

FEEDING

HOW FOOD ENVIRONMENTS ARE FAILING CHILDREN

PROFIT





PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
\$5.90

CHOCOLATES
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MINI!
PACK FESTA
ALTO EN CALORIAS
ALTO EN AZÚCAR

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PACK FESTA
DE 20 UNDS
CHOCOLATE REAL

PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
\$11.90

PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
\$10.50

Old England
Tobacco
Candy

BONBON BUM
Columbian
FRESH

GLOBOP
GLOBOP
SWEET CHOCOLATE
SUNNY INTENSE

PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
\$7.50

PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
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PACK SIZE OF 20 UNDS
\$7.50

REPORT BRIEF

Millions of children and adolescents are growing up in environments where sugary drinks, salty and sweet snacks and fast foods, including ultra-processed foods and beverages, are highly accessible and aggressively marketed. These unhealthy food environments are driving nutrient-poor, unhealthy diets and a surge in overweight and obesity among children and adolescents, even in countries still grappling with child undernutrition.

The cost of inaction for children, adolescents, families, societies and economies is immense. Unhealthy diets increase the risk of overweight, obesity and other cardiometabolic conditions in children and adolescents, including high blood pressure, elevated blood glucose and abnormal blood lipid levels. These health problems can persist into adult life, increasing the risk of non-communicable diseases, including type 2 diabetes, cardiovascular disease and some cancers. Overweight and obesity are also associated with low self-esteem, anxiety and depression among children and adolescents. Parents bear the emotional toll of their children's mental health challenges and the financial strain of higher medical expenses and lost income to care for them. Economies throughout

the world are already struggling with escalating health care costs and reduced workforce productivity because of rising overweight and obesity.

The ultra-processed food and beverage industry holds disproportionate influence over children's food environments. It shapes what foods and beverages are produced and how they are marketed, especially in settings where government regulation is weak or absent. In pursuit of profit, the industry leverages vast financial resources and deep political influence to resist policies aimed at creating healthier, more equitable food environments. This imbalance of power makes it difficult for governments, communities and families to protect children's right to food and nutrition.

DEFINITIONS: NUTRITIONAL STATUS OF CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

Children aged less than 5 years:

- **Overweight** is defined as a weight-for-height greater than 2 standard deviations above the WHO Child Growth Standards median
- **Obesity (or severe overweight)** is defined as a weight-for-height greater than 3 standard deviations above the WHO Child Growth Standards median
- **Severe wasting** is defined as a weight-for-height less than 3 standard deviations below the WHO Child Growth Standards median

Children and adolescents aged 5–19 years:

- **Overweight** is defined as a body mass index-for-age (BMI-for-age) greater than 1 standard deviation above the WHO Growth Reference median
- **Obesity** is defined as a BMI-for-age greater than 2 standard deviations above the WHO Growth Reference median
- **Thinness** is defined as a BMI-for-age less than 2 standard deviations below the WHO Growth Reference median. In this Brief, thinness is referred to as **underweight**

THE FORCES SHAPING CHILDREN'S DIETS

This global report examines how unhealthy food environments are shaping children's and adolescents' diets and contributing to the surge in overweight and obesity. It presents data on the status, trends and inequities in overweight and obesity in children and adolescents, and projects when obesity will overtake underweight as the more prevalent form of malnutrition. It also reviews the latest evidence on children's and adolescents' diets and investigates the key forces driving unhealthy food environments.

We analysed data on nutritional status from the UNICEF, World Health Organization (WHO) and World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates database for children aged less than 5 years, and the

Non-Communicable Disease Risk Factor Collaboration (NCD-RisC) for children and adolescents aged 5–19 years. Dietary data were sourced from the UNICEF Global Infant and Young Child Feeding databases for children aged 6–23 months, and the Global Diet Quality Project for adolescents aged 15–19 years. We present analysis from a global U-Report poll among adolescents and young people aged 13–24 years on their exposure to advertisements for sugary drinks, snacks and fast food. In addition, the report draws evidence from state-of-the-art reviews on commercially produced complementary foods, ultra-processed foods and sugar-sweetened beverages, and from UNICEF-supported studies on the drivers of unhealthy food environments.

