

Key Policy Lessons for More Sustainable Agri-food Trade from TRADE4SD and MATS Horizon 2020 projects

Politiques pour un commerce agroalimentaire plus durable : Principaux enseignements tirés des projets TRADE4SD et MATS d'Horizon 2020

Wichtige politische Erkenntnisse für einen nachhaltigeren Handel mit Agrar- und Lebensmittelerzeugnissen aus den Projekten TRADE4SD und MATS Horizon 2020

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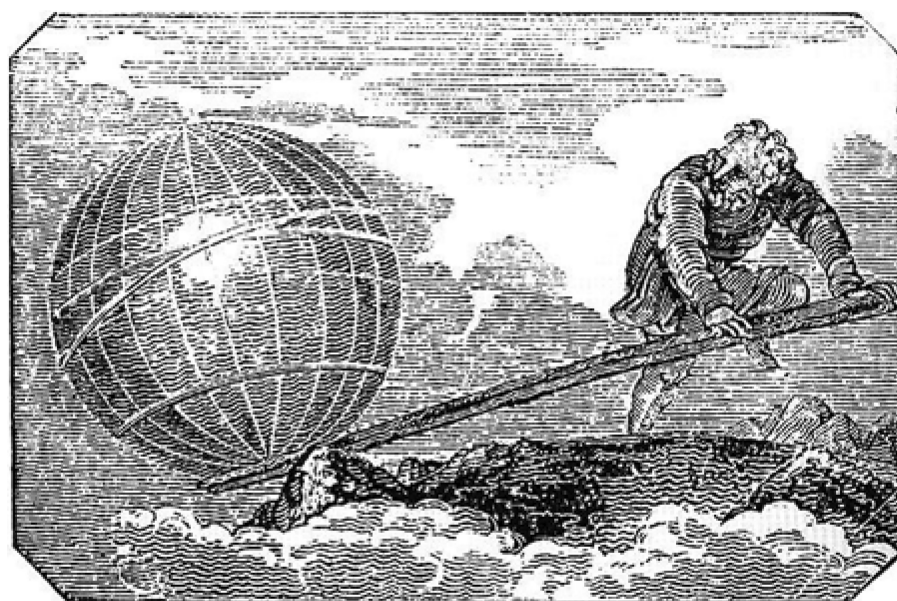
Trade at regional, national and global level has the potential to play a key role in achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), impacting social, environmental and economic sustainability in the context of agrifood system transformation (Avesani, 2021). The starting point for the two EU-funded MATS and TRADE4SD projects was that international trade and trade governance systems can be important contributors to realising positive impacts of trade while reducing the negative ones. Realising these positive contributions can be achieved when trade policies, which define the rules of the game, are framed and designed in a way to promote market access, fair prices, high standards of living, alleviate rural poverty, reduce food insecurity and ensure sustainable farming practices (Avesani, 2021; van Berkum, 2022).

To understand the impacts of trade governance from a systems perspective in terms of the three key pillars of sustainability – environmental, social and economic sustainability (Elkington, 1998; Rockström *et al.*, 2009) – it is necessary to focus on the core components of trade governance systems and the linkages between

trade and sustainable development. For this purpose, both Horizon 2020 projects (MATS and TRADE4SD) have assessed trade governance systems and their underlying key components (international agreements, institutions, regulatory frameworks and standards) with respect to selected SDGs. While the TRADE4SD project emphasises the integration of sustainability standards into trade policies and their implications for welfare and distributional outcomes, the MATS

project aims to identify key leverage points for changes in agricultural trade policy that foster sustainable development and human rights through an integrated legal, institutional and economic assessment.

The common starting point of each project was that addressing the relationship between agricultural trade and SDGs requires a systems-based approach to policymaking and stakeholder-inclusive governance.



Archimedes lever, Engraving from *Mechanics Magazine*, published in London in 1824. For further discussion on levers and leverage points, see <https://www.thwink.org/sustain/glossary/LeveragePoint.htm#:~:text=In%20systems%20thinking%20a%20leverage,small%20change%20in%20system%20behavior>.

