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United Nations



Health on the table

A consumer advocacy perspective
on reducing overweight and obesity
in Latin America



**CONSUMERS
INTERNATIONAL**

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FOR CHANGE

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FOREWORD

In Latin America and the Caribbean, overweight affects 59.5 percent of adults, more than 20 percentage points above the world average, while almost a quarter of all adults are obese, well above the world average of 13.1 percent.

Overweight and obesity are strongly correlated with non-communicable diseases (NCDs), responsible for most of the deaths in the region. This situation is even more worrisome in the context of the current pandemic, because, according to the World Health Organization, those who suffer obesity and overweight are at much greater risk of severe illness from COVID-19, and most likely to die from it.

To face this situation, we must aim for a post pandemic recovery with transformation of our agrifood systems, which will allow us make them healthier and more sustainable.

This requires the joint work of all sectors, including the public and private sector, the academia, and the member of the civil society.

Consumers are among the most preeminent actors of food systems; in Latin America and the Caribbean, organized consumers have been key in promoting policies and regulations that aim to improve food environments.

Consumers International is the largest consumer organization in the world, and plays a fundamental role in the defense of consumers, one that is crucial to ensure healthy food environments. They promote the empowerment of consumers, and enable them to demand their rights, and to make their voices heard in decision-making.

This publication gathers the opinions of consumer organizations on healthy eating initiatives from seven Latin American countries. It identifies promising practices and recommendations to strengthen public policies on this issue.

We hope that this document will serve as a valuable tool for the different sectors, and especially decision makers, to incorporate the vision of consumers in the transformation of agrifood systems.

Julio Berdegué

**FAO Assistant Director-General and Regional Representative
for Latin America and the Caribbean**

THE URGENT NEED TO ADDRESS OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

The health of consumers in Latin America and the Caribbean and globally consumers has suffered greatly from the growing problem of overweight and obesity. Most recently, underlying overweight and obesity problems have made individuals more vulnerable to COVID-19, which has infected over 90 million people and killed nearly 2 million worldwide in the past year (Worldometers, info, 2021; FAO *et al.*, 2020; Wadman, 2020). In many countries in Latin America and the Caribbean inequality, fragmented health systems, poverty, and other factors have made COVID-19 a leading if not the top cause of death in the past year (Beaubien, 2020). Although science may be moving extraordinarily quickly to provide vaccines and other measures to fight COVID-19, businesses and regulators need to act with similar focus and resolve to reduce overweight and obesity and manage their burden on the health and finances of consumers worldwide.

A combination of factors is changing food consumption habits around the world, with home preparation of meals and consumption of fresh fruits and vegetables on the decline while purchases of ultra-processed foods grow (PAHO, 2015, 2016). Consumption of ultra-processed convenience foods is exacerbated by factors including their easy availability, time poor households and long working hours. Although personal choices, economic status, cultural norms, and social life impact the eating habits of consumers, factors in the food environment, like agriculture, trade policy, marketing, advertising, and prices, shape these habits too. In the aggregate, these factors have led to an increased prevalence of overweight and obesity worldwide, which has contributed to rising rates of diabetes, hypertension, and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs) and amplified the harmful impact of COVID-19 (FAO *et al.*, 2020; Wadman, 2020). These health problems are particularly relevant in Latin America, where over 260 million or nearly 60 percent of the population is overweight or obese (FAO *et al.*, 2019).

Food security and nutrition (FSN) continue to be critical issues around the world, as recognised by their inclusion in the Sustainable Development Goals and the high-level attention being paid to the topics as part of the United Nations' Food Systems Summit 2021, in which the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and Consumers International are playing important, active roles. To contribute to these global efforts, this document provides policy recommendations so that an array of stakeholders can collaborate to address the critical issue of overweight and obesity from a consumer perspective. As opposed to focusing only on the supply side, the recommendations consider the consumer needs (UNCTAD, 2016) and behavioural determinants that public policies and private actions need to address in order to change eating habits. In order to improve population health, food environments need to address consumer decision factors such as economics, culture, content, access, home environment, knowledge, and skills, and enable healthy choices. Our collective health demands swift and effective action to address this growing problem.

CONSUMER ADVOCATES INVESTIGATE HEALTHY EATING INITIATIVES

The FAO requested a view from consumer advocates in seven countries in Latin America on healthy eating initiatives, in order to identify promising practices and recommend policy changes (Consumers International and FAO, 2021). The following Consumers International members participated in the study: Acción del Consumidor (ADELCO, Argentina), Servicio de Educación y Defensa de los Consumidores (SEDECO, Plurinational State of Bolivia), Organización de Consumidores y Usuarios (ODECU, Chile), Asociación Colombiana de Educación al Consumidor (Educar Consumidores, Colombia), Tribuna Ecuatoriana de Consumidores y Usuarios (Tribuna, Ecuador), Asociación Peruana de Consumidores y Usuarios (ASPEC, Peru) and Consumidores y Usuarios Asociados (CUA, Uruguay). Supported by Consumers International, these consumer advocacy organisations developed a consumer-centred framework highlighting the key elements of any healthy eating initiative. The team surveyed over 70 organisations in the seven countries for examples of initiatives that encourage healthy eating. Initiatives were then assessed against the framework to identify elements that could be strengthened, encouraged, or scaled through public policy interventions.

CONSUMER-CENTRED NUTRITION FRAMEWORK: TOUCHPOINTS AND LEVERS TO MAKE A DIFFERENCE

The team developed a Consumer-Centred Nutrition Framework (CCN Framework - see Appendix) to guide its analysis and recommendations. The CCN Framework identifies ten touchpoints through which the consumer's choices can be impacted and six levers that can be used to influence consumer choice along the continuum from pre-purchase to post-purchase, as shown in Figure 1 below. In the view of consumer advocates, these touchpoints and levers need to be addressed in order to achieve lasting changes in eating habits.



CONSUMER-CENTRED NUTRITION FRAMEWORK

Consumer decision drivers, touchpoints and levers along the consumer journey (pre-purchase, purchase, post-purchase). Rooting these in consumer rights supports healthy eating.

