# arXiv:1201.3584v1 [q-fin.GN] 17 Jan 2012

# Ecological analysis of world trade

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(Dated: January 17, 2012)

PACS numbers: 87.23.-n,89.65.Gh, 89.75.Fb, 89.75.Hc

Ecological systems have a high level of complexity combined with stability and rich biodiversity. Recently, the analysis of their properties and evolution has been pushed forward on a basis of concept of mutualistic networks that provides a detailed understanding of their features being linked to a high nestedness of these networks. It was shown that the nestedness architecture of mutualistic networks of plants and their pollinators minimizes competition and increases biodiversity. Here, using the United Nations COM-TRADE database for years 1962 - 2009, we show that a similar ecological analysis gives a valuable description of the world trade. In fact the countries and trade products are analogous to plants and pollinators, and the whole trade network is characterized by a low nestedness temperature which is typical for the ecological networks. This approach provides new mutualistic features of the world trade highlighting new significance of countries and trade products for the world trade.

Ecological systems are characterized by high complexity and biodiversity [1] linked to nonlinear dynamics and chaos emerging in the process of their evolution [2, 3]. The interactions between species form a complex network whose properties can be analyzed by the modern methods of scale-free networks [4–7]. An important feature of ecological networks is that they are highly structured, being very different from randomly interacting species [7, 8]. Recently is has been shown that the mutualistic networks between plants and their pollinators [8–11] are characterized by high nestedness [12, 13] which minimizes competition and increases biodiversity. It is argued [12] that such type of networks appear in various social contexts such as garment industry [13] and banking [14, 15]. Here we apply a nestedness analysis to the world trade network using the United Nations COMTRADE database [16] for the years 1962 - 2009. Our analysis shows that countries and trade products have relations similar to those of plants and pollinators and that the world trade network is characterized by a high nestedness typical of ecosystems [11, 12]. This provides new mutualistic characteristics for the world trade.

### Results

The mutualistic World Trade Network (WTN) is con-

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FIG. 1: Normalized import/export WTN matrix elements  $m^{(i)}$  and  $m^{(e)}$  shown on left/right panels for years 1968 (bottom) and 2008 (top). Here products/countries  $(p = 1, \ldots, N_p)$  and  $c = 1, \ldots, N_c$ ) are ordered in a decreasing order of product/country total import or export in a given year.

structed on the basis of the UN COMTRADE database [16] from the matrix of trade transactions  $M_{c',c}^p$  expressed in USD for a given product (commodity) p from country c to country c' in a given year (from 1962 to 2009). For product classification we use 3-digits Standard International Trade Classification (SITC) Rev.1 with the number of products  $N_p = 182$ . All these products are described in [16] in the commodity code document SITC Rev1. The number of countries varies between  $N_c = 164$ in 1962 and  $N_c = 227$  in 2009. The import and export trade matrices are defined as  $M_{p,c}^{(i)} = \sum_{c'=1}^{N_c} M_{c,c'}^p$ and  $M_{p,c}^{(e)} = \sum_{c'=1}^{N_c} M_{c',c}^p$  respectively. We use the dimensionless matrix elements  $m^{(i)} = M^{(i)}/M_{max}$  and  $m^{(e)} = M^{(e)}/M_{max}$  where for a given year  $M_{max} =$  $max\{max[M_{p,c}^{(i)}], max[M_{p,c}^{(e)}]\}$ . The distribution of matrix elements  $m^{(i)}$ ,  $m^{(e)}$  in the plane of indexes p and c, ordered by the total amount of import/export in a decreasing order, are shown in Fig. 1 for years 1968 and 2008 (years 1978, 1988, 1998 are shown in Fig. S-1 of Supporting Information (SI)). These Figs. show that globally the distributions of  $m^{(i)}$ ,  $m^{(e)}$  remain stable in time especially in a view of 100 times growth of the total trade volume during the period 1962-2009. The fluctuations of  $m^{(e)}$  are visibly larger compared to  $m^{(i)}$  case since certain products, e.g. petroleum, are exported by only a few countries while it is imported by almost all countries.

