



TRADE POLICY BRIEFS

FAO SUPPORT TO THE WTO NEGOTIATIONS AT THE 13TH MINISTERIAL CONFERENCE

IMPROVING FOOD SAFETY TO FOSTER TRADE

KEY MESSAGES

- Food safety measures are paramount to protect consumer health and promote confidence in international markets. Therefore, it is critical to ensure that food safety measures and controls are in place to protect public health, while avoiding unnecessary costs and barriers to trade.
- The WTO SPS Agreement identifies the joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius as the relevant international standard-setting body for food safety. Codex standards provide a common reference guide to an acceptable level of food safety, greatly facilitating trade of food.
- To further promote the production and trade of safe food, efforts should focus on four pillars: i) strong national control systems; ii) a strong intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder engagement at national and global levels; iii) the development and harmonization of food safety measures based on sound and scientific advice and evidence; and iv) a better public and private stakeholder collaboration to improve food safety.

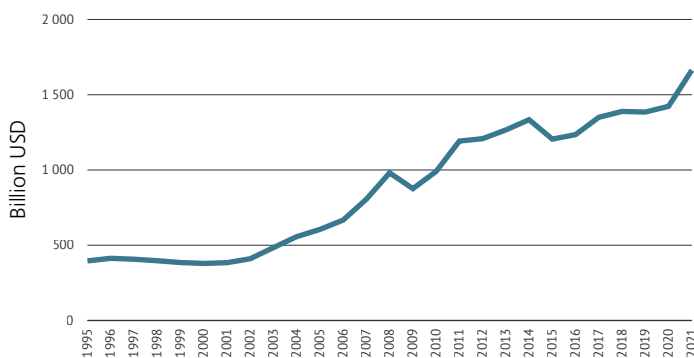
Authors: Markus Lipp, Vittorio Fattori and Cosimo Avesani

Food trade and the importance of food safety

To operate effectively, our agrifood systems need a holistic approach, able to involve production, consumption, and everything in between in an integrated manner. Both food safety and trade are fundamental elements of this integrated approach and key enablers for agrifood systems transformation towards the achievements of the 2030 Agenda.

International food trade has been growing over time, from less than USD 400 billion in 1995 to nearly USD 1.7 trillion in 2021 (Figure 1), creating both opportunities and challenges for consumers, producers and traders. While trade can provide consumers with sufficient, diverse and nutritious food, it can also contribute to increasing the availability of unsafe food, affecting consumers' health and hampering the development of new market opportunities (FAO, 2022; WHO, 2020).

Figure 1. The evolution of global food exports, 1995–2021



Source: FAO. 2023. FAOSTAT. [Cited 17 October 2023]. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#home> and FAO. 2023. FishStat. [Cited 17 October 2023]. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/fishery/en/fishstat>

Food safety requirements can raise production costs, affect the reputation of the product, and even limit the access to some market destinations. In an effort to ensure, inter alia, that the food that reaches consumers is safe while trade is

facilitated, Members of the World Trade Organization (WTO) adopted the Agreement on the Application of Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures (SPS Agreement) and the Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT Agreement).

The SPS Agreement sets out rules for the application of measures for food safety and requirements for animal and plant life and health and recognizes the right of governments to adopt and enforce measures necessary to protect human, animal or plant life or health (FAO, 2017a). It strongly encourages WTO Members to use international standards, guidelines and recommendations, but allows governments to adopt higher levels of protection if there is scientific justification for that, or if they are based on appropriate assessment of risks. The SPS Agreement identifies the joint FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius Commission as the relevant international standards setting body for food safety (WTO, 2023).

The TBT Agreement covers a wider variety of product standards and regulations adopted by governments to achieve a range of public policy objectives, such as protecting human health and safety or protecting the environment, providing consumer information and ensuring product quality. By contrast to the SPS Agreement, it does not recognize any particular international standard-setting body. However, it strongly encourages WTO Members to use international standards, guidelines, and recommendations as the basis for establishing their measures (FAO, 2017b).

Four pillars to improve food safety and enhance trade

Codex standards provide a common reference guide to, an acceptable level of, food safety, greatly facilitating trade of food. However, coherence between trade facilitation and the

achievement of food safety goals do not only require public interventions, but also the engagement of all stakeholders and collaboration at both national and international levels. It is essential that standards are implemented in a way that does not hinder trade and allows countries to reap the benefits of the international markets. In this respect, to improve food safety and enhance trade, efforts should focus on the following four main pillars.