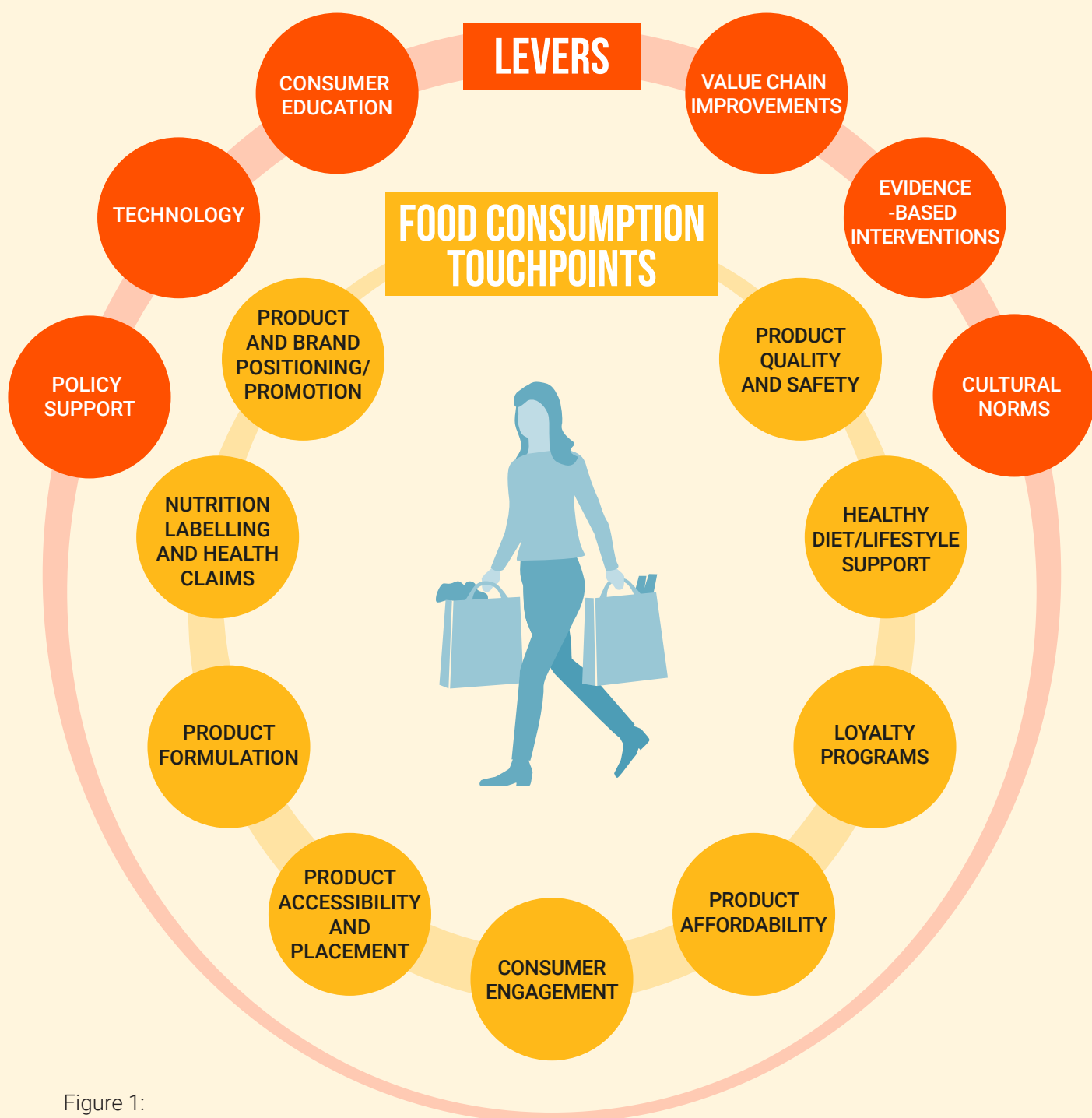


Figure 1:
The Consumer-Centred
Nutrition Framework

Analysing 35 initiatives in seven Latin American countries against this framework, consumer advocates found a number of initiatives were incorporating the following critical touchpoints and levers:

- **Product formulation:** A number of companies attempted to develop healthy products while taking consumer needs and feedback into consideration.
- **Product accessibility and placement:** Several businesses sought to improve the visibility of healthy products in retail and workplace contexts.
- **Consumer education:** Efforts on this varied from community gardening with children to meal planning and preparation trainings.
- **Value chain improvements:** Numerous initiatives sought to connect consumers and producers more directly.

However, a number of touchpoints and levers appear to receive little or no attention from the participating businesses and social enterprises, suggesting an opportunity for innovative thinking:

- **Product affordability:** Few efforts focused on pricing of products, though affordability can be a critical enabler of healthy eating.
- **Nutrition labelling and health claims:** The regulatory framework seemed to be determinative on this issue, with little evidence of private initiatives addressing it on their own.
- **Product and brand positioning and promotion:** Marketing and advertising restrictions, particularly regarding children, were not self-imposed in our sample.
- **Technology:** Digital tools to improve the availability of information for decision-making and logistics to reduce prices, as well as technologies to facilitate the development of innovative products, were used only in some initiatives.
- **Evidence-based interventions:** None of the initiatives made rigorous use of behavioural economics or behaviour change communication to change eating habits.
- Initiatives would benefit from stronger **monitoring and evaluation** to guide implementation and scale-up

In aggregate, consumer advocates highlighted the following aspects of the framework and considerations as particularly important for any stakeholder aiming to encourage healthy eating:

1. ACCESSIBILITY AND AFFORDABILITY OF HEALTHY OPTIONS

The shift in consumption from traditional, home-cooked foods to ultra-processed and fast foods despite their unhealthiness is driven by taste, low price, and convenience. Increasing access to and affordability of fresh fruits and vegetables as well as to nutritious, healthy, and tasty processed food products to counter this trend is critical for consumer health.

2. INFORMATION AND EDUCATION

Consumers need accurate, understandable, and actionable information in order to make healthy food choices. The right to information and education means that information is needed and must be accompanied by education to ensure it is understood and translated into informed decisions. Consumer organisations can play a role in providing accurate information and education. The food industry itself can also aid in this regard through increased transparency about product contents and characteristics and support for evidence-based interventions to educate consumers of all ages.

3. POTENTIAL FOR DEEPER, HARMONISED REGULATION

The focus countries, as well as those in Latin America and the Caribbean more generally, continue to need significant regulatory intervention in the food environment. Front-of-package labelling is a major priority in Argentina, Colombia, Plurinational State of Bolivia, and Uruguay, with these countries being at different stages in terms of passing legislation and implementing regulations. In addition, most countries could benefit from further restrictions on advertising of ultra-processed foods, particularly to children, and taxes on unhealthy products such as sugar-sweetened beverages. Further, the regulations recommended by the World Health Organization (WHO) and FAO include promotion of breast feeding and availability of healthy foods and safe drinking water in school settings.

