

Public Deliberation on UK Trade Policy Priorities Report

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Prepared for: the Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy

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Key findings

The Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy (CITP) is a multi-year ESRC-funded research centre, which started in April 2022 and aims to be a centre of excellence for innovative trade policy research. To support its review of UK trade policy, the CITP commissioned the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen)'s Centre for Deliberation (CfD) to conduct a deliberative workshop to understand the public's trade policy priorities. The workshop involved 33 members of the public from across the four nations of the UK. The key aim of the workshop was to understand how the public prioritises specific economic and non-economic trade outcomes.

To support participants to deliberate, the CITP presented two case studies (food standards and human and labour rights) that highlighted trade-offs between economic and non-economic outcomes. The CITP also provided a basic introduction on trade policy. The information presented drew heavily upon information used in previous Citizen's Juries¹ commissioned by the CITP and delivered by the CfD in early 2023 where jurors explored the same two specific trade issues among others across 15 hours of deliberation. The information was presented to all participants in plenary and discussion took place in small groups of five to seven people facilitated by NatCen researchers.

To understand the impact that the deliberation had on people's attitudes towards trade participants completed the same survey before and after the discussion.

Survey themes suggest that participants prioritise both economic and non-economic trade outcomes. However, when deliberating the food standards and human and labour rights case studies the majority of participants prioritised non-economic outcomes over economic ones. This aligns with findings from the 2023 jury.

Most participants prioritised maintaining food standards (a non-economic outcome) over the economic benefits of access to a wider range of food. When deliberating this trade-off participants balanced the need to protect UK farmers and the importance of affordable food in a cost-of-living crisis.

Most participants prioritised the non-economic outcome of improving human and labour rights over economic benefits to the UK and developing nations. When deliberating this trade-off participants balanced the right of all people to decent working conditions with the UK's right to influence the governance of another country.

¹ [Citizens' Juries on UK Trade Policy | National Centre for Social Research](#)

1. Method

This chapter outlines the objectives and method of this research, including our approach to sampling, delivery and analysis.

1.1 Research Objectives

To support its review of UK trade policy the Centre for Inclusive Trade Policy (CITP) commissioned the Centre for Deliberation (CfD) within the National Centre for Social Research (NatCen) to conduct a deliberative workshop to understand how the UK public prioritises trade policy issues. This research built upon a previous citizen's jury exploring public views on trade which NatCen conducted for the CITP². CITP identified three research questions to explore in this workshop:

1. What are the public's priorities when it comes to trade issues?
2. How does the public prioritise between specific economic and non-economic trade outcomes?
3. To what extent do public priorities evolve over the course of the workshop?

1.2 Deliberative workshop method

To address these research questions the CfD delivered a two-and-a-half-hour online workshop on the 14th of November 2024. A total of 33 members of the public took part.

Deliberative research methods provide participants with the time, information and discursive conditions needed to engage in depth with a topic, typically taking place over extended periods. In this case the same design principles were applied to a single two-and-a-half-hour workshop. Material on a given topic (in this case trade policy) was provided to ensure that all participants had access to the same balanced information to inform their views. Trained facilitators supported participants to deliberate this information to ultimately form a view on the questions and policy area at hand. These methods yield insights into people's considered views on complex, value-driven issues that often require trade-offs for resolution.

1.3 Approach to sampling and recruitment

To account for attrition, 35 participants from across the UK were recruited to ensure at least 30 took part in the workshop. Our sample plan (see Appendix 1) created a 'mini public'³; setting demographic quotas to reflect the population of the UK.

To help us understand how views differed by nation, we recruited 14 participants from England and 7 participants each from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland so that breakout rooms could be

² NatCen 2023, *Final Report: Citizens' Juries on UK Trade Policy*

³ A group of people who reflect the wider population brought together to learn and deliberate on a topic to inform public opinion and decision-making. For further information on this concept, see: Escobar, O., Elstub, D. (2017), *Forms of Mini-publics*, available at: newdemocracy.com.au/docs/researchnotes/2017_May/nDF_RN_20170508_FormsOfMiniPublics.pdf.

organised by nation. To ensure the sample reflected a range of experiences and viewpoints we set quotas to ensure a mix of occupations and political affiliation. To ensure the discussion was not skewed towards those more interested in trade we used national trends⁴ to set quotas on self-reported interest and knowledge of trade.

