West African Cotton and International Trade Rules:   
A Strategic Plan of Action

PbAf 532 – Managing Policy in a Global Context

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# Executive Summary

Cotton subsidies, especially those of the United States, have artificially driven the price of cotton below market rates. For the millions of West Africans that depend on cotton revenues, these subsidies have lowered their incomes and worsened the poverty of the many poor families struggling to get by on their land and labor.

The world trade rules being set up within the WTO are intended to create fair rules for trade. However, the negotiations have led to imbalanced trade rules that disadvantage developing countries dependent on agricultural exports. As a result, the latest round of WTO talks came to a dramatic halt last year as a block of 21 developing countries (the G-21) banded together to fight for their interests, only to be rebuffed by negotiators from developed countries.

The plight of West African cotton growers was a potent symbol and galvanizing force for the G-21 at the Cancun conference, which was a direct result of the political organizing and concerted effort of West African nations, cotton producers, and international NGOs. Moreover, the WTO just recently issued an interim ruling in favor of Brazil on its challenge to US cotton subsidies, ruling the subsidies illegal.

Though there is a strong economic and moral case for the West African position, winning will remain an uphill battle due to the wealth and political power of those defending the US subsidies. The US is already trying to muzzle the African farmers’ demands for an end to the US’s illegal subsidies by bringing diplomatic pressure and promises of aid into the negotiations.

In light of these challenges, we have the following strategic recommendations:

* + - * **Key policy goals** – Focus on the elimination of price-distorting subsidies by the United States, continuing to call for free and fair trade in cotton. Do not get distracted by offers of near-term development aid in exchange for subsidy concessions—ending the subsidies will have much more profound and longer-lasting economic benefits. If other nations will not end their subsidies, insist on being awarded damages for lost income by the states offering subsidies to their cotton growers.
      * **Indicators of progress –** Negotiate clear timelines and specific reductions in subsidies. Quantify the lost income for West African farmers due to ongoing subsidies.
      * **Key strategies –** Continue to develop a coalition of support around this agenda, with backing from rich and poor countries, international NGOs and other advocacy institutions, and domestic participation in the West African countries involving all regional stakeholders. Pressure from international cotton consumers should also be leveraged. The cotton campaign must retain a character that elicits sympathy. If those in wealthy countries perceive the African cotton farmer as being the aggrieved party, this increases West Africa’s negotiating power. However, if the cause stops attracting sympathy, support and passion, it will lose a lot of its leverage vis-à-vis larger, richer countries.

# Introduction

Millions of impoverished farmers in West Africa depend on cotton for their livelihoods. However, government subsidies to cotton growers in the US (and to a lesser degree the EU and China) cause overproduction in those countries and depress world cotton prices. Despite good-faith efforts by West African nations to negotiate fairer trade terms in the context of WTO negotiations, the US has led efforts to block reforms of cotton subsidies and has pushed instead for a different “solution”: West African nations diversifying their economies away from a reliance on cotton.

The West African Cotton Growers Association[[1]](#footnote-2) has retained our trade-policy consulting firm to assess the current economic and political environment as it affects the Association’s efforts to establish fairer trade terms for West African cotton. In this paper, we recommend a strategy for how WACGA could further its aims in the coming months. We first provide background on the cotton economy and emerging trade rules. We then review the critical stakeholders that will affect the outcome of the Association’s efforts. Lastly, we make strategy recommendations for how WACGA can best pursue its aims.

# The Cotton Economy

### World cotton production has doubled since the 1960s, while the real price of cotton on the world market has declined by half over the same time frame (see Figure 1). This drop in price is partially due to market forces, including:

* + - * technological change (e.g., genetic engineering),
      * the emergence of new cotton-growing regions around the world, and
      * competition from substitute goods, especially polyester.[[2]](#footnote-3)

Government subsidies, however, are also to blame for overproduction and the drop in prices. These subsidies—largely given to US and EU farmers—glut the export market and decrease prices, thereby drawing production away from low-cost producers located in poor countries that cannot afford to subsidize their cotton growers.

