

*Special Issue: Mapping the Global Food Landscape***Section III****Global food trade**Jennifer Clapp¹, Annette Aurélie Desmarais², and Matias E. Margulis³

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Few issues animate debate about the global food system as much as the role of international trade and, in particular, that of the World Trade Organization (WTO). Indeed, the WTO is a subject that polarizes debate among food scholars and activists. Some scholars see the WTO as imperfect but necessary to ensure a transparent and rule-based system to manage international food trade that is preferable to the exercise of unilateral raw power by governments. For others, the WTO represents the apex of neoliberal globalization and they regard it as an institution that has entrenched corporate interests and control over the food system at the expense of public interests. For many food activists, in particular, the WTO became a principal target for mass public protests; it also galvanized the transnational food sovereignty movement that has long sought to get the WTO “out of agriculture”.

The articles in this section address a series of recent controversies surrounding the WTO and consider new issues and political struggles over international food trade rules. Sophia Murphy, a long time observer of the WTO, argues that an understudied consequence of the 2008 Global Food Crisis is the breakdown of trust in the international trading system. In particular, Murphy illustrates that a breakdown in trust is particularly acute among low-income food deficit countries (LIFDCs). This group of countries, which are highly reliant on imported food to meet domestic food needs, experienced severe difficulties accessing food on international markets during the crisis. However, LIFDCs cannot simply relocalize food production and will continue to rely on traded food. Murphy considers how the interests of states vulnerable to food insecurity

may be better served by reform of current WTO rules. Gawain Kripke of Oxfam delves into the 2013 debacle at the WTO regarding India's national food stockholding policy. He shows that the efforts by the United States and other Northern states to thwart India's Right to Food legislation by claiming it was illegal under WTO rules illustrates the intensity of Northern resistance to innovative policies for food insecurity. Kripke also suggests this case reveals the hypocrisy of the Northern states that on the one hand claim to be champions of world food security while blocking India's effort to expand food entitlements to its hundreds of millions of food insecure citizens. Matias Margulis asks whether existing WTO rules are a potential pathway to regulate food-based agrofuels that are strongly linked to ecological and social problems and global food price volatility. Margulis argues that governments lack the political will to regulate food-based agrofuels at the global level; however, he points to a series of WTO rules and recent trade disputes that could be potentially used by food insecure governments and global civil society actors to curb, and potentially rollback, the expansion of agrofuels production.

Kim Burnett's synthesis paper takes a longer view of the debate over the WTO and agriculture. She contextualizes this debate, starting from Peter Rossett's intervention that "food is different", to other key criticisms of the WTO, such as its undemocratic decision-making process. However, Burnett also points to recent and pivotal changes to the political dynamics at the WTO. This includes the growing political assertiveness of food-insecure developing countries that are challenging power there and, in particular, the Group of Thirty-Three (G33) coalition that has been instrumental in carving out greater flexibility at the WTO to address food security concerns. This latter development, Burnett suggests, illustrates that power is far more mutable at the WTO than previously thought and therefore calls for a more nuanced analysis of the current dynamics of the food security and trade debate.