

# EXISTING WORKFORCE NUTRITION POLICIES IN MEXICO AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT



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## KEY MESSAGES

- Most people spend 1/3 of their adult lives at work. By leveraging the workplace as a connector to people, access to and knowledge about healthy nutrition can be brought to millions of people around the globe through **workforce nutrition**.
- Major opportunities to further expand workforce nutrition policies in Mexico include **expanding food security and distribution initiatives** to target formal workplaces and/or supply chains, **incentivising minimal nutritional standards** as part of food provisioning in workplaces, and **extending maternity entitlements** in line with international standards.
- With supportive policies in place, even greater impact can be achieved when ensuring minimal **accountability** and **compliance mechanisms** against these policies.

## SETTING THE SCENE

Malnutrition in all its forms, from undernutrition to micronutrient deficiencies and overnutrition, is a global public health burden. It is estimated that 2 in 3 women of reproductive age are affected by nutrient deficiencies<sup>1</sup>. In Mexico, the Global Nutrition Report highlights the public health burden of malnutrition, with obesity prevalence estimated at 36% for adult women and 27% for adult men, amongst the highest worldwide. Although some progress on infant and young child feeding has been achieved; only 29% of infants are exclusively breastfed the first six months of age<sup>2</sup>. Never has there been more need to engage all actors and options to address the malnutrition burden the world faces. People spend one-third of their adult lives at work, therefore, by leveraging the workplace, access to and knowledge about healthy nutrition can be brought to millions of people around the globe. Workforce nutrition is an opportunity to deliver proven benefits to employers, workers, and communities. A definition and framework for workforce nutrition can be found [here](#).

In recent years, Mexico has taken some critical steps to identify the role of employers in enabling good nutrition for workers, most notably in the Food Assistance Law for Workers of 2011. Further improved action in the policy arena could help start or scale up existing workforce nutrition programmes and contribute to addressing the Sustainable Development Goals, including SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 3 (good health and wellbeing), SDG 5 (gender equality), and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth).

## WIN-WIN-WIN APPROACH

As elaborated in a [GAIN evidence brief](#)<sup>3</sup>, poor-quality diets and insufficient food quantity are linked to reduced work capacity. This suggests that the malnutrition burden can be partly addressed through a win-win-win approach which improves individual lives, business outcomes, and national economies. Individual outcomes observed as a result of workforce nutrition programmes have included increased job satisfaction, reduced sick days, higher consumption of healthy foods, and increased duration of exclusive breastfeeding, amongst others. Business outcomes are reduced absenteeism, enhanced productivity, reduced medical costs, and significantly lower rates of accidents and mistakes, which together could lead to an increase in the national GDP<sup>4</sup>. **Therefore GAIN, as part of the Workforce Nutrition Alliance, urges Mexico's regulators and policymakers to support employers by further developing and implementing public policies for improved workforce nutrition.**

<sup>1</sup> Stevens, G. A., Beal, T., Mbuya, M. N., Luo, H., Neufeld, L. M., Addo, O. Y., ... & Young, M. F. (2022). Micronutrient deficiencies among preschool-aged children and women of reproductive age worldwide: a pooled analysis of individual-level data from population-representative surveys. *The Lancet Global Health*, 10(11), e1590-e1599.

<sup>2</sup> Global Nutrition Report. Mexico. 2021. <https://globalnutritionreport.org/resources/nutrition-profiles/latin-america-and-caribbean/central-america/mexico/>





<sup>3</sup> Nyhus Dhillon, C. & Stone, G. The evidence for workforce nutrition programmes. 2019. <https://www.gainhealth.org/resources/reports-and-publications/evidence-workforce-nutrition-programmes>

<sup>4</sup> Lambrechts, M. & B. Stacy. Increasing productivity and reducing vulnerable employment. In Atlas of the Sustainable Development Goals 2020. <https://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdgoalatlas/goal-8-decent-work-and-economic-growth/>

## IMPROVING WORKFORCE NUTRITION-RELATED POLICIES

An outline of the four nutrition pillars for workforce nutrition and the related existing policies in Mexico is presented in Table 1. Based on an analysis of these policies, the table also provides opportunities to further employer-driven approaches to improve nutrition among formal worker populations. Even greater impact can be considered when expanding existing policies to include reaching workers in supply chains (as opposed to only those directly employed by the company) as well as establishing minimal accountability and reporting requirements against these policies. Furthermore, state-level actors should be supported in their efforts to operationalise strong federal policies.