Although the TRADE4SD project had a strong modelling focus (CGEBox, MAGNET, AGLINK-COSIMO and AGMEMOD), it applied an integrated and systemic approach combining quantitative models and qualitative methods, applying five case studies to five value chains, recognising that SDGs and trade are highly context-dependent. Both Horizon projects complemented each other by applying macro models focusing on trade dynamics (incl. Computable General Equilibrium models, CGE). MATS used macro-modelling as a smaller element in its overall systemic approach to Triple Bottom Line measurements of trade impacts. Relative to TRADE4SD, MATS gave greater emphasis to social sustainability issues (human rights), legal and institutional issues and correspondingly more scope to micro-focused assessments through its 15 case studies and integrated model assessments (Figure 1, below). The integrated modelling framework applied in MATS consisted of a variety of modelling approaches connecting bottom-up (micro-level and actor focus) and top-down perspectives (a participatory systems approach, a customised quantitative systems model and a CGE model), which interacted with institutional, regulatory and legal assessment to

address trade regime issues at unilateral, bilateral and multilateral trade levels in an integrated manner (Figure 1).

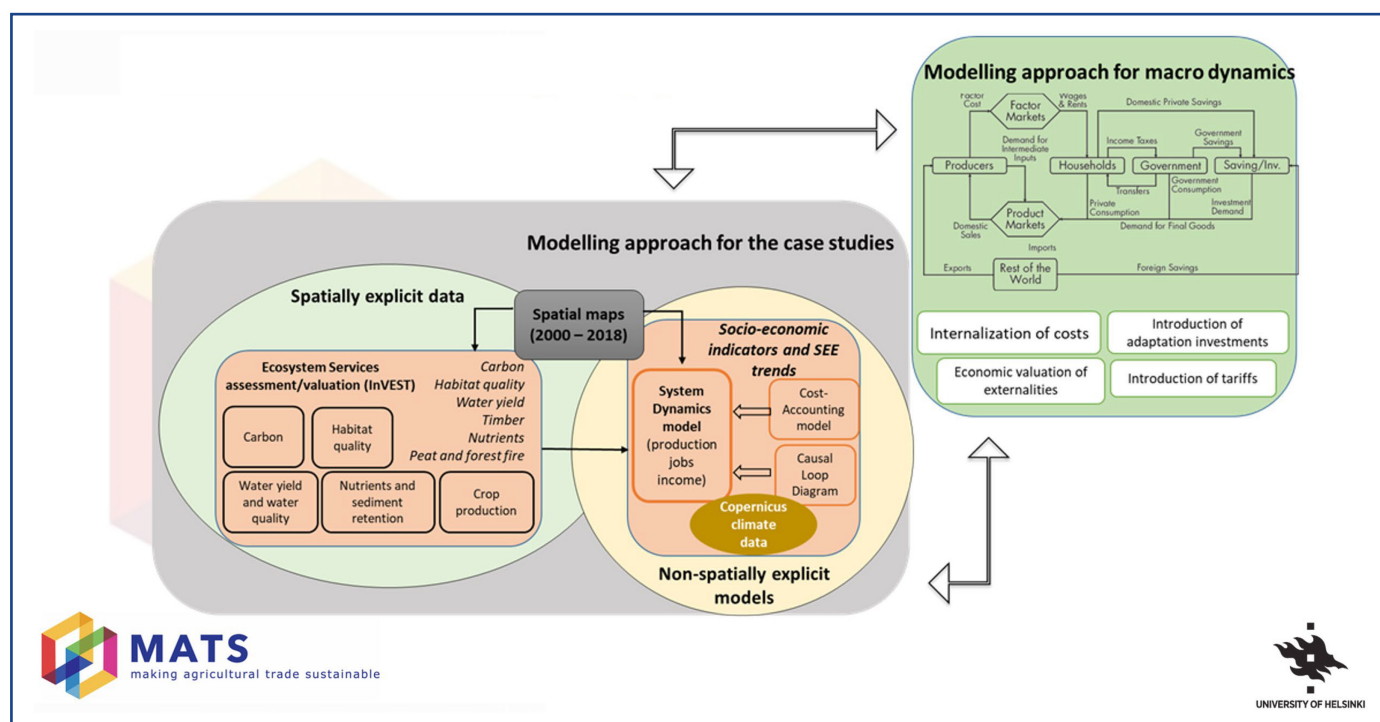
“ Si les décideurs de la politique de l'Union européenne (UE) veulent défendre de manière crédible des 'valeurs' (normes de l'UE) dans l'arène controversée du commerce agroalimentaire, il est temps d'avancer de manière collaborative et concrète. ”

