



Trade against hunger

Exploring trade actions to fight acute food insecurity and the threat of famine





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About UNCTAD

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Abbreviations

BSI	Black Sea Initiative
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FSIN	Food Security Information Network
GNAFC	Global Network Against Food Crisis
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
LDC	Least Developed Countries
NFIDC	Net Food-Importing Developing Countries
NTM	Non-Tariff Measures
OFPR	Office of the United Nations Coordinator for Famine Prevention and Response
SPS	Sanitary Phytosanitary Measures
UNCTAD	UN Trade and Development
UNECA	UN Economic Commission for Africa
WFP	World Food Programme
WTO	World Trade Organization





1. Introduction

Acute food insecurity and the threat of famine present critical global challenges that affect millions worldwide and impair human and economic development. In 2023, between 713 and 757 million people worldwide experienced chronic food insecurity (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2024) and 281.6 million people in 59 countries faced acute food insecurity at or above crisis levels (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). With projection indicating that 582 million people will be chronically undernourished in 2030, achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 2 (Zero Hunger) remains a huge challenge (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2024). The Bridgetown Covenant, UNCTAD's mandate, calls for special attention to the needs of net-food importing developing countries to address these urgent issues.

This issue note aims to underline the potential of trade actions in alleviating these pressing issues. It offers an exploration of the relationship between trade and food crises, providing guidance on possible trade actions and policies that can contribute to famine relief and improved food security.

The issue paper explores the economic shocks and conflicts that are key drivers of food insecurity and hunger and how these are intertwined with trade dynamics. It seeks to understand how trade can be leveraged to enhance food security in both short- and long-term contexts and evaluates the effectiveness of different trade strategies in famine-stricken countries. It also aims to identify sustainable solutions to combat severe food insecurity and prevent future famine occurrences.





2. Background

a. Causes and consequences of acute food insecurity and the threat of famine

In recent years, **global food insecurity and malnutrition have increased rapidly**, reversing decades of progress in the fight against hunger. In 2023, between 713 and 757 million people worldwide experienced chronic food insecurity (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP and WHO, 2024) and 281.6 million people in 59 countries faced acute food insecurity at or above crisis levels (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). These numbers represent increases of approximately 150 million people compared to 2019, respectively.

The causes of acute food insecurity are complex, multi-faceted and inter-linked, but several key drivers can be discerned. These include socio-economic instability, poverty and inequality; armed conflict and violence; and climate change and weather extremes which impact lives and livelihoods.



Socio-economic stressors and shocks, combined with persistent poverty and inequality, remain the largest drivers of chronic food insecurity around the world. They are also among the main drivers of acute food insecurity, both directly and indirectly. In 2022, such factors were considered the main driver of acute food insecurity in 27 countries with almost 84 million people affected – up from 30.2 million people in 21 countries in 2021 (FSIN and GNAFC, 2023). This rapid increase within a short timeframe was largely driven by the economic downturn resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and disruption in global trade volumes due to the war in Ukraine. Many of the countries most vulnerable to food insecurity also have high levels of poverty and are highly reliant on food imports. A combination of trade disruptions, currency devaluation, inflation and rising food prices directly impacted governments' fiscal space and the ability to maintain much-needed support systems as well as people's ability to purchase both food and the inputs needed for local food production. In 2023, over half of low-income and the vast majority of lower-middle-income countries experienced inflation rates exceeding 5 per cent, with many witnessing double-digit inflation (World Bank, 2023a). This situation is aggravated by high food price inflation in high-income countries as well, indicating a global trend (World Bank, 2023a). Furthermore, following the beginning of the war in Ukraine, there was a surge in food trade restrictions. These measures, implemented by many countries to bolster domestic food supply and curb prices, have contributed to the global food crisis. By November 2023, several countries had implemented food export bans and export-limiting measures, affecting the global food supply chain (World Bank, 2023a). The impact on economic stability and resilience has been extensive, with almost 60 per cent of low-income countries now in or facing debt distress (United Nations, 2023a).

Armed conflict, violence and insecurity remain the primary driver of acute hunger for 134.5 million people in 20 countries, almost half of all those affected (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). Fighting associated with armed conflict frequently destroys lives, homes and livelihoods, thereby reducing food production, disrupting markets and restricting availability, affordability and access to food. Almost 80 per cent of food sector aid is absorbed by conflict contexts, and nearly all eleven countries where people faced famine-like conditions in 2023 were affected by armed conflict or extreme levels of violence (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). The economic cost of armed conflict can be significant, amounting to an estimated 2.5 per cent of GDP per year on average, with cumulative effects over five years being as high as 20 per cent (IMF, 2019). At the same time, recent research suggests that food insecurity itself fuels instability which can lead to armed violence (WFP, 2023a).

