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The Competing Kings of Cotton: (Re)framing the WTO African Cotton Initiative

MATTHEW D. EAGLETON-PIERCE

Since 2003, the West and Central African (WCA) cotton initiative in the World Trade Organization has stood as an ambitious case of Africa's desire to be integrated into the trading system and yet also receive reparations for past injuries. This article seeks to explore how and why the initiative debuted through close attention to the interdependence between power and language in diplomatic practice. It takes the concept of cognitive framing to explore the relationship between political legitimacy and mobilisation capacities. The genesis of cotton as 'an issue' is critically examined, focusing on how the WCA countries constructed a novel 'competitive victim' frame to define themselves and the problem. While this opening move was effective, it also featured tensions that were exploited by Northern actors who were threatened by the campaign. I argue that what followed was the introduction of a politically driven 'counter-frame', which divided the problem into a 'trade-related' component and a 'development-related' component. It is important to understand why and how this distinction was constructed and monitored. By scrutinising the relationship between framing and institutional power, I suggest that the counterframe won over the original frame, leading to a re-positioning of the demanders and a re-calibration of their expectations.

Keywords: cotton, WTO, Africa, competitiveness, development, framing

Since the eighteenth century, the global trade of cotton has been a business deeply informed by politics. Although much has clearly changed since this early history, disputes over the cultivation and sale of this 'humble fibre' continue (Yafa 2005). One such dispute in the most recent past has centred on a group of West and Central African (WCA) countries – Benin, Burkina Faso, Mali and Chad – which since 2003 have been at the forefront of international cotton diplomacy, this time focused on the World Trade Organization (WTO). When these countries

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debuted their first official diplomatic submission, it was ambitious and unexpected. The 'Cotton Four' (C4), as they were quickly named, argued for greater integration into the multilateral trading system and also to receive reparations for past injuries. In conventional parlance, these countries had an offensive agenda focused on liberalisation and legal conformity. In turn, it was argued and implied that other leading cotton producers, particularly the USA, were not meeting their own responsibilities due to a dependence upon government measures. During the process of negotiations within the ongoing Doha round (2001–), a connection was made between the declining world price and the use of subsidies. Thus, the cotton initiative has been at its core a struggle over competitiveness or, more precisely as I will argue here, competing representations of legitimacy in claims of competitiveness.

This particular international trade problem is a surprising story for three sets of reasons. First, there was nothing inevitable about how four states commonly classified as 'least developed' managed to carve out a significant space on the Doha agenda for their prized interest. If one focused only on their economic capabilities as a guide to achieving policy goals, such as in terms of relative GDP, it would have been difficult to imagine how this group of poor countries could have challenged a trade hegemon like the USA. Similarly, from a historical perspective, these African countries have never demonstrated any sophisticated use of WTO institutional or legal mechanisms, tending to act as 'rule takers' rather than as 'rule makers' to use the standard dichotomy. Thus, the very genesis of the problem at the WTO level is difficult to immediately explain through conventional indicators of power. Moreover, in the broader context, examining the cotton initiative can serve as a further case study for our general understanding of how southern countries have adapted to, as well as contested, the conventional politics of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT)/WTO system (Hoekman and Martin 2001; Drahos 2003; Narlikar 2003; Kufuor 2004; Narlikar and Tussie 2004; Odell 2006; Bermann and Mavroidis 2007; Lee 2007; Lee and Smith 2008; Sampson and Chambers 2008; Wilkinson and Scott 2008).

Second, once recognised as a specific 'issue', the question of cotton mobilised groups like few other southern trade concerns in recent years. The initiative became an exemplary vehicle to debate about the regulation of agricultural trade. For some advocates, it also appeared to serve as a touchstone for deeper concerns about economic and political justice within the North–South relations. Yet, it still remains unclear why and how this single commodity – which represents less than 0.2 per cent of world trade – could consume so much political energy on the part of the C4 and their allies and, significantly, the USA, the EU, the WTO Secretariat and other international organisations. A range of other agricultural debates have certainly preoccupied negotiators in the Doha round, but the categorisation of cotton as a distinct topic has been unusual.¹ Finally, the WCA cotton issue is also puzzling in a third sense: for how the intense 'heat' surrounding the problem, so prominent from 2003 to 2005, has now dissipated. One reading on this relative decline in interest would be to attribute it to the inertia of the Doha round and the lack of a final settlement. While this is certainly correct in the larger context, it would also miss some important specific factors that explain how the problem was subtly reformulated and in the process, better controlled by actors

who felt threatened by the initiative. This is not to say that the problem does not remain contentious; rather, the focus here is on how the definition of the cotton initiative changed, leading to a re-calibration of political expectations on the part of the concerned actors, notably the C4.

With respect to all these aspects of the WCA cotton story, existing scholarly accounts have shed little light. Overall, there has been a paucity of dedicated studies. What research has been conducted, such as that done by Heinisch (2006), Lee (2007), Lee and Smith (2008) and Shahin (2008), has tended to underplay the innovation of the original proposal or not adequately capture important junctures and processes in its political management. This article seeks to offer a better explanation for why and how the C4 initiative evolved from the late 1990s to 2005, with a particular focus on its debut and incorporation into the Doha agenda. My main interest is examining the agenda-setting and negotiation processes in the context of unequal relations of power. In order to undertake this critical analysis, I draw upon a conceptual framework that is alert to the relationship between power and language in diplomatic practice. Specifically, this article takes the concept of cognitive framing in order to illuminate the contested struggle between actors over the 'correct' definition of the cotton problem and the means by which it could be resolved. It argues that the notion of framing can serve as a valuable analytical tool for grasping not only how such trade problems are envisaged and represented, but also how such conceptual work informs processes of institutionalisation and the scope for material gains.

The focus here on the earlier history of the cotton initiative is significant for two reasons. First, I argue that it enables one to show what were the central struggles over the framing and reframing of the problem. The basic classification of the cotton issue was conceived and institutionalised during this period, the repercussions of which are still experienced today. This article does not attempt to provide a comprehensive analysis of all cotton-related events and negotiations in the context of the Doha round or compare cotton with other agricultural topics or trade issues of interest to southern countries. Nor does it offer normative prescriptions on what could be the best path forward for the C4 and other actors. Such undertakings either would constitute alternative enquiries or could, indeed, prove difficult to accomplish in detail within the space constraints here. Second, due to the theoretical objectives of this article, emphasis is placed on explaining why and how certain arguments were made at particular points. For some, this micro-level process tracing may appear rather excessive, but it will be suggested that such a method is necessary in order to better explain how framing can be understood as a technique of power.

The discussion is organised into three parts. First, I provide a brief conceptual analysis of the notion of framing. Second, I examine how the WCA cotton problem emerged as a dedicated 'issue' in the WTO. My argument is that the C4 began their campaign by constructing a novel 'competitive victim' frame to define themselves and the problem. This frame was effective in many respects, but it also featured tensions that were later unravelled and exploited by other actors. Third, in order to assess the value of the C4-led diagnosis and prognosis, one needs to analyse the subsequent management of the cotton problem by

Northern actors. I argue that the USA was disturbed by the trajectory of the cotton issue and sought ways to control the timing and scope of any outcome within the Doha round. What followed was the introduction of a 'counterframe', which appeared to be 'neutral', but was, in fact, politically driven to divide the problem into a 'trade-related' component and a 'development-related' component. By paying attention to the relationship between language and institutional power, I suggest that the counterframe won over the original C4 frame, leading to a re-positioning of the WCA countries.

