

The Good, the Bad, and the Hungry:

An Analysis of Food Protectionism in Hungry Agrarian Countries

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Abstract

This paper seeks to address the paradoxical issue of food protectionism in hungry agrarian countries. By comparing the geography of world food tariffs with that of world hunger, we can see that food tariffs are generally higher in countries plagued by chronic hunger than in their richer neighbors. This apparent contradiction is often justified by developing country governments using the popular rhetoric of food sovereignty and rural development. Consequently, international controversies surrounding world agricultural trade have revolved mainly around those barriers erected by developed countries. This paper argues that the lack of skepticism and opposition to food protectionism in developing countries are founded neither on sound economics nor solid empirical evidence, and thus a careful reassessment by all those involved must be made on this very important matter.

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1. Introduction

The collapse of the WTO's Doha Development Round of trade talks in July 2006 serves as an authentic reminder of the important role agricultural protectionism still plays in local and international politics. While most complaints against agricultural protectionism have customarily been directed toward developed countries, less skepticism has been raised regarding the rationale for agricultural protectionism in developing countries. Yet despite such tendency in the politics of world trade, food tariffs are generally higher in poor countries than they are in their richer neighbors. This is clearly a peculiar fact, since the negative impact of restrictions in the flow of food trade (and hence food supply and prices) grows in significance as the percentage of income spent on food by those affected grows larger.

The Agreement on Agriculture, which came into effect in 1995 as a result the Uruguay Round, was also enacted in this same spirit. While developed countries were called to make large reductions in the level of protection they applied to their agricultural sector, developing countries were given a "special and differential treatment" in order to protect their agricultural sector and liberalize more slowly. Least-developed countries were altogether exempt from the obligation to liberalize their agricultural markets. Thus seemingly, the hungrier a country is, the more justified it is to keep cheap foods out of its home market.

More recent proposals submitted by developing countries to the WTO also reaffirm their conviction on the necessity of food protectionism to ensure their well-being. For example India, a country with more than 200 million chronically hungry people, maintained that: "Developing country members should be exempt from any obligation to provide any minimum market access." Similarly, a coalition of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) from the Caribbean, a region where one-fifth of the population suffers from undernourishment, argued that they "should not be obliged to provide reciprocal access for their agricultural exports under preferential trading agreements with developed countries." And perhaps even more interestingly, the African Group, which represents many countries where more than one-third of the population suffers from chronic hunger, added that they must "ensure that food aid would not disrupt domestic production in recipient countries."

Given that many malaria-plagued poor countries in Africa perplexingly tax the importation of bed nets (“Africa’s”, 2003), the food trade paradox really comes to no surprise from a political standpoint. Nevertheless, food protectionism in hungry countries deserves more attention than it has received. More than 800 million people in the developing world today continue to live in the grip of hunger. Meanwhile, most of their leaders in government are seemingly convinced that food protectionism is the best way to achieve food security and economic development. In this paper we shall examine the prudence of this position.

This paper is organized as follow: first, we shall review the geography of world food tariffs and that of world hunger. Particular attention will be given to the developing regions of the world as we subsequently compare the two geographies. Next, we shall review the arguments for food protectionism as eloquently stated by many developing countries in their proposals to the WTO. For the purpose of this paper, these arguments are categorized under the two general headings of food sovereignty and rural development. We shall then proceed to examine the validity of these arguments. Finally, this paper concludes by briefly addressing the popular cry against “unfair trade”.

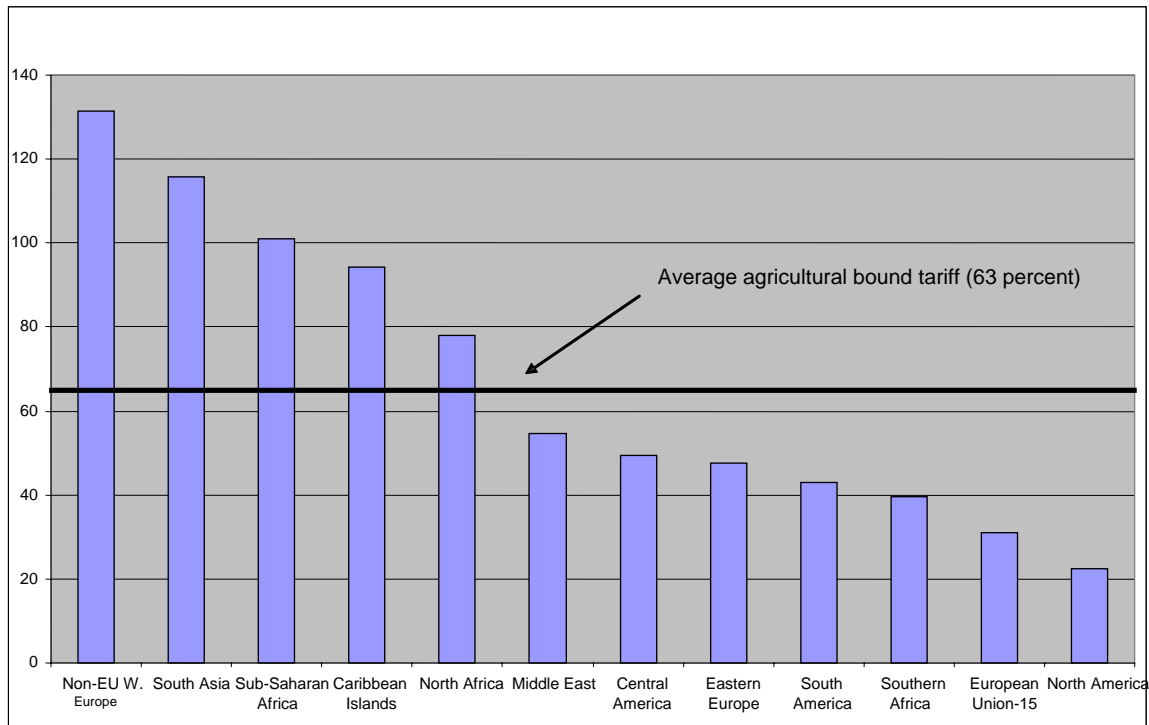
2. The Geography of World Food Tariffs

With very few exceptions, governments in both the developed and developing worlds enforce numerous policies to support and protect their farmers from what is perceived as ruinous foreign competition. The WTO classifies these government interventions into three general categories: market access, domestic support, and export subsidies. In this section, we shall take a glimpse at the highly contentious category of market access, which deals primarily with protective tariffs.