**Table 1:** Existing policies and opportunities to further strengthen policies on workforce nutrition in Mexico for the different nutrition pillars, based on an analysis of the national labour and nutrition policies.

Nutrition pillar	Existing workforce nutrition related policy components	Opportunities to further strengthen policies on workforce nutrition
<p><b>Healthy Food at Work</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law states that salaries cover food, either provided free to employee or in alternate form <sup>5</sup>.</li> <li>• Employers may provide food aid to workers whether in the form of food aid via canteens/ restaurants, food consumption via establishments, or groceries (through food baskets/ vouchers). Provisioning of cash is not permitted. Employers may gain tax benefits. Reference to regulations on dietary guidelines and campaigns on nutrition, and standards for cafeterias <sup>6</sup>.</li> <li>• Ongoing initiatives for food security/ assistance include the low-cost Milk Social Supply Program and school breakfasts programme <sup>7</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Mandate employers to apply or incentivise minimal nutritional requirements for canteen offerings (prioritising nutritious and safe foods and minimising harmful unhealthy food offerings) based on Dietary Guidelines for Mexico <sup>8</sup>.</li> <li>• Expand existing for food security/distribution initiatives to workplaces.</li> <li>• Consider incentivizing fortified and/or biofortified foods wherever possible in worker meals and/or rations.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Nutrition education</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No direct reference found under available laws/ rules or policies. However, Mexico had a multi-sectoral National Agreement for Nutritional Health, which led to initiatives such as front-of-the-pack nutritional labelling and other useful guidelines <sup>9</sup>.</li> <li>• The Strategy on Overweight and Obesity includes workplaces in its definition of healthy environments within the broader strategy of health promotion.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Expand the Mexico National development Plan 2019-24 on sports promotion for NCDs, awareness campaigns on nutrition, healthy habits, and sexual and reproductive health to workplaces.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Health Checks</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• No direct reference found under existing laws, rules, or policies on the inclusion of health checks in worksites, aside from occupational health checks.</li> <li>• Mexico National Development Plan 2019-24 highlights the creation of the National Institute of Health for Welfare, which would provide free medical and hospital care to the entire population not affiliated with health insurance to formal workers in public or private employment <sup>10</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Include nutrition-related indicators within the comprehensive 67 indicator listing for self-assessment of workplaces <sup>11</sup>. For example, by expanding or specifying indicator 16.</li> <li>• Promote nutrition counselling for workers (all workers or targeted to those at risk, as identified by health checks).</li> </ul>
<p><b>Breastfeeding Support</b></p> 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Law requires a 12-week maternity leave (6 pre-childbirth and 6 post-childbirth) and 6 weeks with adoption cases <sup>12</sup>.</li> <li>• Law requires a 5-day paternity leave.</li> <li>• Provisioning of 2 breaks per day during 6 months post-childbirth or, in agreement with employer, the workday will be reduced by an hour <sup>12</sup>.</li> <li>• Guidelines for the implementation and operation of breastfeeding rooms in the workplace <sup>13</sup>.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Consider extending maternity leave policy to at least 18 weeks as per International Labour Organization (ILO) recommendation 191</li> <li>• Consider parental leave for supporting spouses, suggested for at least 2 weeks as per ILO recommendation</li> <li>• Require a non-dismissal policy for women from announcement of pregnancy through to at least 1 month post maternity leave, as per ILO recommendation</li> </ul>

<sup>5</sup> Ley federal del trabajo. 1970. Última reforma publicada 2015. [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044\\_Ley\\_Federal\\_del\\_Trabajo.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044_Ley_Federal_del_Trabajo.pdf)