DEFINITIONS: FOODS AND DIETS

Nutritious and healthy foods

are defined as those that are good sources of vitamins, minerals, protein, unrefined carbohydrates, healthy fats, fibre and other health-promoting substances; do not contain excessive amounts of added sugar, salt, fat and refined starches; do not contain industrially produced trans-fats, harmful additives and other harmful ingredients; and are not ultra-processed. Examples include vegetables, fruits, legumes, nuts and seeds, plant-based oils, whole grains, dairy products, eggs, poultry and fish. While no single type of food can meet children's and adolescents' dietary needs (other than breastmilk in the first six months of life), in appropriate variety, combinations and quantities, these foods are the basis for nutritious and healthy diets.

Unhealthy foods and beverages

are defined as those that contain excessive amounts of added sugar, salt, fat and refined starches; contain industrially produced trans-fats, harmful additives and other harmful ingredients; and/or are ultra-processed. Examples include

commercially baked foods with industrially produced trans-fat, deep-fried fast foods, sugary and salty snacks, sugar-sweetened beverages and other ultra-processed foods and beverages. While no single food or beverage is inherently 'unhealthy', excessive and/or prolonged consumption of these products can contribute to nutrient-poor, unhealthy diets, especially when they displace nutritious and healthy foods from the diet.

Ultra-processed foods and beverages

are industrially formulated foods and beverages, composed primarily of chemically modified substances extracted from foods, together with additives and preservatives to enhance taste, texture, appearance and shelf-life. They contain little or no whole foods and are typically high in refined starches, sugar, salt and fat, including trans-fat. Examples include commercially produced complementary foods, sweet and salty snacks, confectionery, breakfast cereals, processed meat products, ready-made meals and sugar-sweetened beverages.

A **nutritious and healthy diet** is defined as containing a variety of **nutritious and healthy foods** and is low in, or free from, unhealthy foods and beverages. It provides adequate amounts of vitamins, minerals, protein, unrefined carbohydrates, healthy fats, fibre and other health-promoting substances; balances energy intake with energy requirements; supports the growth and development of children and adolescents; and provides protection from all forms of malnutrition and diet-related non-communicable diseases.

A **nutrient-poor, unhealthy diet** is defined as containing excessive quantities of **unhealthy foods and beverages** and is low in or lacking nutritious and healthy foods. Such diets often contain inadequate amounts of essential vitamins and minerals, protein, fibre and other health-promoting substances, and provide excessive energy. They increase the risk of all forms of malnutrition – stunting, wasting, underweight, micronutrient deficiencies and overweight and obesity – as well as diet-related non-communicable diseases.

OUR FINDINGS

THE SCALE OF OVERWEIGHT, OBESITY AND POOR DIETS

Our findings expose the current scale of overweight and obesity among children and adolescents worldwide, the rapidly increasing prevalence in low- and middle-income countries, and the shift from underweight to obesity as the more dominant form of malnutrition among 5–19-year-olds. We also explore how sweet, salty and fried foods and sugary beverages – including ultra-processed foods and beverages – are embedded in children’s diets in early life and persist into late adolescence.

Finding 1. The global surge in overweight is affecting children and adolescents in every region of the world.

Globally, one in twenty children under 5 years of age (5 per cent) and one in five children and adolescents aged 5–19 years (20 per cent) are living with overweight (see *Figure 1*). Latin America and the Caribbean, the Middle East and North Africa and North America rank in the top three regions for overweight prevalence among children and adolescents aged 0–19 years.