Conceptualisation of framing

In the WTO regime, as elsewhere in international politics, mental shortcuts are used by actors to distil information, shape understandings on problems and encourage action. Before coherent arguing and bargaining begin, there must be at least some provisional resolution of meta-arguments or 'frames' (Crawford 2002). From the academic point of view, frame analysis is an analytical device derived originally from Goffman's (1974) formulation. Framing is clearly an important political resource in wider WTO negotiations, and yet its explicit use in scholarly accounts of the trading system has been limited (Payne 2001; Odell and Sell 2006; Odell 2009). One only needs to note how the 'masterframe' of the Doha round – 'development' – has been so heavily contested to appreciate how the framing process can be significant. All countries invest considerable energy into these designs, and therefore, it is important to understand how this technique is used to serve particular interests.

In its broadest sense, a frame can be understood as a representation tool to 'fix meanings, organise experience and alert others that their interests and possibly their identities are at stake, and propose solutions to ongoing problems' (Barnett 1999: 25). In social movement studies, pioneering work conducted by David Snow and Robert Benford, among others, helped to develop the idea of frames as 'conscious strategic efforts by groups of people to fashion shared understandings of the world and of themselves that legitimate and motivate collective action' (McAdam et al. 1996: 6; also see Snow et al. 1986). A number of international relations scholars have been inspired by this literature. For instance, in the analysis of transnational activism, Keck and Sikkink (1998) explored how the building of durable cognitive frames was in many ways essential to the success of women's movements ('rights-based' or 'discrimination' frames). In other contexts, the concept has also been utilised by theorists who study arguing as a mode of communication in negotiation, most notably in terms of analysing persuasion (Ulbert et al. 2004; Checkel 2005).

These contributions offer useful starting points for any researcher keen on studying the notion of framing, but I would also argue that one needs to analytically delineate the concept into two phases. According to Snow and Benford (1998), the first phase could be represented as diagnostic framing, referring to problem identification. In social movement analysis, for instance, the 'injustice frame' or 'victim frame' has been studied often (Klandermans et al. 1999). The character of a problem is formed by interpreting the actions of another player as unjust. But the task of defining the most credible diagnostic frame is very

important. Once constructed, it has to be defended and sustained. The greater the number of causal stories that can be told explaining why a problem exists, the more the space that becomes available for opponents to challenge the veracity of the promoted diagnostic frame (Snow and Benford 1998).

Beyond issue identification, Snow and Benford (1998) also draw attention to the second phase of framing: the prognosis of a recognised concern. Even if agents agree on the legitimacy of discussing a certain problem, it does not necessarily lead to accord on what is the best set of solutions. In many situations, one can find that the degree of correspondence between the diagnostic and prognostic frames is not in alignment and, therefore, struggles continue between actors. Importantly, if the linkages between these two stages are not robust enough or richly developed, openings may emerge for opponents to distort the overall framing process. This points to how the dynamics of framing often do not proceed along a single path but, rather, are subject to contests, featuring actors that intervene to reframe or counterframe. In summary, therefore, one must not forget how frames are always shaped by material, political and ideological forces, no matter how common or self-evident they may appear on the surface.

In other words, in the larger context, this article argues that framing can be conceived as a technique of power. Rather than treating power in the WTO system in only compulsory or institutional terms, this article seeks to specify how power also has a 'productive' quality through which subjects and objects are shaped through ongoing processes of signification, that is, the very social construction of meaning (Barnett and Duvall 2005). If power is only viewed as a notion about repression, one may miss how it can also be understood as a productive force which shapes knowledge and discourse, a point of particular relevance when considering struggles over trade concepts and classifications (Adler and Bernstein 2005; Lang 2009; Wilkinson 2009). Indeed, this particular stress on understanding how frames are constructed and normalised will prove valuable in grasping how the definition of the WCA cotton problem changed, the details of which we can now turn to.

Construction of the cotton problem

While there have always been general debates on the problems of commodity dependence in the WTO setting, an isolated focus on cotton was absent from the negotiations prior to 2003. From an organisational perspective, it could be suggested that this was logical: why should cotton be privileged over other commodities and agricultural policy problems? According to the institutional design of the Agreement on Agriculture (AoA), it was no more important than any other product. What is thus remarkable in the first instance is how cotton became classified in the WTO as a distinguishable 'issue', separate but still related to the main agricultural talks. Cotton was not a specific item during the initiation of the AoA talks in 2000, nor was it on the agenda at the Doha Ministerial the following year. In order to explain the emergence of the problem, we have to address both the political economy of the cotton trade and how the C4 originally formulated an agenda for negotiation.

The political economy of cotton

Cotton is the world's most important fibre in textile production. Although there is increasing competition from synthetic fibres, production is still rising, from 10.2 million tons in 1960 to 22.9 million tons in 2006 (ICAC 2005). Most of the production is highly concentrated in a few countries: nearly half of the world's output is derived from the USA and China, rising to more than two-thirds when India and Pakistan are included. The EU is a relatively minor producer but still contributes to determining the world price (ICAC 2005).

The WCA region consists of smaller but still important producers, accounting for around 5 per cent of world production (ICAC 2005). Most of the cotton from the region is exported, with 80 per cent being shipped to Asia (including China at 46 per cent) (COMTRADE Database 2007). Chinese demand for textiles requiring cotton rose substantially around the turn of the century, with imports from West Africa increasing from 2.2 per cent in 1994 to 18 per cent in 2004 (ECOWAS-SWAC/OECD 2006). For some countries, such as Benin, in 2005, the share of cotton exports to China was 65 per cent. Because access to China has become more important, C4 producers have been competing more closely with the US operators for market share, thus underscoring why the USA would be singled out for blame at the WTO. In terms of the share of total merchandise export revenue, cotton provides Benin with 47 per cent, Burkina Faso with 37 per cent, Chad with 33 per cent and Mali with 22 per cent (FAOSTAT Database 2007). With around two million on-farm workers in the cotton industry across the C4 countries, the commodity undoubtedly plays a fundamental role in shaping the quality of livelihoods (Alston et al. 2007).

International cotton trade, however, is subject to considerable state-led interventions. Direct state assistance to the cotton sector worldwide was estimated at US\$4.7 billion in 2004–5. In that season, the main actors providing high levels of support included the USA (US\$2.4 billion), China (US\$1.1 billion) and the EU (US\$1 billion) (ICAC 2006). According to some industry observers, however, even these figures probably underestimate the scale and range of government measures. For instance, in reference to the USA, it is not always clear what types of transfers are included in official figures. A distinction is sometimes drawn between direct US support and total US net outlays. The former refers to three major categories defined by the US Farm Act 2002: direct payments, counter-cyclical payments and loan deficiency payments.² In the 2001–2 season, for instance – a period when local cotton producers in WCA were beginning to campaign for action on subsidies – direct support spending by the US government totalled US\$2.3 billion. But this figure does not include a range of other programmes that form part of the complete US net outlay to the cotton industry. Other forms of support include emergency payments, export credit guarantees and subsidies to exporters via the Step 2 programme (the latter facility, prior to the Brazil-initiated *US-Upland Cotton* dispute, was not recognised as illegal by the WTO rules). When these transfers are included, it is calculated that 25,000 American cotton growers received a total of US\$3.9 billion in government subsidies during the 2001–2 season, a doubling in the value of receipts within 10 years (Oxfam International 2002).³

