

Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform

NAPC

National Agricultural Policy Center

PROCEEDINGS No. 4

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Agricultural Policy Forum

on

Economic Liberalization and Agriculture: a Critical Overview

held in Damascus on September 7, 2002

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Ministry of Agriculture
and Agrarian Reform

Introduction

As part of the Agricultural Policy Forum promoted by the National Agricultural Policy Centre (NAPC) with the support of the Project GCP/SYR/006/ITA-Phase II, a seminar on “Economic Liberalization and Agriculture: a Critical Overview” was held in Damascus on September 7th, 2002. The Agricultural Policy Forum aims at promoting the debate on agricultural policy issues among national and international experts, stakeholders and policy makers, in order to provide technical background for the policy making process, and to obtain suggestions for NAPC research and policy advice activities.

The seminar was introduced by Mr. A. El Hindi, director of the NAPC, who welcomed the guests and thanked them for their participation, especially Mr. Mahmoud Taher, the FAO representative in Syria and Ms. Laura Ciampoli, *Commercial Attaché* at the Italian Embassy (a comprehensive list of participants is provided in Annex 1). Mr. Hindi briefly presented the activities carried out by the NAPC with the support of the Project GCP/SYR/006/ITA-Phase II “Assistance for Capacity Building through Enhancing Operation of the NAPC”, which is implemented by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations and financed by the Italian Government. Mr. El Hindi referred to the policy studies carried out during the previous phase of the Project and to the on-going activities, stressing the relevance of the Policy Forum initiative to stimulate the debate and gather opinions on agricultural policy issues and priorities for Syrian agricultural policy making.

Mr. El Hindi introduced the lecturer, Professor Jonathan Kydd of the Imperial College London, UK and emphasized the importance of the seminar in presenting new approaches to the reform of agricultural policies and institutions for Syria.

Synthesis of the presentation

Mr. Kydd opened his lecture (Annex 2 includes the presentation slides) stating that insofar as institutional change is a change in the rules of the game, liberalisation can be thought of as a bundle of institutional changes. In this sense, mainstream analysis of liberalisation is a form of institutional analysis. But it is an analysis with, as yet, an unbalanced treatment of institutions. A number of gaps were identified and discussed as follows:

(a) The need for a fuller and more sophisticated treatment of the *institutions of the national political economy*. The nation, or an alternative aggregation such as a region, can be considered as a system with a particular historical institutional endowment. The institutions of its political economy must be examined from a perspective that recognises there are different routes to the achievement of *effective coordination*. The liberal market economy (LME) institutional set is very effective in some regards, but relatively unsatisfactory in others. Thus, when liberalisation policies are proposed for a particular nation or region, it is necessary to consider these as *developments of that nation’s systemic approach to dealing with coordination problems*. Radical changes may be damaging, as they amount to new institutional models, which are not rooted in accepted ways of solving coordination problems. They risk damaging existing sources of “comparative institutional advantage” while, because only shallowly rooted, failing to find the platform for fostering new areas of comparative institutional advantage.

(b) LME institutions are probably not appropriate for the development of smallholder agriculture in developing countries. (This conclusion is tempered by the fact that transactions challenges differ by crop, and generally are at their most difficult for semi-tradable staples). Thus the institutional changes required by liberalisation measures within the “Washington Consensus on Agriculture – WCA” (Kydd and Dorward 2001) may be taking poor farmers down a blind alley. For

smallholder farmers, the key challenge is to devise *institutional arrangements* which are able to reduce transactions costs and also induce much stronger strategic commitment to investing in needed specific (and co-specific) assets. The characteristics of poor smallholder agricultures are such that LME institutions are unable to solve the very particular coordination problems that arise.

To put these points in a different way, there is a consensus that thoroughgoing agricultural trade liberalisation, applied in both the OECD and the poorer economies, will reduce global production and raise global prices, at least in relative terms. This is supposed to be beneficial for poorer countries by: (a) enhancing access to OECD agricultural markets; and (b) raising producer prices within poor countries – no longer depressed by subsidised exports from the OECD - thereby providing their farmers greater incentives to supply their domestic markets.