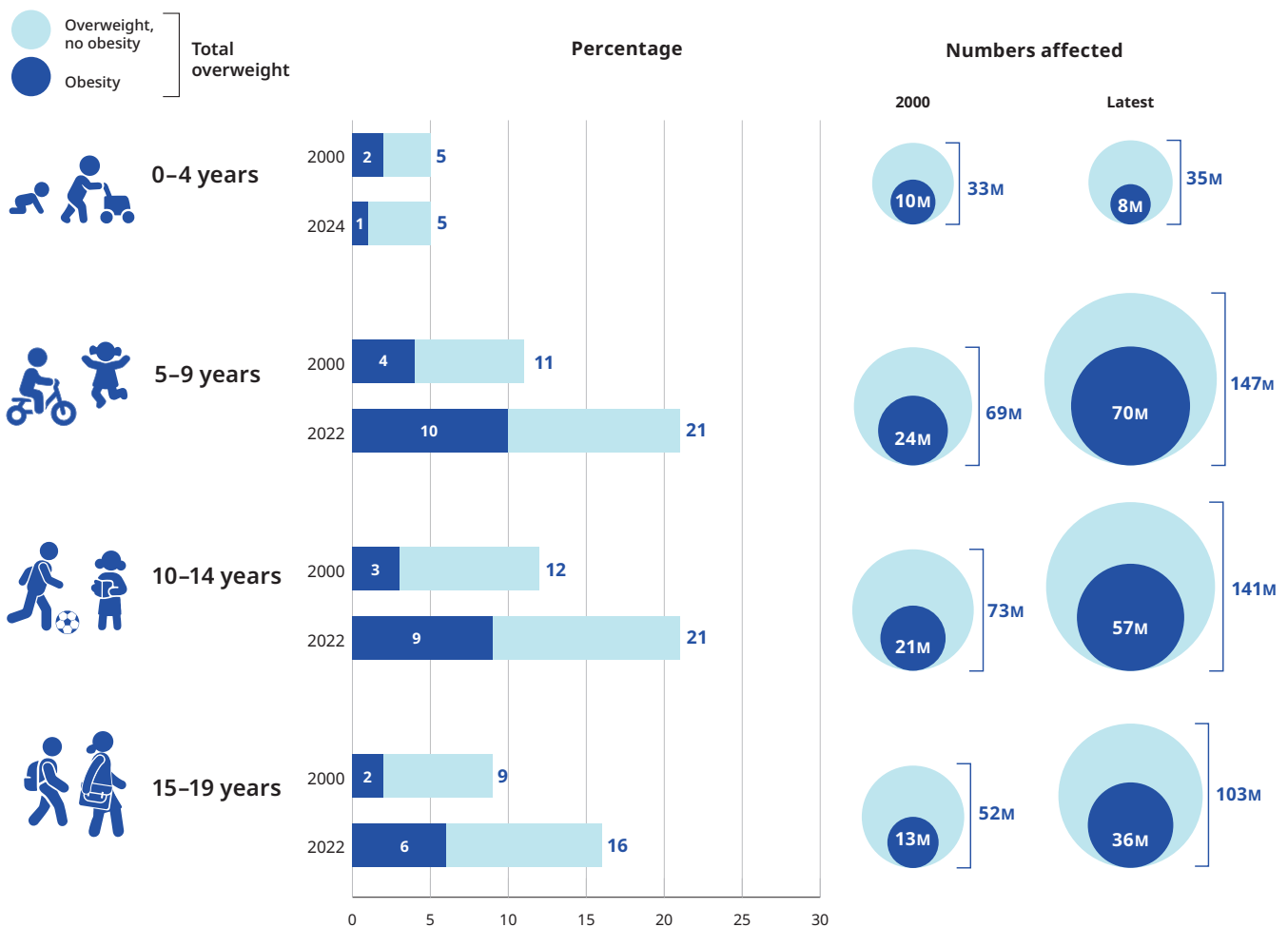


FIGURE 1: Trends in percentage and numbers (in millions) of children and adolescents with overweight and obesity, by age group, globally, 2000 and latest

Note: Latest estimates are from the year 2024 for children under 5 and from the year 2022 for children and adolescents 5–19 years. M = million.

Source: UNICEF, WHO and World Bank Joint Child Malnutrition Estimates for children under 5 and UNICEF analysis of data from NCD-RisC for children and adolescents 5–19 years.

However, East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean and South Asia account for more than half of all children and adolescents with overweight globally (241 million out of 427 million).

Since 2000, the number of children and adolescents aged 5–19 years living with overweight has doubled from 194 million to 391 million (*Figure 1*). Some regions have experienced a much greater rise in overweight than others. In South Asia, the region with the lowest prevalence of overweight in 2000, the prevalence increased almost fivefold by 2022, and in East Asia and the Pacific, Latin America and the Caribbean, and the Middle East and North Africa, the prevalence increased by at least 10 percentage points.

Finding 2. Low- and middle-income countries are experiencing the steepest rise in overweight in school-age children and adolescents.

The prevalence of overweight among children and adolescents aged 5–19 years has historically been highest in high-income countries. However, since 2000, overweight has more than doubled in low- and middle-income countries, compared to a modest 1.2-fold increase in high-income countries. As a result, the gap in prevalence is narrowing, and low- and middle-income countries now account for 81 per cent of the global overweight burden, up from 66 per cent in 2000.

As nations develop economically, the pattern of child overweight shifts. In low-income countries, children are more likely to have overweight if they belong to wealthier households, which can afford larger quantities of food, including energy-dense foods. As countries transition to middle-income status, ultra-processed foods and beverages become more widely available and more affordable, increasing the prevalence of overweight among children across all household income levels. In high-income countries, the pattern reverses: nutrient-poor, unhealthy diets are a marker of poverty, not affluence, and child overweight tends to be more common among children and adolescents belonging to poorer households.

