

BRIEFING NOTE No. 219

Bridging the gap between Geneva and Rome for inclusive agricultural trade

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Summary

The brief argues that achieving inclusive and sustainable agricultural and food trade requires greater institutional and policy coherence between Geneva-based trade organisations, such as the WTO, and Rome-based food and development institutions, like the FAO.

While agriculture serves as a vital testing ground for this coherence, as it sits precisely at the intersection of trade policy, rural development, and environmental sustainability, the WTO lacks the specialised mandate to address the environmental and social complexities of food systems, requiring deeper synergy with development-oriented organisations. By examining initiatives like the Green Commodities Programme and the Agricultural Market Information System, the paper illustrates how coordinated data and multi-stakeholder platforms can improve coherence and mitigate market volatility.

The brief thus advocates for incremental, informal partnerships and enhanced capacity-building to help low-income nations navigate rigorous sustainability standards, calling for an integrated policy framework that aligns international trade with global food security and environmental protection goals. The brief recommends bridging the food and trade institutional gaps through flexible collaborations rather than creating complex new structures. This could also be encouraged through the establishment of an independent Rome-based knowledge platform to facilitate the systematic integration of analysis from low-income countries into international trade and development discussions.

1. Introduction

[Recent geopolitical tensions, escalating tariff disputes among major economies, and the accelerating drift toward geoeconomic fragmentation have disrupted global value chains and underscored the fragility of the multilateral trading system.](#) The International Monetary Fund (IMF) warns that these compounding disruptions continue to weigh on global economic growth, with its April 2026 World Economic Outlook projecting global GDP to expand by only 3.1% in 2026, down 0.2 percentage points from earlier forecasts, as trade policy uncertainty and geoeconomic fragmentation continue to [suppress the pace of global recovery](#). At the same time, the Doha Round, launched in 2001, remains stalled, while [new rules for modern commerce, such as those governing international production networks, are increasingly being shaped outside the WTO framework through bilateral, regional, and unilateral actions](#). Against this backdrop, strengthening policy and institutional coherence emerges as a critical priority for making globalisation more resilient, inclusive, and sustainable ([WTO 2024b, 110](#)).

Agriculture offers a revealing test case for this challenge: it sits at the crossroads of trade policy, rural development, and environmental sustainability. The question, therefore, is how greater institutional coherence, particularly between trade and development institutions, can make global trade more inclusive and sustainable, especially in the agricultural sector.

While initiatives such as Aid for Trade (AfT) and, in particular, the Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) aim to support developing countries, their fragmented design and limited impact on the most vulnerable populations illustrate the broader challenge of policy incoherence.

The profound transformations in the international political, economic, and social spheres since the end of the Cold War have exerted significant pressure on institutions and organisations within the global governance system, especially traditional intergovernmental organisations. Slow and insufficient responses have frequently marked their efforts to adapt to these evolving conditions. As a result, [critical gaps within the emerging global governance framework have raised serious concerns about the legitimacy and relevance of existing international organisations in addressing contemporary global challenges](#).

This paper argues that enhancing institutional coherence is essential for advancing inclusive and sustainable agriculture and food trade. To explore this, the paper examines the concept of policy coherence, the role of sustainability standards in food value chains, and two illustrative initiatives: the UNDP's Green Commodities Programme (GCP) and the FAO-led Agricultural Market Information

System (AMIS). It concludes with recommendations for strengthening interinstitutional cooperation between trade institutions in Geneva and the food and agriculture community in Rome.

2. Policy Coherence

[Achieving policy coherence requires aligning policies and institutions in support of sustainable development across its economic, social, and environmental pillars.](#)

Within the WTO framework, coherence also involves creating the conditions for effectively implementing trade commitments. As noted in Governing the World Trade Organisation, coherence depends on coordinated support from multilateral entities, regional organisations, national governments, NGOs, and private actors. Programs such as Aid for Trade (AfT) illustrate this approach by [aiming to strengthen the trade capacity of developing countries.](#)

The WTO's institutional design, however, limits its ability to deliver broader development outcomes. Andrew Lang argues that the [organisation was never intended to advance goals](#) such as improved livelihoods or sustainable development. It operates primarily as a forum for reciprocal concessions and lacks the mandate, expertise, and institutional structure required to address distributional and developmental challenges that arise from global trade. For this reason, **trade rules alone cannot guarantee inclusive or sustainable outcomes.**

Structural mismatches within WTO mechanisms reinforce these limitations. Special and Differential Treatment (SDT), created to offer developing countries policy space and support export-led strategies, has shifted over time toward facilitating the implementation of existing commitments. This shift often takes place without sufficient reference to national development priorities. Scholars also highlight the [absence of systematic evaluation](#) regarding how WTO rules affect poverty reduction and human rights. **As currently formulated, SDT remains ambiguous and poorly targeted** and struggles to serve as a meaningful development instrument ([Ukpe and Khorana 2021, 84–85](#)).

