

Achieving Sustainable Development Goal 2

Which Policies for Trade and Markets?

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SDG 2.1 and SDG 2.2: Why Open, Transparent, and Equitable Trade Is Essential to Ending Hunger and Malnutrition Sustainably

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Introduction

During the past years there have been several noteworthy global pledges on eliminating hunger, achieving food security and improved nutrition, and moving to environmentally sustainable patterns of production and consumption of food and agricultural goods. These pledges include the commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in December 2015, followed by the entry into force of the historic Paris Agreement on climate change in November 2016, and the incremental advances at the World Trade Organization (WTO) during the 9th and 10th ministerial conferences in Bali in 2013 and in Nairobi in 2015, all of which represented important steps towards building a more supportive international system for the attainment of those objectives.

However, as the limited results from the 11th Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires in December 2017 suggest, much remains to be done for humanity to be able to achieve the SDGs by 2030. This paper will briefly consider the importance of trade in achieving the SDGs and transforming food systems. The paper also highlights some key policies that are critical to achieving these goals.

Trade is Critical to Achieving SDG 2 and Transforming Food Systems

SDG 2 commits all countries to "end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture." As its first two targets, SDG 2.1 pledges to "end hunger and ensure access by all people ... to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round" by 2030, and SDG 2.2 commits countries, also by 2030, "to end all forms of malnutrition." Additionally, the targets under goal 2 promise to reach internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under five years of age, and include the commitment to "address the nutritional needs of adolescent girls, pregnant and lactating women and older persons."

The goal and targets address the triple burden of malnutrition: hunger, or insufficient intake of calories; deficiencies in proteins, vitamins, minerals, and micronutrients, also known as hidden hunger; and excess consumption of calories (sugar, fats, and others), leading to problems such as obesity, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases (Pinstrup-Andersen 2007). As will be discussed, many countries are facing multiple burdens of malnutrition, and progress on global nutrition targets is slow or moving backwards (Global Nutrition Report 2017). Adequately functioning food systems will be critical in achieving SDG 2 to eliminate all forms of malnutrition.

SDG 2 has important linkages to many other SDGs, with more than half of the goals relating to global food security and nutrition. For instance, the elimination of poverty (SDG 1) is central to ensuring food security and nutrition, and vice versa, as hunger, poverty, and malnutrition form a vicious circle. Food security and nutrition are both key drivers of other SDGs, while benefiting from their achievement, especially improved health (SDG 3), gender equality (SDG 5), and reduction of inequality (SDG 10). Moreover, food systems play key roles in responsible production and consumption (SDG 12), in maintaining sustainability of fisheries (SDG 14), and in mitigating climate change (SDG 13) while adapting to its effects (Fan 2016).

To achieve the range of goals, the global food system needs to be transformed into one that is nutrition- and health-driven, productive and efficient, environmentally sustainable and climate-smart, inclusive, and based on a diverse, competitive, and dynamic private sector. While there may be trade-offs along these dimensions, there also are complementarities. Therefore, countries, always operating with limited resources, must prioritise and define a proper sequencing of interventions to minimise the trade-offs and maximise the synergies.

A nutrition- and health-driven value chain that delivers healthy, nutritious, and sustainable diets is critical, especially as the world faces population growth, urbanisation, and increasingly intensive agricultural and industrial practices. The food system should be productive and efficient, by producing more food with fewer resources, and reducing food waste and loss, to meet current and future needs. The system must also be environmentally sustainable to minimise negative impacts on our planet, such as land degradation, deforestation, and over-use of species. The adoption of climate-smart approaches¹—including low-carbon policies, agroforestry approaches, zero-till farming, and climate-ready crop varieties—will be crucial. The global food system also needs to be inclusive, especially of smallholder farmers, women, and youth, as they often lack access to assets and markets and risk exclusion from food value chains. Lastly, the food system should be based on a diverse, competitive, and dynamic private sector, operating within an enabling environment based on adequate macroeconomic and sectoral policies, improved infrastructure, institutional and regulatory frameworks, and access to information and communications technology (ICT).