The main objective shared by the two projects was to provide policy solutions through a multi-method and multi-disciplinary understanding of the impacts of existing and novel trade regimes and trade practices at local, national and international levels. By policy solutions we refer to

improved trade policy design at national, EU and global level, including potential implications regarding WTO reform. This focus on policy solutions includes the identification of increased policy coherence across different domains such as agricultural, energy, climate, environmental and nutritional policies. It also includes the identification of international trade, investment and environmental rules that have a bearing on achieving the SDGs, such as international rules under the WTO, Free Trade Agreements (FTAs), Bilateral Investment Treaties (BITs), and Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs). Through these rules, the role of national and supranational legal and policy frameworks was assessed with particular attention paid to the EU and the WTO. This enabled an assessment of the impact pathways, leverage points for change towards more sustainable agricultural trade and the derivation of transition pathways as part of multi-stakeholder integration.

To meet the above key objective, the projects developed an integrated mixed-method and systems-based approach, recognising that SDGs and trade are highly context-dependent. A robust mixed-method analysis of

Figure 1: MATS modelling approach



economic, social and environmental sustainability impacts of trade policies was implemented by using diverse yet integrated modelling techniques and case studies. The resulting integrated micro (firm/ individual) and macro-level (country/ global) approaches for trade impact assessment first needed to establish impact indicators in both projects that could be used for cross-country and commodity analyses. Both projects developed sustainability impact indicators across the diverse case studies, such that these indicators could help to describe the linkages between agriculture trade policy, trade policy regimes and investments with the main sustainability pillars and the key SDGs targeted. Based on these impact indicators, a suite of qualitative method approaches (case studies, Q method, lab-in-the-field experiments, trade games, grounded theory, phenomenology, Delphi Surveys, Causal Loop Diagrams) were complemented with quantitative approaches (quantitative economic macro-models, experiments) to understand repercussions of policy changes, land use changes and impacts on ecosystem services relevant for systemic Triple Bottom Line measurements.

To address agency concerns (market power asymmetries, lack of market transparency, marginalisation of smallholders and female entrepreneurs) and thus legitimacy issues associated with trade governance, a wide multi-stakeholder consultation process had first been implemented in both Horizon projects in the EU and in partner countries (Asia, Africa, Latin America). To this end, the consortia involved a number of private and public stakeholders as co-producers of knowledge, with the ultimate goal of facilitating the civil society dialogue on gains and losses from trade. In selecting private and public stakeholders, both projects included citizen and trade expert perspectives, while paying specific attention to marginalised actors (e.g. smallholder and female farmers) and their roles, interests and responsibilities to be able to address issues of power inequality and



Current trade agreements need to be redesigned and SDG-proofed © Scott Blake, License Unsplash.

participation. As a result of this stakeholder participation, MATS also derived transition pathways for desirable changes in trade relations and practices at macro, meso- and micro levels, identified steps for reforms of policy instruments, and formulated corresponding policy recommendations.

“ Wenn die politischen Entscheidungsträger der EU ihre ‘Werte’ (EU-Standards) im umkämpften Agrar- und Lebensmittelhandel glaubwürdig verteidigen wollen, ist es an der Zeit, gemeinsam und wesentlich voranzukommen. ”

Both projects provide evidence on the evolving role and sustainability impacts of global agri-food trade. We have witnessed a transitioning from a phase of globalisation, to ‘slowbalisation’, to de-globalisation

(Sjöholm, 2024; Zahoor *et al.*, 2023) and to ‘rupture’ (Carney, 2026). During the past decade, we have observed a continuous rise in the role and share of regional and bilateral trade agreements. Global agri-food value chain resilience has been reduced by geopolitical risks arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian war in Ukraine and the political uncertainties introduced by the new US administration under the name that president (Kuzina and Steiner, 2026). Due to these geopolitical risks, preferences of citizens have significantly changed regarding the different sustainability implications of agricultural trade. During times of instability and insecurity, economic sustainability has emerged as a dominant concern and preference as voiced by European citizen surveys conducted in 2023 under TRADE4SD and as voiced by African farmers surveyed in 2024 under MATS. This suggests there is continued support for taking economic sustainability seriously while safeguarding the achievements in terms of environmental and social sustainability, yet at the same time preventing potential greenwashing through diluted EU Green Deal cornerstones (Steiner, 2024). According to TRADE4SD survey results from 2023, European citizens believe in trade liberalisation,

perceiving it as a driver of economic and agricultural sustainability. However, the survey results also suggest that European citizens need to be made more aware that while trade liberalisation has tangible benefits, such as improved food availability and affordability, these are not shared equally across all stakeholders in the value chains. This is confirmed by the stakeholder views assessed in the 15 MATS case studies (Steiner, 2024).