The USDA’s Economic Research Service estimated the latest global average of agricultural tariffs at 63 percent (see figure 1). It is important to note that this incredibly high figure represents the average of WTO bound tariffs, and not the actual tariff rates applied by the individual countries. A bound tariff rate simply means the maximum allowable rate a WTO member may impose on a particular good without facing legal retaliation from other members. Bound rates are particularly important because they are used as the basis for tariff reductions in all WTO negotiations. Actual applied tariff rates

are usually much lower than the agreed-upon bound rates (especially in the case of developing countries with triple-digit bound rates), and these generally fluctuate depending on the level of protection needed at any particular moment. For example in 2001, India had an average bound rate of 114 percent for agricultural products, but an average applied rate of “only” 38 percent.

Figure 1: World Agricultural Tariff Averages (By Region)



Source: ERS/USDA

While the agriculture sector includes a vast variety of commodities, agricultural protectionism is ultimately inseparable from food protectionism. Indeed, food products make up almost 80 percent of all agricultural goods traded internationally (WTO, 2001). These protected commodities include basic foodstuffs consumed by the rich and poor alike (see table 1). Table 1 further show that with the exception of those in the Caribbean and Sub-Saharan Africa, most countries employ either an escalating or de-escalating bound tariff rate as a commodity goes through the different stages of processing. Tariff escalation, generally the more common of the two, indicates a government’s intention to

protect the domestic production of a value-added product against cheaper imports. One clear example of this is North Africa, where the average tariff on sugar beet and sugar cane are bound at 33 and 32 percent respectively, but the average tariff on sweeteners is bound at a massive 143 percent.

Table 1: World Agricultural Bound Tariff Averages (By Commodity and Region)

Commodity group	WTO Bound Tariffs (Regional Average %)												
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M
All commodities	25	54	86	39	30	104	49	48	71	75	39	34	113
Grains	25	55	86	46	53	100	47	40	84	75	37	60	103
Grain products	19	50	86	40	48	122	65	45	82	75	54	54	117
Feed	23	50	86	39	47	131	17	34	32	75	43	22	110
Starches	14	53	86	38	24	93	49	41	53	75	9	64	113
Oilseeds	18	42	86	37	0	90	14	36	53	75	34	33	110
Oilcake	13	45	86	40	3	81	9	39	78	75	33	22	112
Oilseed oil	17	72	79	39	13	95	34	38	106	75	81	24	134
Fats and oils	28	53	81	38	10	85	33	36	68	75	24	23	128
Live animals	21	48	88	34	30	233	65	43	93	75	0	30	111
Meat: fresh, or frozen other meat	10	53	86	38	70	206	69	50	111	75	75	27	111
Meat: fresh beef, pork, or poultry	49	68	91	43	41	274	90	62	94	75	95	32	113
Meat: frozen beef, pork, or poultry	80	86	90	43	66	309	82	62	85	75	68	31	110
Meat: prepared	41	55	90	41	43	282	74	67	58	75	44	35	122
Skins and hides	6	59	86	37	0	22	45	39	50	75	20	20	101
Dairy	83	68	87	43	87	221	84	65	74	75	23	71	104
Eggs	60	51	86	38	22	189	49	53	36	75	19	28	119
Fruit: fresh	10	52	86	40	21	51	39	65	36	75	22	30	108
Fruit: frozen	17	52	86	40	20	34	39	54	34	75	26	30	120
Fruit: dried and fresh (coconuts, dates and figs)	15	55	86	41	4	21	14	70	34	75	4	26	112
Fruit: dried (raisins)	7	49	86	38	2	19	16	101	34	75	23	25	107
Fruit: preparations	12	52	86	39	21	48	49	50	34	75	37	28	117
Fruit juice	12	48	86	37	37	49	66	59	34	75	26	28	107
Vegetables: fresh	11	54	86	41	16	175	28	60	30	75	31	31	110
Vegetables: frozen	17	45	86	39	14	146	47	70	34	75	37	24	111
Vegetables: frozen or prepared (other)	13	50	86	40	18	103	23	55	35	75	34	38	114
Vegetables: dried and fresh roots and tubers	11	46	87	39	38	70	32	44	31	75	7	74	115
Vegetables: dried	11	54	86	36	2	47	22	56	52	75	36	54	108
Vegetables: preparations	12	51	86	38	21	123	47	59	35	75	43	28	109
Vegetable juice: tomato	25	52	86	39	16	26	88	98	34	75	26	32	107

Nuts	18	52	86	38	5	31	17	47	58	75	18	31	113
Nuts and fruit: dried, fresh, and prepared	11	51	86	38	16	49	37	55	34	75	38	30	117
Horticulture: live	1	47	86	33	5	67	8	51	34	75	0	23	91
Horticulture: cut flowers and foliage	13	45	86	36	5	91	34	66	34	75	49	29	120
Sugar beet	12	45	86	38	349	144	49	38	33	75	26	22	110
Sugar cane	12	45	86	38	56	99	34	38	32	75	26	24	110
Sweeteners	50	65	86	39	59	82	73	42	143	75	22	38	121
Tobacco: unmanufactured	28	64	86	38	14	28	42	58	98	75	44	206	110
Tobacco: products	112	66	86	38	38	29	64	79	59	75	54	32	119
Fiber	12	59	86	37	0	23	40	37	43	75	13	21	104
Food preparations	30	48	85	36	15	105	48	50	63	75	53	33	117
Coffee	18	50	86	38	6	20	22	33	30	75	119	29	118
Coffee: other	19	57	86	38	10	37	25	39	33	75	78	32	118
Tea and tea extracts	14	54	86	38	2	23	19	35	35	75	51	41	130
Cocoa beans and products	28	55	86	36	17	84	61	37	34	75	10	25	115
Spices	8	50	86	38	2	26	14	37	34	75	7	24	114
Essential oils	14	59	86	31	3	23	24	44	100	75	22	22	120