Trade and trade policies are essential to transforming food systems. Trade can contribute to improved health and nutrition by diversifying the supply of healthy food and lowering food prices (Hawkes 2015). The food system can become more productive and efficient as trade can shift food from regions of low production costs and ample supply to areas of high production costs and insufficient supply to meet demand (Glauber 2017). Increased trade from higher-yielding and less biodiverse countries to lower-yielding and more biodiverse countries can be effective in preventing biodiversity loss (Tilman et al. 2017). Similarly, although actual commercial flows occur due to a variety of reasons, trade from water-abundant to water-scarce regions can aid food security without pressuring local water levels, and can contribute to an environmentally sustainable and climate-smart food system (Oki and Kanae 2006). As trade policies can also help improve access to markets, foster opportunities for value addition, and create rural jobs to contribute to agricultural productivity and incomes for small producers, it will be important for trade to be more inclusive (Díaz-Bonilla and Hepburn 2016a).

Hunger and Malnutrition: Past Trends and Current Conditions

Agricultural and food production has increased significantly at the global level over the past decades. The world is producing 25 percent more calories and 27 percent more proteins per capita in the 2010s compared with in the 1960s. Inflation-adjusted food and agricultural price indices decreased by 18–20 percent from the 1960s and 1970s to the 2010s. At the same time, global average income

1 Climate-smart agriculture, and similar concepts such as “eco-efficient agriculture,” encompass practices that aim at improving productivity while ensuring adaptation, resilience, and mitigation in relation to climate change, having as final objectives food security and development (see, for instance, FAO 2013). Eco-efficient agriculture has been defined as one that “improves livelihoods by raising productivity and minimizing negative environmental impacts through more economically and ecologically prudent use of resources” (CIAT 2012). These concepts help to assess technologies according to their ability to generate multiple wins.

more than doubled, and the poverty headcount ratio at US\$ 1.90 a day (2011 purchasing power parity) declined from 39 percent in the 1980s to 13 percent in the 2010s (World Bank World Development Indicators).

The overall global growth in production and income has led to significant progress in reducing global hunger and malnutrition. Between the early 1990s and 2015, the prevalence of undernourishment worldwide declined from 19 percent to less than 11 percent, equivalent to a reduction of almost 220 million people (Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Food Security Indicators). Yet, progress has been uneven across regions. Improvements have been driven largely by Asia, especially China, while reductions in hunger in Africa over the past decade have stalled or worsened (FAO et al. 2017). Furthermore, global progress reversed in 2016, with an increase of 38 million undernourished people, largely due to armed conflicts and climatic events in Africa and the Middle East and weaker economic growth in Latin America and the Caribbean. About 815 million people are undernourished at the world level.

Slow progress in reducing other forms of malnutrition is also a concern. Between the early 1990s and the last available date in the 2010s, prevalence of anaemia in women of reproductive age declined from almost 40 percent to about 33 percent, and stunting of children under five years of age declined from about 39 percent to 23 percent (World Bank World Development Indicators).² But still, 2 billion people in the world lack key micronutrients such as iron and vitamin A (Global Nutrition Report 2017). Furthermore, global prevalence of overweight (body mass index (BMI)³ of 25 kg/m² or over) and obesity (BMI of 30 kg/m² or over) has been increasing and is currently about 39 percent for women and 37 percent for men, with about 1.9 billion people considered overweight, of which some 600 million are obese. These problems have led to rising rates of high blood glucose or diabetes, hypertension, and other non-communicable diseases (Global Nutrition Report 2015; 2016; 2017).

