



Why We Should Still Pay Attention to the Doha Negotiations

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The Doha Round of trade negotiations remains important because worldwide agricultural production and the private sector that delivers the products to the market is facing a tremendous challenge: global agricultural food production must double by 2050. This reality makes trade imperative if we are to meet the food, feed and fiber needs of growing global populations. Food security is strengthened by interdependence, and weakened by divergent, unilateral national food policies.

World population estimates project that the global population will grow by 50% between now and 2050 – from a current population of just over 6 billion persons to over 9 billion. The food and feed demands are growing exponentially due to this population increase and improved economic conditions in many developing countries which are improving the diets for many who are emerging from poverty. A second and additional piece of the challenge is the current commitment by governments to alternative energy sources, which includes some biofuels derived from agricultural feedstock.

We have no moral alternative to accepting the first challenge – ensuring food security. Furthermore, I believe that we can meet the second challenge as long as the demand on agricultural production is reasonable. However, neither challenge will be met without improvements in two enabling forces: trade and technology.

Trade

Global food, feed, and fiber security requires an intelligent use of the world's resources. This cannot and will not be accomplished on a nation-by-nation basis. Throughout history, economic gains have been secured for more and more of the globe's populations when governments have recognized the value of policies that encourage trade. While these policies cannot protect against price increases, they importantly transmit true market signals to farmers throughout the world about what crops need to be grown. Such signals are vital in the current market environment.



Governments that impose high tariffs create markets that utilize resources – including capital – inefficiently. In their effort to protect domestic production it is the consumer who is punished. More troubling in today's higher commodity price environment, governments are turning to policy devices such as export controls or outright embargoes. These devices not only distort trade, they oftentimes suffer from the law of unintended consequences. By forcing domestic production to remain in the country, prices are temporarily reduced, but do not encourage local farmers to increase production, and can thus lead to greater regional and global scarcity.

Technology

Ever since Malthus, periods of global food production shortages have caused great pessimism, but thankfully also motivated those searching for solutions. Today the world is fortunate because we already possess important tools and technologies and, by working to improve these, we should be able to increase agricultural productivity to combat this apparent future supply shortfall. Yet, because of a lack of confidence in some of these tools and technologies, some of us are hesitant to employ them.

I would therefore urge those parts of civil society that are often hesitant to embrace new technology, to participate in an effort, along with governments and scientists, to demand sufficient public funding both for research and public oversight so as to ensure that new technologies are effective and safe. Both will be critical to gaining the public trust.

Today's panel is focused on the Doha Round and the furthering of trade. My comments this afternoon come from my belief that we need to see Doha in the larger context of the tremendous challenge that we as world citizens have before us. When it comes to producing food, feed, fiber and even biofuels, failure is not an option. Success in negotiating a reduction in trade barriers will be a key component of success.