**Cotton in West Africa** – Cotton is critical to West Africa’s economy, providing 60% of direct export earnings and direct economic support for 10 million people. It currently contributes 5-10% of the GDPs of Benin, Burkina Faso, Chad and Mali. Together, these West African countries produce 5% of the world’s cotton and account for 15% of the world’s cotton exports. African countries are among the lowest-cost cotton producers, while the US and EU countries are the most expensive. According to the International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC), the cost of producing a pound of cotton in Burkina Faso is only 21 cents. In the United States, it is 73 cents—over three times as much.[[3]](#footnote-4)

Figure 1. World Cotton Prices



*Source: Cotlook "Index A" index of prices; http://www.cotlook.com/*

**Cotton in the US** – The United States is the world’s leading exporter of cotton, responsible for 42 percent of world exports (up from 24 percent in 1996). It is also the world’s biggest subsidizer of cotton growers. According to the Institute for Agriculture and Trade Policy (IATP), the US exported cotton at 61 percent below its cost of production in 2002.[[4]](#footnote-5) Oxfam estimates that US cotton subsidies were $3.9 billion in 2001–2002, double what they were in 1992 and $1 billion more than the market value of US cotton.[[5]](#footnote-6) These subsidies, which go to a mere 25,000 farmers, increase total cotton output and lower world cotton prices. Analyses by the IMF, the World Bank, the International Cotton Advisory Committee and economists at the US Department of Agriculture support Brazil’s current contention before the WTO panel that US subsidies depress world cotton prices by almost 13%.[[6]](#footnote-7)

**Other regions –** The ICAC estimates that together, the US, EU and China supported the cotton sector by $6 billion in 2001-2, equal to the total value of world exports that year.[[7]](#footnote-8) Some countries produce large amounts of cotton for their domestic markets, but export relatively small portions of their crop (see Table 1). For example, Brazil’s cotton crop was 23% the size of the US crop in 2001, but its exports were only 6% of US exports that year.[[8]](#footnote-9)

Table 1. Production and Exports of Selected Countries (in 000s of bales), 2001



**Impact of subsidies on West Africa** – Cotton subsidies have had a devastating impact on West Africa’s farmers, who number in the millions and frequently live in poverty. According to Oxfam, the losses in export revenue experienced by West African exporters often exceed the level of economic aid received from the US. In fact, subsidies to the 25,000 US cotton farmers are more than three times the USAID budget for all of Africa.[[9]](#footnote-10)

# Trade Rules and Agriculture

Good international trade rules can be powerful tools to help reduce poverty in developing countries. Bad rules have the opposite effect. They can prevent governments from initiating the strategies that are needed to make trade work for the poor. The full potential of trade to reduce poverty will not be realized unless poor countries have access to markets in rich countries, and unless the ‘playing field’ is level for both developed and developing countries. Unfortunately, Northern governments reserve their most restrictive trade barriers for the world's poorest people. International trade has become something like an unfair hurdle race, where the weakest athletes face the highest hurdles.[[10]](#footnote-11)

## Free Trade and the WTO

The WTO was created in 1995 to serve as a global forum for creating, negotiating, and reforming a set of rules to govern international trade. The system’s overriding purpose is to “help trade flow as freely as possible — so long as there are no undesirable side-effects”.[[11]](#footnote-12) The WTO agreements are negotiated and signed by the bulk of the world’s trading nations, and provide the legal ground-rules for international commerce. These agreements act as contracts, binding member governments to keep their trade policies within agreed limits.

For good reasons, the agriculture sector calls for ‘special treatment’ within the system of rules for international trade. Governments usually have three primary reasons for supporting and protecting their farmers, even if this distorts agricultural trade:

* To make sure that enough food is produced to meet the country’s needs.
* To shield farmers from the effects of the weather and swings in world prices.
* To preserve rural society.

While well intentioned, these policies have often been expensive, and have created gluts leading to subsidy wars, distorted prices and markets, ultimately undermining the entire notion of “comparative advantage.” The countries with the lowest prices, highest efficiency, and best products are no longer rewarded. Instead, the rewards go to the farmers living in countries that spend the most money on subsidies.

