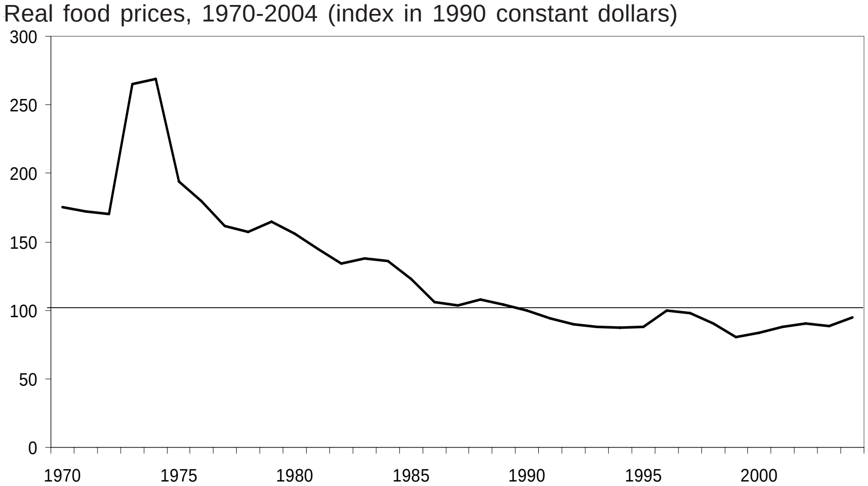
The Marrakesh Ministerial conference that concluded the Uruguay Round in 1994 adopted a decision on "Measures Concerning the Possible Negative Effects of the Reform Program on Least Developed and Net Food Importing Developing Countries." That decision, which has become known as the Marrakesh Decision, was adopted in response to fears that subsidy cuts imposed on food exporting countries by the Uruguay Round Agreement on Agriculture (URAA) would have the effect of raising prices of imported foods. The Marrakesh Decision requires regular reviews of food-aid commitments and flows, the adoption of guidelines to ensure that food aid is given in grant form or on concessional terms, and technical assistance. But many food-importing countries remain concerned that food prices could rise with the reduction or elimination of subsidies in exporting countries. That concern has hampered an agreement on agriculture during the Doha Round. This is unfortunate, because the benefits of such an agreement for developing countries would greatly outweigh the negative impact of increases in the prices of food imports.

The Marrakesh Decision has become a catch-all for concerns about increases in food import prices, whether or not those increases can be traced to multilateral policy reforms. For example, the rise in wheat prices in 1995–1996[1] led to a proposal by 16 countries, including some net-food-importing developing countries (NFIDCs), to establish a revolving fund to help meet the short-term needs of financing normal levels of commercial imports. The proposed countercyclical subsidy mechanism would have triggered food and financial aid upon commodity price increases stemming from agricultural trade liberalization agreed to under the URAA. The proposal was motivated by the increases in wheat prices, despite the fact that little reform had been agreed under the URAA and almost none implemented by 1995–96 (Ingco 1995). Volatility is not unusual in world food prices, and a range of financial instruments are available to mitigate its effects.

This note examines the historical food imports and trade balances of the least developed countries (LDCs) and NFIDCs, examines the impact of price increases that might result from policy reforms under the Doha Round, and discusses measures that could be taken to address the problems of variability in food prices, some of which could be negotiated during the round. Of special note is the occasional ban on food exports to which some countries have resorted during periods of price increases. These export restrictions are potentially more important to national food security than the increases in food prices that result from policy reform, because they limit access to exports at the time when they are most needed. The note begins with a review of globally traded food prices.

Figure 1. Productivity gains have made food cheaper

Real food prices, 1970-2004 (index in 1990 constant dollars)



Note: This is the World Bank's index for internationally traded food commodities weighted by world export shares and deflated by the manufactures unit-value index in dollar terms of the G-5 countries.
Source: Development Prospects Group, the World Bank.