Climate change, including weather extremes, are increasingly driving acute food insecurity globally. In 2022, climate extremes were the main driver of hunger for 77 million people in 18 countries, up from 57 million people in 12 countries (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). Changing weather patterns and advancing desertification have reduced the average growth in agricultural productivity by 21 per cent since 1961 (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). Weather extremes, such as heavy rains, tropical storms, cyclones, flooding, drought and increased climate variability significantly impact food security and livelihoods. Although the impact is most acutely felt in fragile and crisis-affected countries, such countries have, on average, received only limited financing to address it (US\$2.1 per capita compared to US\$161 for non-fragile countries) (UNDP, 2021).

Various other factors also play a role in growing food insecurity. In recent years, urbanization has emerged as a major trend affecting food security, blurring the lines between rural and urban areas and impacting agrifood systems (FAO, IFAD, UNICEF, WFP



and WHO, 2023). Public health emergencies, in particular communicable diseases, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, also drive significant levels of food insecurity.

Famine, the most extreme form of food insecurity, is defined as an extreme deprivation of food, with evident starvation, death, destitution and extremely critical levels of acute malnutrition (IPC, 2020). The last decade has witnessed two declarations of famine, in Somalia in 2011 and in South Sudan in 2017. These famines resulted in widespread acute malnutrition and the deaths of tens of thousands of people. Recently, these countries have seen the threat of famine re-emerge, with populations in the Bay and Bakool regions of Somalia, and in internally displaced person camps, facing a recurring risk of famine in 2017, 2022 and 2023, along with six other countries experiencing catastrophic levels of acute food insecurity (FSIN and GNAFC, 2024). Each year communities in several countries experience famine-like conditions.

The consequences of acute food insecurity and famine extend beyond immediate hunger, and include long-term socio-economic disruptions. Famine conditions precipitate increased mortality due to malnutrition, with children, women and the elderly being particularly vulnerable. Such crises often trigger mass migrations, creating resource strains and potential conflicts in host areas. Furthermore, such conditions can undermine global development efforts, reversing progress in health, education and poverty reduction. Addressing these challenges is imperative to prevent a cycle of poverty and dependence on aid, and to maintain global stability and progress towards development goals.

b. Trade's impact on food security and famine relief

The potential for trade to mitigate the risk of famine and reduce undernourishment is complex and multifaceted. On one side, it can serve as a conduit for transferring surplus food production from agriculturally prosperous regions to those lacking adequate domestic food production. Moreover, trade can act as a safeguard against unpredictable fluctuations in local food production, brought on by increasingly frequent extreme weather events, poverty or political instability. Besides shoring up supply, international and intra-regional trade can also facilitate access to a diverse, nutritious diet, and enables economic development, thereby playing a pivotal role in enhancing food security. Similarly, trade can also act as a catalyst for economic development, contributing to poverty reduction and increased food security by bolstering economic stability (see Figure 1). On the other hand, trade can have negative impacts as well. For example, investment in cash crops may divert efforts in boosting food production for local consumption, while fluctuations in globalized food markets can impact food affordability and availability in domestic markets.

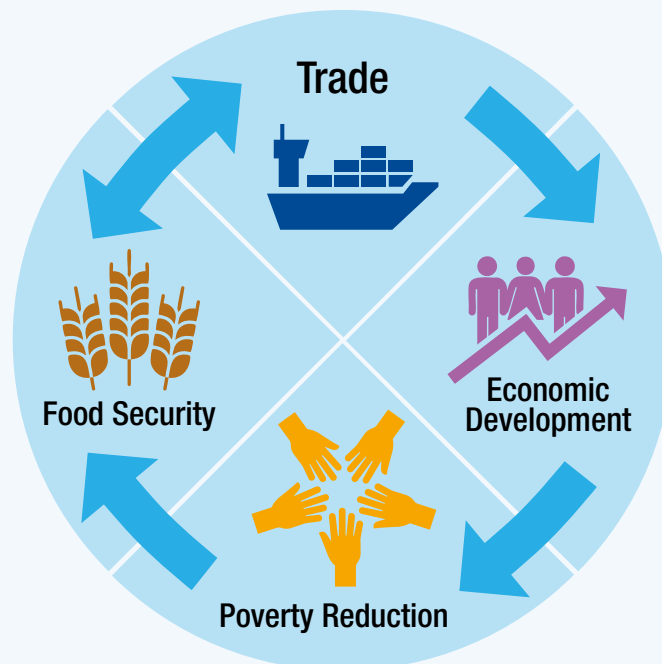
Despite the complexities just mentioned, trade can play a central role in bolstering food security as conceptualized by the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO). The four dimensions of food security – physical **availability**, economic and physical **access**, food **utilization**, and **stability** – can all be positively impacted by trade (FAO, 2008; Stamoulis and Zezza, 2003).



