



Illustrations: Nikau Hindin, Obesity and Junk Food, 2009, @nikaugabrielle

editorial

ultra-processed food, a "corporate diet"

The past 60 years have seen an exponential rise in the production and consumption of ultra-processed 'food'—or rather, edible—products (UPP), such as packaged crisps, biscuits, sweetened beverages, and ready-to-eat meals. Driven by an expansion of the industrial food system, including global sourcing and retail structures, and corporate concentration and power within this system, UPP are replacing fresh and minimally processed foods and home-cooked meals in our diets. Dietary patterns are becoming increasingly homogenized and culinary traditions are disappearing. This shift started in high income countries and has now reached all countries, in some making up over 50 percent of what people eat¹.

This edition of the Nyéléni newsletter explores how the 'corporate diet' based on UPP is being imposed in different regions of the world and what this means for people's health and food sovereignty. It further provides examples of resistance, from the recovery of traditional crops to the struggle for effective regulatory measures. What is clear is that to reclaim sovereignty over our plates we must look beyond our plates and reshape the food system as a whole.

FIAN International and AFSA

1 - Ultra-processed foods: a global threat to public health - https://www.globalfoodresearchprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/GFRP_FactSheet_UltraProcessedFoods_2023_11.pdf and Planeta Ultraprocesado: Los riesgos para la salud y el medio ambiente de los productos ultraprocesados - <https://alianzasalud.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/PLANETA-ULTRAPROCESADO.pdf>

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who we are

In the last years hundreds of organisations and movements have been engaged in struggles, activities, and various kinds of work to defend and promote the right of people to Food Sovereignty around the world. Many of these organisations were present in the *International Nyéléni Forum 2007* and feel part of a broader **Food Sovereignty Movement**, that considers the Nyéléni 2007 declaration as its political platform. **The Nyéléni Newsletter is the voice of this international movement.**

Organisations involved: AFSA, ETC Group, FIAN, Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International, GRAIN, Grassroots International, IPC for Food Sovereignty, La Via Campesina, Marcha Mundial de las Mujeres, Real World Radio, The World Forum Of Fish Harvesters & Fish Workers, Transnational Institute, VSFJusticia Alimentaria Global, WhyHunger, World Forum of Fisher People, WAMIP.

box 1

What are ultra-processed 'food' products?

Ultra-processed 'foods' or rather 'edible products' – commonly referred to as 'junk food' – are industrial formulations based on substances derived from natural foods and additives that make these products more appealing and enhance their shelf life. They are often high in free sugars, refined starches, saturated and trans-fats, and sodium.

The excessive amount of these so-called "critical ingredients" combined with a typically low nutrient content ("empty calories") and the addition of additives, such as colourings, emulsifiers, and taste enhancers, make UPP harmful to our health. At the same time the sensory features that these products are designed to display (which can reach the degree of addiction) and their low satiating qualities (due to removal of fibres), combined with colourful packaging and aggressive marketing, triggers an overconsumption of these products – and a parallel displacement of real food in our diets.

The NOVA classification system has been developed to group different foods and helps to distinguish ultra-processed edible products from real food, including processed food.

continued on page 3 →

in the spotlight 1

The imposition of ultra-processed edible products and what it takes to reclaim choice over what we eat

The rise of UPP in our diets is not a question of individual choice, as the food industry would like us to believe. We are made to want these products. UPP are industrial formulations created with the aim to be highly palatable (tasty) and even addictive, especially if introduced at an early age. The food industry invests billions in marketing and sales, using cartoons and celebrities, free giveaways, and strategic placement in shops. Small vendors are provided with branded refrigerators and food carts, while school meal and public aid programmes are additional lucrative markets.

A vast amount of research demonstrates that UPP harm our health and are a central cause of premature deaths¹. This includes an increased risk of obesity and other non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as cardiovascular (heart) diseases, diabetes, and cancer, and also heightened vulnerability to infectious diseases. While this link is recognized by international and regional health authorities, it is fiercely contested by the food industry, which invests heavily in research and in public media downplaying the negative impacts of its most profitable product.