- A. North America F. Other W. Europe K. Southern Africa
B. Central America G. Eastern Europe L. Asia-Pacific
C. Caribbean Islands H. Middle East M. South Asia
D. South America I. North Africa
E. EU-15 J. Sub-Saharan Africa

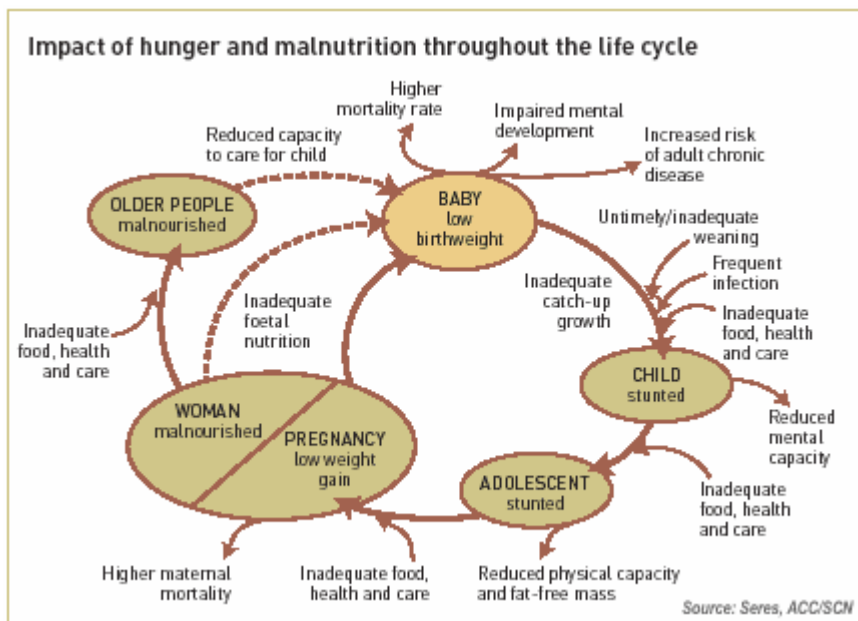
Source: ERS/USDA

3. The Geography of World Hunger

At the beginning of the present millennium, the FAO (2004) estimated the number of chronically hungry people around the world at approximately 852 million, of which more than 814 million live in developing countries. Although most of these people are not dying of starvation, the presence of chronic hunger nevertheless forces the human body to compensate for inadequate diet by slowing down physical activity and growth, hence disrupting a person's ability to function normally (FAO, 2000). Chronic hunger also creates its own vicious cycle by increasing the infant mortality rate of those born by undernourished mothers, causing low bodyweight for the surviving babies, stunting

physical and mental development during the youth’s growth period, and finally leading once again to malnourished adults (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: The Vicious Cycle of Hunger



Source: FAO (SOFI 2004)

Almost half of the world’s hungry (approximately 363.2 million) live in China and India. However due to their massive population, this astoundingly large figure constitute “only” 15.6 percent of the two countries’ total population, whereas the 203.5 million hungry people living in Sub-Saharan Africa constitute a third of the region’s total population. Table 2 further shows that this already high average proportion still underplays the presence of chronic hunger in Sub-Saharan Africa, as three out of the four sub-regions in the area display an average proportion of 40 percent or more.

Table 2: Hunger Distribution in the Developing World

Developing Region	Millions of People Undernourished	Percentage of Total Population
East Asia	151.7	11
Southeast Asia	65.5	13

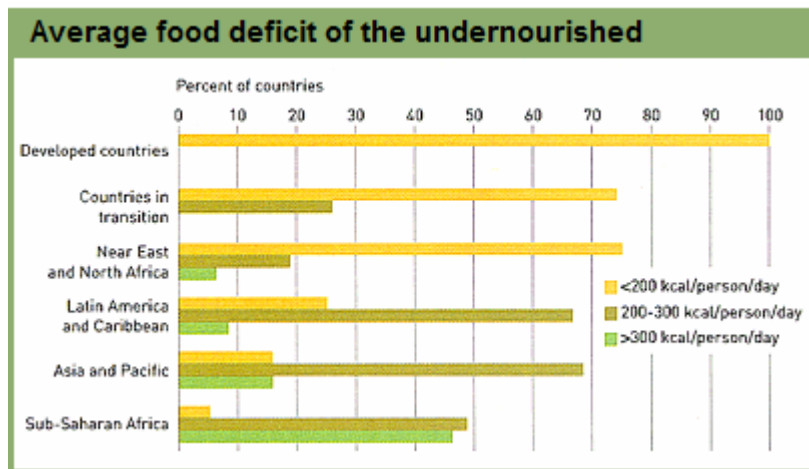
South Asia	301.1	22
Asia and the Pacific	519	16
North America	5.2	5
Central America	7.4	20
Caribbean	6.7	21
South America	33.6	10
Latin America and the Caribbean	52.9	10
Near East	33.1	13
North Africa	6.1	4
Near East and North Africa	39.2	10
Central Africa	45.2	55
East Africa	86.2	40
Southern Africa	35.7	40
West Africa	36.4	16
Sub-Saharan Africa	203.5	33
Developing World	814.6	17

Source: FAO (SOFI 2005)

As chronic hunger is suffered in varying degrees, it is important that we take into account the degree of food deficit prevalent in each region. The FAO (2000) calculated the depth of hunger by comparing the average amount of dietary energy that undernourished people get from the foods they eat with the minimum amount of dietary energy they need to maintain body weight and undertake *light* activity (of course this minimalist approach does not imply that light activities actually dominate the lives of the poor in developing countries). Figure 3 ranks the depth of world hunger by region, with the average dietary deficit of undernourished people in each region expressed in kilocalories per person per day (the higher the number, the worse the hunger). People who experience a high kilocalorie deficit (> 300 Kcal) in their daily diet are likely to be deficient of basic energy sources including starchy staples like maize, rice, wheat, and cassava. While those who experience a moderate deficit (200 – 300 Kcal) tend to lack

other foods that make up a nutritious diet, such as: meat, fish, vegetables, and fruits (FAO, 2000). Again, despite the obvious problems in Latin America and Asia, it is evident that Sub-Saharan Africa suffers from a much more severe level of hunger than any other region in the world.

