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parlons graphiques

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How Trade and Sustainability are Seen: Insights from Citizens and Value-Chain Actors

Comment le commerce et la durabilité sont-ils perçus : Perspectives des citoyens et des acteurs de la chaîne de valeur

Wie Handel und Nachhaltigkeit wahrgenommen werden: Einblicke von Bürgern und Akteuren der Wertschöpfungskette

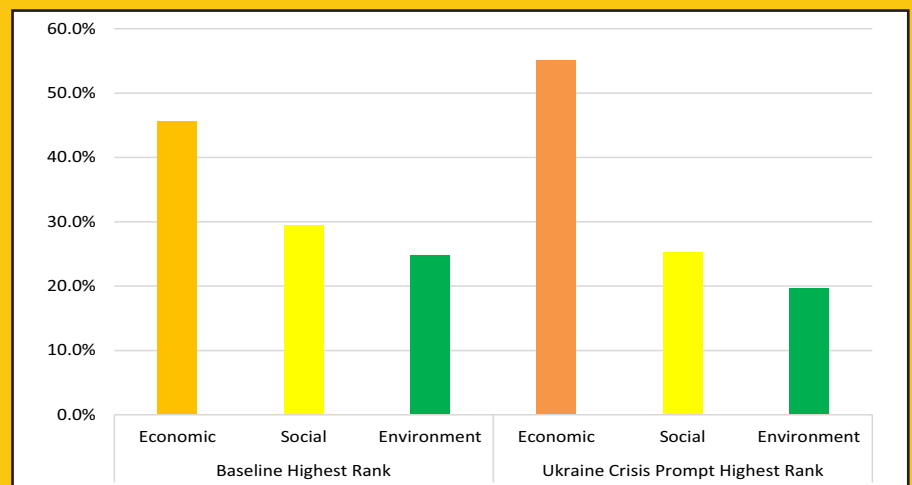
How citizens prioritise sustainability dimensions in the context of agri-food trade – and how actors working inside value chains think sustainability can be improved – matters greatly for policymaking. Using evidence from two Horizon 2020 projects, TRADE4SD and MATS, this *Parlons Graphiques* highlights (1) what citizens believe about trade and sustainability dimensions, and (2) what value-chain actors consider are the strongest levers available to policymakers for achieving improved sustainability outcomes within food value chains. Together, these findings offer a powerful indication of what kinds of policies can be both effective and publicly supported.

What sustainability means to citizens

In TRADE4SD, a survey of 3,000 citizens from Germany, Hungary and the United Kingdom, conducted in the 1st quarter of 2023, asked respondents about sustainability and food trade concerns.

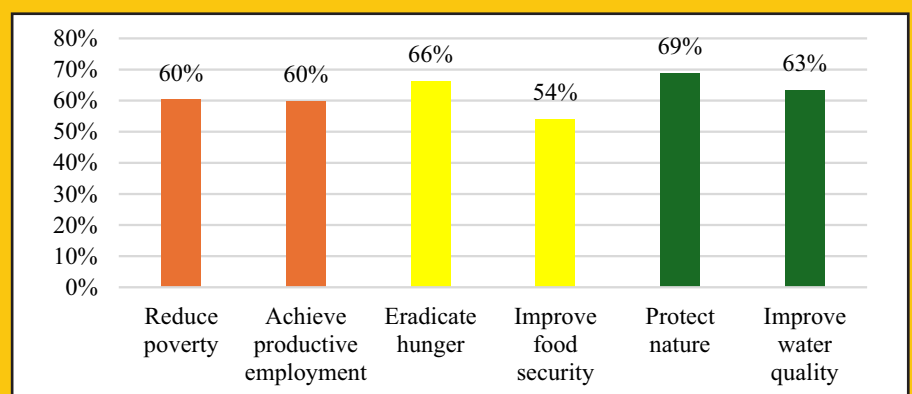
Figure 1 shows the share of respondents who ranked each of the three Pillars of sustainability 1st. Economic sustainability emerged as the top priority, with 45 per cent ranking it first, followed by environmental (30 per cent) and social (25 per cent) pillars. When prompted to consider how the Russian invasion of Ukraine, still months old, might alter their

Figure 1: Most important sustainability pillars and the impact of crisis



Source: Authors' own composition based on TRADE4SD survey data.

Figure 2: Ranking attributes of sustainability pillars



Note: Columns in orange relate to the economic pillar, yellow relates to the social pillar and green to the environmental pillar.

Source: Authors' own composition based on TRADE4SD survey data.

Figure 3: Impactful intervention potentials in the social dimension

ranking, this changed to 55 per cent, 25 per cent and 20 per cent, respectively. This shift in priorities mirrors recent public opposition to Greening in the EU but reminds us that the shift is far from universally expressed.

As to concrete issues, European citizens emphasised poverty reduction and employment growth as the most important issues inside the economic pillar, then hunger reduction and food security enhancement inside the social pillar, while viewing nature protection and water quality improvement as central for the environmental pillar (Figure 2). These priorities show that citizens view sustainability not as a single goal but as a balanced portfolio of economic, environmental and social concerns, all of which they expect trade policy to address.

Do citizens believe trade supports sustainability?

Despite scepticism about globalisation in general, survey respondents overwhelmingly believe that agri-food trade can contribute to sustainability. Across the four countries, more than 70 per cent agreed that trade liberalisation

can support sustainability in one or more pillars, while fewer than 30 per cent thought trade would hinder it.

Importantly, these findings suggest that public reservations are not about trade itself but about ensuring that trade delivers visible sustainability benefits, particularly in economically uncertain times. Citizens appear open to sustainable trade policies – provided that economic security and social welfare remain central considerations.

How can trade be more sustainable

The MATS project brings insights from value-chain actors. Evidence from 15 case studies in Europe, Africa, Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean identified 31 leverage points – specific actions that, if taken by policymakers, could strengthen sustainability outcomes in agri-food trade. The six most frequently identified levers fall into four sustainability dimensions: policy; governance and regulation; social & human dimensions; and economy & markets.

Figure 3 shows more specific evidence on one of the four dimensions from specific

commodities value chains, the social dimension, suggesting that if policymakers were to act to strengthen female farmers' land entitlement (S5), this action may support micro-credit access, lead to greater market access for exports and make agricultural trade more sustainable. Similarly, if policymakers were to prioritize interventions to support research, innovation and technology (S4) it would support technology adoption at farm and processing level, address issues of low yields and high pest control costs, and also support a sustainability transition through better documentation and evaluation of sustainability practices at farm gate.

Conclusion

Together, TRADE4SD and MATS provide a consistent message: citizens support sustainable trade, and practitioners know where targeted interventions can make the biggest difference. This combination of public confidence and practical leverage points offers policymakers clear guidance. Sustainable agri-food trade is both desirable and achievable. The above findings from MATS and TRADE4SD highlight pathways to align agricultural trade with sustainability goals.

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