When one turns to the world price, the data clearly show a decline over recent decades. During the 1960s, prices averaged US\$2.31 per kilogram, but by the 1990s, the average had dropped to US\$1.34 per kilogram, and by May 2002, it dropped by just US\$0.39 per kilogram. From 2002 to 2007, there was some marginal recovery, trading in a US\$0.55–\$0.65 range, on average.⁴ However, despite the reduced price, US farmers, as a consequence of the subsidies they received, were insulated and posted record levels of cotton production and near-record export volumes. For instance, in the 2003 crop year, the USA exported three quarters of its cotton production and increased its share of world exports to 41 per cent (Minot and Daniels 2005). During this period of price decline, it could be speculated that the US farmers were taking opportunities to enhance their competitiveness by lowering the costs of production. However, the evidence does not bear this out. According to the data from the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service, during the 1991–2003 period, total production costs (both fixed and variable) remained relatively stable, averaging US\$0.78 per pound (Womach 2004). As Womach (2004: 14) argues in reference to the US farms, the data suggest that ‘a sizeable proportion of cotton would not be profitable’ without the aid of government subsidies.

A number of studies have examined the relationship between subsidies and cotton prices. The work of Kevin Watkins, then Head of Research at Oxfam, needs to be credited for mainstreaming the connection between US cotton subsidies and WCA livelihoods. His 2002 report, *Cultivating Poverty*, had a key impact in terms of increasing information awareness. Using International Cotton Advisory Committee (ICAC)’s World Textile Demand Model, Watkins calculated that eight countries in WCA suffered a loss of US\$191 million in foreign-exchange revenue in 2001.⁵ Recent years have seen further simulations being conducted. In a study undertaken by Alston et al. (2007), it was found that the elimination of US subsidies would result in an increase in the price of cotton by between 6 and 14 per cent, adding between 2.3 and 8.8 per cent to the average expenditures of cotton-producing households in West Africa. They argued that this money would provide sufficient income to support food expenditure for one million additional people in the region.

Nevertheless, while these studies are persuasive and remain central to understanding the political economy of cotton, there are additional reasons for cotton prices declining at this time and remaining volatile. Apart from government measures, other factors include the increased use of synthetic fibres; general fluctuations in production and exports, especially in China, India and Pakistan; and also fluctuations in exchange rates in the CFA franc zone (Goreux 2003).⁶

The opening frame: the C4 as ‘competitive victims’

While the economic justifications for launching a WCA cotton initiative may have seemed obvious from the market conditions, this did not mean that a WTO submission was easy. From late 2002, the role that civil society experts played proved to be very important in crafting a precise strategy. Although it is often difficult to judge the relative significance of these contributions, it is safe to say that the initiative would not have been the same without such input. As *Cultivating*

Poverty became more widely read and cited, Oxfam's Geneva-based advocacy team began to study how the issue could be articulated in the WTO. Such work was complemented by the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development (ICTSD), which became important in terms of building solidarity between African missions.⁷ In addition to these groups, another organisation deserves a special note of recognition: a small consultancy in Geneva called the IDEAS Centre, led by a former Swiss Ambassador, Nicolas Imboden. Funded by the Swiss government, along with six other European government agencies, Imboden's work has been acknowledged by many actors close to the initiative as being highly significant.⁸ One of the differences between the IDEAS Centre and other civil society organisations was the quality of Imboden's social network: he had the political contacts and acquired expertise to meet regularly with the high-level government officials in the region, notably through the Economic Community of West African States (Sneyd 2011).⁹

In these early deliberations, the question of whether the C4 would negotiate or litigate was an important debate, one which was never entirely settled in the either/or terms it was often posed. By mid-2002, some countries advocated a more confrontational approach via the Dispute Settlement Body (DSB), a move that was indirectly supported by Oxfam.¹⁰ Other parties counselled for diplomacy, a position that the IDEAS Centre backed. In the end, partly due to enduring fears of broader political reprisals for challenging the USA, it was decided that the latter pathway would be pursued (Diouf and Hazard 2005; Pesche and Nubukpo 2005). However, due to the concurrent work of Brazil through the DSB, the political stakes on cotton continued to rise. By March 2003, a panel was established to investigate the Brazilian complaint that the US cotton subsidies were prohibited. It was at this stage that Benin and Chad decided to act as third parties to the *US-Upland Cotton* case.¹¹ As examined by Zunckel (2005), this would prove to be an 'African awakening' in terms of these countries using the DSB to master knowledge directly relevant to their cause.¹² Both the WCA and Brazilian parties appreciated how their activities complemented each other, particularly through media coverage.¹³ Still, for the C4, the diplomatic track via the Doha round would assume the greatest prominence overall. By April 2003, the contours of a campaign had become more clearly defined with Imboden, according to some insiders, leading the drafting of the dossier.¹⁴

When trying to understand the arguments advanced by the WCA cotton producers, one needs to remember that the C4 possessed one ace card in their relations with other members: in this product, they were internationally competitive. After the effects of subsidies are accounted for, African cotton is up to three times more competitive than that produced by the USA (Goreux 2002). In terms of both production costs and fibre quality, cotton from the WCA region is highly regarded by millers. Cotton farmers are paid less than their foreign counterparts and, in many rural areas, growers rely on unpaid family labour (Estur 2005). In terms of quality, African cotton lint is given a premium rating on the Cotlook A Index. Fibre quality is superior, because the tropical environment is more favourable and, crucially, the cotton is picked by hand rather than being harvested by machinery.

References to the C4 advantage in competitiveness are found throughout the original dossier. The signatory countries stated that their cotton production was

‘competitive ... among the most competitive’, the ‘second largest exporter after the United States ... [producing] high quality cotton and its production costs are among the lowest in the world’ (WTO 2003b: ¶ 2, 10). Yet, they argued that the results of these efforts have been ‘virtually nullified by the refusal of other cotton-producing countries to accept market forces and competition as defined in the WTO’s objectives, by maintaining high levels of support for production and export’ (WTO 2003b: ¶ 15). The dossier called for full liberalisation and denounced all forms of cotton border measures, domestic support and subsidies. A time period for eliminating all subsidies was also proposed: 2004–6 (WTO 2003c).

This contrast between the so-called genuine competitiveness of the C4 and the ‘artificial’ competitiveness of the USA made for a very effective diagnostic frame, one which would repeatedly trouble US negotiators. Indeed, this was precisely the same approach that later worked so successfully for Brazil in the *US-Upland Cotton* case (Cross 2006). Thus, the C4’s closest coalition ally has remained the Brazil- and India-led G20 coalition, which has strongly campaigned for the reform of US subsidies. In contrast, the WCA countries, at least on the subject of cotton, can be distinguished from more defensive Southern coalitions, such as the G33 which has sought to strengthen the notion of food security as well as safeguards against import surges. In the formulation of the dossier, El Hadji Diouf, a Geneva-based legal advisor to the C4, advocated that the dossier focus tightly on rights-based claims linked to competitiveness, rather than on connecting cotton to the more amorphous idea of ‘development’. From this perspective, the case was very straightforward: some members are not in agreement with the WTO rules and others are.¹⁵ As summarised by Imboden: ‘How could you be against this argument? The Africans only asked that the USA and the EU apply those global trade rules to themselves. I think that was a very powerful statement, especially coming from a group of least developed countries.’¹⁶

If the framing of the cotton problem in terms of competitiveness was considered a legitimate touchstone for actors within the WTO, it would be logical to assume that the C4 could conclude their opening argument here. What is interesting, however, is why the dossier also incorporated a second (if secondary) theme: the notion of victimhood. Like the competitiveness frame, this theme is also highly political. Yet, the idea of victimhood is in many respects more complicated and contestable than the concept of competitiveness. How it relates to the orthodox theme of competitiveness, moreover, is not entirely clear. Indeed, it will be argued next that there is a tension – or even contradiction – at work when notions of victimhood are introduced. How can one explain why this frame was used?

