

Processed Food Import, BMI, and the Obesity Kuznets Curve: Disaggregating Results by Income Groups

Nawaraj S. Paudel¹ and Jeeten Krishna Giri²

Abstract

We analyze the impact of processed food imports on body mass index (BMI) using 17 years (2000–2016) of panel data from 158 countries, employing OLS and GMM dynamic panel methods. Our results consistently demonstrate that processed food imports raise BMI levels worldwide, with variations based on countries' income groups and trade directions. Processed food imports from developing countries (DEV) by the rest of the world and imports of processed food by DEV from the rest of the world significantly increase both average and overweight BMI. We find that imported processed food does not contribute to BMI increases in high-income countries, whereas processed food imports from high-income countries (HICs) by all countries positively influence overweight BMI. Our evidence supports an Obesity Kuznets Curve (OKC), with GDP per capita showing an inverted U-shaped relationship with BMI. Globalization is positively linked to overweight BMI, while urbanization raises the average BMI in most countries except HIC. These findings highlight the complex relationship between global food trade and obesity, emphasizing the need for income-sensitive and trade-specific public health policies to address rising BMI levels worldwide.

Keywords: Body Mass Index (BMI); Processed Food Import; Obesity Kuznets Curve (OKC); Panel Data; Dynamic Panel.

JEL Classifications: F19, F60, I12, I18

¹College of Arts and Sciences, Department of Economics, Bucknell University, Lewisburg, PA 17837, U.S.A. (E-mail: nsp011@bucknell.edu)

²Madras School of Economics, Gandhi Mandapam Road, Chennai 600025, India [Corresponding Author] (Email: jeeten@mse.ac.in)