Participants were recruited by Propeller Research⁵, and 33 in total attended the workshop (see Appendix 1).

1.4 Workshop and survey design and delivery

To understand how participant views on trade evolved they completed the same survey questions before and after the workshop (see Appendix 2). In the workshop, participants alternated between plenary sessions (the whole group of 33 participants in one virtual room), where they were presented with information on the topic of trade by CITP, and breakout rooms of five-to-seven people from the same nation, where they deliberated this information. The breakout rooms were moderated by NatGen facilitators and not attended by members of CITP.

The workshop began with an introduction to trade by CITP in plenary (see presentation materials in Appendix 3a) before participants discussed their initial trade priorities in breakout rooms. This was followed by two breakout room discussions focused on two different case studies that highlighted a trade-off between economic and non-economic issues priorities for participants to consider. The first case study explored food standards (see Appendix 3b). The second was focused on human rights and labour standards in poorer countries (see Appendix 3c). After each case study presentation, participants completed a Zoom poll in plenary to understand their initial view on the trade-off, before deliberating in breakout rooms to understand their reasoning.

1.5 Approach to analysis

This report draws on data generated through the pre-/post-workshop surveys, and facilitators' in-session notes and post-session reflections. The workshop recordings alongside transcripts and demographic characteristics linked to the survey data were not analysed for this report but were shared with CITP for further academic research. The themes in this report are based on high-level qualitative insights of the discussions participants had and results from the survey data. They are not generalisable to the wider UK population.

⁴ [Public attitudes to trade tracker \(PATT\): wave 6 - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ <https://propeller-research.co.uk/>

2. Trade Priorities

This chapter reports key themes in how participants prioritised different trade outcomes. Evidence from the pre-post survey and facilitator notes suggests that most participants prioritised both economic and non-economic trade policy outcomes similarly before and after the workshop.

To support participants to prioritise trade outcomes CITP outlined key definitions as well as how trade can achieve both economic and non-economic outcomes in plenary before NatCen presented headline findings on participants' priorities from the pre-workshop survey. In breakout rooms, participants then discussed their initial views on trade priorities.

2.1 Economic growth and non-economic outcomes were prioritised

Before and after the workshop participants were asked to rate the level of priority the UK government should give to a number of different policy outcomes. Most participants rated all policy outcomes as either a “high” or “very high” priority before and after the workshop. Figure 1 shows the six policy outcomes that received the highest number of “high” and “very high” votes. Trends remained largely consistent before and after the workshop.