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- 1** *Availability* relates to the physical presence of food, which can be bolstered by imports and by trade agreements that facilitate the movement of food from surplus to deficit regions. In countries experiencing famine, availability can be impaired due to supply chain disruptions caused by factors such as conflict or poor infrastructure.
- 2** *Access* pertains to the affordability and allocation of food.¹ Trade can potentially lower food prices by increasing the supply of food or of the inputs needed for food production, hence improving access. It is important to note that inputs for food production, such as fertilizers and seeds, can be as crucial as food imports themselves in ensuring food security. Conversely, high import tariffs and other trade barriers can make imported food less affordable. Trade can also help lift people out of poverty, thereby strengthening their ability to purchase food.
- 2** *Utilization* refers to the body's ability to consume and metabolize food, which can be affected by the quality and safety of the food available. International trade can potentially improve food quality by introducing a broader range of nutritious foods.
- 4** *Stability/Resilience* underscores the importance of sustained food availability and access over time. Trade can help create a buffer against fluctuations in domestic food production due to seasonal variations or shocks like drought or conflict. However, excessive reliance on food imports can also create vulnerability if global food prices spike or import routes are disrupted.

Figure 1.
The indirect impact of trade on food security



Source: UNCTAD.

¹ Including the lack of physical access and movement restrictions.

In famine-stricken countries, these four aspects are rarely present due to market disruption, weak infrastructures, extreme poverty, and political challenges. This can prevent trade from unfolding its positive effects in famine-stricken countries.

A positive example of how the international community can reduce disruptions is the agreements brokered by the United Nations and Türkiye in July 2022, consisting of the Black Sea Initiative (BSI) and the Memorandum of Understanding.² During the implementation of these agreements between July 2022 and July 2023³ they contributed positively to global food security by facilitating the continued export of food and fertilizers from Ukraine and the Russian Federation, leading to a fall in the FAO Food price Index by 23 per cent from the record heights in March 2022 (FAO, 2024).

According to a World Bank estimates, for each one percentage point increase in food prices, 10 million people are thrown into extreme poverty (World Bank, 2022).

The relationship between world food prices and the prevalence of undernourishment can indeed be complex and not immediately evident. As suggested by Figure 2, the first two decades of the 21st century did not show a clear correlation between these two factors.⁴ However, the situation seems to have shifted from 2020 onwards, when the increase in the cereals price index appears to correspond with a rise in the percentage of undernourished individuals. This parallel movement suggests an evolving relationship between food prices and undernourishment. Although food prices have begun their decline from their 2022 peak, it remains to be seen if this will positively impact undernourishment.

Notably, this period coincides with the widespread economic disruptions triggered by the COVID-19 crisis. The pandemic has resulted in widespread loss of income and heightened financial uncertainty, especially within least developed countries, pushing at least 15 million more people into extreme poverty (United Nations, 2023). Despite constituting only 12 per cent of the world's population, these countries accounted for 58 per cent of the increase in undernourished individuals, underscoring the profound socio-economic impacts of the pandemic.⁵

² Memorandum of Understanding between the Russian Federation and the Secretariat of the United Nations on promoting Russian food products and fertilizers to the world markets (<https://unctad.org/global-crisis/memorandum-of-understanding>)

³ The Initiative was not renewed after its third term, which expired on 17 July 2023 (<https://www.un.org/en/black-sea-grain-initiative>).

⁴ The apparent correlation between rising cereal prices and undernourishment rates during this period may indeed be influenced by the concurrent economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine. However, it is crucial to note that correlation does not imply causation, and further research is needed to disentangle the complex interplay of factors at work. For instance, Headay and Martin (2016) distinguish between urban and rural poor and have found “that rural poor might ultimately benefit from higher food prices”.