To use the methods of ecological analysis we construct the mutualistic network matrix for import  $Q^{(i)}$  and export  $Q^{(e)}$  whose matrix elements take binary value 1 or 0 if corresponding elements  $m^{(i)}$  and  $m^{(e)}$  are respectively larger or smaller than a certain trade threshold value  $\mu$ . The fraction  $\varphi$  of nonzero matrix elements varies smoothly in the range  $10^{-6} \le \mu \le 10^{-2}$  (see Fig. S-2 of SI) and the further analysis is not really sensitive to the actual  $\mu$  value inside this broad range. It is important to note that in contrast to ecological systems [12] the world trade is described by a directed network and hence we characterize the system by two mutualistic matrices  $Q^{(i)}$  and  $Q^{(e)}$  corresponding to import and export. Using the standard nestedness BINMATNEST algorithm [17] we determine the nestedness parameter  $\eta$  of the WTN and the related nestedness temperature  $T = 100(1 - \eta)$ . The algorithm reorders lines and columns of a mutualistic matrix concentrating nonzero elements as much as possible in the top left corner and thus providing information about causal role of immigration and extinction in an ecological system. A high level of nestedness and ordering can be reached only for systems with low T. It is argued that the nested architecture of real mutualistic networks increases their biodiversity.

The nestedness matrices generated by the BIN-MATNEST algorithm [17] are shown in Fig. 2 for ecology networks ARR1 ( $N_{pl} = 84$ ,  $N_{anim} = 101$ ,  $\varphi = 0.043$ , T = 2.4) and WES ( $N_{pl} = 207, N_{anim} = 110, \varphi = 0.049$ , T = 3.2) from [11, 18]. Using the same algorithm we generate the nestedness matrices of WTN using the mutualistic matrices for import  $Q^{(i)}$  and export  $Q^{(i)}$  for the WTN in years 1968 and 2008 using a fixed typical threshold  $\mu = 10^{-3}$  (see Fig. 2; the distributions for other  $\mu$ values have a similar form and are shown in Fig. S-3 of SI). As for ecological systems, for the WTN data we also obtain rather small nestedness temperature ( $T \approx 6/8$ for import/export in 1968 and  $T \approx 4/8$  in 2008 respectively). These values are by a factor 9/4 of times smaller than the corresponding T values for import/export from random generated networks with the corresponding values of  $\varphi$ . The detailed data for T in all years are shown in Fig. 3 and the comparison with the data for random networks are given in Figs. S-4,S-5,S-6 in SI. The data of Fig. 3 show that the value of T changes by about 30-40% with variation of  $\mu$  by a factor 1000. We think that this is relatively small variation of T compared to enormous variation of  $\mu$  that confirms the stability and relevance of ecological analysis and nestedness ordering. The nestedness temperature T remains rather stable in time: in average there is 40% drop of T from 1962 to 2000 and 20% growth from 2000 to 2009. We attribute the growth in last decade to the globalization of trade. The small value of nestedness temperature obtained for the WTN confirms the validity of the ecological analysis of WTN structure: trade products play the role of pollinators which produce exchange between world countries, which play the role of plants. Like in ecology the WTN evolves to the state with very low nestedness tempera-

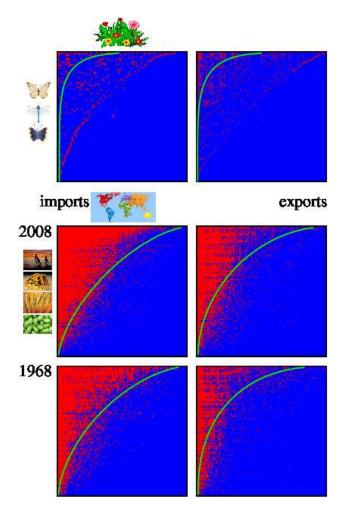


FIG. 2: Nestedness matrices for the plant-animal mutualistic networks on top panels, and for the WTN of countriesproducts on middle and bottom panels. Top–left and top– right panels represent data of ARR1 and WES networks from [11, 18]. The WTN matrices are computed with the threshold  $\mu = 10^{-3}$  and corresponding  $\varphi \approx 0.2$  for years 1968 (bottom) and 2008 (middle) for import (left panels) and export (right panels). Red and blue represent unit and zero elements respectively; only lines and columns with nonzero elements are shown. The order of plants-animals, countries-products is given by the nestedness algorithm [17], the perfect nestedness is shown by green curves for the corresponding values of  $\varphi$ .

ture that satisfies the ecological concept of system stability appearing as a result of high network nestendess [12].