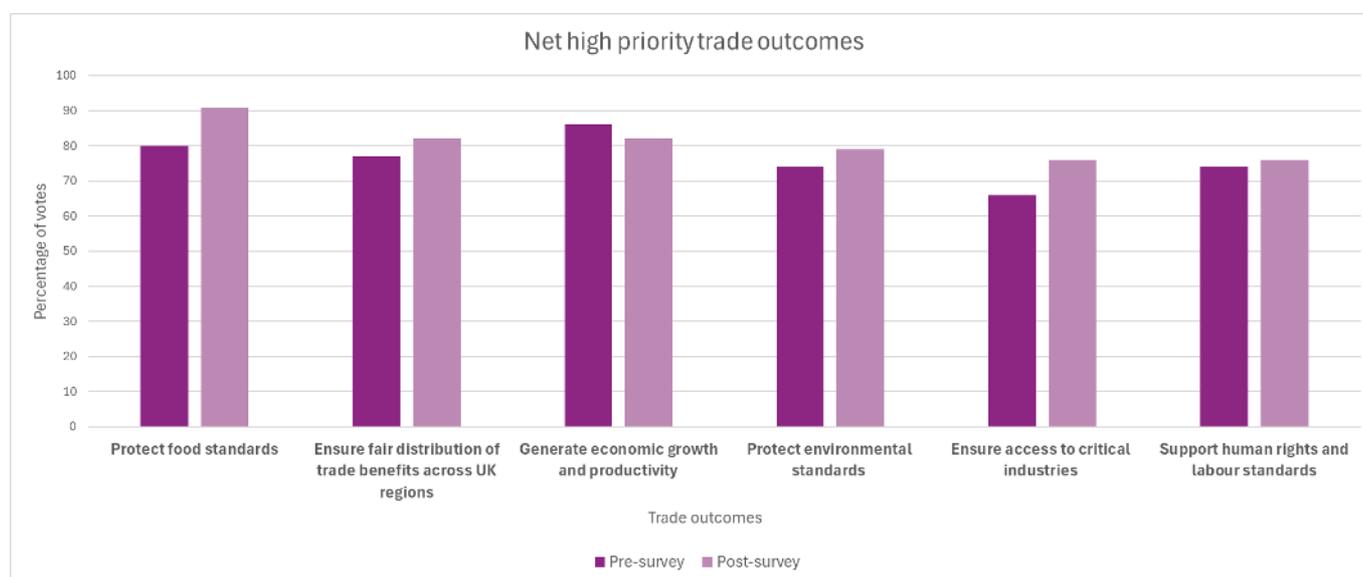


Figure 1. Net high priority (combining ‘Very high priority’ and ‘High priority’ votes) trade outcomes from pre and post workshop surveys

At the start of the deliberative workshop participants were asked why they prioritised these policy outcomes. Analysis of facilitator notes suggests that participants prioritised economic growth because it was seen as a key national interest (e.g a way of remaining competitive against other countries), and crucially, an important avenue for tackling the current cost of living crisis in the UK. These were also

commonly shared reasons for prioritising economic over non-economic trade outcomes when exploring specific case study trade-offs (see Chapters three and four).

During the opening discussion participants also highlighted the need to balance economic growth against costs, for example, to the quality of products, fair labour conditions, the environment, and national industries. When discussing economic growth some participants referred to the term “profit”, and felt that profit should not be achieved at the cost to human rights.

2.2 Trade outcomes were seen as complex

The post-workshop survey results show that participants felt more informed about the topic of trade after the workshop. Facilitator reflections suggest that participants felt the workshop highlighted the complexity of trade issues. For example, prior to the workshop, many said they had not considered how the UK may achieve non-economic policy outcomes through trade or thought about the power dynamics involved in trade between rich and poor countries. Participants also learned more about the challenges involved in making trade-off decisions through the case study discussions and why other participants might prioritise one trade outcome over another (see Chapter three and four).

3. Food Standards

This chapter reports how participants traded-off the non-economic outcome of protecting food standards against the economic outcome of access to cheaper, wider range of food.

Survey trends before, during and after the workshop suggest most participants prioritised maintaining food standards over the economic benefits of access to a wider range of food. Facilitator reflections suggest that participants weighed up two competing national interests when deliberating this trade-off: the need to protect UK farmers and the importance of affordable food in a cost-of-living crisis.

CITP presented the costs and benefits of this trade-off using a 'UK-Australia Free Trade Agreement' case study (see appendix 3b). Participants were then asked to complete a zoom poll in plenary on the extent to which they agreed with the statement "the benefits of access to a cheaper, wider range of food are worth the costs to food and environmental standards." The NatCen lead facilitator shared zoom poll findings (figure 2) with everyone in plenary before participants discussed their reasoning in breakout rooms.

3.1 Maintaining standards prioritised by most participants

Figure 2 shows that the majority of participants (59%) disagreed that the benefits of access to a cheaper, wider range of food were worth the costs to food and environmental standards. A small number of participants (16%) agreed that the benefits of cheaper food were worth the costs to standards. One quarter (25%) neither agreed nor disagreed.