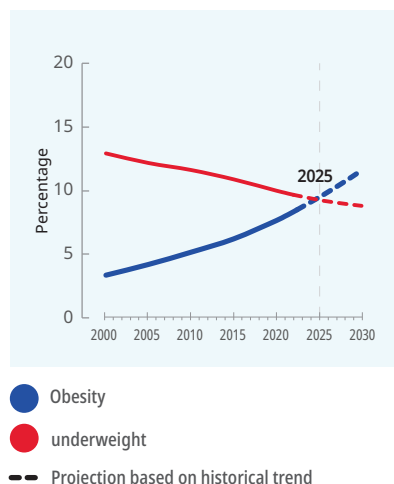
Finding 3. Globally, obesity has overtaken underweight as the more dominant form of malnutrition among school-age children and adolescents.

Since 2000, obesity has risen at a faster rate than overweight among school-age children and adolescents. At the same time, there has been a steady fall in the prevalence of underweight. In 2025, a historic turning point was reached: for the first time, the global prevalence of obesity among children and adolescents aged 5–19 years surpassed that of underweight (9.4 per cent versus 9.2 per cent) (*see Figure 2*).

Obesity accounts for a growing share of all overweight cases. In 2022, 42 per cent of all children and adolescents aged 5–19 years living with overweight had obesity (163 million out of 391 million), up from 30 per cent in 2000 (58 million out of 194 million). This is immensely concerning because obesity is more difficult to reverse than overweight and has a greater risk of serious health conditions.

FIGURE 2: Trends in the percentage of children and adolescents aged 5–19 years with (a) obesity, (b) underweight, and projections to 2030, globally

Source: UNICEF analysis of data from NCD-RisC for children and adolescents 5–19 years.



Finding 4. The diets of children and adolescents are loaded with unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods.

In 2021, UNICEF and WHO introduced new indicators for monitoring the consumption of unhealthy foods and beverages in children aged 6–23 months, such as sweet, salty and fried foods and sweet beverages. While there are currently insufficient data to produce global estimates, available data show that more than 50 per cent of young children consumed sweet foods or beverages during the previous day in 13 out of 20 low- and middle-income countries.

In adolescents aged 15–19 years, data from the *Global Diet Quality Project* reveal that a

staggering 60 per cent consumed more than one sugary food or beverage during the previous day, 32 per cent consumed a soft drink and 25 per cent consumed more than one salty processed food (see *Figure 3*).

Furthermore, studies show that ultra-processed foods and beverages account for at least one-third of the total energy intake of adolescents in Argentina, Belgium, Chile and Mexico, and at least half of total energy intake in Australia, Canada, the United States and the United Kingdom. These levels are so high that they match the description of a staple food – meaning they constitute a dominant portion of adolescents’ diets.

