

VIRTUAL WTO AGRICULTURE SYMPOSIUM 2020 - AGRICULTURAL TRADE AND
FOOD SYSTEM TRANSFORMATION

"Big Take-Aways – Session Three - AGRICULTURAL TRADE, NUTRITIONAL DIVERSITY"

- The Nutrition Challenge is a Paradox of Sorts: Multiple forms of malnutrition exist simultaneously. One in 10 people worldwide is food insecure. Lack of sufficient nutrition stunts the growth of around 144 million children. Yet, 600 million people are obese, and the problem is growing. These dualities are visible in low and middle-income countries, and also affect the developed world. The problem is particularly acute when nutrition disparities are seen within the bounds of a single household; for example, when some members of the household are obese, but others undernourished. This is cause for concern in an era where 20% of global diseases are due to unhealthy diets. The affordability and accessibility of a healthy diet are thus central issues to the nutrition debate, especially in Africa where healthcare systems are fragile and much of the "good calories" embodied in fruits and vegetables are exported to Europe. But even in Europe, one panellist pointed out, millions struggle to access quality meals regularly. Meanwhile, the region generates 88 million tonnes of food waste per year. Food waste and environmental damage are among the many concerns of stakeholders in the food system. Poor nutrition, and related health concerns, have also negatively impacted labour productivity, leading for instance to absenteeism.
 - The Role of International Trade: Advocates of open trade argue that trade contributes to the diversity of the human diet and steadies the supply of food. The Panel focused on the "how"; i.e. on the importance of considering the kind of food that is traded. Food which has long shelf-life, for example, is often heavily processed and may not be the healthiest choice. Citing the examples of teff from Ethiopia becoming scarce when international demand turned it into a cash crop, panellists called for a cost-benefit analysis of the impact of international trade on local communities (teff is a multipurpose crop which has a high importance for the Ethiopian diet and culture). Other cases were pointed to, such as South Africa that produces but does not consume enough fruits and vegetables.
 - Policy Incentives for Good Nutrition: Government interventions are crucial to leveraging the benefits of trade in food. Governments, in collaboration with the private sector, need to ensure that products are marketed responsibly and transparently. Taxation may be an effective tool to alter the cost of unhealthy food and disincentivize their purchase by consumers – as Mexico did successfully with sugary drinks. Regulation has also been effective in disciplining the marketing of food and beverages to children in the UK. Reformulation guidelines were another successful tool in the elimination of trans-fats. Nevertheless, the final and perhaps most important challenge is that of changing consumer behaviour, which requires coordinated efforts between governments, industry, international organizations and consumers themselves.
 - Looking ahead: Panellists called for sustainable food production and consumption; taking a planetary perspective to the food system. Multi-stakeholder engagement to reform international trade in food, address the SDGs, and tackle the multiple food system challenges, were all central elements to the discussion and would be taken up at the UN Food Systems Summit of 2021.
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