Figure 3: The Depth of World Hunger



Source: FAO (SOFI, 2000)

4. Comparing the Two Geographies

By comparing the two geographies, we can see that many of the regions with high food import tariffs are also those plagued by hunger the most. These particularly include developing countries in the regions of South Asia, the Caribbean, and Sub-Saharan Africa. Table 3 highlights this comparison for those countries with the highest number of hungry people residing within their borders. Five of the top ten countries selected have a bound tariff average of more than 100 percent, and only one has a bound tariff average of less than 34 percent. Table 4 shows the same comparison for those countries with the highest percentage of undernourished population, and all of them expectedly come from Sub-Saharan Africa. Once again, five of the top ten countries selected have an average bound tariff rate of more than 100 percent, with none at less than 30 percent.

While actual applied tariff rates are generally much lower than these exceedingly high figures, the level of bound tariff rates naturally allude to the level of protectionist

orientation that exists in a given country. And what is most interesting is the simple reality that these tariffs are purposely and proudly imposed by various governments to raise the cost of food purchased by their hungry citizens. Zimbabwe for example, had an average applied tariff rate of 28 percent in 2001 for food products (ERS/USDA, 2004). Yet at the same time, 44 percent of its population suffers from chronic hunger. Sahn (1999, p. 134) points out that the average household in Sub-Saharan Africa spends approximately 60 percent of its budget on food alone. What then, are the reasons behind this curious policymaking? Is food protectionism in hungry countries truly an idea built upon sound economics, as its proponents claim to be? We shall take up this very important issue by first looking at the various arguments put forth in favor of food protectionism.

Table 3: A Country-level Comparison between the Number of Hungry People and Average Food Tariffs

Number	Selected WTO Countries*	Undernourished population (millions)**	Average Food Tariffs (Bound %)***
1	India	221.1	114
2	China	142.1	15.8 ^a
3	Bangladesh	42.5	197
4	Pakistan	29.3	101
5	Philippines	17.2	34
6	Brazil	15.6	37
7	Tanzania	15.6	120
8	Indonesia	12.6	48
9	Thailand	12.2	44
10	Mozambique	8.5	100

* Countries are selected based on tariff data availability

** Source: FAO (SOFI 2005); 2000-2002 data

*** Source: ERS/USDA (2004); (^a) Except China: as cited in FAO (SOFA 2005)

Table 4: A Country-level Comparison between Hunger Proportions and Average Food Tariffs

Number	Selected WTO Countries*	Undernourished population (%)**	Average Food Tariffs (Bound %)**
1	Burundi	68	100
2	Zambia	49	123
3	Mozambique	47	100
4	Tanzania	44	120
5	Zimbabwe	44	146
6	Central African Republic	43	30
7	Angola	40	55
8	Madagascar	37	30
9	Rwanda	37	80
10	Congo	37	30

* Countries are selected based on tariff data availability

** Source: FAO (SOFI 2005); 2000-2002 data

*** Source: ERS/USDA (2004)

5. Arguments for Food Protectionism

Although arguments for food protectionism in developing countries come in a variety of intermingled political rhetoric, for the purpose of this paper they are organized into two categories: (1) food sovereignty and (2) rural development. The first refers to the idea that a country needs to be self-sufficient in food production in order to achieve national food security, while the second refers to the idea that agrarian countries need to protect their agriculture from cheap imports in order to avoid serious unemployment problems and thus achieve economic growth. To get a better sense of these arguments, let us begin by listening to what some developing country governments have to say in their own words. The following excerpts are taken from the various proposals submitted by developing countries to the WTO (WTO, 2004) concerning their need for food protectionism:

1. “The low-income developing countries would like to be able to produce their food requirements, in the light of constraints that a number of developing countries

- have faced in the past in procuring their food grain requirements from international markets. Moreover, since a majority of the population is dependent on agriculture for their livelihood in these countries, such countries being able to have a certain level of self-sufficiency would also facilitate in taking care of a large number of the workforce engaged in agriculture.” (India, 2001)
2. “The extent to which the food gap of developing countries can be met by imports is also constrained many a times by their meager foreign exchange resources. The entry of large consuming countries in the world food grain markets can lead to an upswing in the prices, which would in turn compound the problems of these countries. Besides, the world commodity market for basic food grains is significantly more volatile than the domestic food grain market in most of the developing countries. International price fluctuations, if transmitted to the domestic economies of developing countries, can seriously affect the prices of food grains and food entitlement of the poor. The inadequate physical and institutional infrastructure for managing large quantities of import of food grains and their distribution particularly in rural areas further makes it undesirable for the developing countries to depend on imported food for meeting their domestic requirements.” (India, 2001)
 3. “Further, the ability of farmers to respond to market signals through a shift in the cropping pattern or a relocation in order to maintain their income entitlements is hampered on account of low literacy levels, limited infrastructural facilities and dependence of a very large number of farmers and agricultural laborers on this sector.” (India, 2001)
 4. “The income entitlements of majority of people in the developing countries are directly linked to domestic agricultural production. In a liberalized trade policy framework, this entitlement is often threatened due to surge in subsidized imports. Several commodities like wheat, coarse grains, oilseeds, vegetable oils, sugar, dairy products, fruits and vegetables which are of great significance for food security in developing countries have been subjected to high levels of export subsidies by the developed countries. By artificially depressing the international prices, these subsidies in developed countries lower the farm incomes of