Limits or targets for reduction should be set by regulators for sodium, trans fat, and sugar content of processed foods in order to make foods healthier, as Argentina has done with salt and trans fats, for example (FAO *et al.*, 2019). Such compositional requirements are effective because consumers improve their eating habits passively when the products themselves are healthier. These types of changes are ones that are difficult, if not impossible, to achieve through self-regulation by the industry, as evidenced by the lack of an effective and sufficient approach on these issues to date in the absence of regulations (Ronit and Jensen, 2014).

When companies sell products in multiple countries, differences in national regulations allow for variation in the quality and nutritional value of products sold. The commercialisation of products with different formulations in different countries highlights the need to harmonise regulations across the region, with the goal of ensuring each company consistently meets best practice standards. This will allow for equal protection of the consumer across borders and will avoid exploitation of lower or non-existent quality or nutrition standards or other regulations in different markets.

4. ETHICAL MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

Marketing and advertising represent a major source of concern among consumer organisations. Aggressive, misleading, and abusive marketing of ultra-processed products, particularly to children, has contributed to the current situation in terms of obesity and deteriorating eating habits (Jolly, 2011). In Latin America, ultra-processed foods are the most frequently marketed products, and almost all products marketed to children are unhealthy (Chemas-Velez *et al.*, 2019). Marketing aimed at children is ripe for regulation and could have a strong impact on overweight and obesity as children's eating habits are shaped early. In addition, given that health claims are a frequently used marketing tool, such claims must be based in scientific evidence to protect consumers (Kelly *et al.*, 2015; Boyland *et al.*, 2016).

5. PROMOTION OF LOCAL AGRICULTURE

Increased promotion of local agriculture and use of economic incentives to build the base and market access of small producers can help bring unprocessed and minimally processed foods to market at lower prices. By directly linking producers and consumers, it might be possible to reduce the cost of healthy products like fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts while also improving the livelihoods of national agricultural workers. In addition, having more local production could improve a country's food sovereignty, which has taken on particular importance during COVID-19 lockdowns and related supply chain disruptions.



6. SUSTAINABILITY

Fostering local food production and shorter supply chains could lead to a more sustainable diet. In cases where such diets also involved minimally processed foods and more fruits, vegetables and legumes (versus animal-based food products), then sustainability and health can go hand-in-hand. Food waste reduction remains an important effort that could be used to reduce food security among vulnerable groups, for instance through donations to food banks and other entities delivering excess food to the most vulnerable. In addition, private composting programs currently focused on recovering commercial food waste could also be expanded to include household food waste.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO CHANGE EATING BEHAVIOURS

Based on the findings, consumer advocates made the following recommendations to policy makers to improve eating habits and support stakeholders, especially business:

1. APPLY THE CCN FRAMEWORK TO DEVELOP BETTER HEALTHY EATING INITIATIVES AND POLICIES

The Consumer-Centred Nutrition Framework lays out the considerations that consumer organisations consider critical to the development of successful healthy eating initiatives and policies. The framework can be used by businesses and social enterprises to guide the design of new programs and activities as well as to improve existing ones. Policymakers can consider the touchpoints and levers laid out in the framework and scorecard as they assess and address the policy gaps in their local context.

2. IMPLEMENT FISCAL MEASURES AND PROACTIVE MEASURES SUCH AS ECONOMIC INCENTIVES, SUBSIDIES, LOANS, LEVIES, AND TAXES TO MAKE HEALTHY PRODUCTS MORE AFFORDABLE

Consumers need to be able to afford and find healthy food products. This means that healthy food needs to be available either through convenient physical retail points or through direct-to-consumer and e-commerce options and that the pricing of products matters.

Numerous surveyed initiatives aimed to increase access, with the dominant approach being featuring healthy products as the only option or making such products easily visible in store settings. Addressing the pricing of products directly appeared to be less of a priority among the examined initiatives, but remains critical to healthy eating. Healthy foods need to be as or more affordable than unhealthy ones.

Given the consumer interest in accessible and affordable healthy food, policymakers should focus on how to facilitate both goals and take the following actions:

- **Encourage competition through display regulations in supermarkets and other retail settings:** Ecuador requires supermarkets to stock and display a certain percentage of products made by micro and small enterprises (Normas Regulatorias para Cadenas Desupermercados and Sus Proveedores, 2017). Argentina recently instituted a requirement that supermarket displays include a certain percentage of local and small producer products and that such products be featured in prominent central shelf locations as well as register displays, among other measures to encourage competition (Lanacion, 2020). Similar measures in other countries could increase visibility of and access to a variety of products. Although products made by micro and small enterprises are not necessarily healthier, a more diverse selection of products may benefit consumers if combined with other regulations and incentives to make such products healthier.
- **Support and promote local markets:** These venues often sell healthier and more sustainable foods than supermarkets or more formal retail outlets and are critical to food access in many areas in Latin America. Governments should ensure their safe and continued operation.
- **Address affordability by implementing agricultural subsidies and loan programs:** Carefully designed subsidies and loan programs can be useful to help encourage production as well as to reduce the price of unprocessed healthy foods, such as fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts.

- **Raise taxes or levies on unhealthy foods:** Taxes and levies on unhealthy and ultra-processed foods have proven helpful in decreasing demand for such products (WHO, 2017). Policymakers should consider implementing sugar-sweetened beverage and other unhealthy food taxes in order to make healthy foods relatively more affordable, with the caveat that revenues from such taxes should be earmarked for obesity prevention programs and efforts.

3. SET AND ENFORCE STANDARDS FOR SALT, SUGAR, AND TRANS FAT CONTENT OF FOODS

Product formulation can play a critical role in improving eating habits, since it passively contributes to improved nutrition. For this to work, however, the healthy products need to be appealing in terms of their taste and texture. Formulation of healthy products is preferable from a public health perspective, but making unhealthy food less harmful by reducing its salt, sugar, and fat content, for example, can also contribute to improving the food environment provided consumers limit intake of such unhealthy products.