The nestedness algorithm [17] creates effective ecological ranking (EcoloRanking) of all UN countries. The evolution of 20 top ranks throughout the years is shown in Fig. 4 for import and export. This ranking is quite different from the more commonly applied ranking of countries by their total import/export monetary trade volume [19] (see corresponding data in Fig. 5) or recently proposed democratic ranking of WTN based on the Google matrix analysis [20]. Indeed, in 2008 China is at the top rank for total export volume but it is only at 5th position in

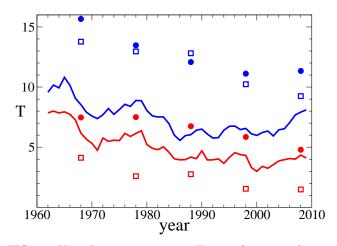


FIG. 3: Nestedness temperature T as a function of years for the WTN for  $\mu = 10^{-3}$  (curves),  $10^{-4}$  (circles),  $10^{-6}$ (squares); import and export data are shown in red and blue.

EcoloRank (see Fig. 4, Fig. 5 and Table I in SI). In a similar way Japan moves down from 4th to 17th position while USA raises up from 3rd to 1st rank.

The same nestedness algorithm generates not only the ranking of countries but also the ranking of trade prooducts for import and export which is presented in Fig. 6. For comparison we also show there the standard ranking of products by their trade volume. In Fig. 6 the color of symbol marks the 1st SITC digit described in [16] and in Table II in SI.

# Discussion

The origin of such a difference between EcoloRanking and trade volume ranking of countries is related to the main idea of mutualistic ranking in ecological systems: the nestedness ordering stresses the importance of mutualistic pollinators (products for WTN) which generate links and exchange between plants (countries for WTN). In this way generic products, which participate in the trade between many countries, become of primary importance even if their trade volume is not at the top lines of import or export. In fact such mutualistic products glue the skeleton of the world trade while the nestedness concept allows to rank them in order of their importance. The time evolution of this EcoloRanking of products of WTN is shown in Fig. 6 for import/export in comparison with the product ranking by the monetary trade volume (since the trade matrix is diagonal in product index the ranking of products in the latter case is the same for import/export). The top and middle panels have dominate colors corresponding to machinery (SITC 7; blue) and mineral fuels (3; black) with a moderate contribution of chemicals (5; yellow) and manufactured articles (8; cyan) and a small fraction of goods classified by material (6; green). Even if the global structure of product ranking by trade volume has certain similarities with import EcoloRanking there are also important new elements. Indeed,

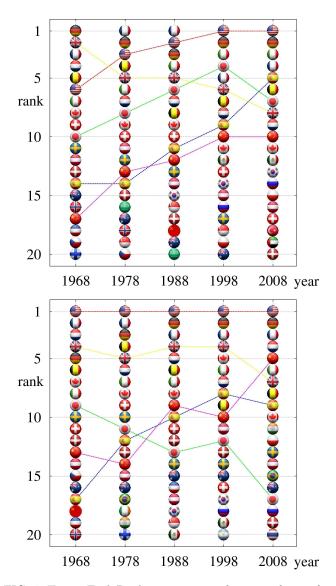


FIG. 4: Top 20 EcoloRank countries as a function of years for the WTN import/export on top/bottom panels. The ranking is given by the nestedness algorithm [17] for the trade threshold  $\mu = 10^{-3}$ ; each country is represented by its corresponding flag. As an example, dashed lines show time evolution of the following countries: USA, UK, Japan, China, Spain.

in 2008 the mutualistic significance of petroleum products (SITC 332), machindus (machines for special industries 718) and medpharm (medical-pharmaceutic products 541) is much higher compared to their volume ranking, while petroleum crude (331) and office machines (714) have smaller mutualistic significance compared to their volume ranking.