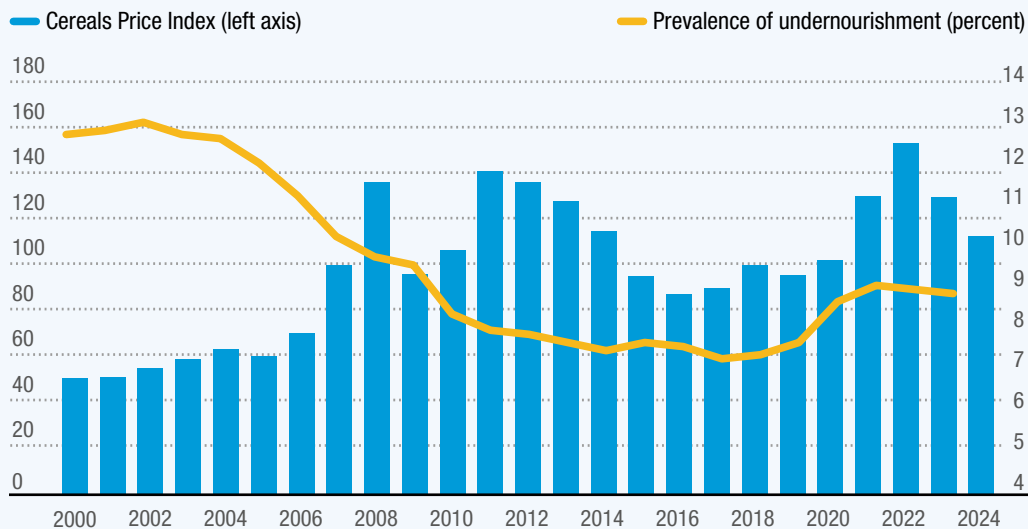
⁵ Calculations based on FAOSTAT data (<https://www.fao.org/faostat/en/#data/FS>).





Figure 2.
After decades of decline, undernourishment is on the rise again

Evolution of FAO Cereals Price Index, base 2014-2016, and prevalence of undernourishment, percentage



Source: UNCTAD based on FAO Cereals Price Index and FAOSTAT.

Note: The data for the “prevalence of undernourishment” indicator was only available until 2022.

The role of imported food in the global dietary landscape is substantial and particularly critical in regions where local food production is insufficient to meet demand.

A case in point is cereals, a primary dietary staple across the globe. In Africa, approximately 30 per cent of the total cereal supply is imported, emphasizing the continent’s reliance on international markets to meet its nutritional needs. Cereals, roots and tubers, which make up a substantial portion of caloric intake, illustrate this dependency more vividly. These staples constitute 62 per cent of the total caloric intake in Africa, compared to 50 per cent in the rest of the world, according to FAOSTAT (2024). Africa’s dietary reliance on these food groups is therefore significantly higher than the rest of the world, making consistent supply critical.

Figure 3 provides a visual representation of global cereal import dependency.⁶ Countries experiencing acute food insecurity are generally more reliant on imports, underscoring how political instability, conflict and natural disasters can disrupt local food production and heighten dependence on external sources. There are, however, exceptions like Pakistan or Myanmar, which, despite their challenges, remain net food exporters (FAOSTAT, 2024). It is important to note that cereals represent just one aspect of food security; in many countries, other staples like root tubers also play a significant role in local diets.