Both projects confirmed that agricultural trade liberalisation *per se* was not enough for the world to become more sustainable. Trade liberalisation alone does not bring the world significantly closer to meeting the SDG targets without addressing key governance issues, as they relate to impact assessment, design and implementation of trade practices, regimes and policies (Steiner, 2024). The modelling results from both projects suggest that greater liberalisation combined with local development support such as sustainability-focused farm-level investments (e.g. in the context of the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism, CBAM) can support the achievement of SDG targets. Yield improvements and dietary changes can also help to improve food availability, affordability and resilience of local and global value chains. Moreover, TRADE4SD modelling results suggest that a substantial reduction in trade-related GHG emissions is only possible with a CO₂ tariff imposed on all goods. The MATS modelling results provide further support for applying more collaborative trade-based solutions to sustainability challenges in agri-food trade. In particular, the creation of country climate-clubs among production regions with similar carbon-intensity accompanied by farm-level technology adoption support has been shown to have the potential to effectively reduce carbon leakage while preserving economic growth (Bassi *et al.*, 2025; Steiner, 2024). The 2023 stakeholder inquiry under TRADE4SD found that a modernisation of the WTO could

significantly contribute to supporting trade-led global sustainability, providing further evidence of the increasing opportunity costs generated by the current US administration implementing a series of 'reciprocal' tariffs through executive actions, notably invoking the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA).

Both projects provide evidence of policy incoherences and conflicting sustainability impacts of trade regimes and practices. Despite efforts to integrate sustainability dimensions (SDGs) into trade policies, the European Union's approaches have often been ineffective at doing so. Incoherent policy strategies (Engel *et al.*, 2013) and conflicting EU policy objectives have negatively impacted exporting agents and countries exporting to the EU by raising compliance costs with EU standards. Consequently, such incoherences have led to conflicting sustainability impacts for example by increasing deforestation while increasing financial viability through greater export access, increasing carbon leakage as part of non-cooperative policies, or undermining the competitiveness of producers abroad through EU exports. These factors are likely limiting the efficacy of policies such as the Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM) and EUDR

deforestation regulations (Steiner, 2024). Challenges in enforcement, complexity in implementation, and unintended consequences, such as trade diversion and conflicting sustainability implications, have further hindered progress. For example, voluntary sustainability standards can induce farmers to adopt some sustainable production practices while simultaneously stimulating deforestation practices and more intensive use of irrigation to the detriment of local value chain development (MATS CS11). Moreover, the TRADE4SD project found that one-size-fits-all policies would never work in the fields of trade and sustainability as linkages are overly complex and case-specific (TRADE4SD, Project Brief 1).

To address the above challenges and enhance the environmental, social and economic sustainability of trade policies, the following three key recommendations are proposed from both Horizon projects. The following order of listing does not imply a recommendation of implementation sequence or priorities. We are convinced that a coordinated approach that simultaneously addresses all three key recommendations synergistically is not only aligned with the systems approach that our projects have promoted, but also delivers on



Liberalisation *per se* will not bring the world significantly closer to meeting the SDG targets © Barb Canale, License Unsplash.

efficacy and thus EU taxpayers' money.

Policy Recommendation 1: Account for local contexts in agri-food trade policy design

First, the sustainability of agricultural trade is intimately tied to the sustainability of domestic production, including local social dimensions (e.g. labour standards and salaries) and local environmental dimensions (e.g. water availability and soil erosion). Trade agreements should include measures to help the integration of local smallholders into global value chains through supportive market access conditions. Three possible action points are: (i) reduce information and market power asymmetries through technology support and adoption (support ICT, digital trading platforms for farmers); (ii) support cooperative business models, and (iii) provide differential standards requirements as part of differential transition phases (smallholder farmers vs. larger or other value chain actors) to lower transaction and compliance costs and thereby standards adoption costs.