World food prices—lower and less volatile than during the 1970s

Part of the concern over prices is based on the experience of the 1970s, when internationally traded food prices rose sharply, causing shortages in some countries. At that time, real food prices showed high variability associated with specific events such as the emergence of OPEC and resulting higher oil prices, large grain purchases by the former Soviet Union, crop failures, and significant structural changes in the world economy. Since the mid-1970s, however, real food prices have trended lower relative to the index of manufactures and have generally exhibited lower year-to-year variability (figure 1). The relative price stability of the past two decades occurred despite some equally dramatic changes, such as the collapse of the Soviet Union in the late 1980s, the increasing importance of China in the global economy, and the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s.

Which developing countries are net food importers?

The NFIDCs that are covered by the Marrakesh Decision include 73 countries—the 50 LDCs plus an additional 23 developing countries: Barbados, Botswana, Cuba, Côte d'Ivoire, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Honduras, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Mauritius, Morocco, Namibia, Pakistan, Peru, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sri Lanka, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, and Venezuela (FAO 2005). Of 72 countries examined (data was

Table 1. Estimates of world price increases in percent for key food

Source	Scenario	Wheat	Coarse grains	Meat	Sugar	Rice	Oil-seeds	Dairy
Full liberalization scenarios								
BBDJ	3 tiers [a] (100% export subsidy reduction)	2.3	3.1	1.6	2.8	9.4	9.7	2.7
RST	3 tiers [b] (45% export subsidy reduction)	4.0–6.3	4.3–7.0	2.0–4.3		1.2–1.4	2.8–4.5	3.9–4.3
FAPRI [c]	Elimination of domestic farm programs and border measures	4.8	5.7	3.7–10.3		10.3	3.1	22.0–39.0
USDA	3 tiers with full domestic subsidy removal [d]	18.1	15.2	22.3 [e]	16.4	10.1	11.2	
Partial liberalization								
BBDJ	100% reduction in export support	0.1	0.1	0.1–1.5	5.6	0.1	0.0	2.3
USDA	Global export subsidy removal	2.0	0.6		3.3	1.5	0.1	
DHK	50% reduction in domestic support (OECD)	4.9	5.5	2.2	–0.6	0.3	3.5	–0.2
DHK	50% market price support reduction, re-instrumentalization [g]	0.8	1.0	–0.7	0.2	0.7	0.4	–0.2

a. "Three tiers" relates to reductions or elimination in export subsidies, a reduction in domestic support, and global tariff reduction.
b. The presented figures summarize three scenarios with the following parameters. An Amber Box reduction of 55 percent; a 60 percent Amber Box and 50 percent Blue Box reduction; and a 100 percent Amber Box and 50 percent Blue Box reduction.
c. Policy changes that result in the reported price increases were supposed to take place in 2002. The values differ widely for beef, pork, and poultry.
d. This scenario assumes full OECD domestic subsidy removal and worldwide export subsidy removals.
e. Price increase for livestock and products.
f. Scenario assumes a 100 percent reduction in export subsidies and a 55 percent reduction in domestic support linked to inputs and outputs, estimated effects on "world prices of developing countries trade."
g. Scenario assumes 50 percent cut in tariffs and export subsidy rates but allows for compensatory increase in domestic support.
Source: BBDJ = Bouet and others (2004). USDA = USDA (2001). RST = Rae and Strutt (2003). FAPRI = Beghin and Fabiosa (2002). DHK = Dimaranan et al (2004).
Source: World Bank calculations and summary of results from Table 1.Table 2. Comparison of commodity price changes and simulated impacts of reforms (percent)

not available for East Timor), 46 had a food-trade deficit and 38 had a trade deficit in primary agricultural materials during 1998–2002.[2] Of the countries with a food-trade deficit 34 were LDCs. Among the countries with a deficit in agriculture trade, only 22 were LDCs, leaving non-LDCs overrepresented (17 out of 23 had a deficit in this category). Using COMTRADE data for the 72 countries, we found that countries with the highest net food imports per capita in this group were island economies and countries in conflict or just emerging from conflict.

The most important food imports for LDCs and other NFIDCs in 2001 were wheat and wheat flour (21 percent), fruit and vegetables (11 percent), maize (10 percent), dairy products and eggs (9 percent), sugar (8 percent), rice (6 percent), soybeans and oil (6 percent), meat and preparations (4 percent), and palm oil (4 percent) according to the FAO.