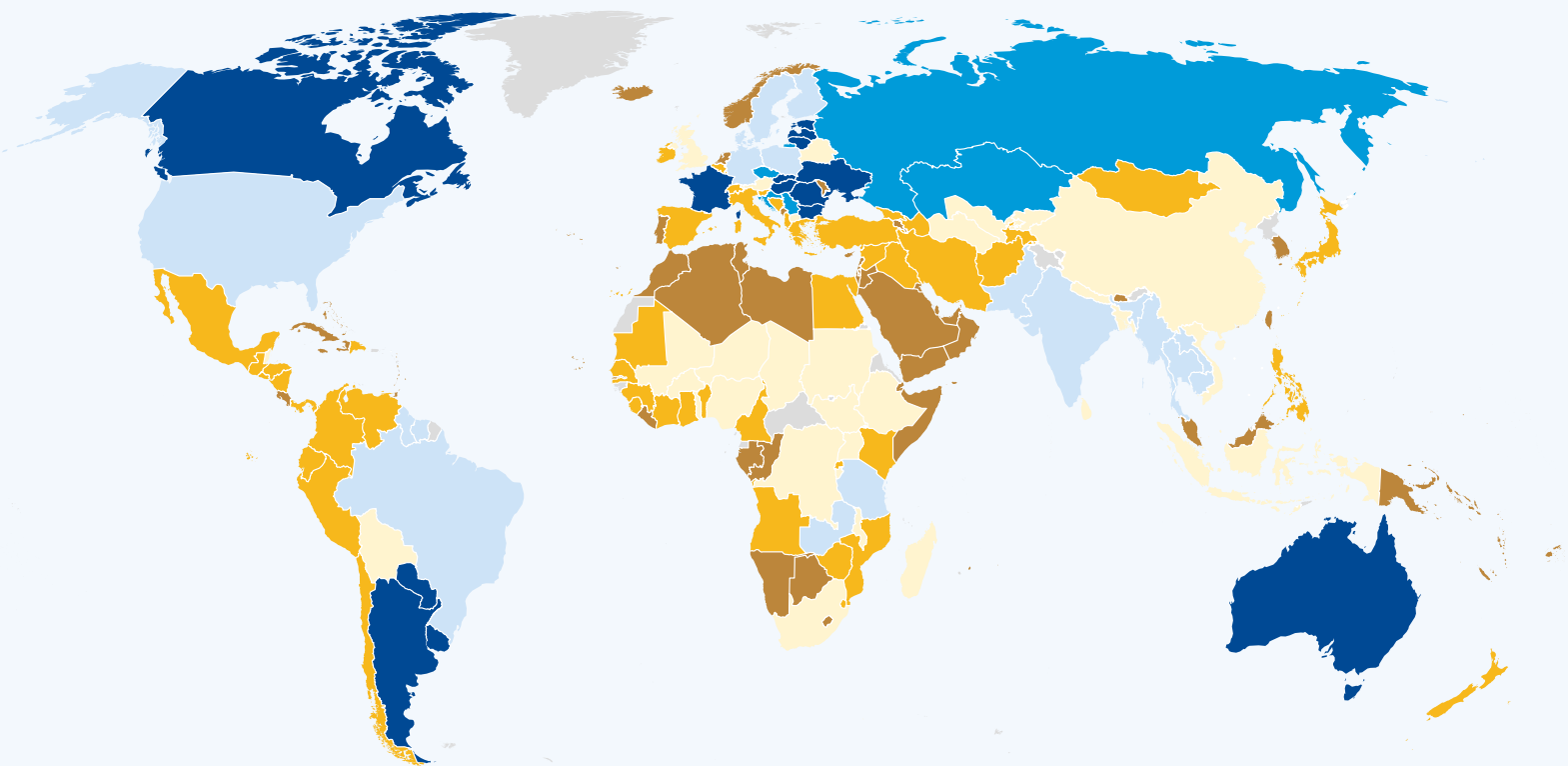
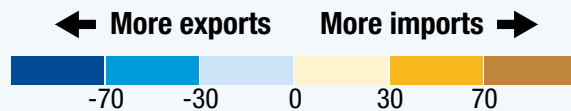
A closer examination of countries facing acute food insecurity shows that Yemen, for instance, depends on cereal imports for a staggering 92.8 per cent of its cereal demand. Haiti, another country grappling with significant challenges, relies on imports for 85.7 per cent of its cereal needs. Kenya and Afghanistan, too, demonstrate substantial import dependencies, with respective rates of 51.3 per cent and 42.5 per cent. Other countries

⁶ “Cereal import dependency” provides a measure of how much of the available domestic food supply of cereals has been imported and how much originates in the country’s production. A higher ratio means a higher dependency to imports.



also experience smaller yet significant import dependency rates, such as the Democratic Republic of the Congo at 23 per cent or Bangladesh at 15.7 per cent (FAOSTAT, 2024).

Figure 3.
Net exporters and importers of cereals
Cereal import dependency ratio, per cent, 2020-2022



Source: UNCTAD based on FAOSTAT.

Note: Cereal import dependency does not imply that countries are overall net food importers or have a net negative agricultural balance.

The designations employed and the presentation of material on any map in this work do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries. Data refer to statistical territories. Statistics published for China exclude those for Hong Kong, Special Administrative Region; Macao Special Administrative Region and Taiwan Province of China, as trade statistics are reported for each.

These figures underline the significant role of international and regional trade in addressing food insecurity and meeting dietary needs, particularly in regions grappling with acute food shortages. They also highlight the necessity for robust international cooperation and support mechanisms to ensure consistent and affordable access to vital food imports, especially during periods of crisis (UNCTAD, 2023a).



Trade as a mechanism to combat hunger

Trade plays a key role in combating food insecurity. It stands as a powerful instrument for encouraging economic development. Trade promotes economic growth and poverty reduction and also improves the availability of food, especially in food-importing developing countries (NFIDCs). A rules-based, transparent and predictable trading system therefore contributes to food security in NFIDCs. However, the risk of excessive dependence on food imports should be minimised wherever possible through appropriate measures to strengthen domestic production of locally adapted crops and diversifying trade partners (OECD/FAO, 2023). A healthy balance is needed between improving access to foreign food markets and avoiding increased dependence on global markets (UNCTAD, 2021). Trade must act as a bridge to food security rather than a barrier, especially for countries struggling with the challenges of excessive food import dependency.