- otherwise efficient producers in importing countries and thus adversely affect their livelihood. It is in this context of high trade distortions being practiced in developed countries that the developing country members would require an appropriate level of tariff protection.” (India, 2001)
5. “The other dimension is political independence and sovereignty. Countries in dire need and dependent on other countries for something as basic as food are politically weakened because they have little choice but to accept the conditions which may be imposed on them by the lending agencies or countries. Indeed, past history has instructed us that food has been used as a tool many a time to gain political and also economic stronghold over a country.” (Cuba, Dominican Republic, Honduras, Pakistan, Haiti, Nicaragua, Kenya, Uganda, Zimbabwe, Sri Lanka, and El Salvador, 2000)
 6. “Food insecurity is intrinsic to SIDS-specific characteristics. In Barbados for example, approximately 74 percent of all food consumed is sourced through imports... Small farmers in LDCs (least-developed countries), NFIDCs (net food-importing developing countries), and other developing countries, including SIDS, need to be protected against import surges particularly when the latter affect the production of key staples of the domestic diet and negatively impact on rural development and poverty alleviation.” (Dominica, Jamaica, Mauritius, St. Kitts and Nevis, St. Lucia, St. Vincent and the Grenadines, and Trinidad and Tobago, 2000)

Based on a careful examination of the arguments above, we can first deduce that the case for food protectionism raised strictly on the basis of food sovereignty is built upon the following premises:

1. Food self-sufficiency is naturally indispensable to a country’s food security due to the vulnerability and weakened political sovereignty of the import-dependent country
2. Dependency on food imports is harmful to food security due to the relative instability of international food prices (i.e. domestic production might not increase quick enough should food import prices rise drastically, thus causing food shortages)

A more extreme position on food sovereignty is taken by organizations such as La Via Campesina, an international farmers movement that calls for the removal of agriculture from the WTO altogether. For this and other like-minded NGOs, food sovereignty is equated primarily with the right of indigenous farmers to preserve what has been their traditional way of life for centuries.

Secondly, we can deduce that the case for food protectionism raised strictly on the basis of rural development is built upon the following premises:

1. In a liberalized domestic food market, most poor farmers cannot respond to market signals quickly enough to avoid serious unemployment problems
2. Since a great majority of the poor work in agriculture, anything that threatens a developing country's agricultural sector would only serve to worsen the problem of poverty

Although food protectionism is also frequently presented by developing countries as a defense mechanism against the unfair trade practices of developed countries (e.g. trade-distorting export subsidies), this argument shall be addressed separately because the "unfair trade" rationale is neither intrinsic nor exclusive to the case of food protectionism.

6. Problems in the Arguments for Food Protectionism

6.1. Food Sovereignty

In addressing the arguments for food sovereignty, the first question we seek to answer is this: is food self-sufficiency naturally indispensable to a country's food security? As a natural expression of fear and patriotism, this sentiment is arguably quite common among the citizens of both developed and developing countries. Yet a closer look reveals this argument as a two-edged sword that poses a serious dilemma for developing countries in particular. For if all WTO members accept the premise that each country must produce its own food to ensure food security as a priori true, then developed countries can by the same logic continue to protect their own agriculture from the threat posed by cheaper imports coming from the developing countries. It is thus logically inconsistent for developing countries to close their domestic markets under this reasoning, while at the same time asking for developed countries to open their markets.

And indeed, the only logical conclusion based on this premise would therefore be the removal of agriculture from the WTO altogether, as proposed by farmers' organizations such as La Via Campesina. But the question remains: is this premise true?

To answer the above question, let us consider the following basic premise: An individual can achieve food security through either food production or exchange (i.e. by producing one's own food or purchasing it). If this fundamental premise were to be rejected, then we must conclude that each and every individual must be self-sufficient in food production in order to achieve personal food security. This would necessarily eliminate any division of labor in food production, destroy human civilization as we know it, and reduce what is left of humanity to abject poverty since capital accumulation would be practically impossible. This is clearly an unfavorable situation to food security. But if on the other hand we accept this premise, we can therefore conclude that absolutely speaking, food security can be equated with food self-sufficiency within a geographic area only in the case of the world economy itself: i.e. since the earth is a closed economic system in which no interplanetary trade is possible, it must therefore produce its own food requirements in order to achieve food security. Of course at the present moment, there are also places within this absolute planetary confinement where food self-sufficiency is still a prerequisite to food security. These are geographically and economically isolated places where external trade is not (yet) feasible. Because in these places food "imports" are by default non-existent, they are henceforth irrelevant to the discourse on food protectionism.

It must be understood that food protectionism becomes a contentious issue only because it is pursued through coercive or political means (i.e. no one would protest against consumers who voluntarily purchase their food from domestic farmers despite higher prices). Why then, must food self-sufficiency be coercively maintained at the nation-state level through protectionist measures? For one, as the coalition of Cuba et al (2000) explained, it is the loss of political power and sovereignty associated with food dependency. As patriotic as this reasoning may sound, it nevertheless involves a slippery slope fallacy that could in fact destroy the very national unity it seeks to preserve. Indeed there is nothing that prohibits this same reasoning from being applied to sub-national political units (e.g. states, provinces, cities, villages, etc.), which would ultimately lead to

endless political secessions. Why for example, should one province be dependent on food production in another province? By the same logic, to achieve its own food sovereignty it must therefore secede from the political union that causes it to be food dependent through free trade between the two provinces.

Furthermore, what makes any non food-producing individual more food-secure in obtaining his or her food from a fellow citizen as opposed to a foreigner? Clearly he or she does not have any control or ownership rights over the actions of any farmer anywhere. If one were to argue that the military power of the central government acts as a safeguard against food embargoes within the nation-state (hence making power the true basis of food security), then the slippery slope could simply be tilted the other way around. Why not allow food to be produced by the most efficient international producer (thus expanding the division of labor even more for the country's own benefit), and deploy the military force of the central government should a food embargo take place? It is after all impossible to objectively justify the former intervention of force as morally superior to the latter, simply because it is easier.