Social inequalities are an important factor driving consumption of UPP and related NCDs. Especially in high-income countries and urban areas, these products tend to be more easily accessible, both physically and economically, than fresh and minimally processed food. A central reason is that the true cost of production is not reflected in their pricing. While the UPP industry presents us with an "illusion of diversity" in its products, these are largely based on a handful of high-yield, low-cost crops: corn, wheat, soy, sugar, and (palm) oil. The monoculture production and global trade chains attached to these have heavy environmental impacts, the costs of which are not accounted for. These include deforestation, pollution of water, air and soil with agrotoxics, excessive use of water, loss of biodiversity, CO₂ emissions arising from production, transport and packaging, and plastic waste.

Added to this are immense social costs—displacement of rural populations (and alternative ways of production and exchange), dependency and low prices paid to food producers, as well as exploitative work conditions and wages across the industrial food chain. The mass-scale of production and distribution together with the fiscal benefits the companies obtain further add to the artificially low cost of UPP.

To reclaim control over what we eat and have a true choice we need to curb corporate power across the entire food system. Regulatory measures around UPP, such as warning labels and marketing regulations, are urgently needed and are a public health imperative. At the same time, we also need to work on viable alternatives. To have diversity on our plates we need diversity in our fields; to have healthy food, we need healthy soil. This requires public policies for the transition towards agroecology, as well as support for farmers' markets, cooperatives, and other distribution and exchange systems, based on proximity and solidarity. Moreover, we must address the structural inequalities that impede access to real food, including by ensuring decent wages and income.

1 - See <https://www.bmj.com/content/384/bmj-2023-077310>

in the spotlight 2

UPF pose enormous threats to Africa's food systems and just agroecological transitions

Food systems are rapidly changing in Africa, mimicking the global trend of increased consumption of ultra-processed food (UPF). This is notable in urban and rural areas, beginning in coastal urban areas and spreading to landlocked regions. Food consumption in urban areas is largely based on purchases, with a greater amount of these being ultra-processed foods. In rural areas less than half of food is purchased and most of this food is still minimally processed. UPF imports are also rapidly increasing, with soft drink imports into the Southern African Development Community surging by 1200% between 1995 and 2010, while snack foods increased by 750%.

Rising UPF consumption in Africa is linked to changing socio-economic and politico-economic conditions, and structural inequities that contribute to making UPF more accessible, affordable, and desirable in both urban and rural areas. The privatisation of food-related parastatals and liberalisation of foreign direct investment (FDI) have greatly enabled the entry of UPF into Africa. Investment in UPF (breweries, distilleries, soft drinks, sugar products) comprises 22% of all FDI into the food system and is double that invested into farms and plantations. UPF are manufactured and supplied by small and medium enterprises and large corporations, including transnational food corporations such as Nestle, Unilever and Danone. Supermarkets have expanded exponentially on the continent, typically packed with UPF. However, it is also sold by local street vendors and can also be found in small convenience stores across the continent.

As UPF is consumed more extensively and frequently in Africa, and by more people, it inevitably displaces traditional healthy and nutritious food, dietary and agricultural diversity, and local farming systems. This phenomenon is closely correlated with the obesity pandemic taking hold in the region and several other diet-related non-communicable diseases (NCDs), such as type 2 diabetes and cancers. The rise in people becoming overweight and obesity occurs alongside continued high rates of undernutrition and micronutrient deficiencies.

There is a critical gap in knowledge regarding consumer interactions with food systems in current food sovereignty discourse. While there are clear linkages with struggles for a just agroecological food system transition, the current discourse tends to be biased towards rural areas, with limited relevance for urban populations, farm workers, industrial food workers, and other actors across the rural-urban continuum. The discourse needs to deepen, addressing the structural factors that both limit access to healthy diets and perpetuate poverty, inequities, hunger, and malnutrition in a never-ending cycle on the continent.