These shortcomings reflect long-standing insights from Raúl Prebisch concerning structural inequalities in global trade. Prebisch argued that economies reliant on primary commodity exports and dependent on manufactured imports face persistently unfavourable terms of trade. [This dynamic reinforces inequalities between the global centre and periphery.](#) Highly volatile and often declining commodity prices also [limit the ability of such economies to diversify or industrialise.](#) For these reasons, **trade liberalisation cannot substitute for policy**

coherence that links trade governance with development and agricultural strategies.

Institutional fragmentation further complicates these efforts. [Overlapping mandates among trade and development organisations generate duplication, competition, and occasionally conflicting obligations, raising transaction costs and reducing policy effectiveness.](#) This [phenomenon has become more widespread](#) as the number of organisations with shared competencies has grown. Fragmented or uncoordinated institutional landscapes can waste resources and create contradictory norms that complicate the implementation of trade and development programs (FAO 2005, 50).

Strengthening legitimacy within this fragmented environment requires the WTO to pursue deeper cooperation with development-oriented institutions such as the FAO and UNDP. These partnerships widen participation beyond national governments, incorporate diverse stakeholder perspectives, and enhance accountability to broader constituencies. **By integrating development concerns into trade governance, the WTO can improve both its credibility and the effectiveness of efforts to achieve policy coherence.**

Institutional fragmentation is further exacerbated by asymmetries in the surrounding institutional ecosystems that support global governance. Unlike Geneva or Washington, D.C., which are embedded in dense policy environments populated by permanent missions, specialised think tanks, advocacy networks, and epistemic communities, Rome lacks a comparably rich external ecosystem to inform its agencies and their membership. This relative “policy dialogue void” limits opportunities for sustained exchange between technical expertise and political negotiation. As a result, **low-income countries often struggle to translate Rome-based agricultural knowledge, data, and policy instruments into positions that can effectively influence global agricultural processes and rules, as well as Geneva-based trade negotiations.** This disconnect ALSO weakens the ability of developing countries to leverage agricultural evidence and development-oriented perspectives within trade governance processes, reinforcing institutional silos and constraining efforts to achieve meaningful policy coherence between trade and food systems governance.

Political constraints also impede coherence. The WTO’s consensus rule, combined with a highly diverse membership, makes it extremely difficult to adopt new rules. **Power asymmetries reinforce this challenge because larger members often drive agenda setting, while smaller states may rely on the same actors for development assistance.** This dynamic can marginalise the priorities of weaker members, as illustrated by the prolonged deadlock surrounding SDT reform

([Jones et al. 2010, 74](#); [Ukpe and Khorana 2021, 84](#)). As a result, many states increasingly pursue cooperation outside the WTO through regional or issue-specific arrangements, which further undermine coherence at the multilateral level.

Practical constraints create additional barriers. Many developing countries and LDCs face significant financial and human resource limitations. [Limited technical expertise, weak interagency coordination, and insufficient information flows hinder their ability to implement WTO rules](#) and to align domestic policies effectively. **Achieving coherence, therefore, requires sustained financial and technical support, stronger institutions, and improved coordination mechanisms, which many countries lack** ([Ukpe and Khorana 2021, 92](#)). [Existing technical assistance often provides short-term benefits without addressing longer-term institutional and human resource needs.](#)

Although the WTO and its partners increasingly recognise the need for more inclusive outcomes, current initiatives remain fragmented. AfT has helped strengthen the trade capacity of developing countries and LDCs and is increasingly aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals ([WTO 2024b, 107](#)). However, [its impact on the poorest and most marginalised populations remains unclear](#), and further research is needed to identify conditions that allow vulnerable groups to benefit from trade or avoid harm. The Enhanced Integrated Framework (EIF) supports recently graduated LDCs in integrating trade into development strategies ([WTO 2024b, 121–122](#)). Yet funding shortages and reliance on diverse donor priorities contribute to fragmented implementation (WTO n.d.).