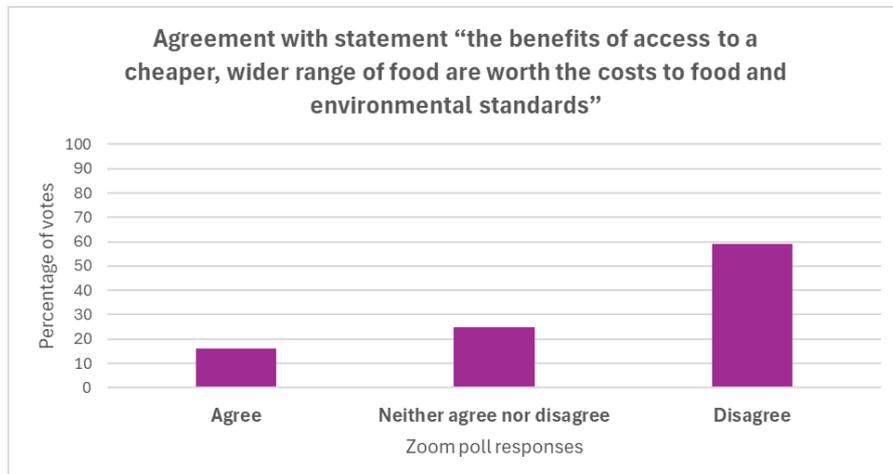


Figure 2: Zoom poll on food standards trade-off statement

Reasons for prioritising food and environmental standards

In breakout room discussions, the most prominent reason for prioritising food and environmental standards over access to cheaper, wider range of foods was the need to protect British farmers and national produce. The Northern Ireland group in particular associated farming with a sense of national pride.

Other reasons participants prioritised maintaining standards included:

-
- The UK has a responsibility to ensure other countries match its high standards (around food quality in particular).
 - The costs to human health, animal welfare and the environment are not worth the economic gains.
 - Consumers don't need more variety beyond the range of food products that already exists.

Some participants wanted more certainty and detail around the economic impacts of the free trade deal with Australia. For example, whether the economic benefits would last in the long term and who would benefit more or less. Without this certainty, they were cautious around prioritising economic outcomes.

Reasons for prioritising cheaper, wider range of food

An overarching reason participants gave for prioritising cheaper, wider range of food over protecting food and environmental standards was the importance of affordable food in a cost-of-living crisis. Participants who prioritised food standards often sympathised with these ideas even though they ultimately thought maintaining standards was more important.

Participants who prioritised cheaper, wider range of food also felt that:

- Consumer choice is important and that consumers should be allowed to weigh up the costs and benefits of consuming foods below certain quality standards for themselves.
- The UK needs to import certain products it cannot produce on its own.
- The UK should not impose its standards on another country (when the UK's own standards may not be higher than the other country; and because the UK needs to be flexible when negotiating trade deals).

Some participants wanted more evidence on the likely impact of compromised standards from the trade deal with Australia on health and the environment (e.g., the effects of permitting previously banned pesticides in the UK which are used in Australia). Scepticism over the impact of these non-economic costs (e.g., uncertainty over the harms that would be caused by permitting these pesticides) pushed participants to prioritise the economic benefits of cheaper, wider range of food.

3.2 Survey trends before and after the workshop

In the pre and post-surveys participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statement “UK trade policy should aim to protect high food quality standards in the UK even if it means food is more expensive”. Participant views remained largely the same before and after deliberating the case study on food standards with c.80% agreeing with the statement before and after the workshop (See Figure 3.)

