



1.08 Incentivise food systems change towards equitable food marketing

The Solution: *Enablers to Incentivise Food Systems Change Towards Equitable Food Marketing* (or “Engaging the Gatekeepers for Equitable Food Marketing”) is a proposal to lever some of the most powerful forces in the food system to transform the food marketing landscape. By placing unhealthy foods centre stage, food marketing crowds out nutritious foods. This solution seeks to address this imbalance. Given the challenge of re-incentivising the food marketing system, it does so by learning from existing mechanisms, bringing them together to propose a ‘systems toolkit’ of enablers: a sustainable funding mechanism, transparency of marketing spending, engaging gatekeepers, and compelling communications to increase the desirability of nutritious foods. The elements build on ongoing experience with such mechanisms, including transparency mechanisms (e.g., Access to Nutrition Index, ATNI), investor metrics (e.g., World Business Council for Sustainable Development), digital platforms (e.g., Google), healthy food marketing, and government levies on advertising and to provide sustained financing. Insights from these experiences suggest these enablers could jointly work to re-incentivise the system. While it is unclear exactly how this would work at the country level, the *actionable* solution now is to change mindsets about the problem by engaging gatekeepers (i.e., large communications companies and digital platforms, investors, business transparency mechanisms, supermarkets, innovative public health financing models) in a conversation about how this *could* work to leverage actionable changes, leading to incentives for fundamental systems change.

Source of the Solution: During working group discussions, members noted that even when nutritious foods are available and affordable, people do not necessarily eat them; in contrast, foods with little nutritional benefit are perceived as affordable and appealing. The issue was also raised in AT1 meetings. Finding ways to make nutritious foods more appealing emerged as a priority. Paul Newnham led further discussions with several group members and consulted with others supporting the Summit on other ATs and Summit groups; he then crafted the solution with Alyson Greenhalgh Ball and Rosie Cowper. It was noted that the challenge across contexts was a lack of a sustainable funding to scale campaigns. Discussions also showed that any campaign must be localised. Thus, the real game-changer was not a single campaign but a sustainable funding mechanism to support such campaigns while creating space for them by reducing unhealthy food marketing.

Problem addressed within food systems: Unhealthy food marketing crowds out nutritious foods while creating aspiration for foods that do little to support nutrition and health, even when they cost more. It is vital to learn from the power of unhealthy food marketing to build sustained communications on healthy foods (and those with a smaller environmental footprint), so that they are perceived as affordable and aspirational, especially for young people. This arises because promotional marketing is a key driver of food systems behaviour and a major means through which large businesses compete but is not equitable: less healthy foods get much less focus than those that are more nutritious, sustainable, and affordable. This incentivises production and consumption of foods that do little to support nutrition. In contrast, there is relatively little marketing and no sustained financing for creative, well-targeted promotion of healthier food.

Furthermore, current efforts to change this are not working. Social marketing campaigns for healthy foods tend to be patchy and short-term and fail to use top creative techniques to appeal to young people; advertising restrictions play a key role. In contrast, there are strong business incentives related to promotion of “unhealthy” products, given their impressive financial margins. Placing the system on a transition pathway will require significant disruption of public messaging to rebalance the marketing landscape and create a more competitive playing field for nutritious food businesses.



How this solution will address that problem: Given the innovation needed to fundamentally address the problem, this solution aims to communicate, via a toolkit, the range of options available to incentivise the system to rebalance promotional marketing (especially for young people) towards nutritious foods. These ‘enablers’ would work together in a systems approach to change incentives and drive equity in food marketing. This would lead to hundreds of locally adapted campaigns for nutritious foods that engage young people in multiple markets and less marketing for unhealthy foods (**output**). Young people would then experience compelling, creative messaging about healthy, delicious food throughout the many touchpoints in their days and through digital media (and fewer messages about unhealthy foods) (**outcome**).¹ Over the longer term, this will make return on investment more balanced and drive investors to support marketing of healthy options for people and planet. The intended **impact** is that young people perceive healthy foods (with a small environmental footprint) as affordable and aspirational relative to “unhealthy” ones and request, buy, and eat them.

The four main elements that would need to be included are:

(1) A *transparency mechanism* (e.g., through investors, auditors) could require large food and beverage businesses to disclose their marketing spend on all foods by brand/type, which could be used by investors to drive investment decisions. This transparency would enable actors to hold companies accountable for what they claim versus do.

(2) *Engaging gatekeepers*. This could happen through *investor pressure*. Investors are key gatekeepers for food companies large and small, providing investment and input on business models and investment returns. Historically, regular reviews of quarterly results have focused solely on growth, but this community is pivoting towards increased interest in human and planetary health, with detailed discussions on innovation and nutritional composition of foods and how these are marketed using established tools such as ATNI to help guide progress. A consortium of progressive investors could lead with an aligned approach to help food companies improve portfolio mix, ensure equity in marketing, and understand impacts on profits and shareholder expectations. (This would be further supported by Solution 21). It could also happen through *media channels*. For example, Google has introduced its own nutrition profile that must be met in order to place content on social media. Such firms could also apply an advertising discount for healthier foods or add a levy on unhealthy foods (taking into account the frequency and adequacy of the messaging). *Food stores* could also play a role. Supermarkets and stores could set rules on healthier food promotion and shelf space for healthier foods, acting as a gatekeeper for what young people and adults see when shopping. Many examples exist, including investors pressuring supermarkets to align offerings with dietary guidelines.