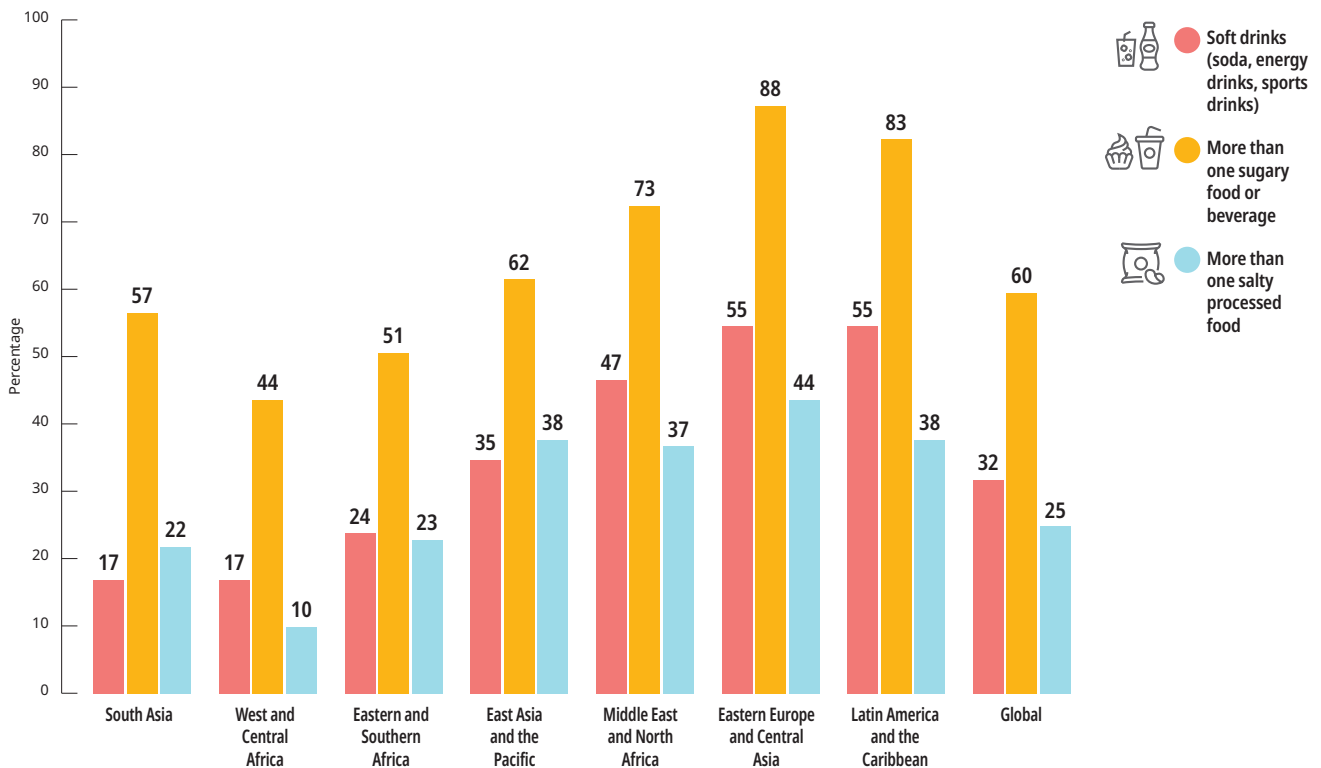


FIGURE 3: Percentage of adolescents aged 15–19 years consuming soft drinks, more than one sugary food or beverage and more than one salty processed food, by UNICEF region and globally, 2021–2024

Source: Gallup World Poll surveys

OUR ANALYSIS

THE DRIVERS OF UNHEALTHY FOOD ENVIRONMENTS



Our analysis finds that unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods and beverages, are widely available, inexpensive and aggressively marketed in the places where children live, learn and play. The unethical business practices of the ultra-processed food and beverage industry undermine efforts to put legal measures and policies in place to protect children from unhealthy food environments. However, with determined action, governments can adopt comprehensive, mandatory measures to reshape food environments and uphold children's right to food and nutrition.

Analysis 1. Inexpensive ultra-processed foods and beverages are flooding retail markets and infiltrating schools.

Global sales of ultra-processed foods and beverages are rising sharply, driven by rapid growth in middle-income countries, where modern retail outlets, online grocery stores and food delivery apps are expanding rapidly, alongside traditional outlets. These ultra-processed foods and beverages tend to be relatively cheaper than fresh or minimally processed nutritious foods – due partly to agricultural subsidies that artificially lower the cost of key ingredients, such as corn, soy and wheat.

Evidence from both high- and middle-income countries shows that retailers disproportionately expose children in poorer neighbourhoods to unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods and beverages. For example, our research in Argentina, Brazil, Chile, Costa Rica and Mexico found that retailers were more likely to prominently display sweet snacks and sugary cereals at entrances and within children's reach in poorer communities than in wealthier areas.

In the absence of effective policies, schools are also being infiltrated by unhealthy foods and beverages – undermining their role as safe spaces for children and adolescents. According to the Global Survey of School Meal Programs, one in four school meal programmes serve processed meat (25 per cent), about one in five serve sweets/ice-cream (21 per cent) and deep-fried foods (19 per cent), and 14 per cent provide sugar-sweetened beverages. UNICEF studies in the United Republic of Tanzania and Zimbabwe reveal how public-private partnerships have enabled ultra-processed food companies to distribute ultra-processed products in schools, build brand loyalty among young learners and strengthen their corporate reputation.

Analysis 2. Children are highly exposed to the marketing of ultra-processed foods and beverages at home, school and play, particularly digital marketing.

Our 2024 global U-Report poll across 171 countries highlights the extent of exposure to food marketing. We found that 75 per cent of young people aged 13–24 years saw

advertisements for sugary/energy drinks, snacks or fast food during the previous week (see Figure 4).

While marketing exposure is highest among those living in upper-middle-income countries (90 per cent), it is also unacceptably high in low-income countries (65 per cent) and even in countries affected by conflict (68 per cent). Children, adolescents and young people report that they experience temptation, pressure and powerlessness in the face of relentless food marketing.