Find out more in the African Centre for Biodiversity Fact Sheet series on UPF in Africa, available at: <https://t2m.io/ultraprocessedfood>

→ continued from Box1, page 2

Group 1 - Unprocessed or minimally processed foods: These are natural foods, such as fruits, vegetables, pulses, grains, nuts, milk, and meat that are either unaltered or minimally processed, for example by peeling, cutting, grinding, drying, freezing, cooking, pasteurization, or non-alcoholic fermentation. There is no addition of salt, sugar, oils, or other additives.

Group 2 - Processed culinary ingredients: Directly obtained from Group 1 foods or from nature, these are substances used for cooking and seasoning meals. They include sugar, salt, oils, and fats.

Group 3 - Processed foods: These food products are made by adding culinary ingredients (Group 2 foods) to natural or minimally processed foods (Group 1 foods) with the aim of making them more durable and enjoyable. Examples are fresh cheeses, freshly baked breads, and bottled/canned vegetables and legumes (in saltwater/marinade).

Group 4 - Ultra-processed products: These are industrial formulations of edible substances derived from low-cost Group 1 foods and other organic substances. Among these are ingredients not found in normal kitchens (i.e., of purely industrial use), such as protein isolates, as well as cosmetic additives, such as colours and flavours, that make the product look and taste more appealing. The products undergo multiple steps of processing involving different industries – hence they are “ultra-processed”. Examples are packaged crisps and other sweet or salty snacks, chocolates, ice cream, candy, sweetened drinks, sweetened and flavoured breakfast cereals, instant soups, and pre-prepared pasta and meat dishes.

References: Global Food Research Program, 2023. Ultra-processed foods: a global threat to public health. Available at: https://www.globalfoodresearchprogram.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/GFRP_FactSheet_UltraProcessedFoods_2023_11.pdf

Monteiro et al. 2019. Ultra-processed foods: What they are and how to identify them, in *Public Health Nutrition*: 22(5), 936-941. Available at: <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC10260459/>



voices from the field

The ‘corredor afroalimentario’ Afro-food initiative in Colombia

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The “corredor afroalimentario” is a social and community-based initiative that originated from the coordination of several organisations, with the aim of promoting and strengthening an alternative dynamic solution to achieve food sovereignty and the fulfilment of the human right to food. This dream is full of hope, as this initiative restores farmers’ dignity and in turn provide a strategy to ensure that the work of the Afro-Caribbean peasantry—a fundamental part of rural communities’ development—is made visible and is recognised.

I am convinced that northern Cauca must shift its current developmental model, which focuses on monocultures such as sugar cane used in ultra-processed beverages, towards the strengthening and conservation of traditional and sustainable farms, the conservation of native and creole seeds, the promotion of solidarity economy and the creation of shorter market chains. The Afro-food market is one of the best strategies for farmers, to sell their products at fair prices without the need for intermediaries, while communities enjoy real and healthy food based on Afro-Colombian culinary traditions.

I believe that the work of social initiatives is fundamental so that this commitment to life is also viewed as a strategy to provide a solution to the national government’s zero hunger project, thus influencing the demand for adequate spaces through municipal and departmental development plans.

box 2

Direct sourcing from small-scale food producers for food aid schemes in the US

In recent years, the United States has seen a rise in programs connecting local farms with food assistance partners like food banks, pantries, and grassroots efforts to combat hunger. Known as Farm to Food Assistance (F2FA), these initiatives offer a promising strategy for addressing food insecurity among the 44 million food-insecure Americans with real food rather than UPP. They also play a role in revitalizing local and regional food economies, which are foundational to a community-driven and equitable food system. The Wallace Center’s 2022 National Farm to Food Assistance Survey¹ highlights the positive impact of these programs on farmers and communities.

While F2FA do not fully shift the need to rethink how hunger relief and poverty eradication are addressed in the United States, these efforts are transitional and challenge the dominance of the corporate industrial food system through redistribution of public funds. For example, the USDA’s Local Food Purchase Assistance Cooperative Agreement Program (LFPA) fosters partnerships between state agencies, tribal governments, food banks, pantries, and farmers to source and distribute food, benefiting local socially disadvantaged producers and underserved communities with a \$900 million budget.

