



Concept Note: Pre-Event Session of the Geneva International Forum on Food Safety and Trade

Title: “Food safety, healthy diets and trade”

Tuesday, 23 April 2019; 11:30-13:00 hours

The globalization of trade, which has contributed to food availability and diversification throughout the world, has also increased the chances that the food produced in one place will affect the health and diet of people living in another. As a result, global efforts on food safety and nutrition, including the establishment of evidence- and consensus-based international standards on food safety and nutrition, with wide stakeholder participation in their development, are more important than ever before.

The importance of this is evidenced by the large burden of food-and diet- related disorders and illness. The global burden of foodborne disease falls disproportionately on children under age five and on the populations of low- and middle-income countries in Asia and Africa. According to the World Bank, low- and middle-income countries are estimated, in aggregate, to experience a productivity loss of some USD 95 billion per year because of unsafe food. Similarly, excessive intake of calories can lead to obesity and to conditions such as diabetes mellitus, coronary heart disease, cancer, hypertension and stroke. On the other hand, the lack of sufficient food and vitamin and mineral deficiencies also causes enormous numbers of deaths and disabilities. Unsafe food and malnutrition undermine food and nutritional security, human development, the broader food economy, international trade, and countries’ potential for sustainable development.

The Codex Alimentarius Commission was created with the objective of developing and publishing food standards in a “food code” that would protect public health and ensure fair practices in food trade. It is the single most important international reference for food standards. Since its inception in 1963, the Codex Alimentarius Commission has developed hundreds of such voluntary international standards and provided guidance to support its members in improving food safety and nutrition globally. Its standard and related texts cover an impressively wide range of subjects of international relevance having to do with biotechnology, pesticides, pathogens, additives and contaminants, food labelling, reference values for nutrients (particularly those related to the risk of non-communicable diseases) and many other areas.

Underlying drivers of changing diets, food safety and trade

Income growth, urbanisation, and globalization are considered as the main drivers of changing dietary preferences and consumption patterns.

Changes in the food systems and subsequently the food environments are facilitating the changing patterns of consumption. These include relative price changes, investments in staple crops production and in infrastructure, including roads and storage, lower transport costs, investment in food processing and retailing and in market facilities. These factors also include food standards and regulations, agricultural support policies and other trade policies. Together, these factors can influence prices, availability and consumer preferences.

Expanding trade has increased availability and affordability of food, and affected food safety and quality, since traded foods need to satisfy inspection and safety standards. Trade has also contributed to the stability of food supplies and prices by smoothing seasonal fluctuations in availability and the negative effects of domestic supply shocks. This is ever more important in the context of climate change, considering the significant risks to agricultural production in low-latitude regions. At the same time, there is apparent

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international convergence in food consumption patterns. Multinational food companies and supermarkets may be associated with these dietary changes.

Further research is needed to improve the understanding of the impact of these key drivers, and thus provide the evidence base on which better policy choices can be made.

Trade, healthy diets and food safety

The relationship between food trade and access to healthy diets is attracting increased attention on both the trade and the development agendas. The global eradication of hunger by 2030 is a key goal in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and trade is one of the means of achieving this goal. The Second International Conference on Nutrition (ICN2 held in 2014) acknowledged that trade can play an important role in achieving nutritional targets, and encouraged governments, among others, to identify opportunities to achieve global food and nutrition targets through trade and investment policies.

The quest for a healthy diet through food systems transformation would be incomplete without the total integration of policies addressing food safety hazards control across the entire system. There can be no healthy diets without food safety. Ironically, the nutritious foods that contribute to healthy diets – such as fruits and vegetables, nuts, legumes, and seafood – are the most susceptible to food safety hazards. As per WHO (2015), nearly one in ten people fall ill every year from eating unsafe food, with 420,000 dying as a result and low-income countries being the most affected.

Regulations, standards and policy options

Policies and programmes aimed at the food system, its economic environment and directly at food consumers can affect prices, preferences, access and availability at all stages of food value chains from farm production and trade through processing, distribution and retailing to the final consumer. Such policies include:

- Nutrition labelling: Labelling is an important interface between producers and consumers. A growing number of governments now require additional nutritional information on food products, in the form of front-of-pack labelling, giving consumers a visual representation of the amount of certain substances, such as sugar, fat and salt to motivate consumers to make healthier overall dietary choices. However, the proliferation of a wide range of uncoordinated schemes across different countries has led to discussion in the WTO TBT Committee in recent years regarding the potential inconsistency with existing Codex standards and the provisions of the WTO TBT Agreement. The ongoing work in the Codex Committee on Food Labelling is focusing on establishing common principles for such schemes.
- Information and market policies: A number of policies aim at influencing consumer behaviour directly in favour of healthier diets, including advertising restrictions, public information campaigns and nutrition education. Other policies target more at changing the market environment, for example, the regulation of school environments, policies to promote product reformulation and measures targeting the accessibility of healthy foods and availability of unhealthy foods. Such policies can be targeted and effective which has led to their increasing adoption.
- Food taxes: Many countries are instituting taxes on foods, especially on sugar-sweetened beverages, high fat and high salt containing foods. The aim is to make nutritionally inferior foods more expensive relative to healthier alternatives, thus shifting long-term dietary habits. The short-term consumption impacts may depend on the level of the tax. As part of a policy mix, in particular together with adequately funded (e.g. from the food tax revenues) and well-planned nutrition education for behaviour change programs, for example, could shift consumption in favour of healthier alternatives provided these are readily available.

Moreover, recently, the EAT-Lancet Commission (2019) recommended among other strategies: (i) the need for global and national commitments to shift towards healthy diets; (ii) major improvement in food production practices; and (iii) increased efforts to reduce food loss and waste.

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Considering the high cost to human lives from unhealthy diets, some have called for a global framework convention similar to the convention on Tobacco control, that sets out an agreed regulatory and policy framework to tackle the negative health and environmental effects of the current food systems (The Lancet Obesity Commission, 2019).

Objectives of the session:

- To raise awareness that food safety is important but not sufficient to ensure healthy diets. More needs to be done in this regard
- To discuss the interlinkages between food safety, healthy diets and trade
- To provide a forum to debate and identify options and possible measures that could help in promoting a safe and healthy diet

TENTATIVE PROGRAMME		
FOOD SAFETY, HEALTHY DIETS AND TRADE		
Tuesday, 23 April 2019		
11.30-13.00		
WTO Headquarters, Geneva		
11:30-11:50	<i>Welcome and Introduction</i>	Mr. Máximo Torero (Moderator) ADG, Economic and Social Development Department, FAO
		Dr. Naoko Yamamoto ADG Healthier Populations, WHO
11:50-12:20	Panel Themes	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Effectiveness of policies targeted at promoting healthier diets 	Prof. Mario Mazzocchi Professor Department of Statistical Sciences "Paolo Fortunati" University of Bologna
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Critical issues on food safety and healthy diets at international trade fora 	Mr. Erik Wijkström Counsellor Division on Trade and Environment, World Trade Organization (WTO) Secretary of the WTO TBT Committee
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Aligning national food safety policies to promote food security 	Dr. Angela Parry Hanson Kunadu Lecturer Department of Nutrition and Food Science University of Ghana
12:20-12:50	<i>Questions and Answers</i>	
12:50-13:00	<i>Conclusion / Closing Remarks</i>	Prof. José Graziano da Silva FAO Director-General Mr. Máximo Torero (Moderator)