

Making the Connections: U.S. Domestic Agricultural Policy and International Trade

An Interfaith Perspective

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Introduction

Access to adequate quantities of safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food is necessary for the dignity and flourishing of both individuals and communities. Ensuring such access requires people of faith to concern themselves with the policies that shape the food system.

The way that the United States structures its food and agricultural system has global consequences. How people eat and the agricultural policies that are set by U.S. politicians directly affect the lives of farmers and farmworkers, consumers and citizens, both domestically and internationally. Changes to U.S. domestic agricultural policy, in conjunction with restructuring international trade and investment policy, have human rights implications and the potential to alleviate or exacerbate poverty and food insecurity worldwide.

The world is starting to pay close attention to U.S. farm policy and many countries, especially in the Global South, are quite critical of what they see. For them, protectionist and trade distorting U.S. agricultural policies contradict demands on countries in the Global South that they liberalize their agricultural sectors. Debates surrounding the 2007 Farm Bill, the piece of legislation outlining U.S. food and agricultural policy, have already begun and the livelihoods of many people, both domestically and internationally, depend on the outcome of these debates.

This article uses the ethical principles of the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment¹ to raise key ethical questions that people of faith should be asking in the process leading up to the reauthorization of the Farm Bill. The hope is that this initial analysis will lead to further discussion and a unified voice among the interfaith community as the debate surrounding the 2007 Farm Bill continues.

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should respect and support the dignity of the human person, the integrity of creation, and our common humanity.

Every person has the right to an adequate amount of nutritious food, through production or purchase, to sustain a dignified human life. Guaranteeing food security – when all people, at all times, have access to sufficient, safe, and nutritious food to meet their dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy lifeⁱ – would ensure the right to food. Despite decades of domestic and international initiatives, however, 852 million people on earth are still hungry.ⁱⁱ One of the main reasons for this continued epidemic is that our current agricultural system is driven by large corporations, banks, and individuals, whose primary goal is profit, not feeding people. The current profit motives of the food system deny access to food for those without the necessary economic resources, in turn infringing on the human right to food. Food is not the same as any other commodity. It differs from shoes and cars because it is necessary for survival. Therefore, the allocation of food should not be decided by market forces alone. A significant shift in the current food and agricultural system will need to be made to ensure that everyone has access to adequate food to be able to reach their full human potential and contribute to the development of their community.

¹ Please see Annex 1 at the end of this document for a complete list of the Interfaith Working Group on Trade and Investment's principles.

Respect and support for the integrity of creation requires that the vast resources on earth, including agricultural resources, are shared in a just manner. The heightened levels of corporate consolidation that have occurred over the past decades within the international food and agricultural systemⁱⁱⁱ threaten the equitable distribution of agricultural resources. In fact, the current organization of the food system closely resembles an oligopoly.^{iv} An oligopoly is when a small number of firms control enough of a given market to set prices for consumers above their competitive equilibrium level.^v In 2002, Monsanto and DuPont alone controlled 65% of the global seed markets for maize, excluding China.^{vi} And while nearly three quarters of all human food is grain-based, four firms controlled approximately 73% of the global grain trade in 2003 – Cargill, Archer Daniels Midland, Louis Dreyfus, and Bunge.^{vii}

High levels of agribusiness consolidation have been combined with a trend toward vertical integration within the industry.² When put together, consolidation and vertical integration create an environment where it is possible for large corporations to manipulate the prices that consumers pay while at the same time driving down the prices paid to farmers.^{viii} By driving down the incomes of farmers while food prices continue to rise, the highly concentrated and vertically integrated food system is one contributing factor to the perpetuation of hunger and poverty. Consolidation within the food and agricultural industry is also a factor in the “dumping” of agricultural goods at below the cost of production into the markets of the Global South, a topic that will be discussed later in this analysis.^{ix}

Agricultural policy plays a central role in rural development and has the potential to promote our common humanity, the ability of all people and communities to reach their fullest potential. Unfortunately, there is still much work to be done to reduce poverty in rural areas in the U.S. and around the world. As larger farmers become more powerful and agribusiness continues to consolidate, the trend has been that family farmers in the Global North and small farmers in the Global South have gone out of business. For family farmers in the Global North, this has meant needing to find “off-farm” work. Currently, less than 10 percent of rural Americans live on farms, and only two percent of rural Americans earn their primary income from farming.^x It is estimated that as much as 89 percent of the income for farm households came from “off farm” sources in 2003.^{xi} It is important to note, however, that this displacement of farmers to “off-farm” jobs often comes out of necessity, not desire. A similar trend of displacement from rural communities to urban areas and other countries can be seen throughout the Global South. Current rural development policies are not meeting the needs of rural people, which in turn threatens our common humanity.