But food import is not the only trade tool to combat hunger. By amplifying their export capacities, nations with significant trade deficits could enhance their economic positions, thus increasing their incomes and resilience to economic shocks.

However, in order to increase exports, supportive frameworks need to be developed. Such frameworks create an environment conducive for exporting, from offering training and resources to local businesses, to ensuring products meet international standards. A critical aspect of this is facilitating improved access to global and regional markets. Countries grappling with hunger often face an uphill battle accessing these markets due to a myriad of challenges.

In recent decades, import tariffs, a levy on imports when goods enter a country, have generally fallen. Food-insecure countries often benefit from preferences and encounter duty rates close to 1 per cent on their exports. Some notable exceptions exist, such as Haiti, facing average tariffs of nearly 11 per cent on their exports. While 1 per cent might seem minimal, it can still inhibit export activities (TRAINS through WITS, 2023). This inhibition is more pronounced when noting that primary exports from developing countries, in particular Least Developed Countries (LDCs), such as agricultural and clothing products, typically confront higher import tariffs than other imported products (UNCTAD, 2023b).

Beyond tariffs, LDCs and developing countries face the growing challenge of non-tariff measures (NTMs).⁷ These NTMs, especially in the agricultural sector, often relate to sanitary and phytosanitary standards (SPS), such as requirements for pesticide residue testing, certificate of origin, or adherence to specific packaging standards. For agricultural exporters, complying with these NTMs is equivalent to an implicit tax, adding as much as 20 per cent on average to the cost of their products (UNCTAD, 2022c). The trade-impeding impact of these measures is three to four times higher than that of traditional tariffs.

While NTMs very often serve legitimate objectives, such as protecting the health and safety of consumers, for countries battling hunger and economic challenges these NTMs represent more than just regulatory hurdles. The high indirect costs associated with compliance can strain their already limited resources. Moreover, the infrastructure, technical capabilities and administrative capacities required to meet these NTMs is often lacking, further complicating the ability of these countries to access global markets. This explains that the impact of NTMs on trade costs is significantly higher for developing countries than for developed countries (UNCTAD, 2022c).

⁷ NTMs refer to policy measures, other than tariffs, that can potentially impact trade in goods, changing quantities traded, or prices or both.



Trade-related drivers of food prices

While many elements contribute to the dynamics of food prices, certain trade-related factors stand out for their substantial influence. Among these, transportation costs and the cost of inputs, particularly fertilizers, play important roles in determining food prices.

Transportation costs have been rising and are often especially high for developing and least developed countries. As noted in UNCTAD's Review of Maritime Transport (2022b), an escalation in sea freight prices was pinpointed as being responsible for a 0.6 per cent surge in grain prices in 2022. However, sea transport costs constitute just a fragment of the broader narrative. The efficiency and accessibility of ports significantly influence these costs, especially in regions like Africa. Ports in this region consistently find themselves at the lower end of global performance metrics.⁸ The recent pandemic exacerbated this situation, causing a contraction in the number of links to these ports. This contraction translates into limited avenues for both exporting and importing goods, including essential commodities like food (UNCTAD, 2022b).

The challenges are not confined to the coasts. Land locked developing countries also grapple with elevated transportation expenditures. Central African countries, in particular, face high land freight costs. For them, transportation charges represent a staggering 45 per cent of the value of imported goods (UNCTAD, 2022a). Many countries suffering from food insecurity are burdened by underdeveloped infrastructures, which escalates the cost of trading, including of food commodities. Notable examples include Afghanistan, Haiti, Yemen, Somalia and Syria, all of which rank at the lower end of the World Bank's Infrastructure Score (World Bank, 2023).

When looking at agricultural inputs, the outlook is no less worrying. Between 2020 and 2022, fertilizer prices more than tripled (IMF, 2023). Although the fertilizer index saw a sharp decline in 2023, dropping from a peak of 312 in 2022 to 203, prices remain nearly double the average since 2003. For farmers in developing regions, this presents a distressing dilemma. The escalating cost of fertilizers either forces them into debt to maintain their production or pushes them to reduce fertilizer use. The latter choice, though cost-saving in the short term, results in diminished crop yields, which consequently affects their income and limits their ability to secure food, and also has broader implications for local food security and affordability.