Our initiative analysis highlighted attempts at formulating healthy products as well as at reformulating existing ones to improve their nutritional value. Legislation in the area of food formulation can have broad impact on the characteristics and content of food products, and it is important to encourage development of healthy products through actions such as:

- **Regulation of nutritional content:** Policymakers should regulate nutritional content while allowing companies sufficient leeway to formulate tasty foods that will be appealing to consumers, and should regularly update and complement such regulations. Limiting sugar and salt content and prohibiting trans fats will automatically result in development or reformulation of healthier products.
- **Harmonisation of regulations regarding food composition:** In order to ensure consumer safety and rights receive similar protection throughout the region, such regulations need to be harmonised. This will ensure that companies formulate the same product consistently and to the highest standard in different countries. Cross-border organisations and efforts, such as Mercosur, should promote greater harmonisation of regulation (Toledo, 2014). These harmonisation initiatives should be guided by the scientific evidence and safeguarded against conflict of interest.
- **Enforcement of regulations:** Responsible agencies need to monitor compliance with existing regulations in order to ensure product quality, safety, and adherence to nutritional standards.

4. PROTECT VULNERABLE CONSUMERS FROM AGGRESSIVE, MISLEADING, AND ABUSIVE MARKETING AND ADVERTISING

Aggressive and often misleading and abusive marketing and advertising is a powerful force leading to unhealthy eating, particularly by vulnerable groups like children. Marketing and advertising of healthy products should be carefully designed and emphasised, so that healthy products are prominent and appealing relative to unhealthy products.

The initiatives analysed by the team did not focus on addressing marketing and advertising or reducing the exposure of children to characters or other appealing elements. While social media platforms can and should enact restrictions on advertising of unhealthy products to children (Sacks, and Yi, 2020), self-regulation by industry itself has proven inadequate with respect to marketing and advertising of unhealthy food.

Given this market failure and the strong commercial incentives to continue problematic marketing practices, governments, businesses, and consumer organisations should act to regulate marketing and advertising practices as follows:

- **Restrict the marketing of ultra-processed foods:** Advertising, particularly when aimed at children, should be carefully regulated by the government. This would involve restrictions on where and how unhealthy foods can be advertised. Regulators should prohibit the marketing of ultra-processed foods to children on any communication channel, including digitally and on product packaging. In addition, regulations should prevent schools, sporting and cultural events, or other venues where children are usually present from advertising unhealthy products. Regulators should also prohibit the use of strategies that appeal to children, like animated characters, for unhealthy products.
- **Promote healthy products through greater marketing and advertising:** Healthy products could benefit from greater marketing and advertising efforts, and businesses can facilitate this through evidence-based campaigns specifically designed to promote unprocessed and minimally processed foods (Rose and Mulier, 2020).
- **Ensure validity of health claims:** Any claims made on packages need to be scientifically substantiated to ensure they are not misleading. While businesses should comply with regulations on these matters, consumer organisations can play an active role as a watchdog to promote compliance with existing requirements and standards. Governments can support consumer organisations in this role by providing a formal mechanism for third party compliance evaluation and feedback.

5. IMPLEMENT EFFECTIVE FOOD AND NUTRITION EDUCATIONAL PROGRAMS FOR CHILDREN AND ADULTS AND PROVIDE ACCURATE INFORMATION ON HEALTHY FOOD AND EATING

Resounding support from consumer organisations exists for additional efforts to ensure consumer access to accurate information about food as well as for educational programs aimed at improving eating habits. Front-of-package labelling, particularly with clear warnings about potentially harmful levels of particular critical nutrients and ingredients, has been shown to impact food purchasing and is an important measure to protect the consumer's right to information. Such labelling can also include information about harmful content such as pesticides. Information alone does not lead to new habits, however. Educational programs are needed to instil knowledge early, as children are developing their lifelong preferences and eating habits. With adults, teaching food literacy, which includes skills like label reading, food selection, budgeting, meal planning, and food preparation, has been shown to be effective (Begley *et al.*, 2019).

From the perspective of businesses and social enterprises, information and education can involve different approaches. Many of the initiatives we analysed engage directly with consumers on food literacy through experiential learning events like cooking classes, gardening, and food label training.

Public policies are critical in informing and educating consumers about food and ensuring that private sector and non-governmental efforts are beneficial to consumers:

- **Front-of-package labelling:** A major priority to increase access to nutrition information is government regulation requiring front-of-package labelling (which is still needed or needs to be implemented in Argentina, Uruguay, Colombia, and Plurinational State of Bolivia). Ecuador has warning labels indicating high levels of sugar, salt, and fats, but these are not on the front of packages. This is needed to ensure a common standard so that companies do not provide inadequate or potentially misleading labelling.
- **School-based food and nutrition education and food literacy programs:** In addition, education on nutrition, eating habits, community and home gardening, traditional food culture and knowledge, and food preparation that businesses and social enterprises are successfully doing should be instituted in schools to develop a good knowledge base and better habits from the early years. Food literacy programs need to be targeted at low-income families and other vulnerable groups, and existing cash transfer programs could be made conditional on completion of such programs. Education efforts carried out by the businesses and social enterprises should follow government guidelines to ensure accuracy and a grounding in science.
- **Oversight of business education efforts:** Government and consumer organisations should guide and monitor business education efforts on food issues to ensure these programs are technically sound and evidence-based, with accurate and up-to-date nutritional information.

6. FACILITATE VALUE CHAIN IMPROVEMENTS AND PURCHASE LOCALLY FOR SOCIAL WELFARE PROGRAMS

Increased consumption of fresh fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds, and nuts improves consumers' diets. To achieve this, price and access are important, both of which can be addressed through value chain improvements. Shortening the supply chain between locally produced products and consumers may help lower costs and make healthy, unprocessed and minimally processed foods more accessible and attractive. Food sovereignty and security can also be enhanced by promoting local agriculture, as can sustainable production practices.

Multiple initiatives involved value chain improvements. Several involved cooperatives that connected small producers with markets and consumers more directly, for example. Another approach was to collect surplus and aesthetically undesirable agricultural products and redistribute them to vulnerable populations, addressing food security and reducing food waste at the same time.

Policymakers can play an important role in promoting value chain efficiency:

- **Facilitate direct marketplace connections:** Government agencies can develop online marketplaces to facilitate direct links between producers and consumers, as has been done in India (Boettiger, and Sanghvi, 2019). This can also be done by civil society, as demonstrated by the recent launch of an online consumer-producer platform in El Salvador by Consumer International member Centro para la Defensa del Consumidor (CDC). In addition, local marketplaces where producers can sell goods directly to customers also promote short supply chains.
- **Prioritise healthy, sustainably produced foods in state procurements:** Social welfare programs that provide food directly, such as school lunch programs or food pantries, can generate demand for local, sustainably grown produce. Such programs should prioritise local, sustainable produce and minimally processed foods over ultra-processed foods.