Iowa and New Mexico² are standout states in the LFPA program, showcasing highly collaborative, strategic, and equity-centered approaches. In their first year, these states saw close to \$4 million in new sales for farmers, enabling them to provide nutritious food to communities in need.

1 - https://foodsystemsleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/12/2023-Wallace-Center-F2FA-Infographic_Final.pdf

2 - <https://foodsystemsleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/Iowa-LFPA-Spotlight.pdf> and <https://foodsystemsleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/New-Mexico-LFPA-Spotlight.pdf>

box 3

Lab-grown proteins

Lab-grown proteins pose a direct threat to food sovereignty. This new market serves to protect the financial interests of corporations and cement an even greater concentration of power, while these ultra-processed and often genetically modified foods have huge economic, social, environmental, and cultural impacts. Public funds should not be attributed to this technology. Policymakers must rather support the farming sector, to ensure numerous farmers on the land. EU institutions should ensure a thorough and independent assessment of the potentially destructive consequences of lab-grown proteins before allowing them anywhere near people’s plates.

Find out what’s at stake for farmers and citizens alike in ECVC’s video on lab grown proteins and accompanying fact sheet:

Video: <https://youtu.be/jUpIDRT4hYs?si=wr2EEzkGBRslil9y>

Factsheet: <https://www.eurovia.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/04/>

Accompagnying-doct-Lab-Meat.pdf

Webpage on ECVC website: <https://www.eurovia.org/publications/ecvc-launches-video-on-the-dangers-of-lab-grown-protein/>

box 4

Law to combat food waste and the right to food in Spain

Today, being in a state of social exclusion means having limited choices, even in your eating habits. The population in general is affected by multiple influences, but those who are in a situation of poverty experience a lack of perspective of rights in access to food on a daily basis. A basic right such as food is subject to multiple constraints in order to access a range of products deemed to be “basic”. Instead of nourishing our bodies, these products continue to feed the interests of multinationals and an unequal food system that places the market at the centre and not the needs and rights of all people.

Another example of this is the food waste law in Spain, which will formalise the link between impoverished people and leftover food. This law will force all leftover food to be consumed as a priority by people in vulnerable situations. This would be positive if it included a differentiation of products according to their nutritional value and put the health of these people at the forefront, but instead the focus is on solving the food waste problem of big business without really reducing the problem, while treating impoverished people as an object and limiting any choice in their food.

Moreover, this new, publicly funded scheme will not be managed by public institutions, but by the Red Cross, a private entity, thus privatising social welfare, at least as far as food aid is concerned. The aid will be managed through digital cards for purchases in large supermarkets, which will be limited to certain products that the large supermarkets decide when they are considered “waste”.

In response to this, initiatives are already being organised by the population to support the most vulnerable with healthy and agroecological food. From the perspective of community-supported agriculture, producers and consumers are organising support groups to be able to provide healthy food for people living in poverty. This gives hope, but also brings sadness because once again a basic right such as food will not be sustained through the responsibility of the institutions.

nyéléni process: towards a global food sovereignty forum 2025

Voices from our allies

Stefano De Angelis, World Federation of Trade Unions (WFTU), www.wftucentral.org

In 2016 the WFTU participated in the Nyéléni Europe process. In fact, we believe that the important issues of food and nutrition must include workers who are often directly involved in both the harvesting and processing of agricultural products.

The union also deals daily with large numbers of workers who buy low-cost food due to low wages, without being aware of the damage they do to themselves and to small food producers. This shows the fundamental need for greater involvement and knowledge sharing with workers (and consumers associations) on the issue of producing good food and respecting nature.

The battle for food sovereignty must be articulated in a united front, coordinating farmers, labourers and consumers. This is vital in order to swiftly overcome the particularities of each struggle that separate and make us weak in the face of an enormously stronger enemy.