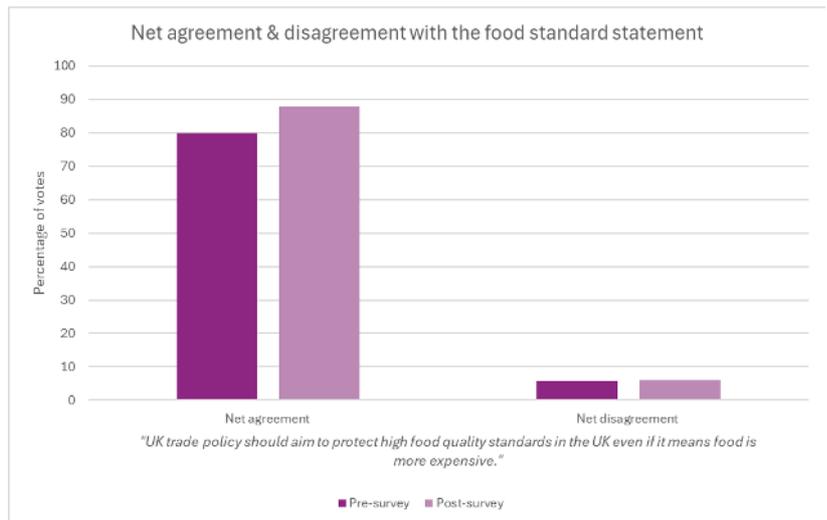


Figure 3. Net agreement (combining ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ votes) and net disagreement (combining ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’ votes) with the food standard statement from pre and post workshop surveys

4. Human and labour rights

This chapter reports how participants traded-off the non-economic outcome of improving human and labour rights with the outcome of economic growth.

Survey trends before, during and after the workshop suggest most participants prioritised the non-economic outcome of improving human and labour rights over economic benefits to the UK and developing nations. Facilitator reflections suggest participants weighed up two competing moral positions when deliberating this trade-off: ensuring all citizens in the world have certain working conditions, and the right of one country to interfere with the setting of another country's human rights and labour standards.

CITP presented the costs and benefits of this trade-off using a 'UK-India Free Trade Agreement' case study (see appendix 3c). Participants were asked to complete a zoom poll in plenary on the extent to which they agreed that "the UK should require poor countries they trade with to improve their human rights standards, even if this slows the poor countries' economic growth". The NatCen lead facilitator shared zoom poll findings (figure 4) with everyone in plenary before participants discussed their reasoning in breakout rooms.

4.1 Protecting rights prioritised by more participants

Figure 4 shows that half the participants (50%) agreed, around one in five disagreed (22%), and just over a quarter (28%) neither agreed nor disagreed that the UK should require poor countries they trade with to improve their human rights standards.

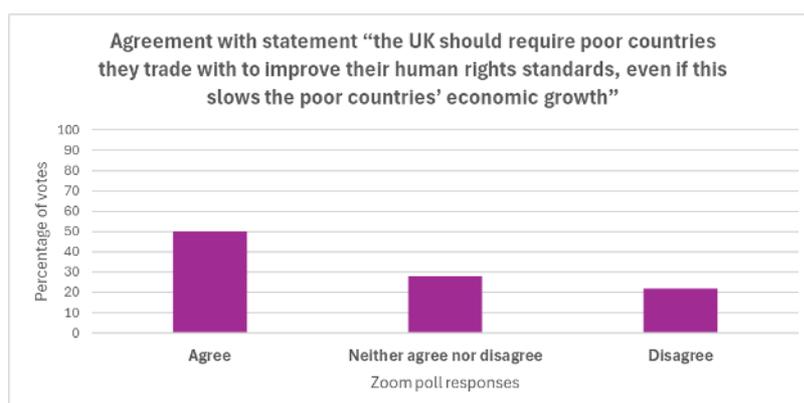


Figure 4. Zoom poll on human and labour rights trade-off statement

Reasons for prioritising human and labour rights

Those who agreed that the UK should require poorer countries to improve their human and labour rights standards argued that human rights and fair labour conditions should be "non-negotiable" in

trade deals and valued over economic growth in any country. When explaining why this should be non-negotiable, participants mentioned:

- Not requiring improvements in labour conditions could result in complicity with serious human rights abuses, including death.
- As a country with relatively high human and labour rights standards, the UK has a responsibility to put pressure on the countries it trades with to improve their human and labour rights.
- If people put themselves in the workers' shoes, they would want improved human rights and labour conditions.