Second, comprehensive training programs, investment support as well as legal and technical assistance to local value chains and farmers are essential for capacity-building through local human and social capital, enabling compliance with EU standards at lower transaction costs, achieving living wage ambitions and fostering triple-bottom-line sustainability. The following are possible action points in this regard: (i) EU financial support for local capacity building of private organisations and ministries on requirement of sustainable production standards and associated marketing; (ii) local institutional support (labour laws also addressing child labour) and EU support (market access, due diligence on imports) since the most frequent violation of human rights found across MATS case studies is the lack of a living wage and living income for farmers and workers; (iii) EU financial support to provide more training related to cooperative

farming models and group-based certification programmes that help lower transaction costs associated with adopting sustainability standards; (iv) strengthen and extend SIFA's (Sustainable Investment Facilitation Agreements) through inclusive partnerships to more value chain actors and countries; (v) align domestic laws with international agreements like the World Trade Organization's (WTO) Sanitary and Phytosanitary (SPS) Agreement to facilitate smoother trade flows and reduce barriers, thereby enhancing domestic competitiveness.

Third, engaging local value chain stakeholders in consultation and co-creation processes can improve the design and implementation of trade agreements, ensuring they address on-the-ground realities effectively. Possible action points include (i) the institutionalisation of multi-stakeholder engagement in new policy design that increases future instrument adoption and lowers compliance costs of future policies, and (ii) learning from mistakes with past stakeholder exclusion in the design of CBAM and EUDR when designing future policy instruments.



Current trade regimes have various incoherences and conflicting sustainability impacts
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Policy Recommendation 2: Redesign trade agreements for closer SDG alignment

First, independent *ex-ante* sustainability impact assessments (economic, social and environmental sustainability impacts) should be jointly required with ongoing *ex-post* impact assessments of trade agreements and associated policies. Possible action points include (i) align future agreements with SDG targets to explicitly include trade and sustainable development (TSD) provisions to ensure a balance of economic, environmental and social impacts; (ii) independent SDG proofing of trade agreements through global multilateral institutions as central actors to increase the sustainability of EU trade agreements and the resilience of global agri-food value chains; (iii) independent impact assessments to avoid individual trade regimes / policies/ sustainability standards having contradictory sustainability implications and unknown or undesirable trade deflection effects; (iv) increase policy transparency and legitimacy through independent, institutionalised *ex-ante* and *ex-post* impact assessment of trade regimes and investment monitoring. Considering the geopolitical and institutional uncertainties over the WTO, SDG proofing as part of the WTO Trade Policy Review Mechanism seems less desirable compared to anchoring an SDG impact analysis institutionally with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), supported by the capacity for data and technical assistance of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Second, future trade agreements and associated trade regimes should focus on the entire global agri-food value chain (systems-perspective), by (i) improving existing and developing new integration mechanisms for all relevant value chain actors (legal and institutional reforms for more inclusive governance); and (ii) balancing social and environmental sustainability gains from greater liability requirements in trade regimes

with economic losses from high compliance costs impacting small businesses (smallholder farmers) that can lead to value chain exclusion (learn from EUDR mistakes).

Policy Recommendation 3: Increase policy coherence

First, enhanced coordination within the EU Commission and among EU Member States is crucial to align trade policies with the multiple sustainability objectives, ensuring coherence across sectors and policy domains as well as across multiple governance levels through applying a whole-of-government approach. Possible action points include ensuring policy coherence among the key set of environmental and sustainability policies while aligning agricultural trade with sustainability goals (Carbon border adjustments, Deforestation-free supply chains, Climate-smart agriculture incentives, Trade-and-environment linkages in FTAs).

“ If EU policymakers want to credibly defend ‘values’ (EU standards) in the contested agri-food trade arena, it is time to move forward collaboratively and substantively. ”

Second, increase policy coherence, accountability and legitimacy through predictable and coordinated policy instrument implementation and reform. This entails the avoidance of investment and adoption uncertainties associated with changes in the Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive CSDDD, and the EU Deforestation Regulation (EUDR).

Third, position agri-food trade as a central component of the EU’s sustainability agenda (Green Deal

2.0), integrated horizontally to maximise synergies and impact with the Clean Industrial Deal and other competitiveness initiatives of the EU Commission that are thus far failing to account for SDGs (Steiner, 2025).