Comparing this issue with the topics covered by the 2002 World Development Report *Globalisation, Growth and Poverty: Building an Inclusive World Economy*, Mr. Kydd welcomed the increasing institutionalism emphasis in World Bank work, but stressed that this report focuses very strongly on property rights. Well defined, accessible and easily tradable property rights are, of course, essential for modern economies, whether they follow the LME route, or the alternatives sketched in this paper. However, for some LME economists, a framework of strong property rights and competitive markets are most of what we have to worry about. This paper takes an alternative line, which argues that institutions such as *non-market coordination* and *deliberative mechanisms*, and institutional arrangements such as *competitive coordination*, *interlocking* and *regulated monopolies* need to be central to our analysis of the effects of trade liberalisation on the poor.

After this introduction Mr. Kydd focused his attention on the roles of co-ordination and deliberative mechanisms, highlighting that in recent work following broadly in the tradition of North and Williamson, Hall and Soskice (2001) (hereafter “H&S”) have set out an approach termed “Varieties of Capitalism”. H&S construe the key relationships in the political economy in game theoretic terms, and *focus on the kinds of institutions that alter the outcomes of strategic interactions*. They see an economy as being populated by different actors seeking to advance their interests in a rational way through strategic interaction with others. Businesses are the key agents of adjustment to technological change, international competition etc., and their aggregated activities determine economic performance of the economy. National political economies can be compared in terms of the means by which firms within these economies solve coordination problems within these five spheres. H&S distinguish two “ideal types”, at poles of a spectrum:

(a) *Liberal Market Economies (LMEs)*, which coordinate activities via hierarchies and competitive market arrangements, classically described by Williamson. The LME system is based on arms length exchange of goods and services, in the context of competition and formal contracting. Actors adjust to the price signals generated by markets. In many cases an effective coordination is achieved and equilibrium outcomes of firm behaviour are given by supply and demand.

(b) *Coordinated market economies (CMEs)* are distinguished by the fact that they make more use of “non market relations to coordinate endeavours and to construct core competencies”. Key elements of non-market relations are, compared to LMEs: more extensive relational investment; more incomplete contracts; and network monitoring – based on the exchange of private information within networks (as opposed to competitive behaviour).

H&S argue that LMEs broadly fit the Williamsonian description of the organisation of the capitalist economy. In LMEs, the principal institutions on which firms rely for coordination are markets and hierarchies (firms), together with vertical hybrid arrangements between firms in a supply chain. CMEs differ because they draw on a further set of organisations and institutions, those supporting more horizontal or networked *strategic interaction*, both across and within supply chains. In general these will be institutions which reduce the uncertainty that actors have about the behaviour of others and will allow them to make credible commitments to each other. In the tradition of the Ostroms, H&S suggest that these are institutions providing capacity for: exchange of information; monitoring of behaviour; and sanctioning of defection from cooperative endeavour.

Strategic interaction is dependent on informal rules based on experience with a familiar set of actors; the shared understandings that accumulate from this experience (a “common culture”); and a set of

shared understandings of available “strategies for action” developed from experience of operating in a particular environment. This shared set of understandings is evolutionary and fragile: H&S conclude that institutions of the political economy need constant reinforcement by the active endeavours of the participants.

The key competitive advantage for CMEs, which results from effective non-market coordination, is that firms and other actors should then be willing to invest more in *specific* and *co-specific* assets (assets which cannot readily be turned into another use, and assets the returns to which depend heavily on the active cooperation of others). In contrast, in LMEs there is a greater interest in *switchable assets*, such as general skills or multipurpose technologies.

Within this framework Mr. Kydd identified the *institutional pre-requisites for agricultural development* challenging smallholder development as follows:

- (a) development of smallholder agriculture requires high investments in co-specific assets by a variety of different players, in situations with significant information problems, high opportunity costs for capital and, for some parties, significant risk aversion. Therefore, a CME institutional set may very likely be more appropriate than an LME set;
- (b) agriculture is an activity in which continuous technical innovation seems more likely and appropriate than discontinuous innovation, again suggesting that the CME institutional set may be more appropriate than the LME set;
- (c) there is currently a serious (desperate) lack of the asset specific investment needed for development in input supply systems, in agricultural finance, in processing and marketing, and in transport and water infrastructure;
- (d) if strategic commitment to asset specific investment could be secured, both horizontally (among specific categories of players such as traders and farmers), and vertically (within supply chains) then it seems very likely that much higher growth rates could be achieved;
- (e) institutions needed to promote strategic commitment to asset specific investment are largely lacking.