Therefore, at the current pace, the SDG target of eliminating all forms of malnutrition by 2030 will not be reached. Moreover, the current global system of production, processing, distribution, and consumption does not seem to be generating adequate levels of income and inclusion for large segments of poorer, more vulnerable populations. At the same time, it is putting pressure on natural resources and local environments and generating significant levels of greenhouse emissions, all of which threaten the timely achievement of other related SDGs.

Policies for an Open, Transparent, and Equitable Trade System

To support open, transparent, and equitable trade, policies need to address different issues in market access and export competition. Reducing high import tariffs and phasing out tariff-rate quotas over time will be important in expanding secure and equal access to markets for food and agriculture. Exceptions and carve-outs to protect a small number of so-called "special" and "sensitive" products should be avoided. Singling out some products for special protection can bias production towards those products and negatively impact diet diversity, which is key to healthy nutrition, and increase prices for consumers, affecting economic access. Tariff

2 Different factors can cause anaemia (lack of sufficient red blood cells), but iron deficiency is the most common. Other indicators, such as vitamin A deficiency, are not available with wide coverage and periodicity.

3 The BMI is calculated as bodyweight in kilograms divided by height in metres squared.

escalation, whereby higher tariffs are placed on processed products rather than on primary raw materials, must also be addressed as it directly affects opportunities for value addition.

The use of safeguards when countries experience sudden negative external impacts, such as import surges or drastic price changes, should be more carefully evaluated, considering costs and benefits.⁴ Though such safeguards can provide support when shocks create market volatility, the current mechanism lacks transparency and provides permanent protection for producers who are not necessarily poor (Hallaert 2005). A truly temporary and price-based system that is managed by an international organisation to avoid indiscriminate use by countries may be a better approach.

Export bans and restrictions are frequently imposed in some countries to promote food security by reorienting production to local markets, which lower prices and increase the food supply in the short term. Over time, however, producers decrease supply in response to weak markets, and poor farm households that are net producers experience income losses; therefore, that policy becomes self-defeating (Aragie, Pauw, and Pernechele 2016). Further, this can negatively impact net food-importing countries. Thus, export bans and restrictions should be eliminated, or at least subjected to stricter disciplines in their use.

Fair competition in domestic and international spheres is also important. The presence of large players in different segments of those value chains highlights the need to pay attention to competition policies and the relative market power of different actors, in both product and input markets. Developing countries will have to strengthen domestic policy and legislation, such as antitrust laws, to govern monopolistic structures. There is also a parallel international challenge if the horizontal and vertical integration of the food system makes the global system less competitive.

Eliminate inefficient domestic support policies

Domestic support policies can have a wide-ranging impact on food systems, trade, and nutrition. Input subsidy policies should also be evaluated for their efficiency and equity, and whether they are using resources that should be directed to more impactful investments in addressing food security. Input subsidy policies are highly visible means for governments to demonstrate support to their constituents (farmers and producers) and could potentially reduce dependence on world markets. However, the policy crowds out commercial fertiliser demand, and the food production response is often lower than expected. Further, it diverts resources that can be used for other, more needed public investments. Research in China has shown that government investments in rural infrastructure—such as irrigation and roads—and agricultural research and development have a significant impact on agricultural productivity growth and reductions in poverty (Fan, Zhang, and Zhang 2004).

Another issue in domestic support is the operation of public stocks for food security reasons. Some developing countries seek to be able to buy at non-market prices when the food security products are bought from low-income, resource-poor producers. This would not only violate general criteria

4 Currently, all countries can use the margin between bound and applied tariffs, or apply the common safeguard of Article XIX of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) 1994. The Special Safeguard of the Agreement on Agriculture is available only to countries (mostly developed countries) that have transformed quantity restrictions into tariffs under the agreement. Concerns expressed by some developing countries regarding the negative impact on their producers of domestic subsidies and other export practices mostly from industrialized countries can be managed under the Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures.