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy decisions should be transparent and should involve the meaningful participation of the most vulnerable stakeholders.

The voices of those who are directly affected by public policy decisions should be involved in the decision-making process, regardless of their race, ethnicity, economic status, or gender. Decisions that are made around U.S. farm policy, however, seem to include certain voices more than others. Those with economic resources tend to have more influence over farm policy decisions than those with limited economic resources. During the 2004 election cycle, the agribusiness industry contributed \$52,593,698 to political campaigns.^{xii} Of the more than fifty million dollars contributed by the agribusiness industry, \$4,923,904 went directly to George W. Bush’s campaign, while \$785,831 went to the campaign of John Kerry.^{xiii} In addition to making large campaign contributions, farm associations

² Vertical integration is the process whereby a company expands its control over a larger piece of the production process. In agriculture, this means that firms control the production process from the seeds, pesticides, and fertilizers to purchasing products from farmers. Then, they also control the processing and branding stages of food production and in some cases they even sell the goods to consumers.

and agribusiness firms hire skilled lobbyists to put continual pressure on elected officials to vote for legislation that benefits them. In light of these facts, it is telling that President Bush's plan to lower the maximum dollar amount of subsidies a given farmer could receive, which would have impacted large farmers the most, was dropped as a priority of the Administration a few months after he introduced the idea.^{xiv}

The limited voice that small farmers have in the legislative branch of government is also seen in federal agencies. Individuals who were previously leaders in industrial agricultural firms are the current decision-makers in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) about the regulatory framework for farm policy. Among the top ranking political appointees at the USDA in 2004, there were nearly as many people who previously worked with agribusiness firms or their trade associations, lobbying firms, and research arms as there were career civil servants.^{xv} The high concentration of ex-industry personnel working at top level positions within the USDA has created a "revolving door" policy at the USDA for current agribusiness industry executives. This high level of access for current industry executives allows them to have significant influence over the regulatory frameworks of U.S. agricultural policy.^{xvi} The resulting regulatory frameworks tend to be more beneficial to industrial agricultural producers than family farmers.

Decisions made by elected officials on domestic policy issues in the U.S. have an impact on people around the world. People in other countries who are affected by these domestic policy decisions, however, do not have voting rights in the U.S. or official means to directly influence the decisions made by U.S. politicians. Currently, people in the international community who are affected by the domestic policies of another country are forced to look to international institutions to address their concerns. For agricultural and trade issues, countries around the world look to the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a forum for addressing their objections to U.S. domestic policy. There is much international debate and concern, however, about the lack of transparency and undemocratic nature of WTO processes, which affects the participation at the WTO for countries in the Global South.^{xvii} Without transparency and democratic participation at the WTO, the countries that are hurt by U.S. agricultural policy have no place to bring their grievances.

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should advance the common good and be evaluated in light of its impact on those who are most vulnerable, both domestically and internationally.

The food system has great potential to promote the common good. The direct connection between agriculture and food means that a just agricultural policy can promote universal access to adequate food, which is a necessary ingredient for people to live dignified lives and be active participants in the development and governance of their communities. Current global economic, political, and social arrangements, however, permit growing inequality and injustice, which threatens the common good. Family farmers in the Global North, African American farmers, and small farmers in the Global South are among those who experience this growing injustice. Agricultural policy is one area where the U.S. government has the ability to assist small family farmers domestically, working with them to ensure that they receive an adequate income from what they produce.³ Family farmers, however, often do not

