

SDG 12

Curbing the consumption of ultra-processed foods and beverages critical to achieving SDG 12

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The consumption of ultra-processed food and drink products (UPPs) has quickly transformed our food systems.¹ UPPs are high in added sugar, salt, saturated and trans-fat and additives and have little nutritional value. They are hyperpalatable, convenient, ubiquitous, heavily marketed and highly profitable for food and beverage corporations. The consumption of these foods is replacing the consumption of unprocessed/minimally processed foods which has consequences for health and the environment.

With regard to health, the consumption of these products has been linked to obesity, diabetes, heart disease and certain cancers.² Meanwhile, the processing, distribution and retailing of these foods has precipitated unsustainable production and consumption patterns to the detriment of the environment.

Four consumer-side public policies are critical to make progress towards SDG 12 and to promote sustainable food systems. These policies seek to protect consumers' and children's rights and the right to adequate food and water, through reversing the unsustainable trend towards the consumption of UPPs. In turn, by changing consumption patterns, these policies will promote sustainable production practices and protect the rights of small-scale food producers.

One priority policy is restricting the availability of UPPs in schools. Food provided in schools should largely consist of unprocessed/minimally processed foods and freely available potable water. Food packaging should be minimized and marketing of food and beverages restricted. The sale and marketing of UPPs on the periphery of the school grounds should also be restricted. School food policy should be developed at a national or district level together with the involvement of the agricultural sector so that it can promote not only sustainable consumption but also production. It should prioritize territorial, small-scale food producers and seasonal products, and ensure that a portion of the school food offer is provisioned directly from small-scale producers, as in the case of Brazil.³

Another key priority is issuing a regulation on the marketing of ultra-processed foods to children. Research demonstrates that the majority of food marketing to children is for UPPs. Marketing bombards children with persuasive messages that lead them to develop preferences for unhealthy foods. Strong regulation of food marketing to children that seeks to create sustainable consumption practices must include restrictions on marketing in all communication channels, not just television and radio, but also marketing in public spaces, at points of sale, on social media, videogames, and on the product packages. In addition, it should prohibit the use of celebrities and characters that are targeted to children, as well as the use of free toys, prizes and event sponsorships.

1 Monteiro et al. (2013).

2 For a brief overview of UPPs role in health outcomes see: <http://protejamosusalud.org/> (in Spanish).

3 Hawkes et al. (2016).

Similarly, the marketing of baby formula must also be regulated, as stipulated in the International Code of Marketing of Breastmilk Substitutes.

The third policy priority that can help implement SDG 12 regards front-of-pack (FOP) warning labels on foods and beverages. Labels should use symbols, shapes and colors to warn consumers that a product has a high content of sugar, salt and/or saturated fat. Warning labels should only be on unhealthy, packaged foods; thus, healthier options and unpackaged foods, like fruits and vegetables, would not need warnings. The goal of FOP warning labels is to encourage consumers to choose foods and beverages with no warnings, thereby shifting their consumption from UPPs to minimally/unprocessed foods. The Chilean FOP label,⁴ which has been shown to be easy to understand, even for primary school children, is considered an international best practice by the Pan American Health Organization (PAHO) and can aid in shifting consumers to healthier, more sustainably produced foods.

The fourth policy priority is that of a sugar sweetened beverage (SSB) tax. An SSB tax has been recognized as a key strategy to limit the consumption of sugary drinks which are responsible for an estimated 184,000 deaths worldwide (in 2010) due to obesity-related chronic disease.⁵ The production of these drinks is not only unhealthy but highly unsustainable, considering: the amount of water needed, and wastewater generated, to produce these beverages; the utilization of single-use plastic bottles; and the fact that many communities' water rights have been threatened due to the water extraction practices of transnational beverage companies. The World Health Organization recommends a 20 percent tax on SSBs.⁶ The objective is two-pronged, to reduce the consumption of these unsustainable beverages and to provide revenue so that the State can furnish public goods and services, such as drinking water fountains in schools and public spaces, that foster sustainable

practices and contribute to obesity prevention. Evidence from Mexico indicates that this tax, despite being low – approximately 10 percent – is working to reduce purchases of SSBs. In Mexico, there was approximately a 6 percent reduction in purchases of these beverages in the first year (2014) of implementation, and up to 9.7 percent in the second year (2015).⁷ Reductions were higher in low-income households and in those with children.⁸

In order for these policies to effectively contribute to achieving SDG 12, it is critical that they are statutory and not self-regulatory, the latter of which have proven ineffective as they are developed by the industries that they seek to regulate. Furthermore, the design, implementation and evaluation of these policies must be free of conflicts of interest from large-scale food and beverage corporations. As a case in point, Mexico's marketing and labelling regulations have failed because they were developed with interference from the food and beverage industry, and these corporate players continue to take part in the evaluation of these policies.⁹

Moreover, policy coherence is essential in order to ensure that trade policies do not threaten a country's ability to implement or weaken this package of interventions, by arguing that they are barriers to trade, as is currently taking place with regard to labelling policy and the renegotiation of NAFTA.¹⁰ Similarly, this package of policies must be internally coherent, in that all policies should utilize the same nutrient profiling system, such as that developed by PAHO.¹¹ Finally, to fully implement SDG 12, reduce reliance on UPPs, and overcome sobering health and environmental challenges, these consumer-side policies must be complemented with strong agricultural policies that guarantee sustainable and equitable food production and guarantee the rights of small-scale food producers.

4 www.minsal.cl/ley-de-alimentos-nuevo-etiquetado-de-alimentos/

5 Singh et al (2015).

6 www.who.int/en/news-room/detail/11-10-2016-who-urges-global-action-to-curtail-consumption-and-health-impacts-of-sugary-drinks

7 Colchero et al. (2017b).

8 Colchero et al. (2017a).

9 Calvillo/Székely (2018).

10 Ahmed et al. (2018).

11 Pan American Health Organization (2016).

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