When one turns to the dossier again, an underlying sense of a victim–perpetrator relationship appears in several references. Such a message, I would suggest, is not communicated in an explicit form but is more subtly and unobtrusively transmitted through an association with the dominant category of ‘development’. The identification is visible immediately from the main title: ‘Poverty Reduction’ is the primary objective. For sure, all members, the Secretariat and other external authorities speak at length about the utility of trade, in offensive or defensive terms, as a means to alleviate conditions of poverty.¹⁷ But such a description is unusual in

the official proposals in the WTO. According to Imboden, the orientation towards what he called a 'development-related viewpoint' was justified, because the product in question represented such a minor share of world trade.¹⁸ To link cotton to 'development' would be one way of minimising any possibility that the dossier would be 'swept under the table', as Imboden expressed it, or that it would be met with placatory remarks of encouragement at best or outright silence at worse.¹⁹

The prognostic frame selected by the WCA countries would be of crucial importance to how other members responded. Associated with the removal of government measures, one major remedy stands out and I would argue that it is related to a representation of the C4 as victims.²⁰ The initiative specified that the C4 should be granted 'financial compensation to offset the income they are losing' as a result of the subsidies, but only as a 'transitional measure' (WTO 2003b: ¶ 7). At first glance, this request could appear reasonable. But the subject of compensation is very problematic in the WTO context. Procedurally, compensation claims are not available outside the framework of the DSB, and even that forum has notable flaws (Bronckers and van den Broek 2005). From one perspective, it would seem rather naïve to believe that the USA or EU would be expected to formally recognise that its subsidies caused damages for which payments were due. More fundamentally, the claim does not fit comfortably with the C4 orthodox representation. In Diouf's opinion, the inclusion of compensation was a poor decision, since it risked leading the C4 back to a historical bargaining position, away from the unique strengths of the case (i.e. aligning closely with WTO orthodoxy and putting the USA under pressure).²¹

Considering this context, why was the proposal for compensation included? First, compensation could have been chosen precisely because it was an inflammatory subject, one that could be easily understood by different constituents. Second, the idea has notable historical roots and, according to some analysts, possibly represented an attempt to revive previous policy frameworks which existed in other international forums.²² For instance, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) originally had a Compensatory Financing Facility designed to provide relatively easy drawing rights when a country experienced a shortfall in export receipts for circumstances beyond its control (Dell 1985; Bird 2003).²³ While both these explanations certainly have value, I would suggest that a third reason is also very important. When faced with manifold economic emergencies, any path towards relief could have been theoretically appealing to C4 representatives. The subsidies in dispute could take years to be eradicated (if at all), with multiple advances and retreats being needed in negotiations. As Abdoulay Sanoko, Counsellor at the Mali mission in Geneva expressed it, 'We are weak countries. We have so many urgencies to deal with. And yet our cotton problem, as far as we could foresee at the time, would not be resolved quickly. So we had to think of some transitional measures to keep our heads above the water.'²⁴ It could almost be speculated, therefore, that the dossier contained an implicit 'plan B'. Even if the formal compensation was likely to be rejected, the C4 appeared willing to open the door to a more feasible prospect: future cotton-related 'development assistance' from Northern donors.

To summarise so far, I have argued that the C4 countries represented themselves as 'competitive victims' to launch their WTO campaign. At a higher

level of abstraction, such framing can be conceived here as an exercise of productive power: the WCA countries made their problem more visible through appropriating the pre-existing legitimacy found in orthodox trade ideas. This was the C4's ace card and it was a very unusual move, one rarely seen by countries classified as 'least developed' in the WTO. Yet, at the same time, the WCA countries drew upon older, more complex representations of themselves as victims of an injustice, in the process, invoking notions of compensation and, by association, 'assistance' (a more conventional bargaining position for Least Developed Countries (LDCs)). When considered holistically, I have suggested that the 'competitive victim' frame contained certain tensions that could be potentially exploited by other parties. One could speculate, in counterfactual terms, that the dossier would have been stronger if it had focused purely on competitiveness and domestic support, without the appeal to the politically non-feasible compensation mechanism. But when one reflects upon the intractability of conditions faced by the C4, the idea of compensation, in the context of the rhetoric of a 'development round', may have been interpreted as providing an effective (if still flawed) opening for subsequent bargaining.

The Northern led management of the cotton problem

This part consists of three sections. First, I consider how cotton was debated as an agenda item at the Cancún Ministerial in 2003. Second, I debate how the issue was resuscitated during a very important period immediately following the conference. At this stage, I argue that the centre of gravity in the discursive universe on cotton subtly shifted away from the original C4 position, to the extent that all members began referring to *two dimensions* of the problem: 'trade-related' aspects and 'development-related' aspects. Third, I assess the start of the most recent period where the problem has become increasingly bureaucratised and internationalised. The discussion focuses on the complex relationship between framing (as a technique of productive power) and forms of institutional power in order to understand how a particular US-led counterframe – defined as the 'trade *and* development' distinction – became universalised as *the* frame for managing the issue.

Cotton at Cancún

Much has been written on the Cancún Ministerial as a watershed moment in the WTO history, with attention being focused on why it collapsed and the subsequent fallout (Narlikar and Tussie 2004; Narlikar and Wilkinson 2004; Hurrell and Narlikar 2006). These debates will not be explicitly dealt with here, but it is important to underscore that the emergence of the cotton problem complicated (particularly for northern actors) an already ambitious working agenda in the Doha round.

On the eve of the Ministerial, the USA opened a series of bilateral meetings with the C4. The Americans appeared to have two objectives.²⁵ First, the USA attempted to broaden the diagnostic frame: it supported the elimination of subsidies and lowering market barriers, but argued that this was only one element in a complex mix of problems. The reasons for the decline in prices did not necessarily rest on the support programmes of certain members (of which the EU and China

were also cited by the USA), but they rested on other factors such as competition from artificial fibres.²⁶ Second, the USA moved to distort the C4 prognostic frame in two ways. Procedurally, United States Trade Representative (USTR), backed by the National Cotton Council of America and a group of US Senators, was strongly against treating cotton differently from other products, preferring instead to classify the matter via linkages to the broader agriculture talks.²⁷ At the same time, the USA appealed to the competitiveness dimension of the C4 argument by highlighting technology- and marketing-based solutions to their problems, areas in which the USA has an unparalleled advantage. The USA indicated a willingness to enhance dialogue with the C4 on these topics, implying that the WCA countries lacked a degree of competitiveness. Linked to this point was a broader argument that the WCA countries would be best diversifying their cotton industry from farming to textile manufacturing, a claim that the C4 (and many other members) found to be insulting, since it again deflected attention from the problem of the subsidies (ICTSD 2003; Jawara and Kwa 2004; Blustein 2009). Finally, and predictably, the proposal for a compensation mechanism was thrown back as a non-negotiable item.