of domestic support policies permitted by WTO, but also impact producers in other countries (Díaz-Bonilla 2013; 2017a; 2017b). While food stocks have been a common response to food crises, they are often ineffective and costly to operate fairly, with too many objectives ranging from emergency aid to producer support. While public physical stocks may still be needed under some circumstances, more direct instruments, such as investments in food production, agricultural research and development, safety nets, and transfers, can better address supply-side issues and aid households (Bouët and Laborde 2017).⁵

Promote environmental sustainability

As agricultural production and land-use changes linked to agriculture have significant implications for greenhouse gas emissions, policies will require changes to be in line with the commitments made in Paris under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) by the Conference of the Parties in 2015 (COP21). Governments will need to implement new policies and budgetary commitments to support adaptation and mitigation practices by farmers. Those policies may need complementary measures that operate at the border (for instance to avoid "carbon leakage"), such as the extension of domestic taxes and standards to imported products (Blandford 2013; Tangermann 2016).

Policies on biofuels also need to be considered. Using crops for biofuels reduces food and feed availability and increases prices, contributing to the reduction of consumption and nutritional well-being of net buyers (buyers who buy more food than they sell or produce). While the use of crops as biofuels could also mean higher incomes for some farmers in developed and developing countries, and perhaps, under some conditions, some reduction in greenhouse emissions, there are lingering questions on the potential trade-distorting effects and the distribution among winners and losers (HLPE 2013; IFPRI 2008; Meyer, Schmidhuber, and Barreiro-Hurlé 2013). With inadequate notification to WTO committees under the current system, it is difficult to provide relevant information on the impact of biofuel subsidies on agricultural markets (Blandford 2013; Josling 2013).

Responding to a separate concern in improving environmental sustainability, governments should consider phasing out fossil fuel subsidies as well.⁶ Taking into account that food production and its supply chain accounts for approximately 30 percent of global energy consumption, shifting towards more renewable energy will be important (WWAP 2014). At the global level, the G20 could serve as a platform to promote this issue (SDG 12c).⁷

5 The problem of food price inflation and price spikes is usually better managed by a combination of macroeconomic and investment policies, combined with safety nets for poor people.

6 This is a reminder that non-agricultural trade policies may also have significant implications for achieving food security objectives, such as those related to trade and competition in different key markets, such as farm equipment, fertilisers, and seeds, or for services such as credit or transport and logistics (Díaz-Bonilla and Hepburn 2016a).

7 A promising step outside the G20 process is the initiative taken by a group of countries during the 2017 WTO Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires, which issued a statement that calls for "enhanced WTO transparency and reporting" to enable "the evaluation of the trade and resource effects of fossil fuel subsidies programmes," seeking "the rationalisation and phase out of inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption" (Ministerial Statement WT/MIN(17)/54, 11 December 2017).

In addition to agricultural production, sustainable fisheries are important not only as a source of nutrition, but also as the mainstay of many livelihoods (Díaz-Bonilla and Hepburn 2016b). Fisheries production and trade are affected by a series of problems, including illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and harmful fisheries subsidies (Díaz-Bonilla and Hepburn 2016b; Rashid Sumaila 2016). The Ministerial Conference in Buenos Aires put in place a work programme to achieve SDG 14.6, which calls for the prohibition by 2020 of "certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing" and the elimination of "subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing." WTO members must make sure that the work programme is completed on time.

Support vulnerable populations with inclusive policies

To complement the trade policies, governments should promote domestic policies and investments that help transform the food system to tackle hunger and malnutrition, especially for vulnerable populations that often do not reap the benefits of free trade. Poor and vulnerable populations can be supported through well-targeted investments and productive safety nets aimed at enabling households to resist shocks, create assets, and become food self-sufficient.

