



How the North American Free Trade Agreement Contributed to Health Setbacks in Mexico

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In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement – called “NAFTA” for short – brought Canada, the United States, and Mexico into a single free-trade zone. My research reveals new chronic health problems spurred by transformations of Mexico’s food system unfolding after the signing of NAFTA.

Mexico was required by NAFTA to eliminate subsidies that helped consumers and producers connect through distribution channels and supply chains. In the two decades since NAFTA, small-scale agricultural producers have become less able to grow food for themselves and their communities. Big U.S. food producers flooded Mexican markets with less healthy products.

The major causes of death in Mexico are now all non-communicable diseases – illnesses like diabetes and heart disease that are not spread by contagions or infection – each of them claiming more lives annually than the highly publicized drug war. Each year, 80,000 people die of diabetes and many more face debilitating symptoms. But so far, Mexican public health responses have been inadequate.

NAFTA Losers and Winners

Even though migration from Mexico has recently slowed, rural communities have not prospered under NAFTA and those who stayed or have returned from abroad seldom find opportunities promised by the trade deal. Poverty in Mexico since NAFTA has grown by 3% of the population. This spike in poverty is counterintuitive because one of Mexico’s main reasons for signing the agreement was to bring greater prosperity to the Mexican people. There is prosperity, of course, but only for an elite minority of automobile and airplane manufacturers – the country’s new billionaires.

Among the big winners of NAFTA have been the transnational food and beverage corporations that have saturated Mexico’s new markets, making Mexico a common place to offload the excess calories produced by the heavily subsidized corn and soybean fields of the Midwestern United States. These calories are delivered in the form of muffins, chips, corn-syrup sweetened beverages, and feed for livestock. Mexicans did not wake up one day wanting to eat American processed foods containing enormous quantities of sugar, which research has shown can be as addictive as cocaine. After NAFTA, however, Mexicans did find that their traditional ways of eating were harder and more expensive to sustain at the same time that junk and processed foods became evermore cheap and plentiful, even in the most isolated rural areas.

Globalization favors foreign, direct investment and obliges countries to reduce or eliminate price supports and distribution systems that favor local producers. The economic logic of NAFTA states that Mexico should no longer produce corn, but should instead purchase it from the United States, where corn is produced in excess.

But the problem is that the kind of corn the United States grows is not edible as corn or in the form of tortillas and tamales – pillars of traditional Mexican cooking. The U.S. corn industry is oriented toward raising industrial corn, used in the production of sweeteners, starches, and snacks. Low corn prices have enabled industrialized foods and beverages like soda, chips and cookies to penetrate even the most rural, isolated communities in Mexico. Although rural and low-income communities can now consume like the industrialized urban populations, they pay the price in their health.

The Health Downsides of Globalization

As countries open their borders to globalization, allowing more foreign, direct investment, trade, and industrialization, countries also increase the risk of chronic disease for their citizens. Research has shown that globalization can dramatically change food systems and negatively affect the public health of the globalizing country. This process is called “nutrition transition,” and has a well-documented history in countries around the world. Unfortunately, many public health campaigns fail to address the ways globalization changes food systems and instead focus on education, exercise, and diet to combat obesity, diabetes, and heart disease. But to address the global rise of diabetes, obesity, and other chronic, non-communicable diseases, policymakers and public health advocates must grapple with the real roots of the problem.

Mexico has begun a massive public health campaign to address the health problems that came with the signing of NAFTA, and has instituted a tax on sugar sweetened beverages. However, my interviews with the architects of this campaign show that public health officials and the general public largely see the rise in chronic disease as a problem of education and behavior and not as a product of Mexico’s trade agreements. If people are simply taught to consume “responsibly,” my interviewees imply, health outcomes will improve. Even academics have told me in utter seriousness that to understand obesity in Mexico one must understand the nation’s prodigious sweet tooth. These misconceptions prevent progress towards real solutions.

The Way Forward

Mexico’s public health policy has been co-opted by transnational corporations seeking to expand market share even if health deteriorates for many people. Public health experts that know that health will improve overall only if there are changes to major systems and the societal factors affecting everyone. Education campaigns that try to teach individuals to switch from soda to water will not move the needle very far, but big, nationwide interventions that make it easier to obtain and afford healthy foods and harder to consume junk foods could make a difference.

Mexican authorities should support small-scale farmers and local producers. They should reduce incentives for the over-production of commodities like corn, soy and wheat and fashion new incentives to support production and purchasing of minimally processed grains, fruits, and vegetables. Such policies would put public health before transnational marketing and profits. Public health-inspired steps of this kind could help Mexico – and other developing nations – eliminate hunger while at the same time limiting the incidence of debilitating conditions like diabetes and heart disease.

Read more in Alyshia Gálvez, *Eating NAFTA: Trade and Food Policies and the Destruction of Mexico* (forthcoming, 2018).