³ The support being discussed here is domestic support, not to be confused with export subsidies, which have a more definitively negative effect on farmers in the Global South. What is being supported in this paper is government intervention to assist family farmers in the United States while at the same time ensuring that those supports do not adversely effect farmers in the Global South.

receive a fair price for their commodities, which means that they can become dependent on a government subsidized system for much of their income; a system that does not translate into a decent income for farmers and results in low farm prices that depress the prices for farm commodities in the U.S. and other farm-based economies throughout the world. Even the Economic Research Service of the USDA openly states that “despite decades of farm program payments, economic researchers have been unable to establish that these payments help sustain farm-based communities.”^{xviii}

Small farmers in the U.S. have faced many challenges, but for African Americans and other minority farmers, including Hmong farmers, the difficulties in the agricultural sector have been extraordinary.^{xix} For African Americans, the historical examples of slavery and sharecropping are clear, but the obstacles persist through the present. Even though African American farmers make up one percent of United States farmers, they only receive one-tenth of one percent of all crop subsidy payments.^{xx} Also, African American farmers are continually being pushed off of their land. In 1910, African Americans owned 14 percent of the country’s farms. Today, they own about one percent of farms.^{xxi} The rapid decline in farm ownership among African Americans is not in line with the broader trend; African American farm ownership has declined at three times the rate that it has for white farmers.^{xxii} The rapid decline in land ownership among African Americans can be attributed to factors including various land inheritance problems and inaccessibility of affordable legal counsel.^{xxiii} In seeking justice through farm policies, it is imperative that African American farmers and other minority farmers receive the resources they need.

United States agricultural policy not only affects domestic farmers, it also has a large impact on farmers around the world. One of the most controversial debates currently surrounding agriculture is that countries in the Global North continue to export agricultural goods to markets in the Global South at below the cost of production. This practice, commonly labeled “dumping,” has detrimental effects on small farmers throughout the world, especially small farmers and women in the Global South. In 2003, wheat was exported from the U.S. at an average price of 28% below the cost of production, while cotton was exported at an average price of 47% below the cost of production.^{xxiv} A few of the central factors contributing to dumping are U.S. export subsidies, certain U.S. domestic supports, increased agribusiness consolidation, a lack of supply management, overproduction, as well as the pressure from the U.S. and the EU on countries in the Global South to liberalize their agricultural sectors – opening them to nearly unrestricted agricultural imports – while the U.S. and EU do not do the same.

Below-cost imports make it nearly impossible for small farmers to compete, even in their local markets. When they are not able to sell their goods, they are often forced to leave their land and move to an urban area or migrate to another country to find work. If displaced farmers are able to find a job in an urban area, it will likely be a job that pays low wages. Some displaced farmers, especially from Latin America, migrate from their countries and become farmworkers in the U.S. Finding justice in the food system is an especially difficult task for farmworkers. Farmworkers in the U.S. are some of the lowest paid employees in the workforce, often earning annual incomes below \$10,000.^{xxv} Under federal law, they are not guaranteed overtime pay when they work more than 40 hours in a week and are not guaranteed the right to organize themselves.⁴ In addition to receiving low wages, farmworkers are often exposed to hazardous pesticides and other chemicals that can lead to serious health problems.^{xxvi} At the same time, many farmworkers do not receive medical insurance from their employers, which means

⁴ The right to organize is guaranteed to certain workers under the National Labor Relations Act of 1935. This piece of legislation prohibits employers from interfering with a worker’s right to join a union and ensures that employers cannot restrain or coerce workers who are promoting a union. Although certain states have granted these rights to farmworkers, under federal legislation farmworkers are excluded from these protections. For more information, see: Farmworker Justice Fund Inc (www.fwjjustice.org) and The Association of Farmworker Opportunity Programs (www.afop.org/advocacy).

that they are not able to get the health assistance they need or are forced to spend much of their income on medical care. For landless agricultural workers in the Global South, many of whom were small farmers forced off of their land, working conditions can be even worse than they are in the United States.^{xxvii} Improving the treatment of farmworkers, both domestically and internationally, needs to be a core part of reforming the agricultural system.