7. ENFORCE SAFETY AND PRIVACY REGULATIONS TO ENSURE RESPONSIBLE USE OF TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE HEALTHY FOOD

As with other areas, technology creates opportunities to change eating habits while also raising risks and vulnerabilities. Technology has applications at various stages—pre-purchase with innovative product development techniques, back-office logistical enhancements for businesses, and digital applications that provide nutritional and price information directly to consumers; at the time of purchase with online sales platforms connecting consumers and producers; and post-purchase in terms of facilitation of redress and assurances of product quality. In addition, digital media provides a powerful marketing and advertising tool, allowing consumer organisations, social enterprises and even the government to reach out to consumers and shape their food preferences through influencers, friends, family, and personalised advertising. Only unprocessed or minimally processed foods should be promoted on social media, particularly to those under the age of 18. In all these uses, care must be taken to ensure transparency and protect the safety and privacy of consumers, both in terms of product content and data management, particularly for online marketing targeting minors.

The initiatives considered for this paper made limited use of technology, mostly focusing on using social media as an outreach tool. Several civil society efforts used technology to provide food pricing and nutritional content information to consumers directly.

Policy makers should play an active role in encouraging responsible use of technology in the food sector by:

- **Carefully monitoring safety and data privacy:** Technology used to produce food requires careful regulation to ensure safety. Enforcement of data privacy requirements as they relate to the digital tools and online marketing efforts of the food industry are critical to protecting consumer rights and needs. Transparency can create trust where consumers have access to full information about product content and composition, for example in the case of innovative plant-based foods. Beyond privacy, it is important to protect the health of the consumer by ensuring there is no marketing of unhealthy foods online, especially to those under age 18.
- **Supporting the development of technology:** Governments can provide funding or institute other incentives to support the development of a broad range of technology, including online marketplaces, informational applications, and food product formulation technology, that benefits healthy eating and is designed with consumer rights principles in mind.
- **Encouraging the use of technology to improve markets:** As noted above, the commercialisation of food can benefit from digital transformation, which can connect producers and consumers directly and improve efficiencies, and the government should facilitate such efforts directly.

8. ENSURE ACCESS TO DATA AND EVIDENCE RELATING TO CONSUMER BEHAVIOUR, FOOD, AND OBESITY

Understanding consumer behaviour around food and eating is critical to shaping effective policy approaches to reducing overweight and obesity. Data and evidence allow for better product development, intervention and program design, and decision-making by consumers. While some data regarding food habits and preferences can be obtained from consumer consultation, population-level data would be useful to inform macro-level changes to the food environment. Monitoring and assessing the impact of interventions would also be useful in determining future program design. By using consumption and preference data based on the consumer rights principles of transparency, feedback, and engagement, businesses, social enterprises, and government can make informed, ethical choices about how to engage with consumers to enable them to improve their eating habits.

Many surveyed initiatives gather limited data about their interventions, often focusing primarily on sales data. In order to improve the design and impact of initiatives, more robust monitoring and evaluation of these efforts should be planned from the initial stages. Data should be made public whenever possible so that good ideas can be replicated and adapted to different products and settings.

These business and social enterprise efforts should be combined with public sector data gathering and sharing including:

- **Data on food consumption:** Regular food consumption surveys in all countries of Latin America would set a baseline and allow for monitoring of changes in eating habits, and donors should fund technical assistance for and implementation of such efforts.

- **Evidence to improve food interventions:** In addition, existing evidence on business and social enterprise efforts, government regulations, and other interventions should be easily accessible. By creating a repository such as the [Obesity Evidence Hub](#), FAO or another entity can facilitate access to obesity trends, impacts, prevention, treatments, and regulations. These data and evidence should be the basis for all-of-government food strategies aimed at reducing overweight and obesity.
- **Increase transparency:** Finally, the government should require companies to issue regular sustainability reports detailing production methods, supplies, pricing and distribution policies, and environmental impact.

9. FACILITATE BROAD STAKEHOLDER PARTICIPATION IN FOOD POLICY AND ENCOURAGE ACTIONS TO RESHAPE THE FOOD ENVIRONMENT

Multiple stakeholders need to step up and act decisively to reshape the food environment, including governments, the food industry, consumer organisations and civil society, technical experts, and donors and multilaterals.

While many businesses, social enterprises, and consumer organisations indicated their involvement in lobbying and the policy process, more can be done to engage them or facilitate their participation. Governments should create policy roundtables or commissions on food policy, provide funding to enable participation by a broad range of stakeholders in such groups, and set parameters to ensure the development of science-based policy free of conflicts of interest (White, 2020). Participation by consumer organisations in policy making should be encouraged. Donors can continue to elevate the issue by including it in items like the Sustainable Development Goals and related events.

Each of the groups below can play a role by engaging in different ways to reshape the food environment:

- **Governments and parliamentarians:** Governments and their elected representatives on all levels share a massive responsibility for protecting and supporting consumers with regard to food and guaranteeing the right to both food and health. As already mentioned, governments should implement policies and programs to ensure access to information and affordability of nutritious foods, including front-of-package labelling and agricultural and food subsidies, for immediate impact on consumer purchasing habits. Effective early food and nutrition programs should be institutionalised to shape the habits of future generations. In order to reverse current trends and reduce demand for ultra-processed foods in the region, governments should also consider taxes and levies on such products, ensuring that revenues are used for public health programs related to nutrition. Governments can also encourage local agricultural production and the sale of local agricultural products, seed protection and sustainable production by supporting and including in public dialogue civil society groups that help develop these community efforts and increase production and sale of healthy foods. Government policy must be coherent across different sectors, with trade, agriculture, economic, education and other relevant policies aligned to maximize impact. In addition, regional efforts to harmonise standards are important to ensure equal treatment for all consumers. Enforcement remains a critical role for government to ensure compliance with existing regulations. Finally, regulators should focus on ensuring the development of evidence-based policy and guard against undue influence by particular interests that do not contribute to the health of consumers.

