

# The role of international trade in strengthening or undermining food security.

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## Introduction

International trade plays a significant role in shaping food security globally. On the one hand, it can help stabilize food supplies, lower prices, and ensure access to a variety of nutrients year-round. On the other hand, dependency on food imports, trade disruptions, and inequitable trade policies may exacerbate food insecurity, especially in developing countries. Understanding how international trade can both support and threaten the four dimensions of food security availability, access, utilization, and stability is essential for creating resilient food systems in a globalized world [1].

Trade enables countries to access food that cannot be efficiently produced locally due to climate, geography, or resource constraints. For example, many arid and landlocked nations rely on food imports to meet their population's needs. Trade reduces seasonal and regional scarcities and enhances food availability, especially during local shortages caused by droughts, pests, or conflict [2].

International trade can lower food prices by increasing supply and introducing competitive pricing. Consumers, especially in low-income countries, benefit from affordable imported staples such as wheat, rice, and maize. When supported by fair trade agreements, global commerce can provide employment and income, indirectly improving household food access [3].

By diversifying national food supplies, trade can improve dietary diversity and nutrition. The exchange of fruits, vegetables, pulses, and fortified foods contributes to better nutrient intake. Countries with limited agricultural diversity can access essential micronutrients through imports. However, the global spread of ultra-processed foods also raises concerns about nutrition quality and diet-related diseases [4].

Trade enhances resilience to local shocks. In the event of drought, floods, or crop failures, international markets can fill domestic production gaps. However, heavy reliance on global supply chains exposes countries to risks such as price volatility, export bans, and geopolitical conflicts. The 2007–2008 global food price crisis demonstrated how trade restrictions by major exporters like India and Vietnam led to panic and shortages in importing countries [5].

While trade can bridge food supply gaps, overdependence on imports can be risky. Low-income countries may face foreign exchange constraints, limiting their ability to import

food during global price spikes. Furthermore, domestic agriculture may be neglected or outcompeted by subsidized imports, leading to loss of local production capacity and rural livelihoods [6].

Multilateral trade agreements under the World Trade Organization (WTO) and regional deals often shape how countries regulate food imports and exports. Critics argue that these frameworks prioritize liberalization over food sovereignty the right of nations to control their own food systems. Smallholder farmers in the Global South may struggle to compete with subsidized products from industrialized nations, deepening rural poverty [7].

Exporting high-value crops can boost foreign exchange earnings and support rural development. Countries like Kenya and Peru have benefited from horticultural exports. However, export-oriented agriculture can divert land and water away from local food production, compromise environmental sustainability, and expose farmers to global market fluctuations [8].

Global crises such as COVID-19, the Ukraine war, and climate-related events have highlighted vulnerabilities in international trade. Port closures, sanctions, and input shortages can rapidly affect global food flows. For example, the Russia–Ukraine war disrupted the global wheat and fertilizer supply, raising food insecurity risks in import-dependent countries in Africa and the Middle East [9].

To ensure that trade supports rather than undermines food security, the global community must: Promote fair trade practices and reduce agricultural export subsidies. Build strategic grain reserves to buffer shocks. Support local and regional food systems alongside trade [10].

## Conclusion

International trade is a double-edged sword in the realm of food security. While it can enhance availability, access, and dietary diversity, it can also undermine local food systems and amplify vulnerabilities during global disruptions. Policymakers must navigate this complexity by adopting trade policies that support equitable access, sustainable agriculture, and national food sovereignty. A reformed global food trade system, driven by fairness and resilience, is vital for securing the right to food for all.

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