

A forthcoming guide for policy makers: Diagnostic Tool on Trade & Health

The Tool builds on a joint WTO-WHO 2002 publication on WTO agreements and public health, and on current work within WHO and in selected countries to improve the understanding of, and action on, trade and health issues.

Trade and health are increasing intertwined with one another

Cross-border flows in goods, services, people, and capital are affecting health through an increasing number of channels. Health professionals are emigrating from resource-poor settings in search of better economic opportunities elsewhere. Food price rises have increased worldwide malnutrition, yet at the same time, record levels of diabetes are witnessed in developed and developing countries alike. Infectious disease outbreaks are causing economic instability. Consumers are travelling away from their home nations to receive care elsewhere. In every nation, in countless ways, trade is impacting the access, quality, and affordability of health care.

Trade agreements have implications for health and the health sector, whether they are multi-lateral, bilateral, linked to the World Trade Organization (WTO), or linked to regional trading systems, such as the EC, ASEAN, SADC or NAFTA. For instance, the General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS) aims to liberalize trade in various services, including health. Similarly, the Agreement on Trade-Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) affects patent protection for pharmaceutical drugs. In this complex milieu of trading policies and practices, health must be protected. Member states have asked WHO for assistance in this endeavour.

Member states call for WHO support to analyze the impact of trade on health

WHA Resolution 59.26 on international trade and health calls upon WHO to provide assistance to Member States to frame coherent policies to address the relationship between trade and health, and to respond to Member States' requests for support in their efforts to build the capacity to understand the implications of international trade and trade agreements for health and to address relevant issues through policies and legislation. It also requests WHO to work with other international organizations to generate and share evidence on the relationship between trade and health.

To implement this resolution, WHO is developing a diagnostic tool (here forth referred to as the Tool) in trade and health that will guide national policymakers in:

- (1) developing national policies and strategies related to trade and health; and
- (2) structuring their requests for capacity building in issues related to trade and health.

A tool is currently under development to evaluate the relationship between health and trade

Designed to be a practical guide on trade and health, the Tool seeks to provide those engaged in health policy a means to ensure that economic integration, international trade, and trade agreements contribute to improved population health and health systems. Specifically, the current draft of the Tool:

- Maps the linkages between health and trade at population and individual levels;
- Provides frameworks to guide policymakers seeking to achieve health and trade policy coherence;
- Contains a workbook allowing readers to individually assess the means by which national health systems are impacted by trade policies; and
- Provides sector-specific overviews on the impact of trade in medicines, health services, hazardous products, and foodstuffs.

The draft of the Tool provides integrated access to information that is critical to safeguarding health in a complicated trade environment. Included within the five sections is documentation about international norms and standards, best practices, data sources, case studies, and decision-making trees.

Pilot studies are underway to assess the Tool's effectiveness

The developers expect this tool to eventually inform policies and strategies in trade and health as well as help countries to identify their capacity building needs in this area. The diagnostic tool may assist both low-income and high income countries. Thus far, the tool has been piloted to understand impact of trade in health services in Viet Nam. Key findings from this experience will be incorporated in the preparatory work and in the dialogues for the subsequent reiterations of the Tool.

The Tool is expected to be available on the WHO website for common use by the end of 2010.

For more information:

Helena Nygren-Krug, WHO Department of Ethics, Equity, Trade, and Human Rights (ETH)
Trade, Foreign Policy, and Global Health Diplomacy (TFD) Unit
Email: nygrenkrugh@who.int – Website: www.who.int/trade/en/