- **Food Industry:** Critical to any food environment changes is the food industry itself, including producers, retailers, and restaurants, both formal and informal. Self-regulation, though not a panacea and often weaker in terms of protecting consumers than government regulation, can play a role in addressing some problems, and well-designed and executed initiatives can have an impact. For example, industry could commit to offering the same product formulations throughout the region rather than taking advantage of weaker regulations in some countries to offer less healthy formulations or not to label packaging demonstrating commitment to the health of the consumer. Businesses and social enterprises can develop healthy products that are convenient, tasty and affordable. By applying the marketing principles that have so effectively been used for ultra-processed foods, the industry can grow demand for unprocessed and minimally processed foods. Corporate social responsibility should involve evidence-based programs that are monitored and evaluated in order to determine impact, with successes shared broadly among the sector. We note that larger business can reach significantly more people and so even small adjustments to their products can have a notable impact on the healthiness of consumer diets. Finally, businesses can use their political and economic power to the benefit and well-being of consumers and support progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, incorporating not only scientific and technical evidence into their business decisions, but also responding to market trends seeking healthier products and ensuring transparency where conflicts of interest between commercial decisions and consumer well-being appear to arise.
- **Consumer organisations and civil society:** Consumer organisations and other civil society organisations have a critical role to play in changing and safeguarding the food environment. Responsibilities range from serving as a watchdog on prices and accessibility to monitoring food quality and safety. Further, civil society plays a crucial role in building coalitions and driving advocacy campaigns to achieve the policy changes outlined above. Consumer organisations represent consumers collectively, helping to bring their voice to the table and promoting consideration of expert opinions and evidence that take consumer needs and rights into account. Similarly, agricultural associations and social movements of small-scale producers represent farmers collectively and can elevate their concerns in policy fora. Through these collective efforts, these groups can provide a crucial counterbalance to the political advocacy and influence of corporate interests.
- **Technical experts:** Academics, food experts, and nutritionists and other health professionals all have important roles in developing and implementing sound policy that prioritises public health and avoids conflicts of interest.
- **International cooperation:** Continued support from donors and multilaterals, including the FAO, is critical to achieving the policy needed to change the food environment and improve eating habits in Latin America. Donors and multilaterals can galvanise the building of inclusive and sustainable food systems through elevating the food issue on the international agenda and undertaking collaborative action with consumer advocates and civil society, the private sector, governments and regional bodies and platforms across global, regional and local food systems to mainstream action that addresses food system challenges. Specialized technical support to governments, knowledge and experience exchange across countries will continue to be critical to better outcomes, alongside initiatives that promote international agreements and frameworks. As will support for advocacy efforts and funding evidence gathering and sharing, including ongoing monitoring and evaluation of policy programs.

All stakeholders need to grasp the opportunities available on the international landscape to tackle and achieve systemic change.

A CALL TO ACTION ON OVERWEIGHT AND OBESITY

Latin America urgently needs to reduce overweight and obesity, which have been having a significant impact on health and finances in the region. In order to change eating habits and have an impact on this growing problem, relevant stakeholders should take a consumer-centred approach to initiative design and implementation. An array of factors, including habits, societal norms, market conditions, information, and economics, influence consumer choices around food consumption, and the decisions are often suboptimal from a health perspective (Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2017). Price and availability often make it difficult for consumers to eat sufficient nutritious and healthy foods such as fresh fruits, vegetables, and fish (Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2017). Notably, businesses and social enterprises have an important role to enable and encourage healthier food choices, implementing evidence-based interventions to educate, encourage, and enable better decisions by consumers (Global Panel on Agriculture and Food Systems for Nutrition, 2017), and the CCN framework can be used to help design these initiatives. Going forward, those interventions can be facilitated, scaled, or institutionalised through the adoption of practical policy recommendations. Government should particularly focus on regulating product formulation, accessibility and placement, affordability, and labelling; restricting marketing and advertising for ultra-processed foods; implementing consumer education programs; and value chain improvements.

As we look to a post-pandemic economy it is important to recognise that economic crises inevitably lead to greater food insecurity pushing populations towards cheaper and less nutritious food. As the region builds back from the pandemic there is a tremendous need and opportunity to refocus efforts on tackling overweight and obesity. Consumer protection frameworks can shape affordable, strong and sustainable food systems that meet the health and nutrition needs of consumers, building both individual health and resilience against future pandemic outbreaks, and protecting livelihoods and environmental resources. As we look towards recovery with transformation, key areas for progress include developing a diverse mix of supply chains to help resilience to future disruptions and maintain the livelihoods of a range of stakeholders including small farmers and small businesses; facilitating economic access to food and improving information to promote healthy diets and sustainable consumption, alongside catalysing the greater supply and physical access to nutritious diets.

Policy change requires many ingredients, including evidence, public support, and stakeholder involvement. The UN Food Systems Summit and other collaborative efforts present opportunities to galvanise action on food issues and it is imperative that they take the voice of consumers into consideration. These policy efforts need to support and recognize small-scale agricultural producers and farmers, as the production of fruits, vegetables, legumes, grains, seeds and nuts are essential for healthy eating. Through support of national, sustainable agricultural production and science-based policies, we can shape the food environment to encourage better food choices by consumers, enabling their action through better information and education as well as by increasing the availability and affordability of healthy, sustainable options. By taking a comprehensive approach, we can address the critical problems of overweight and obesity and improve the health of consumers in the region and around the world.



APPENDIX: THE CONSUMER-CENTRED NUTRITION FRAMEWORK DEFINITIONS AND INDICATORS

The framework has been developed with consumer advocates from seven countries in Latin America, on the basis of the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, and with experts from the worlds of consumer advocacy, health and food & agriculture throughout the course of this work.

The Consumer-Centred Nutrition (CCN) framework has been developed with consumer advocates from seven countries in Latin America, on the basis of the United Nations Guidelines for Consumer Protection, and in consultation with experts from the worlds of consumer advocacy, health and food & agriculture throughout the course of this work. The CCN framework draws on existing frameworks—most notably the Business Impact Assessment on Obesity and Population-level Nutrition (BIA-Obesity) tool (Sacks and Vanderlee, 2017) and the Access to Nutrition Initiative Global Access to Nutrition (ATNI) Index (Access to Nutrition Initiative, 2018) —as well as evidence from public health and behavioural economics literature. The CCN framework lays out the relationship between various types of private sector actions and a consumer’s decision journey. Details about the definitions and indicators for the framework are laid out in the chart below.