At a European level, the development of the Food Sovereignty movement needs to move from a more academic and research focus instead towards the construction of a platform able to make demands – demands which can be brought forward both at European and regional levels. That said, we are aware that a platform of this kind requires a lot of coordination and resources.

Achievements in the area of rights are generally attained through local battles and advocacy work directly with decision makers. This is why it would be useful to organize more assemblies, street initiatives and actions on contentious issues such as the unjust distribution of subsidies, the danger of new GMOs, the high costs faced by small scale producers etc. On this the union, if stimulated, can be of help.



box 5

Food challenges: Fighting the corporate diet in Latin America

In recent decades, we have witnessed the consolidation of an agri-food system that perpetuates poverty and inequalities, favours the economic interests of large industries and weakens ecosystems, and that, instead of favouring real food, has led to the decline of biodiversity and the imposition of the corporate diet. This regime, based on the consumption of ultra-processed food and drink products, has triggered a worrying increase in cases of people being overweight, obesity and non-communicable diseases (NCDs). Recent data reveals that since 1975, obesity has increased almost threefold and is now responsible for 4 million deaths per year globally. In the Americas, NCDs cause 5.5 million deaths annually, equivalent to 80% of all deaths. Each year, 2.2 million people between the ages of 30 and 69 in the region die prematurely from these diseases.

In this context, where the realisation of the Human Right to Adequate Food and Nutrition and food sovereignty has been constantly violated, civil society has led efforts to regulate the widespread availability of ultra-processed food and drink products and their consequent increase in consumption, which has displaced traditional eating patterns where real food, with minimal processing and home preparation, prevailed. The struggle to regulate this industry includes the implementation of clear labelling to warn of harmful health contents and the application of taxes on ultra-processed food and drink products—regulatory developments that have been recommended by bodies such as the World Health Organisation (WHO) and the Pan American Health Organisation (PAHO). However, these initiatives face strong interference from food industry corporations, who seek above all other objectives to protect their commercial interests. As a result, they often distort or block regulatory measures intended to protect public health and promote adequate food. The struggle for a fairer and healthier food system thus finds itself in a constant confrontation between civil society efforts and commercial interests that perpetuate a model that is unsustainable and detrimental to human and planetary health.

For more on the fight against the corporate diet in Latin America see:

- Alianza por la salud alimentaria (Mexico): <https://alianzasalud.org.mx/>
- FIAN Colombia: <https://fiancolombia.org/cartagena-aprueba-politica-publica-del-pae/>
- Proyecto Squatters y Colectivo Duda (Argentina): <https://www.anred.org/2021/10/25/ultra-procesados-por-manipular-y-malnutrir-a-las-infancias/>

box 6

Fighting the rise of ultra-processed ‘food’ products

India is known as the diabetic capital of the world—1 in 4 adults is either diabetic or pre-diabetic and 1 in 4 is obese. Junk food consumption is rising rapidly, making diets unhealthy and a major factor in this epidemic. While the Government of India has put in place regulations on advertisement and labelling to address the aggressive marketing of such foods, these regulations are ineffective by design. Given this background, the Nutrition Advocacy in Public Interest (NAPi), a public health interest independent think tank, analysed advertisements and challenged the celebrities endorsing them. It compiled all the scientific evidence and shared it all over India.

In 2022 the Government of India issued a draft policy to allocate stars on the front of junk food packets, which declared that pre-packaged food could be ‘less healthy’ to ‘healthiest’. People of India sent thousands of letters demanding warning labels placed on the front of the packets instead of the stars. This way people can more easily identify food products that are unhealthy by being high in sugar/salt or fats. NAPi also mobilized several civil society and academic organisations to issue a position statement, demanding a warning label on packaging for food that is high in sugars/salt or fats.

The media supported this work wholeheartedly. Civil society groups also filed several complaints to the consumer protection authority. Calling for a comprehensive policy, NAPi in 2023 launched “The Junk Push” report, highlighting how aggressively junk food is being advertised. Experts wrote opinion pieces in the daily newspapers and published reviews in the peer-reviewed journals.

#EndTheJunkPush, more info:
<https://www.napiindia.in/>