Effects of a Doha Round Agreement

With slow progress in the Doha Round on an agreement to reduce agricultural subsidies and support, it is difficult to estimate how large the food price changes resulting from an agreement might be. However, quantitative estimates made in preparation for the negotiations (table 1) can be used as estimates of such changes. The various estimates are not readily comparable, however, since agricultural trade liberalization scenarios differ widely in their assumptions about (a) full or partial reduction of export subsidies in industrialized countries, (b) the reduction or elimination of schemes of domestic support, and (c) global tariff reductions. The estimates also vary with regard to the time frame of analysis, however, price increases generally assume full adjustment. The largest increases in food prices correspond to full liberalization which does not appear to be a likely outcome of the Doha Round at this time.

Table 2. Comparison of commodity price changes and simulated impacts of reforms (percent)

	Range of estimated price increases from reforms	Average of estimated price increases from reforms	Coefficient of variation of prices 1990–2004	Average year-to-year percentage change of prices 1990–2004
Commodity				
Wheat	0.1 - 18.1	5.1	16.9	11.8
Maize	0.1 - 15.2	4.6	17.2	10.1
Beef	0.8 - 22.3	5.1	15.4	8.6
Sugar	1.1 - 16.4	5.8	23.9	14.1
Rice	0.1 - 10.6	5.5	19.6	11.8

Source: World Bank calculations and summary of results from Table 1.

The results of the various studies are summarized in table 2 and compared with historical variations in prices. The comparison shows that the average increase in prices of major food items under the various scenarios of reform are generally less than the coefficient of variation or average year-to-year percent price change of these foods (table 2). For example, the average increase in wheat prices from the various studies is 5.1 percent while the coefficient of variation for wheat prices was 16.9 percent during 1990-2004 and the average year-to-year percent change was 11.8 percent. The impact on net-food-importing developing countries' import bills ranges from about $300 million to $1.2 billion in the individual scenarios (table 3), and the actual increases in food import costs are likely to be toward the lower end of this range.

The average net food imports of NFIDCs totaled $3.85 billion per year for the five year period from 1998–2002, with LDCs' net imports averaging $2.63 billion and other NFIDCs net imports averaging $1.22 billion. These imports were 6.3 percent of total merchandise imports for LDCs and 1.2 percent of total merchandise imports for other NFIDCs. However, these aggregates do not reflect the situation in individual countries who may need assistance to cope with higher food import costs. For example, the net food imports were 34 percent of total imports in the case of Haiti and 25 percent for Yemen. Net food imports exceeded 100 percent of export earnings in Eritrea, Haiti, Djibouti, Cape Verde, and Tuvalu, with the deficit financed by aid assistance. In some countries, higher food import costs may be offset by higher prices for their agricultural exports. For example, in Benin the share of net food imports of total imports is 22.3 percent, while the net export balance in agricultural products is 11.6 percent. Similar offsetting effects can be expected for Burkina Faso (22.6 percent and 26.4 percent), Chad (20.2 percent and 33.7 percent), the Lao Democratic Republic (21.7 percent and 26.1 percent), Mozambique (6.8 percent and 9.9 percent), and others. Some countries may also receive large food-aid imports and may not be as directly affected by food price increases. For example, Bangladesh is a large food importer with relatively small food exports. However, it is also a large recipient of food aid.

To determine which countries are most at risk from higher food import costs, we consider changes in the costs of imports net of changes in exports with a partial equilibrium analysis of different scenarios for price increases following elimination of export subsidies and domestic support. Using COMTRADE data as the values for food imports and exports, we calculate the dollar increases in the net-food-import bills for all LDCs and NFIDCs under different assumptions for world price changes after the Doha Round.[3] The effects of price increases for five main food commodities (rice, cereals, meat and meat products, oilseeds, and dairy products) are considered and then the analysis is repeated including a subset of other food commodities (vegetables and fruit, fish, live animals, beverages, animal and vegetable fats, animal feeds, sugar, and miscellaneous food products) to capture the broader impact on foods which would not be directly affected by reduced subsidies. This effectively takes some net export commodities into account. Tropical export commodities such as coffee, tobacco, cotton, tea, and cocoa are excluded from the analysis, but including them would improve the balance of payments for most countries—substantially for the group as a whole. Prices for these commodities would likely rise with food prices because agricultural commodity prices are highly correlated due to substitution possibilities in both production and consumption. The increases in food import costs (table 3) are small for LDCs and NFIDCs compared with the total expected gains from trade liberalization.[4]