Taken together, these challenges show that trade cannot generate inclusive development outcomes on its own. Greater coherence with development and agricultural institutions is essential, especially in sectors where vulnerable populations are concentrated. Agriculture plays this central role because it provides livelihoods for a very large majority of the global rural population in developing countries. If the WTO intends to support more inclusive and sustainable development, agriculture must be a primary area of cooperation. In this context, **agriculture emerges as a critical testing ground for policy coherence, since effective outcomes depend simultaneously on trade rules developed in Geneva and food security, sustainability, and development expertise concentrated in Rome-based institutions.**

3. Sustainability Standards

[Voluntary Sustainability Standards \(VSS\)](#) have become important tools for [addressing environmental and social issues in global value chains](#). These dynamics are especially relevant in agricultural value chains, where smallholder farmers face the highest compliance costs and the greatest risk of exclusion. They can offer pathways for producers to improve their practices through training, capacity building, and better integration into global markets. However, [developing countries face significant challenges in complying with VSS](#), including increased production, information, and certification costs, a lack of incentives, and limited participation in VSS governance structures. Because agriculture is central to rural livelihoods, the governance of sustainability standards has direct implications for poverty reduction, inclusiveness, and equitable development outcomes.

When properly coordinated across trade and development institutions, sustainability standards can therefore function not only as compliance requirements, but also as capacity-building tools that enable small producers to participate more effectively in international markets.

VSS are also increasingly referenced in Free Trade Agreements (FTAs) as instruments to foster sustainable trade and complement public regulations. [This trend reinforces the growing importance of standards in determining market access](#). At the same time, caution is necessary to prevent VSS from becoming “de facto requirements for market access” that function as non-tariff barriers, particularly for developing countries. [To avoid exclusion, FTAs and multilateral institutions should incorporate provisions that favour standards systems with mechanisms to facilitate compliance by small-scale producers](#). **The rising relevance of sustainability standards also strengthens the case for the WTO and other organisations to acknowledge and endorse legitimate standards emerging from programs such as the UNDP’s Green Commodities Programme (GCP).**

The WTO’s Aid for Trade initiative plays a complementary role by helping countries design and implement trade strategies that support compliance with international requirements. This includes assistance in negotiating trade agreements and integrating trade into national development and poverty-reduction strategies (WTO 2025a; [UNCTAD 2012, 24](#)). [Aid for Trade supports companies and producers in improving product quality to meet international standards](#), obtaining market information, and reducing trade-related costs. Similarly, cooperation among UNCTAD, the International Trade Centre (ITC), and the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) focuses on helping countries identify, categorise, and implement

measures under the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) (UNCTAD 2015). [Such assistance strengthens capacity](#) in national trade policy and regulations, export readiness, supply-side capacity, trade facilitation, infrastructure, and trade-related financial services.

These initiatives underscore that sustainability standards increasingly govern access to agricultural value chains, but their effectiveness depends on coordination across trade and development institutions. As noted earlier, **trade is being asked to do more than it can alone within a fragmented system characterised by overlapping mandates. Moreover, the WTO “lacks the competence, mandate, expertise, or institutional infrastructure” to address the environmental and social dimensions embedded in sustainability standards. This mismatch highlights why food-chain sustainability initiatives require deeper cooperation with institutions** such as FAO, UNDP, and national development agencies that operate at the intersection of agricultural development and sustainability. The Green Commodities Programme exemplifies how such cooperation can be operationalised in practice, making it an ideal case for examining the potential for greater policy coherence across the trade and food governance communities.

4. GCP & AMIS

4.1 Green Commodities Programme (GCP)

The UNDP Green Commodities Programme (GCP) aims to improve the national economic, social, and environmental performance of major agricultural commodity sectors. Its strategy focuses on helping governments address the sustainability challenges associated with highly traded commodities by creating neutral spaces for collaboration, developing public-private partnerships, and facilitating the exchange of lessons learned through a growing community of practitioners. The programme seeks to advance both rural livelihoods and environmental protection, since progress on only one of these dimensions would be insufficient for long-term sustainability. Agricultural commodity production is a significant driver of deforestation, and transforming the way commodities such as palm oil, soy, beef, cacao, or coffee are produced is crucial for global environmental goals. At the same time, improving smallholder incomes is vital for the economic health of many commodity-dependent countries. GCP now operates across multiple countries and commodities and is considered a flagship initiative within UNDP’s Nature, Climate and Energy portfolio.¹

GCP’s operational model grew out of the recognition that fragmented interventions have not delivered meaningful system-wide change in agricultural

commodity sectors. **Its methodology is based on multi-stakeholder collaboration that brings together producers, government institutions, civil society organisations, and multinational companies to jointly identify challenges and develop solutions.** The programme is organised around a Theory of Change in which National Commodity Platforms play a central role. These platforms provide an inclusive and neutral space for building a shared understanding of problems, planning coordinated action, and developing long-term commitments. Their success depends on skilled facilitation and on a process that acknowledges the gradual nature of institutional and behavioural change.

