

FOREWORD

Economic welfare in many developing countries, and especially the least developed ones, has not increased during the last decades. This disconcerting fact has prompted an intensive debate on how this situation could be improved. The world community has formulated a number of Millennium Development Goals and has promised to adjust its policies to allow these goals to be realized. It has also marked out the achievement of the first Millennium Development Goal (MDG I) – halving hunger and poverty before 2015 – as the *sine qua non* for the achievement of the other ones.

As is well known, the great majority of the world's hungry and poor live in rural areas, mostly in countries that are largely agricultural. Many of these areas are trapped in an unsustainability spiral that is characterized by lack of access to external inputs, soil mining, decreasing land productivity, and chronic poverty. There is widespread consensus that achievement of MDG I first of all requires this spiral to be broken. Policy makers and economists are discussing policies and instruments to this purpose, but the way to go remains subject to extensive debate.

This situation has vital consequences for agricultural trade policies. Both in the Doha Round and in various bilateral trade negotiations, improving the situation in developing countries has been recognized as a primary aim. Nevertheless, there is increasing evidence that the least developed countries will benefit little, or even be hurt, by simple trade liberalization. Opinions on how to respond to this insight widely diverge, and a fruitful dialogue is often hampered by taboos and talking at cross-purposes. This situation led Professor Per Pinstруп-Andersen and Dr. Niek Koning to propose a round-table discussion to upgrade the scientific debate on the issue and enhance its policy relevance. Several views and analyses should be brought together to chart the common ground and the bases of divergence and to see how our understanding of the relation between agricultural trade policies and development could be improved. The idea of such a roundtable discussion, which would require an open and unbiased attitude from the participants, was widely accepted. Various scientific peers and trade policy experts were willing to contribute. The Dutch minister of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality was willing to sponsor the initiative – a contribution that is gratefully acknowledged.

In this volume the various opinions, discussions, common conclusions and recommendations that have come out of this round table are presented. Thanks to the efforts of the participants (and some authors who were invited after the round table itself) and thanks to the open attitude of the organizers, Pinstrup-Andersen and Koning, it has become an unusual and stimulating book. Few other books present such a wide range of views on agricultural trade liberalization and the least developed countries. It is hoped that this constructive engagement between different views will contribute to more balanced discussions in future WTO and bilateral negotiations, and that it will inspire reforms that really help the poor and hungry in the world.

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