

FAO banana and tropical fruits

A touch of dullness

The normalisation of the relations between the United States and the European Union concerning the banana dossier was responsible for the apathy of participants at the Session of the FAO Intergovernmental Group on Bananas and Tropical Fruits (San José - Costa Rica - 4 to 8 December 2001). The banana question had apparently been settled and the liveliest discussions were devoted to the SPS Agreement, the organic market and upstream/downstream trade relations.

The meeting of the Intergovernmental Group on Bananas and Tropical Fruits was very disappointing once again (after Australia in 1999). It was not as strongly attended as previous sessions and the absence of Colombia, the world's third largest banana exporter, was noticed. The composition of the United States delegation was surprising, consisting of only a single member, vice-president and Associate General Counsel of Chiquita.

However, the Costa Rican Minister of Agriculture attempted to enliven the debate. In his opening speech, he asked the developed countries to recognise the multifunctionality of agriculture and to share its cost (with recognition of the social interest of banana production and of the efforts made to protect the environment). On the same theme, he regretted the all-out race for competitiveness, thus aiming at Ecuador, his main competitor.

In fact, the burning issue of the European supply regime was not under fire this year as had been the case in Jamaica (1994) and in Rome (1997). The agreement reached in April between the United States and the European Commission seems to satisfy all the parties for the time being. Even Ecuador and Cameroon praised this compromise more than once.

In order to elude the debate on banana completely, several delegations even requested several times that the future negotiations with the EU should not be complicated by the studies performed by FAO: forecasts to 2010, appraisal of the new EU banana import regime, etc. The group also stressed the fact that FAO meetings were not the right place for discussing banana trade policies and especially those set up by the EU.

This extremely consensual attitude is in fact related to present and future trade negotiations. Discussions of the procedure for the passage to Phase II of the agreement are currently in progress between European Commission, member-states, the United States and supplier countries. Disturbing this difficult exercise is not in anybody's interest today. In addition, opening discussions on the switch to a tariff only system in 2006 would be very premature.

The eternal debate on statistics

The members joined once again to criticise the studies presented by the FAO secretariat and which are based on partial or erroneous statistical data. The delegations often have short memories on this subject. If the banana production, export and import data are incomplete or possibly completely wrong, it is above all the fault of the states that do not supply accurate information. The forming of an informal group on statistics has

indeed been requested several times. The session on tropical fruits generated most interest. In addition to market studies of tropical fruits in India and Russia, members were particularly attentive to a document describing the application of the WTO Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (the 'SPS Agreement' resulting from the Uruguay Round). Indeed, exporting country delegations were surprised to see importing countries setting up import restrictions that more resemble new trade barriers than true sanitary or phytosanitary protection.

In addition to the scheduled presentations, several themes for reflection emerged: the increasing influence of supermarket chains in client-supplier relations, the need for market surveys and permanent monitoring covering organic products and a growing interest in the market for processed products ■

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