On the last point, the lecturer stressed that up to the end of the 1980s, the state had (with mixed success) played the central role as a provider of infrastructure and subsidised finance and of input and output marketing services. Processors were often state owned and/or operated under policies of protection. In the last 10 to 15 years, however, liberalisation policies have been pursued, mainly under pressure from the Washington institutions (to a much lesser extent WTO pressures) and informed by what the present authors (Kydd and Dorward 2001) have called “The Washington Consensus on Agriculture” (WCA). The results have, by and large, been unsatisfactory, and a debate has been joined between:

- (1) Those who argue that liberalisation policies have not yet been pursued with sufficient determination and credibility to elicit a strong supply response.
- (2) The ICW Group (for example Kydd and Dorward, 2001; Dorward et al., 2002), who, while not unsympathetic to many of the aspects the WCA, nevertheless argue that it has tried to introduce elements of institutional change which are regressive, while failing to see opportunities for progressive institutional change. The ICW view can be summarised by saying that the WCA is trying to impose LME institutions on poor rural areas, whereas what is needed is an evolution in a more CME direction. Smallholder agriculture in poor countries needs CME-type institutions if it is to develop, at least at the earlier stages. Ideally, these would be based on deliberative institutions, working horizontally inside a sector, and also vertically along the supply chain, based on a consensus about what may constitute a “just” outcome. (If participants in deliberation do not accept the outcome of the process, then they will simply argue, and fail to engage in strategic commitment).

Mr. Kydd concluded by mentioning that In practice, the conditions of smallholder agriculture may force the government to take a greater role than is suggested by any of the OECD models (LME or CME) studied by Hall and Soskice. Intervention by the state almost inevitably encourages some rent-seeking, inadequate deliberation, and a certain lack of dynamism. At the same time, however, as in

the achievement of India's and China's Green Revolutions, a degree of success may be achieved which is difficult to imagine under a pure LME model due to inadequate strategic commitment to asset specific investment and, possibly, an unwillingness to support non-standard contractual arrangements (such as interlocking).

Summary of discussion

The following matters were raised in discussion:

1. How effective are NGOs as agents of rural development, and what are the implications of the foregoing discussion for the roles of NGOs? It was pointed out that NGOs can be very effective agents of rural development. Positive attributes, compared with government, included greater flexibility, stronger client orientation, willingness to experiment and highly motivated staff. Less strong features included uncertain funding and the fact that they, unlike government, did not make rules and policy – if these had to be changed, then this was a matter for government. In terms of the discussion above, it is obvious that NGOs can play a key role in facilitating non-market coordination, and may also be useful in representing farmer views to government. Finally, a key problem of smallholder agricultural development is farmers' access to seasonal finance. Elsewhere in the world, some NGOs have turned out to be excellent micro-financiers: the combination of the supply of information about technology, plus the finance necessary for farmers to access the technology.
2. How can be seen in this framework the role of "Agricultural Chambers" in fostering agricultural development. In the light of the Hall & Soskice stress on the importance of deliberative mechanisms for non-market coordination, with the participation but not overwhelming dominance of government, Agricultural Chambers are potentially a very useful institution. They should include representation of farmers, local processors, service suppliers to agriculture, consumers and the government. Especially in poor areas, they may need some financial support from government, but they should also be financed by member subscriptions.
3. Can we be sure that LME institutional arrangements, which might be brought in by strong liberalisation, will not be superior? In discussing this point, it was made clear that there are many potential benefits from liberalisation, including: greater internal competition to provide services to farmers and to market their output, including incentives for private sector investment in these businesses; reduced government outlays, and greater efficiency of the remaining outlays in achieving their objectives; benefits to consumers from lower prices; sometimes, greater opportunities to address global markets; reduced "rent-seeking" resulting from the scaling back of government involvement. In aggregate, these benefits can be very considerable. However, liberalisation policies, unless carefully designed, can also damage the ability of the agricultural part of the economy to coordinate, and this is most likely to be the case where there are a large number of relatively poor smallholder farmers. The policy implication is that liberalisation policies should be designed to enhance strategic commitment by partners in the agricultural sector. Doing so will likely require deviation from standard "World Bank" models.
4. Two participants raised questions about "exogenous factors" and "shocks" from the world market. Surely liberalisation will make farmers more vulnerable to these? In reply it was stated that a key policy dilemma has been identified here. There are obvious benefits to farmers from protection from volatile world markets, and farmers in the US and EU have been very successful in lobbying for this. For liberalisation policies there are a number of challenges: (i) can market mechanisms – e.g. commodity exchanges with futures contracts, be used cost-effectively to reduce volatility? (ii) can compromise arrangement be made to work, e.g. , full exposure to world markets, subject to a minimum price guarantee? (iii) can farmers be compensated for poor prices in ways that encourage those who cannot be profitable at these low prices to exit agriculture, or at least the crop in question? Finally, it was stressed that the argument presented in the lecture did not support the idea that long-term farmers should be paid above world prices, unless these prices are clearly distorted by dumping.