## The Agricultural Agreement

The WTO’s Uruguay Round produced the first multilateral agreement dedicated to the agricultural sector, and was a significant first step towards order, fair competition and less distorted markets. The Agriculture Agreement was created out of that round, with the goal to reform trade in the sector and make policies more market oriented. The new rules and commitments fall into what is known as the ‘three pillars’ of agricultural policy:

* **Market access**: various trade restrictions confronting imports, usually tariffs.
* **Domestic support**: production subsidies and other programs, including those that raise or guarantee farm prices and farmers’ incomes.
* **Export subsidies**: and other methods used to make exports artificially competitive.

The Agricultural Agreement does allow governments to support their domestic agricultural economies, but preferably through policies that cause less distortion to trade. Because the framework for cotton trade rules is primarily dealing with subsidies, this analysis will focus on the domestic support pillar of agricultural policy.

## The Rules of the Subsidy Game

As with any game, the definitions used to describe the rules are important. These definitions have an important bearing on the current trade dispute about cotton subsidies. Under the Agricultural Agreement, governments are required to progressively reduce production and export subsidies subject to one exemption, the wording of which is critical:

Domestic support measures for which exemption is claimed shall meet the fundamental requirement that they have no, or at most minimal, trade-distorting effects on production.[[12]](#footnote-13)

According to the WTO, a market is ‘distorted’ when prices are higher or lower than normal, and if quantities produced, bought, and sold are also higher or lower than normal — i.e. than the levels that would usually exist in a competitive market.

Measures that meet these criteria fall into a category known as the ‘Green Box’. In WTO terminology, subsidies, in general, are identified by ‘boxes’ which are given the colors of traffic lights: green (permitted), amber (slow down – i.e. reduce), red (forbidden). Agriculture subsidies are classified slightly different: there is no red box, although domestic support exceeding the limits in the amber box is prohibited; and there is a blue box for subsidies that are tied to programs that limit production. There are also exemptions for developmental policies in developing countries (sometimes called an “S&D box).[[13]](#footnote-14) So, in the agricultural subsidy traffic light: green = permitted, blue = okay within conditions, and amber = reduce.[[14]](#footnote-15)

* **Amber Box**: All domestic support measures considered to distort production and trade fall into the amber box. These include measures to support prices, or subsidies directly related to production quantities.
* **Blue Box**: This is the “amber box with conditions” – conditions designed to reduce distortion. Any support that would normally be in the amber box is placed in the blue box if the support also requires farmers to limit production.
* **Green Box**: To qualify for the green box, subsidies must not distort trade, or at most cause minimal distortion. Green box subsidies are allowed without limits provided they comply with the policy-specific criteria set out in the agreement: they have to be government-funded (not by charging consumers higher prices) and must not involve price support.

These rules are designed to allow some flexibility in the way commitments are implemented. For example, developing countries do not have to cut their subsidies or lower their tariffs as much as developed countries, and they are given extra time to complete their obligations. Least-developed countries don’t have to do this at all. In theory, these trade rules are meant to help poor countries. In reality, the vagueness in the definitions for what actually distorts trade gives countries room to creatively interpret the rules for domestic subsidy programs, often with an extremely damaging outcome.

## Trade Disputes Under WTO

If a WTO member believes that another member has violated the terms of a WTO trade agreement, they can bring a complaint before a WTO dispute resolution panel. If the panel finds that a rule has been violated, it can authorize the aggrieved nation to impose retaliatory measures (e.g., higher tariffs on the offending nation’s exports). Retaliatory sanctions are a much more powerful tool in the hands of large, wealthy countries. Sanctions by smaller and poorer countries are often not perceived as much of a threat. The fact that sanctions (rather than a payment of monetary damages) are the punishment mechanism is a systematic bias in the WTO that favors rich nations.

This year, Brazil brought a complaint about US cotton subsidies before the WTO. In April, the WTO panel made an interim ruling that the US subsidies were indeed illegal. A final ruling is expected in mid June.

# Stakeholder analysis

This section briefly lays out the key stakeholders who are involved in the African cotton issue. First off, there are the core proponents for an end to US subsidies. These are the West African cotton farmers, West African governments, West African NGOs, and West African business and trade associations. Supportive of the proponents’ concerns are various development NGOs, free-trade media (e.g., *The Economist*), and the G-21 Association of developing countries. Opposing any reforms are cotton farmers receiving subsidies from their governments, and the governments they’ve “captured” with their concentrated power. It is unclear where exactly the World Bank, IMF, and WTO stand on this issue—ideologically, they are probably on the side of the Africans, but practically the US wields an enormous amount of influence within those organizations.