Digital marketing is expanding rapidly and gives the ultra-processed food and beverage industry unprecedented access and power to target children and adolescents. It uses children’s online behaviours to deliver highly personalized and persuasive food advertisements; it is interactive, engaging and constantly available; it blurs the boundaries between content and food advertising; and it is poorly regulated and largely invisible to parents and policymakers.

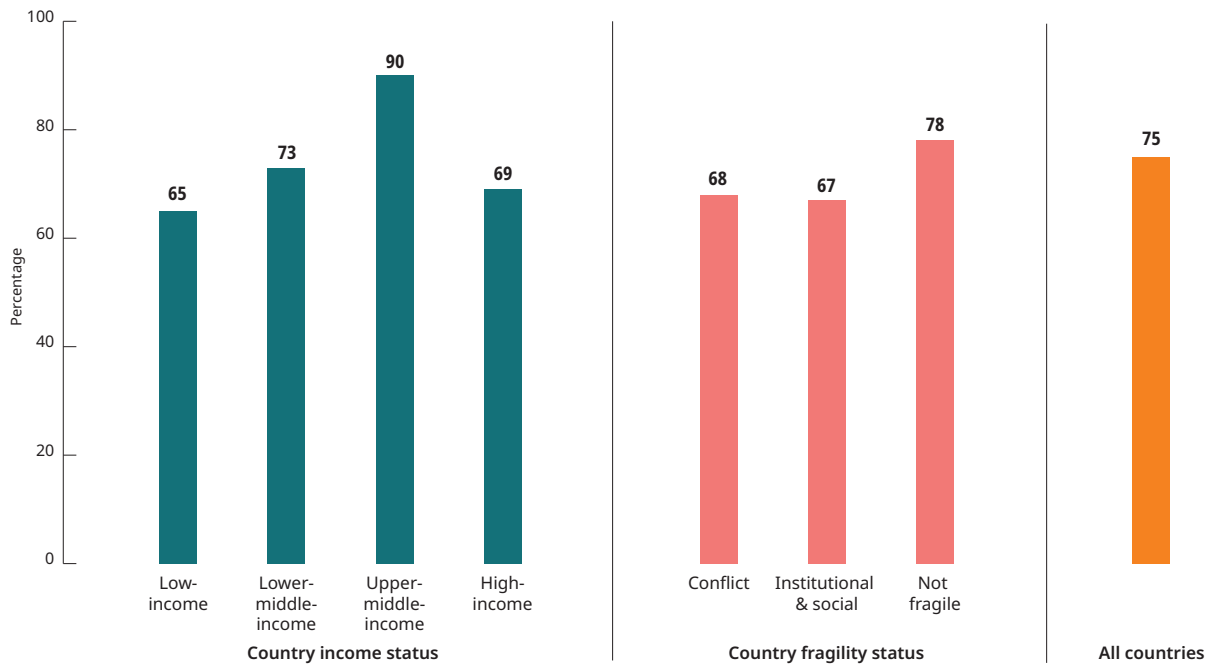


FIGURE 4: Percentage of young people aged 13–24 years who saw advertisements for sugary/energy drinks, fast food or snacks during the previous week, by country income status and country fragility status, 2024

Source: Global U-report poll, 2024

Analysis 3. The unethical practices of the ultra-processed food and beverage industry undermine government action and exploit children, even in times of crisis.

Across the globe, the ultra-processed food and beverage industry leverages its considerable power and influence to out-manoeuvre governments and resist meaningful policy change to improve children's food environments and diets. Our research across 24 countries found that 70 per cent of government officials and civil society representatives identified industry influence as a major barrier to introducing government-led food marketing controls. Studies have found that the industry uses a mix of political, scientific, reputational management and marketing practices to delay, weaken, block and evade government policies.

