



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations



# Expert Consultation on trade and nutrition

15-16 November 2016  
FAO Headquarters  
Mexico Room (D-213)

## Background and objectives

The relationship between trade, food security and nutrition is attracting increased attention on both the trade and the development agenda. The global eradication of hunger by 2030 is a key goal in the new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and trade is one of the means of achieving this goal. In addition, the outcome documents of the Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2) acknowledge that trade can play an important role in achieving nutritional targets. In view of the commitments made in the Rome Declaration on Nutrition and the recommendations put forward in the Framework for Action<sup>1</sup>, there is a need to explore how trade and trade policies can be conducive to improving nutrition.

<sup>1</sup> ICN2 Framework for Action includes:

- Recommendation 17: Encourage governments, United Nations agencies, programmes and funds, the World Trade Organization and other international organizations to identify opportunities to achieve global food and nutrition targets, through trade and investment policies.
- Recommendation 18: Improve the availability and access of the food supply through appropriate trade agreements and policies and endeavour to ensure that such agreements and policies do not have a negative impact on the right to adequate food in other countries.

<http://www.fao.org/3/a-mm215e.pdf>

Malnutrition represents a global challenge that encompasses three separate dimensions: undernourishment, or a lack of food energy or protein; undernutrition or micronutrient deficiencies; and over-nutrition, manifest in overweight and obesity. There is growing evidence that all three forms of malnutrition can coexist, not only in the same country but even within the same family (FAO, 2015). This co-existence is known as “the triple burden of malnutrition”, with relative weights gradually shifting from under-nutrition to over-nutrition. Indeed, the global share of undernourished people has decreased from 23.3 percent in 1990–92 to 12.9 per cent in 2015, while overweight and obesity are constantly rising. With this shift, the focus in the debate is moving from hunger and undernutrition to overweight and obesity and the public health concerns associated with them.

These shifts in the relative importance of different forms of malnutrition are also reflected in the research agenda on nutrition. While the links between trade and food security/hunger have received substantial attention in the literature, including in the recent issue of FAO’s flagship publication *The State of Agricultural Commodity Markets 2015-2016*, the linkages between trade and other forms of malnutrition are less well understood. Even less so are the links between trade and diets or trade policies and diets. There is, for instance, little empirical evidence on how changes in trade policies and patterns affect the nutritional status of a population and how trade can affect the physical and economic access to safe and nutritious food. There is even less empirical evidence on how trade as well as domestic food and agricultural policies affect diets and nutritional outcomes.

At the same time, there are growing concerns that the transition towards an energy-dense and imbalanced diet has contributed to overweight, obesity and diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs). This shift in the diet often comes with higher intakes of meat, eggs and other livestock products, as well as sugar, fats and oils, often in the form of convenience and fast food. This nutrition transition is said to be driven by many factors, some of which may be rooted in agriculture. Frequently mentioned are factors such as the rapid technological progress in agriculture and food processing, innovations in food distribution systems and changes in the international trade policy regime, as well as global phenomena such as urbanization and economic growth. But trade and domestic food policies can also have an impact on countries abroad; not only can they permanently change the consumption patterns and the healthiness of diets in importing countries, they also have the potential to marginalize producers and processors in countries abroad.

The empirical evidence on how trade has actually changed the patterns of consumption is still rather limited. At the broadest level, trade can improve the availability and affordability of different foods, add to a wider choice for consumers, but also help smooth food supply and buffer domestic production shocks. How exactly trade and changes in policies can affect diets is less straightforward and less researched. Better analysis of the effects of trade and trade policies on diets and evidence from specific country cases are needed. Such analysis would provide the basis for a greater coherence between trade policy and nutrition and enable a common understanding of the opportunities and the risks of trade policy reform from a nutrition perspective. Eventually, it would help identify policy options that ensure freer trade with co-benefits for improved nutrition.

This expert meeting is intended to explore these and related issues around the relationship between trade and nutrition. It will address the role of trade in the “nutrition transition” and the extent to which trade and trade policies can be either detrimental to, or supportive of improved nutrition. It will also look at the impacts of changes in trade and domestic policies on food availability at home and in countries abroad and how these policies can change dietary patterns.

The invited experts will present their findings in these areas during prepared interventions; an open debate in each session will help consolidate and refine the results as well as identify knowledge gaps and future research. In particular, the following questions will be addressed:

- How have diets evolved in developed and developing countries? Have diets become healthier over time? What are the prospects towards 2050?
- What have been the main drivers of changing diets and the “nutrition transition”? What are the impacts of globalisation, trans-national companies, urbanisation and market liberalization? How will these drivers change diets over the decades to come?
- How do agricultural (domestic and trade) policies affect nutrition outcomes of the countries that implement them and their trading partners? What trade and agricultural policy options can generate co-benefits for nutrition? Should trade policies be used to pursue nutritional outcomes or be kept focused on trade policy goals?