As the Ministerial got underway, the USA was already preoccupied defending its position on cotton from other members, as well as from an army of civil society groups and media organisations waiting outside. Yet, the situation became even more complicated. Confusion and 'haphazard improvisation' characterised different parts of the conference, with the appointment of facilitators to chair key negotiations being done within hours of the first meetings (Narlikar and Wilkinson 2004: 450). In one remarkable move, encouraged by his own personal convictions and the absence of volunteers, the WTO Director-General, Supachai Panitchpakdi, took it upon himself to chair a separate negotiation group dedicated to cotton. This development greatly angered the US delegation. In the first cotton meeting, Robert Zoellick, US Trade Representative, heavily criticised Supachai's decision in some of the toughest exchanges witnessed at the Ministerial. Zoellick argued that Supachai's role was as a universal guardian to the WTO system, without preference for any particular issue and, therefore, he had no business leading the cotton talks (Blustein 2009). Following the meeting, according to one representative in the Secretariat, the USA applied further pressure on Supachai to back down, threatening that if the C4 demands were met, his job would be in jeopardy.²⁸ By next day, the results of the US intervention were already bearing fruit, as Supachai announced that the members were converging on a new 'integrated approach covering all measures' (i.e. the problem would be viewed as being more encompassing than subsidies alone).²⁹ On the penultimate day, the US position was faithfully reflected in its entirety in the second draft text released by the Conference Chair Luis Ernesto Derbez. The paragraph called for no more than the intention to address the impact of distortions across multiple WTO committees and for the Director-General to consult with other international organisations to channel pre-existing resources towards the diversification of the WCA economies (WTO 2003d).³⁰

However, the USA could not control all the actors and elements within the Cancún maelstrom. From one side, there were many other members and coalitions who spoke out in favour of the C4. The Africa Group, the African, Caribbean and

Pacific (ACP) Group and the LDC Group had all immediately registered their support, despite some reported efforts by the USA to fragment sources of allegiance.³¹ In addition, the G20 and the Cairns Group both supported the C4's campaign for agricultural liberalisation (da Motta Veiga 2005).³² The EU's position was, however, always more delicate. First, while Pascal Lamy, Commissioner for External Trade, and Franz Fischler, Commissioner for Agriculture, both expressed sympathy towards the C4, they argued that the EU had little or no responsibility for the low cotton prices. In part, this was true. As Lamy was always quick to note, under the 2003 reform of the Common Agricultural Policy, the EU had no export subsidies for cotton and already offered quota-free and duty-free access to the LDC exports (Europa Press Release 2003; Lamy 2003a). If there were any concerns about the EU support measures, they centred on the effects of the proposed 'decoupled' Green Box payments within the AoA design.³³ Second, as has now been recognised, Lamy was concentrating on the so-called Singapore issues to an excessive degree according to many WTO members, including some EU member states.³⁴ Lamy was sensitive to any part of the negotiations that could create an obstacle to an agreement on the Singapore issues. The prospect of almost the entire WTO membership aligning with the C4 against the USA was not a favourable scenario for the EU. The USA was left consuming valuable time defending itself on a single product, rather than working with the EU to engineer the overall consensus.

As the conference stumbled towards collapse, the Derbez draft was met with widespread condemnation from the C4 countries and their sympathisers. The final hours of the Ministerial were highly emotional with many delegates being under intense stress (Khor 2003a). It is difficult to assess precisely how the cotton problem contributed towards the early closure of the conference, particularly given the struggles over the Singapore issues and the wider agriculture talks. One theory is that the USA felt that the entire process on cotton was slipping out of its control and, therefore, it sought to deliberately end the conference early in order to reorganise itself and the subsequent agenda (Blustein 2009). Lamy (2003b), wounded and keen to deflect the blame, also argued subsequently that cotton was 'politically neuralgic' and had 'tipped the scales the wrong way' for the USA. There was, however, a gain in one sense: the C4 had proved to themselves and others that resolute, well-organised southern coalitions could at least block northern agendas. But this moment was partial and short-lived. In the three months following Cancún, WTO members, the Secretariat and other international institutions began to revisit the cotton issue again. Away from the heat of Mexico, a crucial difference was drawn on how the problem would be classified in the WTO system and – yet again – it bore the strong imprint of the USA, only this time it was recognised as the 'universal' opinion.

Codification of a 'methodological distinction'

While the immediate implications of the Cancún collapse were not yet clear, the USA could not avoid the cotton problem. As a consequence of the exposure of the issue, the representation of the USA as an orthodox 'competitive' actor in cotton – and, by implication, agriculture in general – was under renewed scrutiny

from other governments and civil society actors. But as has been explained, the reliance upon coercive power techniques, such as in relations with Supachai, was far from ideal as a strategy. Indeed, it had proven costly, leading to a deeply acrimonious exchange in which the USA was unwilling or unable to cope with the process. The post-Cancún blame game, often conducted in a brutal manner, featured similar pressure tactics, and yet it did nothing to address the main problem for the USA, namely, that its classification of the issue was not accepted by others as legitimate (Zoellick 2003; Jawara and Kwa 2004).³⁵ As Lamy expressed it, ‘In Cancún, the [Derbez] text fell badly as it failed to capture the middle ground on issues like cotton, where the text strongly took the US line, and delegates stood up to denounce it as an affront to developing countries and as a heresy’. Clodoaldo Huguency, the Brazilian Ambassador, also made it be known that the Derbez draft was no basis for negotiations on cotton (quoted in Khor 2003b). From the US perspective, therefore, an appropriate accommodation strategy was required to both manage the demands of the C4 and rebuild its own legitimacy.

Under the leadership of Carlos Pérez del Castillo, Chair of the General Council, cotton was discussed in a series of informal ‘consultations’ from October to December 2003. In this period, we can see the emerging recognition that the US subsidies were not going to be substantially reformed any time soon. Yet, since cotton had been the subject of such international scrutiny, there had to be at least a signal or a vision, however ill-defined, that movement on the initiative was progressive not regressive and that a solution was being sought but was not yet at hand. At a meeting on 18 November, which Benin was invited to, there was evidence that a new counterframe was beginning to resonate. Pérez del Castillo, on the basis of his private discussions, noted two points. First, and most importantly, he explained that (unspecified) members were calling for a distinction to be made on how to manage the issue: to divide cotton into ‘trade-related aspects’ *and* ‘development-related aspects’. The Chair also noted that he had found a ‘fairly high degree of convergence’ on paragraph 27 (cotton) in the 13 September Derbez text, the same (still unedited) section that most of the WTO membership had rejected at Cancún.³⁶ Second, procedurally, he said that a majority of the members believed that the issue should be integrated into the main agriculture talks, but given some special status. In short, quietly and without any major fuss, a process of structuring the scope for deliberation was underway and it was closely aligning with the US opinion.

