# Global Forum on Food Security and Nutrition (FSN Forum)

## Are there any successful policies and programmes to fight overweight and obesity?

A yet unaddressed facet of this debate concerns the role of international trade and trade policy in promoting or preventing obesity and overweight.

Trade contributes to food security where it increases food availability. Trade liberalisation can stimulate hitherto protected local production, increase its efficiency and resilience along the food value chain, and thereby mitigate local food insecurity. In theory, even poor consumers can then better choose the diet which is best for them.

Safe but unhealthy food, whether locally produced or imported, cannot be prohibited. But eating today is not only a matter of free, informed choice. Obesity and overweight are related to trade rules in goods, services, and intellectual property. In a world of trade liberalisation and growing interdependence this interaction must be continuously reviewed.

Better and more food production is an issue here. Productivity increases along the global food chain, and global branding and partly government-sponsored market promotion also increase trade in expensive but not necessarily healthier foods. Agricultural policy space, little constrained by trade and investment agreements, allows countries to at least partly protect their farmers from foreign competitors and to enjoy bumper harvests without producer prices crashing or health problems increasing. With the help of farm subsidies and risk insurance support powerful operators from rich and from some emerging economies are now able to compete, despite higher production and transport costs, even on remote markets. They can simply offload their low-end products and food surpluses – and their obesity problems – on the world market, at virtually zero cost.

Unfettered free trade can thus increase inequalities of income and of access to healthy diets. Without accompanying measures trade may actually increase obesity and overweight.

Health considerations should therefore play a bigger role in trade policy formulation. Many measures proposed by international health experts on obesity and diets show a more or less strong correlation between the relevant trade rules and the presently available evidence on effectiveness. This is a matter of maximising benefits and minimising risks. For instance, tariff reductions for health-promoting products, or binding market access commitments for health services should thus be reviewed jointly between trade and health agencies, including their timing. On the other side, health authorities should look at the relevant trade rules when they assess the merits of a fat tax or of consumer information with a “traffic light label” showing the weight impact of certain foods. Governments should also aim at a better use of health-supporting goods and health services. This would improve efficiency of scarce resources. Finally, trade and investment rules can also enhance and facilitate a number of non-discriminatory health measures and private operator actions.

The lack of coordination both at the international and the national levels appear as a serious although surmountable problem. Several examples of trade frictions show that the lack of legally binding health and dietary standards impairs national implementation measures and makes them vulnerable to legal challenges in WTO litigation, not to mention parochial interests of junk food exporters and of inefficient local producers of unhealthy foodstuffs. This means that intergovernmental health, trade and financial agencies must improve their own governance and mutual support with the help of their member governments and of private operators – and by listening to advice from concerned citizens and from the scholarship.

From an obesity and overweight mitigation perspective most important and urgent, therefore, are better cooperation, standard-setting, and synchronisation between all concerned stakeholders, both at the national and international levels, especially in a process accompanying a rapidly progressing globalisation and trade liberalisation.

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