Under a scenario that uses average predicted price increases, only 16 countries would see their net food import costs for the five main commodities increase by more than 5 percent. A few countries would see larger increases, but the additional financial burden still represents a small share of total imports. Summarizing the results of our simulations, net food import costs as a share of the total food import bill are likely to rise by more than 5 percent for 13 countries (Benin, Chad, Comoros, Congo DR, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Haiti, Jordan, Liberia, Senegal, St. Lucia, Tuvalu, and Yemen). The expected rise in food costs is not homogenous across simulations for all countries. Some of these countries and some other countries could see their food import costs rise more strongly. The increase in the cost of food imports as a share of the total food bill exceeds 7.5 percent in at least one scenario for: Benin, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo DR, Cuba, Egypt, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Jordan, Liberia, Kiribati, Maldives, Senegal, St. Lucia, Tuvalu, Uganda, and Yemen. When looking at the wider set of food commodities and the average of the price increases in the simulations, only 8 countries experience an increase in food import costs of 5 percent or more of their total food imports (Burundi, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Congo DR, Eritrea, Jordan, and Tuvalu).

Higher world prices will lead to a supply response

Fifty-five of the LDCs and other NFIDCs examined are net importers of goods in general. It therefore does not suffice to analyze the static effect of price changes, as Cline (2004) points out. Increased world-market prices for food can be expected to induce an increase in food production in developing countries that enjoy a comparative advantage in food production (43 of the 72 analyzed) or agriculture (38 out of the 72 analyzed) according to Cline. [5] Over the long term, NFIDCs with a comparative advantage might become less dependent on food imports.

Price increases are likely to induce other changes, such as the distribution of income in developing countries. In parallel with rising world market prices, domestic prices will increase, though probably less than proportionally. Where the rural population is self-sufficient in food production, it will therefore not be adversely affected by higher food prices. To the degree that rural producers also supply the local market, they will gain from increasing food prices. With urban dwellers adversely

Table 3. Estimates of increased net food import costs for NFIDCs based on various scenarios for reforms

	Total extra cost of five main commodities [a] (millions of dollars)	As percentage of total imports	Percentage increase in net food import bill for five main commodities	Extra cost for wider set of commodities [b] (millions of dollars)
Simulations				
Full liberalization scenarios				
BBDJ, 3 tiers (100% export subsidy removal)	251	0.15	2.70	266 [c]
RST, 3 tiers (55% Amber box reduction and 45% export subsidy reduction)	329	0.20	3.60	327 [d]
FAPRI, Elimination of domestic farm programs and border measures (max/min)	1125 / 774	0.68 / 0.47	12.3 / 8.50	n.a.
USDA, 3 tiers, with full domestic subsidy removal	1236 [e]	0.75	13.50	1096 [f]
Partial liberalization scenarios				
BBDJ, 100% reduction in export support	52	0.03	0.60	69 [c]
USDA, Global export subsidy removal	110 [e]	0.07	1.20	31 [f]
DRK, 50% reduction in OECD domestic support	610	0.19	3.40	342 [g]
DRK, 50% market price support reduction, re-instrumentalization	47	0.03	0.50	42 [g]

