

Curbing excess food consumption and waste

Amongst the challenges of improving the management of food is the need to curb over-consumption and waste of food, and to reduce the high risks of an income-induced dietary transition towards the health damaging eating habits already adopted by many high-income consumers. It would, of course, be up to countries to adopt what they consider as the best ways of doing this. These could include consumer education aimed at inducing lifestyle changes, standard setting (e.g. on food labelling and packaging), codes of conduct or compacts with food processors and retailers aimed at ensuring that purchases are sourced from sustainable production systems, and differential value-added taxation on foods.

The most controversial of the above options is differential taxation. It has the advantage that it would not only provide an incentive to change eating and food wastage habits but also generate fiscal income with which to fund remedial actions both within the concerned country and possibly in other countries. It would be possible to design taxation systems to ensure that there would be no rise in the cost of staple foods for low-income consumers and to exempt sustainably produced and fair trade foods from tax-induced price rises. At the same time, governments could apply substantial taxes on *high footprint* foods, favoured by high- and middle-income consumers. In this way they would begin to internalise, within the price that buyers pay for these foods, the currently uncounted costs of environmental damage, GHG emissions, rising future public health expenditures and exploitative labour conditions in the food system. On the assumption that many such consumers will continue to eat to excess in spite of high taxes, this should generate substantial incremental revenue.

The pace at which effective policy changes are introduced will depend on the level and types of incentives given to countries to adopt them in the face of likely consumer resistance. And so we propose that international support should be provided to encourage countries to subscribe to a voluntary **Global Mechanism to Cut Food Waste and Over-Consumption**, built on principles similar to those of the existing Clean Development Mechanism for emissions trading. This would create a tradable quota system through which nations failing to bring average consumption progressively down to more sustainable and healthy levels, could buy entitlements to over-consume from grossly under-consuming countries. Countries that are eligible to sell entitlements would be required to invest the proceeds in measures to end hunger, improve childhood nutrition, cut future population growth and take up sustainable food production systems. The concept of this mechanism is outlined in the following box.

Box. A Global Mechanism to Cut Food Waste and Over-Consumption

Governments of countries concerned about over-consumption of food would set themselves annual targets for progressively bringing down average food availability for human consumption from base-year levels towards, say, 3,000 Kcal and 100 g protein per day by a given year (e.g. 2025 or 2050). They would establish a system of self-imposed penalties, to be paid by the State, related to a failure to meet these goals (e.g. \$x per inhabitant per 100 Kcal or 10 g protein over-run). The proceeds would be used to buy the right to over-consume from under-consuming countries (e.g. countries with over 10% of their population undernourished). These commitments would be incremental to any existing aid commitments.

Recipient countries would use these funds for certified investments that would add to their efforts to reduce population growth, provide social protection for poor families, improve early childhood nutrition, support expansion of sustainable farming and fishing methods etc. Funds could be made available for budget or programme support either through bilateral or multilateral channels (e.g. UN agencies, international development banks), and would include resources to cover the costs of certifying that the money had been properly used for the intended purposes.

At the international level, voluntary guidelines would be prepared for the design and implementation of programmes for curbing over-consumption and for the use of any funds by under-consuming countries, including certification arrangements. They could also include indicative consumption reduction targets. Participating governments would declare their commitments and report periodically at the international level (for instance to the Committee on World Food Security - the CFS) on their performance vis-à-vis their self-imposed goals, and share information on successful policies and programmes.

The success of the mechanism will depend very much on how ambitiously over-consuming countries set their targets. The more ambitious they are, the higher the chance of non-attainment and the larger the volume of resources to be mobilized to fight hunger. But even if less ambitious targets are set and achieved, this would still be a step in the right direction and result in health and environmental benefits.

Source: Trueba, I. & MacMillan, A., *How to End Hunger in Times of Crises*, UPM Press, 2011