The other major problem with agricultural dumping is that it undermines agricultural development in the Global South. Since dumping makes it difficult for small farmers to compete with below-cost goods, improving agricultural systems for small farmers in the Global South may become a fruitless task. Also, the impacts of dumping have a disproportionately negative impact on women. Women produce anywhere between 60% and 80% of the food in many countries in the Global South.^{xxviii} With such a high level of female participation in the agricultural sector, especially in the Global South, the effects of dumping are felt heavily by women. Strategies to eliminate dumping need to be implemented by the WTO to ensure the well-being of small farmers everywhere.

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should safeguard the global commons and respect the right of local communities to protect and sustainably develop their natural resources.

The shift away from family farming and into industrial corporate farming over the past decades has had significant impacts on the environment. Some of the impacts of heavy industrialization in agriculture include: soil and water contamination because of increased dependence on pesticides and chemicals, soil erosion from monocropping, and a loss of biodiversity.^{xxix} The trend towards massive industrialization, which threatens clean water and soil, also threatens the sustainability of the global commons – a necessary component to achieving the common good. Additionally, the corporate nature of agriculture means that decisions about the use and development of natural resources are being decided by CEOs and stockholders, not the people whose communities are directly affected by corporate agriculture.

The agricultural industry accounts for more pollution than nearly any other industry. Agricultural pollution is also non-point source, which means that it is much more difficult to contain. Although there are many sustainable and environmentally sound ways of producing agricultural goods, the recent trend has been towards the industrialization of farming, which perpetuates pollution of the global commons. With significant pressure from civil society, however, the U.S. government has also begun to promote basic levels of sustainability. A recent victory for promoting sustainable agriculture was the addition of the Conservation Security Program (CSP) to the 2002 Farm Bill.^{xxx} The CSP is a “voluntary conservation program that supports ongoing stewardship of private agricultural lands by providing payments and technical assistance [for farmers who are] maintaining and enhancing natural resources.”^{xxxi} The prospect for continued improvement in sustainability, however, is bleak. The current movement towards international “free trade” encourages limited government involvement in agriculture, increased agricultural production for export, and a movement towards agricultural industrialization. If sustainability is thought of as finding ways to meet people’s current needs without jeopardizing the needs of future generations, the current trend toward agricultural industrialization and consolidation appears incompatible with sustainability. Unfortunately, it is unlikely that the current global economic system is going to create the space for increased sustainable practices in the near future.

U.S. Food and Agricultural Policy should reflect that the U.S. government, in collaboration with civil society, is creating public policies that encourage the development and welfare of all people, both domestically and internationally.

The role of governments in agricultural policy-making is being drastically reduced through the perpetuation of the “free market” model. In contrast, a policy of food sovereignty calls for members of civil society and governments to exercise the right to define their agricultural and food policy,^{xxxii} explicitly recognizing the importance of governments in promoting people’s welfare. The pillars of food sovereignty include: the prioritization of local agricultural production to feed people over producing mainly for export, access of peasants and landless peoples to land, the right of countries to protect themselves from below-cost agricultural and food imports, agricultural prices linked to production costs, and the recognition of the rights of women farmers.^{xxxiii} Food sovereignty is one way that governments, in conjunction with civil society, can promote food security that in turn guarantees everyone the right to food.

In addition to promoting food sovereignty, governments also can be key promoters of racial and gender equity, public health, environmental justice, and community development. One way of promoting these societal goods is through government procurement decisions.⁵ What, how, and from whom a governmental body purchases its goods and services can have a significant impact on society because government buying typically represents ten to fifteen percent of a country’s GDP.^{xxxiv} Intentional government procurement of agricultural goods and food can encourage sustainable agricultural practices, local agricultural development, and important financial support to family farmers. The 2004 budget for the National School Lunch Program, one of many federal nutrition programs, was \$6.5 billion dollars.^{xxxv} In the future, the National School Lunch Program could build partnerships with local farmers to support sustainable agricultural practices and guarantee nutritious food for students. Under the regulations of some “free trade” agreements, however, government procurement would need to be as “non-discriminatory” as possible, meaning that decisions about purchasing must be based solely on price and quality, not social or environmental concerns.^{xxxvi} Although there are certain exemptions from these requirements for non-economic reasons, government procurement programs supporting sustainable and local agriculture could be open to contestation. The potential for trade agreements to limit the role governments can play in promoting sustainable agricultural development and community food security, both in the U.S. and abroad, raises important questions about the current model of “free trade.”