The West African side has a compelling moral and economic argument that has the advantage of being easily understood and also lends itself to human interest stories that play well in the visual and print media. The emergence of an effective transnational network that is holding together despite a powerful G-8 onslaught has greatly amplified the voice and negotiating position of the West Africans.

The anti-reform side possesses the vast bulk of the money, the expertise, and the political power. Moreover, the US elected leadership is under direct pressure from a powerful, experienced farm lobby on this issue that will be fiercely protective of its current subsidies.

# Past Strategies for West African Cotton

So far, we’ve reviewed the economics of cotton, the WTO framework in which the trade negotiations are taking place, and the stakeholders involved. Here now is a brief history of what action has been taken to date by and on behalf of West African farmers:

1. Producers, cotton companies, and supportive NGOs networked and campaigned very effectively to put the cotton issue on the global agenda.
2. Prior to the Cancun WTO meeting, four West African governments, led by Benin submitted a proposal to the WTO for a sector-specific initiative on cotton. They called for an immediate end to subsidies, as well as compensation for the losses they had sustained due to US subsidies.
3. At the Cancun meeting in September 2003, cotton became a flashpoint issue, becoming a symbol for irreconcilable differences between developed and developing countries. A draft declaration was presented without explicit recognition of the West African proposal or any specific actions for reform. The wording of the declaration—emphasizing that cotton-dependent countries should diversify their economies—infuriated the African delegates and set the uncompromising tone that closed the Cancun meeting.
4. Follow-up meetings have occurred to try to address the cotton issue and save the Doha round of negotiations. The EU announced its EU-Africa partnership to support Africa’s cotton concerns, offering mild concessions on subsidies. The US has tried bilaterally to get the issue taken off the table, is avoiding the idea of compensation by offering possible financing and technical assistance, and may try to bring in promises of development aid as a negotiating tool.[[15]](#footnote-16)
5. As mentioned, the WTO dispute resolution panel has passed an interim ruling in favor of Brazil against the US subsidies. West African cotton interests were not co-party to the case but have been following the case closely.

# Policy Recommendations

The WTO’ failure to reach agreement in Cancun constitutes a considerable setback in agricultural reform. At the same time, it represents a great improvement in the bargaining position of African cotton growers. One of the positive developments from the Cancun meeting was the increased power that developing countries are exerting within the WTO. This momentum must be continued. Brazil’s recent legal victory seems to indicate that reform may actually move quicker on legal grounds than it will through negotiation. There is no reason that both strategies cannot be pursued simultaneously.

Growing awareness of the cotton subsidy problem has generated a number of policy reform strategy papers and reports in the last three years. Reports from the International Cotton Advisory Committee, Oxfam, studies centering on Brazil’s legal case, and reports from well known economists have now documented the severity of this policy dilemma, and have drafted a way forward for reform. The following recommendations are a compilation of strategies from these reports, and fall into three general categories for reform strategies:

* Institutional reform in rich countries;
* Reform of global trade and financial institutions;
* Domestic policies for strengthening the local cotton economy.

## Institutional Reforms in Rich Countries

* Elimination of all cotton subsidies, including most domestic subsidies and official “Green Box” subsidies which encourage over-production.
* Comprehensive ban on all export dumping of products below the local cost of production
* Increased market access for poor countries (reciprocal liberalization of markets)
* International oversight to ensure that rich governments do not apply strong diplomatic pressure to coerce vulnerable governments to drop their demands for urgent reform.

## Reform of Global Trade and Financial Institutions

* WTO: The WTO sponsored meeting in Cotonou in March of 2004 was a good first step to help address the cotton crisis in WCA, and the mid-year donor meeting in Paris will further this effort. However, these gestures should not be used to detract from the major issue: *that US and EU cotton subsidies must be eliminated*.
* Cotton should continue as a separate issue from the broader agricultural negotiations, to bring fast results.
* Prohibit rules that force governments to liberalize basic services that are vital for poverty reduction.
* Democratize the WTO to give poor countries more security from retaliation when they voice their positions.
* WB/IMF:
  + Eliminate loan conditionality for privatizing trade and commodity markets without regard to the impacts on food security or the livelihoods of poor people.
  + Require PSRPs to document the impacts of trade liberalization on the workers and the poor.