Public investments and services should focus on strengthening human capital through improvements in health, water and sanitation, nutrition, and education, particularly in rural areas. Investments should also create a more equitable agrarian structure by expanding land ownership and access to water for small and family farmers and landless workers. Improving the function of financial markets, developing rural infrastructure, and providing support for intermediate cities are important. Investments and safety nets that promote climate change adaptation and mitigation to build climate resilience will be needed. There is also a need for women's empowerment programmes and the elimination of institutional, political, and social biases that discriminate against vulnerable groups.

Additionally, investments in agricultural research and development and innovation systems that focus on smallholders in developing countries are needed in order to increase productivity, resilience, and sustainability in production as a way to reduce poverty and improve food security. In this regard, it is necessary to ensure that international agreements on intellectual property rights (including those that are part of regional trade agreements) do not impose constraints on the ability of developing countries to use the technologies needed to eliminate hunger and malnutrition.⁸

Conclusion: Role of the Global Community

Most of the national policies mentioned above can be pursued by countries largely unconstrained by international agreements and legal frameworks. At the same time, there is room in the international framework to improve coordination policies, avoid damaging spillovers, and address systemic issues that require different forms of collective action. It is necessary to achieve a proper balance between the needed policy space to design and implement policies to support food and nutrition security, and an adequate coordination of policies at the global level to ensure the operation of the multilateral

⁸ See Pardey, Wright, and Nottenburg (2001) and Pardey and Koo (2003) for a review of different opinions about the correct balance of rights and obligations under the international rules for the levels of intellectual property protection, and about the freedom of researchers to operate in developing countries and the rights of farmers.

system as a public good that avoids a damaging cycle of "begging-thy-neighbour" policies (Josling 2014).⁹

Supporting and complementing the work of the United Nations on these topics, especially for governance and coordination, will be important.

The previous sections suggested different adjustments in WTO disciplines related to the three pillars of the Agreement on Agriculture (domestic support, market access, and export competition) and in relation to other areas, including fisheries, environment, fossil fuels, intellectual property rights, and competition policies. In any case, a key requirement is that WTO members abide by their obligations to notify trade and related policies under different WTO agreements, and that there are meaningful legal implications for non-compliance (e.g. see Josling 2013).

Other groups of initiatives may be pursued under the G20 process, as suggested earlier in the case of energy subsidies. The G20 could also encourage public expenditure reviews with a food and nutrition focus to help realign priorities and expenditures.¹⁰ Another possibility is to review the operation of financial markets to remove obstacles that impede the financing of needed changes in food systems. The G20 could establish further work tracks in some of the existing groups to consider options to finance investments that will help achieve the SDGs.

Regional trade agreements should also be evaluated carefully in their potential conflicts with other WTO rules (including the disputed terms of GATT Article XXIV),¹¹ as well as whether, under the banner of creating "new-generation" or "WTO plus" agreements, developing countries are asked to surrender too much of the policy space they need to address food security and nutrition concerns (which, it has been suggested, may happen in cases of labelling, regulation, and taxing of unhealthy foods, and the use of agricultural technology).

While the task ahead is ambitious, by working together to build an open, fair, and transparent agricultural trading framework, the world can more realistically achieve SDG 2 and beyond.

9 The international system of legal rules for trade and trade-related operations can be seen as a public good that coordinates policies across countries to minimise the overall costs for all of them of the simultaneous use of policies that, while trying to protect employment and production at home, in fact may end up negatively affecting themselves and the world through reduced trade overall and world recessions (as happened in the 1930s). The same logic applies to food and nutrition security: countries trying to ensure food supply for their citizens and protect their citizens from price shocks through trade and trade-related policies may end up exacerbating price volatility and food scarcity for themselves and others, worsening global food security conditions (Josling 2014).

10 See, for example, the case of Honduras in Díaz-Bonilla and Centurión (forthcoming).

11 Article XXIV determines the conditions for custom unions and free trade areas to be compatible with the non-discrimination principle of GATT, and later WTO, legal frameworks. The original GATT Article XXIV was complemented by an "Ad Article XXIV," and later updated by a 1994 understanding when the WTO was created.

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