Conclusion

The effects of U.S. food and agricultural policy are felt worldwide. A careful look at the food and agricultural system – including the treatment of farmworkers, the forced displacement of family farmers, corporate consolidation, governmental transparency and procurement decisions, environmental protection, racial and gender equality, and agricultural dumping – reveals that structural and policy changes are needed to ensure that everyone is treated with dignity and has access to adequate quantities of safe, nutritious, and culturally appropriate food. As the debate over the 2007 Farm Bill continues, it is imperative that the faith community asks how U.S. food and agricultural policy will enhance the right to food globally and address economic justice, environmental sustainability, and human rights for small farmers and farmworkers, both domestically and internationally.

⁵ Government procurement is the purchasing of goods and services by a government or state-owned enterprise.

Annex 1

AN INTERFAITH STATEMENT ON INTERNATIONAL TRADE AND INVESTMENT

INTRODUCTION:

In an age of increasing economic integration and interdependence between the nations and peoples of the world, mounting global inequities have come into sharp focus. While technological and other advances have made it possible for segments of humanity to achieve unprecedented material prosperity, large numbers of people have become mired in poverty, hunger, and disease. In the midst of growing disparities and injustices between and within countries, governments and international economic institutions have increasingly sought market-driven policies, particularly the expansion of international trade and investment. This limited approach has too often served to aggravate the problem. We see the need for a broader, more holistic understanding of human economic activity.

It is our belief, as members of diverse faith communities, that moral and spiritual principles can provide guidance in the search for practical measures to address the profound ethical issues raised by international trade and investment. In this spirit, we offer the following five principles, each accompanied by our observations and visions for the future. These principles apply to all actors, public and private, engaged in international trade and investment. We believe that adoption of these principles will assist people everywhere to shape international trade and investment so that they advance the goal of a more just, more sustainable, and more prosperous human society.

PRINCIPLES:

1. International trade and investment systems should respect and support the dignity of the human person, the integrity of creation, and our common humanity.

All human beings, regardless of any distinction, have been endowed by God with the intrinsic and inalienable quality of dignity. This principle of human dignity, so fundamental to our faith traditions, demands that international trade and investment respect the rights and needs of people above market principles. It is our common conviction that if we are to respect the integrity of God's creation, then the natural world, with all its richness and diversity, must not be sacrificed to shortsighted profit motivations. It is our firm belief that all human beings constitute a single people responsible for mutual care and respect. If one segment of human society is suffering, all of humanity suffers. Recognition and acceptance of our common humanity will enable us to shape international trade and investment to advance the goal of a more just, equitable, and prosperous human society.

We observe:

- A global economy that too often emphasizes the priority of markets and profits over human considerations such as the welfare of workers, communities and the natural environment;
- An unwarranted belief that markets in and of themselves can effectively address the needs of impoverished people and those who are vulnerable;

- International trade and investment activity undertaken on the false assumption that natural resources are inexhaustible and can be exploited without limit;
- Activities of international economic actors that violate international human rights, labor, and environmental conventions.

We envision:

Trade and investment relationships that protect and promote the dignity of the human person, ensure the development and well-being of people in all nations, and secure the earth's natural environment in all its bounty and diversity for present and future generations.

2. International trade and investment activities should advance the common good and be evaluated in the light of their impact on those who are most vulnerable.

In order for trade and investment practices to enhance the well being of people, private enterprise should advance distributive justice, sustainable human development, environmental protection, and poverty alleviation. Trade and investment should assist societies to meet social needs, such as secure livelihoods, health and education, and to realize the benefits of scientific discovery, cultures and spiritual heritages. Among the world's impoverished populations, women and children are often those who are most vulnerable.