The new element of EcoloRanking is that it differentiates between import and export products while for trade volume they are ranked in the same way. Indeed, the dominant colors for export (Fig. 6 bottom panel) correspond to food (SITC 0; red) with contribution of black (present in import) and crude mate-

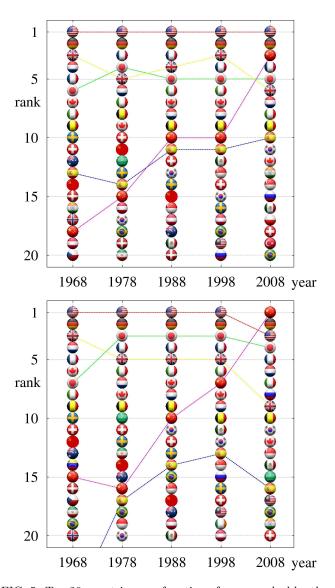


FIG. 5: Top 20 countries as a function of years ranked by the total monetary trade volume of the WTN in import/export on top/bottom panels respectively; each country is represented by its corresponding flag. Dashed lines show time evolution of the same countries as in Fig. 4.

rials (2; violet); followed by cyan (present in import) and more pronounced presence of *finnotclass* (commodities/transactions not classified 9; brown). EcoloRanking of export shows a clear decrease tendency of dominance of SITC0 and SITC2 with time and increase of importance of SITC3,7. It is interesting to note that petroleum products SITC332 is vary vulnerable in volume ranking due to significant variations of petroleum prices but in EcoloRanking this product keeps the stable top positions in all years showing its mutualistic structural importance for the world trade. EoloRanking of export shows also importance of fish (SITC031), clothing (SITC841) and fruits (SITC051) which are placed on higher positions compared to their volume ranking. At the same time

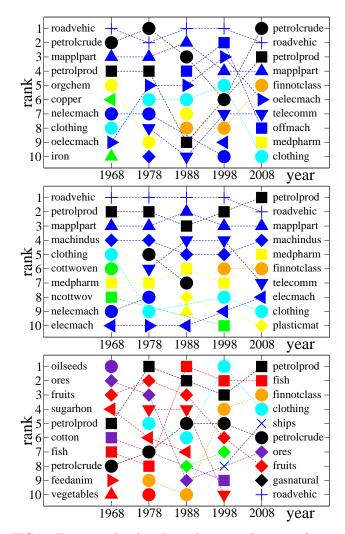


FIG. 6: Top 10 ranks of trade products as a function of years for the WTN. Top panel: ranking of products by monetary trade volume; middle/bottom panels: ranking is given by the nestedness algorithm [17] for import/export with the trade threshold  $\mu = 10^{-3}$ . Each product is shown by its own symbol with short name written at years 1968, 2008; symbol color marks 1st SITC digit; SITC codes of products and their names are given in Table II of SI.

*roadvehic* (SITC732), which are at top volume ranking, have relatively low ranking in export since only a few countries dominate the production of road vehicules.

It is interesting to note that in Fig. 6 petroleum crude is at the top of trade volume ranking e.g. in 2008 (top panel) but it is absent in import EcoloRanking (middle panel) and it is only on 6th position in export EcoloRanking (bottom panel). A similar feature is visible for years 1968, 1978. On a first glance this looks surprising but in fact for mutualistic EcoloRanking it is important that a given product is imported from top EcoloRank countries: this is definitely not the case for petroleum crude which practically is not produced inside top 10 import EcoloRank countries (the only exception is USA, which however also does not export much). Due to that reason this product has low mutualistic significance.

The mutualistic concept of product importance is at the origin of significant difference of EcoloRanking of countries compared to the usual trade volume ranking (see Fig. 4, Fig. 5). Indeed, in the latter case China and Japan are at the dominant positions but their trade is concentrated in specific products which mutualistic role is relatively low. In contrast USA, Germany and France keep top three EcoloRank positions during almost 40 years clearly demonstrating their mutualistic power and importance for the world trade.