(3) *Funding mechanism*. One possible sustained financing mechanisms would be a *government levy for equitable food promotion*. A regulation could require large food businesses to allocate the equivalent of X% (e.g., 20%) of their ‘unhealthy food’² marketing spend (across traditional media, social, content, influencers, placement, instore position, and promotions) to a publicly managed fund for health promotion. For example, ThaiHealth is funded by a levy on tobacco and alcohol. France has a levy on advertising that fails to include a positive health message. Another option would be a *publicly managed fund*. Levies on ‘unhealthy food’ sales (e.g., sugary drinks taxes) could be redirected to a public fund to support communications campaigns.

¹ Ideally this outcome would be measured (e.g., “a meaningful % of the target audience is receiving communications)

² Reaching an agreed-upon definition of ‘healthy’ and ‘unhealthy’ products would be a necessary first step to making this work.



(4) *Sustained, compelling communications using commercial knowhow.* Major national-level sustained campaigns for nutritious, delicious, and sustainable foods would be created using the best creative agencies to understand barriers to change for the target audience, reflecting local public health priorities. Whilst tailored locally, best practice should be quickly shared worldwide, perhaps via a global insight database on success; the fund could also support promotion of nutritious foods from SMEs involved in the Global Virtual Nutrition Innovation Hub for SMEs (Solution 13).

Solution's alignment to the 'game changing and systemic solution' criteria: This proposal seeks to change the rules of the food marketing game. Current approaches are not changing the incentives that drive unhealthy marketing to dominate. As long as these incentives remain, the imbalance will continue. Experience indicates the enablers identified here have the potential to re-incentivise the current balance of marketing—and that marketing works.

Impact potential at scale: If implemented, this would have ripple effects across the business model of large food and beverage companies, which operate globally.

Actionability: As fully envisioned, this is not an immediately implementable solution. Given the challenging nature of change in this space, the initial 'game changer' is to start a conversation about these fundamental shifts with the gatekeepers and existing accountability mechanisms.

Sustainability: This seeks sustained change in the food and beverage industry rather than a quick win

Co-benefits include the following: over the medium-long term, it will create business opportunities for producers of nutritious foods, including SMEs, thus advancing equitable livelihood opportunities; if the campaigns focus on planetary health, they could yield benefits for environmental sustainability; and it can also benefit women (especially low-income mothers) since they are more likely to undertake food shopping and thus are often pestered by their children to buy promoted, unhealthy foods that they may not be able to afford, creating negative dynamics within families.

Existing evidence: There is strong evidence that youth globally are exposed to a large volume of marketing for unhealthy foods through multiple platforms, despite voluntary food business commitments³ and partial restrictions by some governments.⁴ Evidence is clear that advertising influences children's food preferences and intake.⁵ Yet marketing healthier foods, especially when sustainable,⁶ can also be effective, especially if commercial success factors are used.⁷ Generating a health promotion budget through a levy on businesses has been tried and tested with successful outcomes in Thailand.⁸

Current/likely political support: Making this solution feasible is not easy. Nor will gaining traction at the government level – but could build from countries who have focused on restricting marketing and/or financing healthy campaigns (several countries worldwide have attempted to regulate marketing to children and many have implemented public campaigns). But the initial space to find support would be communications companies, the investor community and transparency mechanisms.

³ e.g., Kelly B et al. 2019. Global benchmarking of children's exposure to television advertising of unhealthy foods and beverages across 22 countries. *Obesity Reviews* 20:116-28.

⁴ Whalen R et al. 2019 Children's exposure to food advertising: the impact of statutory restrictions. *Health promotion international* 1;34(2):227-35.

⁵ e.g., Boyland et al, 2016. Advertising as a cue to consume: a systematic review and meta-analysis of the effects of acute exposure to unhealthy food and nonalcoholic beverage advertising on intake in children and adults. *AJCN* 103(2), pp.519-533.

⁶ e.g., Abril EP, Dempsey PR. 2019. Outcomes of healthy eating ad campaigns: A systematic review. *Progress in cardiovascular diseases* 1;62(1):39-43.

⁷ Aschemann-Witzel et al 2012 Lessons for public health campaigns from analysing commercial food marketing success factors: a case study. *BMC Public Health* 12(1):1-1.

⁸ Pongutta et al. 2019. Lessons from the Thai health promotion Foundation. *Bulletin of the World Health Organization* 97(3):213.



Contexts for which this is well suited: It applies in all places where large F&B companies operate. A fundamental part of the design of this gamechanger is that it facilitates the context-specific design of integrated marketing campaigns designed to be effective for young people in their national and local contexts.