I. Strong and effective national food control systems

While the task is on the food industry to produce safe products, governments have a responsibility to provide a well-functioning national food control system. National food control systems are designed to ensure that food safety is safeguarded across the supply chains and play a critical role in protecting consumers' health and promoting fair practices in food trade. To ensure that systems are capable and effective in fulfilling this objective, an assessment of their effectiveness gives the opportunity for evidence-based interventions that strengthen the governance capabilities where needed (FAO, 2023).

II. Intergovernmental and multi-stakeholder engagement at national and international levels

The FAO/WHO Codex Alimentarius not only provides the global reference for food safety in relation to public health and trade, but it also plays a critical role by bringing together the global food safety community, from government to private sector, to develop science-based consensus standards and other tools to protect human health and ensure fair trade practices. Enhanced and effective participation and engagement in the Codex Alimentarius can contribute to the robustness of food safety standards and further enhance global food trade. Effective engagement requires knowledge and adequate capacity in food safety and standards, in which countries should invest.

III. Sound scientific advice and evidence

The increasing pace of scientific innovation, new food technologies and changing trade dynamics are among the emerging trends that can have a significant impact on food safety. To proactively address the changes in our evolving agrifood systems, scientific advice on food safety must keep abreast of these emerging issues and provide a sound basis for regulatory frameworks and decision-making processes. It is also important to promote the harmonization of standards to reduce compliance costs. At the same time, authorities need to remain committed to international engagement through Codex and the WTO (FAO, 2017b).

IV. Public and private stakeholder collaboration

Although the responsibility of designing proper policies and enforcing food safety standards ultimately lies with the competent authorities, the private sector is responsible for much of the food trade. For this reason, it is crucial to ensure the commitment to food safety of all stakeholders along the food chains. Strong public-private collaboration, with clear rules and responsibilities, is essential to improve food safety and ensure fair trade practices.

The way forward and the role of FAO

To facilitate trade and ensure safe food for all people at all times, countries will need to take further steps to continue improving food safety at national, regional and international levels and ensure proper application and harmonization of food standards. In this regard, investing in food safety is essential, and the capacity development support provided by FAO and other international organizations is key.

FAO's competence in food and agriculture places it in a unique position to provide the support that stakeholders need in the food safety area, including in policy, legal and governance matters, as well as in operational management and capacity development. More specifically, FAO provides a neutral platform for policy dialogue and coordination of action for all stakeholders and plays an important role in supporting Members in their efforts to strengthen national food safety capacities and improve national food control systems (including regulatory frameworks), with the objective to protect human health and ensure fair trade practices. FAO also provides the scientific advice that underpins the development of international Codex standards, thereby providing the science-based predictability of food regulations that will facilitate trade.

Actions to address key challenges:

- ▶ As scientific knowledge, products, technology, and trade continue to evolve, countries should remain vigilant and be prepared to ensure the safety of food.
- ▶ Strengthen coordination at national and international levels to support the development of strong institutions to manage food safety risks, thus avoiding unnecessarily restrictions to trade.
- ▶ Countries to further engage and participate in the entire standard-setting process, from the provision of the scientific advice to the adoption and implementation of the standards. This will help to achieve a better harmonization of regulations and facilitate food trade.

References

- FAO. 2017a. Non-tariff measures in agriculture trade. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/a-i8002e.pdf>
- FAO. 2017b. Trade and food standards. Rome. <https://www.fao.org/3/i8007E/i8007e.pdf>
- FAO. 2022. The State of Agricultural Commodity Markets 2022. The geography of food and agricultural trade: Policy approaches for sustainable development. Rome, FAO. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc0471en>
- FAO. 2023. Food control systems [online]. In: FAO. Rome. Cited 23 June 2023. <https://www.fao.org/food-safety/food-control-systems/en/>
- WHO. 2020. World Food Safety Day: Unsafe food continues to affect millions in Europe during COVID-19 pandemic [online]. In: WHO. Geneva. Cited 26 June 2023. <https://www.who.int/europe/news/item/05-06-2020-world-food-safety-day-unsafe-food-continues-to-affect-millions-in-europe-during-covid-19-pandemic>
- WTO. 2023. Understanding the WTO Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures [online]. In: WTO. Geneva. Cited 26 June 2023. https://www.wto.org/english/tratop_e/sps_e/spsund_e.htm

Required citation:

Lipp, M., Fattori, V. & Avesani, C. 2023. *Improving food safety to foster trade*. Trade policy briefs, No. 51. Rome. <https://doi.org/10.4060/cc8406en>



Some rights reserved. This work is available under a [CC BY-NC-SA 3.0 IGO](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/3.0/) licence

Markets and Trade Division
Markets-trade@fao.org
www.fao.org/markets-and-trade

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
Rome, Italy