Government leadership is essential for GCP's whole-of-system approach. **The programme supports governments in creating enabling environments for sustainable commodity sectors by strengthening institutional capacity and embedding the methodology across different ministries and levels of public administration.** One of the most important outcomes of the process is the development of National Action Plans for sustainable commodity production, which are created through multi-stakeholder collaboration and subsequently endorsed by high-level authorities. These plans often trigger regulatory, policy, and budgetary reforms. The case of Indonesia, where GCP-supported efforts involved numerous national and subnational institutions in the development of a National Action Plan for palm oil, illustrates how the programme facilitates coordinated action in complex governance systems.

GCP has also developed a range of tools that complement its system-wide approach by addressing specific policy and implementation challenges. These include Targeted Scenario Analysis (TSA), which supports evidence-based decision-making; Root Cause Analysis (RCA), which helps identify underlying structural constraints; and land-use monitoring instruments such as MOCCUP, which use remote sensing to track environmental change. **By combining landscape-level data, diagnostic tools, and collaborative planning, GCP helps governments and stakeholders convert sustainability commitments into concrete and measurable actions.** UNDP's evaluations emphasise the importance of trust-building, iterative learning, and shared ownership as critical enablers of this approach.

Despite its effectiveness, GCP remains only partially connected to global trade governance. Many of its objectives correspond closely to initiatives within the World Trade Organisation, including Aid for Trade and the growing attention to Voluntary Sustainability Standards. GCP's focus on capacity-building, sustainable production, and improved supply-chain transparency aligns with international efforts to strengthen value-chain participation and reduce trade-related barriers

for producers. Furthermore, GCP's traceability and monitoring tools have the potential to support more transparent global markets and facilitate cooperation among trade and development institutions. These areas of overlap indicate significant potential for deeper policy coherence between development-focused sustainability programmes and the multilateral trading system, especially in agricultural and commodity-dependent economies.

By strengthening national institutions, producer organisations, and participatory decision-making processes, **GCP's approach aligns closely with rights-based approaches to development, particularly through its emphasis on inclusion, accountability, and local ownership**. These features are directly relevant to trade governance, as they shape who is able to comply with sustainability standards, participate in value chains, and ultimately benefit from market access.

4.2 Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS)

The Agricultural Market Information System (AMIS) was established in 2011 under the G20 Action Plan on Food Price Volatility and Agriculture in response to concerns about unreliable and fragmented information in global food markets. A [2011 international report](#) called for a mechanism that could improve the quality and timeliness of market data, and AMIS was created to address this need. [Its core objective is to enhance transparency and strengthen policy coordination by monitoring supply and demand conditions for four key commodities: wheat, maize, rice, and soybeans.](#)

AMIS operates through a multi-agency structure coordinated by a Secretariat that includes ten international organisations such as the FAO, IFPRI, OECD, WFP, and WTO (AMIS n.d., 4). The Information Group collects and analyses market and policy data, while the [Rapid Response Forum](#) provides a venue for policy dialogue during periods of stress. [Key outputs include its statistical database and monthly Market Monitor, which synthesise data and forecasts and support early warning functions.](#) AMIS also invests in capacity development and the creation of indicators that help anticipate major disruptions.

AMIS operationalises coordination between Geneva and Rome by translating Rome-based market analysis and early warning signals into information that can inform trade policy discussions, notifications, and crisis responses within the WTO framework. In this way, data generated through Rome-based expertise becomes directly relevant to trade disciplines monitored and debated in Geneva, particularly during periods of market stress.

Food price volatility threatens food security, especially in low-income countries. Households in these settings spend a high share of their income on food, so price increases quickly erode purchasing power (Häberli 2016, 7). Smallholder farmers also face unstable incomes when input prices rise, or market prices fall after production decisions are already made (Häberli 2016, 2). These vulnerabilities highlight the value of real-time monitoring and coordinated responses.