In conclusion, our results show the universal features of ecologic ranking of complex networks with promising future applications to trade, finance and other areas.

Acknowledgments: We thank Arlene Adriano and Matthias Reister (UN COMTRADE) for provided help and friendly access to the database [16].

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## SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Here we present the Supporting Information (SI) for the main part of the paper.

In Fig. S-1, in a complement to Fig. 1, we show the normalized WTN matrix for import  $m^{(i)}$  and export  $m^{(e)}$  at additional year 1978,1988,1998. As in Fig. 1 all products and countries are ordered in a decreasing order of product (p = 1, ..., N - p) and country  $(c = 1, ..., N_c)$ import (left panels) and export (right panels) in a given year. These data show that the global distribution remains stable in time: indeed, the global monetary trade volume was increased by a factor 100 from year 1962 to 2008 (see e.g. Fig. 5 in [20]) but the shape of the distribution remained essentially the same.

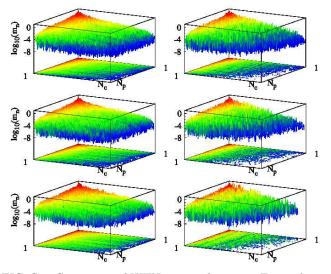


FIG. S-1: Same type of WTN matrix data as in Fig. 1 shown for years 1978, 1988, 1998 in panels from bottom to top respectively.

The dependence of the fraction  $\varphi$  of nonzero elements of the mutualistic matrices of import  $Q^{(i)}$  and export  $Q^{(e)}$  on the cutoff threshold  $\mu$  is shown in Fig. S-2. In the range of  $10^{-6} \le \mu \le 10^{-2}$  there is a smooth relatively weak variation of  $\varphi$  with  $\mu$ .

In Fig. S-3, in addition to Fig. 2, we show the nestedness matrices of WTN at various values of the cutoff threshold  $\mu$ . The data at various  $\mu$  values show that in

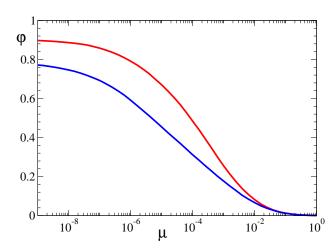


FIG. S-2: The fraction  $\varphi$  of nonzero matrix elements for the mutualistic network matrices of import  $Q^{(i)}$  and export  $Q^{(e)}$  as a function of the cutoff trade threshold  $\mu$  for the normalized WTN matrices  $m^{(i)}$  and  $m^{(e)}$  for the year 2008; the red curve shows the case of import while the blue curve shows the case of export network.

all cases the nestedness algorithm [17] correctly generates a matrix with nestedness structure.

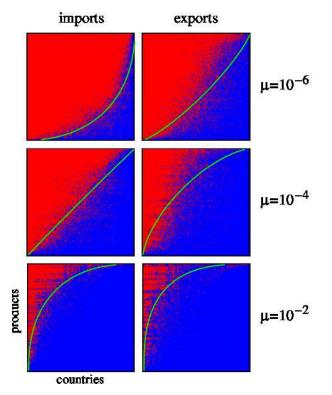


FIG. S-3: Same as in Fig. 2: nestedness matrix for the WTN data in 2008 shown for the threshold values  $\mu = 10^{-6}, 10^{-4}, 10^{-2}$ ) (from top to bottom); the perfectly nest-edness is shown by green curves for the corresponding values of  $\varphi$  taken from Fig. S-2.

The variation of the nestedness temperature T with time is shown in Fig. 3 and several values of the trade threshold  $\mu$ . These data show that in average the value of T for export is higher than for import. We attribute this to stronger fluctuations of matrix elements of  $m^{(e)}$ compared to those of  $m^{(e)}$  that is well visible in Figs. 1,S-1. As it is pointed in the main part, we attribute this to the fact that e.g. only a few countries export petroleum crude while the great majority of countries import this product.