Fuel prices, another critical input in the agricultural sector, have also risen significantly, although not to the same extent as fertilizers. These increased costs affect the entire food value chain, encompassing production, transportation and storage (IMF, 2023). Such a surge in fuel prices further strains the precarious trade balance of countries already grappling with food insecurity, escalating the costs associated with importing food and potentially exacerbating existing vulnerabilities in their food supply systems.

⁸ The average rank is based on the Administrative Approach score. The rank is recalculated by UNCTAD across 333 ports, for which port performance scores are available in 2020 and 2021.





3.

Potential Trade Policy Actions

Trade policies play a crucial role in strengthening food security. **Table 1** outlines a range of policy options, both for national governments and the international community, aimed at strengthening food security. These policies focus on improving access to food, enhancing agricultural productivity, and supporting economic development through trade. The actions listed highlight the importance of coordinated efforts to address food security challenges, especially in vulnerable regions.



 **Table 1.**
Trade policy options to strengthen food security

	Imports	Exports
SHORT TERM	<p>For countries facing food insecurity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate imports: tariff reduction, temporary suspension of regulations (e.g., less stringent sanitary controls), eliminate NTBs, facilitate import procedures. <p>For the international community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate humanitarian aid, including food, nutrition and livelihood support, as well as health care, water and sanitation in areas worst affected, including by exempting aid from import taxes and restrictions. Work with partners to improve postharvest handling and storage along the entire supply chain – from the field to the hands of the beneficiary. 	<p>For the international community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remove/discourage export restrictions by net-exporters. Ensure surplus food reaches countries in need while respecting domestic food security. Reduce export taxes for NFIDCs / famine-affected areas. Strict implementation of the exemption of WFP and other humanitarian purchases from export prohibitions or restrictions.⁹ Increase international food stocks to distribute to countries in need (insurance schemes) and increase supply from stocks.¹⁰
MEDIUM TO LONG TERM	<p>For countries facing food insecurity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Diversified sourcing of food: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage diversified diets and local production of food; Encourage diversification of imports, in terms of type and source. Facilitate the imports of food, inputs for food production and intermediate goods such as fertilizers to enhance domestic agricultural productivity. Establish national and regional strategies of balanced, diversified food production and imports, including the responsible use of trade policy measures such as tariffs. <hr/> <p>For countries facing food insecurity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage and expand intra-regional trade. Integrate food security considerations into regional trade negotiations. Invest in public goods, including infrastructure (logistic hubs/roads/ports/storage to avoid loss of food), extension services and pest and disease control. Adopt and use more resilient crop-varieties. <p>For the international community:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scale up agricultural technology transfer. Increase Aid for Trade towards agricultural development (United Nations, 2024). 	<p>For countries facing food insecurity:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish export strategy of agricultural (and other) goods and services for economic development (income), including for cash crops where a comparative advantage exist: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Quality infrastructure Smart regulations, such as those based on international standards and/ or those that are similar to importing country regulations. Improvements in SPS. Assisting MSMEs, women¹¹ and marginalized groups in integrating into global markets and value chains, while also promoting diversification and value addition efforts.

Source: UNCTAD.

⁹ The MC12 outcome package on agriculture comprised a Ministerial Declaration on the emergency response to food insecurity and a Ministerial Decision on exempting World Food Programme (WFP) humanitarian food purchases from export prohibitions or restrictions (WTO, 2022).

¹⁰ “While the exact correlation between stocks and food price volatility is yet to be defined, there is broad consensus that low levels of stocks are usually associated with an increased market risk” (AMIS, 2021).

¹¹ Ensuring rural women have equal access to resources could lift up to 150 million out of hunger (FAO, 2011).



As shown in Table 1, numerous actions enable the positive contribution of trade to food security. These actions may be implemented directly by countries facing food insecurity, but the international community also has a large role to play in ensuring that trade supports the fight against hunger. Key among these is the reduction of poverty through trade policies. These include supporting the integration of MSMEs into regional and world markets and regional and global value chains, diversification and value addition efforts, and the reduction of trade costs, which are among the most important trade policies for economic development.

Another set of policies focuses more directly on food and food production. The policies have to be implemented in the medium to long term. These include trade facilitation of food and food production intermediates, and emphasis on the diversification of food import sources. Facilitating trade means cutting red tape to reduce unnecessary costs, though it doesn't always mean lowering import tariffs. For certain food sectors, like poultry, a balance must be found between net buyers and net sellers, aligned with national and regional trade and food security strategies. While protecting domestic food production may be beneficial, such decisions should be based on careful analysis. This analysis should consider how these measures impact various parts of society and the economy, and whether they promote long-term sustainability. Furthermore, regional trade and production should be encouraged through regional trade agreements to shorten food supply chains. Moreover, several policies can be positively linked to imports and exports, such as building food stocks and investments in trade infrastructure.

