

## 5.3 Emphasis on appropriate food processing in all food and nutrition policies

### What problem is your proposition addressing?

Most foods consumed today are processed in some way. But while many types of food processing contribute to healthy diets from sustainable production systems, others do the opposite<sup>1</sup>. As set out by the NOVA food classification system, at one extreme, there are minimal processes that prolong the duration of whole foods such as drying grains, pulses and nuts, grinding grains into flour and pasta, chilling or freezing fruits and vegetables, pasteurizing milk, and fermenting milk into yogurt. At the other extreme are a sequence of industrial processes which convert a few whole foods into chemically modified food substances and formulate them with a myriad of additives to make products with highly attractive or even quasi-addictive sensory properties identified as ultra-processed foods<sup>2</sup>.

### How does your proposition address the problem?

The UN Food Systems Summit should urge:

- International and national health and food and nutrition authorities to review their dietary guidelines documents to assure that these emphasize both the preference for fresh or minimally processed foods and the avoidance of ultra-processed foods, in line with guidelines developed for example by the Pan-American Health Organization<sup>3</sup> and by Brazil<sup>4</sup>, Uruguay<sup>5</sup> France<sup>6</sup> and Israel<sup>7</sup>;
- National governments to implement fiscal and other statutory instruments, marketing regulation, front-of-pack labelling, and food procurement policies designed to promote a rich variety of fresh or minimally processed foods, and to discourage consumption of ultra-processed foods, as now done by several countries<sup>8,9</sup>;
- The food manufacturing industry to develop or improve processing methods that prolong the duration of whole foods and make their culinary preparation easier, but ultra-processed foods should be replaced with processed or preferably minimally processed foods<sup>10</sup>.

### Is this a new solution or an existing solution that needs scaling?

Existing solution that needs scaling, as described above.

### Which organisation/s, institution/s or groups of individuals are associated with the solution?

The centres of research excellence headed by the signatories of this proposal, among others.

### What is the scientific evidence that supports your proposition?

Evidence supporting fresh or minimally processed foods as the basis of healthy diets from sustainable production systems is abundant and has been known for a long time. But, in the last decade, analyses of national dietary surveys and a series of experimental studies have made clear that high consumption of ultra-processed foods drives gross nutrient imbalances in the diet, reduces intake of health-protective bioactive chemical compounds, increases intake of chemical compounds that act as endocrine disruptors or induce pro-inflammatory microbiomes, increases glycaemic responses and the energy intake rate, among several other harmful effects<sup>11,12</sup>. In the same period, findings from time-series food sales

studies<sup>13,14</sup>, meta-analyses of large cohort studies<sup>15,16</sup>, and a randomized controlled trial<sup>17</sup> when taken together show that increasing ultra-processed food consumption is a major contributor to the present pandemic of obesity, diabetes, and other diet-related non-communicable diseases, including in children<sup>18</sup>. There is also mounting evidence of the harmful effects of ultra-processed food on the environment, through carbon and water footprints and agro-biodiversity loss<sup>19,20</sup>.

### Is this idea applicable to a particular geography, demography, landscape or other setting?

These proposals are applicable in high-income countries where UPF consumption is already very high, and especially in low and middle income countries, where UPF consumption is rapidly increasing and displacing the consumption of minimally-processed foods and traditional dietary patterns.

### Who are the main actors that would put this action into place?

Relevant UN agencies, national governments, national health and food and nutrition authorities, and the food industry, as above, plus professional, public interest and citizen action groups.

### Source and process

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