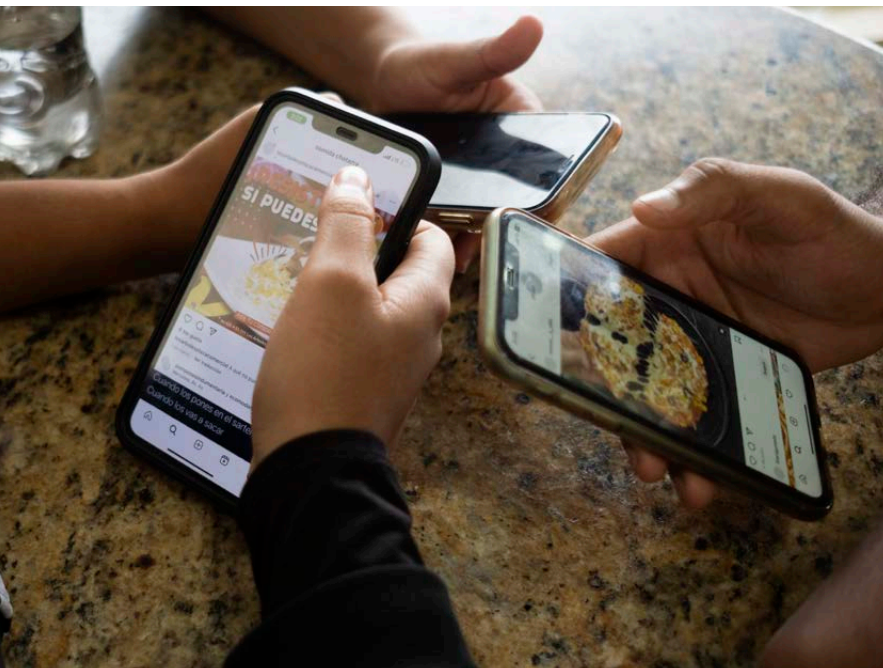
The ultra-processed food and beverage industry has proven highly resilient, even in times of crisis. Past experience shows that it exploits humanitarian disasters and public health emergencies – such as the COVID-19 pandemic – to expand market reach, strengthen brand image and lobby for the delay or weakening of legal measures and policies to protect children and families from their products.

Analysis 4. Inadequate legal measures and policies enable the ultra-processed food and beverage industry to manipulate children's food environments.

Mandatory national legal measures and policies help create food environments that protect children and adolescents from unhealthy foods and beverages and are conducive to their nutrition and health. Yet, no governments have enacted a comprehensive and coherent set of mandatory legal measures and policies – covering breastfeeding and complementary feeding, school food environments, food marketing restrictions, food labelling, food subsidies, food taxes and food reformulation – to protect children from unhealthy food environments.

The gaps in legal measures and policies allow the ultra-processed food and beverage industry to continue shaping food environments to its advantage, to the detriment of children and adolescents. Delays in implementing these legal measures and policies will only allow the drivers of nutrient-poor, unhealthy diets to become more deeply entrenched and difficult to reverse.

However, important progress has been achieved in countries with political will at the highest level, robust civil society support, public engagement to build demand for legal measures and policies, and the refusal to give in to industry pressure. For example, Brazil, Chile and Mexico have some of the most comprehensive sets of legal measures and policies in the world, while notable advances have been made in countries such as Fiji, India, Lebanon, Sierra Leone, South Africa and Spain.



OUR RECOMMENDATIONS

AN AGENDA TO TRANSFORM CHILDREN'S FOOD ENVIRONMENTS

The widespread exposure to unhealthy food environments and the surge in childhood overweight and obesity call for immediate and transformative action to protect children's right to food and nutrition.

The following eight recommendations – requiring actions across the food, health, water and sanitation, education and social protection systems – are universally applicable, including in humanitarian contexts:

- 1. Implement the International Code of Marketing of Breast-milk Substitutes and subsequent World Health Assembly resolutions to protect and promote breastfeeding and appropriate complementary feeding.** This includes the WHO guidance on regulatory measures aimed at restricting the digital marketing of breastmilk substitutes, and the guidance on ending the inappropriate promotion of foods for infants and young children.
- 2. Implement comprehensive, mandatory measures to transform food environments for children and adolescents.** These encompass legal measures and policies that protect children's diets by limiting the availability, marketing and purchase of unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods. They include school food environments, food marketing restrictions, food labelling, taxes on unhealthy foods and beverages, and food reformulation that limits both unhealthy ingredients and harmful substitutes.
- 3. Implement comprehensive policies to improve the availability and affordability of locally produced nutritious foods for children and adolescents.** These include redirecting agricultural, trade and consumer incentives and subsidies towards nutritious and healthy foods; strengthening systems and infrastructure to support the production, processing and distribution of nutritious and healthy foods, including large-scale mandatory fortification of appropriate food vehicles; and improving access to safe and palatable drinking water in schools and communities.



