



WTO Annual Agriculture Symposium 2024

Trade and Nutrition - Exploring the Nexus

BIG TAKE AWAYS

“Malnutrition in all its forms is a fundamental root cause of a wide range of economic and social issues.

Afshan Khan,
Assistant Secretary-General
of the United Nations,
Coordinator of the Scaling Up
Nutrition (SUN) Movement.

“The WTO and its Members could have a bigger impact on nutrition than UNICEF.

Lawrence Haddad,
Executive Director,
Global Alliance for Improved
Nutrition (GAIN).

“International trade closes the nutrition gap.

Maximo Torero,
Chief Economist
Food and Agriculture,
Organization of the United
Nations (FAO).

- International trade is fundamental to both food security and nutrition security. As food and agriculture trade nearly quintupled in value between 2000 and 2022, the energy carried by food trade more than doubled since 2000, reaching 5000 trillion kilocalories in 2021. The diversity of food increased on average almost twofold in every country thanks to trade.
- Food trade can affect nutrition through multiple pathways: openness to food trade promotes higher availability, greater diversity, and a more stable food supply throughout seasons. It can lower prices, spur economic growth, thereby improving access to food and accelerating the nutrition transition (*i.e.*, the dietary change with income growth, urbanization, and changing demographics).
- The complex linkages between trade and diets and the resulting nutrition outcomes, however, can make trade both a blessing and a curse for nutrition. Easier access through trade to ultra-processed foods that are high in salt, fat and sugar and low in micronutrients, can lead to malnutrition, obesity, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs). This link is highly context-specific, with lower-income countries particularly affected. Factors for this link include a rapid nutrition transition following late integration into the global economy; urbanization creating the need for more convenient food; long shelf life and lower prices of ultra-processed foods; and lower investment in traditional foods.
- Malnutrition in all its forms is prevalent and affects all countries. Fifty per cent of child deaths have malnutrition as a cause; obesity and overweight affect 45 percent of adults worldwide; and more than 2 billion people suffer from some form of micronutrient deficiencies. While some indicators such as child stunting rate are improving, the improvement is not fast enough to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

- In the Pacific region, leaders have recently reconfirmed their commitment to tackle the malnutrition and NCDs crisis by scaling up actions and addressing the root causes of NCDs through a holistic, whole-of-society approach. Other countries, such as Chile, have experienced a post nutrition-transition stage during which undernutrition falls dramatically while obesity becomes prevalent. Chile implemented a range of policies to improve the food environment, including front-of-package labelling, bans on advertising targeting children, and R&D in the sustainable production of traditional crops.
- Trade has a critical role to play in closing nutrient gaps. To do so, trade policies must better align with the goal of better health and nutrition. The key is to use the right incentives to increase the availability and accessibility of nutritious foods. Relevant policies can include lowering tariffs (which are often higher for healthier foods), repurposing subsidies, and designing appropriate regulatory and fiscal framework to encourage the production and consumption of nutritious foods.
- Achieving the right policy mix requires effective coordination within different government departments, as well as among governments and all relevant stakeholders in the food system. Strategic and coherent policy design would also need: better awareness of the food system's negative health externalities, and their consequent public health costs; a transparent and evidence-based approach including the use of nutrition classification systems for foods; and capacity building in both trade and health communities to better appreciate their intersections.
- Science and innovation lie at the core of enhancing nutrition outcomes. Synthetic fertilizer and yield improvement technology are among the key scientific achievements in this regard. Innovations in biotechnology and digital agriculture technologies will further productivity growth and increase the resilience and sustainability of the agri-food sector in the face of climate change.
- The WTO rulebook has a crucial role to play in ensuring policy coherence between trade and nutrition. Agreements on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS) and Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT) provide ample room for Members to design policies to achieve the legitimate goals of health and nutrition, while ensuring that such policies are grounded in science and do not unnecessarily obstruct trade. Agreements such as the Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) facilitate trade in nutritious produce that is often perishable, while the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) helps to protect IP rights that are critical to innovation in seed, food, feed and fertilizer.

“ For Samoa, as a net-food importing developing country, we need support, and we look to the WTO and our partners to build capacity and to make sure that the food we import is safe and nutritious.

Nella Tavita-Levy,
Ambassador,
Permanent representative
of Samoa to the World Trade
Organization (WTO).

“ Seeds are the starting point of nutrition security, and no country is seed independent in all crops it plants.

Michael Keller,
Secretary General,
International Seed Federation
(ISF).

“ DG Okonjo-Iweala stated last week that agricultural negotiations are a top priority of her second term.

Jean-Marie Paugam,
Deputy Director General,
World Trade Organization
(WTO).