CONSUMER-CENTRED NUTRITION FRAMEWORK

DEFINITIONS AND INDICATORS

Topic	Key Issue	Indicators/Criteria to Assess		
Initiative Design	Does the initiative address one of the following best practice areas (Sacks and Vanderlee, 2017; Access to Nutrition Initiative, 2018)?	Domain (Different domains will be relevant to different types of initiatives)	Definition	Indicators
		Product and brand positioning and promotion	Initiative reduces the exposure of children (aged under 18) and adults to promotion of “less healthy” foods/ brands	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadcast and non-broadcast media policy • Use of marketing techniques that appeal to children (including mascots, toys, interactive games, product giveaways) • Advertising of children’s meals • In-store promotion practices
		Nutrition labelling and health claims	Initiative includes disclosure and presentation of nutrition information on product packaging, online and on menus (where relevant)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Commitment to implement front-of-pack and back-of-pack nutrition labelling • Provision of online and instore nutrition information • Use of nutrition and health claims • Commitment to implement nutrition labelling on instore/ restaurant menu boards
		Product formulation	Initiative involves product development and reformulation to reduce nutrients of concern (i.e., sodium, free sugars, saturated fat, trans fat) and energy content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Targets and actions related to reduction of sodium, free sugars, saturated fat, trans fat, and portion size/energy content where relevant
		Product accessibility and placement	Initiative improves the availability and affordability of healthy foods compared with “less healthy” foods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increasing proportion of healthy products available across the portfolio, in certain settings (e.g., schools), or in-store, including expanding floor/shelf space for healthier items • Restricting availability of “less healthy” products instore (including through instore product placement and “junk food free” checkouts) • Pricing and discounting strategies, particularly healthy compared to “less healthy” items • Availability of healthier items in meal deals and children’s meals (e.g., fruit, salad, water)

Topic	Key Issue	Indicators/Criteria to Assess		
		Loyalty programs	Initiative rewards purchases taking healthiness of food into account	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyalty program tracks and rewards purchase of healthy food through discounting or other strategy • Loyalty program does not reward purchase of less healthy options • Rewards in the program are either non-food items (such as discounts) or healthy food items
		Support healthy diets and active lifestyles	Initiative addresses barriers or empowers consumers to have healthy diets and lifestyles	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supports employee health and wellness • Supports breastfeeding mothers at work • Supports community-supporting, evidence-based healthy eating and active lifestyle programs
		Product quality and safety	Initiative protects consumer health by strengthening product quality and safety	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compliance with safety, nutritional, and quality standards • Enables redress
		Is the initiative consumer-centred?	<p>Were consumer organisations or consumers consulted (for example through surveys or focus groups) in the design of the initiative?</p> <p>Does the initiative use a system (such as a CRM) to analyse consumer’s feedback and opinions?</p> <p>Does the initiative promote online chats or webinars where the consumers are able to question or comment on the products?</p> <p>Does the initiative uphold one or more of the following consumer needs: (United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, 2016)</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> (1) Access by consumers to essential goods and services; (2) The protection of vulnerable and disadvantaged consumers; (3) The protection of consumers from hazards to their health and safety; (4) The promotion and protection of the economic interests of consumers; (5) Access by consumers to adequate information to enable them to make informed choices according to individual wishes and needs; (6) Consumer education, including education on the environmental, social and economic consequences of consumer choice; (7) Availability of effective consumer dispute resolution and redress; (8) Freedom to form consumer and other relevant groups or organisations and the opportunity of such organisations to present their views in decision making processes affecting them; (9) A level of protection for consumers using electronic commerce that is not less than that afforded in other forms of commerce; (10) The protection of consumer privacy and the global free flow of information. 	

Topic	Key Issue	Indicators/Criteria to Assess
	Does the initiative take equity into account?	Does the initiative address social determinants of health or aim to increase access to healthy food/reduce deterrents to healthy behaviour for a priority population as defined by national or local health authority (for example, might be one of the following priority populations: women, children, groups with comorbidities, or low-income individuals)?
		Has the company done market research or other types of studies to assess unmet food-related needs of priority populations?
Initiative Implementation (Re-aim, 2016)	Reach	How many beneficiaries does the initiative reach (self-reported)?
		What percentage of beneficiaries are low-income or another priority group?
	Effectiveness	Does the initiative have measured outcomes that address obesity and overweight?
		Did the initiative have a positive impact on majority of beneficiaries based on the measured outcomes?
	Maintenance/Sustainability	Does the initiative include plans to institutionalise the intervention in the future?
		Is the initiative's impact likely to continue after the intervention ends?
Use of Levers	Technology	Does the initiative use technology (including personalised medicine, marketing data, ecommerce, gaming, application, or food innovation) to enable access or promote consumption of healthier food?
		Does the initiative use technology to improve the lifestyles of consumers (for example to promote exercise or walking)?
		Does the initiative protect the privacy and security of consumer data?
		Does the initiative make the relevant technology available free of charge or otherwise ensure equitable access?
	Consumer education	Does the initiative expand consumer access to information about healthy food and lifestyle choices?
		Does the initiative provide training or capacity building for consumers on healthy food and lifestyle choices?
		Does the initiative educate consumers about the environmental impact and sustainability of their food choices, including meat consumption?
	Value chain	Does the initiative create links between farmers/producers and consumers that enable access to healthier food, including fruits, vegetables, legumes, and nuts?

Topic	Key Issue	Indicators/Criteria to Assess
	Evidence-based interventions	Does the initiative explicitly use behavioural economics to nudge consumers towards better food and lifestyle choices?
		Is the initiative Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely? (Service, 2015) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Easy: the healthy option is the default; hassle factors are reduced; messages are clear • Attractive: attracts attention with images, colour or personalisation; includes financial rewards (such as lotteries) and sanctions as incentives • Social: show that most people perform desired behaviour; use networks to enable collective action and encourage behaviour; encourage people to commit themselves • Timely: disrupt habits around major life events; make costs and benefits more immediate; give people a plan to address problems
		Does the initiative aim to promote healthy cultural norms or change norms around food consumption or lifestyle issues such as exercise?
		Does the initiative explicitly apply social and behaviour change communication theory to elicit changes in eating habits?
	Cultural norms	Does the initiative use social media (Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, or others) to promote healthy eating or lifestyles?
		Does the initiative explicitly aim to empower children to eat or live healthier?
	Policy support	Does the organisation lobby for policies that support better access to healthy food?