ANNEX 1 - LIST OF PARTICIPANTS

Agricultural Cooperative Bank

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Al Baath Daily

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Ministry of Agriculture and Agrarian Reform

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University of Damascus, Faculty of Agriculture

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Al Humsi, Ayham, *Professor*.

Kawwas, Huda, *Associate Professor*.

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Garcia Alvarez Coqve, Jose Maria, Professor.

University of Rome 3

De Filippis, Fabrizio, *Professor of Agricultural Economics*

The seminar was also attended by 20 of the NAPC trainees

ANNEX 2-

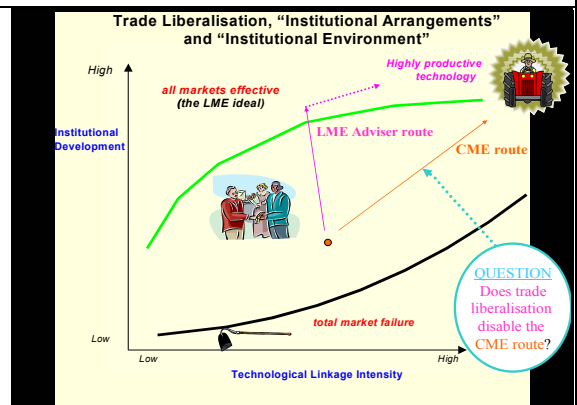
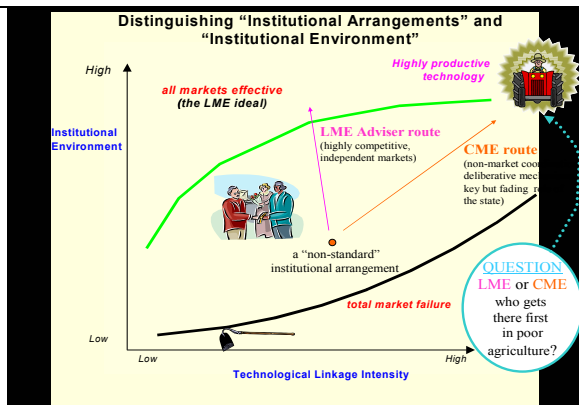
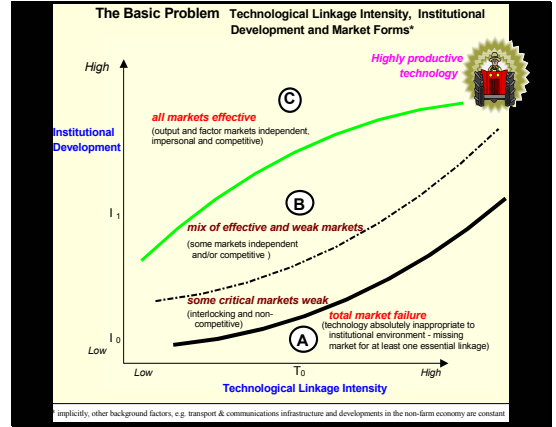
	<p>Rationale for the paper</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ mixed agricultural performance since liberalisation □ misconceived conceptual basis for policy advice? □ exploration of explanations from institutional economics □ debate between: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● liberalisation insufficient, too new, govt not yet credible ● conceptual basis needs reworking <p>Damascus, Syria Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview 2</p>
<p>Washington Consensus on Agriculture (WCA)</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Rural Development, from Vision to Action</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Claim the 21st Century?</i></p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>Can Africa</i></p> <p>Current World Bank website:</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Rich and textured at the conceptual level, but ...</p> <p>Damascus, Syria Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview 3</p>	<p>The WCA: Analysis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Agriculture of poor regions is "<i>undercapitalised</i>" and insufficiently competitive in the world market □ Key problem is "<i>policy and institutional failures</i>" □ "<i>Institutional</i>" failures: not very well defined: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • • <p>Damascus, Syria Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview 4</p>
<p>Unpacking policy failures in WCA: essentially: <i>suppression of agricultural incentives:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ discriminatory "economy wide" policies; □ excessive explicit (commodity) taxation; □ support for agriculture both quantitatively inadequate and inefficient (state dominated and centralised service provision, encouraging rent-seeking, discouraging private services' emergence) □ urban bias (because counteracting political institutions weak) <p>Damascus, Syria Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview 5</p>	<p>Stylised "development retarding features" of "political economy of low density rural areas":</p> <p style="text-align: center;"><i>tax base of which is incentive-depressing interventions in agric. markets</i></p> <p>Damascus, Syria Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview 6</p>