Trade policy can help mitigate severe food insecurity and famine in the short term and in emergencies. An immediate reduction by a famine-stricken country of all types of import barriers including for food aid facilitates access to food. Globally, export restrictions and other policies that limit the availability of food should be restrained as much as possible to mitigate food price increases in famine-affected regions.

Beyond food import-related measures, **a new “Short Term Export Facilitation Mechanism to Combat Severe Food Insecurity”** may be considered. The mechanism aims to strengthen the export capability of countries in or at risk of severe food insecurity and famine to improve their resilience against economic factors for food insecurity.

- 1** Developed countries and developing countries in a position to do so eliminate temporarily all tariffs on imports from these countries with non-stringent rules of origin.
- 2** Resources are provided to support the ability to comply with NTMs (requirements such as SPS and TBT for safety, health and environmental protection will not be lifted). This includes short term support like the use of quality infrastructure, testing facilities and compliance.
- 3** Transport and logistics challenges, including their procedural aspects, are addressed. For example, additional shipping routes are added and transport infrastructure is provided.
- 4** Imports of intermediate goods such as fertilizers, and agriculture capital goods are facilitated in affected countries.



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An agreement to develop such a “Short Term Export Facilitation Mechanism to Combat Severe Food Insecurity” could be reached at an international forum, such as a WTO Ministerial Conference. Following this, countries could provide resources to setup the mechanism. Humanitarian agencies, in collaboration with key international organizations involved in trade, the fight against hunger and humanitarian emergencies, could contribute to implementing this mechanism. The Standards and Trade Development Facility, for example, can support these countries in complying with SPS measures (WTO, n.d.).





4.

Conclusion and Suggested Policy Recommendations

The examination of the impact of trade on severe food insecurity and famine reveals the significance and potential of the role trade can play in mitigating these global challenges. Trade serves as a crucial channel for redistributing surplus food to areas with insufficient domestic food production, ensuring not only a varied and nutritious diet but also promoting economic development. This issue note has looked into the complexities of utilizing trade as a mechanism for food security and famine relief, highlighting the need to balance immediate food aid requirements with longer-term strategies for sustainable food security.

In regions grappling with acute food shortages, the reliance on food imports becomes particularly pronounced. Trade policies and actions are essential to bolster food security and cater to dietary needs but demand robust international cooperation and support mechanisms. Key policy recommendations revolve around facilitating imports, especially of crucial agricultural inputs like fertilizers, and implementing mechanisms such as the proposed “Short Term Export Facilitation to Combat Severe Food Insecurity Mechanism” to fortify the resilience of countries impacted by food scarcity.



To effectively harness the potential of trade in addressing severe food insecurity, it is necessary to build upon existing frameworks and discussions at the international and regional level. Enhancing dialogue on ways to reinforce and make agri-food value chains more resilient and sustainable is central. Given the increasing volatility in food production due to unreliable climate patterns, trade is poised to play an increasingly important role as a market stabilizer. This highlights the necessity of a stable international and regional regulatory framework that not only facilitates trade but also supports and complements local production efforts.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the effectiveness of trade policy as a tool in the fight against hunger and famine is contingent on a fundamental improvement of local and regional conditions and cooperation. This involves enhancing local supply and production capabilities, upgrading critical infrastructure and fostering regional trade and cooperation to ensure shorter, more efficient value chains. In addition, fostering sustainable growth in agricultural productivity through innovation and technology plays a critical role in supporting these initiatives. Encouraging research and development in agriculture, facilitating the adoption of sustainable farming practices and promoting innovative solutions to increase crop yields and resilience are pivotal. Furthermore, women's empowerment, access to education and robust social safety nets are all elements crucial to building a resilient agricultural system.

Sustainable growth in agriculture, driven by innovation and productivity improvements, is essential to supporting these efforts. It is through a comprehensive, integrated approach that encompasses both immediate relief measures and long-term developmental strategies that the world can realistically aim to achieve the 2030 Zero Hunger target.¹² By embracing this multifaceted approach, we can ensure that trade not only addresses the immediate challenges of food security but also contributes to creating a sustainable and resilient global food system.

¹² "To achieve zero hunger by 2030, urgent coordinated action and policy solutions are imperative to address entrenched inequalities, transform food systems, invest in sustainable agricultural practices, and reduce and mitigate the impact of conflict and the pandemic on global nutrition and food security" (United Nations, 2023b).



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