The next step was to codify what had been discussed informally. This was accomplished through the simple act of repetition in the official (legitimate) public arena of the General Council. At the 15–16 December meeting, Pérez del Castillo explained that the trade *and* development distinction was chosen for ‘methodological’ purposes. ‘Trade-related’ would refer to concerns about government measures, including how different domestic support categories in the AoA have been used with respect to cotton. ‘Development-related’ would mean ‘financial and technical assistance’, elements that formed ‘an essential part of an overall response’. Crucially, the Chair underscored that ‘multilateral [WTO] negotiations require time’ and, therefore, ‘development support measures that could be implemented in a shorter timeframe could be of great assistance’ (WTO 2003e). International institutions were highlighted for their potential

role. To prevent the issue from getting ‘bogged down’, Pérez del Castillo noted that the issue should not be considered separate but integrated into the main agriculture negotiations. When it came to member statements, the distinction was reinforced again and again. The US comment was brief, stating that it agreed with the Chair’s view (WTO 2003f: ¶ 23). China, which always remained a less vocal actor in the entire history of the cotton dispute, said that ‘the solution should focus on financial and technical assistance’ (WTO 2003f: ¶ 50). The EU concurred with the new framework (WTO 2003f: ¶ 56). When Benin’s turn to speak arrived, the process of manufacturing consensus was almost complete. Améhou put up a spirited defence, before acknowledging the new classification with a pragmatic tone that mirrored that of the USA:

The most important thing now was that work should focus on seeking firm and rapid solutions to the concerns raised, *taking into account their trade and development aspects*, which both fell – exclusively or partially – within the purview of the WTO. (WTO 2003f: ¶ 133)³⁷

I would suggest that, in hindsight, the consequences of this reconceptualisation have been inadequately interpreted by many political actors and trade analysts. In recent academic discussions, for instance, it has escaped the attention of observers (Heinisch 2006; Lee 2007; Lee and Smith 2008; Shahin 2008). Why was the trade *and* development distinction accepted so easily? To my mind, it represented a manipulation of the C4 position on three counts. First, as mentioned, time was on the side of the USA and its allies and not on the side of the WCA countries. In the face of economic emergencies, even the smallest of potential gains could have appeared attractive to the C4. Second, and crucially, the counterframe universalised the very idea of a ‘balance’ between competing sets of variables. The USA had thus made a major advance: the problem was being re-centred and the allocation of responsibility was being re-distributed. Now ‘trade’ – complete with all those sensitive debates about the US subsidies and competitiveness – was *compartmentalised and considered equal to* that infinitely adaptable category called ‘development’. The northern subsidies were no longer the problem exclusively, but were considered along side ‘African development’ (which included an implication that the C4 had their own duties). By constructing what seemed to be a twin-track solution, the division created the appearance that, far from neglecting the reform of the subsidies, a more comprehensive result was being sought.

Third, the counterframe proved to be particularly effective, because it drew upon another potent source of legitimacy: the C4’s own original claims. This was perhaps the most subtle distortion of the WCA position. To understand how this was accomplished, one has to return to the original introduction of the keywords linked to victimhood. The counterframe established the conditions for broadening the diagnosis and prognosis on the problem, and yet, this was, in part, enabled by the C4 attaching their identity to phrases such as ‘poverty reduction’. Over time, the trade *and* development division became ‘naturalised’, to the extent that its roots were concealed from even those who were close to

the action. As Sanoko at the Mali mission expressed it, ‘*It seems natural* to me that it had to be so – to have a trade track and a development track – otherwise I could tell you about it [the origins]’.³⁸ In short, the codification of the new distinction on cotton happened so swiftly and so effortlessly that one could have easily missed it. Even Imboden, a negotiator groomed in the Uruguay round and a major author of the C4’s strategy, could not quite comprehend what had happened:

All of a sudden, development became aid, and trade became trade. But I said: wait a minute, this is a negation of the Doha round! *Trade is supposed to be development, not aid!* But this worked. It was absolutely incredible. I couldn’t believe it. The US and EU negotiators loved it. And this new conceptualisation that they opened up led all the way to Hong Kong [Sixth WTO Ministerial Conference, December 2005].³⁹

However, one should not overstress this role for political calculation in assessing how the cotton problem appeared to reconfigure into two tracks. Policies linked to ‘development’ and, more specifically, ‘technical assistance’ are certainly contested by WTO members. Yet, at the same time, these categories, at a higher level of abstraction, also carry a certain ‘taken-for-granted’ feel, since, through manifold ways, they have become universalised notions in the post-war period. In this sense, it is not surprising how the C4’s agenda morphed into a trade *and* development distinction, since, for players who are embedded in the trade policy game, this division, at one and the same cognitive and institutional, often appears ‘natural’. What is still vital to understand, however, is how this distinction passed as legitimate; in particular, how considerable *social labour* was exercised to deflate the political tensions surrounding the C4.

Institutionalisation and normalisation of the counterframe

In order to make the trade *and* development distinction a veritable categorisation, one that would become fixed in the minds of relevant participants, the most privileged trading players could not yet rest. Beginning in 2004, an important process of institutionalising the cotton problem began to take shape. By drawing upon resources within the WTO and, more importantly, elsewhere in the international system, the issue became increasingly bureaucratised. It took on the appearance of being a multi-dimensional ‘global problem’, one that was of relevance to many actors, not simply a US–C4 struggle centred on competitiveness. But amidst all the chatter on cotton, particular political interests were being privileged over others. One should not forget that cotton was always a thorny problem for the Secretariat itself. The trade *and* development distinction opened the possibility for justifying the linkage of cotton to aid relations. But since such topics did not fit within the immediate mandate of the WTO, the Secretariat, acting upon the legitimacy granted by members, was compelled to ask for the services of other external organisations. This move was described using the popular and seductive vulgates of ‘engagement’ and ‘partnership’ with the so-called development community (which was often opposed to the ‘trade community’).

One institutional manifestation of this strategy was a Secretariat-organised regional workshop in Cotonou, Benin, in March 2004. I would argue that this event can be highlighted to show how the resolution of the cotton problem was complicated in ways that favoured the weaker ambitions of the USA, relative to the C4. The essential point of such a gathering was to enhance the legitimacy of the argument that the cotton problem was bigger than the government measures alone. But strengthening the legitimacy of this opinion could not be accomplished by the USA alone: it *necessitated* a variety of other actors to involve themselves in a wider debate. Again, my argument here is not that the C4 found no value in such exercises but, rather, to first explain how the trade *and* development distinction was institutionalised, before trying to infer how this reframing worked to cushion the USA from its own legitimacy deficit on the cotton issue.

Participation at the Cotonou meeting was broad, in keeping with the ‘globalisation’ of the problem: the four proponent countries were joined by 26 other African countries and 18 intergovernmental organisations, as well as representatives from the USA, the EU, Canada, Japan and China (WTO 2004c).⁴⁰ Out of these actors, the World Bank and the IMF collaborated with the Secretariat to take the lead in structuring the panels and selecting the speakers. In his opening remarks, a now-weakened Supacchi underscored that the meeting would concentrate ‘exclusively’ on the ‘Development Assistance Aspects’. Supacchi stated that a substantive objective from the workshop would be to link ‘existing’ financial and technical assistance to cotton (WTO 2004c).⁴¹ As the presentations got underway, the problem was unravelled from a number of perspectives. A picture quickly emerged that African cotton was a complex, multi-sided issue, one that seemingly defied neat classifications, explanations and solutions. The discussion fragmented into a range of questions and concerns, including data on production, consumption and trade patterns; productivity issues; infrastructure and transportation; marketing techniques; risk management tools; farm credit and grants; and the role of producer associations. In the subsequent discussions, member representatives added their own contributions. The USA welcomed the ‘comprehensive’ approach while also adding other variables, including the effects of HIV/AIDS and the impact of synthetic fibres (WTO 2004c).⁴² Overall, considerable attention was devoted to process matters, including how different agencies could cooperate and how existing resources could be redirected to the issue. The workshop was summarised by the Secretariat as marking ‘a new sense of pragmatic engagement’ between actors, one which was ‘serious’ in ‘purpose’ and ‘realism’ (WTO 2004c: ¶ 72).