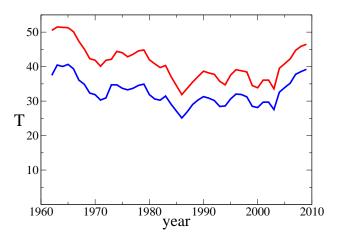


FIG. S-4: Nestedness temperature T for the model given by random generated networks; here T is computed with 500 random realisations of network for each year using  $N_p$ ,  $N_c$  and  $\varphi$ of the corresponding WTN data in this year at  $\mu = 10^{-3}$ ; import/export data are shown by red/blue curves respectively.

In Fig. S-4 we show the nestedness temperature dependence on time for the case of random generated networks which have the same fraction of nonzero matrix elements  $\varphi$  as the WTN at the given year and  $\mu = 10^{-3}$ . These data, compared with those of Fig. 3, really demonstrate that the real WTN has values of T by a factor 5 (export) to 10 (import) smaller comparing to the random networks. This confirm the nestedness structure of WTN being similar to the case of ecology networks discussed in [12]. It is interesting to note that for random generated networks the values of T for import are larger than for export while to the WTN we have the opposite relation. The histogram of distribution of T for random generated networks for all years 1962-2009 is shown in Fig. S-5. Even minimal values of T remain several times larger than the WTN values of T.

In Fig. S-6 we show the dependence of T on the trade threshold  $\mu$  for the WTN data in year 2008. We see that there is only about 10-20% of variation of T for the range  $10^{-5} \leq \mu \leq 10^{-3}$ . Even for a much larger range  $10^{-6} \leq \mu \leq 10^{-2}$  the variation of T remains smooth and remains in the bounds of 100%. This confirms the stability of nestedness temperature in respect to broad range variations of  $\mu$ . We present the majority of our data for  $\mu = 10^{-3}$  which is approximately located in the flat range of T variation in year 2008. The data of Table I for EcoloRanking of countries at two different values of

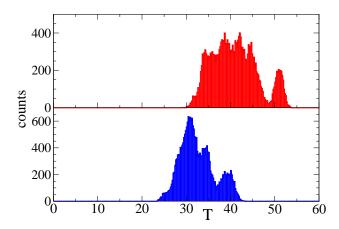


FIG. S-5: Histogram of temperatures for 500 random generated networks per year (from 1962 to 2009). Top (bottom) panel represents import (export) data; here the parameter values of  $N_p$ ,  $N_c$  and  $\varphi$  are as for the corresponding WTN years at  $\mu = 10^{-3}$ .

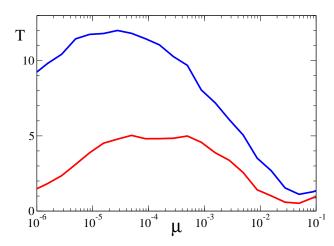


FIG. S-6: Nestedness temperature in the WTN at year 2008 as a function of threshold  $\mu$ ; imports/exports networks are shown by red/blue curves respectively.

 $\mu$  in year 2008 confirm the stability of this nestedness ordering. At the same time larger values of  $\mu$  stress the importance of countries with a large trade volume, e.g. the position of China in export goes up from rank 5 at  $\mu = 10^{-3}$  to rank 3 at  $\mu = 10^{-2}$ .

In Table I we present trade volume ranking and EcoloRanking of top 20 countries for import/export of WTN in year 2008.

