

Exporting obesity: The role of trade

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The U.S. is, by far, the largest exporter of snack foods to Mexico.

The effects of trade liberalization (so-called free trade agreements like NAFTA) on the economy, jobs, the environment and even food security have all been studied closely, but as more and more governments start to confront the large and growing costs of poor diets on human health, new questions are emerging about the relationship between free trade agreements and the growing global obesity epidemic. When countries agree to liberalize the exchange of goods and capital among themselves, are they unwittingly also agreeing to share chronic diseases?

In a new article in the latest issue of the *Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health*, IATP takes a hard look at how the deregulation of trade and investment undermines human health. The article is co-authored by three IATP staff, Dr. David Wallinga, Karen Hansen-Kuhn and Sophia Murphy, together with Sarah Clarke, a graduate student at Tufts University and Corinna Hawkes, an environmental geographer with an extensive background on the links between health, food and global trade and finance.

The article looks at how NAFTA contributed to what nutritional experts call an “obesogenic environment” in Mexico. An explosion in the availability of low-quality, calorie-dense foods in

Mexico in the wake of NAFTA coincided with Mexico going to second place worldwide for the highest percentage of overweight and obese people in its population (the USA takes first place).

The incidence of obesity and overweight in Mexico rose 12 percent between 2000 and 2006. Following the passage of NAFTA in 1994, U.S. corporations began investing in Mexico's food system, all along the food supply chain. The result was a significant increase in the availability and consumption of snack foods, soft drinks, processed dairy and meat products. The article documents those increases. The result is not just a human tragedy, but a huge expense to the public purse as well. In the U.S., obesity is thought to cost at least \$170 billion a year in direct medical costs.

The evidence supports IATP's contention that health impact assessments should be mandatory before trade and investment agreements are ratified. NAFTA was passed under Fast Track: a short-cut through Congress that denied open debate. Negotiations are now underway for the Trans Pacific Partnership, which proposes to extend NAFTA-style rules into much of Asia and around the world. This time around, let's make sure the proponents of free trade face an open and honest debate. One that gives due weight to the public interest in a clean environment, safe and well-paid jobs, and supports access to safe and nutritious food.

See IATP's summary fact sheet on the article at iatp.org, or read the full article in the Journal of Occupational and Environmental Health. Join IATP and the U.N. Special Rapporteur on the Right to Food, Olivier de Schutter for a discussion on the topic this Thursday, April 19.