We observe:

- Increasing inequalities between wealthy and impoverished people;
- Increasing deterioration in the health and well being of the world's impoverished people;
- Growing concentrations of impoverished people in selected regions of the world;
- A tendency toward exploitation and commodification of nature, people, and their cultures;
- An arms trade that constitutes an integral part of the global economy;
- Trade and investment that have sometimes resulted in the forced displacement of populations;
- Certain instances where trade and investment have improved the well being of impoverished people, helping to provide meaningful employment and improved standards of living.

We envision:

Trade and investment relationships that uphold principles of social and economic justice, enhance the material and spiritual well-being of all (through means such as equitable distribution, fair working conditions, and meaningful employment), and promote the advancement of women in social and economic development.

3. International trade and investment policies and decisions should be transparent and should involve the meaningful participation of the most vulnerable stakeholders.

In order for trade and investment practices to advance the common good, then transparency of process, meaningful participation in decision-making by those affected, and empowerment of vulnerable people are essential. Transparency requires that all participants have sufficient knowledge of the issues, rules and procedures and other vital elements of the decision making process. All stakeholders should be able to offer their opinions and perceptions in helping to determine, implement and evaluate policies. Those who are vulnerable include communities of ordinary people who often

bear the burden of the negative consequences of trade and investment. Meaningful participation implies strengthening local actors and economies; it requires the transformation of power relations to create opportunities for those who are vulnerable to fully participate as stakeholders.

We observe:

- Industrial states and global institutions that often make decisions and debate policies without the full participation of those affected;
- Women being denied participation in trade and investment decisions, even though they make significant contributions to the local economy and often suffer the most from the adverse effects of such decisions;
- The evolving participation of civil society and peoples of faith in meaningful dialogue with governments and intergovernmental organizations about ethical trade and investment issues.

We envision:

International institutions and policy processes that incorporate equitable participation and empowerment of all stakeholders, especially the countries of the global South and their peoples and communities; effective regional institutions that enhance local and regional trade and investment options; transparent and accountable national and local structures in which citizens and organizations of civil society meaningfully participate in policy decisions that affect their lives and livelihoods; and economies that value sustainability, human dignity, equity and community.

4. International trade and investment systems should respect the legitimate role of government, in collaboration with civil society, to set policies regarding the development and welfare of its people.

Government exists to serve the needs of society. It has an essential role in setting priorities and making decisions about trade and investment in order to advance the common good. Civil society, in its turn, has the right to freely express its views about society's needs, address them in public policy, and to otherwise participate in decisions affecting social, economic and environmental justice.

We observe:

- International trade and investment regimes that undermine the decision-making prerogatives of national governments to the detriment of local economies and cultures;
- Multi-lateral institutions and national governments that often marginalize civil society's right to participate in trade and investment decisions;

- Multi-lateral institutions that frequently pressure governments to prioritize market needs over those of people and the environment;
- International trade and investment rules that prevent governments and civil society from holding transnational corporations accountable for their actions.

We envision:

International institutions that respect the right of governments to establish policies that ensure the social and economic well-being of their people; effective collaboration between civil society, governments, and international institutions in shaping international trade and investment to advance the goal of a just and prosperous human society; and mechanisms that ensure that transnational corporate activities serve the common good.

5. International trade and investment systems should safeguard the global commons and respect the right of local communities to protect and sustainably develop their natural resources.

The global commons include the shared natural systems and cycles that underpin the functioning of ecosystems everywhere. They are an essential component of the collective heritage of humankind. All nations and peoples, including economic actors, have a joint responsibility for protecting and conserving this heritage. Trade and investment should be carried out with vigilance and precaution, especially when scientific knowledge regarding the potential harm of such activity to the global commons is incomplete. Trade and investment should strictly respect the right and responsibility of peoples and communities to maintain the global commons through the sustainable use of their local and traditional resources.

We observe:

- Dominant patterns of production and consumption that often cause environmental devastation, depletion of resources and extinction of species;
- Human activities that often overburden ecological and social systems;
- Local communities that risk being unable to realize the full benefits of their natural resources, including health and sustenance, due to international patent regimes.

We envision:

Trade and investment systems that safeguard the global commons, natural resources and biodiversity, place a high premium on sustainability, account for environmental and social costs in the pricing of goods and services, and acknowledge that every form of life has intrinsic value and belongs to our global heritage.

Endnotes

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