A seemingly more sensible reason, as put forth by the government of India (2001), is the relative instability of international food prices. This argument holds that exposure to international markets is detrimental to national food security because domestic production might not increase quickly enough should a surge in food import prices occur. Empirical evidence however, does not support this claim. The FAO's latest report on the "State of Food and Agriculture" (SOFA 2005), which dealt with this very issue, concludes:

"...the evidence does not suggest that engagement in agricultural trade is associated with high levels of undernourishment but, rather, the opposite. (p. 83)... A number of empirical studies (e.g. Anderson, 2000) have found that more open trade in agriculture improves price stability than aggravating it: if countries want the assurance of stable and predictable food supplies, they should seek more open trade, not more self-sufficiency. More open trade allows food to move from areas where it is in surplus to areas of deficit, and it enhances the capacity for deficit regions to feed themselves, both within and among countries (Runge et al, 2003)." (p. 86)

Despite contradictory empirical evidence, the arguments for food sovereignty are nevertheless built on valid hypothetical situations that must be more fully addressed. This is because reference to historical data concerning statistical relationships between openness to trade and food availability clearly does not suffice from an epistemological point of view. As the FAO (2005, p.83) rightly states in the same report, these empirical evidences do not imply a causal relationship between the two variables. In their study of agricultural reforms in Sub-Saharan Africa, Jayne et al (2002, p. 1974) also pointed out that: “Many African policymakers still do not fully accept the logic or assumptions of a market economy, despite being compelled to move in this direction under pressure from international lenders and donors.” And so the concern remains: what if such situations were to occur in a liberalized food market? Can the market handle such a threat to national food security in the absence of government intervention?

To better understand the dynamics of a market economy, and why the market is fundamentally more capable than well-intentioned government officials to safeguard itself against food import disturbances, we must first understand the entrepreneurial role of both producers and consumers in the market economy. This is a role that every individual must inescapably play as he or she tries to deal with the uncertainty of the future. In fulfilling his or her entrepreneurial role, the food producer seeks to correctly produce the type, quantity, and quality of food demanded by consumers in a particular time and place. The “correctness” of the producer’s decision is objectively revealed through a system of profit and loss, which is made possible only through the viability of rational economic calculation in the market economy. Profit occurs when the producer uses a certain amount of means (X) to produce something deemed more valuable in the eyes of the consumer ([X + profit] amount of ends), while a loss occurs when the means used in production (X) render something less valuable in the eyes of the consumer ([X – loss] amount of ends). Entrepreneurial profit and loss in the market economy ensure that scarce resources are allocated in accordance with the demands of society. They are, as Mises (1996, p. 25) pointed out, “the instruments by means of which the consumers keep a tight rein on all business activities.” The consumer similarly exercises this role by determining what type of food and how much of it to purchase in a particular time and place.

In order for the food supplier (domestic producers and importers alike) to remain profitable, he or she must anticipate future market conditions correctly. These include not only future consumer demand, but also future supply conditions such as: resource availability, competition, government regulations, etc. that are always changing. Therefore in the event of a possible future disruption in food imports (e.g. the threat of an embargo or war), both food producers and consumers would have every incentive to respond accordingly. As people begin to stockpile certain food items for future use (both for sale and consumption), food prices would rise, and more factors of production would shift into domestic food production as such an investment becomes more profitable in relation to its opportunity costs. If future import disruptions were seen as truly unpredictable events (as in the case of automobile accidents, deaths, etc.), then a food insurance market would become profitable enough (in relation to its opportunity costs) to exist. Again, these decisions can only be made rationally in a market economy in the face of endless opportunity costs, because they can be objectively checked through entrepreneurial profit and loss.

In protecting domestic farmers based on future hypothetical situations, the government similarly justifies its coercive action by proclaiming the economic prudence of its decision. Yet such prudence could never be rationally affirmed outside the context of entrepreneurial profit and loss as described above. Because the government does not “earn” its income through voluntary exchange, it cannot rationally and objectively maintain that its actions would have passed the market’s profitability test (i.e. true public approval). Therefore the fundamental problem facing well-intentioned government officials in making these decisions does not consist only in the lack of incentive to avoid rash behavior (for they do not stand to suffer loss in making a poor entrepreneurial judgment), but also the absence of a rational and objective way in which they can evaluate the prudence of their action in the midst of countless opportunity costs.

Again we must remind ourselves that as an act of coercive intervention in the market, food protectionism necessarily denotes a violation of the coerced party’s demonstrated preference, or else no coercion in the form of import restrictions would be necessary and people would purchase domestic food voluntarily. In this light, proponents of food sovereignty can peaceably demonstrate their claim in a market economy by

voluntarily investing (or convincing others to invest) in the domestic production of food. If their entrepreneurial judgment is found correct, they shall reap entrepreneurial profit when the predicted disruption of food imports actually occurs. And if it should be proven wrong, they shall suffer loss accordingly.

But what if not enough investors are convinced of the future profitability of domestic farming? Should not the coercive power of the government be used for the “public good”? This shortsighted argument, which seeks to replace the demonstrated preference of individuals acting as producers and consumers in a market economy with that of a central planner, contains another serious slippery-slope fallacy that would ultimately lead to the adoption of socialism, or a centrally-planned economic system in which no rational economic calculation is possible due to the absence of market prices on the factors of production (Mises, 1981; 1990). For if the market is deemed incapable of making its own decisions on something as essential as food production and consumption, what makes it capable of exercising sound judgment on anything else? Yet in an economic system where a country’s limited factors of production could not be rationally allocated, escape from poverty is nothing but a hopeless dream.

The position of farmers’ organizations such as La Via Campesina, which proclaims the absolute right of farmers to preserve their way of life at the expense of every other citizen in the country, also contains a self-destructive violation of the principle of universality, which is a necessary premise underlying the very existence of human rights (i.e. rights that are equally applicable to all human beings). Indeed, this argument necessitates the existence of two classes of people: farmers and non-farmers, with one class having a superior position and thus the right to rule over the other class. Who then, is to be the ruler and the ruled? Why cannot urban factory workers demand cheap (or even free) foods from the farmers, to preserve *their* way of life instead? The rhetoric that, “Food sovereignty is the right of peoples to define their own food and agriculture... to determine the extent to which they want to be self reliant” (SOFA 2005, p. 109) is again contradictory to the call for food protectionism. For if the people of a country truly agree with this sentiment, then no act of coercion (e.g. import tariffs, quotas, or government subsidies) would be required for them to support domestic farmers. To close, as Rothbard (2000, p. 142) eloquently pointed out:

“Much can be said in criticism of this doctrine; but suffice it to say here than any argument proclaiming the right and goodness of, say, three neighbors, who yearn to form a string quartet, forcing a fourth neighbor at bayonet point to learn and play the viola, is hardly deserving of sober comment.”

