

The World Trade Organization's Doha Round and Cotton: Continued Peripheral Status or a “Historical Breakthrough” for African Farmers?

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ABSTRACT:

World Trade Organization (WTO) negotiators proclaimed that they had reached a “historical breakthrough” in late Summer 2004 as a framework was created to eliminate all export subsidies and reduce domestic subsidies and tariffs for agricultural commodities. While many hailed this step as a major victory for developing country farmers, others have been cautious on the potential “success” of the agreement. The main objective of this article is to provide an analysis of WTO agriculture negotiations, its main actors and alliances, and its legal content. Given the attention to West African cotton producers during the Doha round, this study focuses on producers of this crop in Mali. More specifically, this article: 1) evaluates progress made within the WTO in the aftermath of the Hong Kong Summit, including the workings of the Sub-Committee for Cotton; 2) analyzes potential short- and long-term effects on African cotton farmers (focusing on economic and ecological sustainability); and 3) proposes an alternative set of policies for improving the situation of African cotton farmers.

Key words: Africa, cotton, World Trade Organization

INTRODUCTION

While it is rare for a commodity to make the headlines, cotton has made an unusually strong showing in recent years. The historical and continuing dominance of the United States in global cotton production is explored in two recent publications (Rivoli 2005; Yafa 2005). A wealth of communiqués, studies and policy reports have been released discussing U.S. cotton production in an increasingly globalized agricultural market setting (Hudson and Ethridge 2000; Jacobson and Smith 2001; USDA 2005). While the heartland of American cotton produc-