In a few breakout rooms, participants were uncertain around the extent to which one trade deal – the UK-India Free Trade Agreement under discussion - would impact India's economy. Some participants were also sceptical about whether workers would lose their job as a result of the deal (a risk presented in the case study). Without more certainty, these participants were cautious around prioritising economic outcomes over improvements to human and labour rights in this trade deal.

Reasons for prioritising a poorer country's economic growth

Participants who prioritised economic growth most commonly argued that it is not the UK's role to intervene in another country's governance of human and labour rights. Most of these participants felt that it was not right for the UK to impose its values on another country, in the context of its relative economic power and colonial history in damaging other countries' economic growth. Some participants also felt that in imposing its own values the UK may not consider or sufficiently understand the different cultural values of the poorer nation. Participants in one group shared that the UK should prioritise the welfare of its own citizens before those of other countries.

Participants also argued that the economic costs to the poorer country would be unfair. For example, some participants felt that it would not be fair for some workers to lose their livelihoods entirely even if labour conditions improved overall.

In a few breakout rooms, participants raised uncertainties around whether and how the human and labour rights conditions would be improved in India. Some questioned who would regulate and enforce the trade clause in India, and others distrusted that the government of any country would fight to enforce workers' rights if economic gains/profits were at risk. These uncertainties made some participants question whether trade is the right avenue for improving human and labour rights, and felt trade is realistically more of a tool for generating economic growth. On the other hand, some participants maintained that it was important that the UK use trade as a tool for improving human and labour rights.

4.2 Survey trends before and after the workshop

Participants were asked the extent to which they agreed or disagreed that the “UK trade policy should aim to promote human rights internationally even if it means less trade with poor countries” in the pre and post workshop survey.

Participant views remained largely the same before and after the workshop with the majority of participants (over 60%) agreeing with this statement (see figure 5).

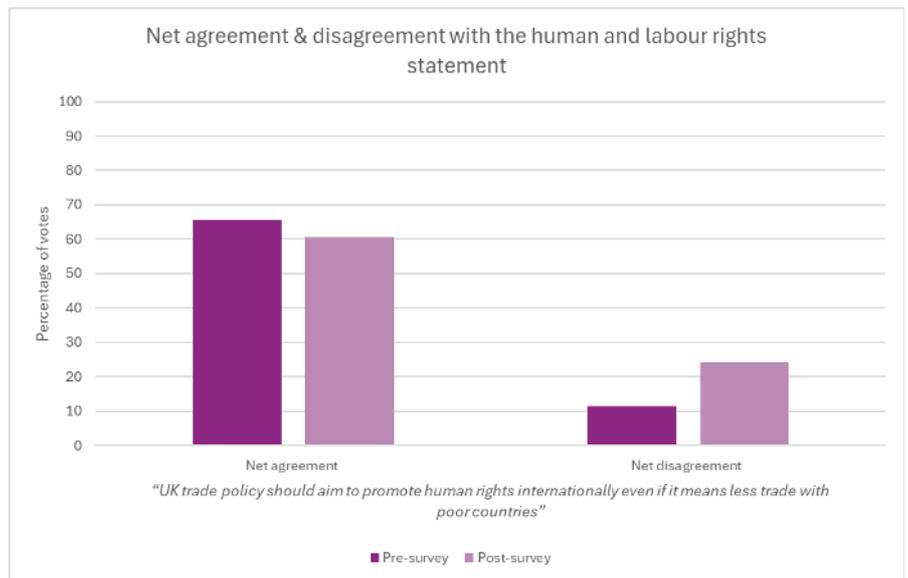


Figure 5. Net agreement (combining ‘Strongly agree’ and ‘Agree’ votes) and net disagreement (combining ‘Strongly disagree’ and ‘disagree’ votes) with the human and labour rights statement from pre and post workshop surveys.