6.2. Rural Development

The argument for food protectionism on the basis of rural development is also one that is simple to understand and at the same time very compelling in the eyes of many: since most people in poor countries still work in the agricultural sector, would not cheap agricultural imports ruin their livelihood? The FAO (2005) estimated the size of the total labor force in developing countries at 2.47 billion people, of which 1.31 billion (approximately 53 percent) are employed in the agricultural sector. These are indeed substantial figures which understandably lead many in the WTO to tolerate agricultural protectionism in developing and less-developed countries. Nevertheless, this argument is similarly riddled with problems that must be dealt with accordingly, not only for the sake of the 47 percent who do not work in agriculture, but also for the 53 percent who do.

The idea of food protectionism is oftentimes portrayed as a benevolent attempt by the government to protect its poor farmers from ruinous foreign competitors who are unfairly subsidized by their rich governments. Yet as Henry George thoughtfully pointed out more than a century ago, this seemingly innocent portrayal can be proven to be an a priori false assumption. From whom does protectionism actually protect? Voluntary exchange between two parties cannot occur with only one consenting party. In order for it to take place, both the buyer and the seller must agree to the said transaction, and they do so only when both parties expect a benefit to be made from the exchange (or else at least one party would have no reason to engage in the exchange). Thus in reality, food protectionism protects domestic farmers not from foreign competition, who have no power to coerce consumers into buying their goods, but from their own fellow citizens (rich and poor alike) who demonstrably prefer to purchase their food from cheaper sources (i.e. subsidized foreign farmers).

Who then, in the context of food protectionism, “the Good, the Bad, and the Hungry” really are? Naturally governments of developing countries portray themselves as

“the Good”, and “the Bad” as those foreign exporters and their governments who seek to ruin the lives of poor farmers through cheap, subsidized food production/exports. Yet considering that protectionism can exist only by directly violating the demonstrated preference of many poor food consumers, is not the very opposite true? Table 5 shows the level of rural and urban poverty in ten selected developing countries with a clearly protectionist orientation (again, bound tariffs are not to be confused with applied tariffs). We can see that in all of these countries, poverty is a serious problem not just in rural areas, but in urban areas as well. Yet as Maxwell (1999, p. 1940) pointed out, “...urban food insecurity, while very real, has become a politically invisible problem in contemporary African cities.” Indeed, studies have shown that the urban poor in Sub-Saharan Africa spend anywhere between 60 to 80 percent of their income on food alone (as cited in Maxwell, 1990). Meanwhile in 2001, the average applied food tariff in a Sub-Saharan country such as Zambia was a gut-wrenching 21 percent (ERS/USDA, 2004). Is this what the urban poor in Zambia, who constituted 56 percent of the country’s total urban population, really needed? Furthermore, is food protectionism really beneficial to the rural poor, who constituted 83.1 percent of Zambia’s entire rural population?

Table 5: A Country-level Comparison of Rural and Urban Poverty

	Selected WTO Countries	Average Food Tariffs (Bound %)*	Rural Poverty (%)**	Urban Poverty (%)**
1	Bangladesh	197	53	36.6
2	Nigeria	150	36.4	30.4
3	Zambia	123	83.1	56
4	Tanzania	120	38.7	29.5
5	India	114	30.2	24.7
6	Romania	113	27.9	20.4
7	Pakistan	101	35.9	24.2
8	Burundi	100	36	43
9	Kenya	100	53	49
10	Mozambique	100	71.3	62

* Source: ERS/USDA (2004)

** Source: World Bank (as cited in FAO, 2006)

To illustrate the economic fallacy of food protectionism in hungry agrarian countries, let us consider the following analogy. Suppose country X has been historically plagued by various illnesses and diseases. As a result of this unfortunate condition, much of country X's economy has traditionally revolved around the healthcare industry. And 53 percent of its inhabitants are employed in healthcare-related fields such as: traditional medical clinics, modern hospitals, healthcare insurance agencies, medical research institutes, medical equipments and supplies manufacturing, etc. In other words, the healthcare industry constitutes a massive part of country X's GDP and employment. One day, a miracle occurs and the illnesses and diseases that have plagued country X for hundreds of years suddenly begin to disappear. Concerned with the income entitlements of the majority of its people, the government of country X, steeped in protectionist ideas, starts to develop and distribute deadly viruses to infect its increasingly healthy inhabitants, construct dangerous infrastructures to increase the number of injuries, and release poisonous chemicals to pollute the country's water supply. To convince the 47 percent of country X's inhabitants who do not work in healthcare-related fields of the prudence of its new pro-healthcare policies, the government issues the following decree:

Proud citizens of country X:

“As you know, the healthcare industry has been the backbone of this country's economy ever since we declared independence 350 years ago. The recent disappearance of diseases and illnesses from this country has severely threatened the income entitlements of 53 percent of our good people, who in the past had served us faithfully in our times of need. In light of this national tragedy, the government has decided to come to their rescue by introducing several pro-healthcare policies designed to increase the number of diseases and illnesses back to their pre-crisis level. While these policies may at first seem unfair to the 47 percent of our fellow citizens who do not work in healthcare-related fields, they are in fact beneficial to all citizens of country X. Indeed, as these policies enrich those who work in the healthcare sector, they will spend their income on goods

and services produced by those who work in other sectors of the economy, thereby enriching all who reside in this wondrous country of ours!”

The above use of *reduction ad absurdum* warns us of the absurdity of protectionism as seen through the lens of economic science. The disappearance of diseases and illnesses from country X does not represent a loss to its economy, but a saving which frees up some of its limited factors of production (i.e. land, labor, and capital previously employed in the healthcare sector) to be applied in the production of something else. Indeed, this is the very means by which economic growth takes place. For if the amount of labor required by a human being to fulfill his or her basic needs does not decrease, human civilization could not possibly advance from its primitive state. Healthcare and farming are not an end to themselves, but the means to an end. To forsake the end for the means, as is the case with protectionism, is an irrational act which demonstrably could only be realized through the government’s coercive intervention in the market.