<p>The WCA critique of marketing policies: monopoly parastatals</p> <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 7</p>	<p>The WCA critique of agricultural finance</p> <p>The basic problem: under-capitalisation</p> <p>general policy failures</p> <p>failures of rural financial systems</p> <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 8</p>
<p>More WCA prescription</p> <p>Continued improvements in economy-wide policies, especially reduction of tariff & non-tariff barriers to imported inputs</p> <p>More reforms in taxation policy, move to non-discriminatory forms of taxes, reducing reliance on commodity levies.</p> <p>Input supply highly unsatisfactory & uncompetitive (<i>less concern about performance of output markets</i>)</p> <p><i>Private players slow to replace parastatals because of barriers to entry in the business climate more generally</i></p> <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 9</p>	<p>Themes in institutional analysis of developing country agriculture 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ North on inst environment – key to growth □ Williamson on institutional arrangements, espec “non-standard contractual forms” □ Williamson describes: hierarchies, markets and hybrid forms determined by: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • asset specificity • human propensity to opportunism <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 10</p>
<p>Themes in institutional analysis of developing country agriculture 2</p> <p>Agriculture in poor countries has a very weak institutional and infrastructural environment, e.g:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> poor information missing markets (land, finance) weak contract enforcement <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 11</p>	<p>Themes in institutional analysis of developing country agriculture 3</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> □ Hall & Soskice “Varieties of Capitalism” argue: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • key distinction between liberal market economy (LME) and coordinated market economy (CME) institutions • CMEs good at continuous technical innovation • LMEs good at radical technical innovation □ So, for poor country smallholder agriculture: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • • <p>Economic Liberalisation and Agriculture: a critical overview Damascus, Syria 12</p>

Some key aspects of CME institutions

- non market coordination to achieve:
 -
- role of deliberative mechanisms for achievement of strategic commitment
 -
- ambiguous role of the state:
 - weak or no capital protection of farmers
 - key to lock and bind strategic commitment in successful Indian and Chinese Green Revolutions
 - historically, LMEs have tended to be superior in output, but followers have used state coordination to catch up (and overtake)

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an outline for a policy research agenda

- how institutions are impacted by agendas for:
 -
- impacts will include:
 -
- do we progress or regress in coordination and incentives for investment
- what institutions should be built in LDCs to enable favourable participation in trade

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ANNEX 3 - Key references and background reading

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