## Policies for Local and Domestic Reforms

* Compensation should be paid from rich countries for injuries from depressed cotton prices.
* Technical and financial assistance should also be granted to help respond both to the short-term cotton crisis, as well as the long-term development of the sector.
* Aid could be used to help stabilize cotton farmer incomes and prices at local and national levels,
* Long-term sector development could include value-adding strategies such as improving the quality and grade of the cotton, encourage “fair trade” and organic production, improved local processing and marketing
* Re-examine the impacts of trade liberalization policies, with the intention to put national poverty reduction as the primary goal.

## Strategy Recommendations

This presents an ambitious reform package, but it is critical that reform move forward at all three levels. Effective implementation of these reforms will require a continued commitment to develop a coalition of support around this agenda, with backing from rich and poor countries, international NGOs and other advocacy institutions, and domestic participation in the West African countries involving all stakeholders: producer associations, cotton companies, cotton farms, and government ministers. Pressure from international cotton consumers should also be leveraged.

It is critical that the cotton campaign have a character which elicits sympathy. To the extent that those in wealthy countries perceive the African cotton farmer as being the aggrieved party, support for Africa will be there to add negotiating power to the group. However, if the cause stops attracting sympathy, support and passion, it will lose a lot of its leverage vis-à-vis larger, richer countries. The following recommendations highlight key strategies for achieving the policy goals mentioned.

## Building the Movement for Support

* Strengthening alliances with other actors in the local and global cotton sector
* Continue to build transnational networks to scale up the movement for cotton reform;
* Increase the international NGO advocacy in this movement to heighten public attention and knowledge of the issue. Use the NGO network to help attract sympathetic media coverage.

## Strategic Political Pressure

* Increase pressure leading up to the US election cycle and US farm bill reform in 2006. US legislation must be tracked very closely and a lot of attention paid to messaging and timing—opportunities for influence appear quickly and must be seized upon.

## Leveraging Resources for Technical Assistance

* To conduct more reports and studies documenting the impacts of rich country subsidies;
* To pinpoint which subsidies should be the first targets for reform

## Maintain Power and Voice in WTO Negotiations

* Continue to build on the momentum leading up to Cancun;
* Must be careful that vulnerable countries do not give in to increased political pressures from rich countries, or lighten their demands in the face of slightly increased cotton prices and financial assistance paid by rich countries;

## Legal Action like Brazil

* Filing a complaint with the WTO could be an excellent strategy, depending on the Brazil outcome; this strategy could easily be pursued simultaneously with negotiation efforts.

# Conclusion

Cotton subsidies are currently a powerful symbol of unfair trade for those involved in WTO negotiations and trade law. The West African cotton producers and their allies have a window of opportunity to focus the global agenda on getting these subsidies removed. Ideally, that would happen in the context of “fair trade for all.” However, this opportunity to achieve West Africa’s specific goals means that the movement must not get distracted from the task at hand: eliminating unfair cotton subsidies entirely.**BIBLIOGRAPHY**

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1. This particular organization is fictional, though similar producers’ organizations do indeed exist and have played a central role in pushing for policy change. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
2. Towsend, 2004, p. 1 [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
3. UNCTAD, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
4. Francis, 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
5. Oxfam, 2002a [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
6. Embassy of Brazil, 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
7. UNCTAD, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
8. USDA, 2002 [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
9. UNCTAD, 2003 [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
10. Or, like having the most overweight team on the downhill side of a steeply tilted playing field. [↑](#footnote-ref-11)
11. WTO, 2004 [↑](#footnote-ref-12)
12. (WTO, 2003a, p. 3) [↑](#footnote-ref-13)
13. S&D stands for “special and differential treatment.” [↑](#footnote-ref-14)
14. http://www.wto.org/english/tratop\_e/agric\_e/negoti\_e.htm [↑](#footnote-ref-15)
15. Oxfam, 2004b, p. 8-10 [↑](#footnote-ref-16)