But what about the potentially massive decline in country X’s GDP, should its inhabitants who worked in the healthcare sector fail to adjust? This of course is the same concern expressed by the governments of many developing countries with regard to the issue of agricultural liberalization, as previously quoted in length. At this point, questions should naturally arise in one’s mind as to whether or not the GDP is a valid measurement of collective wealth, or if such a concept could be rationally and objectively measured in the first place (here one can employ another *reductio* that leaves two people trading with one another in country X, and one of them becoming unemployed due to a new discovery by the other). This very important topic has been exceptionally addressed by Rothbard (1997), and it is out of the scope of this paper. Nevertheless, it shall be pointed out here that the portrayal of poor farmers as passive victims incapable of adjusting themselves to changing market conditions due to their low literacy levels is contrary to the empirical evidence.

Bates (1981) showed that during past decades when African government policies were severely biased against agriculture in their quest for rapid industrialization, African rural dwellers not only withdrew from ventures that had been rendered unprofitable, but also altered their production mix to guard their incomes against adverse shifts in the

prices of particular commodities. These farmers not only adjusted themselves to changing market conditions, but they also used the market to defend themselves from their own governments. For example when the government of Senegal reduced the price of groundnuts by 15 percent in the late 1960s (its principal export crop), rural farmers quickly responded by smuggling thousands of tons of groundnuts annually through the borders of Gambia and Guinea. And they subsequently moved out of groundnut production into the production of food crops. Examples from Ghana, Zambia, Tanzania, Sudan, and other countries similarly confirm the ability of peasants to exploit the alternatives available to them in the marketplace, not only by shifting production from one crop to another, but also by altogether moving from one economic sector to another (see Bates, 1981, pp. 82-87).

Jayne et al (1999) further showed that market reform has ironically been deemed a failure in spurring rural development, and thus received stronger criticisms, in countries where government intervention in the agricultural sector has in reality remained very much entrenched. In these countries, market reform is not a false promise as much as it is a false premise: i.e. something that was never implemented in the first place. Indeed, as De Soto (2000) has documented so well, governments in developing countries more often serve as an obstacle than a help to the poor who seek to adjust themselves to changing market conditions (e.g. it would take a poor farmer in Haiti 176 bureaucratic steps and 19 years to obtain a legal title for a single piece of land; *ibid*, p. 21). The pervasiveness of such horrendous legal barriers is inescapably evidenced by the existence of massive extralegal economies throughout the developing world. Consequently, a much more prominent concern in the process of agricultural adjustment is not the ability of poor farmers to fend for themselves in a free market, but the ability of their governments to secure property rights and eliminate the countless legal barriers to trade that they themselves have created. Until the latter concern is addressed, it shall remain as a self-inflicted stumbling block in the battle against poverty.

6.3. Unfair Trade

Another popular and compelling justification for food protectionism in developing countries is the proliferation of “unfair” trade practices by developed country

governments (e.g. export subsidies). This argument states that developing country farmers have a right to be protected from subsidized food imports (as well as ruinous food aid) because in the absence of such unfair subsidies, they would have had little or less problem competing with developed country farmers. While it may sound appealing to some, such reasoning is problematic from both an economic and ethical standpoint. First we must ask the question: what makes a particular producer advantage objectively “fair” or “unfair”? Because the concept of trade fundamentally implies a transfer of rightful ownerships to the objects being traded between two parties, the answer to this question must consequently be found in whether or not a violation of property rights has occurred (i.e. theft or fraud) in the transaction. And since food import purchases are made voluntarily, a second question naturally follows: how can trade between two consenting parties be classified as “unfair” when no violation of contract between the buyer and seller has occurred? The simple answer is that it cannot. The voluntary purchase of subsidized foods, or the reception of free food aid, cannot be rationally classified as “unfair” because again, commercial farmers do not have a rightful claim to the income of their potential customers.

But does not the subsidy received by foreign farmers constitute an unfair advantage because it is taken coercively through taxation? (I.e. since foreign farmers do not have a rightful ownership to the subsidy received, are they not selling partially “stolen” goods?) This is indeed a valid argument, since any form of coercive intervention outside the realm of legitimate self defense is clearly an unnatural part of the market economy, or an economic system based on the voluntary exchange of private property rights. However, if such an argument were to be used in this case, it must also be applied to every other action taken by the government, and consequently, to the very existence of the government itself as an institution based on taxation. Its discussion is obviously out of the scope of this paper (for further information, see Rothbard, 2000). In reality, most claims against “unfair trade” arguably come from self-interested reasons rather than profound philosophical objections. And upon closer examination, it is clear that nothing prohibits the “unfair trade” rationale from ultimately being extended to include any other advantage (natural or unnatural) that belongs to another producer (e.g. better climate, better infrastructure, better tools, better education, etc.). And therefore, since no two

competitors are ever equal, if pursued to its logical conclusion this faulty proposition would make competition itself illegal. Here one is reminded of Frederic Bastiat's brilliant essay "The Petition of the Candlemakers", in which a group of 19th century French candlemakers complained to the French Chamber of Deputies against an "unfair" foreign rival, the sun, who freely gave away its light during the day and thus causing all their sales to cease:

"We ask you to be so good as to pass a law requiring the closing of all windows, dormers, skylights, inside and outside shutters, curtains, casements, bull's-eyes, deadlights, and blinds—in short, all openings, holes, chinks, and fissures through which the light of the sun is wont to enter houses, to the detriment of the fair industries with which, we are proud to say, we have endowed the country, a country that cannot, without betraying ingratitude, abandon us today to so unequal a combat." (Bastiat, 2001, pp. 47-51)

7. Conclusion

This paper has sought to bring into attention the paradoxical issue of food protectionism in hungry agrarian countries. Understandably, international discourse on agricultural trade has revolved mainly around those barriers erected by developed countries. But as this paper has shown, the lack of skepticism and opposition to food protectionism in developing countries do not necessarily warrant such actions on their part. Arguments for food protectionism on the bases of food sovereignty, rural development, and "unfair trade", which seem to meet with general acceptance in multilateral negotiations, are all laden with economic fallacies and false philanthropy. Raising the price of food in hungry agrarian countries is not merely an apparent paradox; it is a real contradiction that must be carefully re-examined by those who embrace this idea.

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