4. **Establish robust safeguards to protect public policy processes from interference by the ultra- processed food industry.** This includes conflict-of-interest safeguards, the exclusion of ultra-processed food and beverage industry actors from involvement in policy development and implementation, and the mandatory reporting of industry lobbying activities and membership in trade and business associations.
5. **Implement social and behaviour change initiatives that empower families and communities to claim their right to healthy food environments,** raise awareness of the harm caused by diets high in ultra-processed foods and beverages and build public support for legal measures and policies to transform food environments for children.
6. **Strengthen social protection programmes to address income poverty and increase children's access to nutritious and healthy diets** through social transfers (food, cash, vouchers) and other forms of social protection (e.g., parental benefits, affordable childcare and labour market programmes).
7. **Engage young people in public policymaking on food justice by fostering youth-led advocacy.** Support young advocates to share their lived experiences of unhealthy food environments and amplify their voices to demand healthier food and beverage options in schools, communities and beyond.
8. **Strengthen global and national data and surveillance systems to monitor food environments, diets and overweight among children and adolescents using standardized indicators and data collection methods.** In addition, track the implementation of legal measures and policies to protect children and adolescents from unhealthy food environments.



Governments bear the primary responsibility for protecting children's right to food and nutrition; however, achieving swift, impactful change towards healthier food environments demands unified action from multiple stakeholders.

All parties must urgently commit to a bold, comprehensive response – holding themselves and one another accountable for transparent decision-making and measurable progress to create equitable, healthy food environments for all children and adolescents, everywhere.

Governments must:

- Enact, implement, monitor and enforce a comprehensive set of mandatory legal measures and policies to protect children and adolescents from unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods and beverages, and improve equitable access to nutritious and healthy foods.
- Enact, implement, monitor and enforce legal frameworks to prevent interference by the ultra-processed food and beverage industry in public policy processes, including conflict-of-interest safeguards, mandatory transparency measures and restrictions on lobbying and influence.
- Strengthen national monitoring and accountability systems through regular data collection on children's diets and nutrition, the implementation of legal measures and policies, and industry practices impacting children's food environments.

Civil society and the media must:

- Raise public awareness of the harm caused by unhealthy foods, beverages and diets, amplify the voices of children and families affected by unhealthy food environments, and build public demand for legal measures and policies to transform food environments.
- Advocate for comprehensive, mandatory and enforceable legal measures and policies that protect children, adolescents and families from unhealthy food environments and improve access to nutritious and healthy foods, and demand that public policy processes be free from commercial influence.

- Investigate and serve as a public watchdog to publicly expose the harmful commercial practices of the ultra-processed food and beverage industry, including policy interference, misleading marketing practices and other tactics that undermine children's right to food and nutrition.

Development and humanitarian organizations must:

- Set global standards and guidance to improve food environments, including reducing industry interference in policymaking; and strengthening government capacity to implement legal measures and policies to transform food environments for children.
- Advocate for agricultural and trade policies that reduce incentives for ultra-processed food production and improve access to nutritious and healthy foods; and invest in systems and infrastructure that promote equitable access to nutritious and healthy foods.
- Track global and country progress on strengthening food environments, improving diets and reducing overweight and obesity among children and adolescents, using standardized indicators and data collection methods.

Donors and other financial partners must:

- Declare the prevention of childhood and adolescent overweight and obesity as a key priority within organizational agendas, policies, strategies and investments for improving children's and adolescents' nutrition, health, well-being and prosperity.
- Secure global and national commitments to transform food environments through legal measures and policies that restrict access to unhealthy foods and beverages, including ultra-processed foods and beverages, and enhance the availability and supply of nutritious and healthy foods.
- Commit to and deliver financial investments that strengthen institutional and regulatory capacities to improve food environments, particularly in under-resourced settings, including support for systems and infrastructure that improve equitable access to nutritious and healthy foods.

Academic and research organizations

must:

- Undertake independent studies and research – free from conflicts of interest – on the trends, inequities and drivers of nutrient-poor, unhealthy diets, overweight and obesity in children and adolescents, and the impacts on children, families, societies and nations.
- Undertake independent studies, research and evaluations – free from conflicts of interest – on legal measures and policies to improve food environments and diets among children and adolescents.
- Train multidisciplinary professionals – including agriculturists, nutritionists, public health experts, educators and economists – to lead and sustain national efforts to improve food environments for children and adolescents.

Food and beverage industry actors must:

- Ensure that company policies, practices and products fully comply with human rights treaties, normative guidance issued by United Nations agencies, and legal measures and policies to protect children and adolescents from unhealthy food environments.
- Invest in the production, processing and promotion of nutritious, healthy, affordable and sustainable foods for children, adolescents and their families that are low in free sugars, refined starches, salt, unhealthy fats, additives and other harmful ingredients.
- Never seek to delay, prevent or weaken global or national legal measures and policies to protect children and adolescents from unhealthy food environments.

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