By July 2004, in the context of a series of other cotton-related events (many which followed the same basic format as the Cotonou workshop), WTO members put the Doha round back on the rails with the ‘July Framework’.⁴³ In another nod to how cotton had not lost its status as an institutional problem, the text placed the subject on page one (WTO 2004a: ¶ 1(b)). It confidently stated that the matter would be addressed ‘ambitiously, expeditiously, and specifically’ (WTO 2004a: ¶ 4, Annex A). By providing an extra legal coat of legitimacy, it is clear that this agreement crystallised the trade *and* development distinction. There would be no return now to the original C4 frame. In addition to the repeated underscoring that development ‘mattered’, the July Framework also established the idea that a new negotiating forum within the Committee on Agriculture should focus on

the ‘trade-related’ aspects of cotton. However, the C4 had to wait until November 2004 – over a year from the collapse of Cancún – before members officialised the Sub-Committee on Cotton (WTO 2004d). In the subsequent months, this forum did provide some means to maintain pressure on the USA but, overall, has largely remained a defunct vehicle, because the USA continues to refuse to specify the cotton-specific modalities until the wider agricultural talks are near conclusion.

Perhaps, the only minor and indirect material benefit that the C4 have received so far from their efforts has come via the Brazilian victory in the *US-Upland Cotton* dispute. In September 2004, the Panel was found to be in favour of Brazil’s compliant and, in particular, stated that the Step 2 programme of subsidies was prohibited and should be ended (WTO 2004b).⁴⁴ By March 2005, despite a US appeal, the Appellate Body upheld the decision and the DSB adopted the report. In August 2006, the USA removed the Step 2 subsidies. According to Zunckel (2005: 1079–80), the results of *US-Upland Cotton* dispute were diplomatically beneficial to the C4, helping to ‘bolster their existing work on cotton reform’. Other researchers have underlined similar outcomes, arguing that the Brazilian case enabled the C4 to maintain a higher political profile (Oduwole 2009). Nevertheless, the C4 continue to remain cautious on the form of a final cotton settlement. In the most recent period, since the Hong Kong Ministerial in December 2005, there has been relatively little substantial movement on cotton negotiations (WTO 2005). The USA is continuing to treat its final cotton numbers on subsidy reductions as a highly prized asset for other countries to earn. This posture has thus led to fears on the part of players and sympathisers close to the WCA initiative that the USA will reveal its cotton offer in the endgame and, under the pressure of time constraints, enforce a consensus on its terms.

Conclusion

In conclusion, there are three main points that can be made. First, at the centre of the cotton story is a struggle over competitiveness or, more precisely, *competing representations of legitimacy in claims of competitiveness*. In an effort to dazzle the North (in particular, the USA) by mimicking its methods of legitimation, the C4 framing strategy used profoundly orthodox arguments. At the same time, these arguments were also situated in relation to ideas about victimhood and justice claims within North–South relations, a move that alluded to enormously complicated histories. This ‘competitive victim’ frame had tensions that unravelled later as the USA and other actors sensed how a re-positioning of the C4 could be accomplished. Despite the later trajectory of the issue, however, the case remains a very important account of African political will in trade relations, specifically, how a reconsideration of chances was first internalised, before being externalised as a new definition of ‘feasible’ diplomatic practice. At the current juncture, in the shadow of the July 2008 Package (WTO 2008), the hope of the C4 realising gains in cotton rests upon the meaning of ‘more ambitious’ in the current text. With this in mind, it is significant to recognise that all the major actors involved, including the USA, have been on record noting that the Doha

round will not be completed without ‘more in cotton’ (when compared with the rest of agriculture), a positive, if still imprecise, sign.

Second, I have argued how the C4 attempt to narrow the inequities of power in the WTO system was managed by a northern actors-led mobilisation of symbolic and material resources. The USA, the EU and other international actors dedicated to monitoring the logic of frames used in WTO negotiations were not comfortable during the early stages of the initiative. The essential response of the USA, which, in turn, became the ‘universal’ response, was to redefine the C4 from *rights-based proponents* (demanding equal application of the rules) to *charity-based seekers* (hoping for foreign assistance). This re-positioning enabled the USA to exert a stronger hand over the direction of the issue and to partially deflate the expectations of the C4. In this regard, the primary sequencing of discussions – ‘development-related aspects’ before ‘trade-related aspects’ – was not an arbitrary organisation of time and resources but part of a political move to broadly insulate US agricultural interests. These propositions – from agricultural risk management to technical assistance – were chosen to distance the debate from the precise relationship between national competitiveness and government measures. Not all of these efforts were successful, but enough was done to slow down the momentum for policy reform. This reframing, however, required a tremendous expenditure of labour in order to make it appear authentic and not arbitrary or, in other words, not unduly shaped by a US personality.

Third, in light of the current negotiations, it is worth returning to the question as to whether an alternative C4 framing strategy could have produced any better result for the WCA producers. One could speculate that the political pressure on the USA may have been even stronger if the dossier had not featured appeals to compensation. However, even if this were the case, it is imaginable that the efforts to reframe the cotton problem towards topics such as technical assistance would have been conducted by the USA and, indirectly, its institutional allies in the international system. It could also be suggested that cotton created a rupture at Cancún partly because of its timing; specifically, if the USA had been given more space to formally debate about the issue, certain political tensions may have been better managed. Overall, the C4 have remained committed to keeping a spotlight on subsidies reform, granting respect to ‘development-related’ projects when needed. In summary, the cotton initiative helps to reveal the importance of framing as not simply an instrument of communication but, at the same time, of power and, potentially, resistance to power.

Notes

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1. For an overview of the agricultural negotiations, see WTO, Agriculture, Available from: http://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/agric_e/agric_e.htm [accessed 1 May 2011].
2. Under the Farm Security and Rural Investment Act of 2002 (‘Farm Act 2002’), direct payments were categorised as based on the value of production and yields during a previous production period. In this respect, the USA has claimed that such support does not have any distorting effect on the world price, since it is ‘decoupled’. However, this argument has been debated. For instance, direct payments are only authorised

when farmers use their land for agricultural purposes, and yet this must not be for cultivating fruits, vegetables or other crops. Such a situation tends to encourage farmers to grow crops that are eligible for support, including cotton. Counter-cyclical payments refer to subsidies that are transferred when the price of cotton drops through a specified threshold (since 2002, \$0.72 per pound). The USDA has described such payments as forming a 'safety net', but since the transfer is linked to the price falling to a set level, they are classified as being part of the Amber Box in the AoA (support measures linked to trade distortion and subject to removal). Loan deficiency payments are triggered when world prices fall below \$0.52 per pound. The further the prices fall below that level, the more they increase. These subsidies also fall into the Amber Box (see Womach 2004).