<sup>6</sup> Ley de ayuda alimentaria para los trabajadores. Artículo 7. 2011. <http://www.diputados.gob.mx/LeyesBiblio/pdf/LAAT.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Cervantes, G., Thow, A. M., Gómez-Oliver, L., Durán Arenas, L., & Pérez-Ferrer, C. What Opportunities Exist for Making the Food Supply Nutrition Friendly? A Policy Space Analysis in Mexico. *International Journal of Health Policy and Management*. 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Academia Nacional de Medicina (ANM). (2015). Guías alimentarias y de actividad física en contexto de sobrepeso y obesidad en la población Mexicana.

<sup>9</sup> Acuerdo Nacional para la Salud Alimentaria. Estrategia contra el Sobrepeso y la Obesidad

[http://www.sep.gob.mx/work/models/sep1/Resource/635/1/images/programadeaccion\\_sept.pdf](http://www.sep.gob.mx/work/models/sep1/Resource/635/1/images/programadeaccion_sept.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Plan Nacional de Desarrollo, 2019-2024 <https://framework-gb.cdn.gob.mx/landing/documentos/PND.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Programa de Autogestión en Seguridad y Salud en el Trabajo. Guía de Asesoría para la Instauración de Sistemas de Administración en Seguridad y Salud en el Trabajo. 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Ley federal del trabajo. 1970. Última reforma publicada 2015. Artículo 170 (II,V). [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044\\_Ley\\_Federal\\_del\\_Trabajo.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/156203/1044_Ley_Federal_del_Trabajo.pdf)

<sup>13</sup> La Secretaría de Salud (SS), el Instituto Mexicano del Seguro Social (IMSS), UNICEF & la Secretaría del Trabajo y Previsión Social (STPS). Guía para la instalación y funcionamiento de salas de lactancia. 2022.

## EXISTING INITIATIVES FOR PROMOTING WORKFORCE NUTRITION

In May 2022, the programme “Safe and Healthy Work Environments” (ELSA, acronym in Spanish) was launched as a joint effort between the government, business representatives, and employees. Led by the Mexican Institute of Social Security (operating under the Secretariat of Health), the programme has the following key objectives:

1. Improve health and well-being of the workforce
2. Prevent psychosocial risk factors and ergonomic injuries, as well as chronic degenerative diseases, accidents, and occupational diseases
3. Decrease rate of disabilities, consultations, or hospitalisations, as well as related deaths from preventable illnesses and accidents
4. Improve productivity, considering that the greatest assets of companies are workers

The programme consists of a self-assessment covering five focus areas, two of which are highly relevant for workforce nutrition: 1) health inspection at work and 2) health and wellness promotion in work centres. Elements assessed in these two focus areas are aligned with each of the nutrition pillars. ELSA provides support material for compliance with the checkpoints covered under current regulations in Mexico, the options to implement them, and recommendations. Through the programme, workplaces can earn a distinctive ELSA recognition valid for 1 year.

## A CALL TO ACTION

Mexico has taken several positive steps regarding workforce nutrition policies by integrating workforce nutrition-friendly provisions across its labour and social welfare policies. Further refining existing workforce nutrition policies to encourage minimal but broad workforce nutrition standards would help to address the burden of malnutrition. Existing policies that influence the planning of food security (SEGALMEX) or distribution of food through supply chains should become more nutrition-sensitive and should be expanded to workplaces and supply chains as entry points for impact. Other essential considerations include applying minimal nutritional standards to canteen offerings and or other food provision near the workplace using national Dietary Guidelines. In addition, refinements should support the access to nutrition counselling for workers and the extension of maternity entitlements in line with international standards. Finally, even greater impact can be considered when expanding existing policies to include reaching workers in supply chains (as opposed to only those directly employed by the company) as well as ensuring minimal accountability and compliance mechanisms against all policies. When combined, these actions will contribute to healthier lives of citizens, improved commercial results and more stable labour relations.