Fourth, coherence-proof agri-food trade policy agendas for biodiversity impacts and by taking an SDG focus with business-relevant sustainability impact indicators (use Global Reporting Initiative, GRI to address measurability issues associated with SDGs). Also, the EU must transition from isolated policy initiatives to a comprehensive framework of coordinated actions and institutionalised impact assessments, to address the multifaceted challenges of trade and sustainability – with a more comprehensive food systems policy approach (F2F 2.0). A possible action point includes addressing undesirable trade deflection arising from isolated policy initiatives and policy set incoherences. Finally, increase policy coherence through inclusive multi-stakeholder consultation processes that also build local knowledge (capacity building to support local value chain development). Possible action points include (i) addressing the existing incoherence of Voluntary Coupled Support under CAP and special sector payments with the pursuit of environmental goals, and (ii) addressing export incentives arising from decoupled payments to EU farmers going against the economic sustainability of export-oriented LDCs by undermining their competitiveness.

These recommendations are in line with some of the current European policy initiatives yet contradict others. The Draghi Report underscores that the era of rapid global trade growth has passed, calling for a cohesive foreign economic policy that aligns trade agreements with strategic goals as critical to navigating these challenges effectively. Although long overdue, the EU strategic dialogue, which is calling for enhanced cooperation across the whole food

supply chain, has recently concluded that greater coherence between European trade and sustainability policies is needed together with a comprehensive review of negotiation strategies and its method of conducting impact assessments prior to trade negotiations. Last but not least, the Political Guidelines for the new Commission talks about deepening free and fair-trade links and developing a new range of 'Clean Trade and Investment Partnerships'.

Key lessons

The lessons from both Horizon projects highlight the critical need for tailored, impact-assessment-based,

coherent and multi-stakeholder inclusive approaches to agricultural trade. By focusing on local contexts, redesigning trade agreements with triple-bottom-line sustainability at their core and by strengthening multiple governance levels simultaneously through transparent and institutionalised sustainability impact assessments, the EU can lead the way in crafting an agricultural trade system that is economically viable, environmentally responsible, socially inclusive and thereby in line with its values and more resilient in addressing both local and global food sovereignty concerns. This vision demands significant investments, more coordinated efforts, more inclusive participatory policymaking,

and a firmer commitment to aligning trade policies with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals.

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Summary

Key Policy Lessons for More Sustainable Agri-food Trade from TRADE4SD and MATS Horizon 2020 projects

 Two Horizon 2020 projects tasked with assessing the sustainability impacts of agricultural trade collaboratively applied macro models and perspectives (Computable General Equilibrium models, participatory systems approach, customised quantitative systems models) together with micro-perspectives (3 TRADE4SD case studies, 15 MATS case studies) for delivering an integrated, systems-based and multi-disciplinary approach. The multi-level outcomes of policy intervention were assessed across sectors, economic actors and dimensions of sustainable development, over time and spatially. The integrated methods approach highlights the need for comprehensive policy responses that acknowledge the interconnectedness of domestic, EU and international factors for achieving more sustainable agricultural trade. The sustainability of agricultural trade is intimately tied to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of domestic production. Key policy conclusions are: support local contexts in markets exporting to the EU through institutional, investment and technical assistance for cooperative capacity-building (multi-stakeholder) and standards alignment that accounts for compliance costs differences; inclusive and robust trade governance needs investment into actor empowerment as part of capacity-building; redesign trade agreements for closer SDG alignment through institutionalised sustainability impact assessments with a systems perspective; increase policy coherence through coordinated, predictable and impact-assessment-based policy instrument implementation (SDG-proofing) and reform. If EU policymakers want to credibly defend 'values' (EU standards) in the contested agri-food trade arena, it is time to move forward collaboratively and substantively as has been achieved by both the Mercosur and India free trade agreements.