3. The historical, political and economic reasons for the privileged voice that US agriculture receives in Washington, DC, are complicated and go beyond the confines of this article. For discussions, see Goldstein (1989), Gawande (2006); Gawande and Hoekman (2006), and on cotton, Gokcekus and Fishler (2009).
4. Prices are based on the Cotlook A Index published by Cotlook Limited, the industry standard source on world cotton values. For further details, see Cotlook, www.cotlook.com/index.php.
5. Oxfam International (2002). Also, see additional work by Goreux (2002) and Sumner (2003).
6. CFA stands for Communauté financière d'Afrique.
7. El Hadji A. Diouf, Programme Coordinator, Africa Trade Programme, ICTSD, Geneva, interview with the author, Geneva, 29 September 2006.
8. Other governments providing financial support included Denmark, the Netherlands, France, Germany, Sweden and the UK. For details, see IDEAS Centre, www.ideascentre.ch. In the interviews conducted for this article, Imboden's contribution was recognised by the WCA policymakers, including Ambassador Samuel Améhou at the Benin mission in Geneva; two officials at the WTO Secretariat who declined to be named and another trade analyst who also wished to remain anonymous.
9. Nicolas Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, interview with the author, Geneva, 27 September 2006.
10. Romain Benicchio, Advocacy Officer, Oxfam International, interview with the author, Geneva, 26 September 2006.
11. Third party signatories have the right to submit testimony before the panels during the first round of litigation, but they are not allowed to participate in the main panel hearings or appeal panel reports. On Brazilian approaches to the C4, Pedro de Camargo Neto, a major strategist on the cotton case and former Secretary of Production and Trade with the Ministry of Agriculture, has remarked that he had tried to persuade the WCA countries to join as co-complainants, but they refused (see Goldberg et al. 2006).
12. For a historical overview of the participation of the African countries in the DSB, see Mosoti (2006).
13. Among hundreds of articles which would later appear in the world media, see, in particular, Thurow and Kilman (2002).
14. Nicolas Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, Geneva, interview with the author, Geneva, 27 September 2006. On the specific point of Imboden's role in drafting the cotton dossier, two other interview subjects, including an official in the WTO Secretariat and another civil society representative, stated that his contribution was significant. Both these individuals preferred anonymity on this issue. Imboden's contribution is also discussed in Blustein (2009).
15. Diouf, Programme Coordinator, Africa Trade Programme, ICTSD, Geneva, interview with the author (also see Diouf 2003).
16. Nicolas Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, Geneva, interview with the author, Geneva, 27 September 2006.
17. As stated in the Doha Ministerial Declaration, 'International trade can play a major role in the promotion of economic development and the alleviation of poverty' (WTO 2001: ¶ 2). For a brief critical examination of 'poverty reduction', see Toye (2007).
18. Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, interview with the author.
19. Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, interview with author.
20. In addition, it is interesting to note that the C4 also experimented with defining cotton as a 'special product', which they argued was 'essential for agricultural development' (WTO 2003b: ¶ 32). For the official debut of the term (initially as 'strategic products'), see WTO (2003a).
21. Diouf, Programme Coordinator, Africa Trade Programme, ICTSD, interview with the author.
22. Samuel Asfaha, Programme Officer on Commodities and Economic Diversification, Trade for Development Programme, South Centre, interview with the author, Geneva, 28 March 2007.
23. In 1988, the facility was renamed the Compensatory and Contingency Financing Facility.

24. Abdoulay Sanoko, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Mali to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva, interview with the author, Geneva, 27 March 2007.
25. The following analysis is based on interviews as well as public commentary by officials, including Henry Schmick, Agricultural Attaché, and Christine Strossman, Agricultural Attaché, both at the Office of Agricultural Affairs, U.S. Mission to the WTO, interviews with the author, Geneva, 28 March 2007 (also see Shiner 2003).
26. As has been noted already, the growth in the production of synthetic fibres certainly does play a role in determining the world price and the distributional impact on the WCA producers.
27. See National Cotton Council of America (2003a, 2003b).
28. Interview with a WTO Secretariat representative. The incident is also explained by Blustein (2009: 152), commenting that 'Zoellick went all out in strong-arming the director-general'.
29. Report of the Cotton Initiative (2003).
30. WTO (2003d: ¶ 27).
31. See Jawara and Kwa (2004: xxx).
32. Established in 1986, the Cairns Group is a diverse coalition of 19 agricultural exporting countries. Prominent members include Argentina, Australia, Brazil, Canada, South Africa, Thailand and Uruguay. The group has historically campaigned for the elimination of all trade-distorting domestic subsidies and export subsidies.
33. In September 2003, as part of the Mid-term Review of the Agenda 2000 Reforms, the EU announced that only 40 per cent of cotton payments would remain 'coupled' ('more distorting' measures to be classified in the Blue Box), with 60 per cent to be 'decoupled' ('non-distorting' measures not linked to production and, therefore, part of the Green Box). The figures were slightly revised by member states in 2004 to 35 per cent 'coupled' and 65 per cent 'decoupled' (see Karagiannis 2004).
34. The Singapore issues referred to four working groups established at the First WTO Ministerial Conference in Singapore in 1996. The groups focused on investment protection, competition policy, transparency in government procurement and trade facilitation. The UK Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), in a Cancún post-mortem, accused Lamy of 'tactical misjudgment' in offering concessions in the Singapore issues too late (see Elliott 2003).
35. Remarkably, according to Imboden, there was even a US attempt to pressure the Swiss government to cut funding to the IDEAS Centre in Geneva. The US effort did not succeed, because Imboden threatened to create a media storm.
36. Carlos Pérez del Castillo, former Chair of the General Council, WTO Secretariat. Quoted in Bridges (2003).
37. Italics added for emphasis.
38. Sanoko, Counsellor, Permanent Mission of the Republic of Mali to the United Nations Office and other International Organizations in Geneva, interview with the author (italics added for emphasis).
39. Imboden, Executive Director, IDEAS Centre, interview with the author (italics added for emphasis).
40. Participating international institutions included the African Development Bank, the African Union, the ACP Secretariat, the Economic Community of West African States, the Intergovernmental Francophone Agency, the ICAC, the International Monetary Fund, the International Trade Centre, the New Partnership for Africa's Development, the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, the United Nations Development Programme, the United Nations Economic Commission for Africa, the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization, the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, the West African Development Bank, the West African Economic and Monetary Union and the World Bank (see WTO 2004c).
41. WTO (2004c), Annex 1, Opening remarks by Dr Supachai Panitchpakdi.
42. WTO (2004c: ¶ 19, Annex 7) Statement by the US Delegation, Assistant Administrator Simmons.
43. Other prominent events that showcased the C4's plight during this time included the launching of the 'EU–Africa Partnership on Cotton' in Paris in July 2004; an OECD-organised 'Briefing on the Development Dimensions of African Cotton' in January 2005 and the 'IMF/Benin Joint High-Level Regional Conference on Cotton' held in Cotonou, Benin, in May 2005.
44. It is worth recalling that the Step 2 programme represented a small proportion of the total volume of US cotton support measures. In 2001, for instance, Step 2 included US\$192 million worth of payments out of a total outlay of US\$3.9 billion (see Oxfam International 2002). For further analysis, including Brazil's claims that US export credit guarantees linked to cotton were also prohibited, see Cross (2006).

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