Note: Net imports calculated by country and commodity using 2003 mirror data from COMTRADE for Afghanistan, Angola, Bangladesh, Barbados, Benin, Bhutan, Botswana, Burkina Faso, Burundi, Cambodia, Cape Verde, Central African Republic, Chad, Comoros, Dem. Rep. Congo, Cote d'Ivoire, Cuba, Djibouti, Dominica, Dominican Republic, Egypt, Equatorial Guinea, Eritrea, Ethiopia, The Gambia, Guinea, Guinea-Bissau, Haiti, Honduras, Jamaica, Jordan, Kenya, Kiribati, Lao PDR, Lesotho, Liberia, Madagascar, Malawi, Maldives, Mali, Mauritania, Mauritius, Morocco, Mozambique, Myanmar, Namibia, Nepal, Niger, Pakistan, Peru, Rwanda, Samoa, Sao Tome and Principe, Senegal, Sierra Leone, Solomon Islands, Somalia, Saint Lucia, Saint Kitts and Nevis, and Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Sri Lanka, Sudan, Tanzania, Togo, Trinidad and Tobago, Tunisia, Tuvalu, Uganda, Vanuatu, Venezuela, Yemen, and Zambia.
Extra import costs calculated by multiplying the net trade balance of these countries by the estimated price changes. Results do not take forgone preferential market access into account.
Key: BBDJ = Bouet and others (2004). USDA = USDA (2001). RST = Rae and Strutt (2003). FAPRI = Beghin and Fabiosa (2002). DHK = Dimaranan et al (2004).
a. Definitions for the five main commodities are according to SITC1: rice (042), other cereals (04-042), meat and meat products (01), oilseeds (22), and dairy products (02).
b. Adds vegetables and fruit, fish, life animals, beverages, animal and vegetable fats, animal feeds, sugar, and miscellaneous food products
c. Does not add fish, animal and vegetable fats, and animal feed
d. Adds only miscellaneous food products
e. Excluding dairy products
f. Adds only sugar, live animals, vegetables and fruit, and miscellaneous food products
g. Does not add vegetables and fruit, fish, beverages, and animal feed
Source: World Bank Staff estimates.

affected, income will be transferred from urban centers to rural areas, reducing poverty rates in these areas. Cline (2004) comes to the conclusion that liberalization in agricultural trade will lower rural poverty in most of the countries he analyzed.[6] With price increases trickling down from world to national to rural markets, returns to rural factors of production will increase, strengthening incentives for rural production and leading to a better integration of rural and urban markets. This would allow an increase in allocative efficiency in the long run.

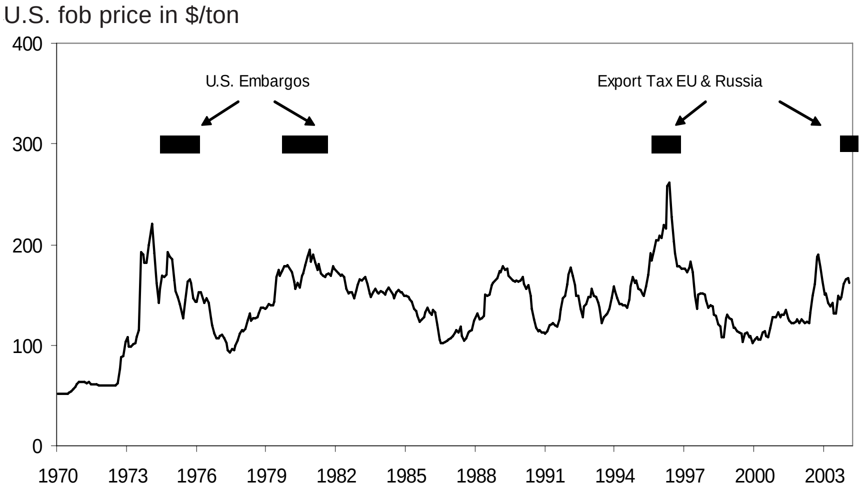
These conclusions are supported by Anderson, Martin, and van der Mensbrugghe (2005) who estimate that full trade liberalization would lead to an increase in the volume of Sub-Saharan African net exports of agricultural and processed food products from $6 billion in 2001 to $27 billion in 2015. Net exports would be $8 billion higher than under their baseline scenario with no further policy changes. Net export volumes increase despite an offsetting movement in the terms of trade. Assuming no supply capacity constraints, annual farm output growth between 2004 and 2015 would be 4.9 percent following full liberalization compared to 4.5 percent in the baseline scenario. Output growth under the full liberalization scenario exceeds the estimated growth rate resulting from trade liberalization with Special and Differential Treatment for non-agricultural goods for developing countries (4.7 percent).

Freer trade can help feed the poor

Countries can take unilateral actions to reduce the impact of higher food import prices on the poor such as lowering tariffs. Such tariffs are often used to protect high-costs domestic producers, but hurt poor consumers most because they spend a higher share of their income on food. Such tariffs often provide little support to rural poor because they leave out two large groups among the rural poor: those who own no farmland, but pay higher prices as consumers, and those who own farmland, but do not produce commercially. Even commercial farmers may not benefit, because protectionism encourages them to continue planting low-value food crops instead of diversifying into nontraditional exports of higher value, a better way of raising income and escaping poverty. In turn, the lack of export production reduces the country's ability to earn foreign exchange and undermines the structural capacity to import food and other products.