Politiques pour un commerce agroalimentaire plus durable : Principaux enseignements tirés des projets TRADE4SD et MATS d'Horizon 2020

 Dans deux projets Horizon 2020 visant à évaluer les impacts du commerce agricole sur la durabilité, ont été appliqués conjointement des modèles et des perspectives macroéconomiques (modèles d'équilibre général calculable, approche systémique participative, modèles de systèmes quantitatifs personnalisés) et microéconomiques (3 études de cas TRADE4SD, 15 études de cas MATS) afin de proposer une approche intégrée, systémique et multidisciplinaire. Les résultats à plusieurs niveaux des interventions publiques ont été évalués par secteur, acteur économique et dimension du développement durable, dans le temps et l'espace. L'approche méthodologique intégrée souligne la nécessité de réponses globales en termes de politique qui tiennent compte de l'interdépendance des facteurs nationaux, européens et internationaux pour parvenir à un commerce agricole plus durable. La durabilité du commerce agricole est intimement liée à la durabilité économique, sociale et environnementale de la production nationale. Les principales conclusions pour les politiques sont les suivantes: soutenir les contextes locaux des marchés d'exportation vers l'Union européenne (UE) par le biais d'une assistance institutionnelle, d'investissements et d'une assistance technique pour le renforcement des capacités de coopération (multipartite) et une harmonisation des normes qui tienne compte des différences de coûts de mise en conformité; une gouvernance commerciale inclusive et robuste nécessite des investissements dans l'autonomisation des acteurs dans le cadre du renforcement des capacités. Il convient de repenser les accords commerciaux pour un meilleur alignement sur les objectifs de développement durable (ODD) grâce à des évaluations d'impact en matière de durabilité institutionnalisées et systémiques; d'accroître la cohérence des politiques par une mise en œuvre et une réforme des instruments de politique publique qui soient coordonnées, prévisibles et fondées sur l'évaluation d'impact (garantie de la conformité aux ODD). Si les décideurs de la politique de l'UE veulent défendre de manière crédible des 'valeurs' (normes de l'UE) dans l'arène controversée du commerce agroalimentaire, il est temps d'avancer de manière collaborative et concrète, à l'instar des accords de libre-échange avec le Mercosur et l'Inde.

Wichtige politische Erkenntnisse für einen nachhaltigeren Handel mit Agrar- und Lebensmittel erzeugnissen aus den Projekten TRADE4SD und MATS Horizon 2020

 Im Rahmen von „Horizon 2020“ untersuchten zwei Projekte die Auswirkungen des Agrarhandels auf die Nachhaltigkeit. Ziel war es, einen integrierten, systembasierten und multidisziplinären Ansatz zu entwickeln (auf Basis von allgemeinen Gleichgewichtsmodellen, partizipativen Systemansätzen, maßgeschneiderten quantitativen Systemmodellen und TRADE4SD- sowie MATS-Fallstudien). Die Ergebnisse der politischen Interventionen wurden mehrstufig über Sektoren, Wirtschaftsakteure und Dimensionen der nachhaltigen Entwicklung hinweg, zeitlich und räumlich bewertet. Der integrierte Methodenansatz hebt die Notwendigkeit umfassender politischer Maßnahmen hervor, die die Verflechtung von nationalen, EU- und internationalen Faktoren für einen nachhaltigeren Agrarhandel berücksichtigen. Die Nachhaltigkeit des Agrarhandels ist eng mit der wirtschaftlichen, sozialen und ökologischen Nachhaltigkeit der heimischen Produktion verbunden. Die wichtigsten politischen Schlussfolgerungen lauten: Unterstützung lokaler Kontexte in Märkten, die in die EU exportieren, durch institutionelle, investive und technische Hilfe für den Aufbau kooperativer Kapazitäten (Multi-Stakeholder) und die Angleichung von Standards unter Berücksichtigung der Unterschiede bei den Compliance-Kosten; eine inklusive und robuste Handels-Governance erfordert Investitionen in die Stärkung der Akteure als Teil des Kapazitätsaufbaus; Neugestaltung von Handelsabkommen für eine engere Ausrichtung an den SDGs durch institutionalisierte Nachhaltigkeitsprüfungen mit einer systemischen Perspektive; Verbesserung der politischen Kohärenz durch koordinierte, vorhersehbare und auf Folgenabschätzungen basierende Umsetzung politischer Instrumente und Reformen. Wenn die politischen Entscheidungsträger der EU „Werte“ (EU-Standards) im umkämpften Agrar- und Lebensmittelhandel glaubwürdig verteidigen wollen, ist es an der Zeit, gemeinsam und wesentlich voranzukommen. Dies wurde sowohl mit dem Mercosur- als auch mit dem Indien-Freihandelsabkommen erreicht.