In Table II we give the notations and symbols for Fig. 6 with corresponding SITC Rev1 codes and names. The list of all SITC Rev1 codes is available at [16] (see file http://unstats.un.org/unsd/tradekb/Attachment193.aspx). The colors of symbols in Fig. 4 mark the first digit of SITC Rev1 code: 0 - red (Food and live animals); 1 - does not appear in Fig. 4 (Beverages and tobacco); 2 - violet (Crude materials, inedible, except fuels); 3 black (Mineral fuels, lubricants and related materials); 4 - does not appear in Fig. 4 (Animal and vegetable oils and fats); 5 - yellow (Chemicals); 6 - green (Manufact goods classified chiefly by material); 7 - blue (Machinery and transport equipment); 8 - cyan (Miscellaneous manufactured articles); 9 - brown (Commod. and transacts. Not class. Accord. To kind).

		import			export	
Rank	Money	$\mu = 10^{-3}$	$\mu = 10^{-2}$	Money	$\mu = 10^{-3}$	$\mu = 10^{-2}$
1	USA	USA	USA	China	USA	USA
2	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany	Germany
3	China	Italy	France	USA	France	China
4	France	France	UK	Japan	Netherlands	France
5	Japan	Spain	Italy	France	China	Italy
6	UK	Belgium	Netherlands	Netherlands	Italy	Netherlands
7	Netherlands	Japan	Belgium	Italy	UK	Belgium
8	Italy	UK	Japan	Russian Fed.	Belgium	UK
9	Belgium	Netherlands	China	UK	Spain	Japan
10	Canada	China	Spain	Belgium	Canada	Spain
11	Spain	Canada	Canada	Canada	India	Canada
12	Rep. of Korea	Mexico	Russian Fed.	Rep. of Korea	Poland	Switzerland
13	Russian Fed.	Rep. of Korea	Rep. of Korea	Mexico	Sweden	India
14	Mexico	Russian Fed.	Switzerland	Saudi Arab	Austria	Rep. of Korea
15	Singapore	Poland	Austria	Singapore	Brazil	Poland
16	India	Austria	Poland	Spain	Australia	Turkey
17	Poland	Switzerland	Sweden	Malaysia	Japan	Czech Rep.
18	Switzerland	Turkey	Mexico	Brazil	Russian Fed.	Austria
19	Turkey	U. Arab Emir.	India	India	Denmark	Thailand
20	Brazil	Denmark	Singapore	Switzerland	Thailand	Denmark

TABLE I: Top 20 ranks of countries for import and export with ranking by the monetary trade volume and by the nestedness algorithm at two threshold values  $\mu$  (year 2008).

TABLE II: Product names for SITC Rev1 3–digit code used in Fig. 4  $\,$ 

Symbol	Code	Abbreviation	Name
•	001	animals	Live animals
	031	fish	Fish, fresh & simply preserved
•	051	fruits	Fruit, fresh, and nuts excl. Oil nuts
<b>A</b>	054	vegetables	Vegetables, roots & tubers, fresh or dried
•	061	sugarhon	Sugar and honey
▼	071	coffee	Coffee
	081	feedanim	Feed. stuff for animals excl. unmilled cereals
•	221	oilseeds	Oil seeds, oil nuts and oil kernels
	263	cotton	Cotton
•	283	ores	Ores & concentrates of non ferrous base metals
•	331	petrolcrude	Petroleum, crude and partly refined
	332	petrolprod	Petroleum products
•	341	gas	Gas, natural and manufactured
•	512	orgchem	Organic chemicals
	541	medpharm	Medicinal & pharmaceutical products
•	581	plasticmat	Plastic materials, regenerd. cellulose & resins
<b>A</b>	599	chemmat	Chemical materials and products, nes
•	652	$\operatorname{cottwoven}$	Cotton fabrics, woven ex. narrow or spec.fabrics
	653	ncottwov	Text fabrics woven ex narrow, spec, not cotton
•	667	pearlsprec	Pearls and precious and semi precious stones
<b>A</b>	674	iron	Universals, plates and sheets of iron or steel
•	682	copper	Copper
•	711	nelecmach	Power generating machinery, other than electric
	714	offmach	Office machines
•	718	machindus	Machines for special industries
<b></b>	719	mapplpart	Machinery and appliances non electrical parts
•	722	elecmach	Electric power machinery and switchgear
▼	724	telecomm	Telecommunications apparatus
	729	oelecmach	Other electrical machinery and apparatus
+	732	roadvehicles	Road motor vehicles
×	735	ships	Ships and boats
•	841	clothing	Clothing except fur clothing
•	931	finnotclass	Special transactions not classd. accord.to kind