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GLOSSARY AND ABBREVIATIONS

CCN FRAMEWORK: Consumer-Centred Nutrition Framework developed by Consumers International to facilitate the analysis of healthy eating initiatives and allow for identification of critical elements for policy development from a consumer perspective

COMMUNITY AND HOME GARDENING: cultivation of fruits, vegetables and other staples in a neighbourhood or household setting (Marsh, 1998)

FAO: Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

FOOD ENVIRONMENT: “collective physical, economic, policy and sociocultural surroundings, opportunities and conditions that influence people’s food and beverage choices and nutritional status” (Swinburn, 2013)

FOOD SECURITY: “...access to sufficient, safe and nutritious food which meets [an individual’s] dietary needs and food preferences for an active and healthy life.” (FAO, 2003)

FOOD SOVEREIGNTY: “is the right of peoples to healthy and culturally appropriate food produced through ecologically sound and sustainable methods, and their right to define their own food and agriculture systems. It puts the aspirations and needs of those who produce, distribute and consume food at the heart of food systems and policies rather than the demands of markets and corporations. It defends the interests and inclusion of the next generation. It offers a strategy to resist and dismantle the current corporate trade and food regime, and directions for food, farming, pastoral and fisheries systems determined by local producers and users. Food sovereignty prioritises local and national economies and markets and empowers peasant and family farmer-driven agriculture, artisanal - fishing, pastoralist-led grazing, and food production, distribution and consumption based on environmental, social and economic sustainability. Food sovereignty promotes transparent trade that guarantees just incomes to all peoples as well as the rights of consumers to control their food and nutrition. It ensures that the rights to use and manage lands, territories, waters, seeds, livestock and biodiversity are in the hands of those of us who produce food. Food sovereignty implies new social relations free of oppression and inequality between men and women, peoples, racial groups, social and economic classes and generations.” (Alliance for Food Sovereignty in Africa, 2014)

FOOD SYSTEM: all activities relating to the “production, processing, distribution, preparation, and consumption of food.” (EAT, 2019)

FRONT-OF-PACKAGE LABELLING: indications on the front of a food product that allow consumers to identify which products contain excessive amounts of sugars, total fats, saturated fats, trans fats, and sodium (PAHO, 2020)

FSN: food security and nutrition

MINIMALLY PROCESSED FOODS: “Minimally processed foods have been slightly altered for the main purpose of preservation but which does not substantially change the nutritional content of the food. Examples include cleaning and removing inedible or unwanted parts, grinding, refrigeration, pasteurization, fermentation, freezing, and vacuum-packaging. This allows the food to be stored for a greater amount of time and remain safe to eat.” (PAHO, 2015)

NCDs: non-communicable diseases are non-infectious and non-transmissible chronic diseases, such as diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer, whose risk factors include unhealthy diets and physical inactivity (WHO, 2018)

NUTRITIOUS FOOD: a food that “provides beneficial nutrients (e.g. vitamins, major and trace minerals, essential amino acids, essential fatty acids, dietary fibre) and minimises potentially harmful elements (e.g. antinutrients, quantities of saturated fats and sugars)” (GAIN, 2017)

PAHO: Pan American Health Organization

PROCESSED FOODS: “Processed foods are manufactured by adding fats, oils, sugars, salt, and other culinary ingredients to minimally processed foods to make them more durable and usually more palatable. These types of foods include simple breads and cheeses; salted and cured meats, and seafood; and preserved fruits, legumes, and vegetables.” (PAHO, 2015)

SDGs: Sustainable Development Goals

SUSTAINABLE DIETS: “those diets with low environmental impacts which contribute to food and nutrition security and to healthy life for present and future generations. Sustainable diets are protective and respectful of biodiversity and ecosystems, culturally acceptable, accessible, economically fair and affordable; nutritionally adequate, safe and healthy; while optimizing natural and human resources.” (FAO, 2010)

ULTRA-PROCESSED PRODUCTS: “industrial formulations manufactured from substances derived from foods or synthesized from other organic sources. In their current forms, they are inventions of modern industrial food science and technology. Most of these products contain little or no whole food. They are ready-to-consume or ready-to heat, and thus require little or no culinary preparation.” They are characteristically high in fats, sugar and salt. “These foods are problematic in terms of human health because they have very low nutritional quality and are usually hyper-palatable, and sometimes even quasi-addictive; imitative of food, and falsely seen as healthy; conducive to snacking; aggressively advertised and marketed; and culturally, socially, economically, and environmentally destructive.” (PAHO, 2015)

UNPROCESSED OR MINIMALLY PROCESSED FOODS: “Unprocessed foods are parts of plants or animals that have not undergone any industrial processing. Minimally processed foods are unprocessed foods altered in ways that do not add or introduce any new substance (such as fats, sugars, and salt) but may involve the removal of parts of the food. They include fresh, dry, or frozen fruits, vegetables, grains and legumes, nuts, meats, seafood, eggs, and milk. Minimal processing techniques extend the food’s duration, aid its use and preparation, and improve its palatability.” (PAHO, 2015)

SUGAR-SWEETENED BEVERAGE: drinks with added sugar (PAHO, 2015)

WHO: World Health Organization

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Consumers International is the global membership organisation for consumer rights groups. We bring together over 200 member organisations in more than 100 countries to empower and champion the rights of consumers everywhere.

Throughout our 60-year history we have worked with our members to drive forward better practice and a consumer centred approach in food systems - including ensuring nutritional labelling on food packaging, highlighting unsafe food through testing and composition analysis; and campaigning against junk food marketing to children.

Our work and role in the food system includes partnering with the Food and Agricultural Organization globally, participating in CODEX, and serving as a champion supporting the United Nations Food Systems Summit in 2021. We believe in building a world where everyone has access to safe and sustainable products and services. A world where consumers are treated safely, fairly and honestly. And where our economic system works better for people and planet by protecting and empowering consumers.

Principal Author: Veronica Valdivieso

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- Eva Monterrosa and Sharada Keats (GAIN)
- Emeline Fellus and Emily Grady (WBCSD)
- Enrique Jacoby (former Viceminister of Health of Peru)

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO)
Viale delle Terme di Caracalla
00153 Rome, Italy

Consumers International
24 Highbury Crescent
N5 1RX London
United Kingdom
Telephone: +44 (0) 20 7226 6663
Email: consint@consint.org