The 2008 food price crisis exposed the fragility of global markets. [Rising international prices contributed to increased hunger, and many governments imposed export restrictions that intensified global shortages.](#) [Similar patterns emerged during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), when supply chain disruptions and unilateral trade measures again revealed the exposure of low- and middle-income countries to external shocks. **These experiences reinforce the importance of better market information and more coordinated policymaking. AMIS was designed to serve this function.**

There are clear opportunities to deepen cooperation between AMIS and the WTO to improve transparency and resilience. AMIS's early warning tools and market analysis could complement WTO notification requirements and offer more complete information on trade flows, policy measures, and market conditions ([WTO 2024a, 3](#); AMIS n.d.). The WTO–International Grains Council maritime trade dashboard shows the value of such collaboration ([WTO 2025a](#)). Strengthening coordination between AMIS and WTO committees, particularly the Committee on Agriculture, could encourage more consistent responses to market disruptions and discourage destabilising trade restrictions ([EU Mission to the WTO 2022](#); [WTO 2024a, 8](#)). Joint initiatives could also help LDCs and Net Food-Importing Developing Countries by combining AMIS's analytical capacities with WTO programmes that support resilience and food security ([WTO 2024a, 7](#)). Over time, linking WTO trade data with AMIS's early warning framework could support the creation of a more formal mechanism for assessing and managing food trade risks.

5. Recommendations

The analysis in this paper shows that **advancing inclusive and sustainable agricultural trade depends on better coordination between the trade institutions in Geneva and the food and agriculture community in Rome.** The challenges identified earlier, such as structural mismatches in the WTO's development instruments, overlapping mandates across international organisations, and persistent capacity limitations in developing economies,

indicate that neither trade rules nor development initiatives can deliver inclusive outcomes on their own. The agricultural sector, which combines sustainability concerns with rural livelihoods, offers the most strategic entry point for strengthening this relationship. Insights from GCP and AMIS demonstrate the value of coordinated approaches, since both initiatives rely on information sharing, multi-stakeholder collaboration, and joint analysis to support better outcomes for producers and consumers.

Closer cooperation should begin with soft forms of engagement. **Informal collaboration, structured dialogue, and the exchange of information can help build trust among institutions and identify areas of complementarity without requiring immediate formal integration.** The experience of AMIS demonstrates how shared data platforms and early warning mechanisms can generate tangible benefits through coordination and transparency, without requiring formal institutional integration. More broadly, this case illustrates how issue-specific, functional forms of cooperation can be more effective than sweeping institutional reforms in complex governance environments.

Targeted partnerships can further reinforce this approach, particularly when they are supported by changes in how knowledge is generated and shared. Moving beyond reliance on internal agency data toward more inclusive forms of evidence production would help reduce existing informational asymmetries. In this context, **establishing an independent Rome-based knowledge platform could serve as a “gate-opener”, facilitating the systematic integration of data and analysis from low-income countries into international trade and development discussions, strengthening links between Rome-based institutions and policy hubs such as Geneva.** By improving the circulation of evidence across institutional and geographic boundaries, such mechanisms would support more informed and inclusive coordination. This model of cooperation could guide joint work on sustainability standards, traceability systems, or responses to food price volatility, all of which require both agricultural expertise and a clear understanding of trade disciplines.

Capacity-building presents an additional avenue for cooperation. Many developing countries face institutional and technical constraints that prevent them from implementing trade rules or engaging fully in agricultural reform. The preceding analysis highlights that **long-term support for human resource development and institutional strengthening is essential.** Aligning WTO initiatives, such as Aid for Trade and the Enhanced Integrated Framework, with FAO, IFAD, and UNDP programs would allow developing countries to receive coherent assistance that links trade facilitation with agricultural development.

To be effective, however, such alignment must actively address the “technical and policy-making asymmetries” that disproportionately affect low-income countries. By systematically linking official data from ministries with citizen-generated information and expert networks across regions, Rome-based institutions could strengthen the analytical capacity of vulnerable members and enhance their leadership and agency in trade negotiations. This approach would help ensure that coordination efforts are not top-down, but instead grounded in a “truly global” evidence ecosystem that is inclusive and accountable to people and the planet. In practical terms, this form of cooperation would also give effect to Special and Differential Treatment by supporting countries as they gradually build the capacities required to participate meaningfully in global markets. Finally, **flexible and incremental governance approaches, rather than new structures, offer the most realistic way forward. Supporting existing partnerships and avoiding duplication allow Geneva and Rome to combine their strengths while respecting the limits of each institution’s mandate.** In this way, cooperation can be deepened gradually and in a manner that responds to national needs and institutional capabilities.

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Endnotes

1. This section draws primarily on UNDP's synthesis of the Green Commodities Programme, which provides a comprehensive overview of the programme's objectives, institutional design, and operational modalities. For a detailed description of GCP's methodology, scope, and country-level implementation, see [UNDP, 2021](#).

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