Legitimate concern over temporary disruptions in food supplies caused by man-made or natural disasters is sometimes used to justify protectionist measures to stimulate domestic food production. However, the impact of such disruptions could be mitigated through other measures, such as reserves in cash or kind, better distribution channels, and reformed food-aid policies, all of which would be more effective and less costly than stimulating inefficient domestic food production. To the extent that disruptions are caused by export cutbacks or bans in times of high world prices (figure 2), developing countries should act through the WTO to seek

Figure 2. Export restrictions during times of greatest need: Wheat prices and export restrictions



Sources: United States Department of Agriculture and World Bank.

to constrain such behavior in the Doha agreement.

Measures to deal with food-price shocks

Several mechanisms are available to help developing countries deal with short-term food-price shocks (Ingco, Mitchell, and Nash 2004). The IMF's Compensatory Financing Facility (CFF) is specifically designed to help alleviate adverse effects of certain commodity-price movements that result in balance-of-payments problems. Commercial risk management instruments are also available to protect against short-term price movement. For example, options can be used to lock in a specific price or to ensure that prices will not be greater (or lower) than a specified level. These could be used by large importers of food—in the public and private sectors—to protect against a sharp increase in food import prices. They could also be used by governments to insulate safety nets from budgetary crises arising from food price increases. The World Bank offers commodity swaps to link debt-servicing costs to movements in the price of a specific commodity or a basket of commodities. Food aid is available from the international community and unilateral donors to deal with food emergencies and disruptions in domestic supplies. In addition, there are new approaches to dealing with short-term price movements and food security concerns that could be developed and implemented. One proposal made in response to the Marrakesh Decision is to establish a system to distribute food vouchers to the needy when food prices rise. These could be redeemed through normal commercial market channels, thereby increasing the demand for food imports without distorting domestic food markets. Another proposal involves an ex ante fund for trade finance.

Conclusion

Agricultural liberalization will stimulate growth and help raise the incomes of the poor. It also may hurt a relatively few countries. The hurt should not be overstated: the predicted rise in prices will occur over several years and be considerably less than annual fluctuations associated with the business cycle and year-to-year yield variations. Still, both the international community and national governments should take actions to mitigate the costs of adjustment. The international community should provide aid for trade using the IMF's Trade Integration Mechanism (TIM) and CFF, as well as resources to support reform programs. For national governments, the first order of business should be to lower trade barriers to keep prices from rising in the local market. If that instrument is not available, governments should allow the exchange rate to depreciate to avoid passing on the full effect of price adjustments to the poor.

Notes

1. Average annual wheat prices rose by 38 percent from 1994 to 1996 primarily in response to low stocks caused by a poor harvest in the United States.
2. Food is defined as the UN's Standard International Trade classification codes SITC1 0-071-074+1-12+22+4; agriculture as SITC1 0+1+2-27-28+4.
3. We assume that the underlying trade quantities remain unchanged as the magnitude of trade elasticities is debated and varies most probably strongly between countries, by category and even within categories.
4. Nearly two-thirds of the potential gains from multilateral trade reforms stand to come in agriculture. However, achieving such gains will require WTO members to make very substantial cuts to their bound tariff rates and domestic farm subsidy commitments. If that is done, the global welfare gains from completely freeing merchandise trade over 2005–10 will be $287 billion per year by 2015. Of that, $85.7 billion would go to the developing countries (Anderson, Martin, and van der Mensbrugghe 2005: table 12.4). Although the largest gains go to developed countries, the developing countries gain twice as much as a percentage of their incomes.
5. A country is considered having a comparative advantage in food or agricultural production, if the ratio of food (agricultural) exports to food (agricultural) imports exceeds the same ratio for non-food (non-agricultural) exports and imports.
6. Under the most likely scenario, rural worldwide poverty will decline by 255 million, while urban poverty will increase by 54 million people.

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